



Political Exclusion in Iraqi Political Parties:

How Women, Youth, and Components Strive to Change Politics

Key Findings and Recommendations from an Inclusion Assessment
Conducted with 11 Political Parties in Iraq

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Executive Summary

In late 2019 and early 2020, the National Democratic Institute (NDI, or the Institute) conducted focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with key informants across Iraq to assess the current political inclusion of women, youth, and components in Iraqi political parties. In addition to gathering data on the proportion of these groups in party membership and leadership positions, the study also gathered qualitative data on openings and obstacles to their recruitment, internal participation and promotion, and opportunity to be candidates for public office.

NDI found that while political parties report high rates of women and youth membership, these groups face numerous challenges to their full participation. Institutional barriers such as *wasta*, or tribal and personal connections, and widespread corruption prevent both women and youth from being promoted internally or running as candidates. Women also note that additional responsibilities such as childcare and housework, lack of prior experience in senior roles, and gender roles that penalize strong-willed women discourage their full participation in political parties. Youth note that they are discouraged from participation because political parties seem uninterested in new ideas or adapting their policies and strategies to meet the current political reality. Few internal mechanisms, if any, exist to overcome these barriers and encourage women and youth participation within political parties. When it comes to taking responsibility for this issue, political parties do believe that they have a role to play in encouraging youth participation, but direct blame for lack of women's participation or leadership on societal failures, rather than internal party failures.

Political parties' ability to report the inclusion of various ethno-sectarian components in their parties is weak, with many not gathering this data. Inclusion of components is often limited to participation in a party that is dedicated to that component. While some minority components do participate in larger parties, they are often viewed as proxies for the party rather than true representatives of their component. Compared to women and youth, components cite barriers of abuse and discrimination based in ethnic hatred that leave many feeling safer if they do not participate formally in the political process.

In response to these findings, NDI offers the following recommendations to help political parties establish internal systems and processes to enhance the inclusion of women, youth, and components in party decision making:

- Through surveys and other engagement techniques, target public consultation at disillusioned Iraqis who eschew political parties that they do not believe reflect them, their struggles, and their interests;

- Increase internal consultations with party members to gather specific feedback on the concerns and challenges that prevent women, youth, and component members from fully participating, as well as to encourage their participation;
- Establish internal equity mechanisms, such as management training for women candidates and committees charged with identifying promising women and youth candidates early in the electoral cycle and providing them with party support, training, and mentorship;
- Adopt a regional approach to educating both men and women in the party on how supporting women strengthens their party, by better representing the community and increasing the chances of electoral support within that community; and
- Reform communication strategies to not only reach out to youth online, on social media, in civil society, and in protest movements, but to show follow-up by the party on that outreach.



Introduction

Despite incremental improvements in recent years, Iraqi political parties continue to be largely male dominated and organized around sectarian and ethnic lines, relegating women, youth, and components to the peripheries of decision making. Expanding avenues for political leadership in Iraq will require political parties to consider institutional reforms that elevate women and minority members. In parallel, politically active women and minorities continue to demonstrate their capacities both inside political parties and in the public arena, in order to change prevailing attitudes toward women and minorities in politics.

Specifically, parties will need to provide tangible support to all of their candidates and newly-elected officials, and formalize processes to ensure avenues for advancement do not put non-majority members at a disadvantage. The recent anti-government protests reinforce how crucial it is for political parties in Iraq to address the widespread perception that they do not represent Iraqis' best interests, in part because they do not represent Iraqis themselves. The visible role of women and the overwhelming number of young people driving the protests indicate that these groups are anything but politically disengaged; rather, they do not see political parties as a home for their engagement. Parties that succeed in being truly inclusive—not only by having women and minorities in their ranks but by heeding their calls for political change—stand a much better chance of being granted legitimacy by the citizens they serve.

Through focus group discussions and semi-structured in-depth interviews with prominent party leadership figures and key informant interviews with party activists across Iraq, NDI assessed the current political inclusion of women, youth, and components in Iraqi political parties. This report contains the key findings of that assessment as well as NDI's recommendations for addressing the challenges to inclusion that Iraqi political parties face.

Methodology

Over the course of several months in late 2019 and early 2020, NDI conducted a qualitative study aiming to assess women's, youth's, and components' participation within political parties. The study looked at the proportion of the target groups in party membership and leadership positions, as well as openings and barriers to their recruitment, internal participation and promotion, as well as being designated as candidates for public office.

NDI included 11 Iraqi parties in its research, chosen to reflect a cross-section of Iraq's 228 total registered political parties. The Institute used a combination of research methods including in-depth interviews with members of politburos and other leadership organs, focus group discussions with youth and women party members, and key informant interviews with party organizers. All party membership figures are self-reported by parties. NDI did not define the terms "women", "youth" or "components" for the parties; rather, we sought to engage each party on their definitions of these terms.

Aggregated findings and recommendations regarding the state of inclusion in Iraqi political parties form this report, which will be shared with local partners and international community programs aimed at fostering equitable political participation by supporting marginalized groups. NDI disseminated party-specific key findings and recommendations of the research to the participating parties.

Key Findings

Inclusion of Women

Overall, parties report high numbers of women members, and low numbers of women in leadership positions. Some women participating in this research feel that the men in their party are, for the most part, supportive of them. However, a common perception NDI encountered in focus groups was the notion that women in positions of political power are there due to their relationship to a man. This refers to both family relationships in the case of wives, daughters, and sisters to men who are party members, as well as connection or affiliation to an interest group, particularly in the case of elected women who are often derided for being nothing more than a proxy vote for whichever men enabled their candidacy. While it is impossible to know the real extent of the nepotism participants referred to, it is frequently cited as a reason why women's political party participation—and quotas in particular—are not actually helpful to the larger cause of Iraqi women's political representation.

Party in the Assessment	Women members	Women in leadership
Party 1	35%	2.9%
Party 2	25%	33%
Party 3	N/A	13%
Party 4	25-30%	25%
Party 5	20-25%	11%
Party 6	20-25%	0
Party 7	10%	18.8%
Party 8	25%	0
Party 9	30%	19.6%
Party 10	30%	32%
Party 11	50%	46%
Average	27.7%	18.3%

While all parties are subject to quotas for women among their elected representatives (either 25 percent in the Council of Representatives or 30 percent in the Kurdistan Parliament of Iraq), few aim to replicate these quotas, either as a rule or as a target, within their party structures. This is true at both the membership and leadership levels. No party states that achieving gender parity is a goal. At the same time, all parties participating in this assessment indicate some desire to increase the number of women in their ranks, as well as increase the ability of those women to take on roles of greater significance to the party. Exactly where the responsibility lies for ensuring women take on those roles in Iraqi political parties is the single biggest point of contention encountered during this assessment, with many party leaders and members (including many women) finding fault with “society” for holding women back. Many participants see the role of their political party as passively accepting social forces that oppress women’s participation in public life, as opposed to actively replicating them.

The most significant place for awareness [of women’s equality] is family, then mosque, then schools, then party—all four have a responsibility to make society aware.

- Political party leader



Women who participated in our research also highlight a number of institutional barriers to women’s political participation and taking on leadership positions within their parties, many of which reflect realities in the society at large. These barriers include:

- A widespread perception that *wasta* (tribal and personal connections) is the main mechanism of promotion within parties, both to leadership roles and as candidates. Some participants pointed to this as being a source of continuous discouragement to any member—but particularly women—without such connections;
- A reticence by both women and youth to work with any political parties due to a perception of widespread corruption in the political system;
- A lack of recognition that there are more demands on women’s time than on men members, due to childcare and household chores being unequally distributed, leaving less time for political participation;
- A lack of experience in senior roles, cited as a reasonable barrier to the advancement of young women in a way that is not applied to young men;
- A lack of understanding of the priorities of women voters due to limited outreach; and
- A reticence to allow women who are perceived as strong-willed to participate in public life, due to cultural norms and stereotypes. While many party leaders affirm the political rights of women, participants in our research note that support



It doesn't work on merit, it works on connections.

- Women's focus group participant

for women's roles in their parties often seems contingent on the docility of the women in question. Even where lesser institutional barriers might exist against women in general, barriers against women with strong views remain.

Inclusion of Youth

Overall, parties report high numbers of youth members, and high numbers of youth in leadership positions. Of note, while most parties define "youth" as being any woman or man over 18 and well into middle-age, there is significant disparity in parties' internal definitions. From the 11 participating political parties NDI interviewed, definitions of youth ranged from "under 40" to "under 50" to "18 to 35" to "under 50 for leadership, under 30 for activists."

Party in the Assessment	Youth Members	Youth in Leadership	Definition of "youth"
Party 1	50%	4.3%	Couldn't say
Party 2	55%	0	"Under 40"
Party 3	50%	40%	"Under 50"
Party 4	50%	25%	Couldn't say
Party 5	50%	22.2%	"18-35"
Party 6	50%	50%	"18-40"
Party 7	40%	15.6%	"Up to 35"
Party 8	80%	N/A	"Under 40"
Party 9	70%	63%	"Under 50 for leadership, under 30 for activists"
Party 10	40%	N/A	"Up to age 40"
Party 11	90%	50%	"Up to age 40"
Average	56.8%	30%	

In stark contrast to the prevailing attitudes toward women in leadership roles, there is widespread agreement among Iraqi political parties that parties have a role to play in encouraging youth to become members and paving the way for their rise within party structures. At a time of broad political instability across the country, parties acknowledge that there exists a real risk that political parties are alienating the next generation from being their core supporters. Of significant concern to participants is what they view as diminishing trust toward the political process, and its impact on politics. They say the breakdown of trust affects partisan work in general, and disproportionately affects youth and women’s participation in elections and general political work, citing the low 2018 election turnout specifically.

Occasionally in our focus groups, and heavily in individual interviews, we heard from women and young party members that there simply was no path for them to rise in their party because those currently in leadership positions would seek to guard their territory carefully. When pressed, our interviewees acknowledged while there could be turnover at those highest levels, those positions of influence would consistently remain under the control of the same older men who’d been running their parties for decades. The term *wasta* came up again and again in reference to party leadership structures.


The heavy influence of these decades-old networks on political parties cannot be overstated. Among younger party members, we heard near universal respect for how their parties came to be, including frequent references in Kurdish parties to those who “went to the mountains” fighting for their cause. But some of those same members evinced concern over their party’s inability to transition from that bygone era into today’s political reality. Some had the sense that their parties were living in the past, resting on achievements that have since become lore and are used as a constant justification for the privileges now enjoyed by the older generation.

It appears to be a widespread view that those privileges are well-earned among those who are middle-aged and older, and respect for those historical achievements runs very deep, including among women and youth. But the younger generation of party members did not grow up with the same appreciation for that lore, and do not lend quite the same credit, emotionally and politically, to the founding fathers of Iraqi political movements.

We frequently heard youth members—both men and women—speak of their disillusionment with their party due to this persistence of their exclusion as a symptom of *wasta*. These members used their belief that they would never rise through the ranks of their party if they retained their independence to explain why they had lost interest in advocating for more inclusive systems within their parties. Essentially, participants are concerned

Encouraging youth in the party is not our business, by the end of the day we are sons of the party and the party decides how to promote the youth.

- Youth focus group participant



they will be seen as out of line if they make suggestions to improve party processes. Instead of hurting their chances at rising within their party, they defer to authority.

While there are occasional moves toward more youth, women or components in power—including as candidates and elected representatives—they are often perceived to be under the thumb of existing powerful men, and not truly in service to a more inclusive agenda. To what extent that is true, or merely perception, is worth further scrutiny.

Inclusion of Components

Political parties' ability to report how many members they have and how many leadership roles are occupied by members of other ethno-sectarian components is weak; any data provided is unreliable and has consequently not been reported here. Most frequently, participants said they do not ask members to report ethnic or religious minority status. Those guessing estimated that their parties' membership was likely very diverse but that few ethnic or religious minorities would be represented at the leadership level.

This lack of data within the parties themselves is indicative of how inclusion of components within political parties in Iraq represents a different challenge entirely from that of the inclusion of women and youth. Several of the parties NDI assessed were created—and continue to exist—in order to strengthen the political clout of an ethnic or religious minority identity. As such, all their membership belongs to that one identity.

An issue frequently raised by parties that identify as an ethnic or religious minority party is the competition fostered between ethnic or religious minority parties for single seats due to the quota system. Paradoxically, they say, reserving a parliamentary seat for an ethnic or religious minority seems to ensure that political parties that identify with that religion or ethnicity vie for that one seat, as opposed to competing for the totality of seats, as non-minority parties do. Not only does that foster division within ethnic or religious minority communities, but it encourages individuals who are members of an ethnic or religious minority and who want to be a part of the political process to consider carefully whether they might be better off as a member of a larger non-minority-identified political party. However, when ethnic or religious minority individuals opt to run for office within these larger parties, they often find themselves—fairly or unfairly—painted as “proxies” for those parties as opposed to “true” representatives of their component.

There is also a strong fear of being targeted by larger parties and being discriminated against for being affiliated with an ethno-sectarian component. Participants spoke of facing racism—an issue they saw disproportionately affecting political activists. Participants report having been targeted themselves, or having witnessed friends and family suffer abuse based in ethnic hatred. There is a widespread sense that they would be safer if they did not formally engage in the political process.

Notable Differences in Challenges Faced by Parties

Parties in government versus parties outside government

Some leaders of parties outside government point to young people’s conflicting priorities of wanting to see change in politics while also needing to find full-time gainful employment. These leaders see those two goals as competing. They reference the relative strength of larger ruling parties in this case, which may attract younger members by hinting at or even offering paid work in return for political support. Further, some members of parties outside government worry that being affiliated to a component-identified party is an obstacle to career advancement, since most jobs in the public sector are distributed to those affiliated with larger political entities.

Strict party discipline versus party in renewal

Some participants understand their party to have a very strict chain of command, with a politburo firmly in control of decision making. In other parties currently facing significant internal upheaval, or even less urgent pressure for renewal, old “backroom” networks reign. In parties with a strong chain of command and party discipline, participants in this research note specific challenges for inclusion. Qualified individuals with strong points of view—particularly women and youth—will avoid getting involved in the party for fear of being forced to abandon their principles and being targeted by men in leadership for their unwillingness to fall in line. While party discipline is a generally positive attribute, to these participants, when applied too aggressively, it can reduce young members’ creativity and their interest in openly proposing new ideas that could improve the party’s organizational structure. Not only does this serve to disillusion those members, it robs the party of fresh and potentially helpful ideas.

In parties where there is internal upheaval causing a vacuum in leadership ranks, participants cite a tendency among party members to fall back on old networks. Specifically, some women participants are convinced that when women run for politburo positions and there are no frontrunners, long-time party members who are men will vote strategically to ensure women do not win. While this assertion could not be proved, the notion that when faced with renewal, men might band together to stop women from rising in their party is worth further exploring.

Our men also come from that same society. Even if there is a strong woman with her opinion and strong personality, this is sometimes scary to the men and they don’t want her to come up in the party.

- Women’s focus group participant





Recommendations by Key Findings

NDI set out to assess the political inclusion of women, youth, and components in Iraqi political parties, aiming to establish a baseline for policies, practices, and perceptions toward diversity and inclusion. This assessment would contribute to identifying entry points to effectively advocate reforms on policies of inclusion and diversity. By sharing party-specific reports, NDI hopes to sensitize leaders on barriers to inclusion within their parties and explain the benefits of diversifying party structures. The recommendations below are in response to key findings across parties and aim to help political parties establish internal systems and processes to enhance the inclusion of women, youth, and components in party decision making.

Consultation

Greater public consultation would help engage Iraqis and re-animate disillusioned supporters who eschew political parties that they do not believe reflect them, their struggles, and their interests. Developing survey capacity and using public and membership consultation tools to increase engagement with the party could be an important step in achieving that. Further, the party could use information gleaned from targeted consultation with women, youth, and components to better serve these underrepresented communities, including by addressing their concerns in the party's election platform.

As well as conducting broad public consultation, parties could conduct internal consultations with their members in order to better understand the concerns that might be holding back some members from fuller participation, or that have been leading some members to consider disengaging from the political process entirely. By soliciting specific feedback from the membership on issues such as the stigma surrounding political work, or the difficulties women face in balancing household responsibilities and volunteering, or by directly addressing the perception that women are less electable, not only might the party generate good ideas, but it would signal to women members in particular that their concerns are valid and will be addressed. The same is true in regard to youth: parties can encourage young members' creativity and their interest in openly proposing new ideas that could improve the party's organizational structure, and reassure them the party welcomes constructive criticism from all members.

Internal equity mechanisms

Parties could provide management training for prospective women candidates and prospective women party leaders in order to increase both the perception and reality that women are qualified to take on roles of leadership within the party. Parties can set up committees charged with increasing the number of women who run for these positions and ensuring they receive party support where appropriate. For instance, first-time candidates for party positions, or members from underrepresented groups, could be provided training on outreach methods when running for internal party office. Some parties might also consider internal quotas for women, youth, or component leaders.

Parties may consider identifying and approving potential future candidates early in the electoral cycle in order to provide opportunities for training, mentorship, and management courses before they run for office. In parallel, parties might increase transparency around how candidates are selected—by publishing guidelines, for instance, or by holding deliberative meetings open to members—to help even the playing field for prospective candidates.

Society and *wasta*

The tension that exists between those who are systematically included in their political parties, and the majority, who are systematically excluded, must be addressed. Political parties that exclude broad swaths of society are more likely to be poor representatives of that society and face significant hurdles to being perceived as legitimate. A first step in improving that perceived legitimacy is to admit where there has been a failure. Parties must acknowledge that while the exclusion of women, youth, and components from decision making could be representative of societal attitudes at large, that does not mean that parties may be excused for replicating it.

In order to address the reticence of more traditionalist elements within parties (and blocs) to welcome women and youth into the upper echelons of decision making, parties could adopt a regional approach to educating both men and women in the party on how women can be assets to parties in general, and elections in particular. Sharing experiences with members from other regions and different backgrounds can help provide real evidence for men on how supporting women is an opportunity to strengthen their party as a whole, by better representing the larger community and increasing the chances of electoral support within that larger community.

The relationship between youth and political parties has collapsed in recent years. Parties may consider reforming their communication strategies, with an eye to meeting youth where they are—whether that be online, on social media, in civil society, and in protest movements. Parties could include a youth platform in their next campaign, drafted by youth in the party.

Parties can build trust over time among youth, women, and component members by actively consulting them on priority areas of concern and then following up on those issues. The consulted members could themselves contribute to addressing these areas of concern through volunteerism within the party. By committing to follow-up at the highest leadership levels, the consultation would ultimately build trust in the effectiveness of participation among these underrepresented groups.

Parties might consider a formal mechanism to choose and increase the number and quality of women candidates, whether through consultation with the women's wing, more training, or aiming for well above the legal quota. This mechanism should be clear to every member and to the public to show that it is a fair and equal process based on merit and not family or personal connection. These women, elected officials, and women in decision-making positions in the party can motivate other women in the party by contributing to party stances, directly affecting outcomes, and ultimately leaving their stamp on the party.

