

Female Politicians Face Glass Ceiling

Author: [Raghad Ali](#)

Women in politics continue to confront gender barriers that prevent them from holding positions of real power.

Iraqi women are gaining political power and influence, but many question whether they will ever reach the upper echelons of government.

Women now make up one-quarter of Iraq's national assembly members, their highest level of parliamentary representation in the Arab world.

According to Leith Kuba, adviser to Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Ja'afari, women provide a "real balance" in building the post-Ba'athist Iraqi state, "Their roles in government institutions inspire us, as officials, with hope. We get our strength from the support they offer."

But while Iraqi women have made strides, they continue to face traditional gender barriers that historically kept them from holding more than token leadership positions under British rule or the Ba'athist regime. And despite a quota ensuring women are represented in parliament, female politicians are often lackeys of their parties and do not speak or act independently, say analysts.

Azhar al-Sheikhly, the state minister for women affairs, noted that women have not yet held prominent political posts such as national assembly speaker or deputy speaker. Women are also "prevented from holding important leadership positions [outside government], such as university president," she said.

Parties often choose female representatives not based on their experience or competency but because they are party loyalists. Because of this, and despite the quota, women's representation in the national assembly "did not meet our goals," said Sheikhly.

"We need to have women lawmakers in the next assembly based on their competency, not because of sectarianism and party affiliations," agreed Shatha al-Abusy, a representative with the Iraqi Islamic Party, referring to the December 15 parliamentary election.

Zeinab Ali, a 35-year-old university professor, criticised female leaders for not forming a women's party or running for the national assembly independently. She doubted that in the current political landscape, a woman would attempt to become deputy prime minister.

"I have yet to find a woman who challenges [the system] and says she wants to put her words into action," she said.

Samira Mousawi, a national assembly lawmaker on the Shia United Iraqi List, agreed that only a small number of women vote independently, but argued that the problem is not one of gender.

"No one performs his role as he should," she said. "Why should this be expected of women?"

There is little doubt that many women are interested in politics and leadership, however. There are 1,290 civil society organisations in Iraq, about 400 of which are dedicated to women's issues, said Iman Abdul-Jabbar, director of the Rafaddayn Women's Alliance.

But most are still in their infancy and have not had significant impact, said Jenan Mubarak, director of the Iraqi Centre for Women's Rehabilitation and Employment.

Shukria Kokez, an independent researcher and media and culture specialist, polled 100 women aged 18 to 60 this year on women and democracy issues, finding that 93 per cent of respondents wanted to participate in building democracy and 90 per cent said the media had an influence on their political engagement.

She said there was a real need for a women's magazine or satellite channel that specifically addressed politics and women's affairs.

Basma Khatib, local coordinator of UNIFEM, a United Nations organisation working for the welfare and empowerment of women, argued that the media needed to document women's stories and struggles.

She said Iraqi women, who often look after up to 20 family members, were "natural leaders".

Abdul-Razaq al-Na'as, a political analyst, also expressed confidence in women's leadership abilities, which he argued would blossom if they break from their political parties.

"If a women runs a ministry," he said, "can she not lead a political movement?"

Raghad Ali is an IWPR trainee journalist in Baghdad.

Location: [Iraqi Kurdistan](#)
[Iraq](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/female-politicians-face-glass-ceiling>