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# **Strengthening Women's Political Participation**

**A Project Supported by**

**United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI)**

**Technical Assistance Provided by**

**The Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA)**

## **Narrative Report**

**Phase One**

October 1, 2019 - February 15, 2020

March 6, 2020

## Project goal and description

The Iraq Foundation (IF), through its local affiliate Iraq Foundation for Democracy and Human Rights (IFDHR), completed Phase One (October 1 - February 15, 2020) of a project aiming to strengthen women's participation in political life at the national and sub-national levels, and enhance the capabilities of women in seeking public office.

This phase focuses on data-gathering, needs assessment, and research through interviews with women candidates and civic focus groups aimed at documenting and understanding the challenges faced by women who run for elected public office and their unmet needs. This will serve as a foundation for strategies and action plans to provide women with the training and tools they need for successfully running for elected office. For this phase, five governorates were selected by the project, namely: Baghdad, Basra, Nenawa, Najaf and Salaheddin. These provinces were selected by the project because they provide a representative diversity in terms of social and political environments. Salaheddin and Nenawa are provinces in the areas liberated from ISIS; Najaf is a province strongly influenced by the religious establishment; Basra is a southern province that has recently faced unrest and public dissatisfaction; and Baghdad represents the widest spectrum of social, cultural, and economic diversity.

In preparation, IF, in consultation with UNAMI, developed the Terms of Reference (TOR) for a regional consultant and an Iraqi consultant on women's political participation. The TOR was published, and IF received resumes and conducted phone interviews with applicants. Dr. Soumaya Ibrahim Huber, from Egypt was selected as the regional expert and commissioned to collect, analyze data and prepare a report and recommendations that will serve as a road map for the second phase of the project. Dr. Bushra Al-Obeidi, a gender specialist, was selected as the local Iraqi consultant. Dr. Al Obaidi provided specific socio-political and context and historical and legislative background. The Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, (ESCWA, a UN agency), provided technical assistance to the project.

IF selected local NGOs in the provinces to conduct on-the-ground research: The Iraqi Firdaws Association from Basra, Al-Nour Foundation from Salaheddin, the Public Aid Organization (PAO) from Nenawa and Al-Rasid Center for Human Rights from Najaf. IFDHR implemented in Baghdad.

## Project Objectives and Activities

Objective 1: Gather data and conduct analysis to identify challenges that face women seeking elected office, and determine the capacity upgrades they require for success.

Outcome 1: Data and findings on women's needs enable stakeholders (national, local, and international) to provide targeted support for women candidates and MPs.

**Activity 1.1:** October 1- November 15. IF developed the TORs for the regional consultant and the local Iraqi expert, and reviewed applications and curriculum vitae. In consultation with

UNAMI, IF selected Dr. Soumaya Ibrahim Huber, an Egyptian national, and Dr, Bushra Al-Obaidi, as regional consultant and local Iraqi gender expert respectively, and signed contracts with them. IF also connected with ESCWA regarding the selection of consultants and experts and their terms of reference. IF introduced the project and its goals to governmental and non-governmental agencies in preparation for logistical and organizational needed to launch the project.

IF focused on two groups of women elected/candidate: Female members of parliament elected in 2018, and current members of provincial councils, some of whom were planning on running in the spring of 2020 (before the Parliament froze the provincial councils). The current parliament provides an array of women MPs, 84 women elected in 2018, 60 of whom are new to the Parliament, 19 winners outside the quota system. One woman, Magda Al Tamimi, headed the list of Sai'roon in Baghdad and got the most votes in the province. She was in one of the case-studies in our project.

Based on a literature review, personal regional expertise, and contextual input from IF and Dr. Al Obaidi, Dr. Ibrahim prepared questionnaires and tools for interviews with recently-elected women MPs and women in provincial councils to assess their experiences in running for office, their needs and the challenges they face in the political process. In this preparatory period, Dr. Ibrahim also received input from ESCWA, which provided international best practices, standards and literature on the topic.

**Activity 1.2:** November 17-19. Dr, Ibrahim traveled to Erbil , where IF arranged meetings with three elected women representatives on November 17, enabling Dr. Ibrahim to hold direct exploratory dialogue and fact-finding that underpin the needs-assessment study. Following these meetings, IF organized a training workshop with NGO/researchers, headed by Dr. Ibrahim, to prepare a study of the needs and challenges related to female candidates in Iraq. The workshop was held in Erbil over a period of two days, on the 18th and 19th of November 2019. The aim of the workshop was to introduce the NGO participants to the framework of the research, its methodology tools, and approach, and train them to conduct research to identify and understand the challenges and needs of female political candidates in Iraq and social perceptions of women in public life. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with elected women, both individually and in small groups, were discussed, as well as the approach and design of focus groups to understand public perceptions. The research and fact-finding would prepare for designing training programs tailored to stated needs, and more broadly in providing policy and actionable recommendations to local and international agencies to support women's political participation.

### ***Results and indicators***

1. Women MPs who met with the regional consultant were responsive and cooperative

2. All NGO participants attended the training workshop and were committed to learn more about the project.
3. The training workshop provided the participants with skills to implement future activities of the project and manage them properly to achieve the goal.

***Outputs:***

1. The work plan was developed, including multiple stages and the research period schedule. Responsibilities were assigned and a communication/reporting system was developed.
2. NGOs/ researchers able to conduct the research met elected women and hold focus groups using research tools and methodologies.

***Activity 1.3:*** From November 20-December 31, 2019, NGOs/researchers, including IFDHR which implemented in Baghdad, conducted the needs-assessment research in their provinces, using the tools and methodologies discussed with Dr. Ibrahim at the workshop. The NGOs interviewed 9 MPs and 24 PC members and guided them through the questionnaires either in person or by phone or email, or a combination of methods. Two cases studies were conducted with women MPs who won seats outside the quota system, to understand their experiences and their strategies. As project manager, IF followed up with the organizations after they returned from the training s and guided them in their activities. IF gathered data from NGOs, ensured data was complete and accurate, and coordinated with the regional and local Iraqi consultants. IF forwarded the outcomes and data to Dr. Ibrahim

***Challenges:***

1. The country's current situation, including demonstrations and political changes, presented difficulties in reaching all the women MPs originally targeted for interviews. .
2. The dissolution of the provincial councils also had a negative impact, as not all targeted women PC members were available..

***Outputs and Results***

1. Despite the challenges, NGOs were able to interview 9 MPs and 24 PC members, and 2 additional MPs for case studies.
2. Data were gathered and submitted to the regional consultant by the end of December 2019.
3. The data gathered presents the challenges, needs, opportunities and strategies for women's political participation, and provides a solid foundation for the needs-assessment analysis and recommendations in the regional consultant's report

***Activity 1.4:*** During the same period ending December 31, 2019, NGOs held 5 focus groups with 83 participants, including civic leaders in the five provinces to understand public

perceptions of women candidates and attitudes towards women in elected office. The focus groups included other NGOs and media professionals. Those sessions focused on six open-ended questions that were prepared by Dr. Ibrahim and refined during the training workshop of NGOs held in Erbil in November. The questions covered the way the public viewed women candidates, what influences voter choices, especially in regard to women candidates, and how women candidates compare with men candidates in the view of the electorate. NGOs compiled their reports from the focus groups and IF relayed them to Dr. Ibrahim.

### ***Challenges:***

The country's circumstances of demonstrations and cutting off various roads prevented some participants from arriving at the appointed time for the focus sessions.

### ***Outputs and Results***

1. Five focus groups meetings with 83 civic leaders were held in the five provinces: 9 in Baghdad, 15 in Najaf, 21 in Salaheddin, 18 in Ninawa and 20 in Basra.
2. The focus groups provided a counter perspective, to understand the public perception of women candidates and attitudes towards women in elective office, and what society is searching for in their credible candidate.
3. The focus groups provided another perspective of the capacity-building and skills enhancement needed by women candidates to succeed in elections

***Activity 1.5:*** January 1-February 15, 2020. With fact-finding reports submitted by the end of December, 2019, the regional consultant worked on compilation, analysis, and findings derived from the data. IF provided assistance to the regional consultant in obtaining any additional clarifications from the NGOs. The local Iraqi expert also provided further information as needed.

The regional consultant submitted a first draft of the report to IF and ESCWA, who had the opportunity to present their broad comments. The regional consultant submitted a second draft to IF, which was further edited. The final report, entitled '**Women Running for Elected Office in Iraq: Needs and Challenges**' was submitted by IF to UNAMI on March 3, 2020. The Report contains compiled data from meetings with women MPs, women members of provincial councils, and focus groups with analysis and recommendations for targeted areas of support.

### **Conclusion**

Based on interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups discussions, Phase One of the project produced a report that addresses challenges and needs of women at the social, cultural, political, and personal levels. The Report also looks at the attitudes towards and perceptions of society regarding women in elected office. Arising from the analysis of data, the report provides recommendations and a road map for policy makers and international organization for

interventions that enhance the ability of women to be viable and successful candidates for office, and that also addresses societal and political barriers to meaningful participation of women.. The report recommends that, to ensure an enhanced and sustained women's political participation, all identified barriers and suggested remedial mechanisms need to be addressed in an integrated manner.

The recommendation in the Report that relate specifically to capacity and skills building for women candidates for elected office in Iraq will form the basis for Phase Two of the Iraq Foundation's project.