



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.



## Listen to Women:

Identifying Barriers to and Opportunities for Women's Participation and Leadership in Iraq



**WOMEN FOR WOMEN  
INTERNATIONAL**



## Introduction

Around the world, women are underrepresented in decision-making in the public sphere including in civic engagement,<sup>1</sup> political participation<sup>2</sup> and leadership,<sup>3</sup> economic and labor participation,<sup>4</sup> and peace processes.<sup>5</sup> This underrepresentation is often a result of formal and informal barriers that women face when seeking to participate across the spectrum of private to public decision-making spaces. These barriers exist despite women's fundamental rights to equal participation and engagement in public life and in the decision-making processes that impact their lives.<sup>6,7,8,9</sup>

Women in conflict-affected communities and contexts face unique and interconnected barriers to their participation and leadership. Their underrepresentation in public life and in decision-making can have detrimental ripple effects within their communities. In addition to being key for upholding women's fundamental rights, ensuring that women have equal ability and access to participate in society is also critical for upholding broader human rights and democratic values, advancing sustainable development, and achieving peace and security.<sup>10,11</sup>

This report explores barriers to women's participation and leadership in the Iraq context and suggests opportunities and policy recommendations for achieving full, equal, and meaningful participation based on evidence and insight from desk research, surveys, focus group discussions (FGDs), and interviews with women and women's rights organizations (WROs) in Iraq.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

## The challenge

Women's participation in public life is a key criterion for measuring equality in society, both because it is a fundamental human right and because it is considered an important pathway to achieving sustainable development, stability, and peace. This importance is heightened in contexts affected by conflicts or instability within governance and politics.

Women face far-reaching detrimental consequences when they are unable to participate in the institutions and processes that make decisions that affect them. In this report, we explored the concept of 'participation' and 'decision-making' across multiple dimensions. This is because Women for Women International (WfWI) and Baghdad Women's Association's (BWA) experience and evidence from programming suggests that efforts to achieve representation and participation of women at the highest level of politics and decision-making are strengthened through holistic approaches that also address participation and decision-making at the individual, family, and community level.

We also link participation to decision-making as the foundation for understanding whether women's participation is meaningful and whether they are able to leverage their participation for outcomes that improve their lives. For example, at the political level, the threshold for full, equal, and meaningful participation in peace and political processes is stipulated as "direct, substantive, and formal inclusion" so that women "can influence the outcomes of negotiations and other processes, as well as their implementation".<sup>12</sup> These criteria for participation assert that consultation, engagement or involvement without any actual influence or without the conditions for influence is not meaningful participation. This is true elsewhere in women's lives, where efforts to uphold women's rights to participation should be holistic and include an assessment of barriers and enablers to women's rights and agency to ensure that women's participation is linked to their influence over decisions and processes.

Despite developments in this field and in global advocacy for women's rights to participate, the reality to which these rights are upheld realized still require in-depth study and analysis, particularly concerning context-specific and evolving challenges and opportunities they face in participating in decision-making across the spectrum of private to public spaces

The status of women's participation in Iraq is the result of a complex interplay of factors, including cultural factors reflecting women's self-awareness, self-confidence, and the norms of the communities they live in – particularly those norms that reinforce men in positions of authority and power for decision-making at the household, community, and national levels.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to cultural factors, women may face additional interconnected forms of marginalization such as poverty, experiences of conflict and violence, and lack of access to education which can lead to their underrepresentation in the formal and informal, private, and public decision-making processes that affect their own lives. Therefore, it is particularly important to consider the interplay of factors affecting women's participation, as well as the diversity of women, when designing efforts to enable women's participation that is broad and inclusive of women facing intersecting vulnerabilities and barriers to their realization of rights and participation in public life.

This report elevates those diverse experiences and perspectives to ensure that the voices of women in Iraq are heard and that their priorities are the foundation of strategies developed to address the gaps in women's full, equal, and meaningful participation.

## Methodology

The realities of women in all their diversity are unlikely to be represented in official national and global level data, this is because existing data collection efforts struggle to capture accurate or sufficiently aggregable data. This is a particular problem in situations of conflict, displacement, and poor governance which increases the risk that women living in such contexts will continue to be underserved, their needs under-resourced, and their rights unprotected. To ensure that the most marginalized women are not being intentionally or unintentionally left behind in the implementation of global and national development, peacebuilding, and humanitarian agendas, we must meet women where they are and apply a gender lens to research and data collection that aims to center their experiences and voices.

**The research presented and analyzed in this report is based on the following quantitative and qualitative data which includes direct surveys, discussions, and interviews with a range of women in Federated Iraq and the KRI:**

- Desk research on women's participation in the Iraq context;
- Surveys and focus group discussions with women in Iraq on their own attitudes, experiences, and recommendations around women's participation;
- Interviews with women's rights and human rights organizations in Iraq on their experiences, efforts, analysis, and recommendations around women's participation.

The survey targeted 208 women across a range of ages, religious backgrounds, and ethnicities in Nineveh, Baghdad, Dohuk, and Erbil. No specific religious or ethnic identities were targeted for this study.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

## IRAQ AND THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ (KRI)

The research for this report was conducted across both Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of the Republic of Iraq (KRI), in communities where Women for Women International and Baghdad Women's Association implement programming, advocacy, and research.

The Iraqi Constitution ratified in 2004 established a federal system in Iraq “made up of a decentralized capital, regions, and governorates, as well as local administrations” which also recognized Kurdistan as an official, semiautonomous region within the nation of Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

There are some cultural, political, and economic differences between Federal Iraq and the KRI that call for context-specific approaches and recommendations when researching or implementing programs within the Iraq context.

Federal Iraq has a population of approximately 41.3 million (2023 estimate)<sup>15</sup> and consists of 18 governorates.

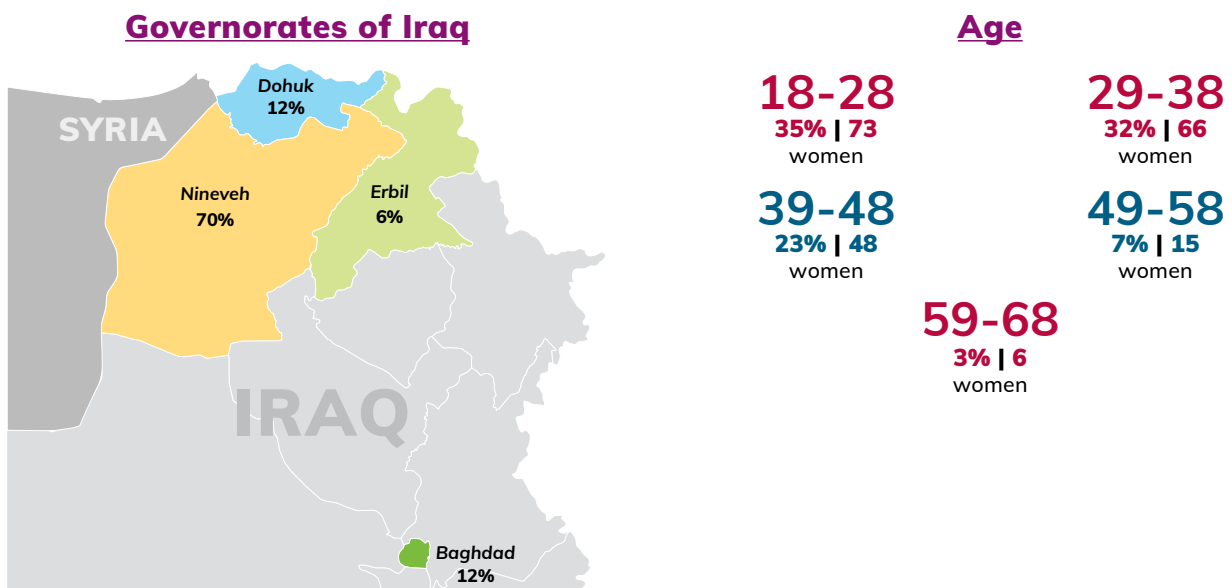
The Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) is based in Baghdad and includes the President, the Prime Minister, two legislative bodies – the Council of Representatives (Majlis al-Nawwāb) and the Council of the Union (Majlis al-Ittiḥād), and a free and independent judiciary branch.

The KRI is a constitutionally recognized semiautonomous region in northern Iraq with a population of 5.1 million (2012 estimate)<sup>16</sup> and consists of four governorates - Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Halabja, and Dohuk.

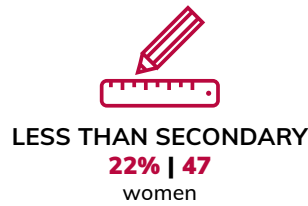
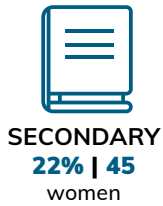
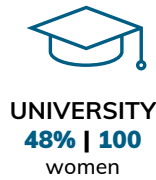
The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) is based in Erbil, and the Iraqi constitution of 2005 grants the KRG the right to exercise legislative, executive, and judicial powers according to the constitution. Those powers exclude those explicitly listed as exclusive powers of the federal authorities and government based in Baghdad, the capital of Federal Iraq.

The KRG has considerable power to enact its own laws and policies, provided that their laws do not contradict the Iraqi constitution. The KRG are also allocated an equitable share of national revenues and are permitted to establish and organise their own internal security forces.

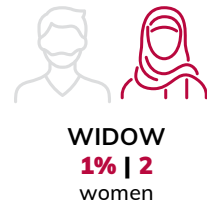
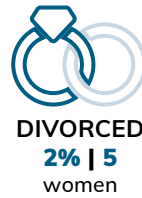
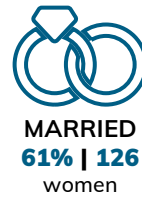
## Who Did We Ask? – 208 women surveyed



## Education Level



## Marital Status



## Employment Status



**WORKING**  
49% | 101  
women



**DO NOT WORK**  
51% | 107  
women

The FGDs were conducted with 41 women in Mosul (12 women), Bartella (17 women), and Nimrud (12 women) in the Nineveh Governorate. During these sessions, women participated in facilitated discussions to further explore their experiences and perceptions around expressing their opinions, taking on leadership roles, participating in decision-making, and civic participation. A validation workshop was conducted following the analysis of the survey and FGD data to affirm the findings and recommendations captured within this report.

Interviews were conducted with WROs working on women's rights in Iraq as part of their mission or scope of programming work in some way. These interviews were intended to better understand some of the practical challenges facing other actors working on these issue areas and the opportunities that civic spaces, programming, and advocacy provide for cultivating and expanding women's participation.



**MOSUL**  
12 women



**BARTELLA**  
17 women



**NIMRUD**  
12 women

**41 total women participated in FGDs  
in Nineveh Governorate**



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

## Context

Iraq is a country emerging from three decades of recurring cycles of armed conflict, violence, and political instability, as well as a range of crises and emergencies. While the humanitarian situation in Iraq has improved, with the number of people requiring humanitarian assistance down from 11 million people in 2017 to 3 million in 2023,<sup>17</sup> there are still 1.2 million Iraqis who are internally displaced following the rise and fall of ISIS control of territories within Iraq. Iraq also currently ranks 146th out of 162 countries<sup>18</sup> on the Gender Inequality Index and has a Global Gender Gap – Political Empowerment Subindex of 14% on a scale from 1 to 100, with 100 indicating full equality of political power between men and women.<sup>19</sup> Together, these factors suggest a challenging environment for women to exercise their freedom of expression and participate in decision-making processes.

## Legal and Policy Context

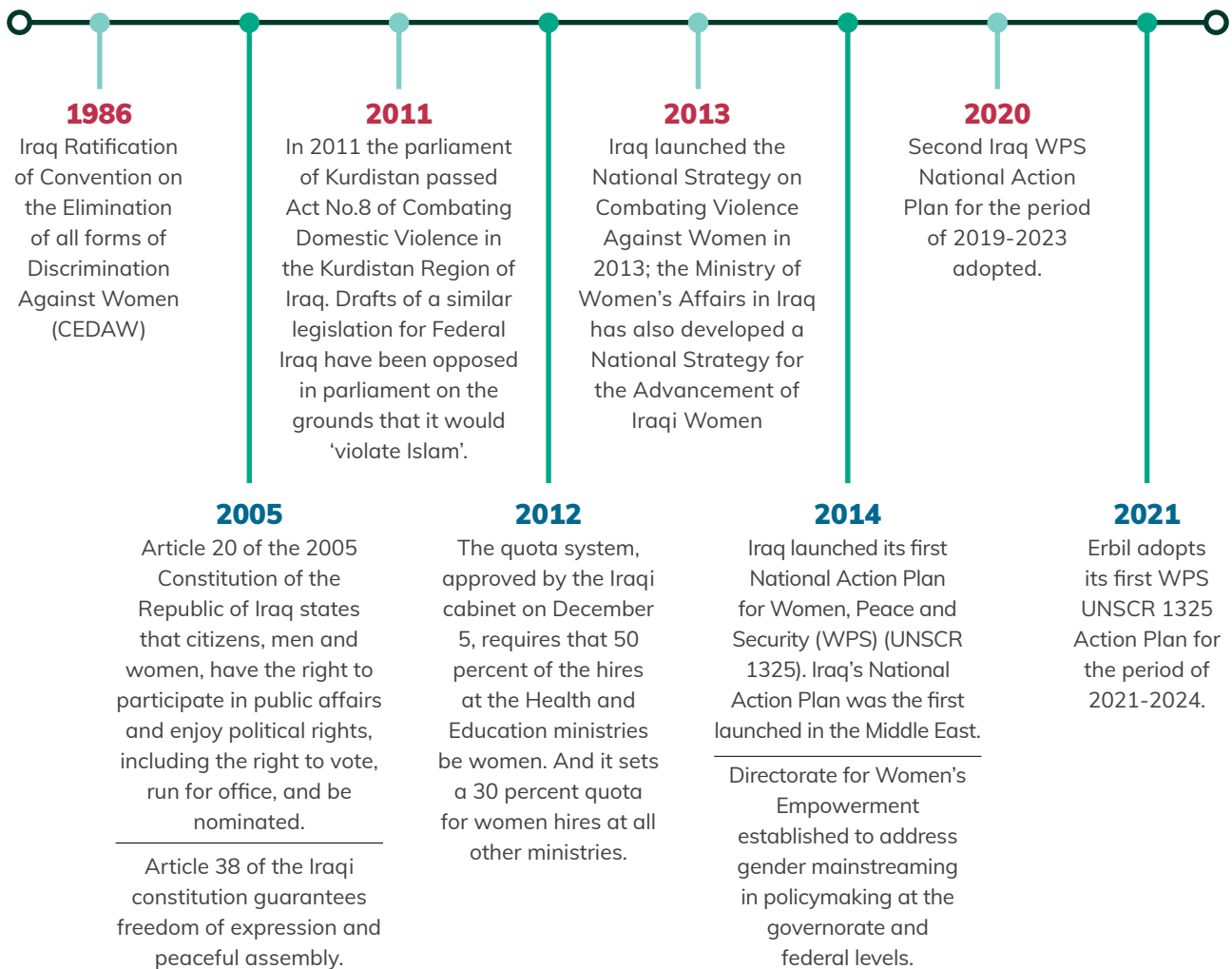


Figure 1: Legal and policy frameworks for upholding women's rights to participation in Federal Iraq and KRI.

Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and dismantling of the existing government, there was a profound transformation and change in the political system, accompanied by changes in the legal system, democratic practices and the establishment of the Iraqi Constitution by national referendum in 2005.<sup>20</sup> These changes were intended to contribute to stabilizing the political situation and to set out an approach based on respecting human rights and gender equality. However, successive armed conflicts and the lack of security and political stability have significantly contributed to creating an unsafe environment, especially concerning women and their meaningful participation in public life and democracy. Despite the existence of legal texts, constitutional provisions and national, regional, and international human rights frameworks aimed at ensuring women's right to such practices, many challenges persist in their path to achieving this.

The legal context governing women’s participation, voice, and leadership, particularly when it comes to participating in political life, is represented by a range of national, regional, and international frameworks. Figure 1 outlines global frameworks such as the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and the global UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)<sup>21</sup> which have been adopted by Iraq. These frameworks affirm fundamental equal rights of men and women, including equal participation in public life and peace processes, and Iraq’s ratification and adoption of those frameworks commits Iraq to upholding and protecting those rights. Equal rights of men and women – including the right to participation - have also been enshrined in national laws such as Article 20 of the 2005 Constitution of the Republic of Iraq which states that all citizens (including women) have the right to participate in public affairs and enjoy political rights, including the right to vote, run for office, and be nominated.

However, despite these legal commitments, in practice there are significant gaps between existing legislation and implementation. Many of the existing amendments include mitigations to women’s full, equal, and meaningful inclusion in society. For example, for Article 38, freedom of expression is granted so long as “public order” and “morality” are not violated.<sup>22</sup> Across both the KRI and Federal Iraq, authorities can leverage this amendment to impose excessive restrictions on the right to freedoms of expression of all citizens, especially minorities and women.<sup>23</sup>

Article 49 of the Constitution enshrines another mechanism for ensuring women’s participation – a minimum 25% quota for women representatives in the parliamentary body of the Council of Representatives: “The election law aims to achieve a representation rate for women of not less than a quarter of the number of members of the Council of Representatives.”<sup>24</sup> The quotas are intended to ensure that at least 25% of representatives in parliament are women and reserves seats accordingly. This has been an important tool in raising representation of women from 6-8% up prior to the adoption of the new Constitution to 25-29% representation in elected parliaments since the adoption of this measure.<sup>25</sup>

Due to the structure and culture of political parties and power sharing within government, parties have an interest in putting forward women as candidates to take advantage of the quota seats. However, they often put forward women relatives of men in the party as candidates, even though these women do not have political experience. This is intended to ensure that those women will not challenge men in the Party and leads to women’s inefficacy in acting independently or inability to take on a leadership or co-design role within their Party and within Parliament.<sup>26</sup>



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.



## Political Context

Despite the legal guarantees established for women's democratic participation and freedom of expression, significant challenges face women in the political arena. Their participation is often confined to the context of Parliamentary seats allocated for women's quotas, and such quotas are not extended to the leadership roles in the IFG and KRG or judiciary roles. Further, women are often excluded once they are in Parliament and the Women, Family, and Child Committee contains the fewest members of all parliamentary committees, reflecting the reluctance of men and women alike to work in what is perceived to be one of the least effective committees, despite its critical importance.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the legal and constitutional guarantees for men and women citizens to participate in establishing or joining a political party<sup>28</sup>, it is rare to find prominent roles for women in leadership or agenda-setting roles of political parties. Women are often approached to participate simply to meet the legal requirement outlined in the Iraqi Parties Law No. 36 of 2015. Article 11 of this law states, "Any party's founding requires submitting a written application signed by the party's representative (for registration purposes) to the Party Department, accompanied by a list of the names of the founding members, not less than seven, and a list of not less than 2,000 members from various provinces, with consideration given to women's representation."

During election campaigns, women are also often uniquely and disproportionately subjected to character assassination or hate speech through media and social media intended to discourage them from continuing their campaigns or speaking out for women's rights or against widely accepted social norms. Considering these challenges facing women when they seek to engage in politics, it can be said that the political system includes discrimination against them. Decision-making mechanisms, policy formulation, and power-sharing methods, whether within official institutions or in political parties and unions, mostly remain dominated by men and traditional, patriarchal social norms, reinforcing the idea of a male leadership hierarchy that contributes to the exclusion or marginalization of women.<sup>29</sup>

## Social Context

The impact of social norms on shaping the roles of women cannot be ignored, whether at the general societal level or at the level of local communities. Often, the role of women in Iraq is limited to social and domestic functions, influenced by social, religious, and tribal factors that converge to frame the role of women in social and domestic life. Moreover, tribal and clan customs and traditions, as well as religious leaders, have reinforced this stereotypical image of women rooted in the authority of men.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, family authority plays a significant role in determining the tasks and roles assigned to women. The decision for a woman to participate in decision-making processes, including formal political life, is often a matter of concern and influence for the male members of the family, who have the final say in whether she participates or not, meaning that the decision to take the first step to engage in different types of participation or free speech often does not solely belong to the woman herself.<sup>31</sup>



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

The perpetuation of these stereotypes by leaders and family makes it more difficult for society in Iraq to accept women as leaders or authority figures. There are ripple effects at all levels of participation whereby women must face community and family pushback if they speak out against violations of their rights.

### **Economic Context**

Women's ability to participate in a wide range of decision-making processes is influenced by economic factors and determinants in general, in addition to the impact of customs, traditions, and the effects of conflicts on women, in particular. According to the latest data from the World Bank, in 2021 the average labor force participation rate in Iraq was 39.7% - though the labor force participation rate for men was 68% and for women it was a paltry 11%.<sup>32</sup>

Women's work is concentrated in specific sectors due to various factors. Most working women do not have the same ability to choose their work as men do due to family pressure and responsibilities and due to workplace norms. Women's contribution to the private sector is also limited compared to men since most of their enterprises are unregistered and part of the informal economy, as indicated by a study of medium and small enterprises conducted by the Central Statistical Organization in 2021. The study showed that women's participation in the private sector is 21.3%, while the male participation rate is 61%. The study also revealed that women still represent a minority in the ownership of enterprises, accounting for 5.1%.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, wars and armed conflicts and their consequences, such as displacement and forced migration, often lead to the deterioration of health, education, economic, and social services, and the suspension of development programs. The major impact of conflicts falls on women, who become the breadwinners for their families in the absence of men, either due to their loss or death. Moreover, the suffering of women increases due to the lack of attention to their issues in the post-conflict period, as politicians often focus on rebuilding, sharing benefits, and redistributing power, which they consider more critical.<sup>34</sup>

In 2023, the United Nations "shifted its focus from a humanitarian-only response plan to a development-focused approach, as this will better serve the needs of all citizens in Iraq, not just those affected by [the crisis caused by ISIS]."<sup>35</sup> While this signals that much of the country has emerged from the depths of the unprecedented humanitarian crisis created through ongoing active conflict, it suggests that gaps may emerge in the economic safety nets for women and minorities who rely on NGOs or aid for survival. Refugees and IDPs are particularly reliant on such aid, and many worry that the transition is happening too quickly for other groups to step in and cover the gaps in funding and services for such vulnerable groups.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

## Conflict and Displacement

Coupled with decades of prior armed conflict, Iraq has had an extended recent history of political instability. This string of conflicts, as well as the UN sanctions imposed on Iraq following the Gulf War (1990-1991), disproportionately impacted women and girls, furthering structural inequalities that impeded their participation in social, political, and economic life. The broader social impact of the UN sanctions regime on society in Iraq has also been linked to a trend toward more conservative norms. Recent and ongoing coerced camp closures, including premature returns, often result in secondary displacement and expose tens of thousands of IDPs and returnees to serious protection risks due to marginalization, discrimination, and physical harm in areas of origin.<sup>36</sup>

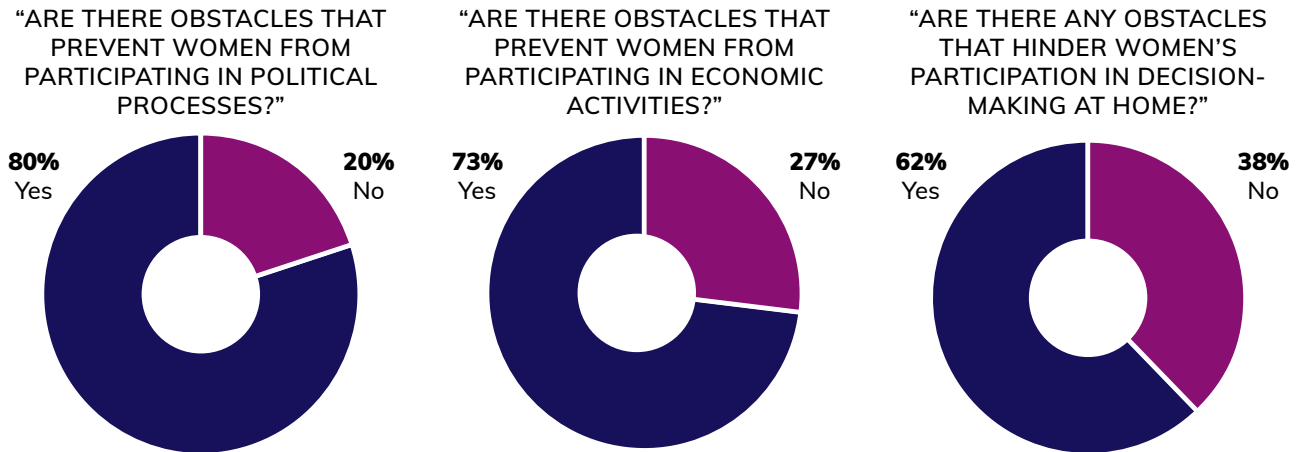
Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq has faced mounting challenges due to war and violence and post-invasion political instability. Following the invasion and eventual withdrawal in 2011, 9.2 million Iraqis were displaced<sup>37</sup> and 4.7 million experienced moderate or severe food insecurity.<sup>38</sup> Conflict and insecurity related to the increased presence of ISIS in Iraq caused further subsequent population displacement, with an estimated 5.8 million Iraqis displaced since 2014.<sup>39</sup> Although by 2017, ISIS had been pushed out of most parts of Iraq that they were controlling, 1.2 million internally displaced families have still not returned to their places of origin due to insecurity, missing civil documents, insufficient essential services, limited livelihood opportunities, and a lack of financial support to rebuild their houses and businesses.<sup>40</sup>

This situation has been particularly harsh for women. Women represent a segment of the population disproportionately exposed to poverty, food, and other types of insecurity, such as violence against women. Recent conflicts have also created thousands of widows and female-headed households, who are uniquely marginalized because they have fewer resources and safety nets, struggle to access emergency assistance and services available, and face unique risks during displacement and rising insecurity.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

# Findings: Barriers to Women's Participation



Though it was clear from desk research that barriers do indeed exist for women in Iraq seeking to participate in all forms of decision-making at the household, community, and national levels, our study still sought women's own confirmation of these barriers. When asked, women overwhelmingly responded that they experienced obstacles hindering their participation in political processes (80%), and - to a slightly lesser degree - economically (73%) and at the household level (62%).

## BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE COMMUNITY

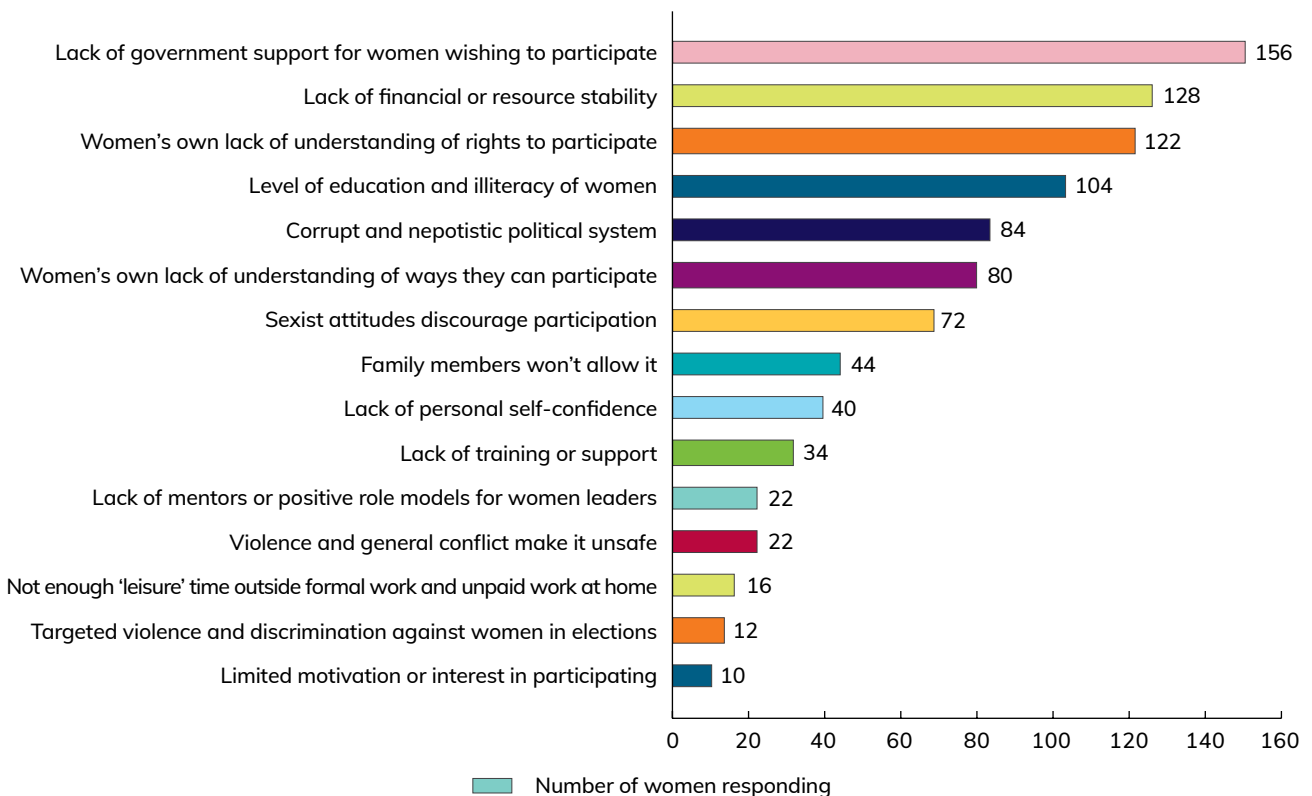


Figure 1: Women responding to the survey were asked to select from a list of sixteen options anything they felt was a barrier to women's participation in their communities. They were permitted to choose more than one option and also provide open ended responses in addition to the sixteen options provided.

When asked to choose the most significant barriers to women's participation in Iraq, women selected three top challenges:

- 1) Lack of government support (75% of women)
- 2) Resource instability (62% of women)
- 3) Women's lack of understanding of their own right to participate (59% of women)

At the bottom of the list of obstacles perceived by women surveyed was a 'lack of motivation or interest' on the part of women themselves to participate. This demonstrates that while women perceive their lack of understanding of their rights to participate in decision-making as an important barrier, that lack of understanding has not necessarily translated to a lack of will to participate.

### WHERE DO YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE MORE EFFECTIVELY OR WANT MORE DECISION-MAKING POWER?

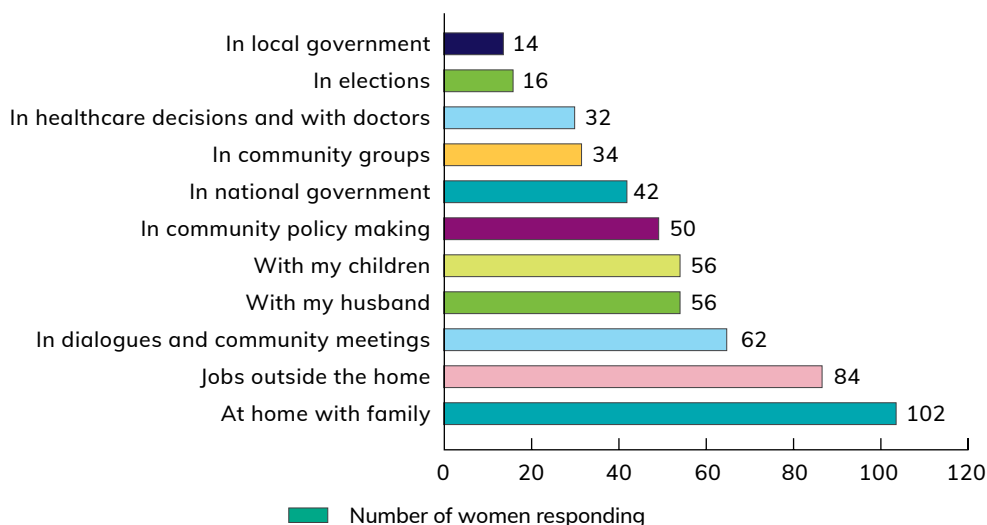


Figure 2: Women responding to the survey were asked to select from a list of eleven options of spaces that women wanted to participate more effectively or more decision-making power. They were permitted to choose more than one option and also provide open ended responses.

Women shared via the survey where they would like to have greater decision-making power or be able to participate more effectively in spaces where they may experience the most immediate benefits such as at home, in a job, or in a decision-making role at the community level at meetings or in policymaking. Yet it's clear that women wish to be participating more across the spectrum of household, community, and national spaces and processes, and they have prioritized a desire to participate in these spaces despite the barriers or challenges that they also acknowledge may face them when they do.

### Lack of government support for women wishing to participate

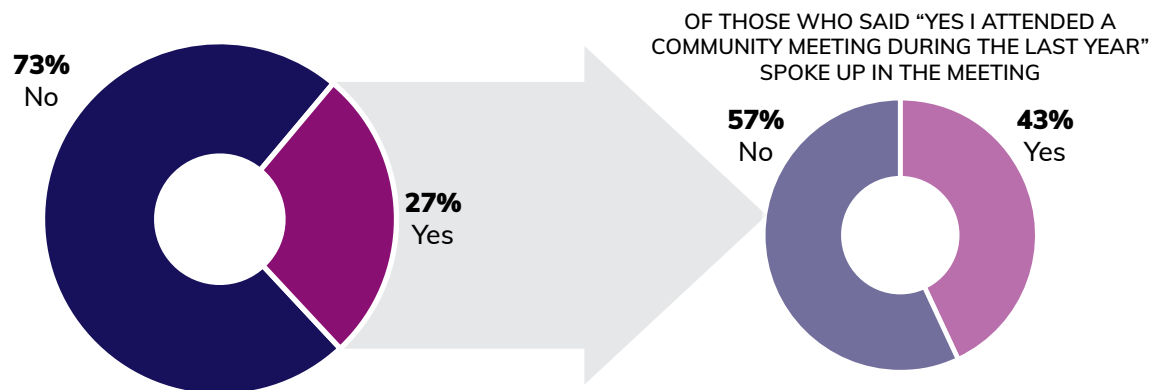
Women indicated that a lack of government support was a primary barrier to their ability to participate, in addition to the related barriers of 'a corrupt and nepotistic political system' and 'a lack of awareness of ways to engage'. The survey questions and statements probed women about their current engagement with their leaders, how they view the situation of other women in their communities, and how they view the government and political entities, leaders, and processes.

Survey Statement	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
1 "The dominance of male-led parties prevents women from effectively participating in democracy and expressing their opinions."	53%	33%	14%
2 "Inherited customs and traditions prevent men from voting for women in elections."	71%	15%	14%
3 "Most women obtained parliamentary seats through a quota and not because of the number of votes."	66%	16%	18%
4 "The role of women in parliament and political work is only 'in name' and not effective."	43%	39%	17%
5 "The public forums held in my community are often closed to some people - it is difficult for a woman like me to stand up and express my opinion freely."	31%	45%	24%
6 "Nowadays, women's opinions are valued in my community and they are included in making more equitable policies."	34%	34%	32%
7 "Women in my community have little voice in public discussions about development opportunities and future issues."	53%	33%	14%
8 "I don't mind speaking in front of a lot of people, even in the presence of male leaders."	71%	15%	14%
9 "Community leaders encourage me to express my opinion at public meetings."	43%	39%	17%

Table 1

Responses suggest that women appear to feel confident in expressing their opinions to leaders (#8 - 71% of women agree), but do not necessarily trust that their opinions will be encouraged (#9 - 43% of women agree), valued (#6 - 34% of women agree), or effective (#4 - 43% of women agree).

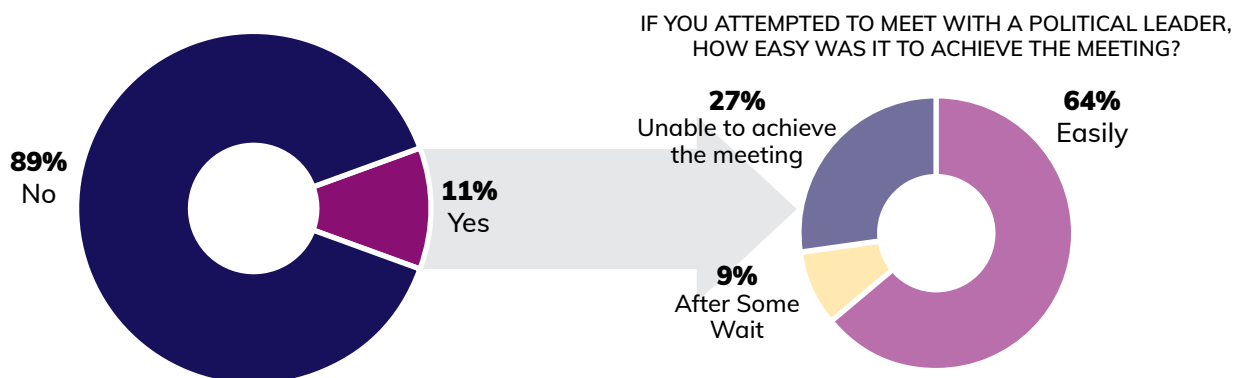
### ATTENDED A COMMUNITY MEETING DURING THE LAST YEAR



When asked about their actual public and civic participation, only 27% of respondents attended a community meeting in the past year. Of the 27% women who reported attending, nearly half (43%) reported speaking up during the meeting they attended. This reflects relatively low attendance at community meetings by women even though the survey responses indicated that only 31% of women actively agree that they feel public meetings are closed to participation from women like them. 24% feel neutral (Table 1, #5). This suggests that while women may feel that the spaces are not officially closed to them, they may not be attending public forums or fully participating at least partly due to the lack of encouragement (Table 1, #9) for their participation and the ineffectiveness of either the overall forum or specifically their participation (Table 1, #4, #6).

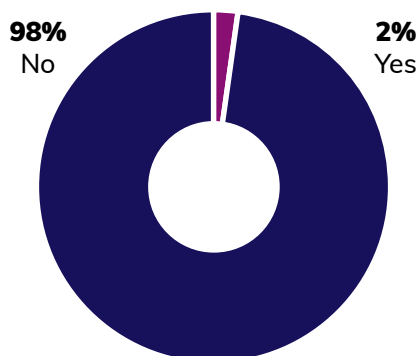
Yet despite the legal and policy frameworks that uphold women's equal participation, women's responses indicate that customs and the dominance of men's authority within political parties and leadership roles discourages men from voting for women (Table 1, #2 - 71% agree) and ensures that men dominate agendas even when women are present in Parliament (Table 1, #1 - 53% agree).

### HAVE YOU EVER TRIED TO MEET WITH A POLITICAL LEADER?

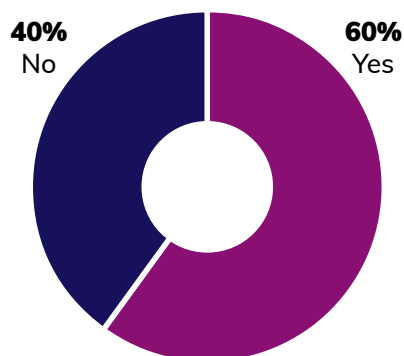


Beyond attending public forums, when asked about seeking more targeted meetings with their leaders, 89% of women surveyed made no attempt to meet with political leaders. Of the 22 women (10%) that did try to meet with political leaders, one-third struggled to arrange meetings or were unable to organize meetings at all, but two-thirds were able to meet with them easily. The survey findings suggest that when women do take the leap to participate beyond the domestic sphere, they are more successful than not in meeting with a political leader if they actively seek them out. But some hurdles do appear to exist – primarily in women not seeking out those meetings in the first place, and to a lesser extent in securing the meeting.

### HAVE YOU EVER PARTICIPATED IN AN ELECTION AS A CANDIDATE?



### HAVE YOU EVER PARTICIPATED AS A VOTER?



When asked about political participation as a voter or candidate, only 2% of the women surveyed had ever participated in an election as a candidate. 60% reported participating as a voter, and 40% reported not having participated as a voter.

In focus groups, women expressed that the idea of women working in politics remains a subject of debate and doubt among community members. Traditional and cultural expectations outweigh legislation changes when it comes to influencing women's participation. Despite some women entering the field of politics and acting as role models, some still face harassment and bullying along with low voter turnout and support for them.<sup>41</sup> For those women who are included in politics, their sphere of influence is often limited to 'women's issues' which creates reluctance for them to engage with women-focused parliamentary groups such as the Women, Family and Child Committee – which of all Iraqi parliamentary committees has the fewest members.<sup>42</sup>

Further, the FGDs revealed the sentiment that women are unable to actively participate in designing or shaping policies but rather are implementing policies driven by the men leading political parties or committees. Ultimately, women shared that they feel they lack a voice within political parties and the role of women in parties is considered symbolic and ineffective with no notable or visible leadership by women in the political movements within Iraq.

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“ **Although women participate in political work, they often do not have free will and the family men negotiate and decide on their behalf.** (Woman, Iraq) ”

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Despite these perceptions, women also shared that they feel that decision-makers and politicians have a crucial role to play in leveraging their political authority to influence and improve these trends. Women feel that political and government leaders can contribute to developing spaces for women's participation, acting as positive role models and mentors, and giving women more senior, substantial, and meaningful roles in government.

Women also shared that they felt that there was a role for government in socializing the constitutional and legal protections for women's rights to participate. Those protections face backlash in the form of social values and customs that reinforce stereotypical images of women's roles in society that suggest they should not be in political or economic fields of work or leadership. Compounding this gap between policy, law and practice is the lack of support and resources for women in Iraq that are dedicated to supporting women's rights. Currently, any support that does exist is particularly inaccessible for women.

Women's political participation is often confined to the context of women's quotas, and such quotas are not extended to groups with significant political influence like the executive authority – in this case, both the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. When women participate in politics it is perceived to be tokenistic and a means to fulfilling the 25% quota. In reality, at the state and national level even when women hold political roles at the state and national level, their level of influence and authority is minimal. Women and WROs shared that without government support through candidate training, addressing socioeconomic barriers to participation, and more programming to support a pipeline of women candidates across parties and branches of government, the quota system will never meaningfully expand women's participation and freedoms.

WROs also highlighted that there are some policies and practices being introduced by the government that limit the civic space for existing non-governmental programs and efforts to increase women's participation. In particular, they highlighted the challenges posed to their work when a national ban on the use of the term 'gender' was introduced in Iraq in the latter half of 2023. The ban was contextualized mainly through framing gender equality in opposition to traditional and religious values and aligns with a broader global pushback against gender equality and the use of 'gender' language.<sup>43</sup> All fourteen of the WROs that were interviewed as a part of this research shared the impact of their shrinking civic space and their renewed efforts to reduce their visibility in response to the prohibition on gender.



**All these things [the prohibition on gender] made the work of the women's empowerment organizations in Iraq really restricted and limited as they will refuse and block any activities as soon as they will hear the word women's empowerment NGO. (Accepting Others Organization)**



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Ultimately, both the IRG and the KRG have a role to play in translating policies and laws into practice by supporting women to take on more meaningful and effective roles in politics and government, by supporting efforts and programs to pushback against the norms that uphold a strictly domestic role for women in society, and by formally protecting civic space necessary for WROs and related groups to implement programs and efforts that seek to address these challenges and encourage women's participation across the household, community, and political spheres.



**The prohibition of using the word 'gender' in September [2023] led [us] to postpone our work. [This] made us struggle by creating challenges for us with the local governorates as they issued warning letters against the gender related activities, we managed to find the solution by using different terms. (Al Manahil Association)**





## Resource Instability and Economic Participation

Resource instability and women’s economic participation impact women’s broader participation in society and in their capacity and self-confidence for decision-making. 65% of women surveyed feel that women’s lack of economic independence limits their freedom to express their opinions and participate in broader decision-making. Many of the challenges that inhibit women’s economic participation are also related to or the same as those that hinder women’s participation and leadership. Women identified resource instability as a key barrier to their participation, and surveys and interviews explored how broad economic insecurity and women’s economic independence are affecting women’s participation.

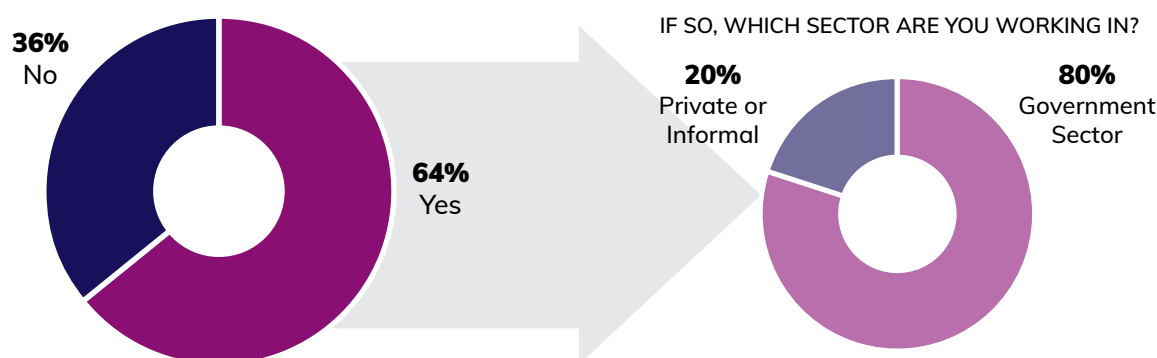
Survey Statement	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
1 “The wife must be able to earn money by working outside the home.”	84%	8%	8%
2 “The wife has the right to buy and sell things in the market without asking her husband’s permission.”	31%	60%	9%
3 “Women must stay at home to take care of their children.”	24%	68%	8%
4 “Women’s economic dependence on men limits their democratic participation and freedom to express their opinions.”	65%	22%	13%

Table 2

Most women – 84% – do feel that wives must be able to earn money by working outside the home and disagree – 68% – that they must stay at home to solely take care of children. However, women still broadly feel that financial purchases and sales should be made with the permission of their husbands rather than not (Table 2 - #2).

“**The need and economic resource pushed many men to accept the idea of women working outside the home.**” (Woman, Iraq)

### ARE YOU CURRENTLY ENGAGED IN INCOME-GENERATING WORK OUTSIDE THE HOUSE?



Of the women surveyed, most (64%) are engaged in income-generating work outside the house. Women noted in FGDs that many communities have seen progress in supporting women’s work and income-generating activities. However, they also note that this support tends to only be directed towards certain sectors, with society still resistant to the idea of women working in sectors - like security or engineering - which they perceive to be outside the stereotypical expectations of women’s roles. Instead, there is more acceptance for women to work in sectors like education, health, and some administrative roles, and a significant portion of society still feel that women should be homemakers responsible for family and children and unpaid care labor. These intersect with societal attitudes on women’s capacity for leadership and in how women’s opinions and recommendations are valued in community meetings or decision-making.

Women and women's groups' limited access to resources such as jobs, income and funding can interact with and exacerbate barriers to their inclusion in decision-making, as verified by women participating in our research, as well as by existing empirical evidence.<sup>44</sup> The limitation of resources is driven in part by the cyclical conflicts and displacement within Iraq and the broader economic context of the country, as well as the cultural and social norms around women's labor force participation as described elsewhere in this report.

The WROs we spoke to for our research also described how the economic climate in Iraq is not only affected by an absence of donor investment in women's rights but exacerbated by the economic consequences of rising global conflicts such as war in Ukraine and ongoing instability in the Middle East which have caused greater economic insecurity in Iraq. Lutheran World Federation, an organization working with IDPs and refugees in the KRI, reflected on emerging threats:

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“**The overall economic impacts of the war in Ukraine and now in Gaza, that is somehow affecting the economy here in Iraq, which then just further makes it difficult for women to have their engagement in their own livelihoods or some sort of sense of control over their financial status.** (Lutheran World Federation) ”

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The conflict in Ukraine caused the cost of basic goods to double in Iraq, with Women for Women International's program participants in April 2022 reporting that the cost of wheat flour had increased by 40%, cooking oil by 30% and kerosine by 80%. These price increases are largely corroborated by global estimates and tracking.<sup>45</sup> In practical terms, the cost of bread has increased by a third. Where previously 1,000 Iraqi Dinar (IQD) would buy eight pieces of bread, today's shoppers can only purchase six for the same price. In a population where about one in three people earn less than approximately 2,000 IQD per day (approximately US \$2.15, the international poverty line), the cost of bread is roughly equal to half a day's income and these price increases significantly impact household financial and food security.<sup>46</sup>

Even whilst women have greater decision-making power within their homes, there are rising challenges that threaten their economic security. In Women for Women International's 2023 research into the intersection of gender, conflict and environment, 78% of women surveyed in Iraq reported experiencing food insecurity in the past ten years, and cited inflation, high costs of basic goods, and reduced support from NGOs, as recent factors that have compounded their experiences of food insecurity.<sup>47</sup> The combined intersection of reduced access to resources, increased food insecurity and high domestic demands create stress and reduce women's capacity to take on leadership roles and engage in civic participation outside of the home, while declines in funding for development and WROs in Iraq decreases the capacity of civil society to address these challenges.

## Awareness and Attitudes Around the Right to Participate

Women’s own awareness and attitudes toward their participation in the household, community, and political domains were assessed through the survey and were supplemented by feedback on societal attitudes toward women’s participation collected in the FGDs.

“**Iraqi women have the desire and ability to practice political and democratic work, but they often do not find anyone to encourage them, so they do not know from where and how to start.** (Woman, Iraq)”

	Survey Statement	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
HOUSEHOLD	1 “A wife should not question the decisions her husband makes.”	28%	48%	24%
	2 “Women like me are just as capable as men to contribute to household decision-making.”	88%	7%	5%
	3 “I can make my own decisions regarding food for the family, children’s education expenses, children’s medications and special events (such as parties).”	78%	12%	12%
COMMUNITY	4 “Women like me are just as capable as men of contributing to societal decision-making.”	72%	13%	15%
	5 “Women need to obtain permission to participate in group activities, civic activities or electoral processes in my community.”	68%	20%	12%
	6 “If a decision is made in a public forum that could negatively impact your life or the lives of your children, you will not hesitate to stand up and protest.”	73%	10%	17%
	7 “It is very difficult for a woman to get an important leadership position in my community even if she really wants to.”	64%	18%	18%
POLITICAL	8 “Women like me are as capable as men to contribute to political decision-making at the national level.”	63%	13%	24%
	9 “Women can be good politicians and should be encouraged to run for elections.”	82%	5%	13%
	10 “It is men’s job to be leaders, not women’s.”	22%	66%	12%
	11 “Women in my community are aware of state laws and policies that guarantee them equal rights to democratic participation and freedom of expression.”	31%	45%	24%
	12 “The law does not guarantee women’s right to democratic participation and freedom to express their opinions.”	34%	34%	32%
	13 “As a feminist community, we are generally able to get our political representatives to listen to our problems.”	47%	32%	21%

Table 3

Most women surveyed felt that women in their communities are not aware of laws or policies that guarantee them equal rights to participate in decision-making, including rights enabling them to participate in democratic processes and express themselves freely (Table 3 - #12, #13). This does suggest that a lack of awareness is a likely barrier to their participation, in addition to some of the social norms that are hinted at in response to the other survey statements. For example, about half of the women surveyed expressed that political leaders listen to the problems facing women (Table 3 - #13) and 68% agreed that women need permission to participate in civic activities, which suggests again that government support and societal norms affect whether women do or don’t participate.

Women surveyed largely agreed with statements that said women are capable of contributing to household decisions (Table 3 - #2, #3), of contributing to societal decision-making (Table 3 - #4, #8), and of being good politicians that should be encouraged to run for office (Table 3 - #9). Only 22% of women feel that leadership is solely purview of men at the exclusion of women (Table 3 - #10). This suggests that women's awareness and attitudes are not the only barriers to women's participation, but that community attitudes and norms may also influence whether women are able to act upon their awareness and self-confidence.



**A large number of community members still believe that a woman's natural place is to run the home and care children.**

(Woman, Iraq)



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Women indicated in FGDs that they feel societal norms possess a strong influence and authority that can either negatively or positively impact a woman's status and her ability to participate and engage in free expression. Thus, they recommended not only raising women's awareness of their rights, but also raising awareness and support of families and broader society for women's rights to participate and shifting narratives and societal perceptions that restrict women's roles and participation.



**What most restricts women's freedom of expression and practicing democracy is societal stigma, which has gradually begun to diminish, but has not completely disappeared.**

(Woman, Iraq)



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## **Opportunities and Threats: Spaces for Engagement and Participation**

While our research uncovered clear barriers to women's participation in Iraq, it is helpful to also highlight the existing opportunities for engagement by exploring the existing civic space and understanding and preserving spaces where women are currently engaging or building awareness about participation in public and political life.

To understand how to increase women's awareness of their right to participate in decision-making, it is helpful to know the communication pathways they currently use to receive information about the actions and activities of the government. Figure 2 demonstrates that most women surveyed receive information from television and radio (59%), followed by colleagues at work (43%). 38% of women surveyed receive information via their social relationships (such as relatives, friends, neighbors, and markets) and 35% receive information via the internet.

## WHAT ARE YOUR TOP 3 MOST IMPORTANT SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT THE GOVERNMENT IS DOING?

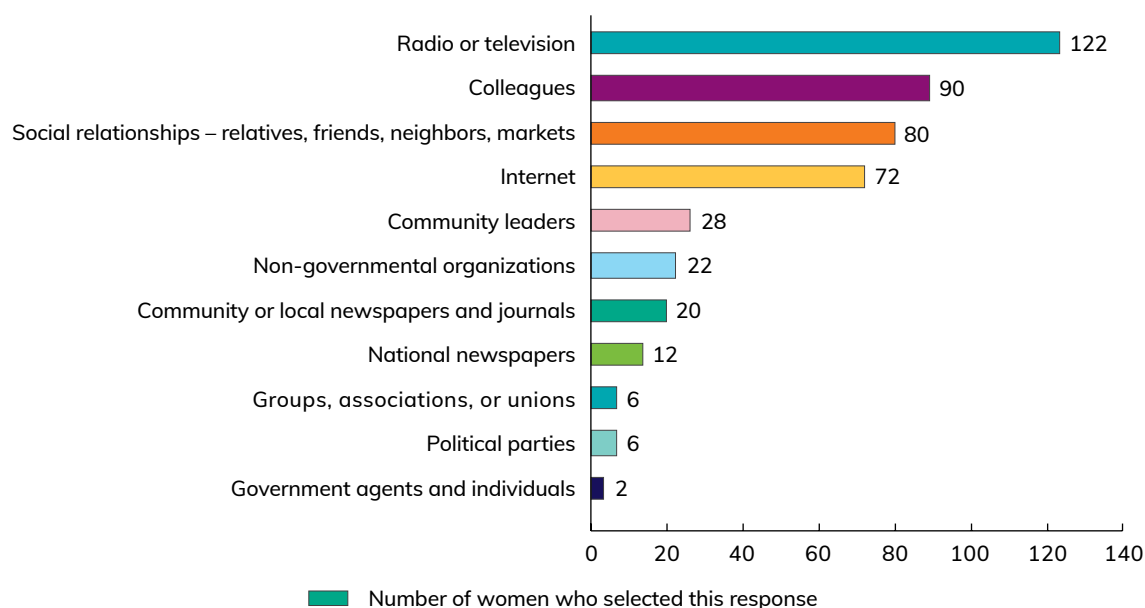


Figure 2: Women surveyed were asked to select from a list of options – including “other” - up to three sources of information they use for governmental or political updates.

The most popular information sources shared by survey respondents suggest that women primarily receive information about government activity locally and/or informally. Whereas the least popular sources of information on government activities selected by women were government officials and representatives themselves, followed by associations, unions, and political parties.

Even newspapers and magazines, whether national or local, had low percentages, with local newspapers being more popular than national newspapers. The responses reinforce trends uncovered in other survey and interview responses that suggest there is limited direct communication between women and the government. Further, the reliance on social networks, media, family, and colleagues to receive this information may indicate that the information that women are receiving may be filtered through the lens of the societal norms and traditions that regard women’s participation poorly.

### Civic Space and Civil Society

During interviews, WROs described the importance of upholding civic space and supporting civil society efforts to increase women’s participation. They described how civil society organizations – especially women-led and women-serving organizations – create opportunities for participation through NGO-facilitated safe spaces and holistic efforts to encourage women’s participation through addressing informal and formal barriers.



**We need to stay active as far as the advocacy goes and remain active in capacity building as there are many women across Iraq and Kurdistan that are not know their own rights, so we have to continue strengthening that, also we need to work to strengthening the women’s abilities to know they can be leaders. (Accepting Others Organization)**



WROs described their role as critical due to their holistic approach which includes direct support for women to support their rights awareness and participation skills in addition to facilitating efforts that address many of the key barriers that women highlighted in their survey responses. For example, WROs implement vital awareness-raising campaigns to address attitudes and norms within communities and in online spaces. To build more government support WROs build networks of allies for women's rights at the community, state, national and global level.



**Government should be engaged more in activities and support organized campaigns against cyber-bullying and against the social stigma and norms, and in promotion of women rights. (Iraq Health Access Organization)**



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In the KRI, WROs shared that civil society groups and spaces play critical roles in enabling women to access and influence decision-making by creating safe spaces, providing trainings and resources, and building awareness and support from the community for women's rights and participation. WROs highlighted that a key strategy for enabling women's participation is to ensure greater investment in existing networks and coalitions to strengthen women's movements and foster further opportunities for learning and collaboration.

WROs recommended a multi-agency approach for broadening supportive civic spaces for women to feel safe engaging with. This approach would include building new networks of allies within existing power structures like community police departments, the governor's office, and activists in conjunction with WROs. As Iraqi Al-Firdaws Society shared during their interview, this kind of cross-community collaboration is essential for long-term change:



**We are passionate to create safe spaces for the women, these spaces have been created with the help of the community police department. Additionally, our work and activities are in coordination with the women empowerment department in the governorate and the governor's office, they are supporting the NGOs working on the women rights and women empowerment. (Iraqi Al-Firdaws Society)**



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However, nearly all WROs interviewed for this report warned that the space and support for women to share opinions, collaborate, and conduct advocacy is decreasing due to the shrinking civic space for women's rights and backlash on programs working toward gender equality. WROs indicated that strengthened government support for women's rights and gender equality is critical to ensuring that WROs can continue to implement their work safely and effectively within communities. Amid a rising anti-gender movement and disinformation, the need for WROs to continue building a holistic enabling environment and undoing stigma around women's participation is fundamental to uphold and expand women's participation – in policy and in practice – within Iraq.

## Online – Social Media

Women and WROs often turn to social media as an open platform to “utilize their platforms to amplify (women’s) voices and connect with a wider audience” (Women Empowerment Organization, Iraq). Survey responses presented in Table 4 also indicate that the internet, including social media, is a key source of information about the government’s activities for women. This presents opportunities for women to engage with each other and in the public sphere about important civic issues. However, women face barriers when seeking to leverage this opportunity in the form of the resource constraints and social stigma mentioned in the barrier section of this report. This therefore impacts the ability of women to fully leverage social media and the internet as a safe space to participate.

However, there has been an increase in Iraq of incidences of direct and violent online harassment otherwise known as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). WROs and women leaders have been experiencing direct threats when they share their opinions or seek to advance their missions. WROs say this is a result of social stigma against women speaking up for their rights bleeding into online spaces and a growing “anti-gender movement” which has been manipulating constitutional provisions that protect free speech to instead target activists online who are deemed to have violated ‘public morals’ by promoting gender equality.<sup>48</sup>

Although TFGBV is used to target WROs and influencers speaking up for gender equality more broadly, it is also used as a targeted mechanism to attack women’s advocates during election campaigns. Women are often subjected to character assassination or hate speech through media and social media. The Executive Director and NGO Founder of Iraqi Al-Firdaws Society, an organization providing vocational and economic support to women supports this, they shared:

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**“ Social media and online platforms are really dangerous spaces for them [women] because they will receive direct threats if they express their opinions and ideas.**

*(Iraqi Al Firdaws Society)* ”

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While the internet was a top source of information about government activities, WROs indicated that there are practical barriers that prevent women from accessing the internet including a lack of access to mobile devices.

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**“ There are concerns about women’s access to technology, with an unequal gap in technology access between genders. Women have less access to smart devices and the internet, impacting their ability to obtain information compared to men. Additionally, there are issues of online harassment, electronic extortion, assaults, and bullying, leading to restricted movement. (Al-Taqwa Association for Women and Child’s Rights)** ”

Interviews with WROs and responses from women about which spaces they currently engage with information about community and government activities illustrate that whilst there are growing spaces and opportunities for civic engagement and participation, the rise in TFGBV and the broader rollback on women's rights signal that decision makers and community leaders in Iraq can do more to secure these spaces as safe platforms for women to express their voice and participate in public conversations and influencing.

## Positive representation

Women also described the potential of having positive representation of effective women leaders and mentors that they can look up to as motivators for their own participation. Participants in FGDs referenced the impact that Nadia Murad has had on their perception of self and motivation for being included in decision making. Nadia Murad is an Yazidi human rights activist and advocate who supports survivors of genocide and sexual violence. Much of Nadia's advocacy work is focused on meeting with global leaders to raise awareness of the genocide against the Yazidi people. This international representation of an Iraqi women leading in decision making spaces impacts community wide attitudes on how women engage with power.

Participants in focus group discussions also shared that they are driven to engage with decision-making spaces not just by global leaders, but by the work of local women in their communities. One participant shared about how she had been motivated by two local women that were denied education due to the social norms in their village and so they travelled to neighboring areas to complete their education and have since gone on to university and now have professional backgrounds. The value of positive representation and role models in motivating younger generations for challenging the barriers they face for engaging in decision-making is clear; you cannot be what you cannot see.

## Conclusion

Women in Iraq shared with us their motivation to participate in decision-making that affects their lives at the household, community, and national levels. Women are aware of their rights to participation and most feel that they are just as capable of speaking up in their community. Despite their awareness, motivation, and confidence in their own ability to speak up, they are less certain of whether their participation will be encouraged or valued by decision-makers and leaders due to community norms, distrust in processes, and domination of male authority in formal decision-making spaces.

Women in Iraq also share the dissonance between national level laws and rights frameworks that enshrine and protect women's rights and participation and the increasing constriction of civic spaces and a backlash against the gender equality and women's empowerment movement.

Iraq is also affected by internal and global conflicts which can create and exacerbate barriers to women's rights and their participation, particularly resource instability which inhibits women's capacity to participate and reduces their confidence in participating at the household level and beyond.

Government and NGOs should proactively work to support women's participation by creating opportunities for women's participation at every level and removing barriers to women's participation through holistic programs that transform harmful, patriarchal social norms and increase women's financial security, education, and confidence to participate in decision-making.



## Recommendations

Through their participation in our research, the women we spoke to in Iraq expressed clear motivation to participate in all forms of leadership and decision-making, despite the obstacles they face.

It is incumbent on local, national, and international actors to act and build on women's efforts to transcend the formal and informal barriers they face when engaging in the public and political sphere.

### 1. Government Support and Civic Space

Protected and inclusive civic spaces and platforms for women's rights create opportunities for women's participation and leadership at the community, state, and political level. Civic space across Iraq should be protected and expanded to ensure inclusive participation and a stronger movement for women's rights and equality.

- Strengthen and invest in existing networks and coalitions for women's rights to increase opportunities for peer exchange with other WROs within and across Iraq. This will enable further movement building, joint coordination and solidarity opportunities for WROs defending women's rights and their participation in Iraq without fear of reprisals.
- Given the rising cases of TFGBV, invest in and protect online spaces that provide new and accessible opportunities for women to participate and lead.
- Encourage and facilitate opportunities for inter-agency and cross-sector collaboration to address institutional barriers to women's participation. This includes working with local leaders, governments, community police departments and governors' offices to build allies in decision-making spaces that can facilitate women's meaningful inclusion and participation in Iraq.
- Protect, uphold and strengthen safe spaces for WROs and CSOs to enable program adaptations, trainings, workshops and dialogue sessions.<sup>49</sup> This should include investments into local infrastructure like schools, universities and government institutions that can support women's development of technical skills, awareness of political and government activities and actions, and confidence to participate.
- Enact, fully implement, and socialize laws that ensure women's right to participate in decision-making and exercise their freedom of expression without retaliation. Legislate laws that protect women within the family, at work and in society from all forms of violence and discrimination. Respect international agreements relation to women's rights and protection such as CEDAW and WPS.



**We promote advocacy campaigns and increase the percentage of women's quotas, influencing policymakers and legislators to establish laws and policies that protect women and enhance their effective participation. Additionally, working to create shelters or safe environments for women to protect them when they face violations. (Altaqwa Organization)** ”



**There are also mechanisms for local and regional cooperation with feminist movements, including climate justice movements, engaging in online meetings, writing research and reports, and through joint projects funded by international or local organizations. (Altaqwa Organization)**



## 2. Awareness and Social Norms

Findings from the FGDs and interviews suggest that adequate resourcing and investment for community-led programs that transform community attitudes to women's rights can open space for women's meaningful inclusion, leadership, and decision-making. These programs and approaches should take a context-specific and holistic approach to ensure that families and communities are included in creating and sustaining practices that build awareness of women's rights, self-confidence, education, and economic independence.

- Build women's power - socially, politically, and economically - through holistic programs, activities, and events for women to raise their own awareness and enhance their confidence, such as workshops, training courses, and mentorships. A holistic approach should also include programs or activities aimed at reducing barriers to women's participation at the individual level by:
  - o Providing job opportunities and/or trainings for women,
  - o Investing in small projects for women and training them in project management,
  - o Providing psychological support through courses and programs for self-empowerment to boost confidence, support health and well-being, and support women survivors of violence.
- Ensure that women's rights organizations and women leaders are recognized for their technical expertise and consulted with as partners for co-creating future programs and approaches that uphold women's rights in Iraq and enable their meaningful participation and leadership.
- Support and fund existing and new awareness raising programs and capacity strengthening opportunities to transform community attitudes and negative social norms towards women's rights. This includes programs that engage men as allies for women's rights<sup>50</sup> and well as programs aimed at providing necessary support for women to create a family environment that respects women's rights and encourages women to actively participate in decision-making and other processes.
- Ensure that social development programs and policies are designed with an intersectional lens to ensure that women with disabilities, girls and young women, IDPs and refugees, and those from diverse backgrounds can access interventions.
- Focus on the quality of education available to women and girls and enriching curricula with vocabulary related to women's political and civil rights to engender a culture that promotes and enables women's participation.
- Implement additional studies and research that center the voices and experiences of women regarding their participation, voice and leadership and share the findings and recommendations from these studies with decision-makers, practitioners and others.



**We need to stay active as far as the advocacy goes and remain active in capacity building as there are many women across Iraq and Kurdistan that are not know their own rights so we have to continue strengthening that, also we need to work to strengthening the women's abilities to know they can be a leaders. (Accepting Other Organizations)**



**Through the participation of females in our activities, we have role models who help increasing women participations.**

*(Better World Organization)*



### 3. Livelihoods and economic security

Women are overrepresented in the informal economy in Iraq, meaning they often have little to no economic security. The external environment in Iraq, complicated by the confluence of conflict, social norms and restrictions on resources, has had a significant impact on women's access to livelihoods.<sup>51</sup> As this research has shown, economic decision-making in the household and community is a route to meaningful inclusion and participation for women in Iraq.

- Integrate economic security and livelihoods support into all programs and policies related to women's participation and inclusion in Iraq.
- Encourage and prioritize a diversity of economic opportunities for women beyond the informal economy and in diverse sectors.
- Encourage employers to allow space and time for women employees to play their role in decision-making, both inside and outside of the workplace, by allowing them to attend meetings and public events during official working hours. This also involves establishing a committee for women's affairs and creating awareness centers that support women's participation, voice and leadership.



**Economic empowerment is our top activity in supporting women to take a lead and be independent in the community.**

*(Better World Organization)*





**Supporting economic empowerment and addressing issues like gender-based violence and discriminatory laws are crucial.**

*(Women's Empowerment for Peacebuilding)*



Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

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