

REIMAGINING INTERNATIONAL SECURITY POLICY  
**The New Paradigm Project**

# **WOMEN AND THE IRAQ WAR, 20 YEARS LATER**

The Consequences of War, Sanctions, and  
Occupation for Women and the Continuing  
Struggle for Women's Rights

David Cortright  
Anna Romandash  
Marcelle Al-Zoughbi



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## ABOUT THE NEW PARADIGM PROJECT

The New Paradigm project, sponsored by the Fourth Freedom Forum, assesses the costs and consequences of overly militarized U.S. policies that led to failure in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries, and diverted trillions of dollars from needed investment at home. The project examines the advantages of cooperative multilateral approaches to international security based on principles of human rights and military restraint. The project produces analyses and policy proposals for greater reliance on diplomacy, peacebuilding, development, economic statecraft, and participatory governance as means of preventing armed conflict and violent extremism.

### REIMAGINING INTERNATIONAL SECURITY POLICY

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## COVER PHOTO

Four teenage Yezidi women attending the annual religious festival of Yezidis in the town of Lalish, in the Kurdistan region of Northern Iraq.

John Zada / Alamy Stock Photo

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This report marks 20 years since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. It recounts the impacts of war and critiques the strategy of using military intervention to enhance women's rights. It is presented in the spirit of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, which urges all actors to "adopt a gender perspective." Our analysis traces the deterioration of social and economic conditions for women caused by U.S. policy and the resulting rise of extremism and sectarian warfare. We also address the role of Iraqi women in mobilizing movements to assert their rights and oppose violence. In telling this story, we rely extensively on the voices of Iraqi women who experienced and studied these events.

A gender perspective means going beyond the view of women as victims to address the political agency of women as they struggle for political, economic, and social justice. We use "feminist discovery" to examine the lived experience of Iraqi women and gain a better understanding of the realities of war.<sup>1</sup> This report draws lessons for the future of U.S. and international security policy and examines the agenda for women's rights today as defined by Iraqi women and their international supporters.

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Nimo's War, Emma's War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), xiii.

## Background

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is acknowledged at the United Nations and in many countries as an essential element of international policy and an important condition for building quality peace. More than 100 states have developed WPS national action plans for gender equality as a means of helping to advance peace and security. Greater acceptance of women's rights in international policy is the result of decades of advocacy by women throughout the world demanding a seat at the table and bringing new issues and perspectives to security debates. It is also the product of extensive scholarly research and scientific evidence confirming that greater political, economic, and social rights for women are strongly associated with more peaceful and prosperous societies.

In Iraq, however, the association between women's rights and peace was turned on its head and used as a justification for armed intervention. "Americans said they wanted to help women but that was just an excuse for invading Iraq," said researcher Illham Makki.<sup>2</sup> Scholars Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt wrote that the discourse of democracy promotion and women's empowerment was a "smokescreen" for U.S. imperial policy.<sup>3</sup>

The women's rights argument in Iraq lacked credibility. Before the imposition of sanctions and U.S. intervention, Iraqi women were relatively well off compared to women in other countries in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. During the 1950s and 1960s, Iraqi women made progress in achieving economic and educational opportunity. With Iraq's oil boom and rapid economic development of the 1970s, the middle class grew, and the state took steps to eradicate illiteracy and expand opportunities for women and girls. As award-winning author Riverbend wrote in *Baghdad Burning*,

Females in Iraq were a lot better off than females in other parts of the Arab world (and some parts of the Western world—we had equal salaries!) We made up over 50% of the working force. We were doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, professors, deans, architects, programmers, and more. We came and went as we pleased.<sup>4</sup>

The advances for women were uneven, however, with significant differences between urban and rural women, and among those living in conservative tribal areas and in minority communities such as the Yazidis. The progress was also precarious, and it began to deteriorate during the war with Iran in the 1980s and in the 1990s with the imposition of comprehensive economic sanctions and the U.S.-led bombing of the country's infrastructure during the First Gulf War.<sup>5</sup> Sanctions devastated the Iraqi economy and caused widespread poverty, the collapse of public health systems, and a rise in malnutrition and preventable disease, resulting in a severe humanitarian crisis.<sup>6</sup> Saddam Hussein responded with a "faith campaign" to galvanize public support for his government, enlisting the help of tribal and religious leaders and reversing the social and legal rights of women.<sup>7</sup>

The 2003 U.S.-led war caused further setbacks for society, as the invasion and occupation led to the disintegration of the state and caused widespread chaos, death, and destruction. Iraqi women bore the brunt of the war's tragic social and economic consequences and the resulting unprecedented humanitarian disaster. The promotion of Iraqi women's rights as the basis for invasion was the "mother of all failures," wrote author Haifa Zangana.<sup>8</sup> Because of U.S.-backed policies that led to armed conflict, instability, and violent extremism, Iraqi women lost much of what they had achieved in previous decades.

2 Illham Makki, interview with Marcelle Al-Zoughbi, 25 October 2022.

3 Nadjie Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 5.

4 Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2005), 22.

5 Yasmin Husein Al-Jawaheri, *Women in Iraq: The Gender Impact of International Sanctions* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008).

6 Hans C. von Sponeck, *A Different Kind of War: The UN Sanctions Regime in Iraq* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).

7 International Civil Society Action Network, *What the Women Say: Picking up the Pieces: Iraqi Women in the Aftermath of War and Occupation*, Brief 6 (Winter 2013), 2, <https://icanpeacework.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/What-the-Women-Say-Iraq-Brief-Winter-2013.pdf>; Noor Ghazi, interview with David Cortright and Anna Romandash, 26 January 2023.

8 Haifa Zangana, *City of Widows: An Iraqi Woman's Account of War and Resistance* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009), 28.

## The Mother of All Failures

The 2003 war caused a further drastic deterioration in social well-being and security for the people of Iraq. War, military occupation, armed insurgency, and bitter ethnic strife turned Iraq into a setting of vast economic

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and social suffering. Violence spread from multiple sources: U.S. bombing and military operations, the armed insurrection against the invasion, the rise of militias and extremist groups, and the emergence and growth of the Islamic State. One of the most rigorous scientific studies of the period from 2003–2011

concluded that approximately half a million deaths are attributable to the direct and indirect consequences of the U.S.-led war and military occupation.<sup>9</sup>

The UN Assistance Mission in Iraq estimated that in 2006, one of the most violent years of the war, more than 34,000 civilians were killed.<sup>10</sup> International agencies and civil society groups documented widespread sexual and gender-based violence as victims received little or no assistance from the Iraqi government.<sup>11</sup> Women and girls were abducted by gangs, beaten, raped, and in some cases trafficked for sexual slavery, prostitution, or ransom.<sup>12</sup> The Global Slavery Index rated Iraq as one of the worst countries in the world, with an estimated 400,000 people living in slavery.<sup>13</sup>

The upheaval caused by the war forced the displacement of two million people within Iraq and drove another two million into neighboring countries.<sup>14</sup> As many as 80 percent of those displaced within Iraq were women and children.<sup>15</sup> The flow of people became a flood in 2006 as sectarian murder squads and militias committed gruesome atrocities. Baghdad became a “hideously scarred city,” wrote Zangana, with thousands of Jersey barriers, checkpoints, and walls erected by U.S. forces to contain the violence and enforce a policy of divide and conquer. Previously mixed neighborhoods were forcibly segregated into Sunni or Shia Muslim enclaves. People who had lived together for decades as neighbors now became enemies.

Scholar Noor Ghazi recounted her experience:

The situation worsened to the point where mixed families like ours had to flee Baghdad.... The car following us was full of children with a little kid waving at us.... At Fallujah we were stopped at a fake checkpoint, just Sunni guys with guns. They came toward our car putting guns to our head and asking, what is your last name? My dad gave them his name which was Sunni and showed our IDs. My mom hid her ID because she was Shia. The armed men allowed us to pass but we were stuck in traffic.... They motioned the car behind us to approach the checkpoint and asked the same questions. When they heard that the names were Shia they started shooting into the car and murdered the entire family, including the little child who had been waving.<sup>16</sup>

9 Amy Hagopian et al., “Mortality in Iraq Associated with the 2003–2011 War and Occupation: Findings from a National Cluster Sample Survey by the University Collaborative Iraq Mortality Study,” *PLOS Medicine* (15 October 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001533>.

10 United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq, *Humanitarian Briefing on the Crisis in Iraq*, 2 May 2007, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/488d96332.html>.

11 Sherizaan Minwalla, “Trapped Between Borders: A Proposal to Apply International Legal Protection to Persecuted Women and Girls Who Are Unable to Flee,” *UC Davis Journal of International Law & Policy* 26, no. 1 (2019): 99–146, <https://jilp.law.ucdavis.edu/issues/Volume-26-1/26.1-MINWALLA.pdf>.

12 Minority Rights Group, *No Place to Turn: Violence against Women in the Iraq Conflict* (2015), <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ceasefire-report-no-place-to-turn.pdf>.

13 Global Slavery Index 2016, Global Findings, <https://legacy.globalslaveryindex.org/findings>.

14 UNHCR, *Iraq Situation Response: Update on Revised Activities under the January 2007 Supplementary Appeal*, July 2007, <https://www.unhcr.org/469632e32.pdf>.

15 Elizabeth G. Ferris, “The Looming Crisis: Displacement and Security in Iraq,” Policy Paper Number 5, Brookings Institution, August 2008, 6, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/08\\_iraq\\_ferris.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/08_iraq_ferris.pdf).

16 Noor Ghazi, interview with Marcelle Al-Zoughbi and David Cortright, 15 September 2022.

As the intensity of the violence increased, women faced greater insecurity and vulnerability. They risked their lives to go outdoors, often seeking to learn the fate of fathers, husbands, and brothers swept up in the violence. Zangana evoked scenes of “black-cloaked women...queuing at prisons, government offices, or morgues, in search of disappeared or detained male relatives.” Baghdad became “a city of bereaved women,” a city of widows.<sup>17</sup> In 2010, Dr. Nahdah Hameed, the Iraq government’s point person for women, put the number of widows in Iraq at more than one million.<sup>18</sup>

During this period, the Kurdistan region remained a protected zone and women did not suffer as severely. Journalist Ameera Al Jaber asked why the U.S. did not prevent violence against women in Baghdad and other cities.

Maybe they thought it was an Iraqi issue, but as an occupier they had a responsibility for providing safety. Baghdad had always been a non-religious city, but now because of political Islam, all women regardless of religion are forced to wear the hijab. I cannot move freely in my city because of the militias who attack women and want to control how we act and dress. These militias who targeted women came from the U.S. invasion. The U.S. helped get them into power.<sup>19</sup>

With the collapse of state capacity, mosques and associated religious groups stepped in to provide basic social services. This accelerated a cultural shift as the views of conservative male religious authorities became dominant. The status of women deteriorated and social mores increasingly depended on fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic teaching.<sup>20</sup>

Power shifted to theocratic extremists. As activist Yanar Mohammed said,

We used to have a government that was almost secular. It had one dictator. Now we have almost 60 dictators—Islamists who think of women as forces of evil. This is what is called the democratization of Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

The rise and rule of the Islamic State of Iraq exacerbated the conditions of oppression for Iraqi women and exacted a further steep price in death and social suffering in the cities and regions where it rampaged.<sup>22</sup> Among its many crimes and human rights abuses, ISIS engaged in genocidal violence against Yazidi and Turkmen populations, as well as Christian and Shabak communities, using rape and systematic sexual enslavement as a weapon of war.<sup>23</sup>

The growth of ISIS was a consequence of the U.S. invasion and occupation. As terrorism scholar Daniel Byman wrote, “The story of the Islamic State begins with the 2003 Iraq War.”<sup>24</sup> The George W. Bush administration justified the invasion of Iraq as part of its war against terrorism, claiming that Saddam Hussein was allied with al-Qaida. No credible evidence of such cooperation ever surfaced. The U.S. intelligence community concluded unequivocally that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11 or al-Qaida.<sup>25</sup>

The U.S. invasion tragically brought about the very terrorist threat it was intended to prevent. Al-Qaida-related groups metastasized in the armed rebellion that erupted against the U.S. occupation. These groups diminished for a time but they re-emerged to spread terror widely after 2011 amidst violent instability in Syria and Iraq. ISIS arose from the remnants of al-Qaida in Iraq.<sup>26</sup>

17 Zangana, *City of Widows*, 11, 31.

18 Hamza Hendawi, “Iraq’s One Million War Widows See Little Help,” NBC News, 6 July 2010, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna38100776>.

19 Ameera Al Jaber, interview with Marcelle Al-Zoughbi, 3 October 2022.

20 Yifat Susskind, “Promising Democracy, Imposing Theocracy: Gender-Based Violence and the US War on Iraq,” (New York: Madre, n.d.), 1.

21 Ibid.

22 Valeria Vilaro and Sara Bittar, *Gender Profile—Iraq: A Situation Analysis on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Iraq* (UN Women, Oxfam, and The People of Japan, December 2018), 5, <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620602/tr-gender-profile-iraq-131218-en.pdf>.

23 Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: ISIS Escapees Describe Systematic Rape,” 14 April 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/14/iraq-isis-escapees-describe-systematic-rape>.

24 Daniel Byman, “Understanding the Islamic State—A Review Essay,” *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 131.

25 Bruce Riedel, “9/11 and Iraq: The Making of a Tragedy,” *Lawfare*, 11 September 2021, [www.lawfareblog.com](http://www.lawfareblog.com).

26 Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (New York: Doubleday, 2015), 117.

## Façade

The U.S. occupation authority appointed an interim government in 2004 that included an office for minister of state for women’s affairs. This was intended to show a concern for women’s rights, as Iraqi women mobilized to demand a seat at the table, but the new office had no resources or political clout. A [2005 study](#) by the American Bar Association’s Iraq program found that the ministry was seriously understaffed and underfunded and had no power to influence legislation and policy.<sup>27</sup>

In 2009, Iraq’s Minister of Women’s Affairs, Nawal al-Samarraie, resigned in protest at the government’s inability to address the pervasive insecurity, unemployment, and oppression that women were experiencing. In an [interview](#), she called for the commitment of greater resources and help for what she called an “army of widows.”<sup>28</sup>

The office of minister for women’s affairs was eliminated in 2014.<sup>29</sup> This was a disappointment for advocates of women’s rights—“two steps back” as one international official said. It was replaced in 2017 by a new directorate of women’s empowerment, which had even less authority than the

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previous office. The use of the term *empowerment* masked the fact that Iraqi women still had no power in determining policy.

Similar issues exist within the Kurdistan Regional Government, which has gone through several iterations of women’s affairs’

ministries. A High Council for Women’s Affairs now exists, but it has little influence or funding.<sup>30</sup>

## Force Multipliers?

In the months preceding and following the 2003 invasion, some Iraqi women expressed support for intervention and were funded by the U.S. and UK governments. Groups such as Women for a Free Iraq and the Independent Women’s Forum were instrumentalized in support of interventionist policy.<sup>31</sup> Iraqi women certainly had good reason to oppose the brutal policies of Saddam Hussein, and some had campaigned against the dictatorship before being forced to emigrate, but most Iraqi women’s groups condemned the previous regime without supporting invasion and occupation.

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U.S.-supported Iraqi and international NGOs were an integral part of the war strategy. Secretary of State Colin Powell made this explicit in a 2001 address to nongovernment groups: “Just as surely as our diplomats and military, American NGOs are out there serving and sacrificing on the front lines of freedom.” NGOs are “[a force multiplier for us...an important part of our combat team.](#)”<sup>32</sup>

Donor support for community-based civil society groups and women’s empowerment programs can be useful in some countries and under the right conditions may help to encourage more inclusive governance, as we advocate below. Problems arise, however, when human rights and development funding is subordinated to military objectives. When the U.S. and UK tried to co-opt the agenda of women’s rights and funded local groups, the struggle for human rights was tainted as a product of outside interference, a form of “Western feminism.”<sup>33</sup> Iraqi women’s groups maintained

27 American Bar Association Iraq Legal Development Project, *The Status of Women in Iraq: An Assessment of Iraq’s De Jure and De Facto Compliance with International Legal Standard* (July 2005), 11, [https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/hr\\_statusofwomeniniraq\\_aba\\_july2005\\_0.pdf](https://www.peacewomen.org/sites/default/files/hr_statusofwomeniniraq_aba_july2005_0.pdf).

28 Kim Gamel, “Iraqi Women’s Minister Resigns in Protest,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 8 February 2009, <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-ml-iraq-020809-2009feb08-story.html>.

29 Anas Salameh, interview with David Cortright and Anna Romandash, 17 January 2023.

30 Sherizaan Minwalli, email communication with authors, 7 February 2023.

31 Enloe, *Nimo’s War, Emma’s War*, 106–107.

32 Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of NGOs, Washington, DC, 26 October 2001, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2001/5762.htm>.

33 Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?* 14, 141.



their independence, however, and continued to exert pressure for social equality and greater political inclusion.

## Political Rights and Social Wrongs

The U.S. attempt to advance women's rights had the notable achievement of establishing greater female representation in Iraq's parliament, the House of Representatives. In 2000, women held only 7.6 percent of the seats in parliament.<sup>34</sup> Today that percentage stands at 26 percent thanks to a mandatory threshold for female representation established in the 2005 Constitution of Iraq. Women's groups actively campaigned for guarantees of political participation. Some demanded a threshold of 40 percent representation in parliament and all government decision-making bodies, but most welcomed the 25 percent standard as an important step in the right direction.<sup>35</sup> That threshold was met in the 2005 elections and has been generally maintained in subsequent balloting.<sup>36</sup>

In recent years, the political participation of women has increased. The proportion of women running for office has grown over the last three election cycles. Voter turnout among women has also increased, rising from 38 percent of all voters in 2018 to 40 percent of the vote in 2021. These are positive steps forward.<sup>37</sup>

The mere presence of women in the Iraqi legislature does not guarantee the inclusion or championing of women's issues in government policy. Many of the women who are nominated and selected as candidates are the wives, sisters, or daughters of established male politicians and are affiliated with ultra-conservative factions. They are not elected by or accountable to women's constituencies or interests, according to Iraqi analysts, and they tend to vote according to the directives of the men who control the major political parties.<sup>38</sup>

The biggest shortcoming of the 25 percent threshold is that it does not apply to cabinet positions or to other levels of government. The senior ministers of the Iraqi government have been and continue to be overwhelmingly male. The presence of women in the political arena has not led to a greater female role in government decision making or to less discrimination against women in a society heavily influenced by conservative religious leaders.<sup>39</sup>

The U.S. and UK governments hailed Iraq's 2005 Constitution as a significant advance for women's rights, but the document has many shortcomings that have reinforced gender inequality. The Constitution established a federal system of communal authority that divides power among the Shia majority, Sunni communities, and the Kurdish region. This quota or muhasasa system creates incentives for corruption and is widely reviled by Iraqis.<sup>40</sup> This structure also reinforces tribalism and gives legal authority to often reactionary religious interpretations of women's rights based on communal practices and fundamentalist beliefs.

The provisions of the 2005 Constitution related to family matters and the Personal Status Law have been particularly troublesome. Under Article 41 of the Constitution, Iraqis are free to observe matters of personal status "according to their own religion, sect, belief and choice." This gives license

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<sup>34</sup> Vilaro and Bittar, *Gender Profile-Iraq*, 6, 21.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?* 120–121.

<sup>36</sup> Enloe, *Nimo's War, Emma's War*, 109–111.

<sup>37</sup> Salameh, interview.

<sup>38</sup> Yanar Mohammed, interview with David Cortright and Anna Romandash, 19 January, 2023.

<sup>39</sup> International Civil Society Action Network, *What the Women Say*, 7–8.

<sup>40</sup> Arwa Ibrahim, "Muhassa, the Political System Reviled by Iraqi Protesters," *Al Jazeera*, 4 December 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/4/muhassa-the-political-system-reviled-by-iraqi-protesters>.

to traditional discriminatory practices of family law that subordinate women to the authority of males, replacing a system of universal legal protections with one based on narrow religious interpretations of Islamic law.<sup>41</sup>

Riverbend anticipated the problem when the Constitution was adopted.

Under our past secular family law (which had been practice since the 50s) women had unalterable divorce, marriage, inheritance, custody, and alimony rights. All of this is going to change. Women are outraged...this is going to open new doors for repression in the most advanced country on women's rights in the Arab world!<sup>42</sup>

The Constitution proclaims de jure equality for women in Articles 14, 16, and 20, but the de facto reality is widespread gender-based discrimination in everyday life. Women need the consent of a male guardian in accessing bank accounts and gaining financial loans or trying to work outside the home. They often have little say over basic life matters.<sup>43</sup>

Aleefa Hassan described her experience as a nurse,

Most women coming to the ER are accompanied by men. When you ask the female patient what's wrong, the man speaks on her behalf, and he tells the nurses and doctors. A woman can't seek medical attention for herself or child without the husband's signature.<sup>44</sup>

An egregious example of legalized gender discrimination is Article 398 of the Iraqi Penal Code. Iraqi law prohibits rape and the sexual abuse of women or girls, but it waives these provisions if the perpetrator marries the victim, although the requirement is only for three years.

Religious and tribal rules allow marriage to underage girls and so-called temporary marriages; in reality rape marriages. In these arrangements, women or girls are "married" in the presence of a religious figure for a fixed period, which can be as short as several hours. In practice, this often takes place under conditions of family duress or desperation in cases of extreme poverty, as the man is obliged to pay a "dowry" to the woman or her family. These temporary marriages are a form of prostitution.<sup>45</sup> A woman who unintentionally becomes pregnant from the ordeal can have an abortion but must pay a fine to a cleric. At home, she could be physically abused or killed for "dishonoring" the family.

The situation in Iraq highlights how laws and local norms often clash. The rights guaranteed in the Constitution are not applied on the ground, where discriminatory beliefs and local practices normalize injustice both within the legal system as well as in society.<sup>46</sup> This is further exacerbated by decades of instability, political struggle, corruption, and extremism, all of which pushed gender issues to the very bottom of the list of political priorities and undermined women's social and economic opportunities.

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## Recovering Development

The harmful effects of war and sanctions in Iraq were evident across all major institutions of society. One of the worst-hit sectors was education. Before 1991, the educational system in Iraq was one of the best in the Middle

41 Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?* 114–115, 121, 133.

42 Riverbend, *Baghdad Burning*, 188, 190.

43 Vilardo and Bittar, *Gender Profile-Iraq*, 53.

44 Aleefa Hassan, interview with Marcelle Al-Zoughbi, 9 October 2022.

45 Nawal Al-Maghafi, "In Iraq, Religious 'Pleasure Marriages' Are a Front for Child Prostitution," *The Guardian*, 6 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/06/pleasure-marriages-iraq-baghdad-bbc-investigation-child-prostitution>.

46 Salameh, interview.

East region.<sup>47</sup> The Iraqi government invested heavily in education, taking major steps to eradicate illiteracy through the introduction of free compulsory education for both girls and boys.<sup>48</sup> Years of sanctions and the collapse of the state during the war severely damaged the educational system. Teachers weren't paid, and student enrollment dropped. The previous progress in education disappeared, as illiteracy among women rose to the highest level since the 1930s.<sup>49</sup> The quality of education also declined as fundamentalist religious teaching gained influence, and co-ed education became less available.<sup>50</sup>

With the end of the occupation and reduced civil violence after 2011, education in Iraq started to recover. Student enrollment rebounded, although gender inequality remains a problem with nearly 25 percent of girls of school age not attending classes. Based on current enrollment rates, an Iraqi child can expect to complete only 6.9 years of schooling—compared to 11.3 in the MENA region as a whole.<sup>51</sup>

Female illiteracy is 28 percent, double that of boys and men.<sup>52</sup> The one exception to this pattern of inequality is the Kurdistan region, where the ratio of girls to boys in school enrollment is about equal.

Low levels of educational attainment are a major factor in Iraq's abysmal ranking in the World Bank's Human Capital Index, which is among the lowest in the world and below that of any country in the MENA region with the exception of Yemen.<sup>53</sup>

Improving educational outcomes in Iraq will require a greater commitment of government funding. In 2019, only 10 percent of the government's national budget was allocated to education, which is the lowest in the MENA region.<sup>54</sup>

The war also had a major impact on Iraq's health care system, once considered the finest in the region. Medical staff were threatened and targeted. Approximately 75 percent of all medical workers—doctors, pharmacists, and nurses—left their jobs, and more than half of the country's 34,000 physicians left the country.<sup>55</sup> The Brookings Institution's Iraq Index estimated that 2,000 physicians were killed during the U.S. war.<sup>56</sup>

Health conditions in Iraq have improved over the past 15 years, but the health care system continues to lag behind those of neighboring states. The under-five mortality rate has improved since the 1990s, but it is far higher than that of other MENA states and upper-middle-income countries. The stunting rate among lower-income children is also higher than in other countries of the region.<sup>57</sup> The rate of maternal mortality is worse than in other MENA countries except Yemen.<sup>58</sup>

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**“Years of sanctions and the collapse of the state during the war severely damaged the educational system.”**

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47 Enloe, *Nimo's War, Emma's War*, 87; UNESCO, “UNESCO and Education Iraq Fact Sheet,” 28 March 2003, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/fact-sheet-unesco-and-education-iraq>.

48 Souad N. Al-Azzawi, “Decline of Iraqi Women Empowerment through Education under the American Occupation of Iraq 2003–2011,” Paper Presented at the International Seminar on the Situation of the Iraqi Academics, Ghent University, Belgium, 9–11 March 2011.

49 Zangana, *City of Widows*, 93.

50 Vilaro and Bittar, *Gender Profile-Iraq*, 35.

51 World Bank Group, *Addressing the Human Capital Crisis: A Public Expenditure Review for Human Development Sectors in Iraq (English)* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 30 May, 2021), 10, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/568141622306648034/pdf/Addressing-the-Human-Capital-Crisis-A-Public-Expenditure-Review-for-Human-Development-Sectors-in-Iraq.pdf>.

52 Vilaro and Bittar, *Gender Profile-Iraq*, 33–34.

53 World Bank Group, *Addressing the Human Capital Crisis*, 10.

54 Ibid, 11.

55 Vilaro and Bittar, *Gender Profile-Iraq*, 49; John Zarocostas, “Exodus of Medical Staff Strains Iraq's Health Facilities,” *BMJ* 334, 7599 (26 April 2007): 865, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.39195.466713.DB>.

56 Brookings Institution, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction & Security in Post-Saddam Iraq* (30 December 2010), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/index20101230.pdf>.

57 World Bank Group, *Addressing the Human Capital Crisis*, 10.

58 World Bank, Maternal Mortality Ratio, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.MMRT>.

The health care system is seriously underfunded. Only 4 percent of Iraq's national government budget is devoted to public health. Public expenditures on health in recent years have remained stagnant, averaging just 1.6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). This is half the rate of health funding for the MENA region and upper middle-income countries.<sup>59</sup> Due to the lack of government funding for health insurance, patients and their families and commu-

nities are forced to pay for medical expenses. A third of low-income households experience "impoverishing" health costs.<sup>60</sup> In Mosul and other cities, many women

and their families cannot afford to pay for health care,<sup>61</sup> and the burden of unpaid care labor usually falls on women.

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**“The health care system is seriously underfunded.”**

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Women's access to paid employment declined significantly in recent decades. Before the 1990s, women had the opportunity to work outside the home, especially in the major cities of Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, and Kirkuk. Two-thirds of all the teaching staff in primary and secondary schools were women, as were 30 percent of university professors and researchers.<sup>62</sup> As the education and health sectors collapsed, most of those employment opportunities disappeared.

The World Bank ranks the female labor force participation rate in Iraq today as "exceptionally low" among MENA countries, the worst in the world among countries not at war. Only 11.5 percent of working-age women actively participate in the labor force.<sup>63</sup> Even women with higher levels of education have difficulty gaining employment.

The unemployment rate among women with a bachelor's degree is 68 percent.<sup>64</sup>

The few women who do manage to find paid employment face problems of sexual harassment. Official statistics are not available, but a 2015 survey by the Iraqi Women's Journalists Forum and interviews with women employees reveal widespread sexual harassment and blackmail, especially in the private sector. In one group, nearly eight of 10 women suffered some form of sexual harassment.<sup>65</sup> Unofficial statistics provided by the Forum of Iraqi Women Media show that 77 percent of Iraqi women experience direct harassment, and more than 90 percent of them have demanded regulations to deter harassers.<sup>66</sup>

## The WPS Agenda

Iraq was one of the first countries in the MENA region to develop a national action plan on Women, Peace and Security. The UN Security Council made specific reference to the WPS agenda in Iraq in 2003 when it adopted Resolution 1483, establishing authority and policy guidelines for the occupation. The resolution encouraged "efforts by the people of Iraq to form a representative government... that affords equal rights and justice to all Iraqi citizens without regard to ethnicity, religion, or gender."<sup>67</sup>

Many women's civil society groups in Iraq advocated for developing an action plan. They played an active role in urging provisions for assuring women's participation in preventing and resolving conflict and in negotiations, peacebuilding activities, and reconstruction efforts. The government invited Iraqi women's groups to discuss the plan

59 World Bank Group, *Addressing the Human Capital Crisis*, 11.

60 Ibid, 12.

61 Relief Web, "Iraq: Five Years after the Battle of Mosul, Women Still Struggle to Access Health Care," 11 April 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-five-years-after-battle-mosul-women-still-struggle-access-health-care>.

62 Al-Azzawi, "Decline of Iraqi Women Empowerment."

63 Tala Ismail, Dana Qarout, and Sen Iman, *Community and Intra Household Norms against Women's Work: What Matters?* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 14 December 2022), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099400212042295797/P1682280361e35093089d005c7834757219>.

64 Vilaro and Bittar, *Gender Profile-Iraq*, 26.

65 Iraqi Women Journalists Forum, *A New Study Reveals Facts about the Phenomenon of Sexual Harassment in Iraqi Society*, 2015, [https://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Shahrazad-Study-FINAL.En\\_.pdf](https://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Shahrazad-Study-FINAL.En_.pdf).

66 Shafaq News, "Shocking Accounts of Harassment in Iraq," 30 September 2022, <https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Shocking-Accounts-of-Harassment-in-Iraq>.

67 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1483, S/RES/1483, 22 May 2003, <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1483>.

and present their recommendations, but it later altered the plan without their [knowledge or consent](#).<sup>68</sup> The action plan initially had six pillars, but the government removed two of those pillars, the ones for social and economic empowerment and law enforcement. It also [removed the budget](#) and failed to develop a coherent implementation plan.<sup>69</sup>

In Iraq, as in many countries, progress on fulfilling WPS mandates has been slow because of low political commitment and a lack of resources. Few political leaders recognize the significant range of political, economic, and social benefits that accrue to countries that have higher levels of gender equality. The WPS agenda means more than appointing women to security and peacemaking positions. It is also about creating societies in which women are empowered and have equal rights with men. [Research shows](#) that states in which women participate equitably in political decision making and have full access to social and economic opportunities [are more prosperous and peaceful](#).<sup>70</sup> This is a crucial but often unacknowledged dimension of the WPS agenda. Gender equality is beneficial not only for women but for society as a whole, for men as well as women.

The WPS Index is a recently developed tool for measuring the performance of Iraq and other countries on issues of women's rights and development. The Index is produced by Georgetown University's Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Led by Melanne Verveer, the first U.S. ambassador for global women's issues, GIWPS examines the role of women across the world in conflict transformation and human development to promote peace and sustainability. PRIO and GIWPS researchers measure women's inclusion in political, social, and economic life; the existence of discriminatory laws and norms related to gender roles; and security within society and on the individual level. The Index evaluates these aspects to estimate an average

for the country and compares its performance over time and in relation to neighboring states and countries that have a similar level of development. The most recent Index examines global shifts in gender roles and power dynamics resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. [The latest Iraq evaluation reviews](#) the impacts of the 2019 protests and continued ISIS-generated violence.<sup>71</sup>

The WPS Index ratings for Iraq show that despite some slight improvements, the prospects for women's participation and gender equality are limited. Iraq ranks 166 out of 170 countries evaluated. Within the MENA region, it ranks third lowest with only Syria and Yemen with worse results.

Although overall levels of political violence in Iraq have declined in recent years and there is greater stability now than in previous decades, Iraqi women still face significant threats of violence, often perpetrated by family members. Iraq is the worst country in the MENA region when it comes to intimate partner violence, with more than 45 percent of women reporting they have experienced such violence. Iraqi women also report feeling relatively unsafe in their communities when walking home or doing simple tasks outside. Iraq has a significant son bias, which indicates serious prejudice against girls and women. The country's ratio of 107 males for 100 females is the highest among all neighboring countries and is on the rise in comparison to previous years. Women's education is also on decline. The [sporadic changes](#) for the better that have occurred do not alter continued dire conditions for women in Iraq.<sup>72</sup>

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**“In Iraq, as in many countries, progress on fulfilling WPS mandates has been slow because of low political commitment and a lack of resources.”**

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68 Vilaro and Bittar, *Gender Profile-Iraq*, 20.

69 Yasmin Chilmeran, “Exploring the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in Iraq,” Iraqi Voices Podcast, Episode 18, 8 March 2022, <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/exploring-the-women-peace-security-agenda-in-iraq/id1559380760?i=1000553280894>.

70 Mary Caprioli and Mark A. Boyer, “Gender, Violence, and International Crisis,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 4 (August 2001): 503–518; Mary Caprioli, “Primed for Violence: The Role of Gender Inequality in Predicting Internal Conflict,” *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (June 2005): 161–178.

71 Tobias Ide, “COVID-19 and Armed Conflict,” *World Development* 140 (April 2021): 105355, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105355>.

72 Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, *Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/22: Tracking Sustainable Peace through Inclusion, Justice, and Security for Women* (Washington, DC: GIWPS and PRIO), <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>.

## Priorities and Struggles

Iraqi women's groups have a long history of advocating for freedom and development and they remain determined today to overcome the difficult conditions they face. Iraqi women have campaigned actively in nonviolent movements to uphold human rights, build peace, and counter violent extremism. They played a central role in the historic protests of October 2019 when large crowds of Iraqi men and women mobilized in Baghdad and cities all over the country to counter corruption and demand greater justice and equality. Iraqi women have also worked at the local level in many communities to make an impact in countering gender-based violence and demanding greater social equality and rights for women.<sup>73</sup>

In presenting their agenda for change, women's groups face an unfavorable political environment and are up against strong opposition from sectarian and reactionary religious forces. They need the support of international civil society and assistance from donor states to help promote development and human rights. The United States has a special responsibility to help Iraq, given the harm American policies created for the country. It can fulfill that duty by working in concert with other states to support the WPS agenda in Iraq. Donors can take action immediately by honoring previous pledges of support for Iraq that remain unfulfilled.<sup>74</sup>

The top priority for Iraqi women is simply the right to life, to have protection against the violence that pervades everyday life and looms as a political threat. Women across the country want greater security guarantees and are critical of overly militarized policing policies that have failed to protect their safety. Part of this agenda is advocating for more shelters to provide safety for women victimized by trafficking and gender-based violence. The Iraqi government has no shelters for adult women and has tried to prevent NGOs from establishing their own. The Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq nonetheless created several shelters and has urged the government to support and

protect such shelters.<sup>75</sup> The Kurdish Regional Government has established a Directorate for Tracing Violence Against Women and maintains four shelters.<sup>76</sup>

Shelter advocacy is directly linked to advocacy for greater protection against violence. This includes preventing human trafficking and so-called honor killings. It is estimated that 1,000 women a year are murdered in honor killings, usually by their husband or a family member.<sup>77</sup> National and local laws do not protect against these crimes. Women's groups are advocating legislation that would criminalize all types of gender-based violence. They want enforcement mechanisms so that such laws are fully and uniformly implemented across the country regardless of regional specifics and local norms. They are also pressuring the government to adopt and implement the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

These same protections against violence should be extended to queer women and non-binary people in Iraq. The laws should include independent monitoring mechanisms to investigate cases of sexual violence in workplaces. These steps are needed to guarantee equality and protections for all people in Iraq.

Another important advocacy direction relates to social and economic opportunity. Greater financing and support are needed for women-led businesses and startups. This includes microfinancing programs and greater access to credit. International donors can increase their commitment to economic empowerment by providing additional funding for enterprises that employ and benefit women. They can also provide greater direct support to the Iraqi government for increased investments in education and

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**“The United States has a special responsibility to help Iraq, given the harm American policies created for the country.”**

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<sup>73</sup> International Civil Society Action Network, email communication with authors, 8 February 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Salameh, interview.

<sup>75</sup> Mohammed, interview.

<sup>76</sup> Minwalli, email communication.

<sup>77</sup> Mohammed, interview.

health programs that benefit women and enhance overall social and economic well-being.

There is a gap in Iraqi law regarding the legal status of women and their children in marriages that have been performed under customary law in religious ceremonies and are not registered or recognized under civil law. Some of these marriages involve girls below the legal minimum age of 15 (with parental permission) and may be forcibly arranged. The affected women and their children are not protected by the law and may not be eligible for health care, education, and other state services.<sup>78</sup> Uncertainties also exist for the many widows and refugee women residing in Iraq.

One of Iraq's greatest humanitarian and security challenges is the status of women and children whose relatives were affiliated with ISIS or other terrorist groups. The Iraq Ministry of the Interior estimates there are 250,000 people in this category, mostly women and children. More than 60,000 of these people, half of them Iraqi, are in the Al-Hol camp in northern Syria.<sup>79</sup> These and other refugee and detainee populations lack legal status and basic social services and are unwelcome in their former communities. Experts have referred to embittered ISIS widows and their children as a "ticking time bomb."<sup>80</sup> This is an enormous problem far beyond the purview of this study. It will require massive international assistance for Iraq and other states in the region to help solve the challenge. Whatever solutions emerge will benefit from fulfillment of the recommendations offered here for greater security, legal protection, and social support for all women in Iraq.

The greatest obstacle to peace and security for the women of Iraq is the lack of political will among male decision makers. Political leaders in Iraq and donor states espouse the rhetoric of women, peace, and security but they are often unwilling to make commitments to enact or support necessary political, legal, social, and economic reforms. Competing political agendas and narrow tribal or sectarian

interests prevent concerted action and impede the work of women's organizations struggling for more equitable policies. A non-partisan approach is needed for establishing communication and cooperation between the state, regional authorities, and women-led NGOs.

Iraqi civil society groups emphasize the need to improve women's representation in the media. It is important to show examples of female accomplishments and to portray women not as victims or passive observers but as agents of change. The media should show the achievements of women not only in the family but in politics, education, and business, offering positive female role models in all walks of life.

This extensive agenda for change will require action by the Iraqi government, but donor states can play a role by providing greater assistance for women's groups that otherwise have few resources. Given its humanitarian responsibilities to the Iraqi people, the United States should play a leading role in this mission. Some progressive groups have called for an overhaul of U.S. foreign policy toward a feminist framework that is reparative of past injustices and focused on providing support for survivors.<sup>81</sup>

Iraqi activists have been critical of some international aid programs, urging a greater focus on meeting humanitarian and social needs rather than on training for democracy. They advocate more priority for funding public health, nutrition, education, infrastructure, clean water, and job creation programs. Women's groups also express a preference

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**“International donors can increase their commitment to economic empowerment by providing additional funding for enterprises that employ and benefit women.”**

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78 International Civil Society Action Network, *What the Women Say*, 6–7.

79 United Nations Development Programme Iraq, *Affiliated with ISIS: Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children*, 24 October 2022, <https://www.undp.org/iraq/publications/affiliated-isis-challenges-return-and-reintegration-women-and-children>.

80 Joanne Stocker, “A Ticking Time Bomb: Meeting the ISIS Women of al-Hol,” *The Defense Post*, 3 August 2019, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2019/08/03/isis-women-al-hol>.

81 Yifat Susskind, email communication with authors, 6 February 2023; Jyhene Kebisi, “Colonial Feminism and the Un-Liberation of Iraqi Women,” *The New Arab*, 22 October 2021, <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/colonial-feminism-and-un-liberation-women-iraq>.

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**“The greatest obstacle to peace and security for the women of Iraq is the lack of political will among male decision makers.”**

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programming is considered the most effective with funds

for the funding model of UN institutions and agencies in Canada, the Netherlands, and Scandinavian countries, which are transparent in their operations and do not interfere in local activities.<sup>82</sup> The International Civil Society Action Network [found from its assessment](#) that EU aid

targeted appropriately and civil society groups given the flexibility to identify their own priorities.<sup>83</sup>

At the core of the women’s agenda in Iraq is the call for greater compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Women are seeking to advance this agenda through transnational linkages with activists in many other countries. With sufficient resources and freedom to operate, women’s groups can play a decisive role in preventing renewed armed violence and creating the conditions for sustainable peace and development. This will require an unequivocal commitment to the implementation of WPS policy guidelines and its mandates for greater gender equality.

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82 Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation?* 146–148.

83 International Civil Society Action Network, *What the Women Say*, 9.