OPENING UP NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN IRAQ

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

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The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that has supported democratic institutions and practices in every region of the world for more than three decades. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to establish and strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. NDI conducts public opinion research to identify issues of public concern, track shifts in public perceptions and opinions, and contribute to evidence-based dialogue on policy and development programs.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A new round of focus groups primarily in Iraq's recently liberated and disputed areas reveals how the conflict with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), along with growing public awareness of the lack of women's equality in Iraq, has contributed to demand for more rights and freedoms for Iraqi women. However, this drive toward a better status within society for women is far from complete and clashes with pervasive resistance to a larger role for women in household decision making, the workforce, and politics. As a whole, these focus groups suggest women in Iraq are at a pivot point when it comes to equality, facing both new opportunities to further improve their status and formidable pushback from those with more traditional values.

Many men and women in these groups hold traditional views toward women in Iraq. These values largely come from religion, which few are willing to challenge openly. Others come from men who view the gains of women as zero-sum and worry about what it means for their own status as they struggle with already-limited job opportunities. Barriers for women arise from all aspects of life, including from family members concerned about shaming if women leave the house, society's preconceived notions of a woman's abilities, and women's actual experiences with abuse and sexual harassment inside and outside the home. They suggest that any recent gains for women are not guaranteed to hold, and provide a reminder that even the concept of gender equality is not a goal for everyone.

Unsurprisingly, the dichotomy of views toward women in families and in the workforce extends to the ways they are viewed in relation to political involvement and access to offices delivering government services, such as police stations and agencies responsible for things like passports, retirement, pension distribution, and post-conflict funds for widows and reconstruction. These focus groups help illuminate just how high the barriers are for women in gaining more access to justice and security services as well as obtaining leadership and political roles.

Yet, participants also note many gains Iraqi women have made even in just the past few years, partially as a result of surviving the harrowing experience of living under ISIS and losing male income earners in the household. Many of these participants share their experiences with loss and equally incredible stories of resilience and adaptation. From their experience with conflict, some of these women say they gained confidence and a larger foothold in the workforce, which led to more decision-making power in the household and a greater understanding of the need to

> **"There are two sides. One side which calls for the liberation of women to be similar with the western women, and the other who calls for women to follow old principles and show no progress. There is a middle direction which is what God intended for women, to be educated and manage herself by herself, to be strong and face the situations which she meets."**
>
> *-A woman in Kirkuk*

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have more women in leadership roles. If conflict empowered many of these women, bureaucracy, resistance from their own families and communities, and harassment may be halting or reversing many of those gains.

In addition to detailing the findings of the focus group discussions, this report explores avenues to build on the socio-cultural changes occurring in Iraq with respect to gender and create more openings for women that would raise their status and chip away at barriers to their further empowerment. Some of these openings likely need to be seized by courageous political leaders, for example through the passage of laws meant to protect women and by help-

ing to normalize women's place in senior political positions. Many participants already think women may be better positioned to contribute to certain public policies, such as fighting corruption or dealing with issues related to the home, which could span education, health, and the economy. But other opportunities to improve the role of women do not have to be so high-profile. Small changes in the way local government and law enforcement services are provided, or giving women more leadership roles outside of government, in civil society organizations or local hospitals and schools, could help bolster the change that has already begun without requiring widespread political agreement.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Women and gender roles in Iraq have been shaped by societal norms, politics, and waves of internal conflict, most recently by the brutal ISIS occupation of one-third of the country's territory. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) seeks to provide insight into Iraqi perceptions of the role women play in society and politics, particularly in Iraq's disputed and ISIS-liberated areas. This report on the findings of these focus groups also builds on NDI pre- and post-ISIS polling research on gender roles in Iraq.

The focus groups aim to identify perspectives on women's place and role in post-ISIS Iraqi society and the governance priorities in their communities, and assess women's trust in governing institutions. Focus groups explore what public services women and girls prioritize and how they can be improved to meet their needs. They also look for potential shifts in society's perception of women in public life, including their current public presence; the roles women should have in local and national governance; women's roles in politics; what hinders women's leadership at all levels; and how women's roles can be strengthened. The research seeks to identify if and how women can contribute to social cohesion, and the role of women in rebuilding communities and how this can be supported, including how the post-conflict environment has created space for women to play a larger role in shaping communities and bridging ethnic divides. Finally, the research aims to make policy and programming recommendations for women's increased participation in stabilizing and developing their communities.

Women's Condition in Iraq. After experiencing considerable gains in gender equality before the 1980s, including greater access to education, health care, employment, and political space, women in Iraq saw their roles reduced as a result of the first Gulf War (1991) and the UN sanctions that followed. Intermittent conflict, including the 2003 war, sectarian violence that peaked in 2006-2007, and the ISIS occupation in 2014, further worsened women's condition in Iraq. Although studies conducted since 2005 show moments of increased sense of improving conditions, numerous structural, cultural, economic, and security barriers remain in the way of a more gender-inclusive and equitable society.

One of the main obstacles is Iraq's insufficiently developed and sometimes contradictory legal framework, which does not provide sufficient protection to women's rights. Iraq's 2005 Constitution states that all Iraqis are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination based on sex, but it also cites Islam as the basic source of legislation and forbids the passing of laws contradictory to its "established rulings." Article 41 allows each religious group in Iraq to govern its own personal status matters. Consequently, the 1959 Personal Status law continues to be periodically challenged by legislative initiatives aiming to, for example, reduce the legal age for women's marriage to as low as nine years, or increase

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the discriminatory treatment of women by changing inheritance rights as well as divorced women's rights to the marital home, maintenance, dowry, and child custody. Additionally, article 409 of the Iraqi Penal Code states: "Any person who surprises his wife in the act of adultery or finds his girlfriend in bed with her lover and kills them immediately or one of them or assaults one of them so that he or she dies or is left permanently disabled is punishable by a period of detention not exceeding 3 years," while the general punishment for premeditated crime is 20 years in prison. Despite pressure from the international community, Iraq has not passed legal protections against domestic violence. Crimes such as sexual abuse and honor killing often go unpunished as they seldom get reported. More recently, gender-based violence saw a new peak in Iraq, when tens of thousands of women were kidnapped, raped, or murdered by ISIS.

Women continue to face restricted civil liberties in Iraq, as they are unable to obtain a passport and travel outside the country without the approval of a male relative, despite a constitutional guarantee of the right of all citizens to travel within the country and to choose their place of residence. The recent conflicts have further affected women's freedom of movement and access to public space. While women are not able to leave their homes due to security concerns or social pressure, others have to become breadwinners for their families in the absence of or due to inability of a male provider.

A quota requiring that at least 25 percent seats in the federal legislature and provincial councils are held by women supports women's political participation in Iraq. In the regional parliament of Iraqi Kurdistan there is a 30 percent quota in place. Women are protected from discrimination in the workplace by the 1987 Labor Code, while the 2015 Labor Law explicitly defines sexual harassment. However, intimidation, defamation, and targeted killings of women who are active in the public space are a constant issue in Iraq. For instance, just in 2018, numerous women candidates running

for parliamentary office were victims of a slander campaign. Women activists participating in demonstrations in Basra were intimidated, harassed on social media, or ever murdered, as in the case of Suad al-Ali. Others, such as the fashion model Tara Fares who was killed in Baghdad, were targeted for not confining themselves to stereotypical roles portrayed equally by society and the media: mother and homemaker.

Methodology Overview. This report is based on 12 focus groups conducted for NDI by JPM, GQR, and local partner IIACSS. By design, most of the focus groups occur in liberated and disputed areas, with two each in Ninewa, Anbar, Kirkuk, and Salahaddin; and separately, two each in Baghdad and Erbil. Each group is demographically homogenous (e.g., only women, Sunni, ages 20-40). To ensure homogeneity and open conversation among more like-minded individuals the set of focus groups are also divided between those who are more (in five groups) and less (in seven groups) open to a larger role for women in Iraqi society based on their responses to a short screening questionnaire implemented during the recruitment. Seven of the 12 groups comprise women; eight comprise Arab Sunni, two Shia, and one each Kurds and Turkmen. Of the 12 groups, three consist of previously displaced returnees, three consist of those in liberated areas that did not leave during the conflict with ISIS, one consists of internally displaced persons, and another one of host community members.

All findings are qualitative and inherently not statistically representative. They are based on the opinions of 110 participants selected by pre-determined specifications, which can be found in Appendix 1. This report supplements this team's findings from regular qualitative and quantitative research in Iraq dating back to 2010.

The focus group analysis aims to capture themes, major conclusions, and points of tension as opposed to following the structured question-by-question of focus group guidelines as this latter approach risks falling into a more descriptive style,

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or straight reporting, and excludes the core benefit provided by qualitative research—depth, imagery, and expression. Several analysts read all transcripts to create hypotheses and key takeaways. Quantitative scoring for exercises is used, not as a way to get statistical insights into views, but as a way to see how participants ordinally rank certain ideas or concepts to give more texture to their views (Appendix 2). The team then creates a compendium of quotes that fit within each theme before compiling the report organized by themes.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS KEY FINDINGS

BACKDROP: NEGATIVE MOOD DRIVEN BY LACK OF JOBS, SERVICES, AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Almost all participants say Iraq is going in the wrong direction, showing little faith in government's ability to fix problems with unemployment, basic services, and the reconstruction necessary to rebuild their lives. They identify limited jobs as the leading challenge facing both men and women. In particular, they note that many people with higher education and degrees cannot find jobs in their fields, believing that the only route to gainful employment is through connections or paying bribes. A woman from Anbar says "There are lots of graduates but no job opportunities, they graduate and work in a grocery store or in a barbershop. We were worn out as we saw them working hard and exhausting themselves [in school], and in the end, they got their degree and sat at home."

Many cite the lack of services available to make their lives better, including problems ranging from lack of water to difficulty interacting with government agencies. They feel that only the corrupt can get ahead and get what they need. A widow in Anbar says, "The government supports the powerful and the people who know the big guys, and I don't have anyone." Alarmingly several participants in the Sunni areas feel that the government in Baghdad is again ignoring them, comparing this time to the period before ISIS arrived.

These concerns are exacerbated by a sense of political powerlessness. Participants blame politicians for the difficulties the country faces. They view elections as "predetermined" that put in place a government filled with political leaders that are "self interested" and without "new faces." These focus groups take place right after the new government in Baghdad formed, but there is little sense that politics or the government will change or be responsive to the people's needs. A man in Salahaddin says, "There is not a good central government that is leading this country in the right direction. They aren't trying to help us they are trying to get rich they are playing soccer with our money and futures."

Instead, participants identify the protests, not elections, as a democratic practice that allows the people's voice to be expressed. Some see the protests as an effective means to bring change. A woman from Baghdad says, "From where I see it, the central government allowed the people in Basra province to practice their rights by letting them demonstrate, which means things are going in the right direction in my opinion." Another Baghdad woman disagrees, "When she said having people demonstrating is a good thing, I see it as a waste because nothing changed, because some of them were hurt and nothing positive happened."

Despite participants' concerns and lack of faith in political leadership, there is general agreement that the security situation has improved. A woman from Erbil says, "I think that the security situation is

now better than a few years ago when ISIS was existing. We are now in a much better situation with less terror groups." Participants are cognizant of the fact that these improvements in security open up more opportunities for them in other aspects of their lives such as reconstruction and aid from non-profit organizations.

Along with an improving security situation, there is a sense that sectarianism, which many participants see as being caused by political leaders and foreign actors, is also improving.

Both Shia and Sunni participants note that Iraqi citizens are increasingly comfortable living and working together. They share a view that unity is the only way to fend off the instigators of sectarianism, whom they primarily identify as political parties, foreign countries, and extremists. A man in Ninewa says, "We already reconciled society, and even after ISIS there is no difference between Kurd and Arab or Sunni and Shia, and it's a shame to use these names, all that is just politician games."

> **"A woman in Ninewa says, "Even men are very tired. That is why you have to be ok with women also working and helping. The situation that we were put into was extraordinary. Most of the people here had to leave their homes and now are renting somewhere else especially after the ISIS disaster… and when the man's job can't cover all expenses the women have to contribute [income] to the home much more."**
>
> *-A woman in Ninewa*

IN POST-ISIS IRAQ, OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATION AND OPENINGS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Large societal changes have historically impacted women's rights, and the ISIS conflict is no exception. A woman in Ninewa says, "To be honest after the war against Iran things changed and we gained things, so did the ISIS war. It brought out our potential because it was not only the men challenged daily now.

We aren't scared of anything anymore. We are decision makers now. It was a big decision whether to leave our homes or not. The man had to make big decisions and the snipers were hunting people in the streets. That brought families together because of the size of the decisions and made us believe in each other."

Participants note that there are significantly improved communications between the public and security forces, mainly in helping detect potential ISIS members, other terrorist groups, or criminal activities. A man from Ninewa says, "Now if I see anything suspicious, I will just go and tell the soldier all that happened because the people get tired of what happens and they learn from the past. Before ISIS if people saw something wrong they just ignored it." An Anbar man when asked what women can do to stop similar situations that led to ISIS says, "Women should report any suspicious acts to the law enforcement, tribes, and the army."

Participants, however, are more likely to blame political parties and the government for ISIS than to see them as a partner to stop ISIS or other terrorist organizations from sprouting. They share a sense that political divisions raised sectarian tensions and thus allowed ISIS to emerge in the country. A Baghdad woman says, "The government was responsible for bringing ISIS." Some participants note the need for better border control to stop ISIS fighters from entering the country, while others mention the need for more employment opportunities and better education for Iraqi children.

Many participants also note that in post-ISIS Iraq, women's freedoms have actually increased. Despite the widely held traditional views of genders, most of these participants recognize that things are changing for women, and doing so abruptly. While a few say these changes have occurred over the past few decades dating back to the war with Iran, most say that these changes are occurring in just the past few years as a result of conflict with ISIS. Many of these participants paint a picture of women emerging from their traditional roles and note a growing

demand for more rights as they increasingly contribute to the workforce or in politics, which in turn, also impacts the role of women at home.

Living through ISIS made women stronger, more resilient, more self-reliant, and less fearful. A woman in Anbar says, "We used to say that the Palestinian woman is really something, but now the Iraqi woman resembles a mountain of endurance. She has endured more than any other woman in the world."

But this is not just a change in mentality, and participants feel the conflict with ISIS caused a shift in gender roles as a matter of economic necessity as many women are widowed or live with men who are unable to work. They see this as placing an entirely new set of responsibilities on women who have become the main income earner in the home, in addition to fulfilling their traditional role within the home.

While some participants would welcome women in the workforce to alleviate the burden of providing for the family, others would prefer that now that the conflict ended women return to their traditional roles. Male participants discussing the subject in Mosul illustrate the divergent gender role expectations: "She raises and educates children until adulthood, is there a bigger sacrifice? We should thank God for women every time we had the chance." Another participant adds, "we should give freedom to women," while another interrupts, "I'm ready to give her whatever she needs but at least let her find a job, she is sitting there asking [for things] all the time. Let's start talking seriously, let's talk about Iraqi Kurdistan, it is a part of Iraq, you see women workers everywhere (…) our women work all the time filling the fridge…" Another participant thinks that "excess freedom should not be given to women because it is not good, what happened after ISIS is that more freedom has been given to women, now you see them everywhere like malls," and finally another man adds, "I don't want her to come to coffee shops and start smoking *hookah*, her responsibility is to raise kids, but I want her to understand that I'm working hard to earn money."

CLASHING VALUES SHAPE VIEWS TOWARD GENDER

These groups reveal that Iraq is dealing with significant ideological tensions across several different dimensions that will not only shape the role of women in society, but the country's direction as a whole. Participants describe challenges associated with the identity of the Iraqi society, which some say is at a defining moment as it experiences both "eastern" and "western" influences. The exposure of many internally displaced people to more liberal parts of Iraq raises awareness of regional differences in values and ways of living. The impact of modernization and technology on traditional values and Iraqi culture is also discussed in the context of the struggle between more rigid religious doctrine and the value of women's rights and freedoms.

Many participants note that Iraq is an "eastern" country with "tribal" attitudes, which acts as a barrier for women to gain more rights. They suggest that long-standing views on the role of women make it difficult for women to emerge from their traditional responsibilities. Participants demonstrate a strong awareness that things are different in "the West" and that gender equality may never be appropriate in Iraq, which is more conservative. Others say there is a growing awareness of other cultures within Iraq, largely driven by traditional, online, and social media. Several reference women's rights in other countries and see this as something attainable, but that will require more time in Iraq.

In some ways, the conflict with ISIS exacerbated these cultural differences. Many, particularly in the Sunni-dominated West, were forced to temporarily move to the Kurdish region, other parts of Iraq, or abroad, which exposed them to more

> "Women are having a much better life and are more powerful in Kurdistan. A quite higher number of women are, for example, getting divorced here in Kurdistan because they do not accept any more to live with men who do not respect them."
>
> *-A woman in Erbil*

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progressive views on religion, culture, and gender roles. A woman from Erbil notes the impact this even had on men, "I believe that what made men open minded is travelling out [of their area]. Iraqis now are travelling out a lot and that they see the world and makes them more open-minded."

Others view this exposure as having a negative impact on their way of life. A woman from Ninewa says, "In Erbil, it is difficult, because when I lived there, I struggled because they are not conservative but we love each other and are more conservative. Our education is also better than Erbil… they are not conservative. For example, I noticed in Erbil the kids have cell phones and we do not let our kids have them. We are still old school and not modernized like them."

Some participants note that modernization and the introduction of technology is causing tensions with a more traditional way of life. They blame the Internet and social media for corrupting their children, breaking up marriages, and changing Iraqi society more generally. A woman from Salahaddin says, "Moral corruption is affecting society the most, especially the Internet and Facebook are affecting the society the most."

There are others, however, who view modernization and new technology as a means to gather news and information to stay informed. A woman from Kirkuk even notes how the internet has helped her sell products, a particularly useful tool for women whose movements outside the household are largely restricted, "I think that the Internet helped a lot in creating job opportunities, since it was provided in Iraq, at least for those who want to sell their merchandise, a woman can't go outside to sell her products but

> **"Sometimes I cry about the situation of the youth. I just wonder what happened to our city and its people. The way we were raised has diminished. You see people doing things that would make you feel terrible. Above anything else, the religion is becoming obsolete."**
>
> *-A woman in Ninewa*

now from her home she can sell, prepare food and provide a living for her family. The technological devices we have also helped."

In some cases, prevalent religious edicts provide the final word on issues that restrict the freedom of women. For most participants, laws stemming from the Quran leave little room for dissent. A man in Baghdad says, "It is the traditions that rule the country. We are an Eastern society with expired traditions. Even the religion is an obstacle. There are many Islamic rules that will hinder women." These limits appear regularly during discussion about women receiving half the man's share of inheritance as stipulated by religious law. Very few of these participants are willing to openly disagree or engage in a debate about flexibility to this law, although almost half of these participants agree women should receive equal inheritance rights with men.

Some use religion in defense of men's dominant role in a paternalistic society. A Ninewa woman says, "God says men dominate over women. He knew what he was doing then. God was talking about strength, he was talking that men are responsible for women." And while some participants are ready and willing to raise concerns over unfair government policies, they are less eager when it comes to challenging religious doctrine, particularly on the inheritance and travel issues. As a woman from Anbar says, "We won't go against the Quran's words, and [inheritance] is written in the Quran." And a woman from Kirkuk says, "Travelling alone outside of her governorate is forbidden by Allah. She should be escorted by a *mahram* [a male escort]." These religious edicts further complicate the role and rights of women as they struggle for greater independence within the constraints of religious doctrines.

A SENSE OF DISTINCT GENDER ROLES

In principle, there is recognition of the role women play in the Iraqi society, and often participants use adages to express that. A man in Baghdad says, "She is

the wife, the daughter, and the mother. She is half the society and maybe more than that. However some participants acknowledge that these refrains do not translate into women's everyday treatment. Another man in Baghdad says, "They are stuck at home. A woman in Ninewa says "They say women are half the society but we don't get nearly as much. Men control the society."

The roles of men and women in the Iraqi society are clearly defined among participants, even as traditional perceptions are challenged. Women are largely seen as playing a supporting role to their families including raising children, "serving husbands," and maintaining a functioning household. Most still define the male role primarily as making money, fighting in conflict, and protecting the family.

Participants view women in a relatively confined role and as being "oppressed," "broken," "marginalized," "trapped" with "broken wings," and as relegated to the role of "only a housewife." Although many women participants note that their opinions are considered when making large household decisions—like purchasing a car or moving—the final decisions typically are made by the men in the house, as the man "works, so he decides." This relates to pushback on women's participation in the workforce. If providing for the family is a source of power to make family decisions, women who make an income would upset that traditional order.

Relegating women to household duties means that women are the main caretakers of their children and husbands. A man in Baghdad says, "If women are busy working they won't be able to perform their domestic duties. They won't be able to give enough time for their husbands and kids and that is very important." And a man from Erbil says, "The duties at home are joint responsibilities, but the biggest burden inside home is for the woman starting with raising kids, taking care of the house, cooking… And the man according to what we are accustomed to and according to tradition, he's handling things outside the house."

Participants are keenly aware that the roles women play are incredibly important for the functioning of society, and that women make huge sacrifices to fulfill their duties at home and in the family. Participants show great admiration for all that women do, with many repeating that women "are half of our society." They know that women are working incredibly hard and show extraordinary endurance in fulfilling these roles. A man in Erbil says of a woman's responsibility at home, "Raising kids. For example, if I come home, after one hour I want to run away. Yes, I swear to God. The woman goes through the same routine everyday starting from early morning until night. This is beyond the energy of a man, if I'm in her shoes, I wouldn't have such endurance so God help them."

In contrast to women, men are viewed as "dominating," "controlling," "strong," "smart," and "always right." A woman in Ninewa says, "The man is always dominating. Whether he is right or wrong his word has to be listened to." Men's roles are largely defined as providing for and protecting the family. A Baghdad man says, "You have to protect your family and shield them from the bad things in the community." Many participants view men as "shepherds" that are responsible for all aspects of the family, thus also having a heavier burden than the women. And many women participants do note the very real challenges Iraqi men face from safety concerns to financial challenges in providing for their families, which increases pressure on the entire family. A woman in Erbil says "Men are dominant, but I think they have reasons to be like that. They cannot find jobs and do not have a good life. Many of them left the country and or committed suicide because of not having a job. The outside situation in society makes men angry and they, as a result, express their anger on the women."

> "[Women] get pressured psychologically, and at her home, in the kitchen, and with the kids, everything is on her, the man wants her to take care of everything, any mistake she makes he gets furious."
>
> *-A woman in Anbar*

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The overwhelming dominance of men leads some of these women to hold starkly negative views towards them. For some, this anger comes from abuse, sexual harassment, or a sense of unrelenting subservience to men inside and outside the home. While there is certainly not a consensus in these views, they do suggest how difficult life is for women living in a more traditional society. A woman in Erbil says, "The thing is that men in this society do not look at us as humans; they only see us as women. We are not human beings for them." The women in Kirkuk share their frustrations with men: "The first thing that he uses is beating. Because he likes to use his strength on women;" "I hate men;" "Men are insulting;" they "love to control" and are "authoritarians."

> ""I am sure that all girls here [in Iraq] have dreams but cannot achieve these dreams because of the society and [living] in fear of what people might say."
>
> *- A woman in Kirkuk*

Above all, the perceived difference in roles of men and women in Iraqi society generally places women in a position where they have fewer rights than men and little voice even within their household. A woman in Salahaddin adds, "I can make a decision but I can't execute it until my husband agrees on it." Another woman in Salahaddin says, "I see that women are entirely marginalized in Iraq whether she was single or married or divorced or a widow; she has no rights. The woman is suffering a lot in Iraq."

While there is virtual consensus on this inequality, participants do not all agree on its appropriateness for the country. Views on gender inequality range from those who passionately feel it is the principal problem with the country to those who do not see gender equality as a goal that Iraq could ever reach, to those who think that Iraq should not be striving for gender equality at all. The more conservative viewpoints are a bit more common among male participants, but some women participants also suggest that some gaps between genders should never be removed, while some men participants are avid proponents of greater rights for women.

SOCIETAL PRESSURES AND OBSTACLES TO GREATER WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Against the backdrop of a struggling economy, high unemployment, a government that is unable to provide adequate services, and a society that is grappling with its identity, there are numerous obstacles that impede greater freedoms and rights for Iraqi women, particularly outside of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). These pressures limit the amount of freedoms women have and contribute to how Iraqis view women and the role women should play in society. It expands into all areas of their life, including what type of clothing they wear, where and when they will travel, who they will marry, and even if they will work outside of the house, which also directly impacts their ability to have economic independence. These societal pressures make many women participants note their lack of voice both within society and within their family, and limit their ability to imagine a better life.

Culture of shame. Participants, especially the women, describe how the fear of being shamed by their community limits the amount of freedom and rights they have. When women decide what clothes to wear, where to travel and if to travel alone, who to marry, whether to get an education, or participate in public affairs, this fear of shaming is a significant force in determining their actions. Participants in different focus groups note, "people talk" to justify limitations to women's freedoms. A woman in Kirkuk says, "Shame is our principle." Another says, "The restriction on women's life in Iraq is really difficult, she's restricted from every corner; if you go to the front yard you have to call him and tell him 'I am in the yard' because if he comes out and sees you in the yard he'd be like 'What are you doing in the yard? What are you looking for in the yard?' These are the challenges we face in this society." A Salahaddin woman says: "Unfortunately, our society is an Eastern society where a woman is criticized if she works and people will comment about her leaving the house and working." And a man in Baghdad

notes that a woman has "to protect her honor," something not noted about men.

This culture of shaming to force women to act (or not act) in a certain manner places significant burdens on women's freedoms. A Kirkuk woman articulates how the shaming culture can impact women's ability to work, "Because our society is like this, if I wanted to go out, I started work in a certain place, and my father approved. If one of my father's friends saw me he would go talking around saying that 'The daughter of this person is working in this place how did he approve of it?' They make up stories." A Ninewa woman notes that women "have to protect their honor."

Pressure from the family. This culture of shaming manifests itself in how women and girls are treated within their own families, with varied reactions from women participants. A woman from Kirkuk says, "…the parents know how the society is… because when I disobey them and go out I realize that they were right and they have a right because they know more than we do." For many of these participants, families ensure that women receive less access to jobs and limit opportunities to improve their economic independence. A woman from Ninewa says, "Women cannot even get their rights at home, how can she get rights in society?"

There is a disagreement between women participants who believe that men's domination in the home and in society is a negative thing, and those who try to explain men's control by the expectation that society places on them to protect and provide. An Erbil woman says, "Men want to dominate and organize and run everything, starting from their families up to the whole country." But another woman participant says, "Men are like shepherds according to the social rules, looking after women and taking care of the family." And a Kirkuk woman reinforces this argument by saying, "Of course the Iraqi society doesn't allow the woman to have her freedom. Why? Because in the Iraqi society the man bears all the responsibility: work, house; he has to put all his effort into the house [providing for the house]. The Iraqi woman is not al-

lowed to have freedom, travel, or work. The man is the one to bear all responsibilities in the Iraqi society. This is the reason [for the lack of women's rights]."

LIKELY WIDESPREAD SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Many of the obstacles women face stem from real life experiences and how they are treated by men, both outside and inside their homes. Women participants note instances of sexual harassment in the workplace, when getting administrative services from government offices, and at security checkpoints or police stations. An Erbil woman says, "Women are sometimes abused when looking for jobs. Employers are many times asking them to agree on something otherwise they do not get the job. And the more beautiful the lady is, the more she will be sexually abused." A Kirkuk woman says, "I went to get my passport and the officer who was supposed to give it to me sexually harassed me. Now how can I go alone?" And a Salahaddin woman states, "…if a female student is coming from another area like the Tikrit University for example, then many questions will be asked [at police checkpoints] like what is the reason for travelling or what is the relationship with the person she is visiting, so she is experiencing harassment so her parents are concerned about her and the security forces."

Additionally, some women participants discuss violence both outside and within their own household. Several participants mention the assassination of the

> "I used to work at a company, a national company; I used to be a secretary, my working hours end at exactly 5:00. Sometimes the manager would have meetings with clients and I would need to be two hours late because I am a secretary, to 6:00 or 7:00. The moment I arrive home very big problems start for me. The whole way home they keep calling and asking 'Where are you?' In the end I had to resign because of these challenges and problems."
>
> *-A woman in Kirkuk*

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> "I believe it is difficult to be a woman in this country; society can always fight you even if your family supports you. The most recent example of this was Tara Fares, the model lady who was killed in Baghdad because she was not accepted in her society. She might have been given freedom from her family to work like that, but she was still killed, because her job was not making the society happy. This is how women live in Iraq. It is not easy to be a woman here, even for the stars and important women. You have to always face society which is against you."
>
> *-A woman in Anbar*

Iraqi fashion model Tara Fares in September 2018 as evidence of the price women pay for opting to stand against social norms. Others describe security concerns within their own homes. A Baghdad woman says, "The man should appreciate the woman and protect her and not hurt or hit her, but we only see the opposite." Several participants mention the need for more protections against domestic violence. A Baghdad woman says, "The law does not protect the woman so safety is an issue now." These women call for more protections in and out of the home.

Stereotypes and stigmas about women. Women also suffer from prevalent views that they are too emotional and lack intelligence, which reduces their voice and ability to influence. A Baghdad woman says, "…a man says something and people will see this as important, but when a woman says the same things as the man it will not be taken as important." And another says, "Society does not value women's words."

Some women participants share these beliefs about women, and it leads them to censor their own actions and ambitions. A woman in Kirkuk says, "I think that girls should dream according to their own size [not too big], she is supposed to know society's limits and her parent's limits so she does not get shocked. Everyone should live within their own level."

Many participants also think that women should not be able to travel wherever and whenever they want, leaving women to feel "stuck at home" and further limiting their ability to get an education or find work. This resistance toward freedom of travel is not perceived as being solely driven by a desire to repress women, as much as it is about protecting women from the real harms outside the home. An Anbar woman says, "A woman cannot protect herself. If anything would happen with her on her travel, she would not be able to protect herself, the woman is weak by nature."

Early marriage and control over whom to marry. Awareness about the Jaafari Personal Status Law proposal, which would allow men to marry women as young as nine, is low, but in most groups one or two participants has either heard about it in general, or knows it is related to early marriage. A man in Anbar says, "I heard about it, but I have no information on it or about it, it was on TV. I don't have information about it." While another replies: "Honestly, I don't know the details. Just that it's a civil status law to be submitted to the parliament and the members vote and accordingly the nine-year-old girls can be married. This is what I know."

Almost all participants strongly reject the Jaafari Law, stating that this is far too early for a girl to get married. Male and female participants alike are appalled by the idea of child marriage, some noting that a young girl is not physically and psychologically fit for taking on the responsibilities of a married woman—having children and caring for the house. Others mention the risks associated to giving birth at an early age, or even rising tolls of divorce due to age difference. A man in Erbil says "An innocent child, how can I get her married, give her responsibilities and she doesn't even know what responsibility is?" Men in Ninewa say, "It is a crime" and "She should understand her child and husband's needs." A female participant in Salahaddin states, "She is still a child and can't be responsible. She still needs someone to be responsible for her at the age of nine so this marriage is a failure and will fail, which will result in high divorce rates." Another woman in Salahaddin says, "Because she is still a child and she needs someone to ed-

ucate her and take care of her and even raise her and the man won't do that."

Many of these participants disassociate themselves from the bill and instead say early marriage is practiced in other, more rural areas. A man in Erbil says "Honestly, the father that gets his nine-year-old daughter married is trying to get rid of her. Another participant adds, "Or is looking for money... tribal marriages are for money." A man in Ninewa says "Some people marry at the age of nine. This usually happens in small villages, people fear the society." Another participant responds, "I am from a village, if a girl doesn't reach puberty, no one will marry her, but these kind of people exist and they marry their girls at an early age. A woman in Erbil says, "This is a law that is set by Shia women, in which girls have rights to get married after they become nine years old. This is not a right! This is a crime and should not exist. I am totally against this law."

Some participants are open to women marrying in their teens, especially if it means it helps them financially or keeps them away from activities that could bring shame. Some note that technology leads to some families losing control over a girl's interactions with others, and that this online behavior is a threat to the family's reputation, while marrying daughters at a young age can reduce this burden on the family. A male participant in Anbar says "at least get married at the age of 12." A woman in Ninewa says it is acceptable for girls to be married "when they are 14 or 15 years old, not nine. After the Internet, I think if you marry them young it is better... I think if the girl wants to go to school then you shouldn't get her married, but if she is at home on the Internet and listening to music maybe you should get her married." Another woman says, "If you cannot monitor your daughter and help her understand life, then you have her married. However, if your daughter is at home you can monitor her but if she is married the husband won't do that and she will do things that she shouldn't. Girls need parents' supervision."

Less than half of these participants completely agree that women should be free to marry who they want. Many of these women participants think that parents may make better decisions when it comes to deciding whom to marry. A woman in Kirkuk says, "It's because the parents know how the society is. Because honestly when I disobey them and go out, I realize that they were right and they have a right because they know more than we do."

But still others say that increased freedoms that come with the internet do not justify acceptance of young marriages. A woman in Ninewa says: "We aren't in the prophet's age anymore. Back then they were more mature at the young age but not anymore. This is the Internet you are talking about... but getting married at nine years old is killing her; imagine if she is 20 and has four kids. She will still want to go through her teenage years even if she is married and that would be a disaster if she has kids."

> "It's a compromise–if two tribes have problems with each other, if one kills another, the family of the killed one takes the little, eight-year or nine-year old girl, from those who committed the killing. This happened once in Basra, an eight-year old girl was married to an old man, very old."
>
> *-A man in Erbil*

STRUGGLE FOR ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

Although many participants note more openness to women working outside the home, many also say that increasing women's foothold in the workforce continues to be a challenge. Whether it is a result of society, parents, husbands, or personal anxiety, there are still significant segments of women that feel they are unable or restricted from seeking work. A Ninewa woman says, "I used to make custom clothes for women, but my husband did not like that I did that as a job because of society and the way they perceive these jobs." And a Salahaddin woman says, "Unfortunately, our society is an Eastern society where a woman is criticized if she works and people will comment about her leaving the house

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and working instead. Some people would prevent their wives from working."

With less ability to travel, not only do women suffer from a lack of economic independence, they also have smaller networks and experiences, limiting their ability to make potential business connections, start their own companies, or expand their knowledge base. A man in Baghdad says, "Men have more ideas. Men have the freedom to leave the house whenever they want to. Women have ideas and they want to do things but they do not go out."

Nonetheless, there is a widespread sense among participants that women are now more established in the workforce and that their role will keep growing. Both men and women cite women working in markets or other retail positions, but also in more elite professions, including teachers and professors, doctors, engineers, high-level political offices, police inspection offices, or even as members of the military. Others note that there are more female students than male students, and that like men, these educated women are now having trouble finding work.

Many feel that women can do just about anything that men can do in terms of work. Some also think that women are even better suited than men for many professions, including because they show more compassion or have a better work ethic. Others sense that women are more honest and less likely to cheat. Several go even further and say that women are stronger than men, or that they can do more than men. A common refrain is that "some women are better than one hundred men."

The changing role of women in the workforce causes some gender tensions. Some note that employers prefer women over men, suggesting women are getting jobs that men used to get, whether it is due to quality of work, different pay scales, or that employers prefer to work with women for more nefarious reasons. A woman in Erbil says, "The appearance of a female employee will make big changes. That is why big companies like car companies and airlines always have nice girls show-

ing their cars and members of their crew. These are all business tricks to attract people. Friendly nice girls can bring more clients and make more money."

They note that for some families this means that wives are working while men are at home unable to find a job. A woman in Anbar says, "The woman has moved on with her life, she took control, on the other hand, the man became afraid, he's even afraid to go to work."

Changes in the composition of the workforce are also adjusting views of women in the home. Some feel that the growing employment of women give them more power at home to make decisions on how purchases are made, especially as some of these women are the only employed parent. A man from Salahaddin says, "In Iraqi families we have been discussing things with our wives and that is very new to us. Before, it was all about the man and nothing else."

It is women's inability to have economic independence that will continue to hinder their ability to have greater autonomy and rights, particularly since women also shoulder the burden of child rearing. Without her own economic independence, many women can be trapped in a marriage. A woman in Kirkuk says, "If there are problems [in the marriage], women have to solve them. It's her responsibility… No matter what, she cannot start a problem because if something happened and they separate she will regret it, any challenge she faces she should overcome it herself."

More common however is the sense that both men and women around the country struggle to find work. Even well educated potential employees struggle to find jobs, with many sitting at home. They feel that acquiring jobs is based little on merit but much more on the connections one has or willingness to pay bribes or part of their salaries back to employees.

WOMEN FACE SIMILAR CHALLENGES IN POLITICS AS IN SOCIETY

The tension between traditional views and those demanding more rights extends beyond the family and the workforce into views of women's involvement in politics, both as participants in a democracy and as elected officials. First and foremost, most of these participants share a strong disdain for political leaders, regardless of gender. Most see politicians as ineffective, and do not believe that voting will have an impact on who is in power. As a result, many of these participants, more so among the women, are non-voters or show little interest in politics. A woman in Kirkuk says, "If a peaceful governor comes who does not belong to any party, the [political parties] force him, they bribe him; in every possible way, they stop him from working for the people's benefit [so that he] starts working for them."

Participants believe that the stances and positions of women elected officials have little to do with gender, but instead that viewpoints are shaped by the political party she represents. Women political leaders have not proven to these participants that they are any different than their male counterparts. They are generally viewed as having token positions with little power who "are not heard" and have no accomplishments to strengthen their standing. A woman from Kirkuk says, "They [women MPs] have done nothing." And a man from Erbil says that, "…women in parliament are unsuccessful."

A few name women political leaders that could act as potential role models for these women, such as MP Hanan Al Fatlawi or the Former Health Minister Adila Hamoud. They agree that there are strong women in politics, but without a voice. A man in Salahaddin says, "Women are fighters; they fight for their homes and in the battlefield and they lost many lives. They fight in the parliament and even in the battlefield they are fighting. But unfortunately, no one is listening to them and supporting them. The government has to support them, or at least the governor. There should be more support for women."

An IDP from Anbar shares a story about his wife's efforts to run for office:

"At the 2009 provincial elections I voted for my wife. She was nominated by her manager, honestly. They wanted a female figure so they nominated her, and when she came and told me I said there's no problem with this. So I swear to God, in Hit [district] or somewhere else she got a lot of votes, and in Anbar she got a lot of votes, but in our community around us it wasn't a lot.

So I asked [my community], why? They said how would you let your wife be a member of the provincial council? I asked what's wrong with that? Tell me. There's no problem with her getting to high positions. Maybe I had simple education, so I thank God that I have an educated enlightened wife. So why don't you let her go on? They said if she won and became a member of the council I should leave.

So I had to make her withdraw from the elections. I swear to god (…) she would have been a member of the provincial council. But eventually I had to make her drop out. So just like my colleagues said, it's our society. They look at the woman in a way as if she's…I don't know how to say it…I don't want to describe her with a word that could be religiously forbidden."

Women politicians face many of the same challenges that women in Iraqi society face as a whole. Many of these men and women participants think women make decisions differently, primarily based on emotion, suggesting it makes them less capable leaders. Others say women are too weak and indecisive for politics. A man in Baghdad says, "I disagree with women getting political positions. The reason is women get emotional very quick and I have noticed that with school principals for example. They do not even talk to you eye to eye, can you imagine if they become ministers."

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And the shaming of women is just as powerful within politics as it is in Iraqi society. Several men and women note that women in politics have less room for error, and that there is a double standard in that men are free and able to make mistakes or behave poorly in office, while a woman is never given that freedom to make mistakes, tying back to views that women constantly face a fear of shame.

> **"Three years ago, women were more marginalized but the government is democratic so women reached high positions and took places in the parliament to represent a slice of the society or to defend the rights of women in society. Of course, they have struggled like we are struggling now so I think the perspective towards women has changed because they have worked hard and reached high places like the provincial council and the parliament. In my opinion, the perspective towards women changed and the society is now more open to women."**
>
> *-A woman in Salahaddin*

A woman in Kirkuk says, "The slightest mistakes which a woman makes, it is highly emphasized, but if men did a mistake the [political community] doesn't mind it but it's not the case for women."

Participants also believe that men show little willingness to see women in leadership positions. Some note that men will sabotage, threaten, and harass women leaders to make sure they do not succeed in leadership roles. As a result, many of these participants can see women in important political roles but only up to a point, often stopping at whether or not a woman should be prime minister, a minister, or outside of politics, as a director of a school or hospital. In Ninewa, a woman says, "It isn't easy to be a politician, because we like to be emotional and we can't control it. Decision making is hard for women".

Women also contribute to the sense among participants that they should not enter politics. A woman in Ninewa says, "Women are very competitive with each other. They never want other women to do better." A woman in Kirkuk says, "I said that I love politics and watching po-

litical news; but I do not get involved in this work, because it's a risk, in this work hundreds want to sabotage you."

Many participants also note the security concerns that women politicians face. Awareness of women political leaders that were assassinated, blackmailed, or threatened is high in these groups, leading many participants to associate running for office with security concerns and extreme risk. A man from Anbar says, "It is known that most politicians are threatened and the situation is unstable. If the government was decent and the situation stable, then women can continue their [political] path but right now the political path is dangerous." And a woman from Salahaddin notes when discussing why women will have trouble in politics, "Women will fall under pressure or maybe a woman will be blackmailed or threatened so she is afraid for her life and family…"

Yet not all of the sentiment of women in politics is so pessimistic. Both men and women say they would absolutely vote for a woman if she is qualified, with many citing prior examples of voting for women. Some say they would happily support women in their own families running for office, and have done so in the past. A few recognize that it is the democratic system that gives women more opportunities to be leaders.

Others say that inherent qualities of women actually make them better leaders than men. Some note that women have a greater understanding of what families need and that they show more compassion for average Iraqis. Others reference their role as lead budgeter in the home and think this could help Iraqi handle government budgets and resource allocation better. Still others cite that women are more honest, and less ambitious, which may make them less susceptible to corruption. A woman from Anbar says, "If they give her such a position [MP], she'll be amazing. It is not like the woman cannot do it, she delievers on the people's requests more than a man because she's tender-hearted towards her country and the people, more than a man."

OBSTACLES IN DEALING WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Iraq's justice system is another area that highlights the complicated gender divides that the country faces. Generally, participants have little confidence in the justice system. A woman from Kirkuk says, "There is no justice now or before," and a Baghdad man says, "There isn't justice in the society even for men and they make it worse for women."

Participants do have different opinions about how the justice system treats men and women. Some believe that women actually get better treatment within the broader justice system, which includes the courts and police, particularly among Erbil participants. A woman from Erbil says, "I think women are treated in a better way and are respected more. For example, if a woman is involved in a car accident as a driver, she will not be arrested, but a man with the same issue will be arrested." And another Erbil woman says, "Police and courts are softer on women." And a man from Salahaddin says, "They [women] are treated better than men are treated. If they reach a judge he will listen to her. Men might or might not be believed but women are always believed."

Even if women may get preferential treatment or have more credibility than men in some cases, many participants note the level of harassment that occurs within the justice and government administrative system. A Kirkuk woman says, "If her problem is easy and quick he [a policeman] will try to help her, but if her case is difficult or she has a conflict with another person he will try to take sexual advantage of her, this happens at a normal rate." And an Anbar man alludes to sexual harassment when he talks about women going to police stations, "They [the police] will bargain with women for other things in there."

Stories of sexual harassment extend beyond the police station: these women reference similar stories from police checkpoints, government administration such as passport offices, and the workplace. The women in these groups tend to agree that these occurrences are "regular" or "normal practice."

Not only does the fear of harassment prevent women from going to a police station or courts alone, but the culture of shaming once again manifests itself. A Salahaddin man says, "It is not acceptable in society [for a woman to go alone to authorities]. If it is a woman people will talk." And an Anbar man says, "The society does not digest seeing women entering police station or courts [alone]." In many cases, women would need to go with their husband, brother, or father to a police station, which can create a barrier to reporting certain crimes that are personal in nature.

> **"If a woman was wearing the abaya then [the police] would tell her to file her complaint or anything she wants with low interest, but if a woman with full make up on and hair styled and wearing nice clothes [enters] then they will give her full attention and you will see the officer walking with her by himself to help her. But he wouldn't do that if the woman came wearing abaya to file a divorce against her husband and her baby in her hands."**
>
> *-A woman in Baghdad*

Beyond the courts and the police, there is a belief that the laws in general do not discriminate against women, except for laws relating to marriage issues—who women can marry, punishments for adultery, and inheritance issues. Here is where the line between legislated laws and religious doctrines are blurred, as an Anbar woman says when discussing discrimination, "[It's] not by law but by religion."

Although about three out of four participants think a woman should be allowed to marry whomever they want, participants note the differences between what women and men are allowed to do when it relates to the law regarding marriage. An Erbil woman says, "Muslim men are allowed to get married to women from any religion, while Muslim women are only allowed to marry Muslim men, otherwise their marriage contract will not be made." When it comes to adultery, a Kirkuk woman says," I noticed that a

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woman's adultery punishment is much higher than men. She gets more years in jail time than men, men usually only get approximately six months of jail time."

Participants do note areas where the law benefits women, such as when a man dies his pension goes to his wife, but the same is not true if the wife dies. A woman from Ninewa says, "Law says that if a man dies, his salary goes to his wife, but if a woman dies he does not get money but her children do if they are under 18 years of age." But the larger debate is on inheritance and the religious edict that men get two-thirds while women get one-third. Although women participants indicate hope to get equal inheritance to men, most participants note that it is "God's will" that men get more than women. An Anbar man says, "Women should have right in inheritance but not equal because the religion says that." And an Anbar woman says, "We won't go against the Quran's words and it is written in the Quran."

> "I think women have a great role [in stopping organizations like ISIS] because more than being a political organization, ISIS is mostly an ideology that we need to fight and that starts at home. I noticed that people now have ideas that we need to get rid of even within kids and families. We need to teach our kids that we are united and more importantly you need to talk about things with others and not just hate them. I know there are many families who are divided, some being with ISIS and others against them. People need to open their hearts to their colleagues and talk about things… People argue about the smallest things and just not listen to what others have to say. We need to listen to each other."
>
> *-A woman in Ninewa*

Beyond the justice system, participants do not see a difference in services provided by the government to men and women, and they generally agree that the government doesn't provide many services at all. Many participants think that the government services should go beyond basic services and social assistance to include creating government jobs. Specifically, in the case of jobs, some participants think government jobs tend to be given more to men because families prefer that men are working. An Anbar man describes why this might be the case, "Let us say the government is providing services like job opportunities and a father has a son and a daughter, whom do you think the father will send for the job interview? He will send this son."

There are generally low levels of trust in government and the services provided, but some participants note they trust education, health care, and social welfare services. Women participants tend to not see any government institutions representing them, but look to private and non-governmental organizations as structures that help women, such as providing education or offering business loans for women. The women participants generally hold non-governmental organizations in high regard and show interest in working for these organizations that distribute aid, help widows, or promote human rights. Most, but not all, say their families will rarely resist work for non-governmental organizations while several others say they know little about the organizations that are out there.

One result of low trust in service delivery and in the justice system results in a stronger reliance on citizen groups and their own sense of community. Men and women regularly say that it falls on them or their tribes to help themselves, rebuild, and protect their communities. A man in Erbil says, "If I see a stranger—and Al Habaniya is a small city—we know that this is a stranger, we report about this person. We know the phone numbers of the intelligence, of the police, so we call them and they investigate him. So, it's about community cohesion. A woman in Erbil says, "We do not have to ask for help from the neighbors, they come on their own."

WOMEN'S ROLE IN COUNTERING EXTREMISM INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE HOME

Although participants debate the role women should play in government, politics, business, and society, there is more uniformity in their perceived role in countering insurgent and terrorist movements in Iraq; namely, by educating their children about the dangers of extremist ideology or joining extremist organizations. Participants acknowledge the importance women play in raising children, particularly given their societal roles as primary caregivers. They stress that everything starts at home, and as women spend more time in the company of their children they provide the proper direction and also sense if their children are drifting in the wrong direction and can intervene.

Much fewer see women playing a more public role in the fight against extremism, such as through conducting advocacy work, becoming political, or joining the security forces. But they can see women as providing a larger, more positive role in reducing the violence in Iraq, mainly because of their natural tendency toward peace. A woman from Erbil says, "Women are in general softer than men and they are less violent. I think women can better provide peace to Iraq if they are in power. We have seen how the country is full of wars and fighting under the control of men power. I think women are more diplomatic and better in this."

Civil society organizations. Making the most of this perception of women requires a more inclusive society where women are less isolated in their homes. Several female participants express the need for a space in which women can talk about their experience and concerns, so they are less isolated and more aware of what is happening in the community. Civil society organizations may provide that outlet, especially where government is seen as less effective. A man in Erbil says, "Because the Iraqi government is not doing anything so there should be CSOs."

Participants, especially the women, generally hold positive views toward civil society, and are aware of many sectors they cover, including women's rights; education; health; helping the elderly, poor, and orphans; IDP assistance; domestic violence, and many other functions. A woman in Kirkuk says, "There are organizations, the ones I know, they help students when the school year starts; they teach the students small things like brushing their teeth. They do this with many schools; I myself helped out because my aunt is working with them. I was really happy, the students were really happy; they like this kind of thing."

Several participants also note the help CSOs provide specifically to women, including providing education and helping women start their own businesses, in cooperation with the government. A woman in Ninewa says, "I know there are organizations that help women, they have courses for women for general education and skill courses. These courses exist only in these organizations but not in the government. There are some services by the labor and public services department that help providing these services for women. They offer small loans for women so you can open businesses and things like that."

Some participants make the connection between the role civil society plays in combatting extremism since they are providing the services that ISIS used to provide. Others note that civil society is playing a large role in reconstruction efforts in liberated areas. A woman in Ninewa says, "[CSOs] maybe teach people how to rebuild. If you look at the right bank for [Mosul] it is torn down because of war. My house was destroyed same as

> **"[I joined an organization because] it is a humanitarian organization… because women can't always hold weapons and fight but can help the IDPs and the families in need so many women would come from nine o'clock and stay until 12 or one o'clock and spend time with us to feel relieved and talk about their sufferings in addition to the benefit they get from receiving food and cloth to sew.**
>
> *-A woman in Salahaddin*

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my car and now the only income is my husband's. I am sure if I join an organization I can be of some help."

While views toward civil society organizations are mostly positive, some women participants note they run into the same restrictions in working for a CSO as they would for any job. A woman in Baghdad says "My parents don't allow it, but I wish I could." A woman in Erbil says, "I do not think my father will accept this. He is an old uneducated man who has no idea what organizations are." A woman in Anbar suggests family approval would depend on the gender makeup of that organization: "If it was only women, I don't think [my father] would mind."

Others say that they cannot work for organizations because they often are misunderstood. Some participants say CSOs have bad reputations, especially since joining organizations is sometimes associated with joining a terrorist organization. A woman in Kirkuk says, "[My family] knows these organizations and they don't trust them." Another says, "The ones who joined ISIS thought they were joining an organization and ended up being a part of a terrorist group. As a result, we started to have fear from this [for joining groups or organizations]."

RECOMMENDATIONS

For many participants, changes for women are just at a starting point, with the sense that their rights and freedoms are only going to increase with time. These focus groups suggest a number of practical near-term adjustments or openings for programming that may help improve and expand the rights of women. While there are likely hundreds of other small and large ways to improve the quality of life for women, this list is derived from the views of these participants.

WOMEN PROTECTION POLICIES

Raise the stakes on sexual harassment during interaction with government institutions. Participants express high concern about the prominence of sexual harassment when engaging with government institutions. Creating a task force to review policies (or lack of policies) prohibiting sexual harassment, greater enforcement of existing laws on harassment, increased punishments for perpetrators, establishing a code of conduct for security forces and government institutions, ensuring easier means for women to report harassment, and a broad public awareness campaign on the impact harassment has on women and society as a whole could help to build a foundation for improved women's rights.

Establish more safe spaces without the need for male accompaniment. Not all change needs to come from legislation, but could come from practical changes or new technologies. For ex-

ample, some of the necessity for male accompaniment of women could be mitigated by higher use of cameras in government offices. Increased cameras is an attractive policy being considered in many countries in response to various stories of unwarranted police mistreatment, and there is little reason to think that more police stations could not be equipped with mandatory video cameras, with punishments for their misuse. Other ideas to improve opportunities for justice would be a training program to increase the share of women working in police stations or in government agencies that deal directly with constituents, or establishing women-only lines at police stations or government agencies.

Increase government services that help single mothers. One of the biggest concerns participants have about women in Iraq is the growing number of single mothers who have lost their husbands through war or divorce. Participants note the struggles many single mothers have to not only raise their children, but provide the financial resources a household needs. Government programs can help to target these single mothers and provide valuable assistance to help them raise their children.

Create more awareness of key laws to better ensure their implementation. More women show frustration with the implementation of key laws that impact them than with the laws themselves. For example, these women do not push back much on their lower share of inher-

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itance, but they do say that it is common practice for them not to even reach that share. A new government or even provincial government, open to improving conditions for women, could establish the equivalent of a women's bill of rights to raise the profile of a short list of demands that local and national government officials must review and post on walls of government offices.

WOMEN LEADERSHIP

Move women into more leadership areas beyond traditional gender-related issues. Many notions of women act as limits on greater equality, but many of these perceptions about women suggest an openness for women to be in specific leadership positions, which, in turn, could help further normalize their ability to achieve leadership roles. These participants tend to see women as more empathetic than men, with a better understanding of the challenges facing families and communities. There is also a greater awareness of women in the workforce suggesting that women legislators can move beyond placement in committees or developing legislation that is only focused on "women's issues." Having women take a greater role on economic issues, education and health care policy, and even certain aspects of security can help to break stereotypes of women leaders.

Gain leadership roles outside of the political sphere. Women's involvement in civil society organizations (CSOs) faces less resistance from family and is another potential area where investment could have a larger impact. CSOs also give women more leadership opportunities and more chances to addresses issues that the government is falling short on. Many of these women already view civil society organizations positively, while men are already more open to women running their own organizations and companies than they are to women in political office.

Providing assistance to women's parliamentary caucus. Trust in parliament is low, as many say MPs serve parties, not voters. However, a multi-party women's caucus of MPs that is working on major high-profile initiatives would help create a sense that these MPs have agendas that go beyond their own parties', as well as beyond women-specific issues. Strategically selecting one or two issues, whether gender-related or not, to focus on and discuss in the first year of their mandate would raise the women MPs' profiles and elevate the issues.

ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Incentives for companies to employ women, or for women to start their own business. More women in the workforce would not only help provide a better life standard for their families, but would help develop the private sector, and consolidate women's freedoms and decision making roles at home.

Invest in ways for women to earn a living from home. While many of these women reference the Internet as the cause of negative changes to the society, others note that it gives women opportunities that they've never had before, such as starting online companies and selling products out of their homes. Online commerce infrastructure, such as investments from the government and NGOs, and improvements in domestic shipping, could also facilitate new opportunities for women to bring in income.

PARTICIPATION IN SECURITY

Provide counter-insurgency messaging and tactics to help mothers educate their children. Participants see women as playing a critical role in stopping future ISIS or other terrorist organizations' development in the country. They see women as the central caregivers and educators of Iraqi children, and thus responsible for educating children about the dangers of these terrorist organizations. Providing mothers with information about how to talk to their children about these issues and giving them warning signs to look for with their children can help to minimize terrorist organizations' ability to recruit Iraqi children and young adults.

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Increase women within the police force. One of the biggest challenges women face within the justice system is their inability or fear of going to a police station, largely due to harassment issues. Women MPs and women's organizations can help to develop protocols for how police officers should manage situations involving women. Additionally, pushing to hire police women to handle women's complaints can help to diminish fears women have about going to the police station.

APPENDIX 1

	IRAQ FG SPECIFICATIONS (OCTOBER 2018)								
Group	Date	Location	Type	Gender	Age	Urban/Rural	Ethnicity/region	Education	Openess to increased role of women
1	Oct. 10	Erbil	Kurd	Female	30-45	Urban	Kurd	Diploma and above	More open
2	Oct. 10	Erbil	IDPs	Male	30-45	Rural	Sunni	Primary/Intermediate/Secondary	More open
3	Oct. 13	Ninewa	Host/not-displaced	Female	45-65	Urban	Sunni	Primary/intermediate	Less open
4	Oct. 13	Ninewa	Returnee	Male	30-45	Urban	Sunni	Intermediate/Secondary/Diploma	More open
5	Oct.14	Anbar	Returnee	Female	45-65	Rural	Sunni	Intermediate/Secondary/Diploma	Less open
6	Oct.14	Anbar	Host/not-displaced	Male	20-30	Rural	Sunni	Primary/intermediate	More open
7	Oct. 14	Kirkuk	Turkmen	Female	25-40	Urban	Turkmen	Intermediate/Secondary/Diploma	Less open
8	Oct. 14	Kirkuk	Returnee	Female	20-30	Urban	Sunni	Primary/intermediate	Less open
9	Oct.16	Salahaddin	Host/not-displaced	Female	20-30	Rural	Sunni	Intermediate/Secondary/Diploma	More open
10	Oct.16	Salahaddin	Returnee	Male	45-65	Urban	Sunni	Primary/intermediate	Less open
11	Oct.13	Baghdad	Shia	Female	30-45	Urban	Shia	Diploma/University	Less open
12	Oct.13	Baghdad	Shia	Male	20-30	Urban	Shia	Intermediate/Secondary	Less open

APPENDIX 2

WOMEN'S RIGHTS HANDOUT

Women should be able to:	Total Asked	Total Answered	% of Total	% of Total Men	% of Total Women
Marry whomever they want	110	110	100%	100%	100%
Completely Agree	50	110	45%	26%	59%
Somewhat Agree	36	110	33%	41%	27%
Somewhat Disagree	14	110	13%	24%	5%
Completely Disagree	10	110	9%	9%	9%
Total Agree	**86**	**110**	**78%**	**67%**	**86%**
Total Disagree	**24**	**110**	**22%**	**33%**	**14%**
Work wherever they want	110	110	100%	100%	100%
Completely Agree	28	110	25%	9%	38%
Somewhat Agree	34	110	31%	35%	28%
Somewhat Disagree	28	110	25%	33%	20%
Completely Disagree	20	110	18%	24%	14%
Total Agree	**62**	**110**	**56%**	**43%**	**66%**
Total Disagree	**48**	**110**	**44%**	**57%**	**34%**
Wear wherever they want	110	110	100%	100%	100%
Completely Agree	8	110	7%	2%	11%
Somewhat Agree	17	110	15%	11%	19%
Somewhat Disagree	37	110	34%	33%	34%
Completely Disagree	48	110	44%	54%	36%
Total Agree	**25**	**110**	**23%**	**13%**	**30%**
Total Disagree	**85**	**110**	**77%**	**87%**	**70%**

Travel on their own when ever and wherever they want	110	109	100%	100%	100%
Completely Agree	16	109	15%	9%	19%
Somewhat Agree	31	109	28%	24%	32%
Somewhat Disagree	24	109	22%	24%	21%
Completely Disagree	38	109	35%	43%	29%
Total Agree	**47**	**109**	**43%**	**33%**	**51%**
Total Disagree	**62**	**109**	**57%**	**67%**	**49%**
Run their own business	110	109	100%	100%	100%
Completely Agree	56	109	51%	38%	61%
Somewhat Agree	35	109	32%	40%	27%
Somewhat Disagree	8	109	7%	11%	5%
Completely Disagree	10	109	9%	11%	8%
Total Agree	**91**	**109**	**83%**	**78%**	**88%**
Total Disagree	**18**	**109**	**17%**	**22%**	**13%**
Become PM or President	110	110	100%	100%	100%
Completely Agree	41	110	37%	24%	47%
Somewhat Agree	27	110	25%	28%	22%
Somewhat Disagree	17	110	15%	15%	16%
Completely Disagree	25	110	23%	33%	16%
Total Agree	**68**	**110**	**62%**	**52%**	**69%**
Total Disagree	**42**	**110**	**38%**	**48%**	**31%**
Be physically punished	110	110	100%	100%	100%
Completely Agree	5	110	5%	4%	5%
Somewhat Agree	18	110	16%	17%	16%
Somewhat Disagree	22	110	20%	28%	14%
Completely Disagree	65	110	59%	50%	66%
Total Agree	**23**	**110**	**21%**	**22%**	**20%**
Total Disagree	**87**	**110**	**79%**	**78%**	**80%**

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Serve in the Army/Police	110	110	100%	100%	100%
Completely Agree	26	110	24%	13%	22%
Somewhat Agree	26	110	24%	17%	19%
Somewhat Disagree	26	110	24%	28%	23%
Completely Disagree	32	110	29%	41%	36%
Total Agree	**52**	**110**	**47%**	**30%**	**41%**
Total Disagree	**58**	**110**	**53%**	**70%**	**59%**
Have equal enheritance rights with men	110	110	100%	100%	100%
Completely Agree	28	110	25%	20%	22%
Somewhat Agree	22	110	20%	26%	25%
Somewhat Disagree	8	110	7%	7%	8%
Completely Disagree	52	110	47%	48%	45%
Total Agree	**50**	**110**	**45%**	**46%**	**47%**
Total Disagree	**60**	**110**	**55%**	**54%**	**53%**

NATIONAL
DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTE