



**PULTE INSTITUTE**  
FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

# **PROMOTING PROTECTION AND EMPOWERMENT FOR IRAQI WOMEN**

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## OVERVIEW

The 20th of March will mark the twenty years since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. This solemn occasion offers a time to reflect upon the humanitarian consequences of the war and their impact on the status of women's rights today. U.S. and British officials claimed in 2003 that using force would bring Iraqi women liberation. Instead, the war led to widespread chaos, death, and destruction, compounding the humanitarian harm caused by sanctions during the 1990s and imposing a heavy burden of suffering on Iraqi women. Sectarian civil violence and the rise of ISIS added to these hardships. Although political violence in Iraq has declined in recent years, Iraqi women still face threats from gender-based violence and have limited opportunities for political, social, and economic advancement.

According to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Index, the prospects for gender equality are extremely low.<sup>1</sup> Iraq ranks 166 out of 170 countries evaluated in the WPS Index. Within the Middle East and North Africa region, it ranks third lowest, with only Syria and Yemen ranking lower.

Iraqi women's groups have a long history of advocating for human rights and development. They remain determined to overcome the difficult conditions they are experiencing, including opposition from sectarian and reactionary religious forces. Iraqi women have developed an agenda for change that deserves international support. Given its role in leading the invasion, the United States has a special responsibility to help by advancing the WPS agenda in Iraq.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is essential for the United States to stay engaged in supporting development and human rights in Iraq. U.S. aid programs started diminishing in 2013 but scaled up again during the struggle against ISIS. Given the continued fragility of Iraqi institutions, the United States should remain steadfast in helping to advance the protection and empowerment of Iraqi women.

The top priority for Iraqi women is simply the right to be safe and protected against the violence that permeates everyday life. It is estimated that 1,000 women are murdered every year in Iraq in so-called honor killings, usually by

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<sup>1</sup> The WPS Index measures 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.

their husbands or relatives.<sup>2</sup> Women across Iraq need security guarantees. They also demand a greater voice politically and more social and economic opportunities.

We offer the following considerations to guide U.S. and international policymaking:

## **SUPPORT LEGAL PROTECTIONS AGAINST ALL FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

Women's groups are advocating legislation that would criminalize all types of gender-based violence and require uniform enforcement of such laws across the country regardless of regional specifics and local norms. These same protections should be extended to LGBTQ and non-binary people in Iraq. Part of the agenda is legalizing shelters to protect 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. Donor states should urge the government to protect shelters and, where appropriate, support locally-based organizations that operate these centers by adopting shelter-friendly policies.<sup>3</sup>

## **PROVIDE GREATER TARGETED SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

Iraqi state funding for education and health care lags behind other countries in the region. Low-income women often cannot afford basic medical services. Donor states should support increased investments in education and health programs that benefit women. Greater financing and support are also needed for women-led businesses and startups, including access to credit and financial incentives for enterprises that employ women.

## **ENCOURAGE CHANGES IN PERSONAL STATUS LAW**

Iraqi law prohibits rape and sexual abuse, but it waives these provisions if the perpetrator marries the victim. Tribal and religious rules allow marriage to underage girls and so-called temporary marriages that authorize rape. In these arrangements, women or girls are "married" in the presence of a religious figure for a fixed period, which can

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<sup>2</sup> Interview, Yanar Mohammed, with David Cortright and Anna Romandash, January 19, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Interview, Yanar Mohammed, with David Cortright and Anna Romandash, January 19, 2023.

be as short as several hours. The victims may suffer further violence for “dishonoring” their families. Donor states and civil society groups can work with victims and legal practitioners to end these practices.

## **TELL WOMEN’S STORIES IN THE MEDIA**

Women should be portrayed not as victims or passive observers but as agents of change offering positive female role models in all walks of life. Iraqi civil society groups need to improve women’s representation in the media by showing examples of female accomplishments in the family, politics, education, and business.

## **ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF REFUGEE AND DETAINEE FAMILIES**

There is a gap in Iraqi law regarding the legal status of women and their children in marriages performed in religious ceremonies that are not recognized under civil law. Since affected women and children are not protected and may not be eligible for health care, education, and other state services, uncertainties exist. The same holds true for widows and female refugees.

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 Iraqi Ministry of the Interior estimates that 250,000 women and children are in this category. Al-Hol camp in Northern Syria hosts over 60,000; half of the individuals there are Iraqi. Experts have called ISIS widows and their children “a ticking time bomb.” This enormous problem requires massive international assistance for Iraq and neighboring countries. Greater security, legal protection, and social support for all women in Iraq can help reduce security and social threats from this issue.

## **TAKING ACTION**

The agenda outlined here will not only require action by the Iraqi government, but it will also need the support of the United States and other donor states, who can play a role in facilitating a women-oriented agenda through the funding of public health, nutrition, education, infrastructure, and job creation programs. Interviews with women’s groups indicate preferences for funding programs that are transparent and give civil society organizations the flexibility to identify their own priorities.

The greatest obstacle to peace and security for Iraqi women is the need for more political will among male decision-makers. Political leaders espouse the rhetoric of women, peace, and security, but they need to be more willing to enact necessary political, legal, social, and economic reforms. Change will require sustained engagement and a greater commitment by the United States and other countries to implement WPS policy guidelines and action for greater gender equality.

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