

# Women's Political Empowerment in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: A Comparison Between the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria

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## Abstract

This study examines the role of women's political participation in empowering women and promoting gender equality in Kurdish society, comparing the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria. The research aims to understand how political parties and women's organizations influence women's empowerment and address gender issues in these regions. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study draws on 15 interviews and 474 surveys from political party members, women's organizations, government officials, and local residents in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dhok, Kerkuk, Halabja, and parts of the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria. The findings show that women's organizations, particularly in Rojava, have been pivotal in advancing gender equality through initiatives such as Jineology and self-protection strategies. However, women in both regions continue to face significant socio-economic and familial barriers, limiting their political and societal participation. While the regional focus presents a limitation in generalizing the findings, the research provides practical implications for improving women's political involvement and rights. The study offers original insights by comparing the political empowerment of women across two distinct Kurdish regions, highlighting the critical role of women's organizations and the need for collaborative efforts to dismantle barriers and promote gender equality in Kurdish society.

**Keywords:** *Women's political participation, Gender equality, Kurdish society, Women's organizations, Political empowerment.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

The narratives about women's political participation are evolving. Women now hold more leadership roles, including heads of state and parliamentary speakers. As of 2023, women in national parliaments reached a record 26.5% (UN Women, 2023). Despite this, gender parity in politics remains a distant goal. Women's political skills are crucial for integrating their perspectives into decision-making and advancing gender equality and democracy (United Nations, 2021). Research shows that higher female representation in parliament leads to increased focus on women's issues and better governance (Ziroat, 2023). Effective strategies to boost women's participation include reforms in political institutions and targeted support for

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women candidates and officials (Anenih, 2009). The CEDAW Convention mandates the elimination of stereotypes that hinder women's political participation (CEDAW, 2012). These stereotypes, rooted in cultural and social norms, discourage women from exercising their rights and contribute to their underrepresentation. The CEDAW Committee recommends measures like revising educational materials to challenge these stereotypes (CEDAW, 2012).

Political parties play a critical role in enhancing women's political participation. They can implement gender equality policies, set female participation targets, and establish women's committees (Anenih, 2009). Training for women candidates in skills such as fundraising and media relations, along with civic education and gender equality campaigns, can further promote women's involvement in politics. Since 1991, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has operated under its own government system. Despite this, women's political participation in KRI remains low. In contrast, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava) prioritizes women's political empowerment, mandating at least 40% female representation in elected bodies (Bodette, 2020). However, in KRI, women face challenges like low labor force participation and high unemployment, influenced by social and legal barriers (Gunter, 2019). Addressing these issues requires empowering women and confronting entrenched gender roles and societal norms (Gunter, 2019). Efforts to address women's and girls' issues in regions like the Middle East demand substantial commitment, as societal values often disadvantage women and enforce restrictive gender roles.

This research seeks to deepen the understanding of women's political capacity and the regulations empowering women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and to draw insights from the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria. Despite women constituting 30% of the parliament in the Kurdistan Region, other governmental branches lack proper vetting systems for women's inclusion. Furthermore, women hold few senior positions in both government and political parties. Social, economic, and religious barriers persist, and there are no penalties for violence against women. Consequently, many women, especially younger generations, are hesitant to engage in political activities. Promoting women's political participation is crucial for achieving gender justice across all sectors of the Kurdistan Region. The objectives of this research are: (i) to identify strategies for enhancing women's political participation and leadership across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq; and (ii) to explore innovative approaches to develop women's political skills and address societal challenges impeding their political and socioeconomic roles. The research questions guiding this study are: (i) What is the status of women's political participation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq? (ii) What is the status of women's political participation in the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria? (iii) What lessons can the Kurdistan Region learn from the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria to better empower women politically? (iv) Does women's political participation address women's issues in Kurdish society?

Women's political empowerment involves increasing women's capacity and participation in decision-making and ensuring their equal representation in political institutions (Budryte, 2014). The situation of political participation includes factors such as access to institutions, civic engagement, political freedoms, and cultural norms, which influence how individuals participate in politics (UNDP, 2012). Political participation encompasses activities like voting, campaigning, and activism, and requires an analysis of barriers and opportunities affecting individuals' involvement (UNDP, 2012). Women's issues refer to social, economic, political, and cultural challenges that disproportionately affect women, including gender-based violence, pay equity, reproductive rights, and caregiving responsibilities (Rubin, 2018).

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Feminist philosophy about women political participation**

The philosophy of public policy examines normative questions in policymaking, focusing on values like democracy, justice, and human rights (Wollner, 2016). It explores the ethics and

rationality of policy decisions, considering philosophical theories in designing institutions (Jesper, 2020). This field addresses the challenge of aligning ideals with political realities, including competing interests (Wollner, 2016). Philosophers like Scanlon and Voor Hoeve stress the importance of considering social norms, such as gender norms, in policy design to avoid neglecting marginalized groups and systemic barriers (Kugelberg, 2021). Intersectionality highlights unique barriers for different groups of women (Tedds, August). Mary Wollstonecraft advocated for equal rights and political participation for women, arguing it benefits the state (Bernath, 2016). Understanding power dynamics and societal norms is crucial for women's political participation. Increased women's involvement can lead to more effective governance, though further research is needed on its impact (UN Women, 2023).

## **2.2. The current situation of women political participation in the world**

As of January 10, 2024, 26 countries have 28 women serving as heads of state or government. At the current rate, achieving gender equality in these top positions would take about 130 years. Women hold 22.8% of Cabinet positions globally, with only 13 countries having women in 50% or more of these roles (UN Women, September 2023). Regional representation in local deliberative bodies varies, with Central and Southern Asia at 41% and Western Asia and Northern Africa at 20%. Women make up 35.5% of elected members in local deliberative bodies, with only three countries reaching 50% representation and 22 exceeding 40% (UN Women, September 2023). Despite progress, achieving gender parity in leadership roles remains slow, with women often occupying ceremonial rather than executive positions.

## **2.3. The importance of women's political participation in administration and government**

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action aim for balanced political participation and power-sharing between genders, but achieving global gender parity remains challenging. Gender quotas have enhanced representation, leading to higher female participation in parliaments and local governments by five to seven percentage points (UN Women, September 2023). Women's leadership positively impacts decision-making and service delivery, as seen in Indian panchayats and Norway's increased childcare coverage (UN Women, September 2023). Despite these advancements, only 26 countries have female heads of state or government, reflecting persistent systemic barriers and gender gaps. Diverse political systems, from democracies to non-democratic regimes, illustrate the varied governance structures worldwide (List of forms of government, December 2021).

## **2.4. Comparison of regime systems and their impact on women's political participation**

Political systems today vary widely and can be categorized into democracies, non-democratic regimes, and hybrids. Democracies include direct, representative, and parliamentary forms, while constitutional monarchies are also considered democratic. Non-democratic systems encompass authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, oligarchies, technocracies, theocracies, and absolute monarchies (World List of Forms of Government, December 2021). Authoritarian regimes centralize power, rejecting democracy and limiting political rights to maintain the status quo (Macarena Sáez, 2024). Totalitarian regimes exercise extreme control, suppressing opposition and targeting women's rights through restrictive measures on education, employment, and reproductive freedoms (Hannah Arendt & Juan Linz, 2024; Victoria Vygodskaia Rust, 2012). Autocratic regimes may use "gender washing" to create a facade of progress while maintaining control, as seen in countries like Afghanistan (Oliver Schlumberger, 2017; Cynthia L. Cooper, 2023).

Hybrid regimes blend democratic and autocratic features, often using gender quotas symbolically rather than substantively empowering women, which limits real political influence (Jean-François Gagné, 2015; Anna Ehrhart, 2023; Anna & Susanne, 2024). Democracies, rooted in ancient Athens, aim to empower people through various democratic processes and generally promote gender equality, though challenges such as discriminatory norms and political resistance persist. Efforts

like gender quotas and voter education are crucial for enhancing women's political participation (Hannah & Juan, 2024; Evie & Staffan, 2022; John Keane, 2023). In summary, different political systems have varying impacts on women's rights and political participation. Democracies generally advance gender equality, while authoritarian and hybrid regimes often impose restrictions as part of broader control strategies.

### **2.5. The similarities between the political systems of Iraq and Syria**

Both Iraq and Syria have been governed by authoritarian regimes with a focus on consolidating power along sectarian lines. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime favored the Sunni minority, leading to significant unrest following the 2003 US invasion. Similarly, Syria, under the Assad family's rule from the Alawite minority, has faced resentment from the Sunni majority. Both countries have experienced political conflicts with sectarian dimensions, involving struggles between secular Baathist/nationalist forces and Islamist factions. Additionally, class dynamics play a role, with political and economic elites closely tied to the ruling regimes, while rural and lower classes feel marginalized (Julian Barnes-Dace, 2014). In summary, Iraq and Syria's political systems are marked by authoritarian rule and sectarianism, contributing to ongoing domestic unrest and conflict.

### **2.6. History of Kurdish Women Leaders**

In the history of Kurdistan, women have held notable political, religious, and military leadership positions, a rarity in the broader Middle Eastern context. For instance, Khanzade Sultan ruled Harrir and Soran in the mid-17th century, commanding an army of 40,000 to 50,000 men and leading several raids into Iran. Similarly, Kara Fatima Khanum, from Marash in southeastern Turkey, succeeded her husband as chieftain in the 1850s and participated in the Crimean War with 300 men from her tribe. Additionally, the Kurdish Zand Dynasty (1750–1794) included women in military campaigns, to the extent that Afghan officers mocked them for their perceived reliance on women (Michael M. Gunter, 2019). These historical examples underscore the potential for women to lead and govern. Achieving transformative equality in public and political fields requires a fundamental shift in institutions and societal attitudes, moving away from traditional male-dominated power structures. This involves removing structural barriers to women's political rights and changing societal views on women in public life (CEDAW Convention, 2012).

### **2.7. Current situation of women in Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has made notable progress in addressing discriminatory laws against women, outpacing other regions in Iraq (Katherine Hay, 2021). Despite their pivotal roles in the Kurdish revolution, Kurdish women still face gender discrimination, violence, and limited opportunities. Historical figures like Khanzade Sultan and Kara Fatima Khanum exemplify their significant contributions, but entrenched patriarchal attitudes persist (Kugelberg & Elsa, 2021). The Kurdistan Region operates as a democratic parliamentary republic with a 111-seat parliament, yet power remains concentrated in the KDP and PUK, limiting opposition influence (Government of Kurdistan Region, 2024; Choman Hardi, 2021). The rise of "neo-tribalism" and traditional power dynamics have impacted women's political participation. The 30% gender quota in the Kurdistan Parliament has improved representation, with 35 women elected in 2018 (Kamaram & Rawezh, 2021). However, barriers such as conservative traditions, lack of male support, and negative perceptions of women's leadership continue to hinder progress (UN Women & UNFPA, 2021; Project: First Phase, 2020).

### **2.8. Women Organizations Works on Kurdish society**

The status of women in Kurdistan has improved, yet challenges remain for achieving full gender equality. Established in 1989 by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Kurdistan Women's Union addresses oppression, offers education and job training, and provides healthcare to empower Kurdish women. The High Council of Women Affairs, collaborating with UN Women and UNFPA, reaffirms its commitment to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda, aiming to

enhance women's political participation and decision-making roles (SEED Foundation, 2022; Choman Hardi, 2021). Civil society organizations, both local and international, are vital in advocating for women's rights and promoting gender equality. These groups often address gaps left by government institutions and receive support from international entities like the United Nations and the World Bank. The SEED Foundation, a local NGO in the Kurdistan Region, provides comprehensive support to women affected by violence, including case management, mental health services, legal aid, and shelter. The World Bank's initiative to promote family-friendly policies among private sector companies further supports women's rights (GHARAM, 2016). Despite these advancements, challenges such as gender discrimination, violence against women, and limited socioeconomic opportunities persist. Addressing these issues requires ongoing efforts in legal, political, social, and economic spheres.

### **2.8.1 Lack of Preparation and Training**

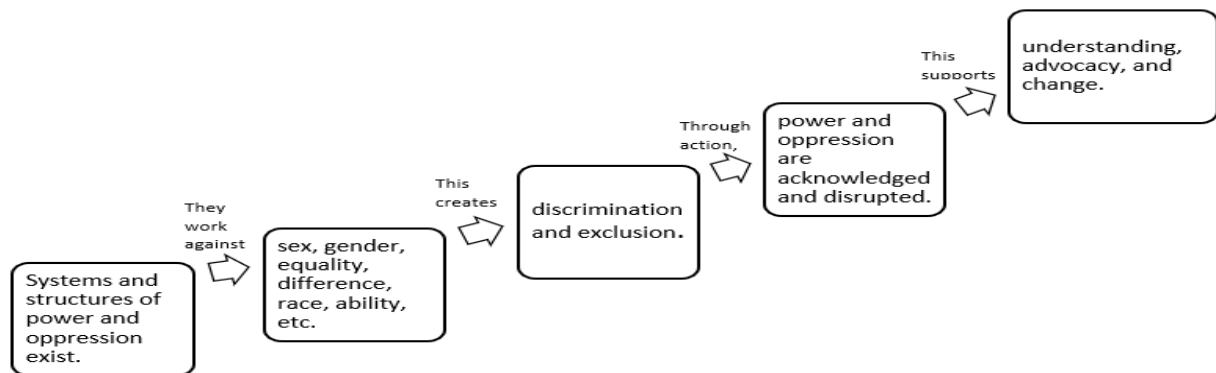
The lack of political awareness and training opportunities limits women's leadership potential in Kurdistan (Project: First Phase, 2020). Political parties rarely invest in developing female politicians or provide meaningful training. This lack of investment hinders women's ability to secure leadership roles beyond gender quotas (Ayat Mudhafar Noori, 2021). Societal norms that confine women to private spheres further restrict their political engagement and skill development (Ayat Mudhafar Noori, 2021; Hooshmand Alizadeh, 2022). Cultural beliefs and practices that restrict women's roles in education and the workplace impede their development of necessary skills for political leadership (Hooshmand Alizadeh, 2022). Educating children, especially girls, about equality and human rights from an early age is crucial for preparing them for future political roles (Hooshmand Alizadeh, 2022). Targeted training programs are needed to bridge the gap in opportunities and empower women for leadership positions.

### **2.9. Women political situation in Syria**

Kurdish women's involvement in politics in Syria has notably advanced women's rights and gender equality, particularly through high-level positions. The Kurdish-led autonomous administration in northeast Syria, known as Rojava, implemented co-presidency policies to increase women's decision-making roles. Established in 2012 by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) amid the Syrian Civil War, Rojava follows democratic confederalism, emphasizing local governance, direct democracy, and equality (WILPF International Secretariat, 2021). Despite opposition, Rojava's constitution guarantees gender equality (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, 2019). Women hold 50% of all official positions in Rojava, potentially making its government one of the most gender-equal globally (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, 2019). The Kurdish women's movement, evolving since 1946, has had a transformative impact (Katherine Hay, 2021). Kurdish women's influence extends to military efforts against ISIS and has positively shaped international perceptions of the administration (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, 2019). However, challenges like violence, child marriage, and limited access to services persist, especially for female-headed households (Rosário Frada, 2023). The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has advanced gender equality through its Social Contract, mandating 50% female representation in decision-making roles. Prominent female leaders and initiatives like the YPJ showcase women's significant roles in various spheres, despite ongoing patriarchal challenges (Julia Wartmann, 2022; Elizabeth Flock, 2024). Jineology, an educational philosophy developed by the Kurdish women's movement, promotes women's empowerment through education and challenges patriarchal norms (Nadje, Isabel Käser, 2020). The co-chair system, featuring shared leadership, enhances gender equality and decentralizes power (Uğur Deniz, 2020). Overall, the Kurdish women's movement has significantly influenced the Middle Eastern political landscape, promoting gender equality and challenging traditional patriarchal structures through its governance and educational initiatives.



**2.10. Theoretical framework**  
**2.10.1. Feminist theory**



**Figure 3.** Model of feminist theory (Joy Egbert, Mary F. Roe, 2020)

Feminist theory explores and challenges gender inequality and patriarchal structures. It focuses on concepts such as gender, race, discrimination, equality, and choice, aiming to dismantle power imbalances for understanding and change. Gender Analysis reveals how political systems and institutions perpetuate discrimination against women, influenced by patriarchal norms that shape policies and decision-making. It examines how these structures lead to unequal access to power and resources. Intersectionality highlights that women's political exclusion is shaped by intersecting factors like race, class, and sexuality. It advocates for inclusive strategies to address overlapping forms of oppression (hooks, 2000). Representation and Voice push for increased and substantive women's representation in political bodies to ensure their perspectives are addressed and influential. Empowerment and Agency focus on building women's confidence and leadership to actively engage in politics and challenge discrimination. Policy Advocacy seeks reforms to address structural barriers such as discriminatory laws and cultural biases. Transformative Politics aims to reshape power structures for more equitable systems, calling for collective action and solidarity among women and marginalized groups. Overall, feminist theory provides a framework to address women's political participation and promote gender equality in political systems.

**3. Research methodology**

**3.1. Methodology**

This dissertation employs a mixed-methods approach to explore women's political participation. By integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors influencing women's involvement in politics, including social, cultural, economic, and institutional aspects. This approach allows for the identification of key barriers and opportunities for women's engagement and the development of evidence-based policy recommendations.

**3.2. Research Design**

To capture diverse perspectives, qualitative methods such as interviews are utilized to collect rich, in-depth data on women's experiences, perceptions, and barriers related to political participation. The study ensures a diverse sample to reflect a range of viewpoints. In addition, quantitative methods, including questionnaire surveys, are employed with a large respondent sample to assess the impact of women's organizations and political participation on women's issues in Kurdish society. The first survey focuses on the impact of women's organizations in the Kurdistan region of Iraq in 2024, while the second survey evaluates how increased political participation and women's organizations affect women's issues in the Kurdish autonomous administration in Syria.

### **3.3. Research Area**

The research centers on Kurdish society, which spans the Kurdistan region of Iraq and the Kurdish autonomous administration in northeastern Syria. In Iraq, Kurds constitute about 17% of the population (5.5 million out of 32.5 million), while in Syria, they make up 9% of the population (1.7 million out of 18.5 million). The Kurdish population is primarily concentrated in the northern and northeastern regions of these countries.

### **3.4. Targeted Participants**

Qualitative data are gathered from a range of political figures, government officials, social workers, and activists to provide insights into women's political participation and the roles of government and organizations. Quantitative data are collected through surveys to evaluate the influence of women's organizations and political participation on women's issues and socio-economic conditions in Kurdish society.

### **3.5. Sample Size**

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 13 interviews are conducted with political and governmental figures, social workers, and activists to understand women's political and socio-economic issues. A survey involving 211 respondents, with a gender distribution of 54.3% women and 43.7% men, aims to assess the impact of women's organizations. In the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria, 2 interviews with government officials explore the effects of women's political participation on intra-family and community situations. A survey of 173 respondents, comprising 81% women and 19% men, examines the impact of women's political participation in this context.

### **3.6. Sampling**

Purposive sampling is used for selecting interview participants from various political, governmental, and social organizations to ensure that the sample provides relevant and in-depth information. Convenience sampling is applied for surveys to gather data from readily available respondents.

### **3.7. Research Instruments**

The study uses an interview protocol with structured questions to guide interviews, ensuring consistency and depth in exploring participants' experiences and perspectives. For surveys, a questionnaire gathers quantitative data on women's political participation, socio-economic issues, and the impact of women's organizations.

### **3.8. Method of Data Analysis**

Qualitative data are analyzed using thematic and content analysis to identify recurring themes and key topics. Quantitative data are analyzed through descriptive statistics to summarize sample characteristics and responses, and inferential statistics to examine relationships between variables and test hypotheses related to women's political participation.

**List of Interview Respondents of the study**

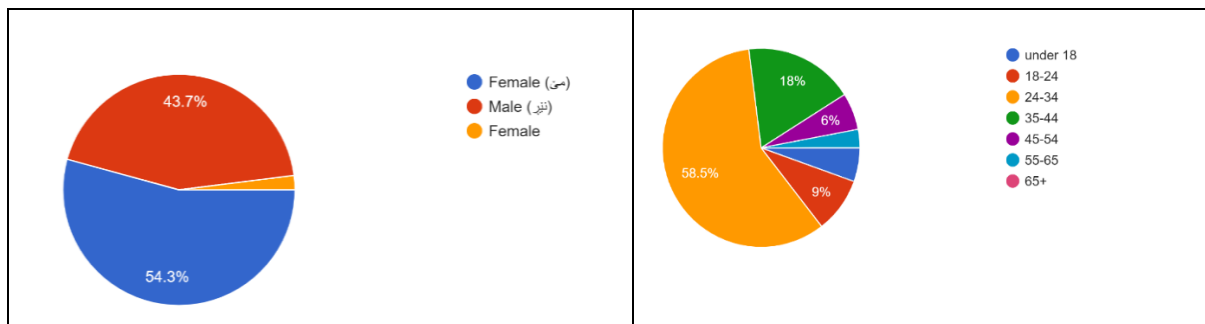
<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Carrier</b>
p.1	Female	Former Minister of Education, Women's Affairs, Tourism of Iraq, and Education of the Kurdistan Region, Director of Narin Covenant, Writer, and Activist
p.2	Female	president of the PUK women's department and head of administration at Raperin University
p.3	Female	Chairman of the Kurdistan Regional Tourism Board
p.4	Female	Minister of Agriculture and Water Resources of the Kurdistan Region, former Kurdistan Regional Parliamentarian
p.5	Female	Member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leadership and member of the previous session of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament
p.6	Male	Deputy Headquarters of the PUK)
p.7	Male	Administrator of the Kurdistan Democratic Party Youth Secretariat

P.8	Female	; Member of the PYD and co-chairman of Congress Star
p.9	Male	Deputy Co-Chairman of the Northern and Eastern Syrian Autonomous Administrative Assembly
p.10	Male	Member of the Organizational Bureau of the Kurdistan Democratic Party
p.11	Male	Social worker
p.12	Male	Journalist and activist
p.13	Female	Coordinator of women leadership organization
p.14	Female	Coordinator of Jine Azad organization
p.15	Female	Feminist activist, social worker

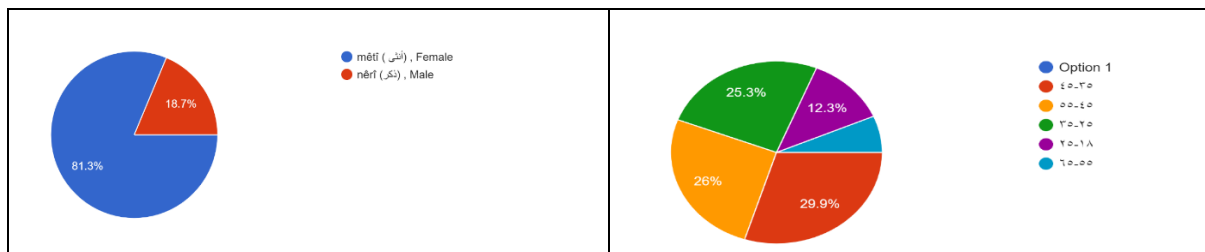
**4. Findings, data analysis, and discussions**

**4.2. Demographic information**

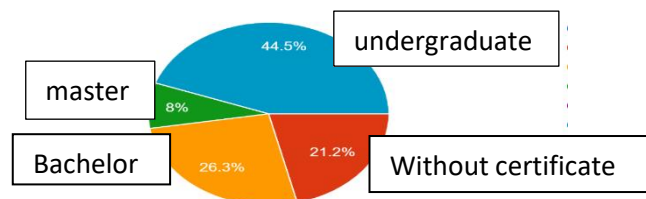
Of the 211 participants from Iraq and 173 from Syria, 54% of the Iraqi respondents were women and 44% men, with 58% aged 24-34, 18% aged 35-44, 9% over 65, and 6% aged 45-55. In Syria, 81% of respondents were women and 19% were men. Interviews involved 10 women and 5 men. Questionnaires were completed online, and interviews focused on the theoretical framework and current issues for women in both regions. Results are displayed using charts, graphs, and content analysis.



**Figure 4.** Gender and age of respondents in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq



**Figure 5.** Gender of respondents and age in the Kurdish autonomous administration in Syria



**Figure 6.** Educational levels of respondents in the Kurdish autonomous administration in Syria

Figure 6. illustrates the total number of responses, which is 173. Regarding the educational level, 44.5% have an undergraduate degree, 26.3% hold a bachelor’s degree, 21.2% are without a certificate, and 8% possess a master's degree.

**4.3. The situation of women’s political participation in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region**

Women have the ability to influence decisions for both men and other women, making their active participation in political systems essential. Yet, challenges remain, as Kurdish politics often



marginalizes women, restricting their roles to women's branches within parties rather than allowing them to shape policy. The Kurdish women's movement has played a key role in regional transformation and democratization. Women have served as guerrillas, human rights activists, and parliament members. Prominent Kurdish politicians like Adela Khanum, Leila Zana, and Nisrin Barwari have overcome significant obstacles to reach leadership positions (Chenoweth & Ma, 2022). P.6-2024 shared a true story of

*"Halima Khana was in Balakaiti when the fighting between the Peshmerga and the Ba'ath regime resulted in several Peshmergas being martyred. Halima Khana's brother was hanged as a punishment. Nobody dared to approach them to bury them. But Halima secretly went to remove her brother from the tree and return him to her family. She decided to become a peshmerga. She served in the military and was a skilled soldier." Sanawbar is one of the women revolutionaries in Qaladze who fought against a dictatorial regime and was martyred. Women played a very important role during the revolution. During the secret struggle, women played a very high role in organizing and secretly transporting secrets and serving and feeding the Peshmerga".*

Following the 1991 uprising, Kurdish women experienced a surge in political engagement as the Kurds established their own parliament and government. They began actively participating in the Kurdistan National Assembly and played crucial roles in subsequent revolutions, contributing to national liberation and enhancing family security, education, and information dissemination. Women's parliamentary representation increased from 7% in 1992 to 33% in 2012, the highest percentage in any Iraqi parliament, and they achieved high-ranking positions in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), including chairing several parliamentary committees (Hooshmand Alizadeh, 2022). This growth in political participation was bolstered by the KRG's reforms, such as restricting polygamy, criminalizing domestic violence, and abolishing mitigating circumstances for "honor" killings. In 2012, the KRG ratified a national strategy to combat violence against women, setting a precedent for progressive gender policies in Iraq.

#### **4.3.1 Women and their desire to participate in politics in the Kurdistan Region**

*"Women are afraid to participate in politics, but because women have a lot of contact with men, they are put in another social mold and are not spoken of well "(P no.6-2024)*

In the Kurdistan region, women encounter significant barriers from social, familial, religious, and cultural sources (see Figure 9.2). Around 60% of respondents believe these obstacles deter women from political participation due to fears of violence, a concern also affecting over 60% of women in South Asia (UN Women, 2014). Violence against women candidates, their families, and voters during elections further discourages involvement. Women in politics often face financial constraints, unpaid domestic responsibilities, and limited roles in party discussions (UN Women, 2014). Enhancing women's political participation is crucial for gender equality and empowerment, as diverse involvement boosts the legitimacy, creativity, and effectiveness of political movements. To address these barriers, countries need to implement laws and policies to protect women from violence and discrimination, and provide support and equal opportunities for more inclusive governance (Hanna Duggal & AJ Labs, 2023).

*"Women are afraid that the road they are walking is full of thorns" (p .4, - 2024).*

This suggests that women can articulate their ambitions independently of men. The term "thorns" represents the challenges women face in pursuing their goals, especially in politics and professional fields. Patriarchal traditions, male ambitions, and societal expectations often hinder women's full self-expression and participation. Women may also hesitate to engage in politics due to uncertainties about their future. However, in societies like Kurdish society, women are increasingly empowered and motivated to participate in politics.

*Women's political participation has changed since the 1991 uprising, especially in terms of society. Women are better able to go out and work than in the years before the uprising. A good proportion now work in government and political parties (all interview participants).*

This suggests that with the right support and opportunities, women can overcome the "thorns" they face and prove their abilities in various professional and political arenas.

*"Media coverage tends to focus more on the personal attributes and appearance of women politicians than their qualifications and policy positions. When women do enter politics, they can have a positive impact.' All this has made politics a cadastre for men and a danger for women because when a woman enters politics, she loses her family. This is wrong thinking because women become entrepreneurs. They not only protect themselves but also become defenders for those around them and create a kind of security and dignity for their families, children, and future generations. So let's redefine politics." (P.4-2024)*

Women politicians are more likely to recruit other women activists, engage equitably with all voters, and boost political knowledge and participation among women. However, studies show that media coverage of women leaders often emphasizes traditional gender roles and appearance, reinforcing stereotypes of women as weak, indecisive, and emotional (Meriem Trabelsi, March 3, 2023). Women politicians, particularly women of color, face significant abuse and gendered disinformation campaigns from both traditional and social media. Even positive discussions about a woman politician's attractiveness can negatively affect voter preferences. In contrast, media scrutiny of male politicians' appearance or families is much less prevalent (Tobias, Daphne, Loes, 2023). "*Women themselves do not like political participation*" is not supported by the evidence provided. Women remain underrepresented in political party positions and leadership roles around the world, despite the importance of political parties in modern democracies. This underrepresentation is not due to a lack of interest or ambition from women, but rather to systemic barriers and biases that hinder their political participation and advancement.

#### **4.3.2. Legal measures to promote women's political participation.**

According to Article 7(b) of the CEDAW, the focus extends beyond formal participation and voting to addressing substantial issues; it guarantees the right to participate in formulating and implementing government policy and the right to hold public office and perform public functions without discrimination. It covers the vast variety of non-elective public sector employment and the right to influence politics not only through voting but also through other, less formal channels. (CEDAW convention, 2013).

*The government, through the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Directorate of Violence, and the existence of a large office in the office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Women and Gender Affairs, the High Council of Women, and parliament. Because of the law and the special courts for women, these aim to empower and protect women (P. 3-2024).*

The government, through the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Directorate of Violence, and the significant presence of a large office under the Deputy Prime Minister for Women and Gender Affairs, the High Council of Women, and parliament, works towards addressing these issues.

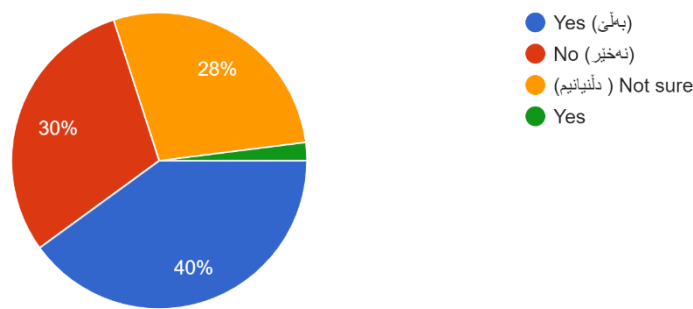
*"The government has seen good progress, but now it is better. The previous cabinet had one woman minister. The ninth cabinet has three women ministers "(P no .5- 2024) .*

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) supports around 25% to 30% female representation in parliament, which, while short of the ideal 50%, is better than in some other Middle Eastern countries with more restrictive women's rights. The KRG has established the High Council for Women and Development to promote women's empowerment, but activists argue that Kurdish authorities lack genuine political will for meaningful change. Despite laws against gender-based violence, enforcement is problematic, with many cases resolved through tribal mediation rather than the justice system. Women's representation in the KRG parliament remains below the 30% target, and issues such as forced marriages, honor killings, and high rates of violence persist. In 2022, over 16,000 complaints were filed, and 3,500 cases were opened for violence against women. This highlights that while laws are in place, enforcement is insufficient and cultural factors continue to perpetuate these issues (Kurdistan Parliament, Iraq).

### 4.3.3. The impact of women’s organization

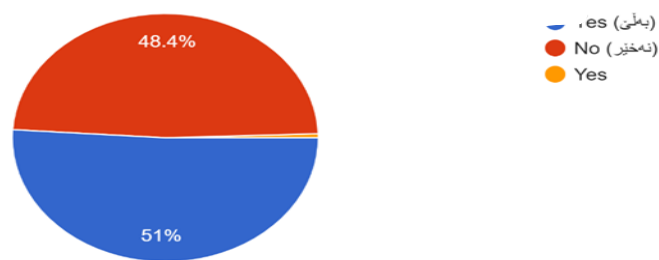
The Kurdistan region has made strides in promoting gender equality, particularly through legal reforms and the establishment of a directorate against domestic violence—a feature not present in other parts of Iraq, where its re-establishment is currently under debate. As a result, women from other regions of Iraq seek protection in Kurdistan. However, political efforts have not yet significantly increased the number of women in departments and ministries. Women’s organizations are crucial in investigating issues, protecting women through legal means, and enhancing women’s capabilities.

*"Women's organizations have played an important role in raising awareness among women about their legal rights. Women can now work, choose their own spouse, or travel abroad. This progress is partly attributed to the efforts of women's organizations, along with the availability of vocational courses and microloans. However, the role and influence of these organizations are still not significant enough." (P. 14-2024)*



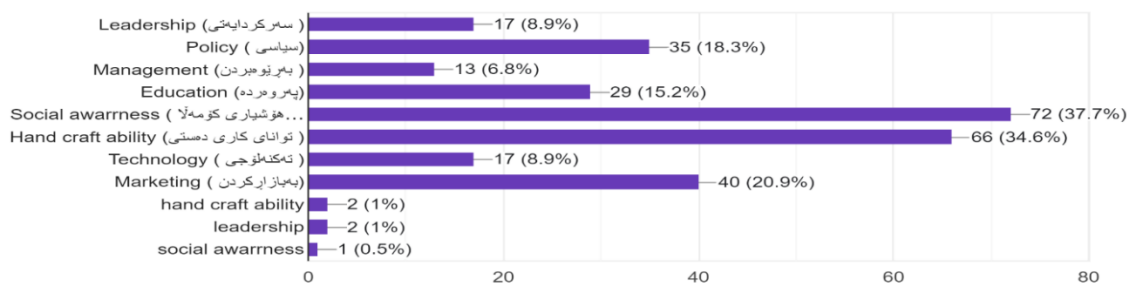
**Figure 7.** Women's organizations can help women improve political and socioeconomic skills (No. 211).

Figure 5 shows that 40% of participants view women’s organizations as vital for gender equality, while 30% doubt their effectiveness and 28% are unsure. Enhancing awareness and credibility of these organizations is crucial for overcoming barriers to women’s empowerment. Policymakers should use these insights to boost support for gender equality.



**Figure 8:** Have there been any notable changes in societal attitudes or behaviors related to gender equality and overcome social and cultural obstacles as a result of women's organizations's work? (No=211)

Figure 5 reveals mixed opinions in Kurdish society about women’s organizations' impact on gender equality. Fifty-one percent believe progress has been made, noting increased political participation, advocacy for rights, legal reforms, and challenges to patriarchal attitudes. Conversely, 48% see minimal change, citing ongoing patriarchal norms, barriers to high-level roles, the "feminine honor code," limited education and employment access, high rates of gender-based violence, and traditional and religious beliefs prioritizing men.



**Figure 9:** The impact of women's organizations on improving women's different skills in the Kurdistan region of Iraq (No. 211)

Figure 7 shows that 37.7% of respondents value women's organizations for raising social awareness but believe efforts should include both genders and integrate gender education in schools. Conversely, 34.6% think these organizations focus too much on manual labor due to restrictive conditions. With only 8.9% working on tech skills and 18.3% on political capacity, there's a need for a broader approach to enhance women's education and skills in technology, politics, and other areas, addressing gaps in protecting women's rights and improving their impact.

*"The departments and organizations dealing with violence against women often have a male-dominated mentality that does not adequately prioritize women's needs and rights." (P. 15-2024)*

To better protect women, departments and organizations must adopt a scientific, educational, and women-centric approach targeting the root causes of gender inequality and violence. Women's rights organizations should collaborate systematically and evidence-based. Despite some progress by political parties, ongoing conflicts and social norms still hinder women's empowerment. A shift from traditional roles to modern opportunities, including technology, is essential (Kaur, 2023).

#### 4.3.4 Women's participation in the government.

*"Women's participation in the government depends on the agreement of the parties that the participation rate of women in the government is low. The parties have an impact on women's political participation in the government because there is no law." (P .2-2024)*

Women's political participation and leadership remain limited globally, despite their proven abilities as leaders and agents of change. Women face various structural, capacity, and attitudinal barriers that restrict their options to run for office and participate equally in democratic governance (UN Women, 2014).

*"Therefore, women must use their strength, and strength needs education. Any woman who cannot educate herself to the point of decision-making will one day fail." (P no. 4 - 2024)*

Education empowers women by broadening their perspectives, increasing their rights awareness, and enhancing their decision-making abilities, leading to greater involvement in various aspects of life. However, some countries and organizations may superficially embrace democracy and gender equality for public relations, without genuine commitment. While many are sincerely dedicated to these principles, implementation can be imperfect. Promoting these ideals globally helps set norms, encourage reforms, and foster cooperation. Organizations like UN Women and USAID are actively advancing women's rights and political participation through training, advocacy, and support. Despite women's presence in politics, they often rely on male leaders and struggle to drive deeper changes (UN Women, 2024; USAID, 2024).

*“Efforts are also underway to coordinate multilateral and country-level actions to advance gender-inclusive democracy. In the Kurdistan Region, this tradition cannot be replicated if the quality of women reaching the leadership level is not at a level that can prove its existence in international institutions. If a woman is put in a key position just because of her gender, she will face some very difficult challenges that she cannot overcome. For example, the director general who has worked for me, when I, a woman, took on an administrative position, expressed his skepticism. He told me, ‘I said that the ministry was not for itself. What will happen in the future if women rule this administration?’ But after a while, he came to my room, sat down, and said, ‘I am proud of the years I have worked with a woman because you have worked better than any other man and you have been able to protect the rights of the Ministry of Agriculture’. Therefore, I believe that anyone who stands on their own two feet can protect their rights. I say this because I have not been discriminated against, but there can certainly be discrimination in the government, parliament, and many other places.” (P4-2024)*

Minister of Agriculture Begard Talabani exemplifies a woman in a leadership role who has faced resistance from male colleagues but has successfully implemented policies to empower women within her ministry. She emphasizes that women should prove their capabilities on their own merits rather than being appointed based solely on gender. Despite progress in advancing women's rights and representation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), significant challenges remain in fully integrating women into leadership and decision-making roles. Ongoing efforts are necessary to address patriarchal attitudes and ensure women can effectively contribute to shaping the region's political and economic future (Hussain, 2021).

#### **4.3.5. Quota system**

##### **1) Quota system in government or parliament system**

*“The quota system in the parliament is appropriate for now, although I do not agree with the quota system, but when women have more confidence in women, we can overcome this stage.” (P11-2024)*

Quotas can increase women's parliamentary representation by overcoming barriers and encouraging participation (UN Women, 2014). Effective implementation requires careful design and enforcement; otherwise, quotas may be seen as undemocratic. Successful examples include Sweden and Mexico, while El Salvador and Algeria show that quotas alone are insufficient without supportive policies. Quotas may also face criticism for potentially undermining fairness and merit (Kaur, 2023).

##### **2) Quota in the political party system**

In the Kurdistan Region, despite the use of the quota system by various parties to advance women's representation, progress remains slow. For example, while there is now one woman in the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) Political Bureau, the increase in female representation has been modest. The 14th KDP Congress saw the number of women in the 61-member central committee rise to 8, yet no women currently head KDP headquarters in different regions (UN Women, 2014). Additionally, among the KDP's youth union's 48,000 members, only 6,000 are women. This slow progress highlights ongoing barriers to achieving gender parity. Women's roles and participation in political parties need to be further expanded. To overcome these obstacles, it is crucial to address the male-dominated mentality prevalent in Kurdish society, enhance women's education and political involvement, and promote supportive family attitudes toward gender equality. Efforts must focus on creating more inclusive opportunities and setting higher standards for women's representation within political parties to approach a more balanced ratio of 50/50.

*Their influence can be two-sided because we are in a society that is still influenced by previous backgrounds, which has prevented women from coming forward, and sometimes there are obstacles.” “If we come to the truth, the Qur'an does not balance us equally (P7-2024).*



The patriarchal mindset still prevalent in Kurdish society poses challenges, with some citing religious beliefs to justify unequal gender representation. There is a need to further educate and empower women to overcome these barriers. (UN Women, 2014)

*“There should be changes within the parties that have been set at 30% for 10 years the rate should have been increased to 40% now.” (P.3-2024)*

The PUK party in Iraq has made strides in promoting women's leadership, with women comprising 25% of the PUK Women's Union leadership and a woman heading the legal center. However, achieving 50-50 gender representation remains a challenge due to ongoing male dominance and an environment not fully supportive of women's advancement.

*There are a few capable women below. The number can be increased because we have capable women in society, and it has been proven that women are very capable and commit the least corruption ‘But we must not only work on the quantity but also on the quality of women participating in politics because a conscious woman can influence women around her and pave the way for them. Masculine views have become a problem for women because we have many capable women who are not trusted during electionss” (P 2-2024)*

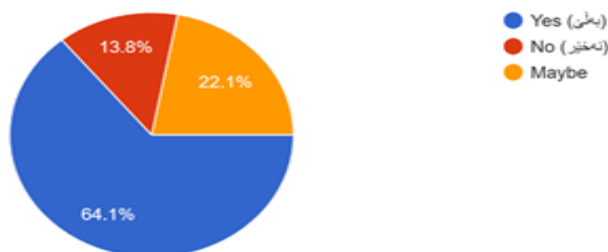
Gender gaps in political ambition, where women are less encouraged to run for office and less likely to believe they are qualified compared to men. Voter and political party biases against women candidates Cultural and family-related barriers that make it harder for women to advance their political careers (Suhail al-Ghazi, May 14, 2021)

*“ Most parties' programs are very appropriate in their constitution but not in practice. Parties can play an important role in increasing women's political participation in decision-making Unfortunately, in the Kurdistan Region, ‘But in fact, decisions are not in the hands of women and we still do not have women who can make important decisions without going back to the leader of their party Because the views of the parties are still patriarchal ‘When women's problems are solved, men's problems are also solved because most of men's problems are secondary to women They believe that women are a problem for men, but the rights they fight for themselves that you don't want to give them back will solve most of men's problems, Masculine views are a problem for men because they are all in the struggle not to lose them “ ( P.11 -2024)*

Political parties act as "gatekeepers" for women's political power, supporting advancement through quotas, women's wings, and training. However, many fail to fully implement gender equality measures (Daphne Joanna & Loes Aaldering, 2020). In the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), progress in women's leadership is challenged by legal, cultural barriers, and inadequate quotas. Globally, gender quotas effectively increase women's representation, emphasizing the need for genuine reforms rather than superficial measures. Addressing patriarchal mindsets and entrenched power structures is crucial for real progress (Daphne Joanna & Loes Aaldering, 2020).

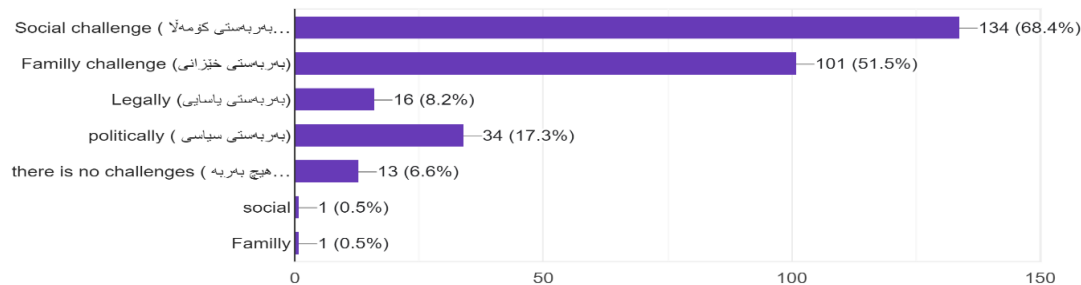
#### 4.3.6 The biggest social challenge for women to participate in politics ‘Conservative views of religious and tribal authorities on the role of women in political participation

Data represent challenges facing women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



**Figure 8.** Do we have challenges to improve women's skills in 2023? (no =211)

According to the data in Figure 8, 64% 64%c believe that there will be obstacles for women face in 2023. Women in the region will face numerous barriers to physical exercise, which can be categorized as interpersonal, social environment. .



**Figure 9:** What are the challenges faced by women when they want to improve skills in 2023 in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (no = 2011)?

Figure 9.2, with (101+134) 60% citing social and family barriers, along with religion and culture. Generally speaking, women still encounter numerous challenges. For instance, most departments dealing with violence are controlled by men. Nowadays, technology has become a powerful factor in increasing barriers for women due to the widespread dissemination of conservative articles online, especially targeting gender concepts or social issues. These issues include sexual threats, insults, and defamation. Society is not adequately educated to handle this technological advancement, and organizations should refrain from misusing the concept of gender.

*“Social barriers are one of the most difficult barriers facing women because of society’s patriarchal view of women. It is true that there are changes, but many men still think that women belong to men” (P.12 – 2024).*

This is one of the obstacles that prevent women from making free decisions. Often, women themselves are the creators of this culture by emphasizing gender differences in front of boys and girls. Therefore, family education is important. In addition to the education system, the media, politics, and civil society organizations all play a role in changing the family’s attitude towards girls. Men must be made to believe that women’s political and economic participation will not be a problem for them. Many men are afraid of losing their social power. Unless men believe that women are complementary rather than a threat, it is difficult to remove these barriers.

*“Religion has a great influence because Kurdish society relies primarily on religion, followed by customs. It is a complicated issue in our society, which is predominantly Muslim. Islam has two sides: it has given women rights in some parts and deprived them in others. The blurring of women’s political work or the distinction between men and women has prevented women from participating. Therefore, women’s participation changes society’s view of women as kind and gentle and men as strong. This is perceived as betrayal towards women. When we have kind women, we also have kind men. When we have strong men, we also have strong women. (P.11-2024)*

*“If a woman acts according to her religious obligations, she must not leave the household so that no one can see that she has taken away her freedom. Men who are religious leaders use it to control women. (P.2 -2024)*

Discriminatory social and cultural attitudes, as well as gender-based biases, often restrict women’s ability to participate in politics on an equal footing with men. Women are still seen as belonging in the private/domestic sphere rather than the public/political sphere. Women face significant capacity gaps compared to men, as they are less likely to have the education, contacts, and resources needed to become effective political leaders. (Daphne Joanna, Loes Aldering, 2020). This is exacerbated by a lack of encouragement and support for women to pursue leadership roles from an early age.

*“Conservative religious and tribal authorities in some societies reinforce traditional gender roles and norms that marginalize women's political participation. Perceptions that voters are not ready to elect women to higher office, as well as a lack of support from political party leaders, further discourage women from entering politics.” (P, 13–2024)*

*When we tried to amend the violence law in parliament after 12 years, they made noise; they interpreted it as if we wanted to destroy the family. Therefore, our current mentality that says we are advanced and not advanced is still dominated by a patriarchal mentality; even women were against it. Women often throw things at each other and don't want to move forward. Women often throw each other away. Women often don't support women as much as men. And the mother raises the child and makes the difference. Women still face other obstacles: their husbands do not accept that their wives are higher than themselves. Women still face other obstacles; their husbands do not accept that their wives are higher than themselves (P.5–2024)*

The resistance to amending the violence law after 12 years reflects a deep reluctance to challenge traditional norms and laws. This reluctance is rooted in patriarchal beliefs about family and gender roles, with proposed changes seen as threats to these norms. Some women's opposition to progressive changes and the resistance from husbands further highlight internalized misogyny and the intersection of gender and marital dynamics, compounding barriers to equality and empowerment.

*There is a mother with 10 children who does not allow girls to study, instead requiring them to serve the children with mom and the husband is not cooperating. Therefore, the state plays an important role in enabling women to work by building kindergartens and safe places for children. Sometimes women themselves cannot strike a balance between working outside and working at home. Lack of understanding between men and women. women do not know how to convince the other. So women must educate themselves to be able to know and adapt to their surroundings. Mothers need to establish a mutual understanding with their children, and the child need to understand their mother very well. Outside harassment and rape due to a misunderstanding of the social norms terrify women. Naming women involved in politics because of hatred or jealousy of each other reflects the still prevailing our society's attitude towards women, where the body often lags behind the mind. This issue exist in all countries, but in Kurdistan the situation is taken more seriously “ ( P.1 -2024)*

The state plays an important role in providing support systems like childcare to enable women's political involvement. However, traditional customs and their influence can sometimes pose a major barrier. Women face challenges balancing political or public roles with domestic or caregiving responsibilities, as societies often fail to provide adequate support systems, including childcare.

#### **4.3.7. The impact of political conflicts on women's political participation**

Political conflicts in the Middle East, including external influences and internal conflicts that political parties leverage to gather votes and sway public opinion, also have a profound impact on the emergence and representation of women in politics.

*“Women are the first victims of any conflict, especially in closed societies. So the current struggle, which is a struggle to break the barriers of unity, has led to an increase in risks for women's participation due to the sensitive situation of women in this society.”(P.10–2024)*

Women's political participation in the Middle East has been deeply intertwined with broader political conflicts and power struggles. As states have emerged and evolved in the region, the boundaries between the public and domestic spheres have shifted, often restricting women's ability to participate in formal politics. (Tucker, J,1986)

#### **4.3.8 Measures to be taken to support women's political participation**

Women face significant obstacles and criticism due to political vacuums and fears of challenging societal norms. Barriers include masculine leadership perceptions, insufficient party support, safety concerns, and self-doubt. Women peacebuilders advocate for greater inclusion in peace processes and decision-making (UN Women, 2022). Addressing cultural attitudes and gender norms is key to political equality. Women should educate and empower themselves, and political parties must actively promote female participation. Mentorship and support, as seen in long-term leadership examples, are crucial for development and inspiration (P.2-2024).

*"Having women in positions of power is important, but it's not the only factor. Women need to enter power with a 'women's mentality' and a commitment to defending women's rights. Women who work tirelessly at home without pay are often overlooked and undervalued. Their contributions to the family and society must be recognized and respected." (P2-2024)*

*"Being a woman is important you must not forget" (P1-2024)*

the excerpt stresses the importance of women entering positions of power with a commitment to defending women's rights and advocating for gender equality. It acknowledges the often overlooked contributions of women who work tirelessly at home without pay and emphasizes the need to recognize and respect their role in both the family and society.

#### **4.4. The situation of women's political participation in the Kurdish autonomous administration in Syria**

##### **4.4.1 The political system and its promotion of women's political participation.**

The Kurdish political landscape in Syria is predominantly influenced by two major parties: the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The KNC is an umbrella organization that includes 16 different Kurdish parties, such as the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (al-Parti), the Kurdish Democratic National Party in Syria, and the Kurdish Democratic Equality Party in Syria. Other parties within the KNC include the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria, the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party in Syria (Yekiti), the Kurdish Yekiti Party in Syria, the Azadi Kurdish Party in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Kurdish Party, and the Kurdish Left Party in Syria (Dr. Mohamad Hasan, 2020). The region operates under a federated, semi-direct democratic system, as outlined in its 2014 constitution, known as the "Charter of the Social Contract" (Hasan, 2020).

*"After reading the situation that women's participation in power is low, Ocalan's ideology aims to create an environment, therefore, like the PYD, where the role of women in organization and negotiations is emphasized. As women account for half of society, this ideology is reflected in the philosophy of management, and we made that philosophy a reality. Therefore, women's organizations were established, and women's strengths were taken into account on both sides, in politics and society, which complement each other. Therefore, we worked on how to educate women and how to educate society because women play an important role in education, both in society and in the education system. Therefore, working on society is important because women can know women and understand their problems. Therefore, the Women's Assembly has been established, and we have followed the co-presidency system like PYD, although there are other parties and the proportion of women is high. The percentage of women participating in elections is 50-50, which is enshrined in the law and the constitution of the autonomous administration. In politics, women's titles are protected by the Women's Court. There is a council alongside political participation and all other government centers. There is a philosophy of leadership that upholds equality between men and women and emphasizes the importance of environmental protection. Especially, the democratic government protects the rights of women of all different nationalities, including Armenians, Circassians, Syrians, and Arabs." (P.8-2024)*

In the Middle East, the patriarchal mind is still ruling, yet a revolution for women has begun, paralleling the Western revolution, which has led to a social revolution. This revolution is not about using women as mere physical tools but about reshaping society and nations, with profound reflections on communities. Given the systems of power within the framework of the state, political parties and families are all patriarchal.

*"So to restore power to women and social justice, a new system is running within the framework of the democratic system" (P. 9-2024).*

*"I speak as a man. Women play a big role in the struggle in northern and eastern Syria. Therefore, no matter how hard we try, if women do not come to power and are not free, men will not give them their rights because every man is raised on this mentality. Therefore, unless women are free, men will not be free." (P.9 -2024)*

In 2013, the Rojava Revolution led to the creation of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), a military force aimed at safeguarding women from attacks. Integrated into Rojava's self-government framework, including a co-presidency system, the YPJ operates within a confederal system similar to the Social Alliance for Women. Despite prevailing patriarchal norms, the Rojava Revolution has allowed women to assume significant roles in both political and military spheres, highlighting their leadership and protective capabilities. Guided by Abdullah Öcalan's "Jineology" ideology, which emphasizes that women's freedom is essential for societal liberation, the Rojava model has become a symbol of women's empowerment and revolutionary change (Wartmann, 2022).

#### **4.4.2 Women and their desire to participate in politics in the Kurdish autonomous administration.**

*"Political participation is women's right, yet for five thousand years the system has failed women, which has addicted women only to serving and having children at home. These systems impose limitations on women in school and family, especially through gender biases and gender protection, which makes women fall under the influence of this system and believe in it. But when women gain awareness, they know the system that has been imposed on them for five thousand years. Therefore, women will understand the impact of access to information and the consequences of lacking access to information. In fact, women are already engaged in politics both at home and in society. They should not be afraid of politics in the government and political parties. When women come to know themselves, they will understand life and politics, and they will become more involved in both. Therefore, women's political participation is high in the West." (P.8 -2024)*

Women's self-knowledge is important for understanding life, which further enables them to become active participants in politics. If even domestic women know what politics is, women will then know what their rights are in relation to politics.

*"In Rojava, there is a lesson for politics, especially for women, on how women can enter politics according to the philosophy of women's society. This is because politics is not merely about taking power; it also entails addressing the material and spiritual needs of society. Given that politics and society are interconnected, our definition of politics has changed today. Politics is the work of society, and women are the ones who create society." (P.9-2029)*

"Identity rights" and "women's emancipation" have been crucial for increasing Kurdish women's political participation. Since the 1990s, Kurdish women have challenged male dominance and patriarchal norms, with their sexuality becoming a resistance focal point (Gupta, 2016). In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, despite legal changes, challenges persist due to conservative views and limited governmental incentives. In northern Syria's Rojava, women have significantly influenced political decision-making through the Democratic Autonomous Administration, advancing gender equality supported by grassroots efforts (Wartmann, 2022).



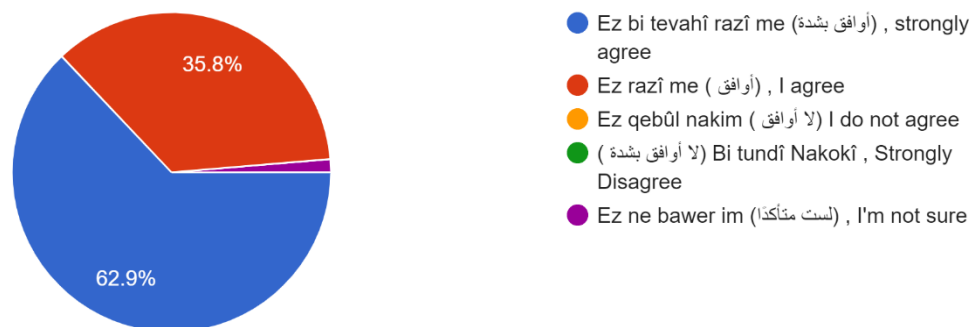
#### 4.5. The Iraqi Kurdistan region can learn from the Kurdish autonomous administration in Syria to effectively increase women’s political participation.

##### 4.5.1 How the Kurdish Autonomous Regional Government Implements the Women’s Right to Political Participation Code

The Rojava political system emphasizes developing young women’s political skills and awareness through three main areas: self-education, self-organization, and self-protection. Self-education provides the knowledge and tools needed to engage in politics. Self-organization fosters collective identity and empowerment, enabling effective organization and advocacy. Self-protection focuses on safety measures and strategies to safeguard women in the political sphere.

*“The Kurdish autonomous administration government was not created on the basis of women’s participation but on the basis of women’s essence and women’s will. As an important part that is no different from men, the system will not be democratic without women’s participation. It has been made in such a way that if a man does not respect women, he cannot respect society. And you can’t talk about a free society if you don’t respect women. Democracy is the basis for accepting women’s freedom. Democracy cannot be created if women do not play their role alongside men. Unless women play their role, a social system cannot be created. Women’s participation is not just for gaining power. In Rojava, the murder of a woman is severely punished. Society will not be democratic only through elections but also through respect for women. In 1933, elections were held in Germany, and Hitler was created. Therefore, we cannot say that a democratic system is not enough for women’s advancement; also, women’s education, self-building, and confidence are important.” (P9 -2024)*

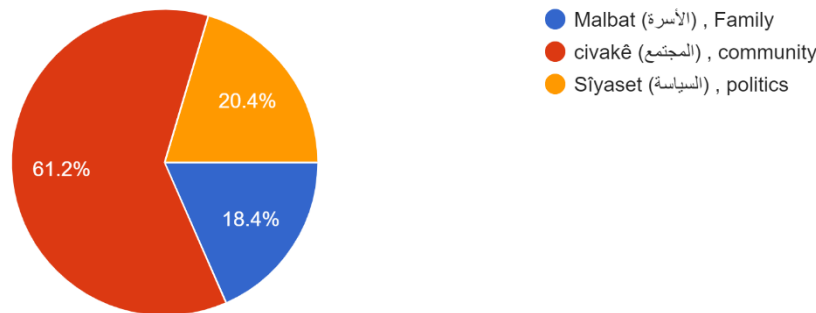
The Autonomous Administration’s constitution mandates at least 40% female representation in all elected bodies and uses a co-chair system with equal male and female leadership. Women’s organizations, like the Women’s Council of North and East Syria, have advisory power on women’s rights. The administration also has women-only security forces and provides political training for women. These measures challenge patriarchal norms and boost women’s empowerment. In contrast, Syrian opposition groups lack similar measures, resulting in significant disparities in women’s political participation (UN Women, October 2014).



**Figure 10.** Women’s political participation is an important factor for women, and women can lead the country (n = 173).

Women’s participation in the Kurdish autonomous administration showcases their political, military, and social leadership capabilities. Figure 10 shows 63% strongly agree and 36% agree on the importance of women in leadership. Nearly 99% believe women’s engagement is crucial for national leadership. Women’s effective management and the shift to a cooperative, democratic approach highlight their key role in inclusive governance.

#### 4.5.2 How the Kurdish Autonomous Administration addresses the biggest social challenge for women to participate in politics



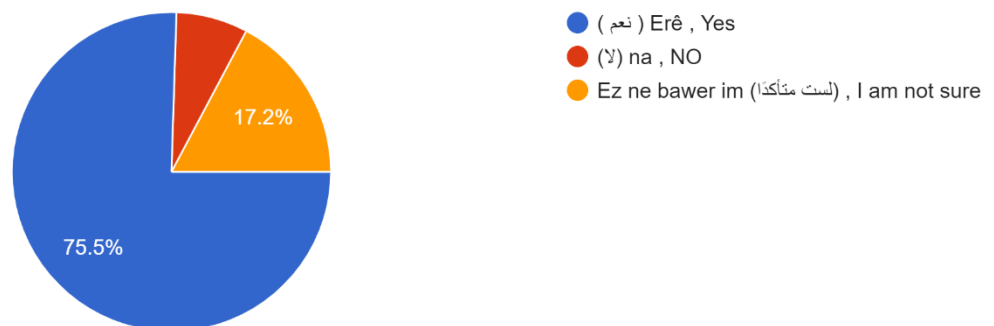
**Figure 11.** What are the challenges faced in women’s participation in politics, economics, society, and education in the Kurdish community in Syria? (No=170)

Figure 11 shows that 61.2% of respondents in the Kurdish community in Syria see community as a major barrier, 18.4% cite family, and 20.4% point to politics. These barriers, including restrictive policies and conservative values, mirror those in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. While the fight against ISIS and the formation of forces like the YPG have advanced women’s roles in Rojava, cultural barriers remain, especially in South Kurdistan. In contrast, the Autonomous Administration in northern and eastern Syria promotes women’s equal participation through local communes and assemblies (Wartmann, 2022).

*“In the past 13 years, significant changes have been made in the situation of women, despite the fact that the region is always full of war and conflict (P. 8-2024).*

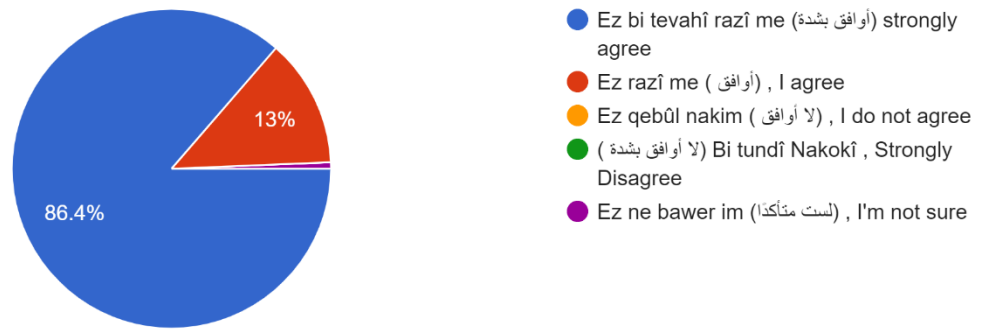
In a peaceful society, women’s education and self-knowledge can rapidly enhance their political participation within a decade. In Rojava, despite some religious influence in Arab areas, efforts are being made to address this through true religious values and challenging tribal thinking. Women’s progress impacts men’s perceptions, inspiring societal transformation and contributing significantly to national development, as seen in Rojava where women defend their land and advance the nation (Hassan, 2024).

#### 4.5.3. How women’s organizations and political parties worked to empower women’s rights



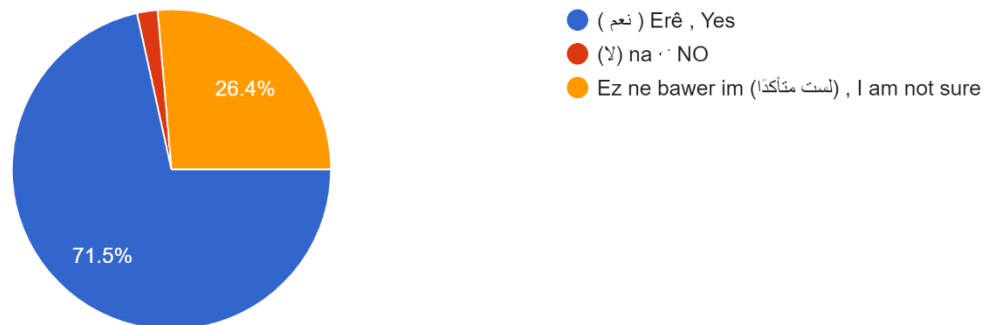
**Figure 12.** Have women’s organizations and political parties worked to empower women’s rights? (No. 173)

Figure 12 shows that 75.5% of respondents believe women's organizations and political parties are effectively advancing women's rights and gender equality. However, 17.2% disagree, suggesting a need to address their concerns. Understanding these differing viewpoints is crucial for overcoming challenges and improving the impact of these entities on gender equality.



**Figure 13.** The women and girls should be and have been educated and empowered in the community. (No = 173)

Figure 13 shows that 99% of respondents believe equal educational opportunities for women and girls are vital for empowerment. This includes education at all levels, vocational training, and access to reproductive health care. Efforts also focus on equal employment, a discrimination-free work environment, and women’s political participation and legal protection. A public coalition, active for three years, has developed 50 points to safeguard women’s rights, supported by various organizations like the Star Congress and the Zanubia Organization. These initiatives, part of the broader feminist revolution in Rojava, have inspired significant advocacy and progress (Bodette, 2020).



**Figure 14.** Has jineology ideology played an important role in educating and raising awareness among women? (No =173)

Figure 14 indicates that 71% of respondents believe jineology has significantly shifted societal attitudes, normalizing women’s roles in politics and administration. This change has enabled equitable participation in various spheres, contributing to democracy. The Rojava revolution emphasized women's roles, transforming perceptions from traditional domestic roles to active political, military, economic, and administrative roles. Curricula now reflect this shift, depicting women in diverse roles and incorporating Gnosticism to inspire women to challenge norms and seek freedom. This comprehensive approach has enhanced women’s social awareness and their impact on the Rojava revolution (Bodette, 2020).

#### 4.5.4 How Jineology promoted women’s political participation and gender quality

The Middle East played an important role in the birth of human civilization. And it is with great pride that women in this region can boast their contribution, given the abundance of natural resources and suitable climatic conditions to ensure a stable life, especially in the fertile crescent region (Mesopotamia). However, the pursuit of male dominance in historical periods, rooted in the imposition of power through demagoguery, has distorted women’s history, tainting it with

stories of betrayal, deception, and the denial of their long history. The fertile soil of the Middle East gave rise to great female figures, such as Semiramis, who distinguished herself in battle by her courage and demanded the construction of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, as well as Zenobia, the Desert Woman, who symbolized love for her country and people, leaving an indelible mark on the pages of history. This information goes back to the book. (jineology)<sup>1</sup>

*The Star Congress also works on the ideology of leadership and the science of gynecology, dedicated to studying women and exploring how women can take their place as women in political parties and methods for self-protection. It aims to create a system that enables women to play a significant role in society. Women should see themselves as an important part of society, recognizing their duty to keep society in educated unity and self-organization (P. 8-2024).*

Introduced by Abdullah Öcalan in 2015, jineology aims to address constraints on women imposed by various systems and promote gender equality. In Rojava, this approach has led to equal participation for women in political, military, and social spheres. The governance model incorporates jineology through mandatory study for both genders, a co-presidency system, and women's courts, aiming to dismantle patriarchy and advance gender equality as essential for a democratic society (Hasan, 2020).

#### **4.6. Women's political participation helps solve women's issues in Kurdish society.**

*"According to data, when women are active in political participation and hold high positions, this is because women understand a woman's situation better than a man. There are many important women's rights that are not considered rights by men. For example, women's issues such as divorce, inheritance, proxy, and identity are the main problems in Iraq. But for men, women should be given the right to go out and dress, which is not a right. According to Maslow's pyramid, these are basic needs, and physiology must be provided." (P.2 -2024)*

Therefore, when women themselves are in the decision-making centers, they know better than men what their rights and demands are. When a woman can run a society and a state, it is easier for her to run her family.

*"Women's political participation generally builds self-confidence in other women and their desire to participate in politics and management. For example, no woman asks for a security or police director, even though neither the law nor the state nor society prevents it, but women are not willing because we have never seen an example of a woman being a security director." (P.11-2024)*

The search results indicate that women's political participation and leadership have been shown to have several societal benefits, such as reducing inequality, increasing cooperation across party and ethnic lines, and prioritizing social issues like health, education, and social welfare. The results also highlight the role model effect that women leaders can have in inspiring other women and girls to participate in politics. (UN Women, 2011)

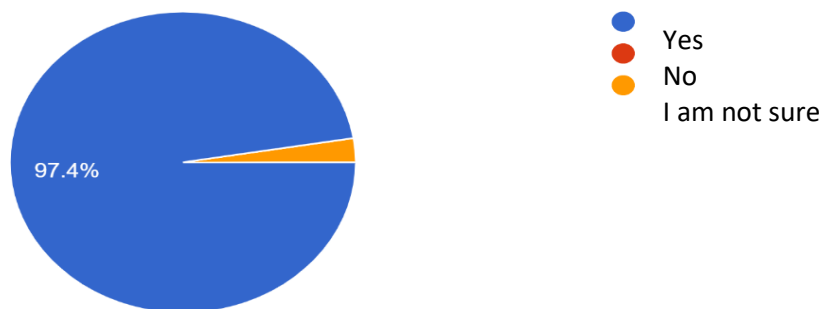
*"When women become presidents and managers, they work differently than men. Both sexes work in this sector. Women incorporate their own ideas into the work, while men may think more about administrative management. Although we are not saying that men should not participate, There should be both sexes. But these administrative structures cannot be male-dominated."(P.3-2024)*

Women leaders often prefer flatter organizational structures that foster teamwork and communication over rigid hierarchies, and use indirect communication to give employees more autonomy. In Kurdish society, the value of educated women is increasingly recognized, leading to more women in decision-making roles and encouraging families to support their daughters' leadership ambitions. For example, the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources has set up a gender equality unit to train women in investment and business, reflecting a broader commitment to gender equality in government.

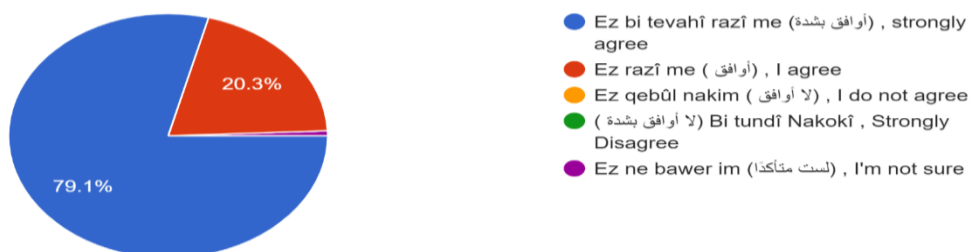
*“When a man quit, I told the general manager to suggest a good woman to play the role of power. Therefore, I think we should support each other, and the women in power should provide an environment in which other women can be educated under their hands and have the desire to play a role in political and administrative power.” (P.4 - 2024)*

The rise in Kurdish women's political participation has boosted family support for their education and leadership. Women in roles like the Ministry of Agriculture have advanced gender equality and created new opportunities (Chomani, 2023). Despite setbacks in the 1980s and 1990s, the 2014 Rojava revolution improved their status, leading to 33% female representation in the KRG parliament and key leadership roles by 2012 (Chomani, 2023; UN Women, 2014).

According to data shown in Figure 15, 97% of respondents believe that women's political participation is crucial for addressing women's issues in society. The survey in the Kurdish autonomous administration in Syria highlights that women's participation, ranging from 45% to 50%, significantly benefits Kurdish society. Women, being foundational to society, play a critical role in resolving social, political, and ideological issues. Their involvement in decision-making processes and all aspects of life is essential for protecting their rights. The women's revolution in West Kurdistan and northeastern Syria exemplifies this, with a constitution reflecting principles of freedom and a co-presidency system. This participation not only spreads awareness but also promotes job opportunities and societal transformation for women. The most crucial factor is ensuring that women have the confidence and capability to assume decision-making roles (UN Women, October 2014).



**Figure 15.** Does women's political participation help solve other women's issues in society? (No =173)

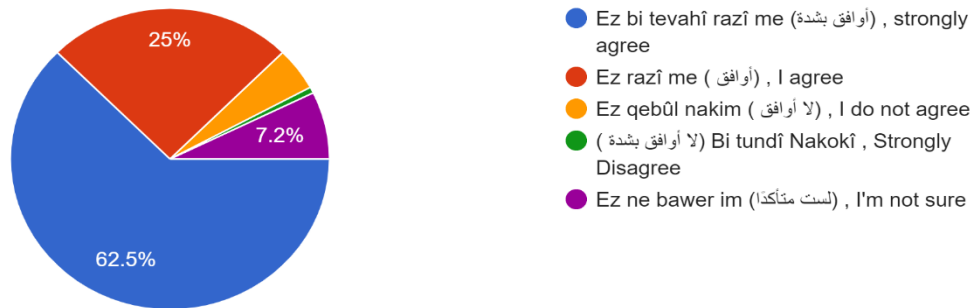


**Figure 16.** Do women and girls have the right to participate in politics, society, and the economy, and have they progressed to do so? (No = 173)

Figure 16 shows that 79% of respondents strongly agree and 20% agree on the importance of women's political, social, and economic participation and the need for their education. This reflects a significant shift in societal attitudes, recognizing women's essential role in business and



governance. Despite progress in Kurdish regions, challenges like deep-rooted norms, economic constraints, and threats to female politicians remain. The Western revolution emphasizes women's crucial role in addressing societal issues and self-governance, underlining that understanding gender is key to building social justice (Dr. Shilan Fuad Hussain, 2022).



**Figure 17.** Girls in the family have the same right to inheritance as boys and to make decisions about their lives.? (No=173)

According to the data presented in Figure 17, 88% of respondents believe that girls in families have the same right to inheritance as boys and to make decisions about their lives, while 7% of respondents are unsure about girls' rights to inheritance and decision-making. In contrast, a survey conducted in the Middle East-North Africa region shows that only 25% of Muslims support equal inheritance rights for children regardless of gender, suggesting that 75% of Muslims in that region believe in unequal inheritance based on gender, as per traditional Islamic inheritance laws (Elshamy, 2021).

*“To achieve effective women’s empowerment, work must be done to change systems and policies that limit their capabilities and choices and to enhance their role in all aspects of social, economic, and political life. Feeling that there is no difference between me and him and that I am no better than him because he is a man and that I have a personality independent of that of a man (father, brother, husband, boss, etc.), and have the full right to participate in all aspects of life, we can see that still women have challenges “(participant questioner response -2024). It shows the men’s mindset has changed because of women’s revolution to their rights.”* (one of the survey participants)

Women's political participation in the Kurdish autonomous administration in Syria has significantly advanced women's rights and representation. By taking on decision-making roles, women have championed policies and laws for gender equality, including a constitution emphasizing freedom and co-presidency. Their involvement has raised awareness, encouraged more female participation, and worked towards improving job opportunities and living conditions for women (UN Women, 2014).

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

### 5.1 Answer to research questions

#### 5.1.1 The situation of women political participation in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region

Women's political participation in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region has seen modest improvements, with women holding up to 30% of parliamentary seats and leading three out of 21 ministries. Despite a long-standing quota system for parliament, there is no equivalent for government positions, limiting women's decision-making power. Significant challenges persist in translating increased representation into real influence and leadership. Cultural attitudes and gender norms need to change to ensure true equality. While quotas can encourage more women to engage in politics and shift societal attitudes, they can also lead to stigmatization and be ineffective without proper implementation and oversight. The male-dominated political environment, focused on retaining influential voters, often sidelines women's issues. Although progress has been made,

substantial obstacles remain, hindering the advancement of women in politics and socio-economic status.

### **5.1.2 The situation of women's political participation in the Kurdish autonomous administration in Syria**

Since the Rojava revolution in 2013, women have played a central role in the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in northern Syria, both politically and militarily. The Women's Protection Units (YPJ), an all-female military force, were established to defend women and are closely affiliated with the male-led People's Protection Units (YPG). The Autonomous Administration's constitution mandates that at least 40% of all elected bodies and political parties be women, ensuring significant female representation. Leadership positions in the Executive Council are shared equally between women and men, promoting equal decision-making power. Autonomous women's organizations have challenged traditional patriarchal norms, including enforcing severe penalties for crimes against women. This has facilitated women's progress across various sectors. Data shows strong community support for women's leadership, with 99% of people agreeing that women should be at management levels and responsible for addressing all issues. Despite ongoing conflict, significant strides have been made in gender equality and democratic governance in the region.

### **5.1.3 Experiences the Iraqi Kurdistan Region can learn from the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria to effectively increase women's political participation**

To achieve gender equality and boost women's political participation, the Iraqi Kurdistan Region can learn from the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria. The Syrian administration's effective political system and women's organizations offer valuable insights. Their innovative approaches to enhancing women's representation and influence in decision-making, along with their focus on developing women's organizations, provide a model for advancing gender equality and political participation in Iraqi Kurdistan.

#### **1) Political systems**

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria exhibit distinct political systems. Iraqi Kurdistan operates as a hybrid of majoritarian and consensual democracy, with 16 registered political parties in the Kurdistan Parliament. In contrast, the Kurdish Autonomous Administration uses a decentralized, non-statist model of democratic confederalism. Iraqi Kurdistan, under the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), is pursuing greater autonomy within the Iraqi federal system, which has facilitated some democratization. Rojava, however, has developed a model of "democratic autonomy" that rejects central state administration in favor of decentralized, non-hierarchical governance. While the state-based systems in Iraqi Kurdistan can impede women's political progress due to their regulatory nature, Rojava's confederal system provides women with greater political opportunities and more significant changes in governance. This highlights the critical role that political structures play in either supporting or obstructing women's participation and representation. Addressing gender biases within these systems and implementing legislative reforms are essential for achieving gender equality in politics.

#### **2) Women's Organization and Ideology**

The Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have notably different political systems. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq operates as a hybrid majoritarian-consensual democracy, while the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria follows a decentralized, non-statist model of democratic confederalism. The Kurdistan Region's political evolution has been influenced by limited internal sovereignty and the dominant role of the KDP and PUK, facilitating some democratization but also posing challenges to women's political progress. In contrast, Rojava's stronger sovereignty and decentralized governance have provided more opportunities for women's political and social advancement.

In Iraq, women's organizations have faced challenges due to a European-influenced approach that did not fully align with local needs, resulting in less impact. Conversely, in Rojava, women have been integral to building an inclusive administration, driven by education in jineology and strengthened self-defense capabilities. This has led to significant female participation in political and military roles, a marked shift from their traditionally lower status. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq can learn from Rojava's practices by adopting strategies that better align with local contexts and promote women's political empowerment. This cross-regional exchange of knowledge can enhance gender equality and foster stronger cooperation among Kurdish communities.

#### **5.1.4 Women's political participation helps address women's issues in Kurdish society.**

Women's political participation in Kurdish society is transformative and requires a comprehensive, women-led approach to effectively advance their rights and influence. Moving beyond male-dominated and reactive strategies, it is essential to foster collaboration among the government, civil society, and political parties to dismantle systemic barriers. Empowering women in politics involves addressing societal biases, ensuring equal access to education and opportunities, and actively supporting women's leadership. A well-structured support system and policy framework are crucial for women to assume active and influential roles in politics. This entails shifting societal attitudes and overcoming persistent patriarchal norms to enable women's full participation. Contrary to the belief that women are uninterested in politics, research shows that systemic barriers and biases are the main reasons for their underrepresentation, not a lack of ambition. High levels of women's political participation in the Kurdish Autonomous Administration have demonstrated their capacity to effect meaningful change and advance gender equality.

#### **5.2 Recommendations**

In the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, there exist numerous issues and challenges related to women's political participation and gender equality. While progress has been made, there is still a long way to go in ensuring women's equal rights and opportunities. The Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria, however, has provided valuable insights and experiences in this regard, demonstrating the positive impact of women's political involvement. Drawing inspiration from these successful practices, the following recommendations are put forward to further promote women's political participation and gender equality in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region:

1. Political parties should focus more on women's participation and move away from the patriarchal mentality by opening up opportunities, introducing women to political philosophy, and enhancing women's capacities. Working more on women's political education and adopting a quota system, as seen in Rojava, can increase the proportion of women to 50 percent in the political system.
2. Political parties and the government should adopt more legal measures to protect women's rights and work seriously to implement them to make women feel more secure.
- 3: Kurdish women's organizations should work scientifically on the situation of women, relying on Jineology and different women's sciences to educate women to know themselves as women and as human beings. This approach has been effective in transforming the situation of women in Kurdish society.
- 4: The High Council of Women of the Kurdistan Region Government must coordinate all political parties and NGO women organizations to discuss women's issues and draft a new constitution. Financial support should be provided by the council, while working on the rules and programs to promote women's political participation should be made conditional.
5. The establishment of a quota system in government and other departments besides parliament will encourage an increase in the number of women leaders in all government bodies. This will help resolve most of the women's issues in Kurdish society.

### 5.3 Contributions

This study investigates women's political empowerment in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in Syria, offering insights into gender studies, political science, and regional governance. By comparing these regions, it highlights factors influencing women's political participation and identifies similarities and differences. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, the study examines women's representation in government, political parties, and decision-making bodies. It analyzes socio-political determinants like legal frameworks, cultural norms, and institutional structures that affect women's political empowerment. The study evaluates policy initiatives, such as gender quotas and co-chair systems, assessing their impact on gender equality in politics. It provides reflections on achievements and challenges, offering recommendations for advocacy and governance reform. In summary, this study delivers a thorough examination of women's political empowerment in Kurdish-majority areas, offering empirical evidence and policy recommendations for promoting gender equality and inclusive governance.

### 5.4 Limitation and suggestion for further research

The limitation for this study lies in limited access to resources on Kurdish girls' political participation and its impact, primarily relying on desk research in the library. Additionally, there is also a lack of feminist writers in Kurdish society due to the underestimation of the role of women in policy and society, as well as the social barriers that women face. As we delve deeper into the complexities of women's political participation in the Kurdistan Region, a crucial area for further research lies in examining the impact of the quota system. The quota system, designed to promote gender equality and enhance women's representation in decision-making bodies, could potentially serve as a powerful tool for effecting meaningful change. However, the true effectiveness of this system in the Kurdistan Region remains understudied. Therefore, conducting thorough research on the quota system's impact on women in this region could provide valuable insights and recommendations for shaping future policy reform within the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government. Such research would not only help us understand the current challenges and opportunities but also guide us towards more inclusive and equitable policies that empower women and promote gender equality.

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