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Weavers of the Social Fabric:

Securing the Participation of Women in Iraq's Reconciliation Program

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The inclusion of women is critical to the success and sustainability of reconciliation efforts. To date, however, the government of Iraq has failed to prioritize women's participation in its national reconciliation program. In the development of the second INAP, the federal government has an opportunity to rectify this legacy and restore the social contract with its female constituents. This policy brief examines current gender deficits throughout Iraq's reconciliation process and offers relevant recommendations.

Nearly 20 years ago, the UN Security Council urged member states to increase the participation of women, as decision-makers, in conflict resolution and peace processes. Unfortunately, despite the invaluable contributions of women to peace and security, the government of Iraq has consistently failed to prioritize women's participation in its reconciliation efforts. As a UN member state, Iraq must substantiate its commitment to the WPS agenda, as well as to a sustainable post-war process, by securing the robust and equitable inclusion of women at all levels of its national reconciliation program.

I. Momentum for Change: The Women, Peace, & Security (WPS) Agenda

In October of 2000, the landmark passing of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 catapulted women's experiences of conflict and their contributions to peace and security into the international limelight. This watershed moment inaugurated a worldwide movement to secure women's meaningful inclusion at all levels of influence and at every stage of the

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conflict resolution cycle. In the intervening years, a total of nine resolutions have been passed, which together comprise the Women, Peace, & Security (WPS) agenda.

The WPS agenda is designed to address an existing deficit in peacebuilding policy and practice. For much of recorded history, war has been a distinctly “masculinized story” in which women are relegated to the periphery.ⁱ This reductive conceptualization of women’s complex and variable relationship to conflict is grounded in gendered power relations that have, historically, impeded women’s access to resources and limited their representation in social, political, and economic institutions.ⁱⁱ The field of peace and security, shaped by such institutions, has systematically failed to include women in peacebuilding processes. As a result, it has contributed to the continued marginalization of women and the pervasive misrepresentation or underrepresentation of their interests.ⁱⁱⁱ The WPS agenda seeks to rectify this problematic history by advocating for the robust inclusion of women in peacebuilding efforts.

UNSCR 1325, the bedrock of the WPS agenda, is constituted around four distinct but interdependent pillars of implementation: participation, prevention, protection, and relief and recovery.^{iv} Participation refers to the need to secure women’s meaningful and equitable inclusion – whether in government, leadership, or the security forces – to ensure that their experiences, interests, and needs are correctly identified and adequately represented in conflict and post-conflict settings.^v Of the four pillars, participation is the fundamental prerequisite that makes other objectives of the WPS agenda both possible and efficacious.

II. The Benefits of Women’s Inclusion in Reconciliation

The argument for women’s inclusion in reconciliation and peacebuilding is frequently framed as a moral one, premised on the notion that “half the population has the right to have its voice heard.”^{vi} Due to the differential and distinctly gendered impacts of war, many women experience sexualized violence during conflict; suffer from protection gaps, additional human rights violations, and exploitative dependency relations in displacement; and face marginalization, economic deprivation, and domestic violence upon their return. Since women’s experiences of war and displacement are unique, they bring qualitatively different perspectives and priorities to the prospect of reconciliation.^{vii} It cannot be assumed, therefore, that their male counterparts are capable of adequately representing their needs and interests.^{viii} Sidelining women from reconciliation efforts is unconscionable; war belongs to them, and peace should as well.

“Women are half of every community. Are they, therefore, not also half of every solution?”

Theo-Ben Gurirab, 2000

There are also practical considerations behind this argument, however. In order for a peace process to prove sustainable, it must secure public ownership and support. Engaging women, who comprise 49.6% of the global population and often represent different constituencies than men, is essential in ensuring the resonance of interventions and the local embeddedness of social change processes.^{ix}

Additionally, women possess a number of capacities and characteristics that make them valuable agents of reconciliation. For example, women:

- Frequently promote *a holistic and socially-inflected understanding of peace* that addresses root causes of instability and contributes to long-term sustainability.^x
- Often have *greater mobility and access* to diverse social groups in times of conflict, and are therefore more likely to be accepted as messengers and mediators in intragroup and intergroup disputes.^{xi}
- Often possess *greater legitimacy and credibility* than distrusted traditional or political leaders, due to their proximity to their communities.^{xii}
- Are capable of inspiring *greater public trust and confidence*, as they are widely perceived to be less corrupt, more cooperative, and more compassionate than men.^{xiii}
- Have *a proven track record of practicing “transversal politics”* and working across entrenched divisions in order to activate strategic coalitions and alliances.^{xiv} Women’s capacity to unite across difference in the service of a superordinate goal makes them multidimensional bridge-builders. They can transcend ethnic, religious, and political divides; connect elites and grassroots; and negotiate across “battle lines and national borders” to break impasses and secure sustainable outcomes.^{xv}

“Because of their rootedness in their communities, [women] play a crucial role in re-establishing the social fabric in the aftermath of conflict.”

Development and Peace, 2017

Because of these capacities, women are uniquely positioned to represent the needs of the public, garner support among a broad constituent base, and promote visions of peace premised on the dignity of all.^{xvi}

Gender experts have observed that it is ludicrous to assume that peacebuilding initiatives can be solvent and sustainable without the buy-in of these strategically positioned social architects, and evidence bears this out.^{xvii} When women are empowered socially and included politically, their countries are less prone to intrastate violence, less likely to go to war internationally, and more capable of detecting and moderating violent extremism.^{xviii}

Once a state has descended into violence, the inclusion of women in peace processes:

- Increases the likelihood of reaching peace agreements;
- Increases the likelihood of successful implementation;
- Increases the likelihood that an agreement will last 2 years by 20%, and 15 years by 35%.
- Decreases the risk of relapse into conflict.^{xix}

The implication is clear: there is a profound link between women’s participation and state stability, and “the inclusion of women helps prevent conflict, creates peace, enhances reconciliation processes, and sustains security after war ends.”^{xx}

III. Gender Deficits in Iraq's National Reconciliation Program

Unfortunately, despite this overwhelming evidence, women remain critically underrepresented in Iraq's reconciliation process. Nationwide reconciliation efforts are currently spearheaded by the Coexistence and Communal Peace Committee, the newest iteration of the National Reconciliation Committee established by parliament in 2007. In partnership with UNDP, this committee has formed a total of 8 subcommittees in Nineveh Province, as well as a smattering of subcommittees across other districts, including Anbar, Saladin, and Diyala.^{xxi} The purpose of these entities is to identify and address reconciliation challenges at the *meso* level, such as the integration of returnees, tensions between diverse ethnoreligious components, and issues between the citizenry and the local government.^{xxii} Each subcommittee reportedly consists of 30-40 members with robust social networks and access to local information.^{xxiii} However, women comprise only 10-15% of that membership, or roughly 3-4 members per group.^{xxiv}

Outside of these subcommittees, the Coexistence and Communal Peace Committee has also, in consultation with UNDP, developed a number of smaller "peace teams" comprised of women.^{xxv} Unfortunately, while their formation signals an interest in securing women's inclusion in the reconciliation process, the peace teams face significant limitations. For example, their designated remit engenders an exclusive focus on social issues, and particularly on "women's issues," such as the need for psychosocial support or the management of survivors' files.^{xxvi} This segmentation of women's issues as a distinct or special interest category impedes women's ability to address the holistic needs of their communities. Additionally, peace teams possess meager institutional resources and are comprised of volunteers. Allegedly, the government has a unidimensional relationship with these groups, and neglects to provide the support, strategies, and mechanisms that would facilitate their integration within larger reconciliation processes.^{xxvii} Finally, peace teams are few in number. While 8 male-dominated subcommittees exist in Nineveh Province, only 2 peace teams operate in the same area; and while 4 subcommittees are planned for Kirkuk, only 1 peace team has been formed there.^{xxviii} Women's relegation to peace teams with limited mandates, resources, and numbers undermines their capacity to influence decision-making in meaningful ways.

Gender deficits are especially egregious at the highest levels of leadership over Iraq's reconciliation process, where women's participation dissipates completely. No women are involved in the leadership of the national Coexistence and Communal Peace Committee.^{xxix} In fact, while 5-6 female employees support the committee in a logistical and administrative capacity, women do not participate as decision-makers and are not included in the committee's formal membership.^{xxx} The national reconciliation plan, premiered under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in 2006, did allow for the formation of an "Office for Women." From the beginning, however, the Women's Office lacked adequate resources, legitimate political influence, and a concrete program to activate women's participation throughout the national reconciliation process.^{xxxi} While the situation of the Women's Office began to improve under the leadership of Hanadi Attieh between 2015 and 2018, a lack of federal funding and institutional support continued to impede its efficacy. Now, reportedly, this office has been dissolved.^{xxxii}

As recently as October of 2019, experts from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women identified significant gaps in women’s participation in decision-making processes throughout Iraq.^{xxxiii} These deficits are deeply problematic for the prospect of reconciliation. Evidence indicates that decorative or tokenistic measures are not sufficient to secure the significant peace dividends of women’s inclusion and can, in fact, exacerbate instability and compromise the success of peace negotiations.^{xxxiv} The failure to secure appropriate and proportional visibility for women in leadership positions can also heighten sentiments of disenfranchisement, disincentivize women’s participation overall, and weaken public confidence and investment in the national reconciliation process. In contrast, women’s substantive representation – including their authority and capacity to make decisions – enhances the likelihood of reconciliation and sustainable peace.^{xxxv} For reconciliation to be successful, it must be representative.

“Where women’s inclusion is prioritized, peace is more likely – particularly when women influence decision-making.”

O’Reilly, 2015

IV. The Second INAP: An Opportunity and Responsibility

As a nascent post-conflict society, Iraq is beset by lingering fragility. Its prospects for stability are threatened by a number of internal factors, including protracted displacement, widespread militarization, and escalating civil unrest that signals the deterioration of the social contract between the government and its citizens. Simultaneously, Iraq remains vulnerable in the shifting matrix of political rivalries between regional and global powers. For the stability of the country and the longevity of its peace process, it is imperative that the Iraqi government capitalize on the political momentum and international support associated with the development of the second Iraq National Action Plan (INAP) to secure progress on women’s inclusion in reconciliation efforts.

The first Iraq National Action Plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 was launched in 2014. It was the first of its kind in the MENA region, and was heralded as a significant step toward furthering gender parity in the country. However, it was also criticized for failing to appropriately prioritize women’s participation in reconciliation.^{xxxvi} Furthermore, while the INAP listed “ensuring fair and proportional representation and full participation of women in all reconciliation committees” among its strategic goals, this objective was not achieved during its 4-year implementation.^{xxxvii} The absence of a definitive timeline, federal budget allocation, and monitoring mechanism for the INAP have been cited as critical factors impacting its capacity for success.^{xxxviii}

However, the government of Iraq now faces a new window of opportunity, in the development of the second INAP, to restore its social contract with female constituents and substantiate its commitment to a robust, inclusive, and democratic post-war process. As an implementing partner of the original INAP, the Coexistence and Communal Peace Committee can assist in the satisfaction of these objectives by recognizing women as active agents of change and mandating their fair and proportional representation in nationwide reconciliation initiatives.

V. Policy Recommendations

- The Cross-Sector Task Force on 1325 must ensure that women's inclusion in reconciliation features prominently in the new INAP, and the federal government must allocate sufficient budgeting for its full and comprehensive implementation.
- The federal government should reinstate the Women's Office of the Coexistence and Communal Peace Committee under the leadership of a female Gender Director; expand the remit of this office to meaningfully address both political and social files; and provide it with sufficient resources to engage with the particular concerns of women and explore what efforts are required to successfully solicit their participation.
- The Coexistence and Communal Peace Committee should secure the proportional representation of women in its decision-making membership and, if necessary, implement a formal quota to match the 25% minimum established in parliament.
- The Coexistence and Communal Peace Committee should institute formal quotas or other mechanisms for inclusion to increase the 10-15% participation of women in all reconciliation subcommittees.
- The federal government, in partnership with international and national gender experts, should adopt a cohesive monitoring framework across all national reconciliation initiatives. This framework should include mechanisms for tracking the percentage of women included in national reconciliation programs at every level; strategies for scaling up inclusion efforts once minimum thresholds have been satisfied; and metrics and indicators to ensure women's substantive, rather than descriptive, participation.

ENDNOTES

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^{xxvi} Attieh, interview.

^{xxvii} Attieh, interview.

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