

Hold the line! Stand with feminist peace activists in Iraq

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We call upon diplomatic actors and the international donors to prioritise the support of Iraqi feminist activists and women's rights organisations. Their work is essential in countering the current regression of women's rights and their insights key for realizing inclusive security through an intersectional approach. Feminist activists and women's rights organizations in Iraq are facing escalating repression, with key legal protections being dismantled and civic space increasingly restricted. We need to act now.

Introduction

Women's rights organizations and feminist activists in Iraq are facing an ongoing backlash against their work and values; with fundamental women's rights being stripped from legal frameworks, and state authorities trying to erase progress towards gender equality. Feminist civic space is being highly restricted with marginal opportunities for operations. Where there are opportunities, there is increased surveillance, 'security' protocols, and excessive bureaucracy.

Recent regressions in Iraq, such as amendments to the Personal Status Law that legalize child marriage for girls as young as 9 and the removal of the terms 'gender' and 'women's empowerment' from public discourse, reveal a backlash against feminist gains. State and militia authorities frame these moves as protecting religious and national values, but they are aimed at crushing the renewed momentum and effectiveness of the feminist movement sparked by the 2019 Tishreen demonstrations which led to, amongst other things, increased political participation of women.

Background

In Iraq, political fragmentation is not just territorial or political, it is institutional and epistemic. Since the 2003 US-led invasion, the post-Daesh period, and the 2019 Tishreen uprising, governance in Iraq has been shaped by militia-state entanglements, foreign interference, and corruption. These dynamics instrumentalize women's rights for international visibility while criminalizing autonomous feminist peace and justice work and organizing.

Iraq stands out as the first country in the region to adopt a UNSCR 1325 National Action Plan (NAP) in 2014, written first and foremost by Iraqi civil society. Although the first NAP resulted in little more than words on paper, Iraq has adopted two more NAPs since. Unlike the grassroots, localised drafting of the first NAP (2014-2018), the second NAP (2021-2023) was shaped by the state, ministries and UN Women, with civil society mobilized too late in the process. The third NAP (2025-2030) was written through consultations with elitist and government-connected CSOs, excluding autonomous civil society networks and resulted in a deeply traditional plan affirming the rollback of women's rights.

In the recent and developing anti-gender backlash that began in 2022 but gained traction in the summer of 2023, the removal of the terms "*gender*" and "*women's empowerment*" from public discourse reflects a broader trend of delegitimizing feminist contributions within patriarchal and militarized governance frameworks. This process undermines progress achieved through decades of feminist advocacy and increasing involvement in peace and security processes. In response, feminist actors are engaged in a contest over language, recognizing that the framing of discourse is integral to maintaining visibility and influence in policymaking spaces where their presence is increasingly perceived as a challenge to state authority.

What is happening right now?

- **Restricted funding:** In 2023, 71% of UN-funded WPS projects were channeled to government-vetted organizations, limiting independent civil society participation.
- **Depoliticized NAP:** The 2025–2030 Iraqi NAP omits major threats to women, including militia violence, sectarian conflict, and regressive legislation, reflecting a shift toward bureaucratic, technocratic framing. It also reflects a shift to deeply traditional and discriminatory framing focusing intently on women's role within the family.
- **Erosion of feminist language:** Terms like *gender* and *empowerment* have been replaced with neutral alternatives, weakening feminist agendas, women's political participation and visibility in policy and national security dialogues.
- **Feminist resilience:** Women's rights actors adapt through strategic rebranding and discreet coalitions, leveraging informality to sustain advocacy despite repression and anti-gender campaigns.
- **Need for international support:** Solidarity from actors like the EU is critical to protect civic space, advance gender equality, inclusive security and reinforce democratic governance.

We need to act

Recommendations to diplomatic actors:

1. Political solidarity for women's participation in political decision making that goes beyond representation and quotas, towards accountability for outcomes that reflect the variety of perspectives and needs voiced by women, including rural communities and minorities.

2. Support the development of WPS locally-driven and politically relevant action plans drawn from community and activists needs and priorities.
3. Put coordinated diplomatic pressure on the Iraqi government to revoke the Personal Status Law amendments, and restore and protect crucial policies, laws and language to further gender equality.

Recommendations to donors

1. Participatorily tailor funding programmes in order for more direct, longer-term and strategic resourcing of community-rooted feminist actors in Iraq. This would entail promoting access requirements which are transparent, realistic and tailored for local CSOs, such as programme access in Arabic/Kurdish.
2. Programme design that promotes a strong Iraqi civil society infrastructure through long-term direct support, capacity strengthening, incentives for coordinated advocacy and collaboration among civil society, and disincentives to guard against destructive dynamics, such as competition.
3. Directly fund women's rights organisations, provide legal protection for feminist activists and women human rights defenders, and create secure funding channels (multi-donor trust funds) to bypass restrictions.