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Women's participation in peacebuilding and reconciliation in Iraq

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Question

A rapid review of the evidence available on women's participation in peacebuilding and reconciliation in Iraq.

Contents

1. Overview

This rapid review synthesises data from academic, policy and NGO sources on women's participation in peacebuilding in Iraq. Peacebuilding will be defined as a 'range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management and to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development', and reconciliation will be included under this term (Khodary, 2016, p. 499).There is a severe lack of focus on women and peacebuilding in the literature, which is mirrored by the limited role women have played in institutionalised peacebuilding in Iraq. Moreover, there is little disaggregation in the literature between the various religions, ethnic groups or class structures and women are categorised together as uniform.

Key findings are as follows:

- Women are hugely under represented in peace processes as core actors and when they do participate their role is limited and the quality of their participation is extremely important.
- There are several opportunities to increase gender equality in the immediate aftermath of conflict and it is important that these are harnessed whilst the window is open.
- Research points to the increased likelihood of reaching an agreement and of the longevity of the agreement if women are involved in the peace process (O'Reilly et al., 2015).
- It is important that women's peacebuilding is locally driven with international support, and civil society has a significant role to play in this through pressuring political actors.
- To gain rights, Iraqi women have a history of using civil society, rather than the political sphere, which is still seen to mainly be the domain of men.
- Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraqi women continued to utilise civil society spaces to pressure for political gains, as they were not granted through the coalition.
- Women's civil society organisations in Iraq are able to engage with more people at a local level and are an important actor in pushing for political change.
- Although the launching of the Iraqi National Action Plan (INAP) to implement Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security was a significant step, the plan ignores women's participation in conflict resolution and reconciliation.
- Whilst women's participation in peacebuilding in Iraq is limited, at a local level there are a number of important initiatives led by civil society that are gradually increasing women's role in peacebuilding at a micro level.
- There remain a number of obstacles to women's participation in the political sphere, including the security situation, cultural barriers, and the tribal/high ranking nature of negotiations.
- The partisan nature of Iraqi politics often means that the women who get involved are not promoting women's interests, or that it is not in the power of these women to raise issues that go against their party.

2. Importance of Women's Participation

O'Reilly et al. (2015) highlight that between 1992 and 2011 only 2% of chief mediators and 9% of negotiators in peace processes were women. They argue that a leading barrier to women's participation is that the goal is often merely to end violence, where women play a small part and that if the focus were instead on building peace women would play a more prominent role. Moreover, women's security needs and priorities for peace differ from international system's focus on state security. Finally, organisations that prioritise women's participation, for example the UN, often have little power to influence the direction of the process.

Nonetheless, statebuilding in conflict-affected and fragile contexts provides opportunities for implementing greater gender equality, as it offers a window for change. Post-conflict statebuilding can provide women with the opportunity to mobilise, be heard, and become more politically active due to the opening of a democratic space. However, at the same time, this is not always the case and these spaces can also end up being dominated by men and omit gender equality in the agenda (Khodary, 2016).

O'Reilly et al. (2015) stress the importance of including women in peacebulding. The Geneva Graduate Institute's Broadening Participation Project examined the roles of women's groups in 40 peace and transition processes and found that the involvement of women made it more likely for an agreement to be reached and increased the probability that the peace agreement will last longer. Nonetheless, tensions exist between the level of actual change fostered in the processes; the inclusion of gender sensitive language is not the same as the inclusion of women and it is important that this differentiation is made clear. Moreover, the inclusion of women does not by virtue mean that gender issues will be addressed or included and a very important point that O'Reilly et al. (2015) make is that the quality of women's participation is more important that than the quantity of women participating and thus quotas are not necessarily beneficial. This is often discussed in terms of women's descriptive (women's presence in politics) and substantive representation (the promotion of women's interests), whereby substantive representation 'requires that legislators have certain attitudes and preferences when acting as representatives' (Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008, p. 397). Goetz and Jenkins (2016) echo this point by highlighting that there is no correlation between women's participation and gender-equality provisions in peacebuilding agreements and that the degree of impact rather depends on the form of women's engagement.

Goetz and Jenkins (2016) also argue that the most effective way to increase gender-equality content in peace agreements is through pressure on delegates and mediators by women's civil-society organisations. Thus, it is important that steps are taken to encourage and enable the participation of women's civil-society organisations in peacebuilding.

Women's rights are often sidelined in the rush to achieve a political settlement to end conflict. Both exogenous and endogenous actors have to be willing to confront and deal with the root causes of gender-based discrimination and inequalities across multiple levels in order for these to be part of the society going forward. Although challenging, addressing women's citizenship helps introduce and remove inequalities from security and gender-responsive development. O'Connell (2011) argues that gender mainstreaming by the donor community focuses on placing gender components within mainstream programmes, rather than developing a comprehensive strategy for including, and targeting, women in development. O'Connell also critiques the lack of attention to the roles local women's organisations play as agents of change, and highlights that donors rather tend to view these merely as implementers. To promote women's empowerment

and gender equity in conflict-affected and fragile contexts action must be taken on various levels including constitutional and legal frameworks that enshrine gender equality and equity, inclusive and equitable political institutions and gender-responsive economic and social policy-making, and clear accountability mechanisms. These should be locally driven (with attention to existing ethnic, religious and economic divisions) however international actors should build capacity and support local women's organisations, rather than give programmes for them to implement (O'Connell, 2011).

Finally, Khodary (2016) argues that women should not be given roles based on stereotypes; men should not be viewed as dominant and violent, and women as subordinate and peaceful. Rather, identities overlap and experiences are contextually based. This is particularly relevant in the Iraqi case and the fight against the Islamic State, where women (mainly Yazidi and Kurdish) played an active role in the combat against the Islamic State, challenging gender stereotypes (Nilsson, 2017).

3. Historical Participation in Iraq

Iraq has a history of women's participation and early in the 1900s women were pushing for independence and equal rights. In the 1920s and 1930s women from privileged families were enrolling in universities and entering the job market. During this period, women were also aiming to gain the rights of full citizens and to be permitted in public without a veil. By 1952 the Iraqi Women's League (IWL) was founded with the aim of defending the rights of women and children. IWL also established literacy centers focusing on women's education and encouraged their involvement in politics through civil society. In 1958 the Kurdish Women's Federation (KWF) was established, which focused on national independence and Kurdish autonomy. These organisations encouraged women's participation in politics and campaigned for their social and economic rights. IWL managed to successfully campaign for laws granting women employment, education, and inheritance rights following the 1958 revolution. As part of the socialist revolution post-1958 education became mandatory for all under 16s, and women were encouraged to attend universities. As a result more women joined the work force and this was particularly high when men went to fight in the Iran-Iraq War (Brennan, 2003).

Under the Baathist regime, with increased wealth from oil, Iraq underwent considerable social sector expansion in the 1970 and 1980s. As a result, by the 1990s primary school attendance reached 93% and women became prominent actors in the workforce. Although women's employment rates remained low, there was a considerable increase from 13% in 1997 to 21% in 1993. Women also constituted 79% of the services sector, 43.9% of the professional and technical sectors, and 12.7% in administrative and organisational posts (Pina, 2006: 2). However, women still suffered political repression and mainly used civil society to pressure for gains, rather than the male dominated political system. In 1972 the Baathists formed the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW), which became the only legally sanctioned women's organisation in Iraq. However, in his later years Saddam Hussein began restricting the activities and rights that the GFIW secured for Iraqi women and as the economy constricted in the late 1990s women were pushed out of the labour market.

Following the fall of the Saddam regime, women's rights and participation in politics was not granted at the levels expected by some actors, and some women felt they were actually worse

off (Moghadam, 2005). It is also argued the invasion led to Iraqi women activists losing all they had achieved and that the justifications of the invasion as being empowering for women was thus completely false, as the opposite actually occurred (Thompson, 2013). In July 2003 the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), unveiled the 25-member Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), which included only three women. Additionally, one of the female members of the IGC, Akila al-Hashimi, was assassinated in September 2003. Moreover, there were no Iraqi women on the nine-member committee drafting the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), which acted as Iraq's interim constitution (Pina, 2006).

Henrizi (2015) argues that women's rights and participation were sidelined to other priorities following the invasion of Iraq by the coalition forces. However, hybrid spaces of agency for women in civil society have been created since the invasion. Women have been able to utilise these spaces to address security concerns, make efforts to overcome sectarian ideas, and to add a longer-term perspective of transformation process. According to Henrizi (2015) international help eventually proved crucial to helping Iraqi women recreate civil society and develop agency, which suffered under the later years of Saddam's regime.

In 2005, a quota of 25 % for women in parliament was introduced and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) increased this quota to 30 % in 2009. However, women remain underrepresented in local and national government and women's needs are not part of the political agenda, pointing again to the issue of descriptive, rather than substantive representation. When in 2006 Iraq adopted a national reconciliation programme, there were no women in the coalition and instead a separate, much less prominent Office for Women was formed (Moghadam, 2005).

4. Current Dynamics

According to Kaya (2016) a significant step towards enabling women's participation and protection in the processes of conflict resolution and peace-building was taken with the launch of the Iraqi National Action Plan (INAP) to implement the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in 2014.

INAP mainly focuses on political participation and improving women's rights. It largely ignores some of the key areas of Resolution 1325, such as women's participation in conflict resolution and reconciliation, prevention of violence against women, and women's specific relief needs in conflict and post-conflict. Additionally, INAP was not drafted by the wider political community, thus making it lack the legitimacy necessary for its implementation, it also lacks a defined timeline, budget, and monitoring mechanism. Without consulting civil society the Iraqi government removed sections on social and economic empowerment and of legislation and law enforcement, which makes it difficult to improve women's participation in peace & security issues.[1] However, Iraq is the first country in the Middle East to launch a programme to implement Resolution 1325 and it is a step in the right direction towards furthering women's interests in the country (Kaya, 2016).

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[1] https://www.womenpeacemakersprogram.org/news/challenges-facing-womens-participation-in-peacebuilding-processes-in-iraq/

Khodary (2016) highlights the importance of civil society for women engagement in Iraq and argues that it is as important as their engagement in the formal levels of government. Civil society organisations at the local level are able to appeal to more people, include more women, and can mobilise people and decision makers to pressurise for women's rights. Women's civil society played an important role shaping INAP, even if some important pillars were later removed without their knowledge. Seven Iraqi women civil society organisations played a major role in the development of INAP over a two-year period. Additionally, in May 2015, the Al-Amal Association organised the Regional Feminist Security Forum on Resolution 1325 in the Middle East and North Africa region. The Forum resulted in the "Arbil Declaration" and stressed solidarity among women against violence, terrorism, and extremism, as well as the need to increase the role of women in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and negotiations (Khodary, 2016).

In July 2017 the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), in collaboration with UN Women and the Government of Iraq National Reconciliation Committee, Office of the Prime Minister's Women and Gender Affairs Department organised a meeting with leading Iraqi women to discuss women's participation in Iraq's National Reconciliation process. The participants called for a smooth transitional justice system following the defeat of the Islamic State and for accountability for those who committed crimes against women during the conflict. Importantly, they called for the Political Parties law to be amended to ensure representation of women in the parties' leadership.[2] However women are still under-represented in decision-making positions and in national peacebuilding forums, and actors, such as the Swedish government, are working to build the capacity of women's rights organisations and media actors in this regard.[3]

Civil society has become an important space for women to organise, as access to the political structures are restricted. Again, despite the 25% quota for women in the parliament, it is argued that this just ensures women are represented numerically, but does not lead to them having any real impact on decision-making and thus Henrizi (2015) argues that women rather see NGOs as places for political agency. Moreover, due to the turbulent political situation and no means of accountability for political parties, female MPs are hindered from advancing women's rights (Davis, 2016). In Iraq politics is often considered a space for men and civil society, as a space for women to exercise their agency. From a feminist perspective, it is not only important to push for a greater involvement of women in politics, but also it is crucial to recognise these other spaces. Therefore, these other, civil, spaces need to be viewed as political, as women's political agency is enacted in them and this can transcend into formal political spaces. Henrizi (2015) also argues that formal international spaces created by organisations such as the UN where women's agency is central, allows for Iraqi women to balance power imbalances and gives them the opportunity to force state institutions to fulfil its obligations with regards to women (Henrizi, 2015).

Although the post-conflict period opens up opportunities for increasing women's participation in politics and peacebuilding, it is important to note the damages done to women's rights under the Islamic State's rule. For instance, women had limited options to work, were expected to dress a certain way in public (Niqab, black and without decoration), were no longer allowed in public without a male relative, there were forced marriages (including of young girls), and most girls stopped attending school. These dynamics created a shift in gender norms that in turn need to be renegotiated post Islamic State, and thus humanitarian interventions that take this shift into

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[2] https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/women-s-participation-iraq-s-national-reconciliation-process-paramount-enar

[3] http://www.government.se/4a4af1/contentassets/9eff707db38046b8bc21b873b6c5a80c/swedens-strategy-for-development-cooperation-with-iraq-2017-2021.pdf

consideration can contribute to more egalitarian renegotiation of gender roles (Dietrich & Carter, 2017).

Currently, in a project run by PAX and funded by the United Kingdom Embassy in Baghdad, nine Iraqi Women parliamentarian members are engaging with citizen platforms and women groups in the newly accessible areas of Nineveh. The aim is to develop an action plan with the community on gender sensitive social reconstruction, community reconciliation and transitional justice. The idea is to create a safe space for women to air their grievance and articulate their ideas with the MPs acting as role models. The plan will be presented to stakeholders and through this platform the aim is to include women's priorities in post-ISIS reconstruction and stabilization (PAX, 2017).

At a local level the current conflict in Iraq and the resulting dynamics have opened up a number of opportunities for women to participate in peacebuilding. In Kirkuk province a local organisation, Iraqi Al-Amal Association (IAA), has been training IDP women in camps to become mediators to solve local conflicts. As a result of the training a number of women ran in the camp elections to become local mediators (a role traditionally occupied by men) and 60 women were elected in Laylan camp, most who went from very traditional gender roles to becoming community leaders. IAA has also facilitated interactions between women and the police force in Kirkuk with the aim of uniting the efforts of women with the police in peacebuilding. In November 2016, they organised a conference with the Kirkuk police where 55 police officers and 50 women activists attended, along with several judges, members of the Kirkuk Provincial Council and representatives of the university (Cordaid, 2017).

In August 2017 in Mosul, the Iraqi Women Network held a conference with Iraqi civil society from throughout the country on women as peacemakers in Iraq. The conference gave women from Mosul the opportunity to share their experiences and discuss their role in confronting extremism in the city during the Islamic State's control of Mosul. The conference stressed the determination of Iraqi women to play a role in the process of political reform, resolving conflict, as well as building peace and justice (Iraqi Women Network, 2017).

In the Kurdish Region of Iraq and the Yazidi parts of Nineveh Province women have taken up roles in fighting the Islamic State, which in a traditionally conservative society plays an important role in challenging the perception of women's roles throughout society. It also contests the perceived norm of women as caregivers and even objects when they become perceived as spoils of war, which transfers into the peacebuilding process. Moreover, women as combatants challenges the patriarchal society itself (Nilsson, 2017).

5. Challenges and Best Practices

Insecurity in Iraq is a significant obstacle to women's political engagement and participation and this has led many women to leave politics or activism. Social and cultural barriers also often hinder women's participation in Iraq, particularly the patriarchal cultural norm whereby women often need permission to engage in activities outside the home. These barriers inform decision-making and are thus reinforced in post-conflict reconstruction and political settlements. These attitudes are not solely the domain of men and are transferred to women too. According to a study carried out by the UN only 67.7 % of Iraqi women believe that women should participate in elections as candidates and 84.8 % believe that women should vote. Moreover, 41.5 % said they did not want to participate in political affairs as this was the domain of men (Khodary, 2016, p.

503). Finally, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) found that only about half of men aged 10-30 in Iraq supported women's right to work (Guthrie, 2017).

Peacebuilding in Iraq also often relies on tribal hierarchy, religious leaders and the established political actors, thus restricting women's room for involvement. Additionally, for women to become involved in Iraq's peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction, they often have to rely on partisan support and thus become an extension of their sponsor. As a result women who could promote women's interests and/or have a history of campaigning for women's rights and participation are often overlooked and as a result these issues are sidelined. Therefore, it is argued that in order to advance women's role in peacebuilding a key challenge is to shift the mind-set of Iraqi society and thus considerable support and capacity building is needed for women's organisations. Suzan Aref, Director of the Iraqi Women's Empowerment Organisation, argues that it is pointless having new laws for women, or services if women cannot take advantage of or access them. Thus, education is needed in order for these laws to be internalised by the wider society, so that they can actually be implemented.[4]

Sanad for Peacebuilding, a local peacebuilding organisation in Iraq, carried out focus group discussions with women on the lack of women's participation in peacebuilding. They key obstacles women mentioned were the lack of women's capacity-building measures, family and social pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, pervasive use of negative stereotypes in the media, and a lack of civic and human rights education programmes. Thus, Sanad argues for a range of actions to increase the role of women in peacebuilding:

1. Identify influential women actors and map them
2. Train women in multiple different roles across the peacebuilding spectrum
3. Collect gender disaggregated data on the participation and impact of peacebuilding initiatives
4. Set up a monitoring framework for the National Reconciliation Committee to ensure women play a role (Guthrie, 2017).

In June 2012, the United States Institute for Peace USIP brought together a range of Afghan and Iraqi women leaders for dialogue in Istanbul, Turkey. From this workshop both Afghan and Iraqi women shared their experiences with regards to best practises for increasing women's participation and role within peacebuilding.

Afghan best practices:

- Mobilise early during conflict rather than wait for the post conflict period

- Lobby to join the legislation drafting processes

- Take advantage of transition periods to advocate for legal reforms that benefit women

- Bring together women from diverse sectors, provinces, ethnic groups, and backgrounds

- Ensure advocacy on key issues is timely

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[4] https://www.womenpeacemakersprogram.org/news/challenges-facing-womens-participation-in-peacebuilding-processes-in-iraq/

- Reach out to men to form partnerships, especially religious and tribal elders.

Iraqi best practices:

- Work quickly to establish a wide range of civil society groups focused on women's empowerment.

- Establish effective communication and networking systems between women's groups.

- Establish clear goals and develop effective lobbying and advocacy campaigns.

- Use mass media effectively.

- Establish parliamentary quotas at the provincial and national levels (Kuehnast et al., 2012).

Based on her report on the implementation of Resolution 1325, Kaya (2016) gives recommendations for best practices for international actors in Iraq:

- Implement 1325 in all peacebuilding, humanitarian and military activities in Iraq and ensure implementation is monitored

- Train military and relief staff on Resolution 1325

- Provide funding to women civil society organisations and ensure that diversity (including class, ethnicity, political affiliation and geographical location) is included in distribution variety of backgrounds.

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- PAX for Peace: https://www.paxforpeace.nl/our-work/programmes/iraq
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