

Women Losing Out in Parliament

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Female deputies trying to promote women's rights face uphill struggle.

Dr Raja'a al-Khuza'ee, a member of the constitution drafting committee, said when she recently insisted on the retention of the 25 per cent quota for women lawmakers, her fellow female parliamentarians on the body refused to back her.

"This issue has turned into a joke," she said. "I didn't get any support from women and was even more disappointed with the liberal men."

Female lawmakers who promote women's rights in the National Assembly believe they have been marginalised. Many claim their views are not taken seriously and that they're being excluded from membership of important committees.

Fa'ezah Baba-Khan, a parliamentary deputy, said her efforts to promote women's issues in the assembly have been fruitless.

One of her proposals to develop laws on the latter was passed from the legal to the constitutional committee, where it has languished for more than a month, she said.

With a master's degree in women's rights law, Baba-Khan also lobbied to be on the constitution drafting committee but was rejected. She was also pressured to withdraw her candidacy when she wanted to run for the presidential council in parliament.

Baba-Khan believes she's been hamstrung because of her assertiveness, "Inside the National Assembly, they call me the 'opposition' because I always follow my personal beliefs."

But Amal Kashifa al-Ghata'a, a member of the human rights committee in the assembly, insisted that lawmakers advocating women's rights are not being unfairly treated. Rather, she feels, the problems they're coming up against have more to do with their lack of leadership experience - which, she went on, was a consequence of decades of isolation.

Perhaps more worrying for female deputies are the threats they face from insurgents. Indeed, some have been forced, or have chosen, to decrease their involvement in politics because of the intimidation. The dangers that confront them were illustrated starkly in April when parliamentarian Lamia Abed Khadouri al-Sagri, a member of the Iraqi List party, was killed at her home.

Meanwhile, measures brought in by the government to ensure that women are represented in parliament have been a source of controversy.

The 25 per quota mentioned earlier is seen as a double-edged sword, as Safiyah al-Suhail, a political activist, explains.

“If we don’t adhere to it, women won’t participate,” she said. “But if we do, then everybody joins even if they are unqualified.”

Al-Suhail is critical of parties for appointing some women to the assembly who “don’t care about politics”. “The presence of these female lawmakers looks like a decoration,” she said.

Batool al-Azawee, a public prosecutor, agreed, saying women politicians shouldn’t be chosen solely because of their gender. “We don’t believe in nominating women candidates just to fill seats,” she said.

Raya al-Samara’l, an attorney, expressed similar concerns, “We are afraid of women in the National Assembly being there to just fill the quota.”

So while some sort of quota system may be necessary to ensure that women have an opportunity to take part in politics, those that do should be selected on merit, many argue.

“Women should prove themselves in the National Assembly through their performance, not their numbers,” said Fawziya Muhsin, media director at the ministry of labour.

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