



## Iraqi Women in Civil Society

Hafsa Halawa



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## Introduction

In the years following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, a steady but growing body of women's rights actors has formed in the country. While the civil society landscape has weaved in and out of the political framework, engaging political leaders and female political actors, this body of women's rights actors has formed organizations, promoted women's rights and feminist agendas, supported growing civic activism on democracy and human rights, created their own networks, and formulated policies to be implemented at the highest levels of government.

The work of this new body of women's rights actors has extended to the formal participation of women in politics, supported by a constitutional mandate that requires 25 percent of parliament members in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to be women. It has also resulted in the formation of the Iraqi Women's Network, the Iraqi Women's Lawyers Network, and a variety of Iraqi women participating in regional women's networks across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. These actors have also engaged significantly with international interlocutors, such as the United Nations (UN), which has seen two processes for a National Action Plan<sup>1</sup> on implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, and has resulted in notable participation from women's civil society leaders in the development of relief plans for Iraq.

Throughout Iraq's continued attempts to transition to democracy, women's rights actors have faced significant challenges to further women's participation in a number of areas. These challenges have arisen as a result of infighting among women's networks, questions over a feminist agenda or women's empowerment working framework, and continuous cycles of conflict that divert focus away from tangible political developments to immediate humanitarian relief.<sup>2</sup>

The various conflicts Iraq has endured since 2003, compounded by the harsh realities that women in Iraq already face, has imposed even harsher conditions upon women, particularly those in conflict-affected areas.<sup>3</sup> The impact of the most recent war against the so-called Islamic State (IS) was particularly devastating for millions of women and children, who disproportionately made up communities affected by the occupation of IS and the three-year-long offensive to defeat the group.<sup>4</sup> Women and girls were

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.iraqnap1325.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Valeria Vilaro and Sara Bittar, "Gender Profile – Iraq," *UN Women and Oxfam*, December 2018, <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620602/rr-gender-profile-iraq-131218-en.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Hafsa Halawa, "The Forgotten Iraq," *Middle East Institute*, March 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/forgotten-iraq>.

<sup>4</sup> "Conflict Analysis: Sinjar and Hawija, Iraq," *Australian Aid*, February 2020, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ab0691e5417fc8a1ee9a417/t/5e4b018f71f6217a28cb0ce1/1581973942237/BPF-Conflict-Analysis\\_Public\\_.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ab0691e5417fc8a1ee9a417/t/5e4b018f71f6217a28cb0ce1/1581973942237/BPF-Conflict-Analysis_Public_.pdf).

subjected to prolonged displacement, sexual violence, and economic insecurity, among other challenges.

### **Iraq's Protest Movement: Women at the Forefront of Social Change**

During the October Uprising that began in 2019, tens – if not hundreds – of thousands of young Iraqis took to the streets across the central and southern parts of the country. Demonstrators took over public squares, which opened public space for swaths of young citizens to decry the country's economic situation, lack of employment opportunities, and endemic corruption among the political elite. The battle cry of “we want a country” voiced from the squares across Baghdad, Nasiriya, Basra, Najaf, and Karbala echoed across the country. Additionally, there have been acts of solidarity in other provinces, as a small but tangible cohort of traveling protestors joined fellow protest marches in the main cities. In response to economic issues and internal disputes, protests have also periodically occurred in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, physical threats of intimidation, and violence from security forces and popular militias that resulted in hundreds of protestors killed and thousands injured, the protest movement has continued and sustained a role as a significant, albeit powerless, part of the political calculations of the leading government's decision-makers.

Alongside these demonstrations, a growing body of civic activism has grown in the southern parts of the country in recent years.<sup>5</sup> Civic actors in the south have found themselves largely ignored or underutilized by the international community due to the focus of humanitarian needs further north or ongoing conflict and security threats that have resulted in the presence of a smaller contingent of international actors in Baghdad outside of the immediate diplomatic cohort. These actors have also remained rather absent from direct political confrontation with decision-makers or other powerful structures.

At the heart of this growing body of civic activism is a burgeoning group of women's rights actors and activists who have been working to serve the needs of women in their local communities. In southern Iraq, women's civil society has focused its efforts on addressing the direct needs of women and girls, such as early marriage and its consequences, including economic insecurity, domestic violence, and withdrawal from education; religious marriages; citizenship and employment issues; and violence against women in a variety of forms. Since the start of the war against IS, this collection of women's actors has morphed and grown, with younger women engaging directly and forming new civil society organizations (CSOs). As a whole, the women's

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<sup>5</sup> Hafsa Halawa, “US-Iran tensions in Iraq and the effect on civil society,” *Middle East Institute*, April 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-iran-tensions-iraq-and-effect-civil-society>.

movement in Iraq has organically expanded and now encompasses young, fresh graduate women looking to lead and pioneer their communities and the women within them, realize their rights and potential, and provide support and access for young girls, whether to increase their access to education or prevent early marriage.

### **Challenges From Within: Generational Battles Ahead**

While there are clear distinctions with regards to needs, priorities, and support within the women's movement in Iraq more broadly, there is an ongoing and significant generational shift occurring as the country emerges from conflict. As a result, cracks are emerging within the more formal collective of women's rights actors and activists.<sup>6</sup>

As women's activism and visibility grows within the country, there are a number of older, independent, feminist civic actors who are not only willing to engage but also actively encouraging younger women to engage, grow their presence, and formalize their participation. However, there is also a collective of powerful women – welded to either political parties or to powerful and large donors of varying international clout – who are keen to provide roadblocks to prevent younger women from gaining access to their riches.

Similar to civil society in a number of post-conflict countries or emerging democracies, civil society in Iraq can create its own web of corruption. Through the preference of “known quantities,” established and developed CSOs are able to absorb larger funds or expand their networks easily, or cultivate civilian-diplomatic relations over many years. Younger women attempting to break through and lead their own organizations or start their own programs find themselves excluded or unable to access existing networks. These types of scenarios are exacerbated by international donors who fail to engage with new actors on a regular basis and who apply lazy risk assessment barriers to monitoring and evaluating new and emerging initiatives or groups with innovative ideas, which are arguably better suited as agents for change.

This generational divide is not limited to the women's movement in Iraq, as noted by the sheer size and sustainability of the October Uprising. However, it has particular effects on the emerging power of a shifting women's movement that is sorely needed in the country. In addition, younger women engaging or leading parts of the protest movement have the relative benefit of the support and enabling environment of their male counterparts. Unlike the older generation of women, younger women have engaged with relative ease, a unique aspect of the new generation of civic actors. Young men are actively engaging in online debate with their female counterparts about the need for a feminist agenda and how women's empowerment from male supporters could shape women's active participation. Anecdotally, some older men

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<sup>6</sup> Author interviews with women's rights actors in Iraq conducted between January and April 2020.



are responding positively to the engagement of their young daughters in activism and civil society, while young mothers have decidedly engaged their small-age children, both girls and boys, in this emerging social movement.

These centers of growth and development within society do not represent the majority of the public, and there is no widespread sentiment that there should be and could be equal engagement in a number of public and formal spaces for women. However, to discount what does exist – however small – would be to ignore the calls for change and reform that do exist, both within society and the protest movement. While the women’s movement as a whole must still contend with the significant barriers society has placed in front of women, of which there is no exhaustive list, it is imperative that the opportunity to reform and challenge society’s mind-set is not lost.

### **Moving Forward: Forging New Coalitions**

Young Iraqi women, either those working in civil society or those directly engaging in the protests in a formal manner, voice a similar sentiment: the preference to engage with their male counterparts occupying the same public space rather than the older, established women within the country’s various networks. Formal participation is a tangible goal for young women, and one they want to fight to realize. However, many young women feel that there is little support to be gained from most of their older counterparts or women who have been co-opted by the complex political web.

The women’s movement in Iraq is at risk of a generational split that could rip it apart, forcing it to suffer similar fates of other women’s movements across the region, such as those in Egypt or Syria. It is imperative that Iraqi women do not lose the real gains they have made in a tangible and material sense over the last 17 years, while also accepting that there is not only much more room for improvement, but also that the goalposts have changed as women become more empowered as a result of changing environments.

### **Recommendations:**

- \* ***Forge coalitions and build bridges within the women’s movement to allow younger women more access and visibility to engage in a formal manner.***

A number of established and successful independent women’s rights/human rights actors exist within the country who are able and willing to engage and reach out to their younger comrades for better support. This support can include: i) capacity-building towards strengthening formal engagement; ii) reformulating the Iraqi Women’s Network to rebrand and set a new agenda; iii) extending political support to women involved in local civil society and the protest movement; and iv) opening access networks to regional actors and international partners.

- \* ***Create networks among and within CSOs working across the country.*** Beyond the Iraqi Women’s Network in a more formal form, women should create broader networks for CSOs working in different areas of the country to better organize, share experiences, and exchange knowledge in order to strengthen the broader capacity-building of civil society with a focus on women’s rights organizations.
- \* ***The international development community should reassess current involvement and contribute interventions in Iraq focusing on emerging movements in the southern parts of the country, including new forms of civil society.*** International development organizations and/or donors are encouraged to engage more directly with civic actors in the south to prioritize women’s engagement. These civic actors can include women-led organizations, female journalists/women-led media initiatives, and CSOs working with a feminist or gender lens.
- \* ***The international development community should target interventions in Iraq more directly and strategically.*** As a result of the tumult of the last decade and the number of uprisings across the region, direct country interventions have been tried, tested, and shifted among many international partners. These interventions are either regional in scope or country-specific and in many cases do not include Iraq. The development cooperation community is advised to move away from language related to “stabilization,” “resilience,” “conflict-prevention,” and “preventing/countering violent extremism” to re-establish traditional development indicators for interventions in the country. Donors with specific and targeted gender equality strategy goals are encouraged to increase targeted interventions in Iraq, strengthening the women’s rights movement as a whole.

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