

Gender Quotas in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Obstacles,  
Resistances and Possibilities

**Mamilan Hussein & Ana Cristina Marques**

Études kurdes, n°15, 2022, pages 35 à 64.

---

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Hussein, Mamilan & Marques, Ana Cristina. 2022. « The People's Communes in Rojava and Northeast Syria. Characters, Evolution and Contradictions in a Self-Governing Institution ». *Études kurdes* (15): 35-64

<https://www.etudeskurdes.org/article/gender-quotas-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq-obstacles-resistances-and-possibilities/>

---

**Mamilan Hussein**  
University of Kurdistan Hewlêr

**Ana Cristina Marques**  
University of Kurdistan Hewlêr

## **Gender Quotas in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Obstacles, Resistances and Possibilities**

### **ABSTRACT**

Since 2009, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has legislated gender quotas that guarantee 30% of the seats in parliament for women. Thus, in the Kurdistan parliamentary elections of 2018, from the 111 seats available, women were able to secure 33 seats. For the first time in its history, a woman became the president of the Kurdistan parliament and three other women became part of the Cabinet. However, gender quotas remain highly controversial, with several arguments being put for and against their implementation.

In this article, we focus on the consequences of the implementation of quotas for women in the KRI, in the broader context of federal Iraq. We ask what the benefits and/or the limitations of quotas for women in the region, are considered to be. Further we question if the implementation and the increase in the number of gender quotas served its aim of increasing women's representation in decision-making positions, and of changing society's perceptions on women's capability in the political domain. We discuss three main factors that emerged from the data as enabling and/or limiting women's political participation: "patriarchal" cultural norms; (lack) of meritocracy and

affiliations with political parties; and legislation as an enabler or as a hindrance. We conclude by arguing that in the KRI, though gender quotas can be seen as an important tool to increase women's presence in decision-making positions, they have not had the intended result of transforming gender power relations at the political level.

**KEYWORDS : Kurdistan Region of Iraq, gender quotas, patriarchy, political parties, parliamentary elections**

In 2018, general elections took place in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). 33 women were elected into parliament (High Council of Women Affairs [HCWA], 2019). For the first time in the KRI, a woman became the parliament speaker and 3 other women were given a place in the new cabinet (Iraqi Women Network [IWN], 2019). Arguably, these results would not have been possible without the existence of gender quotas<sup>1</sup>.

The national and regional context of conflict and nation-building that led to the presence of several international and transnational actors in the region opened up space for the implementation of the gender quotas in Iraq and in the KRI (Kaya 2017; Voller 2014). Women's social movements in the region and in the diaspora were also essential in pressuring the government to promote women's participation in the public sphere (Al-Ali & Pratt 2011; Fisher-Tahir 2010; Hardi 2013). Furthermore, in the KRI, more so than in federal Iraq, the gender politics followed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), tends to follow international directives in relation to women's rights, allowing for the increase of the representation of women in parliament (Kaya 2017; London School of Economics [LSE], 2014; Voller 2014).

However, gender quotas remain highly controversial, with several arguments being put for and against their implementation (Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Hughes et al. 2017; Krook 2016). In this article, we focus on the consequences of the implementation of quotas for women in the KRI, in the broader context of federal Iraq. We asked what are considered to be the benefits and/or the limitations of quotas for women in the region. Do gender quotas serve their aim of increasing women's representation in decision-making positions, and of changing society's perception on women's capability in the political domain? Do gender quotas secure a fixed number of seats for women in the Kurdistan parliament? Or might it instead limit women's participation?

We will start the article by contextualizing the existing gender quotas in the KRI at regional, national and international levels. We will then proceed to explain our methodological approaches; after which, we introduce a discussion on the arguments for and against the gender quota system, and then explore three main factors that are considered to enable and/or limit the quotas for

---

<sup>1</sup> Gender quotas can be defined as “numerical targets that stipulate the number or percentage of women that must be included in a candidate list or the number of seats to be allocated to women in a legislature” (Dahlerup et al. 2013:16). The main aim of gender quotas is to “to reverse discrimination in law and practice and to level the playing field for women and men in politics” (Dahlerup et al. 2013:16). It is important to note though that “gender quotas for elected offices are considered temporary measures, to be ‘discontinued when the objectives of equality of opportunity and treatment have been achieved’ (CEDAW Convention, Article 4)” (Dahlerup et al. 2013: 18).

women in the Kurdistan parliament. These are: “patriarchal” norms, (lack) of meritocracy and affiliations with political parties, and legislation as an enabler or as a hindrance. We conclude by arguing that, though gender quotas can be seen as an important tool to increase women’s presence in decision-making positions, they have not had the intended result of transforming gender power relations at the political level, in the Kurdistan Region Iraq. This article aims to contribute to the discussion of women’s political participation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

### **Promoting women’s political participation: the implementation of gender quotas**

Although there have been improvements in the gender equality indicators, the political domain continues to be a “male dominated” space (UNDP, 2020). Women continue to be underrepresented in the political domain, particularly in positions with “higher” power and responsibilities (UNDP 2020). According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2021a), though there is a wide variation of women in parliaments in different regions of the world, only 25.7% of all members of all chambers of national parliaments are women<sup>2</sup>. This number decreases when taking into consideration women as members of governments, and as head of governments or as head of states (UNDP, 2020). The masculinization of the political space is perceived as being associated with a division between public and private spheres of social life, where the public sphere-predominantly seen as associated with men, even if women are also present in it-tends to be more valued than the private sphere-usually understood as the domain of women (Krook 2016).

To try to counter the “male domination” of the political space, several countries around the world started to implement measures, such as gender quotas<sup>3</sup>, which would ensure the representativeness of women in the political domain. These measures gained increased popularity during the last decade of the twentieth century, in the context of dynamic and contested transnational normative discourses of gender equality, promotion of human rights, and development and democratization of societies (Dahlerup et al. 2013; Darhour &

---

<sup>2</sup> According to the IPU (2021a), the percentage of women in all chambers of National parliaments by regions is: 32.8% in the Americas; 30.7% in Europe; 25.6% in Sub-Saharan Africa; 20.5% in Asia; 16.3% in Middle East and North Africa; and 21% in the Pacific.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note though that the contexts in which gender quotas are implemented and, therefore, its impact, vary from region to region. Moreover, it is commonly acknowledged the existence of three types of gender quotas in politics: reserved seats (constitutional or legislative), legal candidate quotas (constitutional or legislative) and political party quotas (voluntary) (Dahlerup et al. 2013).

Dahlerup 2020; Krook & True 2010). The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, in 1995, was particularly important to promote a gender mainstream<sup>4</sup> approach and to push forwards measures of positive discrimination that could ensure gender balance - particularly women's political representation around the world (Dahlerup et al. 2013; Hughes et al. 2017; Krooks & True 2010). After the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995, the number of countries implementing quotas for women not only increased, but also extended to different parts of world, with different political regimes (Dahlerup et al. 2013; Hughes et al., 2017; Krooks 2016). Several authors (Dahlerup et al. 2013; Hughes et al. 2017; Krooks 2016) have since stressed the importance of the implementation of gender quotas in terms of descriptive, substantive and symbolic participation<sup>5</sup>.

In the particular context of the Middle East and Northern Africa (the MENA region), we can also see an increase in the number of women in parliament, particularly from the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, arguably, due to the implementation of gender quotas in several countries of the region (Dalacoura 2019; Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Shalaby & Elimam 2020)<sup>6</sup>. The presence of women in parliament-even in countries with a low level of women's presence in parliament, such as Kuwait (Kaya 2021), or regions with Islamist political parties, such as Palestine (Shitrit 2016) - can be said to bring about a bigger acceptability of women's participation in the political domain (Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Shalaby & Elimam 2020; Tripp, 2012). Women social movements had a particularly important role in advocating for gender quotas, as a way of increasing women's political participation, in the context of

---

<sup>4</sup> The gender mainstream approach "was defined in the Beijing Platform for Action as applying 'a gender perspective in all policies and programmes so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively' (paragraph 189)" (Krook & True 2010: 116).

<sup>5</sup> Descriptive participation refers to the inclusion and/or the increase of the number of women in decision-making positions, particularly at the legislative level, but also at the local level; substantive representation refers the proposal, discussion and/or adoption of legislation associated to what are considered "women's issues", such as issues related to marriage/divorce, childcare or sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV); and symbolic representation refers to the idea that women's participation in decision-making positions can be seen as a symbol for the empowerment of women in society (Dahlerup et al. 2013; Hughes et al. 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Still, the presence of women in Parliament throughout the MENA region is diverse, particularly due to the adoption of gender quotas in some countries, such as Tunisia and Iraq, but not in others, such as Kuwait (Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Kaya 2021; Shalaby & Elimam 2020). For instance, according to the IPU (2021b), as of September 2021, women are 50% of the members of parliament in the United Arab Emirates, 27.7% in Egypt, and 26.3% in Tunisia; while they are only 2.3% of the members of parliament in Oman, and 1.5% in Kuwait; with Yemen having no woman member of parliament.

broader demands for women's social, economic, and political rights (Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Tripp 2012; Shalaby 2016).

Yet, despite the recognition of an existent movement towards women's political empowerment in the Mena Region, particularly post-Arab Spring, there is still a great deal of work to do until parity can be achieved (Dalacoura 2019; Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Shalaby 2016). Accordingly, it can be considered that despite the increase of women in parliament, women are not given "real" political power, since political parties tend to include women that are compliant; thereby, displaying a "modernizing" face, without creating real change (Dalacoura 2019; Shalaby & Elimam 2020). Patriarchal gender normativities, with its associated masculinization of the "public" political space, continue to be perceived as having a strong influence in the limited "power" given to women in decision-making positions (Al-Tamini 2019; Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Geha 2019; Kaya 2021; Shalaby & Elimam 2020). Other social inequalities - such as citizenship status, socio-economic structures (Kaya 2021), and, in the particular context of federal Iraq, "imperialism, neoliberal economics, authoritarianism, and [...] sectarianism" (Al-Ali 2016: 4) - can also affect women's access to decision making positions.

The limited results made by the adoption of measures, such as the quota for women, in terms of women political participation, in the Mena region, leads Shalaby (2016) to conclude that changes "will not occur by simply introducing constitutional reforms and electoral manoeuvres on the top level [...] without adequate enforcement mechanisms and measures on the party leadership and mass levels" (p. 8). Importantly, measures aimed at promoting and (re)enforcing women's participation in decision-making positions need to take into account the dynamic political, socio-economic, cultural and historical contexts where these measures are being implemented, in its interconnections between local, national and inter/transnational spaces (Al-Ali & Pratt 2009; Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Shalaby 2016). This position cautions against generalizations; calling instead for a "geographically focused and empirically based" (Darhour & Dahlerup 2020: 5) analysis of women's participation in decision-making positions.

### **The implementation of gender quotas in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

To understand the specific case of the KRI, it is important to take into consideration that "the Iraqi Constitution overrides the Kurdistan Constitution in many areas, and laws in Iraqi-Kurdistan region should not contravene the principles of the Iraqi Constitution" (Al-Ali & Pratt 2011: 351). Moreover,

“the Iraqi constitution declares that all laws inconsistent with Islam will be invalid” (Rahanter 2013: 91). Consequently, as stated by Grabolle-Celiker (2019), gender regimes in the KRI need to be understood as coexisting with other gender regimes in the wider state of Iraq.

In Iraq, the gender quota system (classified as reserved seats) was first introduced in 2004, in a context of nation-building, conflict resolution and reconstruction. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Coalition Provision Authority (CPA), led by the United States of America, took on the administration of the country. Under strong pressure from women social movements and the United Nations, and the support of the British Government, the CPA adopted a 25% of quota for women in legislative bodies, in its Transitional Administrative Law (Al-Ali & Pratt 2009; Al-Tamini 2019; Chirillo & Rodey 2019). Women were asking for 40% of the seats, however, in a context where Shiia associated political parties were gaining strength and with the resistance of the USA, their request was not met (Al-Ali & Pratt 2009; Al-Tamini 2019; Chirillo & Rodey 2019). In 2005, during the drafting of the new Iraqi constitution and the composition of a new Iraqi parliament, the achievement of women’s quotas, as well as the gains made by the 1959 Personal Status Law, were under threat; but once again women’s social movements managed to secure their 25% of representation in the Council of Representatives of Iraq (Al-Ali & Pratt 2009 ; Al-Tamini 2019 ; Chirillo & Rodey 2019). During the parliamentary elections of 2018, “the system for parliamentary elections in Iraq [was] an open-list proportional representation system, where a voter can select a political entity and a specific candidate on a list” (Chirillo & Rodey 2019 p. 9)<sup>7</sup>. This method allowed women to be elected into parliament not only under the gender quota system, but also directly through the number of votes won (Chirillo & Rodey 2019).

This was also the case in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, where “the electoral system is a partially open-list form of proportional representation”, meaning that “choosing from many parties and lists, voters can vote either for one party

---

<sup>7</sup> In November 2020, the president of Iraq—Barham Salih—approved a new electoral system, in which, among other things, the number of electoral districts was expanded from 18 to 83, and voters vote now for individual candidates and not for political parties (Shakir, 2021). According to the new electoral system, “every voting district will send at least one woman to the parliament” (Shakir, 2021). This new electoral system was used on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 2021 parliamentary elections that occurred at the moment of writing, meaning that the electoral campaign and its results will still need to be analysed. Yet, it is already known that the number of women members of the Iraqi Parliament has increased; with the General Secretariat of the Iraqi Council of Ministers announcing that “female candidates running for the parliamentary election have secured 97 seats out of 329 (29.4%)” (Shafaq News 2021).



as a whole, or can vote for an individual candidate from a party” (Kurdistan Parliament, 2020). However, in 2009, the KRG increased the quota for women from 25% to 30%, both at the legislative and sub-national (provisional councils, district and sub-district) levels (HCWA, 2019). In the 4<sup>th</sup> article of Law n. 2 of 2009, regarding the law of national council election for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, it is stated that (HCWA, 2019):

Any political entity in the Iraqi Kurdistan is able to submit their own special list to include names of candidates on the level of Kurdistan-Iraq, in a condition that the rate of women representative shall not be less than 30% also shall organize the list of names in a way to guarantee this rate of women, in a condition the number of candidates in any election list to be no less than three. (2019: 6)

In 2018, in an effort to increase the number of women in decision-making positions, a by-law was passed stating that “one of the positions within the Kurdistan parliament’s presidency shall be reserved for a woman” (NRT 2018); leading to the first nomination of a woman as speaker of the Kurdistan parliament - Vala Fareed Ibrahim (from the Kurdistan Democratic Party [KDP]). The position was later taken by Rewaz Faiq Hussein (from the Patriot Union of Kurdistan [PUK]), after further negotiations between KDP and PUK. She was joined in the parliament’s presidency by yet another woman - Muna Kahveci - from the Turkmen Reform Party, as secretary of the Kurdistan Parliament. In the aftermath of the 2018 elections, three other women were nominated ministers in the new Cabinet - Kwestan Mohamad Abdulla Maarouf, from the Change movement, as Minister of Labour and Social Affairs; Begard Dlshad Shukralla, from the PUK, as Minister of Agriculture and Water Resources, and Vala Fareed Ibrahim, from the KDP, as Minister of State (Kurdistan Government 2020). As a result of the 2018 parliamentary elections in the Kurdistan Region, out of a total of 111 seats, women were able to secure 33 seats (HCWA 2019)<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> However, it cannot be said that there is a continuous increase of women’s participation in the Kurdistan parliament, since the amendment of the gender quota in 2009. There was an increase of 7 to 28 women members of parliament from the first (1992) to the second (2005) parliamentary elections in the region, following the adoption of the 25% quota in federal Iraq (HCWA, 2019). In 2009, during the third parliamentary elections, the number of women in parliament further increased to 41. But in the parliamentary elections of 2013, the number of seats held by women decreased to 34; and in the parliamentary elections of 2018, the number of seats held by women further decreased to 33 (HCWA, 2019). As we are going to discuss below, this shows that although the gender quota did in fact increase the number of women in parliament, particularly until 2009, from then onwards the number of women in parliament can, arguably, be said to be only the one needed to fulfil legal requirements. Therefore, not suggesting a de facto interest from the part of political parties to have an equal participation of men and women in parliament.

The increased, even if limited, presence of women in decision making positions, and particular in the political domain, in the KRI needs to be understood in a specific political, socio-economic, cultural and historical context where inter/transnational factors intersect with national and regional ones (Kaya 2017; LSE, 2014; Voller 2014). Among the key (often interconnected) factors that led to this increase are: Kurdish women's social movements within the KRI and in the diaspora, Kurdish national identity, the KRG's gender politics and the presence of inter/transnational (non)governmental organizations in the region.

Kurdish women's participation in conflict, social movements and activism is not a new phenomenon (Al-Ali & Pratt 2011; Fisher-Tahir 2010; Hardi 2013). Since the 1940s women in Iraq and in the KRI have been involved in political, nationalist and/or women's social movements (Fisher-Tahir, 2010). With the establishment of a Kurdish "safe haven", what can be considered as a "recognisable women's movement emerged" (Begikhani et al 2018: 11); leading to women's "increased participation in public space" (Hardi 2021: 876). However, women's social movements in the region and in the diaspora tend to be diverse, having different political and/or religious affiliations (Al-Ali & Pratt 2011; Fisher-Tahir 2010; Hardi 2013)<sup>9</sup>. Still, the importance of women's social movements in promoting women's rights and empowerment in the KRI has been recognized (Al-Ali & Pratt 2011; Fisher-Tahir 2010; Hardi, 2013). For instance, women had a particularly important role pressuring the KRG to increase the number of women in the current cabinet. Women activists "called on the Kurdistan Parliament to set a 30 percent quota for women in senior-level ministerial offices and the Region's presidency." (NRT 2019). Though they did not achieve their goal, the increase of the number of women in the government (even if small), their presence in the presidency of the Kurdistan parliament and the increase of women working within different governmental departments, such as in the ministry of interior and in the judiciary system-particularly at lower and mid-levels (Aref & Alzamel 2018; IWN 2019), can be partially seen as a consequence of the efforts of women activists to secure women's participation in decision making positions.

International and transnational (non)governmental organizations can also be said to have an essential role influencing the KRG's gender politics (Kaya 2017; LSE 2014; Voller 2014). In the KRI, "the government's reliance on external political, economic and military support" (Kaya 2017: 16), allowed international organizations, such as several United Nations (UN) agencies, and

---

<sup>9</sup> There are Kurdish women that advocate for women's rights within an Islamic framework (Joly & Bakawan 2016). However, secular women tend to be highly critical of Islam and/or Islamic political parties (Joly & Bakawan 2016; Rahanter 2013).

foreign states to become part of the project of nation-building. This context enabled UN organizations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Women, to expand their work in the KRI, in order to enhance women's social, economic and political situation in the region, in line with its aim of improving women's situation in society, at a global level (LSE, 2014). It was in this context that, in 2014, Iraq and the KRI launched the Iraqi National Action Plan (I-NAP) to implement the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (particularly the UN Security Council Resolution 1325), between 2014-2018; while the KRG and the High Council of Women Affairs, in collaboration with UN Women, created the National Strategy for the development of Women in Kurdistan Region 2016-2026 (HCWA, 2016). Further, in a transnational context, where gender equality and the combat against SGBV became symbols of democracy and good governance, it can be argued that the KRG strategically uses its gender politics in order to achieve international recognition (Hussain & Marques 2021; Kaya 2017; Voller 2014). By embracing a gender politics which seeks to empower women and combat SGBV, the KRG is positioning itself as a government that recognizes women's rights as human rights, thus recognizing gender issues as part of the standards for good governance and processes of democratization, and subsequently, trying to create an image of the region as liberal, civilized and more progressive than the rest of Iraq and regions of Middle East (Grabolle-Celiker 2019; Kaya 2017; Voller 2014).

## **Methodology**

For the purposes of this research, we followed a qualitative approach (Bryman, 2016), where we focused on the meanings that social actors give to the implementation and implications of the gender quota system in the KRI. Our data was collected through three major sources: (participant) observation; documental analyses; and semi-structured interviews.

One of the authors, Mamilan Hussein, has a professional and personal interest in women's participation in decision-making in the KRI, which she has been closely following over the years. As a consequence of her interest and involvement with this issue, both authors were invited to participate as panellists in a debate on women's quotas in federal Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region, held in Erbil, during the 18th and the 19<sup>th</sup> of October 2019<sup>10</sup> (Open

---

<sup>10</sup> The debate was organized by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, an international non-governmental German organization, and by Open Think Tank, a local non-governmental organization. The debate was held in Kurdish, Arabic and English; and had simultaneous translations in the three languages. Ana Cristina Marques participated in the panel entitled "Social and Traditional Boundaries of Women Participation"; while Mamilan Hussein participated in the panel entitled: "Women Political

Think Tank [OTT], 2019). During these two days, women's political participation in federal Iraq and in the KRI was widely debated. Amongst the speakers of the debate there were: women members of parliament, current and former women members of government, women activists, representatives from the High Council for Women Affairs, academics and two women councils of European countries in the KRI. The audience mainly consisted of women, but we could also see a few men engaging in the discussion. During the conference both authors took personal notes from the interventions made by the panellists and by the audience (Personal Notes). At the end of the conference, the participants were divided into focus groups according to the main panels of the debate and discussed possible recommendations to improve women's participation in decision-making positions in federal Iraq and in the Kurdistan region. This debate resulted in a final report organized by OTT (2019).

In addition to the OTT (2019) conference report, the authors analysed several other reports that focused on women issues, in general, and on women's participation in decision-making positions, in particular, published by regional, national and inter/transnational (non)governmental organizations (all these reports were published in English and several of them are available on-line). Furthermore, the authors conducted an analysis of three well-known on-line newspapers from the Kurdistan region: Rudaw English, Kurdistan 24 English and NRT English. The authors created separated searches, within the three media outlets, for the words: female, gender, women and quota. Due to the large amount of articles that resulted from this search, the authors circumscribed their search to the years of 2018 and 2019, and concentrated on the articles that were explicitly associated with the 2018 parliamentary elections in Iraq<sup>11</sup>, the 2018 parliamentary elections in the Kurdistan Region and the formation of Kurdistan Region Cabinet in 2019; resulting in 35 newspaper articles that were analysed in depth. Subsequently, the authors conducted a qualitative content analysis where they searched for "underlying themes" (Bryman 2016: 563) on the personal notes taken from the conference, and the reports and journal articles being analysed. Moreover, the authors were open to emergent patterns that were constantly compared; taking an iterative approach "with a movement back and forth between coding/categorizing and data collection" (Bryman 2016: 565).

The authors felt the need to complement the data gathered. Therefore, they decided to conduct semi-structured interviews (Personal Interview) with members

---

Recruitment in Iraq".

<sup>11</sup> We have chosen to take into account the Iraqi Parliamentary elections in 2018, due to the participation of Kurdish political parties and Kurdish women candidates in these elections.

of the Kurdistan parliament (MPs) and with one member of a civil society organization (CSO), with the aim of having a more in-depth understanding of social actors' perceptions of the implementation of the gender quota system in federal Iraq and, especially, in the Kurdistan region. The semi-structured interviews gave the authors an opportunity for a more in-depth, open discussion (Sarantakos 2013). Mamilan Hussein conducted semi-structured interviews with 8 past and/or current members of parliament (four men and four women)<sup>12</sup>, which were purposely chosen due to their personal experience in electoral processes for the Kurdistan Parliament, after the implementation and the increase of the quota for women in the region. The research participants were informed of the aims of the research and were ensured that their participation was strictly voluntary and confidential. To maintain the confidentiality of the research participants, pseudonyms are used and the political affiliation of the members of the parliament is not disclosed. Due to the global health situation caused by Covid-19, the interviews were conducted by phone or by Skype, depending on the preferences of the research participants. The interviews took approximately one-hour and were conducted in Kurdish. Most of the interviews were recorded, with the consent of the research participants, and later transcribed and translated into English. There was one research participant that preferred to have the questions/answers written down and sent via text messaging. Ana Cristina Marques conducted one interview with a senior member of a civil society organization. Due to the importance of civil society organizations in the defence of women's rights in the Kurdistan region, the authors thought that it was important to have the perspective of an active advocate for gender equality and women's empowerment. However, constraints of time, did not allow us to contact other members of civil society organizations. The same ethical principles and procedures were applied in the interview with the civil society member, as had been with the members of parliament. The interview was conducted in English<sup>13</sup>; it took approximately 1 hour; and was subsequently transcribed. All the interviews were conducted during the month of August of 2020.

The interviews were then subject to a thematic analysis, where the authors aimed to detect common words, phrases, and group them together, in order to be able to determine trends and tendencies in the answers of the respondents (Bryman 2016; Sarantakos 2013). The coding process was once again largely iterative (Bryman 2016), with the authors paying constant attention to the emergence of new themes, and comparing them to previous themes that had

---

<sup>12</sup> More members of parliament were contacted, however they were unavailable and/or unwilling to participate in the research.

<sup>13</sup> The loosening of the health-related restrictions in the Kurdistan region, made it possible for this interview to be conducted face-to-face.

emerged from the qualitative content analyses, and from academic literature focusing on women's political representation. The authors were also in constant communication and discussed the emergence of the main themes together.

In the next section we will discuss the three main themes that emerged from the analyses, with regards to the obstacles, possibilities and limitations of the gender quotas and for women's participation in decision-making positions: "patriarchal" norms; (lack) of meritocracy and affiliations with political parties; and legislation as an enabler or as a hindrance. It is important to note that these factors are closely interrelated, being separated here just for a clearer elucidation of the analysis.

### **Gender quotas might be important, but they did not serve its purpose: perceptions of the gender quota system in the KRI**

As it happens in other parts of the world (Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Hughes et al. 2017; Krook 2016), our data shows that the gender quota system in the Kurdistan region is not consensual. If several people defend gender quotas, there are others that strongly oppose them. In this section we will start by presenting the arguments in favour and against gender quotas. We will then proceed to analyse the main factors that are perceived to be associated with the obstacles, possibilities and limitations of the gender quota system, and with the lack of women's participation in decision-making positions.

#### **Against and for quotas for women**

Quotas for women increased the number of women in the political domain, in the KRI, particularly at the legislative and the local levels. However, women are still under-represented at "higher" levels of government, as well as in peace-building and conflict resolution processes, or in areas considered to be "more central" to nation-building and political and economic development, such as oil related issues, and budget and territorial disputes between Erbil and Baghdad. This situation leads several women and men to defend the existence of quotas for women, at least until the structural barriers that hinder equal participation are removed. For instance, Ms. Sara (MP, Personal Interview) considers that the "quota system secured women's participation in parliament in a time when women participation was not a true reflection of society". Thus, gender quotas are often perceived as a measure of positive discrimination, that allows women to run on equal terms with men, and without which women would not have a significant representation in the parliament.

Furthermore, the importance of the presence of women in the parliament is justified in relation to its substantive representation. It is often considered that “elected women carry the responsibility of all women, thus elected women must make it a priority to reform and combat corruption for their female counterparts” (OTT 2019: 10). As it happens in other contexts (Dahlerup et al. 2013; Darhour & Dahlerup 2020), it is considered that the presence of women in the parliament should lead to a bigger discussion and defense of what are considered to be “women issues”. In this sense, Ms. Sanarya (CSO, Personal Interview) argues that:

So the changes [in society] are not talking about: “because I am a woman I have to be in a certain position”. No, I am talking about development. How we can invest in women, integrate them in development. [...] To have women there [in parliament] to think about women. [...] That they need day-care for their children to be fully [...] ready to work outside.

Further, it is considered that the increased number of women in parliament helps to normalize the presence of women in decision-making positions, thus turning women members of parliament into symbols for other women; demonstrating that it is possible to be present in the public sphere, and, particularly, in the political domain (Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Hughes et al. 2017; Krook 2016; Shitrit 2016). The mere presence of women in parliament is seen as an example to other women and for future generations, helping empower women in general and changing mentalities. This is Ms. Zara’s (MP, Personal Interview) perspective: “this 30% [quota for women] is very important for our society. The aim we are working for is to change the [male dominated] society in Kurdistan. That is why the [gender] quota system in Kurdistan is required”.

However, not everyone agrees with the gender quotas. Some women reject them on the basis of meritocracy. These women consider that they are capable of reaching decision-making positions by themselves. For them, gender quotas, instead of helping them realize their potential, have a negative impact, since they might lead to the perception that women cannot achieve decision-making positions through their own merit. In this sense, in an interview with Rudaw (2018), a group of women candidates from Duhok, on the occasion of the Iraqi general elections in 2018, stressed their own qualifications as a basis for running in the elections: “Female candidates in Duhok province say they are confident they can win their seats based on votes alone, without relying on the quota set aside for women”.

Additionally, there is a perception that quotas for women are not making the political process more democratic (Hughes et al. 2017; Krooks 2016), since the quota system takes away seats from people, who rightfully won them through

direct vote. The choice of candidates is also questioned. It is considered that women candidates are chosen due to their political, ethnical, religious and/or family affiliations and therefore they might not defend the interest of women in the population. Accordingly, Mr. Ahmed (MP, Personal interview) argued that:

The presence of quotas for women was needed for a time. However, in Kurdistan, it is taking advantage of the system. Instead of women representing women in society, they represent the political parties and serve their interest. Therefore, I believe the quota system should end and [women should] fight for themselves.

Still, either defending or opposing gender quotas, it is recognized that there are several factors which pose obstacles to women's participation in decision-making processes, and, particularly, in the political domain. Patriarchal gender norms are one of these obstacles.

#### **“Patriarchal” norms**<sup>14</sup>

In the KRI, Islam and cultural traditions are often considered to be patriarchal, meaning that women tend to be subjugated to the will of the men of the family and to older women (Grabolle-Celiker 2019; Kaya 2017; Rahanter 2013). Spaces tend to be perceived as gender-segregated, with women being associated with the private sphere, and men with the public sphere (Grabolle-Celiker 2019; Kaya 2017; Rahanter 2013)<sup>15</sup>. Consequently, in the Kurdistan region, one common perception is that men are seen as more capable of holding political power than women. In this context, women are not always taken seriously as political candidates. Consequently, many people - other women included - are not willing to

---

<sup>14</sup> Patriarchy can be generally understood as a “system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby 1989: 214). However, it is important to understand that there are different “forms of gender inequality at different times and places” and that there is a “diversity of the experiences of women” (Walby 1989: 217). Moreover, as Kandiyoti (1988) argues, even if patriarchal bargains are “intended to indicate a set of rules and scripts regulating gender relations, to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce” (p. 286), these are dynamic and can also be resisted, changed and renegotiated.

<sup>15</sup> Still, it is important to stress that there is a diversity of women's experience in the KRI, due to intersecting factors, such as social class, level of education, religion, ethnicity, age, and locale of residency (Begikhani et al. 2018; Grabolle-Celiker 2019; Hardi 2013; Kaya 2017). For instance, and despite the low participation of women in the labour market—according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2018), only 13.3% of women were part of the labour market (working or actively searching for work) in the KRI, more qualified women (with secondary education or above) tend to be more present on the labour market (44%) than less qualified women (with primary, intermediate and basic education or with no degree) (9.5%).



vote for them. As Mr. Hewa (MP, Personal Interview) said: “In most cases women vote for men and not women, due to the lack of confidence in each other. Women have a lack of confidence in other women, and they believe men are more capable of delivering the work”.

Additionally, the perception that women are the ones responsible for the domestic chores and the care of the children, the elderly and other vulnerable adults, leads them to have to articulate their positions in political institutions and their “obligations” in the household. Family affiliations, that privilege men over women, are considered to be particularly important in the MENA region in all domains of social life (Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Shalaby 2016), having an impact on the choices made for decision-making positions. In this sense, in an interview with Rudaw (Edwards 2018), Hezha Khan, a young women’s rights activist, argued that: “Our culture and society still believes that women should be raising kids, and just support their husbands. Political parties are no exception, and they also take advantage of that mentality”.

Furthermore, the increased presence of women candidates in the public sphere and the visibility that they gain when campaigning in electoral processes, make them particularly susceptible to sexual harassment and attacks on their reputation or even to their physical integrity. This happened during the elections for the Iraqi parliament, where women from federal Iraq, including women from the Kurdistan region, were subject to attacks on their honour, leading several of these women to withdraw from the campaign (Chirillo & Rodey 2019; IWN 2019). This situation led Shler Abdulmajee, a member of the Communist party, in a statement to Kurdistan 24 (Ali, 2018), to argue that the attacks on women’s respectability, during Iraq’s parliamentary elections, deterred several women from running for the parliamentary elections in the Kurdistan region: “The attacks on female candidates do have not [*sic*] only psychological implications on the candidate and her family but also affects future female candidates”.

The persistence of structural gender inequalities, in the KRI, can also be seen, for instance, in the higher poverty levels of women-led households; and in the maintenance of SGBV (IOM 2018; IWN 2019; OTT 2019). Together with people’s strong internalization of gendered cultural normativities and the existence of what is considered to be a “male dominated” media, the consequence is that women’s participation in the political domain remains hindered. Therefore, there is a call from the part of women activists and women MPs for profound transformations within society. In this sense, Ms. Sara (MP, Personal Interview) argues that: “we still need to address old ideologies that women believe in men’s power over

women. We need changes in the family, media and the social mentality to raise awareness of women's capabilities".

However, there is also the perception of existing contradictions between women's political positions and their personal experiences. If, on one hand, these women are perceived as "feminists" that want to change gender inequalities in society; on the other hand, the question is raised: how can they do so, if some of them are in polygamous marriages<sup>16</sup>? This position is expressed by Mr. Ahmad (MP, Personal Interview):

I am confused about women in Parliament. I don't understand if they believe in radical liberalism; if they want to change male dominated ideology within the society. I was surprised to see some women in committees that are the second wife of a man and they are talking about women's rights.

Moreover, in spite of the continuous perception of the Kurdistan Region as a patriarchal society, there is also a belief that women have an important part in Kurdish history, namely at the levels of its political leadership (Begikhani et al. 2018; Grabolle-Celiker 2019; Rahanter 2013). The importance of Kurdish women is also present in discourses of Kurdish nationalism, where their strength, courage, beauty and freedom are emphasized (Begikhani et al. 2018). This is the point made by Mr. Jabar (MP, Personal Interview): "I don't think society has limited women participation because we have always had strong and respected women in our history". However, it is important to note that these women tended to be part of a minority elite, often being the wives and/or the daughters of powerful men (van Bruissnessen 2001).

Moreover, the agency of Kurdish women can be seen, for instance, in the fact that they led party lists for the Iraqi parliamentary elections, and, consequently, as Abdulmajid, from the KDP, said to Rudaw (Mahmoud 2018), were "fighting stereotypes that they have no voice or are afraid to participate in Iraqi politics". Thus, through "access to political decision making is influenced by the dominant gender norms, attitudes and stereotypes in a given society" (Dahlerup et al. 2013: 20), it can also be resisted, renegotiated and transformed. Political parties are considered key institutions in this dynamic process.

### **(Lack) of meritocracy and affiliations with political parties**

Political parties have a decisive role in political participation, making it very difficult for individuals (both men and women) to run as independent candidates.

---

<sup>16</sup> Women activists have been demanding changes in the Personal Law Status in relation to polygamy for several years, in federal Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region (see, for instance, Al-Ali and Pratt 2009).

The role of political parties as gatekeepers has been well documented in the literature (Chirillo & Rodey 2019; Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Geha 2019; Krook 2016). In the Kurdistan region, political parties tend to be perceived as tribal, corrupt and perpetrating nepotism (2016; Mamshae 2019). Moreover, like in other domains of society, political parties are perceived as being male dominated and sexist. The leaders of the political parties, usually men, are often wary of women's capabilities and might consider that they have yet to prove themselves. Therefore, women tend not to have the same opportunities to participate in the political process as men, and do not have access to the same resources. In this sense, Mr. Hewa (MP, Personal Interview) says: "because of the limited resources for women during the elections, women cannot campaign without the support of the political parties". When regulations do not exist for an equitable division of resources between men and women candidates, it is often the case that political parties privilege the former at the expense of the latter (Chirillo & Rodey 2019; Geha 2019; Krook 2016).

The implementation of gender quotas "forced" the political parties to include women in their lists. However, the political parties tend to be highly criticized for their choice of women candidates. It is common to hear that women MPs are selected not on the basis of their merit or their suitability for the position, but on other criteria, such as their beauty, their allegiance with the political party and/or their family connections (Hardi 2013; Rahanter 2013)<sup>17</sup>. In this sense, Hezha Khan, the abovementioned young women's rights activist, said: "I highly doubt any of those seats [in the parliament] are given equally to women from all [social] classes. I bet you cannot find one person who is not a daughter or relative of some big guy in power" (Edwards, 2018; Hussein & Marques 2021: 17). Therefore, as in the case of other places of the MENA region (Dalacoura 2019; Geha 2019), it can be said that "these women are specifically chosen because they are not a threat to the system" (Hardi 2013: 56). Accordingly, Mr. Muhammed (MP, Personal Interview) stated: "The political parties bring their own members forward and they have restricted what type of women they want; not women who represent women movements". Thus, these women might be "accused" of participating in patriarchal

---

<sup>17</sup> As we have mentioned, the KRI's political parties have been characterized by relations of patronage, clientelism, and tribalism (see, for instance, Mamshae 2019), thus leading us to conclude that it is not only women, but also men, that are chosen as electoral candidates due to their social, religious, familial and personal connections. Still, more in-depth research is needed on gendered (power) relations within the Kurdistan Parliament, focusing on: the selection of men and women MPs, the social policies pushed forward and/or supported by women MPs when compared to men MPs, and the committees where men and women MPs participate (Shalaby & Emimam 2020; Darhour & Dahlerup 2020). Importantly, the focus should fall not only on how women navigate politics, but also how men do so, and how both masculinities and femininities are (re)produced throughout these dynamic processes.

dividends - that is, “the advantage to men as a group from maintaining an unequal gender order” (Connell, 2009, p. 142) - and, thus, of sharing economic, political, social and cultural power with men. It is then important to underscore that it is higher qualified women, from urban centres, and from upper classes that tend to be engaged in decision making processes; and that these women might not be representative of all women in the region (Al-Ali & Pratt 2011; Hardi 2013; Ranharter 2013).

Consequently, as it happens in federal Iraq (Al-Tamini 2018, 2019), there is a perception that the substantive representation of women is hindered. Women that are elected as MPs are expected to fight for women’s rights. However, allegiance to their political parties renders several of these women unable or unwilling to push forward a political agenda that supports these rights. Thus, women’s affiliation with political parties can then be perceived as an obstacle to their independence and capability for influencing decisions; leading women to prioritize the interests of the political party to which they belong, instead of the interests of women in general (Rahanter 2013). This is Ms. Sanarya’s (CSO, Personal Interview) belief: “because I am here, ok, and I came because my party nominated me, so, of course, I am thankful for my party and I will obey what they are asking of me.”

Further, it is often considered that the political parties have been strategically using the gender quotas for their own interests, consequently undermining its goals of achieving a more equal society at decision-making levels. In this sense, Ms. Sanarya (CSO, Personal Interview) adds that: “unfortunately, until now the quota system has been used by the political parties for their benefit, for their interest. This is why I am saying the quota is not achieving its aim and objective”. Hence, gender quotas are often considered to actually hinder the women’s “cause”, by giving visibility to women that are inexperienced and/or inefficient; therefore, reinforcing stereotypes that women are not fit to deal with political issues (Al-Tamini 2018, 2019; Hughes et al. 2017; Krook 2016; Tripp 2012). In this sense Ms. Shaima (MP, Personal Interview) states that:

A disadvantage for the quota is that within the political parties there are many restrictions for choosing the candidate; for example, considerations of geographical location, family history, and connection with the party. Therefore, this has limited the competency of women participation in parliament.

To counter this situation, the importance of choosing women to participate in political processes, based on their qualifications and merit is strongly defended<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, this comment seems to focus mainly on women’s capability as MPs. This can also be seen on the focus on “teaching” and “empowering” women candidates to parliament, given by

Political parties are seen as having a particularly important part in the empowerment of women in political processes. It is considered that women should be given more opportunities within the structure of the parties themselves. Political parties are seen as spaces where women should be trained and gain experience, before they take positions within the parliament or at another decision-making level. Ms. Sanarya (CSO, Personal Interview) defends that:

It is important to prepare them [women] in the parties; and they have to be in a high-level position in the parties; and then they will be well prepared to become MPs. [...]. But we don't want the parliament to be the school to learn.

Still, it is important to note that there are women MPs and in other decision-making positions that tend to be respected, listened to and capable of exercising influence, due to their age, reputation, and political experience. Thus, according to Ms. Sanarya (CSO, Personal Interview): “we have a few people that are good. They are strong, because they have a good experience. Maybe their background is good. They worked already in [political] parties”. On the same lines, Shalaby and Emimam (2020) argue that the “increased female political expertise along with sustained quota mechanisms can overturn [...] [women's] marginalization over time” (p. 157).

Moreover, in spite of the criticism made about the functioning of the political parties, there are women that proudly defend their participation within them and that recognize the importance of the political parties in the increased participation of women at decision-making positions. According to Ms. Maryam (MP, Personal interview): “Women should feel comfortable to be part of the political party of their choosing, and we should not be judged by which political party we represent, but feel proud of it”. There are also women that consider that their political party encourages and supports women to participate in the political process. This is the position taken by Dilsoz Mohammed, a Komal candidate, in an interview with Rudaw (Ahmad 2018): “Komal has given women good positions and opportunities. [...] That is why women are playing a good role in the party. There are women in the politburo and all other positions within the Komal party.”

The importance of political elites in establishing quotas for women, and therefore to promote women's empowerment, and more recently parity, at the political level is documented in the literature (Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Hughes et al. 2017; Krook 2016). In the Kurdistan region, gender politics had, until recently, an

---

international (non)governmental organizations in Iraq (Al-Tamini 2019) and in Lebanon (Geha 2019); thus (unwillingly) assuming that men have political knowledge and/or experience while women have not.

important part in the government's discourse on democratization (Kaya 2017; Voller 2014). However, due to the war against ISIS, the influx of refugees and internal displaced people (IDPs), the economic crisis, and, more recently, the Covid-19 crisis, issues relating to gender have been taken a secondary place (HCWA, 2016; Hussein & Marques 2021). Still, the current KRG's Cabinet appears to be, at least at a discursive level, committed to gender equality. For instance, after several months of intermittent functioning of political institutions and civil society organizations, during 2020 - due to political measures implemented to deal with Covid-19 - and on the occasion of the women's international day (March 8), the current prime-minister of the KRI - Masrour Barzani - reiterated the KRG's "commitment to counter discrimination on the basis of gender and the marginalization of women in society" (Shernwani 2021).

### **Legislation as an enabler or as a hindrance**

Notwithstanding the, arguable, efforts made by the Iraqi government, and, especially, the KRG - in collaboration with regional, national and inter/transnational (non)governmental organizations - to promote gender equality, the gender quota system itself is often considered as an obstacle to women's participation in parliament. On one hand, it is often considered that the gender quota legislation is ambiguous, thus leading to interpretations that the law can work as a "glass ceiling" for women's presence in parliament (Tripp, 2012). On the other hand, the "positive" discrimination created by the gender quota can be perceived as unfair - both by women and men, since it can lead to the presence of "quota" women in parliament (Al-Tamini 2018; Krook 2016). We are going to briefly develop these themes below.

Several policies, directives and legislation regarding gender, in federal Iraq, and especially, in the KRI, have been considered as being amongst the most "advanced" in the MENA region. This is the case of Iraq's National Action Plan 2014-2018, the first one to be created in the Middle East; the case of the law n.8 (2011) of combating domestic violence in the Kurdistan Region<sup>19</sup>. and, also, the case of the quotas for women. In September 2020, Iraq occupied 73<sup>rd</sup> place in the ranking of women in National Parliaments, in front of "more developed" countries, such as the United States of America (USA) (which was in 85<sup>th</sup> place) (IPU, 2020b)<sup>20</sup>. Im-

<sup>19</sup> It is important to underscore that, even if women social movements and international organizations are actively trying to pass legislation, as of September 2021, federal Iraq still has no legislation approved to combat SGBV.

<sup>20</sup> By September 2021, Iraq occupied the 77<sup>th</sup> position on the ranking of women in National Parliaments, while the USA occupied the 71<sup>st</sup> place, due to the results of the USA's January 2020 elections (IPU, 2020b). However, as we mentioned before, on the October 2021 elections in Iraq, women got 29.4% of the votes, which will, most likely, lead Iraq to be once again better placed than the USA on the ranking of women in National Parliaments.

portantly, Iraq's constitution guarantees equality to all its citizens, independently of their gender (Al-Ali & Pratt 2009; Al-Tamini 2019; Chirillo & Rodey 2019; Rahanter 2013). However, by stating that laws should not contradict Islam, the constitution opens space "for more conservative interpretations that could limit women's rights" (Chirillo & Rodey 2019: 8). Though women activists try to fight this, the importance of Shiia political parties in Iraq, is perceived as undermining their efforts to promote women's rights (Al-Ali & Pratt 2009; Al-Tamini 2019; Chirillo & Rodey 2019).

Further, it is often considered that there are big gaps between the legislation and its implementation (IWN 2019; OTT 2019). This can be seen, for instance, in the persistence of SGBV in the Kurdistan region (HCWA, 2019), where often, not only are laws not implemented, but also women are blamed for what happens to them or cannot reach the same institutions that should defend them, due to fears of risking their respectability (IWN 2019; OTT 2019). Cultural gender normativities, discussed above, are central to understanding the difficulty in the implementation of laws, policies and directives related to gender equality. The fact that gender issues are still not considered a priority, despite discourses of gender equality, also helps to understand why there tends to be a lack of resources and funding given to gender related institutions, such as the High Council of Women Affairs in the Kurdistan region (Personal Notes). Accordingly, several authors consider that existing gender related changes at the governmental level are only superficial (Al-Ali & Pratt 2011; Fisher-Tahir 2010; Hardi 2013; Rahanter 2013; Voller 2014).

This context can help us understand why in federal Iraq (Chirillo & Rodey 2019; OTT 2019) and, specifically, in the Kurdistan region, gender quotas can be seen as limiting the presence of women in parliament. As we have previously stated, though the Iraqi law establishes a minimum of 25% of women in the Iraqi parliament, and the Kurdistan region law establishes a minimum of 30% of women in the Kurdistan parliament, these percentages are often interpreted as setting the maximum number of seats for women. Accordingly, Chirillo and Rodey (2019), argued that in Iraq there was a need to "amend gender quota application guidelines to clarify rules about seat allocations for women candidates", since "regulations fail[ed] to clearly specify how the presence of women who win enough votes for a seat independent of the quota can distort the application of the quota formula" (p. 11). In the Kurdistan region, law n. 2 (2009) clearly states that the 30% of women representation in the parliament is not a ceiling, but a minimum. However, as happens in federal Iraq, there is the perception that women who are voted directly into parliament are being hindered by the gender quotas legislation, since some of these women believe that they are losing their seats in parliament to other women that are chosen through the gender quotas. This is expressed by Ms. Sara (MP,

Personal Interview): “we would like to see some changes in the [gender quota] system. For example, if women get enough votes to enter, this should not restrict the quota percentage”.

Some men members of parliament also feel hindered by the gender quota law. These men tend to argue that the quota system is unfair, because it can give seats in parliament to women that had very few votes, while other electoral candidates that were “actually” voted in by the public can be left out. As Mr. Jabar (MP, Personal Interview) says: “quota system is also a disadvantage for men and society, because we had a male candidate with 22,000 votes and he was replaced with a woman with less than 200 votes. This is not fair for the voters”. Research has shown that men tend to be more reticent in relation to gender quotas than women; often contending that if women do not achieve decision-making positions, it is because they do not want to (Dahlrehup et al. 2013).

Thus, despite the achievements brought about by the gender quotas and other measures introduced in the KRI, and at a lesser extent in federal Iraq, there is still a long way to go for women to achieve parity in the political domain, particularly at “higher” levels. Furthermore, it is important to guarantee that the women - as well as the men - that are elected to decision-making positions are done so, based on their qualifications and experience, and not due to personal and family networks.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we focused on the consequences of the implementation of gender quotas in the Kurdistan Parliament. Accordingly, we tried to understand what were the considered benefits, limitations and resistances associated with it.

The implementation of the gender quota in the federal Iraq and in the Kurdistan parliaments, allowed for an increase of the number of women as MPs. However, in the KRI, like in several other areas of the world (Darhour & Dahlerup 2020; Hughes et al. 2017; Krook 2016), the implementation of the quota for women can be seen as controversial. Several people tend to think that the implementation of gender quotas in the parliament is very important; otherwise it would not be possible to guarantee the 25% and 30% of seats for women in the federal Iraq and in the Kurdistan parliaments (respectively). However, there are still limitations to the implementation of the gender quotas. There is a general perception that political parties are making use of the quota for women to bring their own people forward, instead of capable, competent



women. These women tend to be highly qualified, from elite families; potentially sharing patriarchal dividends (Connell 2009). Hence, many women members of parliament have been criticized for siding with their political parties, not fulfilling their roles as parliamentarians and/or not representing other women in society. Accordingly, political parties in Kurdistan tend to be perceived as being male-dominated and kin-based; therefore, privileging their social and family networks, and not the merit and experience of their candidates.

This situation can be understood in the context of deeply internalized patriarchal cultural norms that privilege men's presence in the public sphere and women's presence in the household; therefore, leading to a perception that men are more capable of being in the political domain. Consequently, people are still wary of voting for women. Moreover, women candidates can face several obstacles when running for elections, such as having less access to resources or being subject to harassment during the electoral campaign. Further, contrary to what is established in the legislation, the gender quota is sometimes interpreted as being a ceiling for women's participation as MPs. Consequently, there are women that consider that they won enough votes in the parliamentary elections through direct vote, but they were not being given their deserved seats, which instead were going to "quota women" (Al-Tamini 2018, 2019; Krook 2016).

The obstacles associated with gender quotas in the Kurdistan region lead several people to stand against it. For several women involved in the political processes this means underscoring their own merit; while for some men members of parliament this is reflected in a subjective feeling of injustice and/or in the perceived contradictions of women's personal experiences and their political "feminist" positions.

Therefore, we argue that quotas are a significant measure to promote the women's presence in decision-making positions, but cannot be seen as the only tool (Al-Tamini 2018, 2019; Krook 2016; Shalaby 2016). As Krooks (2016) emphasises, "the introduction of quotas thus represents only the beginning of long, contested process to open up politics to women and guarantee their full and equal participation" (p. 13). The implementation of gender quotas in the KRI did not have the intended result of transforming gender power relations at political level. In this sense, a clarification, extension and monitoring of the gender quotas is necessary for it to achieve its main objectives.

Further, larger changes need to occur in society in order to guarantee the full participation of women in the political domain. Measures aimed at promoting gender

equality and women empowerment in all domains of society, and particularly in the political domain, need to take into account the political, socio-economic, cultural and historic contexts in which they occur, in its interconnections between local, national and inter/transnational spaces. Still, the presence of women in parliament, both in federal Iraq and in the Kurdistan region, can be seen as a sign of an increasing, even if limited, inclusion of women in the public sphere, and particularly in the political domain; thus, showing the (conditioned) agency of women in the region and its potential for further social change.

### **Bibliography**

- AHMAD Shikar, 2018, “KRG election: 241 vie for 33 parliamentary seats”:  
<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/170920183>
- ALI Sangar, 2018, “Women hesitate to run in Kurdistan election over harassment, verbal abuse”:  
<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/08ac6eaf-67ff-4783-814f-f77341bc2c47>
- AL-ALI Nadjie, 2016, “Sexual violence in Iraq: Challenges for transnational feminist politics”, *European Journal of Women's Studies* 1-25, p. 10-27.
- AL-ALI Nadjie & PRATT Nicolas, 2009, *Women & War in the Middle East*, Zed Books, London.
- AL-ALI Nadjie & PRATT Nicolas, 2011, “Between nationalism and women’s rights: the Kurdish women’s movement in Iraq”, *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4, p. 337-353.
- AL-TAMINI Huda, 2018, “Effects of Iraq’s parliamentary gender quota on women’s political mobilization and legitimacy post-2003”, *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 11-4, p. 41–62.
- AI-TAMINI Huda, 2019, *Women and democracy in Iraq. Gender, politics and nation-building*, I.B. Tauris, London.
- AREF Suzan & ALZAMELI Qassem, 2018, “Implementation of Iraq National Action Plan for UNSCR 1325 2014-2018. Cross Sector Task Force 1325”:  
<https://www.efi-ife.org/sites/default/files/Report%20-%20Implementation%20Iraq%20NAP%201325%20English.pdf>

BAGIKHANI Nazand, HAMELINK Wendelmoet & WEISS Nerina, 2018, “Theorising women and war in Kurdistan: a feminist and critical perspective”, *Kurdish Studies* 6-1, p. 5-30..

BRYMAN Alan, 2016, *Social research methods (5<sup>th</sup> Edition)*, Oxford University Press, London.

CHIRILLO Gina & RODDEY Caroline, 2019, “Gender analysis of Iraq’s electoral and political process”: <https://www.ifes.org/publications/gender-analysis-iraqs-electoral-and-political-process>

CONNELL Raewyn, 2009, *Gender in world perspective. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

DAHLERUP Druda, KALANDAZE Nana & KANDAWASVIKA-NHUNDU Rumbidzai, 2013, “Atlas of electoral gender quotas”: <http://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/atlas-electoral-gender-quotas>

DALAOURA Katerina, 2019, “Women and gender in the Middle East and North Africa: mapping the field and addressing policy dilemmas at the post-2011 juncture”: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100742/>

DARHOUR Hanane & DAHLERUP Drude, 2020, “The Arab uprisings and the rights of women”. In DARHOUR Hanane & DAHLERUP Drude (ed.), *Double-edged politics on women’s rights in the MENA region*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, p. 1-46.

EDWARDS Robert, 2018, “Iraqi politics “not even close” to achieving women’s equality: female voters”: <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/090520184>

FICHER-TAHIR Anderia, 2010, “Competition, cooperation and resistance: women in the political field in Iraq”, *International Affairs* 86-6, p.1381-1394.

GEHA Carmen, 2019, “The myth of women’s political empowerment within Lebanon’s sectarian power-sharing system”, *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 40-4, p. 498-521.

GRABOLL-ÇELIKER Anna, 2019, “Kurdish women”, In GUNTER Michael (ed.), *Routledge handbook on the Kurds*, Routledge, London, p. 239-256.

HARDI Choman, 2021, "The women's movement in Kurdistan-Iraq", In BOZARSLAN Hamit, GUNES Cengiz & YADIRIGI, *The Cambridge History of the Kurds*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 869-892.

HARDI Choman, 2013, "Women's activism in Iraqi Kurdistan: achievements, shortcomings and obstacles", *Kurdish Studies Journal* 1-1, p. 44-64.

High Council of Women Affairs, 2016, "National strategy for the development of women in Kurdistan Region 2016-2026", Iraqi Kurdistan Government and UN Women.

High Council of Women Affairs, 2019, "The progress of women situation in Kurdistan region. 1992-2019". Iraqi Kurdistan Government and UN Women.

HUGHES Melanie, PAXTON Pamela & KROOK Mona L., 2017, "Gender quotas for legislatures and corporate boards", *Annual Review of Sociology* 43-1, p.331-352.

HUSSEIN Mamilan & MARQUEZ Ana C., 2021, « Gender politics and process of nation-building in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq », 26<sup>th</sup> International Political Science Association, World Congress of Political Science "New nationalisms in an open world",

Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020a, "Monthly ranking of women in National parliaments": <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=8&year=2020>.

Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021a, "Global and regional averages of women in National parliaments": <https://data.ipu.org/women-averages>.

Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021b, "Monthly ranking of women in National parliaments": <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=9&year=2021>.

Iraqi Women Network, 2019, "Iraqi women challenges of security, peace and justice", Shadow report to CEDAW Committee: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2018414.html>

KANDIYOTI Deniz, 1988, "Bargaining with patriarchy", *Gender and Society* 2-3, p. 274-290.

JOLY Danièle & BAKAWAN Adel, 2016, “Women in Kurdistan-Iraq: issues, obstacles and enablers”, *The International Journal of Human Rights* 7-20, p. 956-977.

KAYA Zeynep, 2017, “Gender and statehood in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq”:  
<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/69197/1/GenderandStatehoodKRG.pdf>.

KAYA Zeynep, 2021, “Women’s electoral participation in Kuwait”:

[http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110877/2/Women\\_s\\_Electoral\\_Participation\\_in\\_Kuwait.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110877/2/Women_s_Electoral_Participation_in_Kuwait.pdf).

KROOK Mona, 2016, “Contesting gender quotas: dynamics of resistance”, *Politics, Groups, and Identity* 4-2, p.268–83.

KROOK Mona & TRUE Jacqui, 2010, “Rethinking the life cycles of international norms: The United Nations and the global promotion of gender equality”, *European Journal of International Relations* 18-1, p.103-127.

Kurdistan Government, 2020, “The Cabinet Ministers”:  
<https://gov.krd/english/government/the-cabinet/>

Kurdistan Parliament, 2020, “Elections”:  
<https://www.parliament.krd/english/about-parliament/elections/>

London School of Economics, 2014, “State building and gender in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq”:  
[https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/59019/1/Statebuilding-and-gender-in-the-Kurdistan-region-of-Iraq\\_workshop-report.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/59019/1/Statebuilding-and-gender-in-the-Kurdistan-region-of-Iraq_workshop-report.pdf).

MAHMOUD NAWZAD, 2018, “Five women lead Iraqi election lists in Kurdistan”:  
<https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/200220181>

MAMSHAE Ari, 2019, “Kurdistan’s democratic developments amid a rentier oil economy”, In ANAID Anwar & TUGDAR Emel E. (eds.), *Iraqi Kurdistan’s statehood aspirations. A political economy approach*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, p. 99-123.

Open Think Tank, 2019, “Conference report: Woman quota in Iraq: Limiting or securing woman political participation”:  
<http://www.otto.krd/index.php/speakers/109-conference-report-woman-quota-in-iraq-limiting-or-securing-woman-political-participation>

RANHARTER Katherine, 2013, “Gender equality and development after violent conflict: the Kurdistan Region of Iraq”, Doctoral dissertation, Exeter University:  
<https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/14552/RanharterK.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

SARANTAKOS Sotirios, 2013, *Social research* (4<sup>th</sup> Edition), Palgrave Macmillan, Baingstoke.

Shafaq News, 2021, “For the first time women get 97 seats in the parliamentary election”:  
<https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq-News/For-the-first-time-Iraqi-women-get-97-seats-in-the-parliamentary-election>

SHAKIR Layla, 2021, “Will the new voting system change Iraqi politics?”:  
<https://www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/14092021>

SHALABY Marwa, 2016, “Introduction: deconstructing women’s empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa”. In SHALABY Marwa & MOGHADAM Valentine (ed.), *Empowering women after the Arab Spring*, Palgrave Macmillan, Baingstoke, p. 1-18.

SHALABY MONA & ELIMAM Laila, 2020, “Women in legislative committees in Arab Parliaments”, *Comparative Politics* 53-1, p.139-167.

SHERWANI Halgurd, 2021, “KRG reiterates commitment to combat gender discrimination, PM says” :  
<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/24054-KRG-reiterates-commitment-to-combat-gender-discrimination,-PM-says>

SHITRI LIHI B., 2016, “Authenticating representation: Women’s quotas and Islamist parties”, *Politics & Gender* 12-4, p. 781-806

TRIPP Aili M., 2012, “Do Arab women need electoral quotas? Foreign Policy”:  
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/19/do-arab-women-need-electoral-quotas/#>

United Nations Development Programme, 2020, “Tacking social norms. A game changer for gender inequalities”:  
[http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hd\\_perspectives\\_gsni.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hd_perspectives_gsni.pdf)

VAN BRUINESSEN Martin, 2001, “From Adela Khanum to Leyla Zana: women as political leaders in Kurdish history”, In MOJAB Shahrzad (eds.), *Women of a non-state nation: the Kurds*, Mazda Publishers, London, p. 95-112.

VOLLER Yaniv, 2014, “Countering violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan: state-building and transnational advocacy”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46-2, p. 351–372.

WALBY Sylvia, 1989, “Theorising patriarchy”, *Sociology* 23-2, p. 213-234.

\*\*\*  
\*