

KURDISH WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Kurdish women's participation in the political process in Iraqi Kurdistan and shows that they have a strong and prominent position in the Kurdish community. While fulfilling numerous domestic roles as wives and mothers of communities facing genocidal threats and fundamental resource scarcity over recent decades, they have actively and vibrantly participated in the political and social life of Kurdish society. Under former Iraqi regimes, Kurdish women's activities in Iraqi Kurdistan were banned and repressed precisely because they were a living part of Kurdish society. Since the emergence of a semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan region after 1991, they have had more freedom to work and contribute to socio-economic and civil development, but there is a research gap in terms of updated academic analyses of these developments in recent years. This study uses historical, descriptive, and political analysis to address this research problem, by exploring the commensurate participation of Kurdish women in the political process of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Keywords: Kurdish women, participation, Iraqi Kurdistan, political process, Kurdistan Regional Government.

INTRODUCTION

The status of women in Iraqi Kurdistan (IK) has seen several ups and downs throughout history. Kurdish women have consistently joined the fight for freedom with unrelenting courage, enthusiasm, and audacity, and they have been and are represented in all spheres of Kurdish life. The concerns and demands of women cannot be ignored by political parties, and the Kurdistan Parliament (KP) has passed several laws over the years, notably a raft of legislation in 2009, seeking to promote and protect women's participation in the political process. For example, 25% of the seats in KP and the local councils are reserved for women. Directorates of Violence Against Women have also been established in all provinces and towns to investigate violence against women (KP, 2009a, 2009b). The government's serious efforts to promote gender equality have enshrined women's representation in the decision-making processes, but broader change unfolds in the realm of civil society.

In this regard, women have their own organizations that play a good role in raising awareness among women about their rights and freedoms. However, some of these organizations are influenced by the agendas of secular and Islamic political parties. Some academics contend that Kurdish nationalism motivated women to engage in political life without changing the patriarchal ties that already existed in Kurdish culture (Begikhani, 2003; Mojab, 2004). Most Kurdish women's organizations are members of the Kurdistan High Council of Women and Development, established by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 2008 as an umbrella organization to coordinate the activities of women's Organisations, at their request.

At the state level, absolute equality for men and women is provided by the KRG, including free education in all educational institutions, including universities. In general, men and women have equal rights and responsibilities. In addition, the KRG has provided good opportunities for women's participation in the political process in IK. Women now have a good position in politics at the government and party levels, and most political parties have women in leadership positions. However, this does not mean that women are not prevented from participating in the political process. Beyond the formal dimension of equality manifest in governance institutions, various cultural features continue to shape the way men and women act and are expected to act and behave, and tribal customs, religious beliefs, and economic and educational issues can prevent women from participating more effectively and broadly in the political process in IK.

There is a lack of academic analysis to reflect the emerging trends of women's involvement in the political process in IK, or their socio-economic development more generally. This research gap is addressed by the current study, which addresses the research problem by undertaking to examine Kurdish women's participation in the political process in IK and highlights their strong and prominent position in the Kurdish community. Women continue to play an essential role in the post-conflict and post-genocidal society of IK as mothers and housewives, and they have also participated in the political and social life of Kurdish society in the public sphere.

It should be noted in this regard that Kurdish women's political activities in IK were absolutely prohibited under the former Ba'athist regime, along with any form of Kurdish association and Kurdish culture in general, which were banned and repressed under the ethnic cleansing policies of the central government in Baghdad. However, since the establishment of the KRG in 1992, they have been given the freedom to work, which has led to their growth in political life, and increased participation in the political process in IK.

Nevertheless, Kurdish women faced and overcame many obstacles until they reached the strong political position they have now. The study uses historical, descriptive, and political analysis methods to collect data the study used books and academic journals to explain the role of Kurdish women role in the political process in IK using qualitative narrative analysis from a political science perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is necessary from the outset to note the relative paucity of in-depth studies on the role of Kurdish women in the political process. Some Kurdish authors have narrated the historical role of Kurdish women in Kurdish political life (Auni, 2021; Nigar, 2016; Shirin, 1998). During the early decades of the 20th century Western orientalist such as Cecil Edmonds (1957) and Vladimir Minorsky (1982) visited Kurdistan and remarked on the notably active role of women in Kurdish society (McDowall, 2021), such as engaging in “work alongside men... working outside the home, even participating in the battlefield” (Nigar, 2016). Kurdish women in Iraq were highly active in the fight for Kurdish rights, but prior to 1991 this did not extend to any form of gender-specific agenda; instead, they were primarily concerned with securing national rights for the Kurdish people in general, and not with the particular issues of women *qua* women (Mojab, 2003).

Fischer-Tahir (2009) examined the elements of the life of Kurdish women in an urban context using the theoretical lens of symbolic violence developed by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s (Bourdieu et al., 2013). Al-Ali and Pratt (2011) investigated the post-2004 era, which has been the most significant era for specific women’s activity, on the basis of extensive empirical research on the relationship between gender and nationality. However, most studies of women in Kurdistan have not adapted a particular theoretical approach and have merely narrated historical development and major milestones.

Mojab (2004) discussed the role of women in non-nation states in terms of NGO activism and noted the atrocious history associated with the particular context of women in IK and Iraq in general, characterized by honour murders. Hardi (2021) wrote a book about the torture and killing of Kurdish women by the Ba’athist regime, highlighting women’s Anfal experiences and women’s activism. She argued that the history of women’s activism in IK is closely intertwined with the history of political resistance. In the 1950s, women mobilized against political oppression, and they later they joined the struggle as members of the underground movement, protectors, and material supporters of male fighters, and as couriers and combatants themselves, in women’s Peshmerga units; however, despite such remarkable contributions, only a few women played leadership roles in the resistance.

Despite their significant participation in the political process in IK, women continue to face challenges including gender discrimination based on cultural factors, which has not been explored in commensurate depth. Furthermore, the political situation of women under the shadow of the KRG and their political participation *per se* has not been analysed, thus this study contributes to identifying political as well as cultural (tribal and religious) and socio-economic challenges to the development of women’s political movements.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

A political society is one in which all individuals, regardless of gender, participate in the affairs of society and develop their identity and existence in that society. Kurdish women have played a strong role in the development of Kurdish society throughout history. In this regard, they have been actively involved in all areas of life and have played an influential role in the political field. Kurdish culture in general has long exhibited unusually advanced scope for women’s participation in the public sphere in relation to neighbouring and indeed world cultures. There are numerous brave women leaders who sacrificed their lives in the Kurdish struggle, including Khanzad, princess of King Sleman, ruler of the Soran Emirate in the 15th century. (Goran,2021). Also, Lady Adela Khanum was a famous woman Kurd, the leader of the Jaf tribe, and she was the ruler of the Halabja and Sharazur region in Iraqi Kurdistan from 1909 to 1924. (Nigar, 2016). Throughout the 20th-century women continued to be at the forefront of the Kurdish struggle, including Zakia Ismail Haqi, she was a former Iraqi lawmaker and the first female to serve as a judge in the Middle Eastern nation. Hakki founded the Kurdistan Women's Union in 1952, serving as its president until 1975 and was also elected to the leadership committee of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1970. (Mustafa,2021). And Leyla Qassim, who was executed in 1975 for her Kurdish political activism (Caliskan, 2014).

The first Kurdish formal women’s organization in IK was the Kurdistan Democratic Sisters Union, which was established in 1947 (Auni, 2021). Kurdish women played a role in the political, literary, cultural, administrative, and even military processes, including the Peshmerga, shedding their blood alongside men on the battlefields to defend the land and people. Currently, women are members of leadership committees in various Kurdish movements. However, women’s political participation since ancient times has seen several ups and downs in IK. Women from IK who took part in the national movement originally came from well-educated, liberal backgrounds, but Kurdish society in general was actively suppressed under Ba’athism.

Decentralization of planning led to more equality in political decision-making at different levels in IK after the establishment of the No-Fly Zone in 1991. This created *de facto* political autonomy in IK from 1991-2003, which made it possible for new political organizations to be formed, for previously exiled women to return, and for international NGOs to be established and extend their operations in the region, giving Kurdish women new platforms from which to advance the cause of women’s rights (Al-Ali, 2007; Begikhani, 2005; Mojab, 2004). The standing of women in the newly established KRG recovered strength and started to improve from 1992 onwards. Women started taking part in all spheres of life, including politics, society, business, culture, and religion (Avin, 2020). However, gains for Kurdish women in this safe haven were accompanied by the emergence of “neo-tribalism” in the political leadership of IK (McDowall, 2021). In this setting, traditional Kurdish male political players generally viewed women’s efforts with suspicion, and even actively resisted them (Al-Ali, 2007; Mojab, 2004).

Post-2003, women joined in the political struggle with unwavering daring, bravery, and real spirit. They had to endure suffering, hardship, and exploitation in order to become independent. Women were largely granted rights in decision-making processes, despite the fact that the government was highly concerned about concerns of gender equality, even if political engagement by women in the nation has been considerable. KRG law reserves 25% of the seats in the KP for women, and quotas are applied for many other roles at the state and party level, in order to increase and protect women's participation. Such measures are intended to address the neglect of women in the political process in IK. Women have held several leadership posts, including those of minister and university president, members of the Kurdistan and Iraqi parliaments, and members of state legislative assemblies, but the frequency of these occurrences has not matched their population. Due to the support from different regional parties, authorities' attempts to manage the women's movement in order to increase the involvement of women in politics have been successful.

CONCEPT OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The realization of the highest level of participation and empowerment is seen to require the existence of democratic principles. Empowerment is not seen as acquiring the ability to control others, but rather as the ability to work with others to bring about change. The main element of empowerment is political engagement. In this regard, according to the classical thinkers Verba and Nie (1972), political participation relates to individual acts seeking to lobby governments in various ways, including "by impacting the choices made by government officials or by changing the choices of government personnel." Political and social scientists define participation as an influential act through which individuals respond to the political system in accordance with their wishes. According to Verba and Nie's (1972) participation philosophy:

"Participation is a method the leadership representatives knowledgeable of the preferences, priorities, and fundamental requirements of the masses which are convinced to react to public demands" (as cited in Teorell, 2006, pp. 788–789).

Social scientists have conducted research on women's political engagement, which is seen to have a big role in democracy and women's prosperity. The democratic model is considered to be crucial for socio-economic development, and access to it entails the engagement of men and women in political and social activities, rooted in the principle of equality. This is premised on the doctrine that "the notion of political participation is at the heart of the concept of the democratic state" (Kaase & Marsh, 1979, p. 28). There is little democracy when few people participate in decisions; the more participation there is in indecision, the more democracy there is (Kirbiš et al., 2017).

Political Participation of Women

Three factors may be considered when analysing women's political engagement. These include their ability to vote, participate in the election of representatives, and participate in decision-making. Women must have specific skills and talents in order to put these characteristics into effect in an acceptable way; even if some of the women in politics may not have advanced degrees, it is crucial for them to be informed about significant issues, particularly as women are often denied the same access to educational opportunities. In this scenario, addressing the socioeconomic issues of unemployment, illiteracy, and poverty is crucial. People, especially those from the socioeconomically disadvantaged and impoverished segments of society, must be given the tools they need to pursue improved employment possibilities, and to access democracy and participate in politics.

Women are not treated equally to men across the board in IK. Within the home and in public settings, they are seen by some as having lower status than men. The disadvantaged, disenfranchised, and socioeconomically underdeveloped segments of society are more plainly illustrative of this disparity. Giving women and girls equitable treatment and preventing discrimination against them is thus one of the key goals of women's political engagement. The desire to reduce the frequency of crimes and violent actions against women is another factor that has influenced their political activity. Many women have experienced many criminal and violent offences throughout the nation, including verbal and physical abuse, sexual harassment, rape, acid assaults, and other crimes that have diminished their standing in society.

Women in IK, as a group that makes up half of Kurdish society, have suffered greatly due to the backward political, economic, and social situation that has affected Kurdish women. The situation of women has also been largely shadowed by several family complications. It is rare for a woman to be politically and socially active, but this reflects the contingent crisis situation arising from recent conflicts and genocide. If we look earlier into history, by the mid-1940s women in IK (specifically in Kirkuk) created the Revolutionary Women's Association, led by Aje Khanum, Nahidah Sheikh Salam, and Mina Khan, on behalf of the Kurdistan Democratic Sisters Union. The Association explicitly called for freedom and equal rights with men (Auni, 2021).

However, despite constituting half of Kurdish society, women in IK faced national oppression, which led them to become involved in politics and support the Kurdish nation's liberation struggle at that time. While the genocidal oppression of the Iraqi central government was the main reason for the stalled socio-economic development of IK, women were additionally socially oppressed by old social customs and patriarchal systems that prevented their freedom and equality with men (Auni, 2021).

DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S GROUPS

It is believed that one of the key elements in fostering chances for empowerment among women is the growth of women's organizations. The fundamental goal of these organizations is to enable women, particularly those who belong to underprivileged and disadvantaged groups in society, to become self-sufficient. Promoting chances for women's empowerment is crucial for the successful growth and development of the community, area, or nation. The reform would aid roughly more women who belong to self-help groups. There are many shelters in IK that have sheltered women who cannot live with their families, coordinated by the High Council of Women and Development, a KRG agency. The head of this office is currently Dr Khanzad Ahmad, and it includes members of the organizations adumbrated below (Kurdistan Women's High Council and Development, 2022).

KURDISTAN WOMEN'S UNION (KWU)

The KWU is a civil society organization of Kurdistan women working within the framework of the global feminist movement to ensure women's rights, develop their abilities, and participate in the management and presence in the cultural, social, political, and economic spaces in a modern way. The KWU was established in secret on December 11, 1952 (Shirin, 1998), but due to the unfavourable political situation at that time, it could not hold a congress. The advisory form of the Executive Committee was formed in the presence of twelve women, among whom were Drakhshan Jalal Hafid, Surya Malay Gawra, Najia Khani Mustafa Fandimufti, Najia Khani Mirza Ghafoor, Nahida Khani Mirza Ghafoor, Aftaw Karim, and Madiha Mohammed Karim, who worked secretly and collectively in Suleimaniyah until 1991, without any of them having the title of secretary. There were branch groups in Khanaqin, Kirkuk, Zakho, and elsewhere, but they did not know each other. IK and Iraq in general was a socially masculine society when the KWU was established, following the normative masculine worldview of most individuals.

The KWU's development can be charted over six historical stages: (1) 1952–1958, the secret phase; the organization was entirely underground. (2) 1958–1961, self-disclosure and self-education; characterised by opening headquarters in the cities and carrying out activities. (3) 1969–1970, participation in the September Revolution; revolutionary activities and proving the role and ability of women. (4) 1970–1975, March 11 Agreement; the KWU officially began to organise itself and held conferences and congresses. (5) 1975–1991, working abroad; the organization coordinated activities and resistance from abroad, as the Kurdish people were systematically oppressed by the Ba'athist genocide. (6) From 1991 onwards, the post-uprising stage; the KWU returned to cities and embraced the masses of women and civil struggle (Vian, 2022). Nowadays, the organization has held eight conferences, and they have branches in all IK cities (Auni, 2021).

From the point of view of the KWU, the issue of women is a fundamental humanitarian one, and men and women in IK face numerous fundamental challenges, whereby women's problems are also men's problems. The main reason for the inequality between the two genders is the social and cultural education process. Many unwritten but implemented social laws that are stronger than the written laws, and cause women to be violated and killed, or to be forced to commit suicide and self-immolation. Therefore, the KWU does not direct its struggle *against men*, but against the patriarchal social constructs that consider women to be subordinate to powerful men. Women want a humane society in which everyone is equal, reason decides, and equal opportunities and respect for all are honoured (Vian, 2022).

KURDISTAN ISLAMIC SISTERS UNION (KISU)

Established on October 26, 1994, they affiliated with the Kurdistan Islamic Union. KISU has 25 branches and regions throughout Kurdistan. It is a mass NGO of women, seeking to consolidate their rights, realize their aspirations, and develop their abilities, with a moderate contemporary Islamic vision (Nuche.net, 2019). It works under the slogan "Awareness, Family, Development." Its general principles are that the family is the fundamental unit of society, and it is the primary duty of all authorities to strengthen and protect it; men and women are equal in rights and complement each other in duties; and racial, political, ethnic, religious and sectarian differences are a natural and existent phenomenon of society and must be respected. To operationalise these principles, they are dedicated to promoting human values and combating violence against women under any name and pretext; observing the principles and humanitarian laws that prevent human trafficking; and positive treatment of Islamic and international agreements, preserving the religious and cultural characteristics of the Kurdish nation.

The general objectives of KISU are to defend women's rights by improving their cultural attainment, paying attention to scientific research and new readings of Sharia texts related to women. They undertake efforts to further activate the role of women in the political field and their participation in political and administrative positions, and work to raise the level of legal awareness of women and proposing and supporting the legal projects that serve women. Alongside these active areas of interest, they acknowledge and protect the family institution, and seek to raise social awareness and socialize the issues of women, children, and families, and reducing domestic violence. They also aim to improve women's economic independence and ownership of property, and take a particular interest in defending the demands of rural women and raising their awareness. In pursuit of these aims they coordinate their activities with local and international humanitarian Organisations to consolidate global and particular rights for women.

In terms of the particular issues facing Iraq, they working on the realization of the rights of the victims of genocide, chemical attacks, and refugees and all religious and ethnic communities, who are victims of terrorism and intimidation. They also educate people on protecting women in conflict crises (Nuche.net, 2019).

WOMEN'S UNION OF KURDISTAN (WUK)

The WUK was founded on November 4, 1989, by Hiro Ibrahim Ahmad, Kafia Sulaiman, and several other women abroad (Jinhaagency, 2021). It is a mass organization belonging to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. It works under the slogan "Women, Struggle, Life," and it has published in *Tawar* magazine and *Zhyanawa* newspaper. In 1991, they began their civil activities in Sulaymaniyah, and in 1998 held their first congress. Kafia Sulaiman, a member of the founding committee of the Women's Union, is the General Secretary, and there are another 11 members of the Secretariat. It has not held any other congresses so far, but they have branches and headquarters in Badinan, Chamchamal, Dukan, Duzkhurmatu, Erbil, Garmian, Khanaqin, Kirkuk, Koya, Raperin, Sharazoor, Sinjar, Soran, and Sulaymaniyah (Nuche.net, 2019).

KURDISTAN ISLAMIC SISTERS ORGANIZATION (KISO)

KISO, established in 2001, is an organization affiliated with the Kurdistan Justice Society (KJS) (Kurdipedia.org, 2018). Their slogan is "Family, Education and Development." Twenty-five per cent of the judiciary is reserved for women as the final percentage. Four of the party's 22 leadership members are women. KISO has held four congresses so far. Membership in this organization is conditional on having an Islamic background, and all members wear headscarves. They have their own rules and programmes, and their goal is to serve and assist women in the justice society and Kurdistan according to the framework set by Islam. The organization has a leadership council and six branches in the major cities of Kurdistan (Nuche.net, 2019).

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND PARTICIPATION AND STATE FACILITATION

As discussed previously, the KRG has provided a good legislative framework for women's development. From this standpoint, all women's organizations, with different ideological and religious orientations, formed an advocacy council called the Supreme Council of Kurdistan Women, led by a group of women in political, academic, social and civil society leadership positions. So far, they have made a lot of progress for women and have sponsored a lot of bills before the KP to protect women's rights and empower them. According to KP (2009a, 2009b), KP passed three important laws during its third session in 2009 to participate and strengthen the position of women in decision-making in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the KRG, mainly by instituting 30% quotas for female representation (Law No. 2 of 2009, Law No. 4 of 2009), and "not less than three candidates per electoral list" (Law No. 2 of 2009). The 25 articles of Law No. 7 of 2009 stipulate access to the judiciary for women, and the appointment of several female judges directly connected to the cases connected to women's rights and family problems.

It is worth noting that people are all equal in all political, legislative, and governmental positions in all ministries of the KRG in the Kurdistan Region according to law. In general, civil society Organisations (including those specialized in women's and human rights) have been instrumental in establishing the Office to Combat Violence Against Women, and in enacting and driving special laws protecting women's rights. However, others believe that the High Council for Women's Development, which is affiliated with the KRG and includes women's representatives from most political parties, has played a weak role in gender equality. However, substantive legislative achievements have been achieved, such as the Personal Status Law, which states that a man cannot marry a second wife without his first wife's consent.

On a more tangible level, shelters have also been established in all cities of Kurdistan to protect the lives of women whose lives are at risk due to social problems, and a Directorate Against Violence Against Women has been established in all cities of Kurdistan, where women who have been subjected to abuse or any form of discrimination can seek assistance and prosecute anyone who violates their rights. The Women's Network, consisting of a coalition of 20 women's organizations, plays a role in public life to improve women's rights in the Kurdish community. (Vian,2022).

EMPOWERMENT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Women's growth and the start of a gender-equal society depends on their empowerment in all domains, but notably in politics. The three essential, non-negotiable principles of (1) gender equality, (2) rights granted to women to advance the full development of their potential, and (3) the right of women to self-determination and self-representation are the major pillars upon which the political empowerment of women is founded. The primary component of empowerment is power and authority *per se* (Fadia, 2014). Nowadays, in IK, more women are elected as local government officials as a result of the law requiring female political participation. Statistics show that between 30 and 50 percent of elected local officials in IK are women, and the country has worked to keep track of the number of women who serve in IK women's organizations. In IK, patriarchy, productive resources, poverty, promotion, and powerlessness play major roles in the lives of women.

According to the Jakarta Declaration, women's emancipation is not just important in terms of fairness but is also seen as a prerequisite for long-term social and economic progress. Women's participation in politics and decision-making positions is a crucial instrument for empowerment as well as for maintaining political performance standards. The Jakarta Declaration's conceptual foundations must be put into practice. The reason is that in nations where women have attained almost equal representation, such as the Scandinavian countries, politics has started to change, but within the nation, women's political engagement is not strong enough. Focusing on the interests, needs, viewpoints, and objectives of women will help increase their political engagement (Fadia, 2014).

The removal of obstacles on the path to achieving political empowerment is a crucial component, which includes addressing poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy. To address these issues, the KRG is aware of the shortcomings and remains committed to advancing women's rights and participating there in the political process. The status of women in Kurdistan has come a long way under extremely challenging conditions. There is a quota of 30% female members of KP, the main political parties include women in their leadership, and there are female cabinet ministers and envoys abroad. The speaker of the KP is the second woman in succession to hold that post, which is a rarity in the Middle East (Bayan, 2020). The establishment of the High Council of Women and Development in 2008 by the KRG was a good factor in the development of women's Organisations and their participation in political, economic, and social activities in the political and legislative fields.

All the parties represented in the KP have women members. Three women were appointed ministers in the ninth cabinet: Vala Fried, Bigard Talabani, and Western Mohammed (Gov.Krd, 2019). Also, the current speaker of the Iraqi Kurdistan parliament is a woman, Rewas Faye (Iraqi Kurdistan parliament, 2023) It is worth mentioning that several directors general of the ministries of the KRG are women, and two presidents of public universities (Halabja University and Raperin University). In addition, there are dozens of women judges and prosecutors who are actively involved in the judiciary. In the fields of business, economics, the military, and politics, Kurdistan's women have played a role alongside that of men in the development of IK. In order to fully understand the social position and degree of political engagement of women, it is impossible to look at these issues in isolation. Many different and interconnected variables are instrumental in the context of historic social structures, norms, values, standards, principles, traditions, practises, and rituals that foment socioeconomic circumstances, the political environment, and inequities.

The social standing of women is influenced by each of these elements individually. The position of women varies, however, depending on a variety of criteria, including with regard to locales, caste, class, race, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status. Women from affluent households who reside in metropolitan areas nowadays tend to be more educated and have better lives as a result. Contrarily, women from rural areas who lack literacy skills and career prospects need help and assistance in order to improve their prospects and overall quality of life. Choman Hardi, author and an expert working with civil society organizations in IK argued that these women lack real power, and that negotiations and big decisions remain an all-male domain. (Hardi 2021). This is true to some extent, but these women do have clout, act as role models paving the way for greater female participation and encourage young men and women to see that equality is within reach.

While a great deal remains to be done to achieve equality – in politics, business, and media, among other areas – it cannot be denied that there are more women in prominent roles in government and KP, education, the security forces, science, and cultural roles today than ever before in Kurdistan. However, this can be considered a bubble in the broader regional context, and Kurdish women have been less interested or able to engage with politics in the rest of Iraq. During the Ba'athist era, they were systematically excluded and suppressed, and since 2003 the ascendancy of sectarian political factions and their militias in Iraqi national politics has increased Kurdish separatism and independent socio-economic and cultural development (Nadje & Nicola, 2011).

CHALLENGES FACING KURDISH WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Although women in Kurdistan have been participating in politics to a large extent since the formation of the KRG in 1992, this does not mean that they do not face obstacles and challenges in Kurdish society. In this regard, several core challenges that prevent Kurdish women from playing a greater role in participating in the political process in IK are adumbrated below, due to which women's Kurdish participation in political life remains limited.

Many women in IK are economically dependent on men, especially in rural areas (as discussed previously), and they bear a heavier burden for childcare and family responsibilities. Consequently, they tend to follow men and not make their own political decisions, which has undermined women's self-consciousness in the field of politics. Such attitudes are reinforced by the influence of conservative religious and tribal authorities that advocate the traditional role of women in society. Several political Islamist preachers and Salafis in IK believe that European ideas of gender equality are a form of ideological imperialism, which do not need to be followed because they originate from a society that is different from Islamic society, and that equality between men and women is contrary to Islamic law (Choli, 2015).

Traditional attitudes are also instrumental in the egregious phenomena of honour killings. Although they are treated as murder in KRG and Iraqi law (and indeed according to Islam), the practice continues, and local women's organizations believe its prevalence is increasing. The Forensic Institute in IK reported the deaths of 1,748 women by burning, shooting, or suffocation in 2013. According to a UNICEF survey, 43% of women aged 15-49 in IK reported they had been subjected to some form of female genital mutilation (FGM) in 2011. Also, while child marriage is outlawed, and polygamy is allowed under some circumstances; as mentioned previously, in IK marriage to a second wife is conditional on approbation from the first. In this regard, the reference to Sharia law in the Iraqi Constitution is very vague (Kaya, 2016). This leads to different interpretations of Islamic rules, which makes unitary legislation difficult, leaving spaces open for patriarchal interpretations.

Despite women's presence in KP and in local councils, the number of women occupying executive positions remains very small. In addition, among the 21 ministries in the current Kurdish government, there are only three female ministers (Begard Talabani Minister of Agriculture and Water Resources, Kwestan Mohammed Abdullah minister of Labour and Social Affairs, and Vala Fareed Ibrahim Minister of State). Most female representatives rely on securing the nomination of male party leaders for their positions. This means they are forced to act in accordance with their party's attitude on women's issues and do not or cannot initiate more profound change. This has led to women losing their self-confidence and their identity as opinion leaders and decision-makers in the field of politics, remaining within the framework of social customs and traditions rooted in tribalism and patriarchy. This represents a limitation to the political abilities of women, even in modern democratic institutions.

The lack of advanced institutions to educate and train women's abilities has led to women being likely to have limited abilities. Because of their masculine upbringing, they are more likely to follow the example of men and politicians, and not be independent personalities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The mentioned proposals largely aim to provide possibilities for women that would increase their political engagement and empowerment in IK.

1. In the political arena, it is widely considered that when women participate in political, social, cultural, economic, and other spheres, this effectively contributes to and actualizes their empowerment, and to the advancement of the neighbourhood and whole society or country. Therefore, it is crucial to develop policies that would provide Kurdish women from IK and isolated areas access to possibilities for empowerment. It is critical to inspire and motivate women in order for them to achieve the goal of political involvement and empowerment.
2. It is advised that educational possibilities for women be promoted in order to reduce inequalities. Several of the major elements that might prove to be a barrier to political involvement call for educational solutions, including in terms of educational, legal, social, and political awareness.
3. In order to reduce unemployment, equal employment opportunities for women and men ought to be implemented, increasing women's reliance on their own abilities in the administrative, policy, and economic domains.
4. For fear of social problems only a tiny percentage of the women mentioned concerns about the effects of domestic violence at the IK Women Organizations sessions. Domestic abuse is the most common kind of violence experienced by women worldwide. The causes and effects of domestic violence must thus be taken into account when discussing women's political engagement.
5. It is crucial for both gender men and women to increase their understanding and their skill sets via training and educational programmes. Training and education programmes should be established to address the needs and requirements of women, particularly those from disadvantaged segments of society (e.g., rural women). In order to satisfy the needs of women who have little or no exposure to education, such programmes are necessary.
6. At present, there are more women wanting to fill the positions of authority that are rightfully theirs in the government. Therefore, it is crucial that all institutions, including the state, family, and society, cater to the particular requirements of women. These include closing educational inequalities, redefining gender roles and the distribution of labour, and combating prejudiced views. Also, the creation of institutional and procedural frameworks ought to prioritise strategic female interests in the governing process, in order to engage women's organizations' potential and capacities as democratic and equitable development venues for progress in IK.
7. Legally, although KP has passed several good laws to support women's participation in the political process, legacy laws that hinder women's participation in all areas of society's development must be amended. New laws should be enacted to protect and fulfil all women's political, economic, and social demands.
8. Building a society where women and girls enjoy equal rights to men and boys requires a combination of progressive policies and laws and targeted public campaigns to change cultural mindsets.
9. Political parties, in general, must move beyond the token representation of women in key roles, and women leaders themselves must foster political acumen and skills, with good knowledge and strong charisma to move from the margins of the equations into the centre of IK politics. Leading and experienced Organisations should develop within their agendas feminist behaviour and ideas, and talk more about feminism, with comprehensive programmes to educate members about the role and needs of women in the political, legal, health, social, cultural, and economic spheres.

CONCLUSION

There has been a significant shift in the movement in IK that supports women's emancipation. It is acknowledged that women are increasingly becoming political forces on both the national and international levels. Political parties cannot disregard the interests and demands of women, who make up half of the people of IK, and around 48.46% of the vote. Women's political engagement has to be strengthened. Positive characteristics of women participating in politics include their ability to improve not just their personal lives, but also the welfare of their families and communities. Political, psychological, and socioeconomic environments are the components of the political environment. The key factors considered while performing an analysis of the measuring framework are an introduction to the election system in IK; electoral data in IK; political engagement of women; and the growth of women's organizations.

It is crucial to focus on key factors in order to encourage women's empowerment chances. They should be encouraged to participate in various employment opportunities, including education and training programmes, resources to protect them from violence and other criminal activities, the provision of equal rights and opportunities, and the elimination of discrimination against them based on caste, creed, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background. IK women's organizations at all three levels have not developed into forums for debate and discussion of important strategic and gender problems. Women can acceptably deal with these issues with the support of IK women's organizations and their support system. Promoting the chances for women's empowerment is essential when people and groups are focused on advancing their nation, and political engagement is at the vanguard of advancing women's empowerment.

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