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FEMINISM, REPRESENTATION, AND SUPPORT OF IRAQI WOMEN

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Policy Chair: Madeline Gavitt

Authors: Iman Alshawk, Hannah Bottarel, Cara Chang, Kate De Groote, Nadia Douglas, and Lucy Tu.

Policy Director: Sama Kubba

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Feminism, Representation, and Support of Iraqi Women

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Prepared for:

Dilshika Jayamaha, Supervisory Program Officer and Program Director of USAID
Iraq

Members:

Madeline Gavitt (Chair)

Iman Alshawk

Hannah Bottarel

Cara Chang

Kate De Groote

Nadia Douglas

Sarah Ramberran

Lucy Tu

Policy Director:

Sama Kubba

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Chair, Harvard '23

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Executive Summary

Women have historically been discriminated against by both the law and the culture in Iraq. This paper will explore the background of these issues, the current situation Iraqi women face, and ways to encourage positive reform to address these issues.

The recent Iraqi constitution created in 2005 contains provisions addressing women's rights. It currently states that women shall not be discriminated against on the basis of sex.¹ However, it also asserts that Iraqi laws should not violate the established rulings of Islam, which some have interpreted in discriminatory ways. Consequently, these vague requirements leave an ambiguous gray area pertaining to women's rights, allowing space for discriminatory interpretation and application of the laws.

Currently, women are underrepresented in government positions, although this gender gap has improved due to Iraq's constitutional provision allotting 25% of parliament jobs to women.² Many Iraqis are fighting to improve women's representation through activism, such as the recent protests in Baghdad.³ However, some demonstrators have been met with tear gas and forceful pushback from police.⁴ Many activists face the threat of beatings, kidnappings, and even killings from opposing individuals and groups. As a result, many activists have had to flee Iraq due to the violence and lack of protection.

Beyond this, some Iraqi women face harsh violence in the home, partially due to the ambiguous laws outlining a husband's right to discipline his family.⁵ Additionally, they are often the victims of honor killings and rapes, which are typically left unpunished, given that the police act as more of a mediator of disputes than as law enforcement.⁶ Though Iraqi activists are trying to combat these issues, their efforts are hindered by the aforementioned threats and heavy censorship.⁷

Further, women also face discrimination in labor and education, possessing fewer opportunities than their male counterparts. As a result, Iraqi women's illiteracy rates are twice that of Iraqi males, due to both the lack of opportunities to learn and the lack of employment opportunities that require literacy.^{8,9} Beyond these issues, there is also a deficiency in female-specific healthcare and access to mental health support.¹⁰

To address these problems, reforms must be introduced, starting at the legislative level. Particularly, Article 128 and Article 398 of the Penal Code, as well as Article 49 of the Constitution, pertain respectively to limited sentences for honor killings, the absolvment of charges against rapists upon marrying their victims, and the right for men to discipline their wives. Clarifying the contradictory

¹ Isobel Coleman, "Women, Islam, and the New Iraq," *Foreign Affairs*, January 28, 2009, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2006-01-01/women-islam-and-new-iraq>.

² "Gender Quotas Database," *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-view/148/35>.

³ Barbarani, Sofia. "Hundreds of Iraqi Women Challenge Al-Sadr's Call for Segregation." *Middle East News | Al Jazeera*. February 14, 2020. Accessed April 14, 2021.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/14/hundreds-of-iraqi-women-challenge-al-sadrs-call-for-segregation>.

⁴ Panel discussion on 3/24/21 about the 2019 Baghdad protests with Iraqi activists who choose to remain unnamed for their own safety.

⁵ "Iraq: Penal Code," No. 111 of 1969, (National Legislative Bodies, National Authorities, July 1969), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/452524304.html>.

⁶ "Iraq: Urgent Need for Domestic Violence Law," *Human Rights Watch*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/22/iraq-urgent-need-domestic-violence-law>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Iraq | UNESCO UIS," *UNESCO Institute for Statistics*, November 27, 2016, <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/iq>.

⁹ "Iraq: Assessment on Employment and Working Conditions of Conflict-Affected Women across Key Sectors" (REACH Initiative, November 30, 2019), <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-assessment-employment-and-working-conditions-conflict-affected-women-across-key>.

¹⁰ Raven Heyne, "Women's Access to Healthcare in Iraq," *The Borgen Project* (blog), August 28, 2020, <https://borgenproject.org/healthcare-in-iraq/>.

interpretations of these laws and improving the ability of police to enforce them is a necessary first step to aid Iraqi women. Moreover, protections for peaceful protestors and a reduction of censorship would assist Iraqi activists. Additionally, humanitarian aid should focus on aiding impoverished women, homeless women, and women's healthcare. Lastly, outreach programs focused on women's opportunities in the workplace and access to education could develop more independence for Iraqi women.

USAID can best assist these women by focusing its efforts on the domains of legislative reform, humanitarian aid, labor, education, and healthcare. To do so, USAID could provide recognition, support, and financial aid to NGOs, local activist groups, and grassroots organizations in Iraq. Currently, there are a large array of NGOs (see appendix) that are already lending aid to Iraqi women in these domains. By supporting these organizations, USAID could improve Iraq's ability to positively reform from within.

Introduction

Background

When addressing women's rights in Iraq, it is paramount to take into account how the imposition of Western ideals that have historically caused conflict in the Middle East do not account for the cultural and religious expectations within the region. As with any policy recommendation, when addressing human rights discrepancies in Iraq, one must first acknowledge that religious and cultural norms greatly influence the framework of morality, which differs throughout the world. Given this framework, any suggestions for addressing the human rights violations against women in Iraq must be addressed in a way which is culturally sensitive and takes into account religious ideology and traditional values or expectations.

Many scholars argue that Iraq's new constitution notes conflicting ideas regarding women's rights, which further complexifies the discourse surrounding intervention in women's rights violations. According to Article 14 of Iraq's new constitution, all Iraqi individuals are equal before the law "without discrimination because of sex"; however, the constitution also states that no law can be passed that contradicts the "established rulings" of Islam. Due to various interpretations of Shari'a law, women are often not treated equitably in Iraq even though it is distinctly stated as law in the new Iraqi constitution.¹¹ "Women's Rights in Islamic Shari'a: Between Interpretation, Culture and Politics" demonstrates that the historical oppression of women causes negative backlash against attempts to achieve gender parity from both governmental and non-governmental actors.¹²

Despite this discrepancy, Iraqi women have historically enjoyed more autonomy than other women in the Middle East in states such as Yemen and Syria.¹³ Many women played active roles in women's groups for civil service until the *coup d'etat* in 1968. The 1970 provisional constitution granted Iraqi women the right to vote, run for public office, attend school, and own property; however, the 1991 Gulf War and its sanctions destabilized the region, thus leading to a deterioration of women's rights in Iraq.¹⁴ Women were disproportionately impacted by the crisis, and the Iraqi government expected men to serve as "caretakers" for their wives.

The Iraq War in 2003 also played a significant role in women's autonomy. Violence against women increased, due in part to the fact that women were no longer guaranteed equal treatment after the Family Statutes Law was abolished.¹⁵ As the Family Statutes Law was not formally ratified due to instability following the Gulf War, current legislation allows room for religious leaders to interact in

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Dina Mansour, "Women's Rights in Islamic Shari'a: Between Interpretation, Culture and Politics," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 11, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1515/mwjhr-2012-0006>.

¹³ "Background on Women's Status in Iraq Prior to the Fall of the Saddam Hussein Government," *Human Rights Watch*, November 2003, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/wrd/iraq-women.htm>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Zainab Salbi, "Why Women Are Less Free 10 Years after the Invasion of Iraq," *CNN*, March 18, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/03/18/opinion/iraq-war-women-salbi/index.html>.

family affairs in whatever way they see fit. This disproportionately harms women by allowing different standards for women from various religious backgrounds (i.e., Sunni or Shia Muslim, Christian, Yezidi, etc.).

Concerns stem largely from historic divides and subsequent persecution. Oppression of Shiites under Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, executions of Yezidis under IS and their current vulnerabilities under Iraqi law, and alienation of Kurds, among other crimes, have led to an imbalanced allocation of resources as well as harshly entrenched lines between identities. In order to address women's rights in Iraq, an intersectional approach to various identities such as Kurds, Christians, and Sunni/Shias is of the utmost importance.

Current State

While Iraqi women enjoy various levels of freedom in different regions of Iraq, there are several areas in which Iraqi women have lacked adequate human rights. While these struggles can be attributed to the vague and discriminatory nature of Iraq's Penal Code and 2005 Constitution, the cultural and religious practices of the Iraqi people have often dominated the application of the law.

Political Participation

Women's limited participation in the Iraqi parliament has contributed to the ongoing inequality, as men are now the ones in the positions of power to make the decisions that affect women's lives. Iraq's constitution establishes that 25% of parliament representatives must be women.¹⁶ Additionally, women who seek to be politically active are almost always presented with obstacles. For instance, in the 2018 parliamentary elections, women candidates faced various forms of online threats and abuse, which, ultimately, led many of them to self eliminate from the race.¹⁷ Those who persevered through the challenges and successfully became members of the parliament are severely underrepresented in the most impactful committees, such as the Security and Defense Committee, the National Reconciliations and Impunity Committee, or the Labor and Social Affairs Committee, etc.¹⁸ Additionally, in many rural areas, Iraqi women are deprived of their right to vote; besides the overwhelming influence of families' suggestions on the women's votes, men vote on behalf of the women in many conservative tribal societies, claiming that women should submit to their families' political preferences.^{19,20}

Iraqi women have tried advocating for more protective rights. Their activism, however, has been countered with various forms of suppression. In addition to the common online abuse and social media censorship, Iraqi women activists have faced extreme levels of violence as a result of voicing their opinions. For instance, in 2018, Reham Yaccoub, a prominent Iraqi women's rights campaigner, was assassinated just one week after another activist, Tahseen Osama, was killed.²¹ These frequently occurring series of assassinations have served as constant attempts of discouragement and intimidation, disabling Iraqi women from seeking their rights.

Domestic Violence

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gina Chirillo and Caroline Roddey, "Gender Analysis of Iraq's Electoral and Political Process" (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, October 2019), https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/gender_analysis_of_iraqs_electoral_and_political_process.pdf.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ghazwan Hassan al-Jibouri, "In Conservative Tribal Societies, Iraqi Men Still Vote On Behalf Of Female Relatives," *Niqash*, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5847/>.

²¹ Alex MacDonald, "Iraqi Women's Rights Campaigner Latest Activist Killed in Basra," *Middle East Eye*, August 20, 2020, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-riham-yaccoub-womens-rights-activist-killed-basra>.

While the Iraqi constitution states in Article 29 that “all forms of violence and abuse in the family, school, and society shall be prohibited,”²² the law contradicts itself, as it mentions in Article 41 that men are permitted to discipline their wives within unspecified limits “prescribed by law or custom.”²³ This has allowed men to abuse their spouses without being punished by the ambiguous law. Additionally, the Penal Code’s Article 128 and Article 398 mitigate sentences for honor killings, which can be defined as the murder of a female who is thought to have brought dishonor to her family by a male family member. It mitigates sentences by giving rapists the option to be cleared of all charges upon marrying their victim, lessening the consequence of rape and implicitly furthering its occurrences.²⁴

Education

While the Iraqi constitution states in Article 34 that “education is a fundamental factor for the progress of society and is a right guaranteed by the state” and a “primary education is mandatory and the state guarantees that it shall combat illiteracy,” Iraqi girls and women have not enjoyed the same level of education as their male counterparts.²⁵ According to a 2017 UNESCO report, more than 2.3 million Iraqi females at or above the age of 15 are illiterate in comparison to less than 1.02 million of males.²⁶ While the constitution promises to grant education to all children, regardless of their sex, it is evident from the data that the law does not necessarily translate into practice. The lack of education access that Iraqi women has rendered many of them unable to obtain jobs that will provide them with financial independence and security.²⁷

Labor/Unemployment

Unemployment rates, particularly for Iraqi women, have remained high in the past several years. According to a 2012 survey, only 10.9% of women between the ages of 15-54 are employed for wage. While this percentage is slightly higher in the Kurdistan and urban regions of Iraq, women’s participation in the workforce is limited. The survey also indicated that more than 57% of unemployed women specified that they do not have a job due to personal reasons, mainly relating to family affairs, and more than 17% of unemployed women mentioned that their incompetencies, mainly lack of education and skills, are the reason why they are unable to obtain a job. Finally, more than 35% of unemployed women indicated that they are willing to work if provided with a suitable job opportunity.²⁸

Access to Healthcare

While the Iraqi constitution states in Article 29 B that “the State shall guarantee the protection of motherhood, childhood and old age, shall care for children and youth, and shall provide them with the appropriate conditions to develop their talents and abilities,” it does not specify anywhere else which

²² “Iraq’s Constitution of 2005” (Constitute Project, 2005), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Iraq | UNESCO UIS.” 2016. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. November 27, 2016.

<http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/iq>.

²⁷ Mironova, Vera, Abbas Kadhim, John Calabrese, Hadani Ditmars, Ross Longton, and Antoun Issa.

“Constitutional and Legal Rights of Iraqi Women.” Middle East Institute, January 27, 2021.

<https://mei.edu/publications/constitutional-and-legal-rights-iraqi-women>.

²⁸ “Iraq Woman Integrated Social and Health Survey (I-WISH)” (Ministry of Planning Central Statistical Organization-CSO, March 2012),

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/I-WISH%20Report%20English.pdf>.

ministry is responsible for providing that protection, leaving mothers with no tangible support.²⁹ Looking at the current situation of women’s healthcare in Iraq, there is a severe lack of access to female-centered healthcare, such as obstetrician-gynecologists and crisis centers. The latter is especially important, given that 37% of Iraqi women will experience violence from a partner or acquaintance.³⁰ In rural areas, access to healthcare is increasingly difficult, with the privatization of some healthcare facilities making it difficult for women to afford treatment, given that 85% of women over the age of 15 are unemployed.³¹ Outside of maternal healthcare, which in itself is sparse, there is a severe lack of support for menstrual health issues and a lack of access to family planning services.³² However, there is only unreliable data due to the sensitivity of the subject matter.³³ Mental health care access is practically nonexistent, which is especially worrying given the long-lasting impact of post-traumatic stress disorder and trauma from war and gender-based violence.³⁴

Defining & Integrating the Interests of USAID

USAID strives to end the need for foreign assistance, working around the globe to foster self-reliance, a country’s ability to develop itself in a transparent and inclusive manner.³⁵ After decades of political and economic turmoil driven by both internal and external factors, Iraq needs an internal and sustainable framework for growth. USAID Iraq’s five pillars — stabilization, humanitarian assistance, democracy & governance, economic growth, and genocide recovery & persecution response — all focus on helping Iraqis build themselves systemic pathways towards greater autonomy and development.³⁶

Iraqi women are critical to Iraq’s journey to self-reliance given that women are 49.7% of the country, but less than 15% of women are working or actively seeking work. Additionally, 28.2% of women aged twelve or older are illiterate.³⁷ Women are a bedrock of Iraqi society *and* a significant source of untapped human capital. It is important, therefore, that USAID Iraq view Iraqi women as essential agents and continue to incorporate gender equality into every initiative.

USAID Iraq has already begun to identify short-term stabilization efforts benefitting women by launching projects aimed at promoting long-term growth by stimulating local investment and networking.³⁸ Of particular note are the \$21-million Middle East and North African Investment Initiative (MENA II) and the \$125 million Iraq Durable Communities and Economic Opportunities Project (DCEO), which partner with other foundations and international firms to invest in small- and

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Siobhán Foran, “Access to Quality Health Care in Iraq: A Gender and Life-Cycle Perspective” (OCHA Iraq and UNAMI Information Analysis Unit, August 2008), <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/coordination/gencap/document/access-quality-health-care-iraq-gender-and-life-cycle-perspective>.

³² “WHO EMRO | Gender and Health | Programmes | Iraq,” *World Health Organization: East Mediterranean Region Office*, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://www.emro.who.int/iraq/programmes/gender-and-health.html>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Inga Gerdau, Jan Ilhan Kizilhan, and Michael Noll-Hussong, “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Related Disorders among Female Yazidi Refugees Following Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Attacks—A Case Series and Mini-Review,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 8 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2017.00282>.

³⁵ “USAID’s Policy Framework,” *U.S. Agency for International Development*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/policyframework>.

³⁶ “Our Work | Iraq,” *U.S. Agency for International Development*, November 18, 2016, <https://www.usaid.gov/iraq/our-work>.

³⁷ Valeria Vilardo and Sara Bittar, “Gender Profile - Iraq” (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, December 2018), <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620602/rr-gender-profile-iraq-131218-en.pdf;sequence=1>.

³⁸ “Economic Growth,” *U.S. Agency for International Development*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.usaid.gov/iraq/economic-growth>.

medium-sized enterprises and Iraqi human capital, especially in Northern Iraq where ISIS and then COVID-19 wreaked significant social and economic damage.³⁹ USAID Iraq has also committed to providing humanitarian aid and to rebuilding health, education, and public infrastructure in conflict-ravaged areas.⁴⁰

Much of USAID Iraq's presence is founded on initiatives to connect Iraqis to networks and funding, allowing locals to build tailored and sustainable businesses and civic engagement drives. These projects have not been directed specifically at women, but represent existing avenues of action for USAID Iraq to improve women's rights. By extending these resources explicitly to women, USAID Iraq can give them critical leverage in a patriarchal society. USAID Iraq must also seek new initiatives to target women specifically. Otherwise, fundamental gender inequalities will persist, and potentially grow, ultimately setting Iraq further back on its journey to self-reliance.

USAID Iraq has built a partnership model, collecting American and international capital to invest through local partners. USAID Iraq should expand its model to seek out local partners with explicit foci on women's rights. USAID has already made these connections; for example, it supported Iraqi women's organizations through the Iraq 2014 National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security.⁴¹ Recommendations below will note additional local organizations focusing on legislative, labor, and education reform.

USAID Iraq must continue to adopt a more participatory strategy, engaging Iraqi women at every opportunity, primarily through *connecting with local NGOs whenever possible*. These NGOs (see appendix) have an intimate knowledge of their communities' needs and cultural norms; they would benefit greatly from additional support if USAID Iraq were to reach out to their leadership. USAID Iraq can act as an amplifier, contributing funding and analyses to existing or expanding operations. Such support would advance women's rights while simultaneously removing implementation barriers for USAID Iraq. The goal is to build foundations with the women from the ground up, giving them the leverage to correct fundamental inequities resulting from restrictive patriarchal structures and historic persecution as needed in their own locations.

Moving Forward

Women's rights stem from comprehensive and systemic change; protections must be guaranteed legally, practically, and socially. This paper highlights five sectors of Iraqi society that will work in tandem to create sustainable change for Iraqi women: legislative reform, humanitarian aid, education, labor, and healthcare.

Legislative Reform

There are several pathways for USAID Iraq to engage with ongoing legislative reforms through local activism. The Anti-Domestic Violence Law is particularly pertinent given recent alarming reports of gender-based and domestic violence cases across Iraq.⁴² This surge is a consequence of increased household tensions as a result of the confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is expected to have long-term ramifications.⁴³ To address this emergent situation, the following measures should be undertaken:

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Countering Gender-Based Violence Initiative - MENA" (Banyan Global, International Center for Research on Women, 2016), <https://banyanglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/MENA-Context-Analysis.pdf>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "Iraq: Strengthen Domestic Violence Bill," *Human Rights Watch*, March 19, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/19/iraq-strengthen-domestic-violence-bill>.

⁴³ Ibid.

- Support and host legislative roundtables between Iraqi women’s rights organizations and the Parliament’s Woman and Child Committee, who draft the domestic violence legislation.⁴⁴ USAID Iraq’s support of these legislative roundtables would increase dialogue and collaboration, ensuring legislation is reviewed and amended to account for the distinct needs of Iraqi women.
- Facilitate networks between large-scale national women’s rights organizations (e.g., Organization for Women’s Freedom, Iraqi Al-Amal Association) and grassroots organizers in smaller districts and villages where there is minimal support or awareness of the bill.⁴⁵ With USAID Iraq’s social support, OWF and IAA will be better equipped to conduct awareness campaigns on the critical need for domestic violence legislative reform.⁴⁶ Consequently, USAID Iraq can drive positive momentum in garnering significant visibility for this draft, thus increasing the bill’s potential for success in the Iraqi Parliament and long-term implementation.

Current violence protection and shelter laws only permit shelter services to be hosted by government-run institutions. As a result, many women seeking shelter or violence protection are housed in prisons. It is imperative for USAID Iraq to actively support efforts to amend Iraq’s Family Violence Protection Law and Shelter Policies. Women’s rights activists and organizations, including the National Anti-Trafficking of Women in Iraq (NATWI) Initiative and OWF, are campaigning for the Iraqi Parliament to enact legal protections for the operation and existence of private safe houses and shelters for women by Iraqi organizations and their international allies.^{47,48} If passed, the amendment to the Shelter Policy would propel the expansion of critically needed shelter for women and children fleeing domestic violence. To successfully facilitate the amended Shelter Policy, the following measures should be pursued:

- Support legislative roundtables between parliamentarians, government officials, and local Iraqi NGOs (Organization for Women’s Freedom, Iraqi Al-Amal Association, Asuda for Combating Violence against Women) to promote public awareness of the amendment and obtain significant social support.⁴⁹
- Offer financial support to sustain and expand the aforementioned Iraqi NGOs critical women’s services, including shelters, helplines, and career workshops. In addition to the legal restrictions imposed by current Iraqi shelter policies, many NGOs have limited financial capabilities to provide the meaningful assistance that would guarantee safety for women and children seeking support.⁵⁰

Prominent women’s rights activists have detailed the intrusive and abusive government tactics utilized to discourage political action, including the deployment of tear gas and sound cannons, surveillance of activists’ homes and workplaces, and threats of assassination. Given the brutal repression and excessive use of force against Iraqi women activists, it is imperative that USAID Iraq supports the adoption of policies that end impunity for human rights violations against Iraqi protestors. To effectively

⁴⁴ Miriam Puttick, “The Lost Women of Iraq: Family-Based Violence during Armed Conflict” (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and Minority Rights Group International, November 2015), <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/909446/download>.

⁴⁵ Ruwayda Mustafah, “How to Stop Violence against Women in Kurdistan,” *Thomas Reuters Foundation News*, February 16, 2021, <https://news.trust.org/item/20210216130532-qf8i4/>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “Women’s Freedom Organization in Iraq Demands to Amend the ‘Family Violence Protection Law’ – Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative (ICSSI),” accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/6899>.

⁴⁸ “Legal Reform in Iraq, Anti-Domestic Violence Law and Shelter Policy,” *MADRE*, accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.madre.org/press-publications/article/legal-reform-iraq-anti-domestic-violence-law-and-shelter-policy>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

facilitate this pursuit of justice and dignity, while respecting the sovereignty of Iraq and the free will of its people, the following measures should be enacted:

- Provide technical assistance and expertise to support the conduct of high-quality investigations into violations against protestors. Support the holding of a special session on Iraq at the international Human Rights Council.⁵¹
- If it is proven that the Iraqi authorities are unwilling or unable to conduct investigations, support the establishment of an international investigation committee to conduct the investigation and seek accountability.⁵²
- Encourage Iraqi authorities to:
 - Establish a security sector reform program to protect citizens' rights to freedom of assembly and expression.
 - Provide human rights training for security personnel and strengthen accountability mechanisms within the security service.
 - Offer protection for demonstration sites and activists at risk of targeting.
 - Provide reparations for victims of protest-related violations and members of their families by offering compensation, rehabilitation services, and issuing a public apology. These actions should be taken in a transparent manner with a clear timeline.

These measures are critical to successfully break the cycle of impunity that leads to more cycles of violence, violations, and casualties. They would also provide redress to the victims and their family members and provide the best possible prospect for the success of early elections.⁵³

Humanitarian Aid

As addressed above, many organizations, including MADRE, (an international organization supporting women “facing war and disaster” through community-based partnerships) The Organization for Women’s Freedom in Iraq, (OWFI) and USAID Iraq have contributed to the safety and wellbeing of women in Iraq.⁵⁴ These efforts are crucial, especially in regions once occupied by ISIS. Researchers found that 70% of women survivors of ISIS were raped.⁵⁵ The trauma from these experiences is horrific. To support survivors within Iraq’s borders and combat gender-based violence (GBV) in the country more broadly, the humanitarian community in Iraq collaborated to form the Real-Time Accountability Partnership (RTAP). Partnering agencies include the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), and International Rescue Committee (IRC).⁵⁶ Though significant data on this action network has not been published, it is known that USAID and its UN partner supported these efforts with \$13 million.

⁵¹ “End Impunity for Violations against the Protest Movement in Iraq - Iraqi Al-Amal Association,” accessed March 1, 2021, <https://iraqi-alamal.org/?p=3267>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “End Impunity for Violations of the Protest Movement in Iraq.” Al-Nama Center for Human Rights, October 1, 2020. https://iraqi-alamal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/PolicyBrief_Iraq_Protests_2020_arabic.pdf.

⁵⁴ “Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq,” MADRE, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://www.madre.org/partners/organization-womens-freedom-iraq>.

⁵⁵ Shadab Shahali, Shahrooz Shariati, and Ali Montazeri, “Sexual Violence against Women by So-Called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS): Protocol for a Systematic Review,” *Systematic Reviews* 9, no. 1 (October 12, 2020): 239, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-020-01496-2>.

⁵⁶ “Iraq Humanitarian Community Launches the Real-Time Accountability Partnership,” UNFPA Iraq, February 10, 2018, <https://iraq.unfpa.org/en/news/iraq-humanitarian-community-launches-real-time-accountability-partnership>.

Efforts to support Iraqis following U.S. and ISIS occupation include the UNDP Stabilization Project, which provides \$105 million in aid. The GBV efforts mentioned earlier were allocated \$13 million.⁵⁷ It is clear that women's protection and equal treatment can reduce extreme poverty and bring peace.⁵⁸ This includes the Kurdistan Region, where Kurdish women's groups work to further rights similar to those working in the recognized region of Iraq. Similarly, the UNFPA in Iraq has worked with both Iraqi and Kurdistan officials, to further the health of women in the region.⁵⁹ However, data regarding the organization's work has not been published since 2019. An organization maintaining fruitful partnerships with local partners and researchers to ensure their work is productive is the Iraqi Al-Amal Association. They have conducted ground-level research on the living standards and conditions of Iraqi citizens from Iraqi researchers based in the country, providing a clearer picture of where their organization can make the most impact.⁶⁰ These findings yield the following recommendations:

- Allocate a greater amount of resources to combating GBV through shelter, labor and legislative protections. These may come from current COVID-19 efforts following the pandemic's hopeful slowdown to reinvigorating the RTAP Action Network program.
- Ensure that the RTAP Action Network, and the humanitarian community as a whole, is maintaining prior partnerships with local activists and organizations across the region to ensure the program is impactful.
- Pursue a direct partnership with Al-Amal Association; they can provide a framework for conducting fruitful impact measurement and issue analysis in partnership with local activists and researchers.
- Support the reproductive and general health of women in the region by providing monetary resources and allocating assistance to UNFPA's local partnerships.
- Ensure that this support is culturally appropriate and welcomed through open dialogue with women's rights leaders and activists in a respectful, transnational feminist approach, which respects the autonomy of local advocates.⁶¹

Education

Higher education also necessitates investment to ensure its heightened access to the public. The higher education sector has the potential to be integral to closing sectarian divides and fostering stability.⁶² Though this may not be a key focus of USAID Iraq, this is important to note, especially when considering the role of women across all regions of Iraq in higher education and their access. Thus, it is imperative to consider pathways to assist those in rural, urban, and displaced communities in pursuit of higher education. Aside from higher education, basic education is also necessitated, and there are many barriers in place preventing girls and older women from seeking education. In Iraq, approximately 1.2 million

⁵⁷ "FAE: Data Query," *U.S. Agency for International Development*, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://explorer.usaid.gov/query>.

⁵⁸ Leah Rodriguez, "We'll Never End Extreme Poverty Without Tackling Gender Inequality, Too," *Global Citizen*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/how-can-gender-equality-reduce-poverty/>.

⁵⁹ "About UNFPA Iraq," *UNFPA Iraq*, March 8, 2016, <https://iraq.unfpa.org/en/about-unfpa-iraq>.

⁶⁰ "About Us – جمعية الأمل العراقية," *Iraqi Al-Amal*, accessed April 12, 2021, https://iraqi-alamal.org/?page_id=3082&lang=en.

⁶¹ Nadjé Al-Ali, "Sexual Violence in Iraq: Challenges for Transnational Feminist Politics," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 10–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506816633723>.

⁶² Imad Harb, "Higher Education and the Future of Iraq," *Education and Conflict* (United States Institute of Peace, January 2008), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/46082/sr195.pdf>.

school-aged children and many women are disproportionately affected.⁶³ Social and economic challenges contribute to problems plaguing different communities that are also attempting to recover from ISIS, which include gender disparities and the lack of protection of women's right to an education. This is especially true for displaced populations whose first priorities do not include education.⁶⁴

There are several intersections between the attempts to reform the economy/assisting the labor conditions of Iraq and reforming access to education. When observing international provisions established for education, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Reform Project under the European External Action Service is a prominent initiative which seeks to increase inclusive access to skills and contribute to improved employability and socio-economic status.⁶⁵ The project seeks to expand vocational education nationwide, which directly contributes to the ability of the people to qualify for and obtain jobs, particularly through enhancing the performance of selected vocational schools to create and operate Centres of Excellence.⁶⁶ It intends to last for a duration of 4 years (2020-2024) and develops a framework for participation within the private sector. However, these benefits can not come to fruition if women are not included in these "nationwide" efforts. This yields the following recommendations:

- Develop a clear framework pertaining to the conditions of displaced peoples to ensure that they too have access to education/vocational training. (To be sure, USAID Iraq is a donor of the "Funding Facility for Stabilization" which among its many purposes in aiding the communities of displaced peoples, serves to promote youth education.⁶⁷)
- Specialize a framework dedicated to working more closely with and providing options to women within these displaced communities and women in more rural communities.
- Aim to invest more in vocational training beyond the private sector to allow the people of Iraq to have more access to the public and private sectors of work. After all, proper vocational training is a pipeline to an increase in occupational specialization.
- Heighten collaboration with local and international NGOs (such as International Rescue Committee, World Vision Iraq, and the Al-Mortaqa Foundation for Development) to have a more practical perspective of how to approach localizing and expanding education. When assessing how to make the services accessible to as many women as possible, keep in mind that women are deterred from taking the help from these NGOs due to the role of domestic violence in their circumstances.

Labor

There are several provisions in place to foster economic reform and increase general employability. International provisions, much like that of the European External Action Service, seek to promote inclusive and knowledge-based, sustainable economic growth, while also cultivating improved governance in that field.⁶⁸ Such provisions also seek to enhance labor governance and working conditions

⁶³ "The Right to Education for Girls in Post-ISIL Iraq," *OHCHR*, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/EducationForGirlsPostISIL.aspx>.

⁶⁴ "Supporting Girls Education in Iraq," UN Women | Arab States, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/5/supporting-girls--education-in-iraq>.

⁶⁵ "Job Creation Through Technical & Vocational Education System Strengthening & Labour Market Linkages (TVET Reform Phase 2)," *EEAS - European Commission*, accessed April 12, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/brazil/93404/jobs-creation-through-technical-vocational-education-system-strengthening-labour-market_my.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ "Funding Facility for Stabilization | Fact Sheet," *U.S. Agency for International Development*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.usaid.gov/iraq/fact-sheets/funding-facility-stabilization>.

⁶⁸ "Private sector development and employment promotion/ development-oriented (re-)integration of the Iraqi youth," *EEAS - European Commission*, accessed April 12, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/brazil/93407/private-sector-development-and-employment-promotion-development-oriented-re-integration-iraqi_my.

to simultaneously enhance socio-economic development.⁶⁹ However, even within these programs that have multi-million dollar budgets directed towards providing nationwide assistance, there are major shortcomings present. The length of these initiatives are ineffective as the programs range from 24-48 months, yet there are neither indications that substantial improvements are possible within such a short timespan, nor indications that these programs are truly nationwide. Additionally, much of these programs are aimed at developing the private sector in Iraq, which emphasizes the impact of privatization on Iraq's economic performance.

Even within USAID Iraq, MENA II supports qualified businesses in an attempt to diversify the private sector.⁷⁰ This program is also nearing its end, which prompts concerns as to what is next to continue economic reform and expand job opportunities for the benefit of the entirety of the Iraqi population. To address these shortcomings, USAID Iraq should be mindful of and implement the following:

- Ensure that these support programs are clear in their next steps or other programs are being established to take their place, while assessing effectiveness regularly, not only through noting how much funding these programs are receiving, but through noting how many people in multiple regions in Iraq are becoming employed. This ensures that the effects of these programs are continuous.
- Provide adequate investment beyond the private sector to ensure that these programs are in fact more nationwide and can reach as many people as possible. Expanding investment to the agricultural sector and catering more to occupational specialization can also ensure an increase in access to a multitude of job opportunities, which would yield progress with economic reform.

Reforming the above provides substantial ground to the reformation of the role of women in the workforce and ensuring that they too have access to work. There are disparities within women's work qualifications, such as experience, education, and technical training, that vary based on whether they live in an urban or rural setting. Women are able to attain work through their work experience, education, and technical training.⁷¹ Of course, there are disparities within qualifications based on whether one is located in an urban or rural area. A higher proportion of women are working out of economic necessity, especially refugee women.⁷² Among the many barriers for women to work include being unaware of labor laws and policies, discrimination based on refugee status, some regions not having written contracts, and a lack of education/training.⁷³ This gives way to the following recommendations:

- Provide more information on labor laws and ensure that women are aware of these policies prior to entering the workforce/workplace, thus minimizing any chance of being deterred from working. Groundwork and assistance directed towards local organizations and women-centered NGOs (such as NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (NGOWG), Bent al-Rafedain (BROB), and the Women Rehabilitation Organization) is necessitated to ensure this information is indeed as far-reaching as possible.
- Focus on regions with large refugee populations, such as Ninewa, Dohuk, and the Kurdish region of Iraq, to hone in on the discrimination and barriers they face in entering the workforce. By supporting local organizations within the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities that focus on the displaced ethnic minorities, and the women within those groups, USAID Iraq would be able to address the

⁶⁹ "Enhancing Labour Governance, Inspection and Working Conditions In Response to COVID-19 Phase I," *EEAS - European Commission*, accessed April 12, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/brazil/93408/enhancing-labour-governance-inspection-and-working-conditions-response-covid-19-phase-i_my.

⁷⁰ "Economic Growth," *U.S. Agency for International Development*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.usaid.gov/iraq/economic-growth>.

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

intersection between the economic reform that is already necessitated, and reform catered to integrating displaced peoples into Iraqi society.

Healthcare

USAID has undertaken several efforts to increase access to healthcare across Iraq, especially in the past year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Iraq has received over 4 billion dollars in healthcare-related aid over the past 20 years, making up 5% of USAID's total humanitarian assistance given to Iraq.⁷⁴ However, looking back through past USAID Iraq programs, there has been a lack of focus on women's health and psychological support, which can now be prioritized with the COVID-19 pandemic coming to an end.⁷⁵

Looking at what support USAID can provide to increase access and quality of women's healthcare yields the following recommendations:

- Keep the infrastructure in place that has been used to combat the COVID-19 pandemic such as food basket and hygiene kit distribution and rehabilitation of medical clinics, in addition to adapting the use of free medical clinics to those that also provide supportive women's healthcare. USAID could also consider adapting COVID-19 informational programs to programs that disseminate information about healthcare and women's health.
- Consider restarting aspects of the Primary Healthcare Project in Iraq, which ended in 2015. One important part of this project was the focus on maternal health, and this should be expanded to focus on women's healthcare outside of just pregnancy, with information campaigns to dispute myths that women's healthcare is only needed during pregnancy.⁷⁶
- Incorporate crisis centers and support for victims of gender-based violence into their current healthcare efforts, in addition to incorporating access to free mental health services, where possible.

USAID has a huge opportunity in the healthcare sector to provide women with what they have been without for so long and change the rhetoric surrounding women's healthcare in Iraq. As such, prioritizing increasing this access should be of the utmost importance to USAID Iraq when looking forward to post-COVID times.

Conclusion

Although Iraqi women's rights activists have achieved significant progress in combating long-standing issues of gender inequality and gender-based violence, disparities in political representation, as well as in access to healthcare, education, and workforce opportunities for women, persist across most regions of Iraq. Iraqi women face distinctive challenges due to limited appropriate legal infrastructure and services, which are compounded by years of international conflict and conservative cultural norms in certain communities.

As USAID Iraq continues its mission of facilitating gender equality and women's empowerment, it is imperative to respect Iraqi sovereignty and to recognize the power and free will of the Iraqi people. By collaborating with existing NGOs (see Appendix) that have established accessible infrastructure and

⁷⁴ "COVID-19 Response: Iraq | Fact Sheet | Iraq | U.S. Agency for International Development," February 26, 2021, <https://www.usaid.gov/iraq/fact-sheets/covid-19-response>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ "URC - USAID Primary Health Care Project in Iraq (PHCPI)," URC, June 11, 2015, <https://www.unc-ohs.com/projects/usaid-primary-health-care-project-iraq-phcpi>.

garnered the trust of diverse communities among Iraqi women, USAID Iraq can better ensure greater, safer, and more sustainable participation and protection of women in Iraqi society.

This paper outlines actionable recommendations within several domains for the promotion of gender justice and women's rights in Iraq. To address domestic violence in Iraq and the gaps in legal protection for Iraqi women and activists, USAID Iraq should coordinate legislative roundtables between parliamentarians, government officials, and local women's rights organizations (see Appendix) to specifically address the necessary clarification of Article 128 and Article 398 of the Penal Code, as well as Article 49 of the Constitution, among other provisions. To promote economic and social mobility for women, USAID Iraq should continue to facilitate vocational and educational training opportunities for women, such as workshops on career skills, financial independence, and business management. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored ongoing healthcare disparities in Iraq and around the globe, USAID Iraq can capitalize on global momentum toward public health equity by investing in free medical clinics and Iraqi community programs that distribute accurate information about women's health.

By engaging in each of these gender equality efforts, USAID Iraq will actively work towards promoting the standing of Iraqi women through education, the media, and civil society organizations in order to enhance women's role in society as equal citizens. These efforts will consequently foster and advance economic growth, social and political peace, and long-term prosperity in Iraq.

Appendix

USAID Iraq: Potential NGO Partners			
LEGISLATIVE REFORM	ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN'S FREEDOM IN IRAQ	IRAQI AL-AMAL ASSOCIATION	ASUDA FOR COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
HUMANITARIAN AID	ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN'S FREEDOM IN IRAQ	MADRE	INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE
LABOR	NGO WORKING GROUP ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY	BENT AL-RAFEDAIN	WOMEN REHABILITATION ORGANIZATION
EDUCATION	INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE	WORLD VISION IRAQ	AL-MORTAQA FOUNDATION FOR DEVELOPMENT
HEALTHCARE	IRAQ HEALTH ACCESS ORGANIZATION	ZHIAN ORGANIZATION	DOCTOR'S AID FOR MEDICAL ACTIVITIES

This chart depicts relevant organizations fighting for reform in Iraq, classified by the areas of reform that are working with. USAID could consider partnering with our offering financial support to these organizations in order to boost positive growth.

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