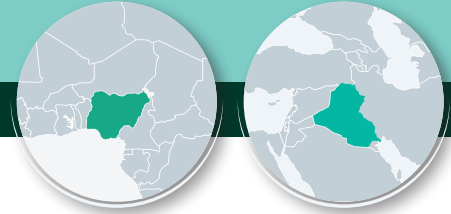


Listen to Women:

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

March 2024



Overview

Around the world, women are underrepresented in decision-making in the public sphere including in civic engagement, political participation and leadership, economic and labor participation, and peace processes. This underrepresentation is often a result of formal and informal barriers that women face when seeking to participate and influence across the spectrum of private to public decision-making spaces. Underrepresentation is also being driven by the global rollback on women's rights. There is a rapid decline in opportunities for women to influence peace and political processes and access safe convening spaces, while threats of violence and backlash are on the rise. Women in conflict-affected communities and contexts are disproportionately impacted by these challenges and face unique and interconnected barriers to their participation and leadership. These barriers persist despite women's fundamental rights to equal participation and engagement in public life.



Women's participation in decision-making is crucial because they are at the receiving end of everything - conflict, violent abuses... in terms of peacebuilding, they are the ones at home with the children and because peace begins at home, they should be allowed to be part of peacebuilding at all levels.

(Woman, Jos East LGA)



Developed in partnership with Baghdad Women's Association (BWA) and Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC), our research explores the barriers to women's participation and leadership in Iraq and Nigeria and suggests opportunities and policy recommendations for achieving full, equal, and meaningful participation.

Who we asked

Our research findings, presented within two standalone reports, is based on the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected using direct surveys (with 209 women in Iraq and 249 women in Nigeria), focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KII) with a range of women and women's rights organizations (WROs) in Federated Iraq, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Plateau State in Nigeria.

What we found

Barriers to women's participation include traditional social norms, gender discrimination and stigma which often supersede the implementation and enforcement of the policies and laws which protect women's rights to participate in community groups, activities, or decision-making. These barriers, often driven by patriarchal norms that are upheld by community members or traditional leaders, are important to untangle. Women's responses make clear across both reports that there is a disconnect between women's appetite to participate and their positive attitudes relating to their own capabilities, versus their communities' acceptance of these positive attitudes.



In our community, the culture says where there are men; women should not be found there even during politics they fix meetings in the middle of the night so that women will not be able to participate. (Woman, Pankshin LGA, Nigeria)



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)



Top barriers for women's economic and political participation

Nigeria

- **Lack of education or literacy:** If a woman is not educated, then she may not have the awareness or confidence to express herself on issues that affect society.
- **Community attitudes and norms:** Gender discrimination, stigma around participation, and gender-based violence (GBV) create direct and indirect barriers to women's participation.
- **Economic vulnerability:** This includes the impact of poverty on women's confidence and capacity, and the challenges posed by women's lack of economic independence and financial decision-making power as compared to men.
- **Institutional constraints:** Lack of government support and socialization of laws can weaken women's rights and status.

Iraq

- **Lack of government support:** Women feel confident expressing their opinions to leaders but do not necessarily trust their opinions will be encouraged, valued, or utilized.
- **Resource instability:** Women's lack of economic independence limits their freedom to express their opinions and participate in broader decision-making.
- **Women's lack of understanding of their own right to participate:** 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.





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)



Despite these barriers, WROs and women involved in this research clearly mapped out the road towards their inclusion and meaningful participation and the avenues they currently use to have their voices heard to drive changes in their communities and beyond. In Nigeria some of these included: **campaigns around elections; women’s groups, traditional media, safe civic spaces, protest spaces** and in Iraq; **safe online spaces, civil society and NGO facilitated safe civic spaces, media outlets.**

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION: FOR GOVERNMENTS, DONORS, INGOs AND WROs		
CIVIC SPACE	Strengthen and invest in existing networks and coalitions for women’s rights. This will enable further movement building, joint coordination, and solidarity opportunities. Protect, uphold and strengthen safe spaces for WROs and CSOs including online spaces to enable program adaptations, trainings, workshops and dialogue sessions.	
Context Specific	IRAQ: Enact and fully implement and socialize laws that ensure women can exercise their right to participate in decision-making and their freedom of expression.	NIGERIA: Match this with strong political will and funding to enable non-state actors and WROs to influence global forums and events.
LIVELIHOODS AND ECONOMIC SECURITY	Integrate economic security and empowerment into all programs and policies related to women’s participation and inclusion. Encourage and prioritize a diversity of economic opportunities for women beyond the informal economy and in diverse sectors.	
Context Specific	IRAQ: 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.	NIGERIA: Invest and fund local politics including election campaigns to ensure that women involved and employed in the informal economy have the capacity to engage and participate in election campaigns and local politics.
APPROACHES AND AWARENESS	Ensure that programs are designed with an intersectional lens to ensure that women with disabilities, girls and young women, and those with different ethnic and religious backgrounds can access interventions.	
Context Specific	IRAQ: Focus on the quality of education , with a specific focus related to women’s political and civil rights. Implement additional research that centers the voices and experiences of women.	NIGERIA: Take a context-specific approach to program design and advocacy. The conflict dynamics in Plateau State are unique to the region and amplified by rises in climate change, economic insecurity and gender inequality.