

## **Women Call for More Political Power**

Conference delegates say greater parliamentary representation has helped, but isn't enough. Female political candidates warned this week that the constitutional quota guaranteeing Iraqi women parliamentary seats has failed to deliver them real political power.

Five female contenders vying for parliamentary seats in Sulaimaniyah and Baghdad laid out their positions on women's issues, the economy and education in a rare all-women debate on February 20.

The Sulaimaniyah forum, which was organised by the United States-based International Human Rights Law Institute, included candidates from two secular parties and two Islamic factions.

The candidates agreed that the constitutionally-mandated quota, which sets aside 25 per cent of seats for female legislators, had helped Iraqi women by ensuring them representation. However, they said female politicians should begin exerting real political power.

"Equality doesn't only mean giving us posts," said Amal Jalal, a candidate from the Kurdistan Alliance in Sulaimaniyah province. "We need to be included in the decision-making process."

Bushra al-Ubaidi, a Baghdad candidate with the Unity Alliance of Iraq, said she believed that Iraq's male-dominated political parties frequently select unqualified women to run on their lists and then exploit their lack of expertise as a reason for ignoring women's issues.

This alleged strategy is discouraging for women who struggle to get their rights recognised, she said.

"The [quota] has been used against women and their cause," Ubaidi said.

Dilkhaz Abdullah, a candidate from the Islamic Union of Kurdistan, noted that gender equality is a global issue, not exclusive to Iraq. She pointed out that women are not well-represented in the US Congress, holding only 17 per cent of the seats.

All of the candidates pressed for stronger laws to protect women's rights and debated how gender equality should be addressed in Iraq.

Ubaidi suggested that Iraq's conservative culture hampers women's rights, saying Iraqis need to better understand human rights and gender equality.

But Qumriya Mohamed, a candidate on the Kurdistan Islamic League, said the western concept of equality between the sexes was alien to Iraq.

Mariwan Hama-Saeed is an editor and online training coordinator with IWPR's Iraq programme.

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