



United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)
بعثة الأمم المتحدة لمساعدة العراق (يونامي)



Strengthening the Participation and Representation of Iraqi Women in Political and Electoral Processes

Key findings and recommendations from governorate-level consultations including local authorities, civil society organizations, former parliamentarians and Governorate Council members, youth, and women, conducted by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the National Directorate for Iraqi Women, General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, Government of Iraq

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PREFACE

This report captures the findings and recommendations of 12 governorate-level consultations including local government officials, civil society representatives, former parliamentarians and Governorate Council members, youth, and women, on challenges to advance women’s political and electoral participation and ways to overcome them. The consultations were conducted by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) in collaboration with the National Directorate for Iraqi Women, General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, Government of Iraq, and took place in Anbar, Baghdad, Basra, Dhi Qar, Karbala, Kirkuk, Muthanna, Najaf, Ninewa (Mosul and Sinjar), Salah al Din and Wasit between June and November 2023. The views and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect UNAMI’s official position and its policies and those of the National Directorate for Iraqi Women.

UNAMI and the National Directorate for Iraqi Women would like to thank all individuals who participated in the consultations, taking time out of their busy schedules to share their insights and perspectives on how to advance Iraqi women’s political and electoral participation.

UNAMI and the National Directorate for Iraqi Women would like to particularly express their deep appreciation to Mr. Mohammed Ali Hussein, the consultant who led the discussions.

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Executive Summary

Between June and November 2023, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) jointly with the National Directorate for Iraqi Women, General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, Government of Iraq, conducted 12 consultation meetings with local authorities, civil society organizations, former parliamentarians and Governorate Council members, youth, and women in 11 governorates to assess the challenges in advancing women's political participation and identify recommendations to encourage and sustain women's participation in politics. These consultations took place in Anbar, Baghdad, Basra, Dhi - Qar, Karbala, Kirkuk, Muthanna, Najaf, Ninewa, Salah al Din and Wasit. A total of 433 individuals (343 women, 90 men) took part in the discussions and shared their views in a questionnaire distributed during the discussions. The questionnaire covered elements on civil society mobilization and advocacy to promote women's political participation; the political context after the October 2021 national elections; institutional and legal reforms needed to strengthen Iraqi women's political participation; the amended electoral law; and specific women, peace and security concerns in the governorates concerned.

The findings of the consultations identified various challenges hindering Iraqi women's full and equal participation in political processes including electoral processes. Some are socio-cultural in nature, others relate to security and yet others are related to access to economic resources for women. Women's participation in political parties and their influence and positions in those parties was also highlighted as a determining factor in women's engagement in political spaces. Most participants highlighted that in political parties, power is held by men as men take up a large percentage of leadership positions. Some governorates, mainly in the south, pointed out that the anti - gender rhetoric since mid-2023 has negatively impacted women's participation and warned that Iraqi women would be deterred from entering politics and civic activism in the future.

During the consultations, the following recommendations were proposed across the different governorates to help strengthen Iraqi women's participation and representation in political and electoral processes:

- Training and support for women politicians and those aspiring to enter politics.
- Support for education and public awareness on the legal framework governing women's participation in political and electoral processes.
- Promotion of security for women's candidates, particularly during electoral campaign periods.
- Advocacy for equal financing for electoral campaigns for all candidates.
- Advocacy for political parties' reform to enable women's representation and participation in decision - making positions.

Introduction

The Government of Iraq has demonstrated commitment towards advancing women's political and electoral participation in line with international commitments and national frameworks. For example, on 16 July 2023, the High Committee to Support Women's Participation in Governorate Council Elections launched its workplan. The High Committee, comprising government, civil society, and United Nations representatives, was established in May 2023 by an executive order of the Council of Ministers. Its workplan includes measures designed to boost women's political participation, such as addressing hate speech against women candidates and advocacy for an electoral code of conduct among political parties. Another example includes the establishment of four hotlines to receive complaints from women candidates during the electoral campaign of the Governorate Council elections held in December 2023.

As the Government of Iraq, with the support of the United Nations continues to exert efforts to promote women's political participation, the focus to sustain women's participation and representation must continue and the gains made on expanding women's participation preserved. Numbers are not enough to measure progress on strengthening women's political and electoral participation. The environment must be favourable to sustain those gains; women candidates should be protected, and legal frameworks should not only guarantee women's representation but also allow for expansion of women's representation and participation in all aspects of political life, from parliament to civic space.

Consistent engagement on women, peace, and security issues with a focus on women's political participation and representation is a key aspect of UNAMI's mandate. United Nations Security Council resolution 2682 (2023) of 30 May 2023, point 2, requests that the Special Representative of the Secretary – General and UNAMI, at the request of the Government of Iraq, shall: *“(a) prioritize the provision of advice, support, and assistance to the Government and people of Iraq on advancing inclusive political dialogue and national and community-level*

Legal Context and Frameworks on Women's Inclusion in Political Processes

- Iraq ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1986.
- The **Iraqi Constitution** in Article 14 under the Chapter on Civil and Political Rights states that *“Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on sex, race, ethnicity, origin, colour, religion, sect, belief or opinion or economic or social status.”* Article 20 in the same chapter states that *“Iraqi citizens, men and women, shall have the right to participate in public affairs and to enjoy political rights including the right to vote, elect and run for office.”*
- Article 49 (4) of the Iraqi Constitution states that *“the elections law shall aim to achieve a percentage of representation for women of not less than one quarter of the members of the Council of Representatives.”*
- In the October 2021 national election, a total of 3,249 candidates, including 951 women (29.3%) contested 329 seats. Women won 97 seats (92 were affiliated to political parties and 5 were independents).
- In the Governorate Council Elections held in December 2023, a total of 76 women won seats (75 through the quota and 1 woman got elected from the minority quota).
- The **National Action Plan on United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2000)**: In 2014, Iraq launched its first national action plan (NAP) as per UNSC resolution 1325, making it the first country in the Middle East and North Africa to launch such a plan. The NAP included a pillar on advancing women's participation in political processes. A second NAP was developed in 2020 for the period 2020 – 2024.
- In March 2023, the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers endorsed the **National Strategy for Iraqi Women** for the period 2023 – 2030 with five pillars including a pillar to promote the role of Iraqi women in political processes.

reconciliation, with the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women, taking into account civil society and youth input;” and “(e) approach gender mainstreaming as a crosscutting issue throughout its mandate, including by consulting with diverse women’s civil society groups, and to advise and assist the Government of Iraq in ensuring the full, equal and meaningful participation, involvement and representation of women at all levels of decision making, including in the context of elections”.

Methodology

Over the course of six months beginning in June 2023, UNAMI, jointly with the National Directorate for Iraqi Women, General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, conducted 12 consultations across 11 governorates in Iraq (excluding the Kurdistan Region) aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the contextual factors that support or impede women’s participation and inclusion in political and electoral processes. The consultations were held in Basra, Dhi- Qar, Muthanna, Najaf, Karbala, Anbar, Wasit, Salah al Din, Mosul, Sinjar, Baghdad, and Kirkuk with 433 attendees (343 women, 90 men). These included local authorities, civil society organizations, former parliamentarians and Governorate Council members, youth, and women. The selection of the governorates took into account the need to reflect an inclusive and diverse cross -section of governorates across Iraq. The overall purpose of the consultations was aimed at supporting the Government’s efforts to implement the women and peace and security agenda.

The findings of this report are based on group discussions and use of a questionnaire shared with participants in the consultations. The discussions examined the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors that influence women’s participation in politics. Moreover, the discussions examined contextual factors in specific governorates. This report contains the key findings of those consultations as well as recommendations for addressing the challenges relating to women’s participation and representation in political and electoral processes. The findings support much of the literature regarding general barriers and enablers to women’s participation in Iraqi politics. The report also offers insights from various governorates of opportunities and challenges experienced by women seeking access to political leadership, including elected office.

Responses from the questionnaires were analyzed and categorized as those relating to women’s political and electoral participation and those relating to specific concerns on women, peace, and security in the selected governorates.

Key Findings

Challenges Cited as Limiting Iraqi Women’s Access to Political Space and their Representation and Participation in Political and Electoral Processes

- i. Traditional views that women are incapable of making good leaders are seen as a hinderance to women entering politics.
- ii. Due to media coverage that is described as biased, the achievements of female politicians are less widely publicized resulting in women being seen as inexperienced and not suitable to occupy political positions.
- iii. Political and electoral processes including the legal framework governing women’s participation and representation are not well understood or viewed as fully transparent by the public,

candidates, voters, and supporters. For example, there is often a lack of clarity around the interpretation and application of the 25% minimum constitutional quota provision. There are concerns about the level of independence of institutions such as the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC).

- iv. Insecurity, particularly in areas experiencing sporadic clashes between militia groups and security forces, acts as a deterrent for women to enter politics or to participate in political processes. The presence of militia groups aligned to or supported by political entities discourages women from joining political parties to enter politics.
- v. The financial cost of running a campaign is a major barrier for women who may not have equal access to financial resources as men. Moreover, the need to address household needs is a disincentive to engage in politics.
- vi. The dominance of males in political parties and fewer opportunities for women to occupy leadership positions have limited women's influence in party politics and their access to benefits that come with occupying those positions.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were proposed and are addressed to relevant government institutions, political actors, and civil society organizations.

Train and support women politicians and those aspiring to enter politics

- i. Train women at governorate and district levels on the formal rules, systems and processes related to politics to increase their ability to influence.
- ii. Champion the achievements of Iraqi women in politics through the media to challenge existing stereotypes that men are more effective than women in the political sphere.
- iii. Network with organizations and media to encourage inclusive media representation to counter public bias against women in politics.
- iv. Undertake public education and outreach to counter mis/disinformation on the role of women.

Support education and public awareness on the legal framework governing women's participation in political and electoral processes

- i. Support governorate-level advocacy efforts of civil society to educate the public on women's political and electoral participation and the importance of inclusive leadership.
- ii. Encourage civil society to engage governorate-level offices of the IHEC and related institutions such as political parties on the legal framework governing women's participation in political and electoral processes and as part of civic education.

Promote security particularly during electoral campaign periods with a focus on women candidates

- i. Continue the practice of establishing hotlines in each governorate to receive complaints from women candidates during electoral campaign periods. Efforts to ensure that the hotlines are functional and operated by well-trained personnel is important to boost trust in institutions responsible for providing security.

Advocate equal financing for electoral campaigns

- i. Advocate for equal financing for electoral campaigns, ensuring that women candidates receive financial support comparable to their male counterparts.
- ii. Urge political actors to collaborate with IHEC to establish transparent funding mechanisms.

Advocate political parties' reform

- i. Urge political parties to develop guidelines that promote women within their ranks and consider quotas to guarantee women's representation and participation in senior party positions.

Conclusion

These consultations aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers to women's participation and representation in political and electoral processes. The challenges highlighted in this report demonstrate that the peculiar contextual factors that hinder women's full, equal, and meaningful participation should be tackled comprehensively, including by addressing cultural, institutional and security issues.