

III. Experienced and perceived challenges facing female candidates and enforcement mechanisms

The present section moves from the wider perspective of society to the meso level, namely the level of the group of women candidates and their involvement in society. It considers the challenges identified in the research framework, and presents the findings of the assessment of the challenges experienced by women, their unmet needs, and mechanisms they suggested for overcoming these challenges. For each challenge, women's experiences and mechanisms adopted or suggested are cited, followed by the views expressed in the focus group discussions. Adopting the triangulation approach, the present section reveals the close similarity of the data from the two levels, the macro and the meso, or the close similarity between the challenges as actually faced by women candidates and those perceived by the focus group participants, thus confirming the validity of the findings.

Based on the findings of the desk review of the international and local literature, the research framework identified several challenges facing women political candidates who run for elected public offices. The identified challenges were discussed in the individual interviews conducted with both groups of women, parliamentarian and PC members, to assess the importance and level of influence of each challenge and its effect on their political endeavours.

The identified challenges are as follows:

Political and legal constraints: the current political landscape in Iraq is shaped by several conflicts and civil unrest. Women,

as an essential part of society that has been marginalized and excluded, have to face these ongoing political obstacles and vulnerabilities in political and electoral processes, and are hence reluctant to participate. Although the Constitution stipulates a quota for the Council of Representatives, there is no provision in the Constitution related to PCs. Law No. 12 (2018) on Governorates, Districts and Sub-district Council Elections does not include a firm commitment to a 25 per cent gender quota. It was left up to the electoral commission to interpret the vague language in the law. This lack of clarity remains a source of mistrust and confusion;

Socio-cultural challenges: stereotyping of women, gender bias, conservative traditions and religious taboos create a popular perception that women's leadership will never succeed. Local council membership is often divided among local families, and no one can to interfere. Women who participate in politics, especially women candidates, are often targets of disinformation and hate speech on social media, to pressure them to withdraw from political life;

Financial and economic challenges: the inability of women to meet the financial requirements of running for election, including advertising and promotion, are added to the difficulty of movement across the electoral district. Political parties either do not provide funds or provide insufficient financial support to women candidates, even for the ones who won through the quota;

Structural and bureaucratic challenges and low participation of women in institutions:

gender biases are pervasive in Iraqi institutions, including in judicial and executive branches of the State, and in electoral systems. There is also the influence of money in politics and reluctance of ministries to disclose information. Political parties also have a long history of not providing sufficient support, networks or resources to women candidates or women in public elected office. There is a lack of women in political party leadership, likewise in the Independent High Electoral Commission. Although the importance of women's inclusion has been recognized, there is a lack of resources for gender equality programmes;

Personal ideology and psychological challenges: from early childhood, Iraqi women are trained to believe that they are lower than men. This indoctrination continues even among educated professionals. Accordingly, women refrain from running for office in the mistaken fear of harming their reputation;

Other obstacles include: election violence and intimidation by the family or society in addition to threats by opponents/challengers; personal challenges related to women's skills and capacities, such as formulating policies, developing strategies, networking, connecting with the electorate, and other requirements of successful candidacy for public office.

A. Political constraints

1. Constraints expressed by women candidates

The political obstacles female respondents mentioned overlap, and revolve around constant political change, corruption, lack of awareness, and confusion about laws.

Constant political change decreases participation. The political climate is new and people in elected office often do not understand the powers assigned to them (Basra PC member). The permanent conflict

among political blocs has changed the political climate and the biggest impact falls on women (Nenawa MP). The change in the political climate and the competition between blocs subjects women to pressures to change their political affiliation (Salaheddin PC member). The continuous political change does not generate stability or a consistent plan of action, and has led to a decrease in the volume of participation (Salaheddin PC member).

Corruption and lack of services hinder attempts to run for election. Citizens are outraged by the lack of services and the Government's lies to justify failure to fulfil promises (Baghdad PC member). Political blocs use money to attract supporters (Salaheddin). Given the high level of corruption and financial blackmail, women especially face many obstacles (Salaheddin PC member). Such obstacles have a big impact on the elections. As a result of corruption and lack of services, voters are reluctant to vote, and women are reluctant to run for election (Salaheddin and Najaf PC members).

Political life is shaped by lack of political awareness and confusion about laws. In Iraq, there is no proper political awareness of the value of participation (Baghdad MP). Women face many political pressures from other political blocs (Baghdad PC member). Owing to the quota system and the vague language in its application, if one female member resigns, priority for the substitute is given to men (Najaf MP).

2. Constraints mentioned by the focus groups

The political environment is not supportive of participation. Instead of citizenship, the tribal system and the sect are the predominant affiliations (Basra). The security situation is deteriorating and there is negative rivalry between the parties (Baghdad). The heads of political blocs have complete control and select the winners in advance (Najaf).

The legal context is insensitive to gender equality. Although Iraq has ratified international

conventions on women, it does not comply with them because the conventions lack mandatory mechanisms, and are only limited to awareness raising mechanisms (Basra). There is also no political will to develop laws based on equal rights. The system ostensibly supports equality but it is not implemented by the law (Basra).

Iraq also adopts different religious interpretations from multiple schools of jurisprudence. This leads to the confusion of concepts and, consequently, gender discrimination is perpetuated. As a result, the status of women in Iraq is likely to depend on the implementation of Islamic law and on the priorities, interpretations and preferences of male religious authorities (Basra).

Women make sacrifices just to win the elections. They sometimes have to join a certain bloc without believing in that bloc or its orientations, just to increase their chances of winning (Baghdad), and a female candidate's loyalty is enforced, so they cannot leave their bloc (Salaheddin).

3. Mechanisms suggested by parliamentarians

a. Raise awareness about creating a healthy election culture

- Awareness starts with culture, and lack of participation in the elections can be solved through the media (Najaf);
- Conduct continuous training courses (Baghdad);
- Raise awareness to create the right election culture (Nenawa);
- Promote awareness in all areas of life that concern women (Baghdad);
- Disseminate a culture that helps dissolve class distinctions among people, and that promotes a view of candidates as individual Iraqi citizens, independent of any family and tribal affiliations (Najaf);

- Spread a culture of voting widely and educate about the constitution (Najaf).

b. Provide political support for women

- Political blocs should support women, but women should not be overly influenced by them (Nenawa);
- Promote women's rights in political issues (Najaf);
- Parties need to clarify their policies so that women are persuaded to participate (Baghdad).

4. Mechanisms suggested by provisional council members

- With determination and will, women can come up with new ideas that motivate participation (Baghdad);
- It is important for candidates to understand the work of the PCs and Parliament, as well as the laws, by-laws and the constitution (Baghdad).

5. Mechanisms suggested by focus groups

- Changing the electoral law to reduce the dominance of political parties and abolishing quotas;
- Preventing social discrimination and limiting the influence of traditions that contradict the principles and rights stated in the constitution;
- Religious fatwas in support of women were also deemed important, especially in persuading men to support women;
- Parties formed by women candidates should be encouraged.

6. Effect of political constraints on women candidates

The findings indicate that political constraints affected female candidates the most, according to 72 per cent of respondents, including five of nine parliamentarians. However, three

respondents ranked it as least important because of their strong party support. In Basra and Nenawa, women MPs cited strong political support from their respective parties.

B. Socio-cultural constraints

1. Constraints expressed by women candidates

a. Discriminatory norms and traditions in society

- Patriarchal traditions (especially those deriving from tribal culture) discriminate against women and reject women's leadership;
- Candidates for election are often selected by political parties for their tribal affiliations and men are favoured;
- The stereotyping of women is perpetuated by political acceptance of this culture and its incorporation into the political system;
- Some respondents viewed this as a regression from Iraq's recent past, where women were awarded greater respect.

b. Limitations imposed on women by family and society

- Parents reject the idea that women can be leaders and work to support marginalized women and defend their rights;
- In some cases, the extended family has to approve of a woman's candidacy, and their views can influence a woman's close family;
- MPs and PC members spoke of having to overcome resistance within their families to run for office;
- An MP from Nenawa described her initial failed efforts to persuade her family;
- A PC member had a somewhat different experience: "I was directly affected by

relatives who were harassing me, but my family and my brothers were the ones who supported me and stood by me to address these customs and traditions in our society. The reason it was difficult when I entered in this area is because I belong to a well-known clan in Mosul city that has influence in the social and political arena";

- Male is the norm: there is lack of awareness about the importance and capacity of women's participation in the political process and hence positions are confined to men (Salaheddin);
- Culturally, society prefers to be represented by males and not females in the PC or Parliament;
- Since masculine culture prevails, political life is conducted in accordance with male norms and values.

2. Constraints mentioned by focus groups

The constraints expressed by MPs and PC members were echoed by participants in the focus groups. There are many restrictions imposed on women by social norms and traditions, and lack of parental/family support is a key constraint. There is a long-inherited tradition of gender discrimination in roles and labour, compounded by rules governing tribal affiliations (Salaheddin).

3. Mechanisms for challenging the barriers suggested by MPs and PC members

- Spread education deep into villages and rural areas and introduce schools for all;
- Female MPs should explore all their creative and intellectual power;
- Educate parents to abandon stereotyping of women and encourage women to engage in the political process with confidence;
- Strengthen the leadership role of women in all fields;
- Enable women to cultivate a strong personality to overcome challenges;

- Candidates should communicate directly with the electorate to demonstrate their service track record.

4. Mechanisms suggested by the focus groups

Raising public awareness was a primary recommendation from the focus groups, including educating families and communities. In conservative societies like Iraq, the role of historical and religious women leaders should be highlighted. Women voters should have faith in women candidates, and they should be educated and encouraged to promote and support women candidates. Providing services to the community is another mechanism to overcome negative social perceptions of the capabilities of women. Many families believe that appearances by women in the media are socially unacceptable. Families need to be convinced that appearances in public and in the media do not mean abandoning acceptable social norms.

C. Structural and bureaucratic barriers

1. Constraints expressed by women

- Preference is for men;
- The work of women in politics is still influenced by social and tribal factors;
- Although government departments respect women because they are fair, they only provide information to men;
- Given the predominance of male culture, political blocs impose their dominance on the authorities and there is always a preference for men, even when women have greater experience. Women therefore have fewer chances of advancement;
- Financial corruption is mixed with male power: the principle of “the strong eats the weak” prevails and the political blocs do not give women the same opportunity as men,

especially now when senior positions are sold for millions of dollars;

- Historically, the performance of women in PCs has been perceived as weak, and they have not played a prominent role. This may be due to a lack of understanding of the work of councils. Women need continuous support for professional growth.

2. Constraints mentioned by the focus groups

- Historical gender discrimination patterns of labour and role;
- Structural barriers facing women in public service;
- Male culture tends to intimidate women;
- The entrenched tradition of division of labour means that women are usually appointed to what society regards as “women’s areas of activity”. For example, committees or ministries for women’s affairs or social services, which are regarded as secondary;
- Lack of institutional support;
- Media and public access tools do not support women, especially if they are independent.

3. Mechanisms suggested by MPs and PC members for overcoming the barriers

- Acquiring skills and expertise, and being determined to excel, are essential for overcoming bureaucratic marginalization;
- Communication with the community and being educated on issues;
- The ability to negotiate and engage in debate;
- The male-dominated political class needs to be transformed in ways that strengthen belief in women’s capabilities and their political role;
- Awareness-raising campaigns to change public perceptions of women;

- Women should go out to the public and advocate for themselves;
- More networks are needed that support women in public office.

4. Mechanisms suggested by focus groups

- Changing the electoral law to reduce the dominance of parties;
- Promote women's organizations to empower women candidates and provide them with skills and knowledge to enable them to assume decision-making positions;
- Encourage and enable candidates and representatives to communicate and interact with the community to increase the candidates' knowledge base and be more credible to voters.

5. Importance of structural and bureaucratic barriers for women candidates

This challenge proved to be major for 30 per cent of respondents, especially in Nenawa, Najaf and Salaheddin. For 22 per cent, this problem was not of any importance. Interviewees from Basra did not rank this constraint as most important, and mentioned that they did not struggle with these constraints because they had political support: "I didn't face such difficulties because the (political) bloc respected me and my decisions without resistance". However, according to another PC member: "We can't deny that women face such challenges, but they must have the strength of character and professionalism to be able to overcome them".

D. Financial and economic constraints

1. Financial challenges prevent women from sustaining their campaigns

- Elected women faced financial challenges in covering their expenses for transportation, advocacy material such as printing posters

and advertising and for communication during the campaign;

- Political parties provide financial support to their candidates, but the bulk of the funds go to male candidates;
- The lack of or insufficient financial support from the political bloc for their women candidates reduces their access to political networks, media, and communities, which leads to further restrictions;
- Women, more than men, need to provide protection to their families while they campaign. The families of women candidates are more vulnerable to abuse and need greater protection, because of social stigma.

2. Constraints mentioned by the focus groups

All focus groups recognized the financial constraints faced by women and the low funding levels provided by political parties to women candidates. This limits advertising capacities, access to the media, and ability to campaign intensively.

3. Mechanisms for overcoming barriers proposed/used by MPs and PC members

a. Minimize costs and raise funds

- Seeking help from other women, and asking local families and citizens to host events, raises the level of communication while reducing costs;
- Using social media extensively also provides access and reduces cost;
- Election integrity should be monitored to prevent the purchase of votes by candidates;
- Candidate should not pay for votes;
- Women who were PC members and wish to run for parliament find it easier to raise funds because they have already established a track record and relations with voters.

b. Other support mechanisms

- The law of the Commission should determine the type of electoral propaganda permitted;
- Cooperate more with the head of the bloc to show your value to the party;
- Always maintain direct contact with the community;
- Design a budget with a plan. Good resource management is essential when funds are limited;
- Raise funds from family members;
- Attend workshops to learn about financial planning and alternative campaign outreach.

4. Mechanisms suggested by the focus groups

The focus groups suggested that Government should provide financial support for candidates and media outlets that run advertising for campaigns. They recommended recruiting volunteers for outreach.

5. Importance of structural and bureaucratic barriers to female candidates

Financial barriers were ranked as highly important by 39 per cent of the respondents, who were from all governorates and included two parliamentarians.

For 26 per cent of respondents, financial constraints were ranked lowest because they were self-sufficient and had enough finances or were funded by their party or family. Candidates who had personal and family financial resources fared best, although some also relied on funding from well-to-do members of their community.

E. Violence during elections

This has emerged as a serious problem in recent elections. Candidates were challenged by different forms of violence that varied by governorates and that differed in prevalence, form and source.

1. Constraints expressed by women MPs and PC members

- a. Intimidation and bullying: this type of violence is spread throughout the governorates and can often be coupled with other forms of violence. For one Najaf MP, this included removal of pictures, and some other threatening behaviour. When this happens, women and their families become more intimidated and emotionally affected;
- b. Threats by family members: in many cases, domestic intimidation against women candidates can be so strong that they cannot overcome this constraint. A PC member from Salaheddin mentioned that her parents were so opposed to her candidacy that her family threatened to disown her, and called her husband several times to make her reverse her candidacy. Another PC member from Salaheddin mentioned that her brother was her strongest opponent;
- c. Social and political projection: this type of violence targets the personal reputation of a candidate and spreads slander. Two women mentioned that they faced this type of violence. A parliamentarian from Najaf who mentioned that she faced many challenges such as political projection, destroying posters and flyers; and a Baghdad PC member mentioned that she faced political projection on social media, where her pictures were published and false accusations were directed at her;
- d. Terrorist threat: Nenawa and Salaheddin are two governorates liberated from Islamic State, yet the social climate appears to be still charged with terror. Several candidates cited their experiences with this type of violence. A Nenawa PC member said that: "Two days before the election, there was a candidate from a neighbouring villags near Sinjar who tried

to intimidate me by gathering people and going to the neighbourhood where I live. He threatened me if I ran against him, but the inhabitants of the area did not listen to him, they told him we have our candidate, whom we are going to elect". Another PC member from Nenawa said: "I did not suffer from my family, but from the Al-Qaeda terrorist groups through their phone calls". A Nenawa MP mentioned that there was fierce competition between candidates. At its peak, they tore up her pictures up and drew an X on them to scare her. Moreover, Salaheddin PC members mentioned that they faced significant violence and threats because there was extremism in some quarters against the political process. Types of violence included stabbing and beating campaigns to force women not to run. Often it is women's husbands and families who support them through this time.

Threats from voters: one Baghdad PC member complained that the threat came from voters who place impossible requests to give their vote, thus creating difficult situations for the candidate.

2. Constraints mentioned by the focus groups

Focus groups confirmed the statements of PC members and MPs. Women may face intimidation and male domination by husbands, brothers, the head of the clan or the head of the party. Social and cultural traditions can give rise to intimidation. Some families refuse to allow women to be seen in public gatherings, or to put their pictures in the streets during the election campaign. Character assassination via social media was also confirmed as a major source of violence against women. Because of social norms, women are especially prone to defamation attacks. Where security is a concern and there are threats of terrorism, women are especially vulnerable, and families usually do not allow women to run in such areas.

3. Mechanisms for overcoming the barriers of violence and threats

a. Mechanisms adopted by MPs and PC members

- Awareness-raising was seen as an effective mechanism;
- Disseminate public awareness to discourage class segregation;
- Educate the public that candidates should not be chosen according to tribe or clan, but according to their capabilities;
- Promote awareness through social media as well as practical training and awareness-raising workshops;
- Raise awareness to create a fair election culture and a level playing field.

b. Some PC members described their personal tactics to overcome violence and intimidation

Women were advised to work with loyal people who appreciated their work. One PC member stated: "When I was threatened, I switched phone lines and moved my house to another neighbourhood". Another asserted: "I did not care and kept working and progressing towards my goal". Another approach is to cultivate virtues such as honesty and trustworthiness through compliance with laws and regulations, staying away from corruption, and cooperating with security agencies. Maintaining their reputation and preserving their traditions, customs and knowledge, and providing services to the community, are good tools to counter defamation campaigns and establish integrity. According to one PC member, "through good work, integrity, commitment, and staying away from suspicious deals, I was able to gain the support of my family and community". Moreover, election-monitoring by the United Nations, cooperation with law enforcement agencies, and adoption and enforcement of laws that penalize those guilty of physical

violence, defamation, or intimidation, would be important tools to help women.

4. Mechanisms suggested by focus groups

Focus groups offered additional approaches to mitigating all types of violence. Women candidates should stay within safe and acceptable areas and stay away from closed areas with political, social or sectarian polarization. We should increase the legal awareness of candidates to protect them from any defamation or threat. Candidates should coordinate and inform security authorities in advance of the visit. Working closely with family members will increase the trust and confidence of male family members. Being honest with the community and informing them immediately about any intimidation or harassment helps build trust. Focus groups advocated greater media discussion of women's candidacy and the challenges women face.

5. Level of importance of the challenge of violence to candidates

Violence as a very important challenge was ranked by 31 per cent of candidates from governorates of Najaf, Salaheddin and Baghdad. For 37 per cent of candidates, this challenge ranked as least important. For those cases, we can assume that they did not witness any violence at all. In Baghdad, one parliamentarian mentioned that she had only heard about it happening in remote areas, and another mentioned that it happened infrequently and only in individual cases. The problem appears to be localized, and depends on the social and political dynamics within each community.

For those who did not experience any violence, their party, the community or the family were supportive of them, or they were themselves from families with a political history.

According to a Nenawa PC member, "The family was a main supporter for me and through them I got the position because my father is a politician and always advises

me and I hear all his advice. He has a great influence on all parties because he holds a religious position and also he believed in me as a leading woman and also respects the role of women in society".

F. Lack of Preparation and Training

1. Constraints expressed by women candidates

In Iraq democracy is a new experience and there is a lack of political and legal knowledge and awareness. A number of PC members mentioned that the democratic experience is new in Iraq, and it is an undeniable fact that most Iraqi politicians lack sufficient political awareness, regardless of whether it is a man or a woman.

a. First time experience for women

For the first time in Iraq, a country with a predominantly masculine culture, the democratic process encouraged some women to participate in the political process and decision-making to convey the voice of women, who suffer from injustice in their public and private lives. As expressed by one council member: "It is a big challenge, because it is the first time we have dealt with politics, and our information has been very, very limited". According to another council member: "Our entry into this field is new and that is why we had difficulties with the political terms and political dealings due to our little experience, although my father has a lot of experience in the field of politics". A third stated: "I had imagined something, but was actually shocked by some of the political interests I did not know about".

b. Women lack knowledge and experience

Several MPs and PC members weighed in on this topic. Women's poor political and

legal awareness, as well as low skills and knowledge, create many problems, as several MPs and PC members in Baghdad and Najaf stated. This minimizes women's chances of gaining leadership positions (Baghdad parliamentarian).

Going into politics needs training. During the first phase after the nomination and during elections, it is very difficult to develop strategies, networking, and communicating with voters, or formulating policies, or knowing anything about laws or strategies. One PC member admitted: "I do not have any knowledge. I am ignorant about political or legal work or about PC work. It is only because of the public's insistence on my candidacy that I was motivated to run".

2. Constraints mentioned by focus groups

Throughout the focus group discussions, it became clear that female candidates face personal technical challenges due to external causes, specifically governmental administrative, social and personal issues.

- a. Lack of support from government administration: absence of a strategic vision for women's political development as well as significant lack of activities that confirm their role and the importance of their political participation;
- b. Social restrictions placed on women: restrictions placed by the norms and traditions in society and lack of parental support, as well as the long historical legacy of discrimination arising from the division of labour and the identification of tribal, family and sectarian roles and affiliations; all these place restrictions on women and lead to a lack of faith in women's programmes;
- c. Low personal abilities of women: a few focus groups found that most women had limited experience in leading their

campaign, had weak personalities and limited information about politics, and were obliged to balance between family and work.

3. Mechanisms to overcome this challenge

a. Mechanisms adopted by members of parliament

- Provision of services: To overcome this barrier, the candidate can provide services to citizens so that they get to know her and can easily respond to her and communicate with her. She must maintain constant cooperation with the public to fulfil their needs to build on accumulated experience from previous sessions;
- Education and awareness-raising for the community: educating the community on the concept of "gender" and conducting workshops and seminars to change stereotyping are useful tools. Education should also encourage selection according to performance and presentation, not gender;
- Improve capacities: women should build their capacities by attending courses, conferences, and seeking information and education through Internet resources.

b. Mechanism adopted by PC members

Additional mechanisms were offered by PC members:

- Women candidates should have self-motivation: they must show determination and a strong will to confront challenges. They must have a strong personality to be able to convince their community, and be well educated to have a career in politics;
- Provision of services to communities: the programme women offers must be realistic, practical and informed about the needs of society, and they should never refrain from perseverance and provision of services to the community;

- Self-education: several PC members stressed the importance of self-education, which can be achieved through multiple channels. It can be done through “reading books that enabled me to overcome political weaknesses”, “reading about the experience of other successful people in politics”, and “reading about the experiences of successful nations”;
- Learning from others was a key path to education: “Consulting older politicians to learn from their experience”, “continuous communication with the Legal Committee of the PC and consulting with the legal profession”. Training was an important feature as well: “Attending training courses within Iraq”, and “participating in workshops in Iraq as well as in other countries, and in the training provided by political blocs”, “keeping up with the legislative and legal issues”, “reviewing the Law of the Provinces” (Law no. 21 of 2008);
- Learning by doing: engaging actively in politics and practising and experimenting, and learning from their own experiences and the experiences of others; following up on issues that are constantly developing and pursuing practical training;
- Other suggested mechanism included assigning an organization to work periodically and coach each candidate independently.

4. Mechanisms suggested by the focus groups to promote technical skills of candidates

Focus groups suggested other approaches to increasing the personal capacities of women candidates. These included developing and equipping the capability of candidates to run campaigns suitable to the local context, and raising awareness of female candidates about the relevant laws to protect her from defamation.

Others suggested supporting the media appearances of women to enable them to present their programmes and plans in a clear

and effective manner. Developing an education and training policy for women. Continuous training, the appointment of capable advisers, and mentoring were also cited as ways to prepare women for public office.

5. Importance of the personal technical challenge for candidates

Findings revealed that for 39 per cent of the candidates, this challenge was given most priority for the above-mentioned reasons. For 28 per cent of the candidates, this challenge was perceived as least important, including four parliamentarians. These candidates are found to have had plenty of information, knowledge or awareness from their prior nominations.

A Parliamentarian from Nenawa states: “I had no challenge about political awareness because I went through the political process as a Nenawa PC member in 2013. This helped me to have good experience when I ran for parliament and now, I serve as a member of the Economic and Investment Committee”. Another member in Basra PC mentioned: “I didn’t have any difficulties with political awareness, because I’ve been in politics for years, so I’ve been able to overcome most of the challenges”.

Recommendation: This group of MPs and PC members, who have accumulated experience through their previous engagement, can be invited to become resource persons for newcomers.

G. Personal psychological challenges

1. Constraints expressed by women MPs and PC members

Personal ideology and psychological constraints are common problems in Iraq. In

general, most women in Iraqi society face the same restrictions, not necessarily the political candidates only. One PC member said: “Most women in society face this, but with self-confidence and family support, women can overcome it, and that’s what happened to me”.

This challenge is created by society. The social context women are born in, their upbringing and education, all create this constraint for women. According to a Baghdad parliamentarian, “this constraint exists by virtue of the tribal society”. A PC member from Basra confirms this: “These restrictions were outside my family and within the external rural community I grew up in, but within my family, my father was supportive of me and made me a woman confident in herself and her abilities. This gave me the strength to overcome difficulties and succeed”. Another PC member explained: “In the last electoral campaign (2018), this challenge was adopted in a “projection” campaign against female candidates, but they were courageous enough to combat it”. This challenge that is widely induced by society is perceived as the reason why female candidates stop their participation in elections.

The personal psychological challenge is inherent in women and is perpetuated. Several MPs and PC members said that the most important difficulty is that women lacked self-confidence and had a poor estimation of their abilities. According to one MP, “We women suffer from woman’s inferiority, and think we’re always less than men, and we have to submit to men’s orders”. According to another MP, “This was a personal conviction even for me, but it was completely removed due to the seminars given by civil society organizations which I attended, and because of the mixed university I visited. It is then that I realized that there is no difference between men and women, and in fact I recognized that women are more capable than men in many areas”.

Women carry this ingrained inferiority throughout their lives. They themselves can

retain negative views towards other women and often also women adhere to and reiterate the social stereotypical role. “Though this does not constitute a problem for me, but I still retain the fear that I might harm the family name or reputation”, said one MP.

2. Constraints mentioned by the focus groups

Personal psychological challenges influence women’s political life negatively. The observations made by MPs and council members were repeatedly confirmed by the focus groups, who noted that women doubt their own abilities to manage their roles independently; they lack awareness about the importance of their role, particularly in the political arena. This is a result of their family upbringing and school education. Because of a woman’s lack of self-confidence and belief in their own capabilities, political blocs can manipulate and decide in advance who will win from their bloc.

3. Mechanisms adopted by MPs and PC members to overcome personal psychological challenges

MPs and PC members believe these constraints can be solved by:

- a. **Spreading a culture of gender equality**
 - Spreading awareness about gender equality through culture and media and civil society members;
 - Educating the community on the concept of “gender”;
 - Promoting a culture of non-discrimination between females and males within families.
- b. **Working on personal development**
 - Women should develop a strong, sturdy and courageous personality;
 - They should be brave and strong to overcome this challenge;

- Women should break the barrier of fear, and ask themselves why they seek nomination and what is their purpose in running for election;
- Perseverance and determination are essential for a woman candidate.

c. Support through family

- Family support is critical for building self-confidence and instilling belief in oneself;
- Parents should be encouraged to teach their children, especially females, freedom of speech and leadership, and encourage ideas that support peace and free will.

4. Mechanisms suggested by the focus groups

The focus groups recommended helping women to examine their abilities and appreciate their role in private and public life. To achieve this, it is necessary to develop a policy for continuous training and education for women, as well as for society in general.

5. Level of importance of the personal technical challenge for female candidates

This challenge was ranked as a most important by 15 per cent of the respondents. This group included three parliamentarians. For 48 per cent of the respondents (16 members), however, this barrier is ranked among the least important. Reasons for this are primarily due to their self-confidence, cultivated through the upbringing of the family, or the support of husbands or experience gained personally. According to a PC member in Baghdad, "The family was supportive. Because of my social environment that does not differentiate between women and men, and believes in gender equality, I did not suffer marginalization as a child. I was rather confident of myself because of the support of

my parents". A council member from Nenawa said, "I was married when I was in the sixth primary grade and I had my children and I did not finish college and yet I had a great desire and was strongly motivated to complete my studies. It is due to the encouragement of my children and support of my husband that I managed to finish my studies and be competitive with men". Another member from the Nenawa PC mentioned that she did not face this challenge because she enjoyed the support of her parents, unlike other women, but also because of the experience she gained from her work with organizations supporting women in Kirkuk governorate.

H. Additional constraints cited by Women

During the interview, candidates were asked if there were any other challenges they faced and would like to add. The following three challenges were put forward:

- a. In public perception, politicians embody lies and theft;
- b. A specific obstacle faced by women MPs who wear the hijab is that they are not invited when guests visit and do not have the chance to travel;
- c. Financial support for the candidate is absolutely essential. When a candidate learns that someone will not support her in her campaign and that she has to rely on her limited means, then she will be reluctant to run, no matter how convinced she is. One MP said, "I was a candidate in previous years, and I realized that it was the leaders of the list who determine secretly whom to support financially and whom to leave out".