II. Findings on society's perspective on women's political participation

The present section sets out the findings of the focus group discussions held in the five governorates. The discussions revolved around society's perspective on the role of female candidates from several angles. The discussions were attended by various categories of participants: male and female media representatives of the media, academia, politics, religious groups, and governmental and non-governmental organizations.

A. What is the public's vision of the candidates? How are they viewed by the public?

According to the findings of the group discussions, the public's vision of the candidates can be grouped into the following five main categories:

a. External circumstances impede women's performance;

b. Women candidates play an important role in politics;

c. Female candidates are useless and submissive;

d. Society is now more accepting of women's role;

e. Women are qualified to be candidates.

The entire list of categories was not put forward in any of the governorates. In each governorate, however, two or three of these categories were discussed. While the first four categories were discussed in three governorates, the last category was only discussed in two governorates.

The view that 'external circumstances impeded women's performance' was the dominant opinion, although it was only discussed in Salaheddin, Nenawa and Najaf. Those external circumstances were found to be due to the electoral law and the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), or due to the prevailing favouritism, tribalism and the opinion of the parties (Najaf, Nenawa and Salaheddin). Female candidates, it is viewed, are selected on a political basis when, for example, the head of the bloc chooses, regardless of the public's vision, and decides who wins in advance, even if the candidate does not get votes. The performance of female candidates/MPs can be controlled and governed by the party, and can in some cases be exploited. In Nenawa, however, it was viewed that if elections were performed fairly, women were likely to play a greater role. Majda Tamimi is a case in point.

According to a Nenawa PC member: "a woman is able to give but only if she gets some of her rights. No matter what we women do, the man obstructs our work. In my experience, when I was in the council, they imposed a committee on me, though it was not of my qualification, simply because they can control us. But still, I was able to give and exert efforts".

The category with the negative views postulating that 'female candidates are useless and submissive' was put forward in Basra, Najaf and Nenawa. In Najaf and Nenawa, women were found to be controlled and exploited by their parties. In Najaf, one opinion was that "they find women unable to keep up with the political process because they are weak, and this is why they have to be supported by a party or the head of the bloc. Society's view of women is clouded by mockery and denigration, and the majority believes that it is only the parties who choose".

In Nenawa, the discussion mentioned that women's performance was not up to the desired standard, because they only came through the quotas. Even though they play an active role in peace-building, many women have done nothing. In Najaf, one opinion suggested that women were only filling the list, while another claimed that "sometimes she is perceived as a supplement to the number and that her participation is only for her own wellbeing, while it would be much better if she would raise her children". In Basra, the discussions noted that women could not meet the aspirations of their constituents, since they were not independent and only followed their political party blocs. Women were deemed weak because they lacked experience in management and decision-making, and do not have political and legal awareness. Notably, discussions in Baghdad and Salaheddin mentioned no negative views towards women.

Moreover, in Basra, Najaf and Nenawa, discussions supported the view that women candidates play an important role. In Basra's discussion, it was perceived that women must take their part in the political process, because it was not possible to manage a country and legislate a decision or law without women's participation. In Nenawa, discussions suggested that women's presence was important, because they could be strong on several issues, especially on problems women faced. In Najaf, participants said that women should be MPs. Their success depended on empowering other women, and on policies targeting women and families.

Participants in Salaheddin, Baghdad and Basra discussed the view that 'society is more accepting of women's role'. In Salaheddin, it was mentioned that at first there were many reservations, but now with the repetition of the electoral process, there were fewer reservations and citizens now accepted women's candidacy. Likewise, in Baghdad, political awareness was on the rise and a large proportion of women were freeing themselves

from social constraints, increasing the number of women not members of any political party. Society's view of women candidates had become positive. Society had also become receptive to women working within civil society organizations, especially women in independent organizations. As a result, there is increased community confidence in women because they can work in more than one place and at more than one level. In Basra, women have gained a solid popularity, which they acquired through successful experiences, even at the level of their tribe or the locality where they live.

The final viewpoint that 'women are eligible candidates' was discussed in Salaheddin and Basra. In Salaheddin, it was maintained that female candidates were a complement to the political process. Nominating women had many benefits, because they work more than men and are wary of suspicious acts. They understand the plight of displaced populations; they are brave and outspoken in the community; and are more service oriented, honest and less corrupt. In Basra, participants said that women were more tolerant and loyal in their work, and were more able to persuade and influence than men, as their cultural background and political awareness enable them to win.

B. What affects the choices of voters, especially with regard to women candidates?

Participants in the focus group discussions were asked about the factors influencing the choices of voters, especially with regard to women candidates.

Five different variables are found to affect voters' choices for female candidates, namely her abilities and achievements, her legal and political circumstances, her tribal affiliations, her characteristics, and her physical appearance and femininity.

The first two variables were covered in the discussions of four governorates, while the third on tribal affiliations and the fourth on characteristics were discussed in two governorates. The fifth of physical appearance and femininity was discussed only in Najaf governorate. Surprisingly, in a society that is supposedly dominated by male ideology, 'femininity and physical appearance' is only commented on in one governorate, while 'women's abilities and achievements' is discussed the most.

The variable on 'abilities and achievements' focuses specifically on educational background and efficiency:

• Candidates must have an acceptable degree and a scientific approach (Nenawa) that is reflected in their work specialization (Baghdad). Moreover, their background must provide them with competencies, skills and experiences (Najaf);

• Candidates' efficiency must be revealed in their ability to serve the community. According to Assin Hamza, PC member in Nenawa, candidates should serve their community, be bold, and support women in improving their status. In her words: "I won without a picture, but I won through my work in villages and provision of services for women";

• Candidates' efficiency must also be evident in the electoral programme, such as their effort in launching campaigns (Basra), the extent of their credibility in their electoral platform (Baghdad), the number and quality of the promises made by the candidate to improve voters' circumstances, and promises to solve crises that concern voters (Najaf);

Candidate efficiency must be reflected in fulfilling promises to guarantee the public's confidence in their implementation (Basra). "We want her to be brave because there are conditions in the provinces that are difficult" (Nenawa). Likewise, candidates' media appearances, the frequency of their communications and their outspokenness reveal their potential to meet the demands made by voters (Najaf).

The other variable also discussed in Baghdad, Najaf, Nenawa and Basra was 'legal and political circumstances', specifically the supporting party candidates belong to, such as the party's strength, its previous experiences and services to the community (Baghdad), and the party rules (number and type) (Najaf). The party candidates belong to strongly influences voters (Nenawa), and the strength of their political affiliation qualifies them to win (Basra).

The variable on tribal affiliation was discussed in Baghdad and Basra, and highlighted candidates' association with clans. The tribal origin of the candidate (Baghdad) and the number of martyrs or political prisoners of her clan, give her greater acceptability among the electorate (Basra).

The variable on candidate characteristics was cited in Nenawa and Basra, including qualities such as charisma and humility (Nenawa). Religious commitment and respect for customs and traditions also constitute the foundations for the selection of female candidates (Basra).

The final variable on 'physical appearance and femininity' was mentioned only in Najaf, which is a governorate known for its strong religious influence. Overall, society is male-dominated, and female candidates can only influence voters through their efficiency in make-up, appearance, cooking and clothing.

C. What is the citizen's image of a credible council candidate?

Participants were asked to discuss the image that citizens have of a credible candidate. The findings reveal that there are seven variables

that citizens are looking for in a credible council candidate, namely a committed person and keeper of promises, an honest person, a balanced person, a communicator, a server of the needy, someone who fulfils promises, and someone with strong affiliations.

There are three common images that can be found in all five governorates: the candidate as the committed person, the server of the needy, and the achiever. The image of the honest person was cited in four governorates, while the image of the balanced person was cited in three governorates. 'Strong affiliations' ws again only mentioned in Najaf. The discussions in Baghdad and Najaf covered six of the seven images. In Salaheddin, Basra and Nenawa, five of the images noted in the discussions. The frequency of the appearances of the images in the discussion reveals their popularity and prevalence in the citizens' expectations of their candidates.

The image of the committed candidate describes her as committed to her electoral programme declaration and to her tasks (Baghdad), and shows her commitment publicly to the audience and in the media (Nenawa). The committed candidate has to verify her commitment (Salaheddin). The commitment of the party itself is also closely linked to the committed candidate because "in Iraq, the credibility of the candidate starts from the credibility of her bloc" (Najaf).

The candidate must be aware of her area's needs (Najaf), and should adopt legislative bills that benefit marginalized groups (Baghdad). She must participate in solving social problems through legislation, law enforcement or pressure on the government (Basra), and should have a long background in public service (Salaheddin).

The candidate should be known for her administrative capacity (Baghdad) and her hard work (Nenawa), especially on women's issues (Salaheddin). She must be strong and persuasive when fighting for rights (Najaf), and must fight exclusion and marginalization (Basra).

The candidate must not be implicated in illegal dealings (Baghdad), should abide by the law (Nenawa), and must not be involved in corruption cases. Specifically, she should be consistent: "We, in Salaheddin, have witnessed constant political fluctuations in positions". She must also be honest with her constituents (Najaf).

The candidate must communicate with the public before and after she wins (Baghdad). She should have an office for meeting with the public (Nenawa), and should keep her door open to the public (Najaf). Her communications must be addressed to all the public, not a specific group (Basra).

The candidate must adopt a civil discourse that is not sectarian, factional or regional (Baghdad); must be stable and not move between political blocs according to her own interests (Salaheddin); and must be able to balance her work between her life and her party (Basra).

Affiliated candidates should be strongly connected to their party, and receive the support of its head (Najaf).

D. Does the competence of female candidates match that of male candidates?

Participants were asked to discuss whether the competencies of males and females matched. Responses from each governorate revolved around the limitations placed on female candidates and the areas they exceled in. With reference to the research framework used in the present study, the limitations faced by women mentioned in the focus group discussions are primarily related to socio-cultural constraints, and to structural bureaucratic constraints and low involvement in public systems.

According to the discussion, socio-cultural constraints facing women candidates are either due to prevailing traditional stereotypes or traditional gendered divisions of labour. Participants said that both men and women were competitive, but society perceived men as having higher efficiency than women in all respects, just because men dominate society (Najaf). Most often the public retains an image about women candidates as only supplements or additions (Baghdad). Consequently, many believe the stereotype that women just run for office, while the men behind her control things. There were also controversial statements such as: "Our society is male, and men's efficiency is greater" (Salaheddin).

Moreover, owing to customary stereotypes, leadership is perceived to be more masculine than feminine (Basra). Society in Salaheddin still believes that political action is for men, and that woman are merely completing a number. In social upbringing, political action is related to men not women, which in turn grants more opportunities for male candidates to participate in politics (Basra).

On the political level, women's opportunities are limited by quotas (Baghdad). In Salaheddin, participants said: "We believe that men's competence is different from that of women because men have roles that women cannot play, women cannot without a quota".

According to the discussions, structural bureaucratic limitations and low involvement in the State can be noted in several modes. Firstly, the media markets women's role very poorly, portraying a lack of competencies (Najaf). Secondly, female candidates are often excluded from participating in sensitive decision-making, such as State security, or meetings for conflict resolution and negotiations (Baghdad). There is evidence that when an important decision is to be taken, the political bloc may turn to the candidate's husband or brother to negotiate decisions (Salaheddin).

Moreover, women candidates have less opportunities to be involved, because men intervene to a large extent in women's work (Nenawa), and because of scepticism that women are able to make a decision without a man having playing a part (Basra).

Despite these setbacks, the discussions revealed that female candidates excelled in their qualities and their practical actions.

Participants said that women's work competence was higher since their credibility, transparency and efficiency were greater in all areas, owing to their sense of responsibility, integrity and accuracy. Paradoxically, although women have higher efficiency, they are weaker at pleasing the public (Najaf).

Women MPs are more effective than men because they are more disciplined at work and less corrupt (Baghdad). There is always less distrust surrounding women candidates; the perception is that they do not steal and do not miss sessions.

An elected woman is more serious than a man at work. She is measured not only by her statements, but by her work in parliament and the council. However, female candidates need to become braver and bolder (Nenawa). Women MPs are always helpful and service oriented, while a man looks at his office for self-benefit (Nenawa).

Practical experience shows that women have proven their ability to manage sessions, raise topics and prove themselves (Baghdad). Female MPs are said to always engage in consultation before they make any serious decisions (Nenawa).

E. Qualities of women MPs

Participants were invited to list the advantages they see in women candidates/representatives. Among the 10 listed attributes of female

candidates, only three were found to be common to all the five governorates, namely courage, cultural and educational background, and presence and charisma. It is also interesting that the three assets that are perceived as female, yet are not necessarily considered feminine, are courage and boldness in their presentation and appearance in the media (Baghdad and Nenawa), ability to manage conflicts (Najaf), and strong will against pressure (Salaheddin). The remaining seven assets are commonly seen as typical to feminine nature and hence fit well in the traits valued in female candidates. Moreover, physical appearance was considered as an asset in Najaf, as was the quality of being peace loving: female candidates were said to have the asset of love and peacefulness more than men.

F. What role can men play in enhancing women candidates' skills in campaigning? And how can they support them to overcome the challenges they face?

Table 6 shows the triangulation done between the challenges identified in the research framework and the findings of the focus group discussions.

Table 6 portrays the role men can play to support female candidates in overcoming the challenges they face in their political participation endeavours. Matching these suggestions to the identified challenge in the research framework, we find a clear belief that men can provide support in all challenge areas, with the exception of political constraints as they seems to be beyond their control. Men were primarily found to have a supporting role in combating the personal barriers related to women's skills and capacities by raising their technical capacities, giving them access, involving them in training, and providing advice.

If these suggestions are implemented, men will not only play an active role, but can become agents of change, providing space for women and recognizing and valuing their role and efforts. The decisive question, however, remains: are men ready to share the space and experiences with women? Will there be challenges for men to accept to do so?

Table 6. Men's support for women candidates to overcome their challenges

Personal challenges related to their skills and capacity	
Baghdad	Involve female candidates in workshops, training or media appearances
Basra	Invite women to public forums and events Encourage women to hold small workshops with people to assess problems and needs Provide advice to women
Najaf	Have confidence in women's capacity and organize courses, seminars and workshops to promote the importance of women's role
Nenawa	Encourage women to accept suggestions from politicians
Salaheddin	Correct women's mistakes, and provide counselling and information

Socio-cultural challenges	
Baghdad	-
Basra	-
Najaf	Support of husband and brother to enable women to reach the sheikh of a clan or head of political bloc, so as to reach the council Support women to study community structures and include everybody
Nenawa	Support by husband and family
Salaheddin	Providing an enabling environment
Structural bureaucratic barriers and low participation in State institutions and electoral systems	
Baghdad	Encourage women to attend high-level media meetings and face-to-face meetings with decision makers to benefit from their experiences Involve women in negotiating sessions of the heads of blocs and parties, and encourage them not to limit their role to women's issues
Basra	Support the drafting of women's electoral platform in accordance with legislation and laws
Najaf	Support women in their social and cultural relations in society
Violence related to election	
Baghdad	Abstain from negative competition or rivalry with women, and grant them equal chances of winning or losing
Basra	Condemn campaigns and rumours that offend women professionally and morally
Najaf	-
Nenawa	Encourage women to demand their rights
Salaheddin	Abstain from attacking women's attitudes (even if wrong) in front of the media or public
Economic and financial challenges	
Baghdad	Provide women with equal opportunities for funds from their party
Basra	Direct women to the private sector to provide financial support for their campaign
Najaf	Give women confidence to become a candidate, provide support with financial funding, and provide media coverage during the nomination
Nenawa	Support women to receive the media and political funds
Salaheddin	-

Findings on society's perspective on women's political participation

Personal ideological constraints	
Baghdad	Support women's political role; support from family members is important
Basra	Link women candidates to the private sector to support them morally by putting their pictures in the media
Najaf	Encourage women to develop their potential, and have confidence in their capacity
Nenawa	Encourage women to overcome their anxiety and self-doubt
Salaheddin	Constantly provide moral support