

Building bridges for
nonviolent change: Women
as insider mediators
during the October 2019 protests in Iraq

Ilham Makki Hammadi

About this paper

This case study report is part of a project conducted by the Berghof Foundation, in consultation with UN Women in an advisory and coordination capacity, and funded by Global Affairs Canada and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. Since April 2023, it has supported women insider mediators actively involved in peaceful protest movements around the world. The project helped to increase their conflict resolution skills and capacities, allowing them to leverage their knowledge and expertise more effectively in peace processes. It also allows them to potentially take on more formal roles in conflict transformation processes, in line with the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

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Preface

The past decade has seen a global proliferation of mass movements demanding societal, constitutional and institutional change. These pro-democratic, peaceful protest movements (PPMs) have arisen in response to various factors including economic distress, systemic violence, political repression, or restrictions placed on civil society. PPMs can become vectors of societal conflict, and experience direct and often spontaneous confrontations between citizens and their governments that may erupt into violence. As these clashes have grown increasingly prevalent, peacebuilding scholars and practitioners began expanding their understanding of peace mediation, from high-level formal processes aimed at resolving armed conflicts, to encompass informal practices that frequently originate in grassroots movements. Often initiated by individual ‘insider mediators’, these activities bridge gaps in state-society relations, thereby further facilitating socio-political change.

Insider mediation in socio-political conflicts is conducted by locally-rooted individuals who build bridges and facilitate dialogue between belligerent parties, enhancing trust, preventing violence, advancing peaceful change, and contributing to sustaining peace. They derive their legitimacy, credibility and influence from their closeness to the conflict parties, thanks to personal and kinship relations, or socio-cultural proximity.

While the peacebuilding community has grown increasingly aware of the important mediation role played by societal actors such as religious or traditional leaders, no attention has yet been paid to the informal (and often invisible) spaces of mediation occurring during peaceful protests. Nevertheless, social movement activists engage in processes of informal and situated mediation - which occur during or between cycles of protests - either between different factions within a movement, or between activists on one hand and community members, government actors, security forces, or even armed groups on the other. In particular, women often play prominent leadership roles in protest movements, but may also take on less visible insider mediator roles; they build bridges between various sets of actors, either to protect activists and mitigate violence or to advance conflict transformation.

This report is part of a series of case studies uncovering the roles of women insider mediators within peaceful protest movements. They examine their various roles and attributes, and the gender norms which may facilitate or inhibit such roles, among other limiting and supportive factors. They also reflect on strategies to sustain and leverage these mediation roles, especially during formal dialogue and mediation processes. Finally, they list key capacity-building and support needs faced by these women to sustain and deepen their mediation engagements, thereby expanding the potential for achieving peaceful change and conflict transformation.

Each report draws on data collected through qualitative interviews with relevant movement actors, activists, observers, as well as civil society organisations and state authority representatives. The women interviewed and featured in the studies may not necessarily self-identify as mediators, but are depicted as such by other activists and observers due to their positions of trust and access to conflict protagonists, as well as the positive outcomes of their interventions. In the spirit of participatory research, the reports are authored by local scholars who had trusted access to the respective movements, either as activists themselves or as close allies and sympathetic observers.

These studies will hopefully appeal to a broad readership. Readers who are experts or interested in mediation and conflict resolution will find inspiration on ways to engage with protest movements through internal and societal bridge-builders. Similarly, activists and experts in the field of social movements and civil resistance will gain new insights into the relevance of dialogue, negotiation and mediation in advancing peaceful change.

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Anti-government protesters gather at Tahrir Square. Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / AP Photo | Hadi Mizban



Acronyms

LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex
PMF	Popular Mobilisation Forces
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

1 Introduction

The October 2019 protests were the most significant demonstrations in Iraq since 2003. They stood out because of their spontaneity and the massive number of participants, with people from across central and southern Iraq joining in. The protests began on 1 October in response to a social media call to voice outrage at corruption in government institutions, poor public services and unemployment. The so-called Tishreen Movement (the Arabic word for October) gained momentum when university students participating in sit-ins in Tahrir Square in Baghdad and demanding improved job opportunities were mistreated by security forces (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq 2020). In a show of solidarity, groups of young people from poor and marginalised areas joined the students on the streets. Importantly, these demonstrations were spontaneous and not organised by political parties or blocs.

Although the majority of participants were young men between the ages of 15 and 35, these protests were notable because for the first time in modern Iraqi history, a significant number of women of various ages from diverse educational, socioeconomic, religious and political backgrounds were involved. Women protesters challenged established gender stereotypes that limited their participation in public life. They also protested the

political and economic exclusion of segments of society that did not benefit from patronage relations with established groupings and parties within the political system. Despite the use of extreme violence by the security forces and the prevalence of gender-based violence, women continued to participate in the protests with unwavering determination. They proved their effectiveness, mobilisation power, immense enthusiasm and unrelenting demand for change in various ways.

Although the protests began peacefully, the government's violent response led to clashes with security forces that attempted to disperse the gatherings in the public squares and suppress the movement. The violence swiftly escalated, and protesters throughout all the governorates experienced systematic assaults by security forces and unknown armed groups. Hundreds of protesters were killed and many were injured as a result of the use of live ammunition (UNAMI 2020). The government referred to these armed groups as “the third party” (Ghafuri 2019), including Al-Sadr’s “blue cap” armed supporters, who infiltrated the protests under the pretext of protecting the participants and enforcing order inside the protest arenas, but then started to attack and kill the protesters (The National 2020). Outside of the protest arenas, conflicts also occurred with

segments of society that rejected the very idea of protesting (NDI 2020). In addition, conflicts arose among the protesters inside the arenas due to their divergent political orientations and cultural, educational and economic backgrounds.

Women employed diverse strategies and played a variety of roles in preventing and managing these conflicts in order to preserve the peaceful nature of the movement. Some women protesters demonstrated natural and intuitive abilities and skills as insider mediators, despite never previously undergoing training or gaining mediation skills. Women used dialogue and encouraged the opening of channels of communication among the different groups inside the protest arenas. These efforts by women mediators focused on building trust and understanding between the protesters present in the public squares, society more broadly, some of the units of the regular police force, certain government representatives and international/national media outlets. However, it was not only impossible, but also very dangerous for women to attempt to communicate with armed militias.

This report focuses on documenting the roles of Iraqi women as insider mediators within the protest movement – both inside and outside protest arenas – and identifying crucial factors within the political and security context, as well as the gender dynamics shaping their mediation practices. It further identifies the most important needs expressed by women in terms of developing their capacities in mediation and peacebuilding.

The methodology is based on primary data collected through in-depth interviews with women and men who participated in the October 2019 protests. The use of open-ended questions helped to provide space for the interviewees to express their own opinions

and perceptions. Interviews were conducted in five governorates (Baghdad, Diwaniyah, Dhi Qar, Najaf and Basra) in August-October 2023. These sites were selected due to the widespread protests that took place there, the active participation of women and the different political, security and social contexts affecting women's participation and roles in insider mediation. The most important criterion taken into consideration when selecting the interviewees was their participation in the protests over a long period of time. Most of the interviewees are academically educated, members of the middle class and active in the civil/political field.

Research ethics (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2014) were adhered to during the interviews,¹ and great attention was paid to preserving the data and the confidentiality of all interviewees. Twenty interviews were conducted overall with (11) women and (9) men activists. Each interview lasted 45 minutes on average. In addition, five interviews were conducted with women who had received previous training in mediation, and these interviews focused exclusively on their needs and the best ways to develop mediation skills among women activists.

The study faced certain limitations due to the sensitivity of the topic of protests and gender; all governments view protests as a threat to political systems and the state, and the study was written amidst the anti-gender campaign (Ali 2023). Obtaining specific answers about the women's mediation roles was challenging as most interviewees were not familiar with the concept of 'insider mediation', which was the main focus of the research. Therefore, open-ended questions were used during the interviews without mentioning the terms 'gender' or 'insider mediator's role' to describe the various roles played by women in the

1 The research ethics employed include the following: Confidentiality and safety were paramount in this study to ensure that the research did not cause any harm to the participants. Privacy and confidentiality were particularly important, and the research team made sure to respect the interviewee's decisions and choices. Women's choices are often influenced by factors such as family, community and politics, which were taken into account during the study. The interviewees were informed of the nature and purpose of the study and had the freedom to choose whether to participate or not. The research team took measures to ensure the personal safety of the participants and made them aware of the potential hazards of participating in the research. The study was based on the 'do no harm' principle to promote the safety of both the interviewees and the researchers. The researchers were mindful of the power dynamics between themselves and the interviewees and posed all questions in a sensitive, supportive and non-judgmental manner.

protest arenas. Sub-questions were then asked about how women dealt with the conflicts that arose during the protests. At first, many interviewees stated that they had not heard of or seen mediation roles played by women. Nevertheless, when they described women's activities inside the protest squares, the insider mediation roles that women performed in that context were confirmed. The data obtained from these responses and descriptions were coded and classified to identify patterns in women's insider mediation roles.

2 Background

2.1 Context of the protests

The protests in October 2019, similar to those which took place in 2010, 2015 and 2018, were a manifestation of the widespread discontent among Iraqis towards the political system and the way it functions. In the previous protests, the demonstrators demanded better public services, reduction of the economic disparity between different segments of society and improvement of the living conditions of marginalised and underprivileged groups. During the October 2019 protests, it became evident that the younger generation had developed a revolutionary political consciousness. The demands shifted from mere protests to holding the political system accountable, with calls for the government's resignation, for the elimination of the sectarian quotas (*muhasasa*) and for an end to the political and financial corruption of the ruling parties. Eventually, the demands peaked with calls for the complete dismantling of the political system.

The protests mostly occurred in Baghdad and the central and southern provinces of Iraq, which are predominantly inhabited by the Shia community. These provinces include Karbala, Babil, Wasit, Najaf, Qadisiyya, Muthanna, Dhi Qar, Maysan

and Basra. Sunni inhabitants also participated in Baghdad, and because security forces in the Sunni-majority governorates forcibly quelled the protests, many activists travelled to the capital city to join the mobilisation there. In Baghdad, the protests were concentrated in Tahrir Square and Al-Khilani Square, with regular clashes between the protesters and security forces occurring on or near Jumhuriya and other nearby bridges (EASO 2020). According to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), around 3,000 people participated in the first protest in Baghdad on 1 October, while the number of protesters reached an estimated one million between 29 October and 4 November (UNAMI 2019a, 2019b).

The violence against protesters, specifically women, during the October 2019 protests was not committed in isolation by individual elements of the security forces; rather, there was a pattern of systematic violations and repeated attacks. In recent years, the influence of some armed factions that participated in combat operations with the military forces against the ISIS terrorist group in 2014 has increased to dangerous levels. These irregular factions constitute a real crisis for the state. Irrespective of the circumstances in which they emerged, many of them now operate outside the law and sometimes even above the law and the

authority of the state. This has weakened the state's fundamental role in maintaining national security and providing protection for all citizens, whether in the private or the public sphere (Almamoori 2017). It also explains the large number of casualties among the protesters, as the government failed to control security personnel and prevent them from using excessive force; it was also unable to stop irregular armed factions from imposing their control and hegemony over the public/political sphere.

From the very first day of the protests, the authorities – including official security forces as well as unofficial armed elements – opted for a repressive response by launching tear gas grenades at the heads of demonstrators, firing live bullets, and deploying masked snipers on the roofs of buildings overlooking squares (Human Rights Watch 2019). Amnesty International documented approximately 600 deaths in the period from October to 23 December 2019. More than 12 protesters were killed in one week as security forces launched a deadly and violent campaign against protesters in Baghdad and the cities of southern Iraq (Amnesty International 2020). According to statistics from the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, the death toll among protesters reached 489 people, with 27,000 wounded, from the start of the protests until 25 December 2019 (Deutsche Welle 2019). A 2021 report by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) documented serious violations of international human rights law. The killing of protesters followed a clear pattern of targeting the head and chest area with live bullets. Official security forces and unofficial armed elements also carried out random arrests, with several documented cases of torture inside detention centres. The state-imposed restrictions on freedom of expression, cutting off Internet networks in all areas that witnessed protests and preventing local and international media from reporting what was happening in the protest squares (UNAMI 2021). The UNAMI report confirmed that the Iraqi government and judiciary were clearly reluctant to hold accountable the perpetrators responsible for the killing, torture and forced disappearance of protesters. Very few cases were referred to the judiciary on the whole, and many of these cases were brought against unknown persons (UNAMI 2021).

Despite the excessive use of force against protesters, their demonstrations were successful in shaking up the political system. Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi stepped down on 30 November 2019. While some political leaders attempted to meet the protesters' demands, these attempts were not serious but were aimed at containing the protesters and stopping the protests. The resignation of the then Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi resulted in the formation of a caretaker government, as coalitions and political forces struggled to find a replacement that satisfied the protesters. In May 2020, the Iraqi House of Representatives passed a vote of confidence in Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's government, ending the stalemate that had lasted for several months. In response to the protesters' demands, the government pledged to hold early elections in October 2021.

However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iraq led to a decline in the protest movement in March 2020. The Iraqi Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization (WHO) advised the protesters to stay at home until the pandemic subsided; they therefore resumed their activism in different forms. One of the main groups announced a temporary halt to demonstrations due to the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, and some protesters shifted their focus to sterilising the gathering spaces to prevent infection.

Once the protesters left the streets, they continued calling for change in the virtual space. Social media sites played a key role in the October revolution by launching calls to protest and articulating the movement's demands (Al-Rubaie 2020). However, other sit-inners refused to leave the tents. In Baghdad, protests occurred on 25 October 2020 to mark the anniversary of the protest movement. That day, security forces used hot-water cannons against protesters, and in turn suffered casualties due to protesters hurling Molotov cocktails and hand grenades at them. After the anniversary protests, the security forces broke up the sit-ins, destroyed the tents and removed activists from the protest squares. To deter renewed sit-ins, the government has kept troops deployed in Tahrir Square since 25 October 2020 (International Crisis Group 2021).

2.2 Mapping the individuals and organisations involved in the protests

The uprising was initiated by protesters who were mainly low-income labourers and individuals from marginalised social groups, including the unemployed, who constituted 90 per cent of the total number of protesters. The majority of the protesters were young individuals aged 16 to 30 who exhibited revolutionary enthusiasm, mass effectiveness and the ability to leverage social media. Other groups mainly comprised formal religious factions that were not politicised or ideological. Small groups of individuals belonging to Shiite Islamic parties, such as the Al-Hikma Movement, Al-Nasr Bloc, the Sadrists and the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), may have participated on their own initiative, without official party guidance, to serve their personal interests. Small groups associated with traditional parties, including leftist, liberal and nationalist parties, also found the spontaneous slogans of the youth movement to be aligned with their own (Daham and Athraa 2022).

According to various sources, the composition of the protesters changed during the second round of demonstrations that started on 25 October. This time, a more diverse group of people joined the protests. Grass-roots movements, including men and women from various age groups, and student unions played a pivotal role in mobilising high-school and university students, alumni groups and professionals. In several places, teachers, students and other professionals declared open-ended strikes in support of the protests. Many of the protesters were educated university students who had recently faced a sharp rise in poverty and economic hardship at the individual and family levels. Many lived independently in rented or informal homes, were unemployed and unmarried, and were also responsible for supporting their families (Nadhmi and Hatem 2022).

The majority of the protesters were not associated with any specific political party or group, were not led by any religious or political leader, did not follow any particular viewpoint or ideology and

had no formal or unified leadership. The followers of Muqtada Al-Sadr, known as the ‘blue caps’, were also present at the protests from 25 October onwards and their numbers grew significantly. According to most of the literature, there were two types of protesters – the leaderless, and the followers of Muqtada who complied fully with their leader’s orders. Initially, Muqtada Al-Sadr’s followers attempted to protect and support the protesters. However, it soon became clear that they intended to control and dominate the protest arenas. When Muqtada failed in this endeavour, he withdrew his support and his followers began to attack and kill protesters. On 2 February, he urged the national security forces to open the blocked roads by force and “discipline” the revolution (Selvik and Amirteimour 2021).

2.3 Roles of women in the movement

The interviews showed that women participated in the protests, both in person and virtually via social media, at similar rates to men. When it comes to women’s areas of engagement, some respondents stated that they did not believe that women were limited to certain roles within protest environments. Instead, both men and women took on roles that were necessary and appropriate depending on the situation.

However, other interviewees identified notable differences in the forms of protest and the roles that each group undertook. One major trend was that most roles performed by women protesters were related to women’s reproductive and housekeeping duties. They would provide food, clean, wash clothes, cook, set up tents and offer first aid and medical assistance, which were crucial tasks in demonstration squares. While men occasionally took on some of these roles in protest scenarios, they were not considered permanent or archetypal for them. Whenever women were present, men often stopped performing these tasks. This resulted in women frequently taking on care and service responsibilities related to traditional gender roles, both at home and in the public or political spheres.



Volunteer women help Iraqi protestors. Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / AA | Murtadha Sudanii

During the protests, women also performed roles associated with motherhood, by maintaining peace and preventing young men from putting their lives in danger in certain areas of the protest squares. They realised the importance of peaceful protests and sought to keep them nonviolent. Their presence had a visible and significant impact in ensuring the peaceful nature of demonstrations during the Tishreen protests. As a result, they earned legitimacy and respect for their presence in the protest arenas. Men were not able to fulfil this role at that time, and protesters appreciated and respected women for their efforts.

Accordingly, based on the interview data, it was observed that women were indirectly subjected to a gender-based division of work in the protest arenas. However, some women refused to comply with these roles, considering them a form of implicit discrimination. Some interviewees also expressed their complete rejection of the gender stereotyping of their roles in the protest arenas. They believed that such stereotyping went against

the aim and objective of the protest movement, which was to eradicate all forms of discrimination and inequality in society. As a result, many women, especially young women, took on unconventional roles in the public sphere. They were able to express themselves through activities such as drawing on public walls and holding educational seminars that helped clarify the political situation and national laws. Women journalists also actively participated by writing about the demonstrations, either independently or for media organisations. Women also helped monitor and document the violations committed against protesters, despite the dangers that this entailed. However, women faced restrictions when trying to perform similar activities outside the public squares.

Women, in general, tended to be less involved in confrontational protest activities with security forces compared to men, who were more likely to engage in confrontations. Nevertheless, some women, particularly young women, were present on the front lines and even took part in confrontations between protesters and security forces (Hammadi 2023), in addition to actively offering logistical support in the protest squares. By taking on these

unconventional roles, women demonstrated their capability and were instrumental in maintaining the momentum of the protests during the most challenging times.

2.4 Visible spaces of dialogue and mediation

The protesters involved in the Tishreen Movement established a presence in Tahrir Square in central Baghdad, which is strategically located near the Green Zone where the main government ministries and agencies are situated. According to the interviews, the protest squares were important spaces for dialogue among the protesters. Initially, the wide protest squares served as the venue for spontaneous and timely dialogues and discussions. As the protests continued, protesters began erecting tents with specific names for each group, where various dialogues took place based on their political standpoints and the developments in the protest squares and beyond. Some activists also held awareness-raising dialogue sessions on political, economic and legal topics for the youth.

On some days, violence against protesters increased, making it difficult to reach the protest square. On such occasions, young activists (men and women) held dialogue sessions outside of the square in nearby cafes in the Karrada district, for example. Social media provided the largest space for dialogue among young people, creating a political cybersphere as an alternative to the physical space.

Besides these forms of dialogue among protesters, there were no direct negotiations with the government and its representatives because there were no identified leaders of the protests. Communication occurred indirectly, as protesters expressed their demands through social media and banners in protest squares, while the government responded through news bulletins on satellite channels and through official statements. However,

its response was mainly aimed at silencing the protesters using the ‘carrot and stick’ approach. On the one hand, it used violence to suppress the protests, and on the other hand, it announced various government measures to contain the crisis, such as distributing financial grants, amounting to 150,000 Iraqi dinars (USD 115) to unemployed young protesters, providing job opportunities for those with university degrees, referring corrupt employees to the judiciary, and investigating the killing of protesters, all of which are obvious duties of the government. These measures did not meet the protesters’ structural demands, which aimed to reform the entire political and economic system, operationalising accountability, addressing impunity and corruption, improving services, and ending the religious and sectarian system of power.

3 Women's insider mediation roles

The data analysis revealed several patterns in the insider mediation roles undertaken by women. These roles were determined by the nature of the conflict and the parties involved, as well as by the specific context. Four main insider mediation roles were identified in the protest arenas: 1) mediation in disputes between the protesters themselves in protest squares; 2) mediation between protesters and unarmed or armed police forces; 3) mediation between protesters and armed groups, to reduce violence and prevent casualties among protesters; and 4) mediation between protesters, society and representatives of some government institutions.

3.1 Mediation roles to prevent violence and unify positions among protesters

“The majority of the women demonstrators played mediation roles and tried to mitigate the intensity of the conflicts and resolve them before they turned into disputes that affected the peacefulness of the protests. There were parties trying to incite differences among the young protesters, so as to give society a negative image of the protests.”²

As explained earlier, the October 2019 protests were met by extreme violence from the Iraqi government and security forces, with the goal of inciting fear and terror and ending the protests. As a result, some protesters confronted the security forces and armed groups, and skirmishes occurred between the security forces and the protesters. The repressive measures by the security forces fuelled the protesters' anger against the government and

the ruling political parties and reinforced their commitment to continue protesting (Nadhmi and Hatem 2022), because they had nothing to lose, as one of the women protesters explained:

“What do we stand to lose? We have tasted the bitterness of this life, poverty and marginalisation, we were injured by rubber bullets, and our friends were martyred.”³

In this context, the interviews brought to light several instances of women playing mediation roles at the front lines. These women saw that the security forces and armed groups were provoking protesters to escalate violence and thus legitimise their repression. The women therefore engaged in lengthy conversations with the young men to prevent them from confronting the security forces and avoid any escalation into violence. The interviews confirmed that women in the protest arenas consistently attempted to convince the protesters to not respond or to stop throwing stones at the security forces, and this helped to send a message to society that the protests were peaceful. The fact that the protesters stopped responding to the armed forces' provocation also helped to create consensus with other groups of protesters who chose not to engage in confrontations with the police.

The mediating role of women activists and journalists during protests extended beyond convincing young people to refrain from using violence and maintaining the peaceful nature of the protests. Many of them also played a significant part in educating the youth about political issues and problems. This often sparked controversy and heated debates among protesters who lacked

² Female interviewee, 51 years old, single, Baghdad, diploma, civil society volunteer, human rights defender and journalist. Interview date: 30 August 2023.

³ Ibid.

political knowledge and dialogue skills. For example, intense discussions took place about the proposed new election law and the issue of transitioning from a parliamentary system to a presidential system. Women who participated in the dialogues and discussions inside the tents drew on their academic knowledge to expose the advantages and disadvantages of all these various options. The women were successful in unifying the young protesters, minimising points of disagreement among them, creating a consensus regarding the demands raised in the protests and reducing conflict. Additionally, the women were able to change the young people's attitudes and ideas about the role of women, as it was the first time many of them had talked and communicated with women leaders who possessed courage, political opinions and leadership skills. At first, it was difficult for the young protesters to accept that a woman was giving them information and explaining political issues to them, as it is a role that men commonly assume within their families and local communities.⁴

A specific example of mediation between protesters is the case of Umm Abbas, an uneducated elderly woman who would often bake bread for the protesters. She did not allow any conflict or disagreement to occur among the protesters. She would make consistent efforts to identify the cause of the conflict, encouraging the adversaries to engage in dialogue and helping to resolve the dispute between them.⁵ Most of the elderly women relied on the implicit authority granted to them by virtue of their age and their role as mothers. They often used the phrase "I am like your mother" at the start of their conversations with young protesters. In this way, they were able to impose their authority when mediating and resolving conflicts among young protesters, as they knew that they enjoyed their respect and appreciation.⁶

Every day, women kept a close eye on individuals who attempted to infiltrate the protest square and incite the protesting youths to violent escalation. These individuals were often mobilised by the security forces and political parties to create problems and disputes among the demonstrators. In these instances, the women alerted the young people and taught them how to deal with these interlopers in ways which ensured that the protests remained peaceful.⁷

Although one of the interviewees argued that women's mediation roles were not successful, the incident she mentioned confirmed women's effectiveness in issuing early warnings, analysing and monitoring conflicts and communicating with parties in a way which was difficult for men to do. This example involved a young woman who played a mediation role in ending a dispute between two groups of protesters. One group consisted of followers of Muqtada Al-Sadr ('blue caps'), who were armed and powerful. They were insisting on reading a statement in the protest square which nominated a political figure for the position of Prime Minister after the resignation of Adel Abdul-Mahdi. However, not all the protesters accepted this candidate, and so the 'blue caps' tried to pressure and coerce the rest of the protesters into accepting their nominee. The young woman intervened and negotiated with representatives of the Sadrist political movement. She succeeded in dissuading them from reading the nomination statement and, at the same time, she negotiated with the other party that rejected the statement and explained the Sadrist representatives' point of view. In the end, she managed to calm the situation and bring the viewpoints of the two parties closer. Other women participated in the initiative, but this young woman in particular played a prominent role in ending the conflict and preserving the peacefulness of the protests.⁸

4 Male interviewee, 30 years old, Dhi Qar, advanced diploma, peacebuilding activist. Interview date: 4 September 2023.

5 Female interviewee, 28 years old, Dhi Qar, PhD, teacher. Interview date: 22 September 2023.

6 Male interviewee, 30 years old, Dhi Qar (as above).

7 Female interviewee, 51 years old, Baghdad (as above).

8 Female interviewee, 37 years old, married, Baghdad, Bachelor's degree, civil society and feminist activist. Interview date: 6 September 2023.

3.2 Mediation roles between protesters and police forces

The young protesters lacked trust in the police due to various incidents in which armed police units, including the riot control forces, attacked and killed large numbers of demonstrators. As a result, the protesters sometimes tried to attack the unarmed police who were responsible for searching them before they entered the protest squares. However, some of the women were able to act as mediators and address the mistrust between the unarmed police forces and the young demonstrators. They focused on conveying the idea that there was a difference between the riot control forces that were attacking the demonstrators and the 'good police' that were checking them. These women were not seen as a threat, which allowed them to interact with the conflicting parties and build trusting relationships with them. On the one hand, the women's daily experiences with the police at checkpoints near the protest squares and their conversations with them helped reduce tensions with the police. On the other hand, women also held dialogues with the demonstrators to convince them that the police forces did not bear any hostility towards them as they too were part of society and shared their experiences of marginalisation and injustice. As one interviewee confirmed:

*"It was necessary to create mutual trust between the protesters and the police and to differentiate between the diverse responses by the police to the protests. The security forces that beat the protesters were different from the police officers who were friendly and even shared their food with the protesters. It took us a long time until we were able to convince the activists that certain parties were attempting to provoke the protesters and drag them into violence so that they would have an excuse to suppress the protests and even kill the protesters."*⁹

3.3 Human chains and mediation in the context of extreme violence

From the first days of the protests in Baghdad, the security forces blocked the roads and bridges leading to the fortified Green Zone, where the government headquarters and most foreign embassies and United Nations facilities are located. The protesters tried to storm this area several times, but the security forces forcibly prevented them from doing so and began firing live bullets at anyone who approached the checkpoints. There are testimonies proving that unknown armed groups of masked individuals, whom the government called the "third party" (Ghafuri 2019), were also present at these checkpoints, supported by a group of snipers stationed on the roofs of buildings, firing lethal shots at the heads and chests of the protesters.

During an interview, it was reported that women faced difficulty in preventing or mediating conflicts between demonstrators and armed men due to the high level of hostility between the parties, the presence of weapons and the lack of government accountability:

*"At one point, a group of unknown masked men entered the protest site, and the demonstrators attempted to expel them. The women intervened and spoke to the young men to prevent them from approaching the masked men, who belonged to 'a third party' and posed a threat. However, the women did not speak to the masked and armed group because they were aggressive and dangerous."*¹⁰

This occurred in all governorates due to the ruling political parties' support for these armed groups. However, despite the volatile security situation and the women's inability to engage in negotiations or dialogue with dangerous armed groups, this did not prevent them from performing key mediation roles, such as analysing the conflict and stopping violence between the parties. These roles can be considered part of insider mediation functions in the broad

9 Female interviewee, 42 years old, Baghdad, Bachelor's degree, human rights activist. Interview date: 7 September 2023.

10 Female interviewee, 32 years old, married, Najaf, Bachelor's degree, activist. Interview date: 8 September 2023.

sense, as identified in the literature (Mason 2009). For example, women in Najaf Governorate resorted to creating a human chain between protesters and armed groups to prevent confrontations and stop the killing of protesters, because the police were unable to contain the situation and stop armed violence, as confirmed by the testimony of one of the interviewees:

“Confrontations occurred between the protesters and the guards of the shrine of Sayyid Al-Hakim. When the protesters tried to attack the shrine and set it alight, the shrine guards responded by firing live bullets at the protesters, and one young man was killed. The protesters wanted to avenge the killing of their friend, so they attacked again. A number of them were killed; they were powerless without weapons, and [this site] became a killing ground for the protesting youths. So we, the women, formed a large human chain and prevented the young people from crossing to the other side. We made large banners warning the youths and carried them inside the protest squares. We kept telling them:

‘We need you, we want you alive. Our country needs you. Your mothers are waiting for you.’ We were able, in one way or another, to reduce violence, maintain peace and prevent young people from going to a place where they would have been killed.”¹¹

A similar incident was reported in Najaf, where protesters tried to attack the police directorate’s building and burn it down in reaction to the killing of their fellow protesters. The police responded with violence and many young men were killed. This incident came to be known as the ‘directorate massacre’. On the following day, the protesting women went to the same place and created a human chain, preventing the young protesters from attacking the directorate, because it contained weapons and equipment, and blowing it up or burning it down would have led to a disaster. After long conversations with the young protesters, the idea of burning down the directorate was abandoned.¹²

In certain cases, women could not be present during the escalation of violence and armed confrontation between protesters and security forces; however, despite the high level of danger, some women did not hesitate to confront the armed security forces and prevent violence against young protesters at the front lines. A young woman in Dhi Qar called on the security forces to stop hurling tear gas grenades at the protesters:

“At that time, there were confrontations between us and the police. They advanced towards the Zaitoon Bridge and the Al-Haboubi area, and we also moved forward towards them. They started throwing tear gas grenades. Here, one of the young women shouted at the security forces: ‘Why are you beating us? Why are you throwing grenades at us? We, the people of your country, are not strangers to you. We came out to protest for you as well.’ At that moment, the police forces were influenced by her words, stopped throwing grenades, and withdrew from the area.”¹³

Women used human chains not only to prevent violence between security forces and protesters. In Baghdad, they used the same tactic to prevent violence between the families of those killed and the security forces. This happened at the funeral of those who were killed by government security forces and armed groups during the protests:

“The funeral procession of the martyrs had to be held inside Tahrir Square, so the women formed a protective shield between the funeral procession and the security forces, because all the families of the martyrs came to attend the funerals of their sons, and there was a large number of martyrs. We were worried about the reaction of the martyrs’ families when they saw someone wearing a military uniform, because they would consider him the killer of their sons.”¹⁴

11 Female interviewee, 50 years old, divorced, Najaf, school principal, public employee. Interview date: 4 September 2023.

12 Female interviewee, 28 years old, Dhi Qar (as above).

13 Female interviewee, 28 years old, Dhi Qar (as above).

14 Female interviewee, 51 years old, Baghdad (as above).

In most cases, women played a mediating role immediately and without prior planning. These roles were assumed as an emergency response to prevent violence against young protesters by the armed security forces, especially the official riot police, who are known for their cruelty and violence when dealing with protesters. Every time these forces entered the arenas and arrested protesters without reasonable cause, the women positioned themselves between the riot police and the young men and prevented their arbitrary arrest.¹⁵ They thus displayed a high level of sensitivity to conflicts.

3.4 Mediation between protesters, society and government forces

All the interviews confirmed that women showed high degrees of sensitivity to conflicts; they were more aware of the factors that made conflicts more complex or led to violent escalation, and they worked continuously to help the conflicting parties inside the protest arenas manage and transform these conflicts. Their various professional backgrounds and expertise (e.g. as lawyers or journalists) contributed to building bridges between the protesters and society at large and supported constructive interactions with state actors.

For example, a young woman in Dhi Qar Governorate used dialogue mechanisms to prevent young protesters from blocking vital bridges connecting the two sides of the city and from burning car tyres, which would have caused severe environmental and human health impacts and paralysed the flow of traffic in the city. According to an interviewee:

“On one occasion, a group of young male protesters wanted to set fire to some car tyres and escalate the situation, while another group refused to participate. A dispute broke out between the two groups. The young woman intervened and spoke to the group that wanted to set the tyres alight about the bad effects that could occur, and how they, as protesters,

would convey a negative image to society and lose people’s support. Traditionally, the young people of Nasiriyah feel shy if a woman talks to them and gives them advice, so she took advantage of that. And they actually stopped burning tyres.”¹⁶

Women’s mediation roles were influenced by a number of variables (age, economic status, education, profession, etc.) that affected the continuation of the protests. One of the most important tactics women used to support the protests in Iraq was communicating directly and efficiently with local communities, which helped reduce tensions with certain groups within society who opposed the protests. Women’s peaceful presence and use of social media helped confirm that the protests were a peaceful movement aimed at effecting change and achieving justice for all Iraqis.

This confidence and legitimacy prompted a group of women in Najaf to take the initiative to mediate and defuse tension and stress after the horrific murders committed on 1 February 2020, when armed groups stormed the protest arenas, killed five young men and left many more with knife wounds, after which the young men withdrew, leaving the square almost empty. On the second day, women visited the injured protesters in hospital and presented sweets, flowers and Iraqi flags to them and their families. They also provided support to the families of those killed. On the following day, the women went to the protest squares, put up banners and photos in honour of those who lost their lives and lit candles. Some of the women began reciting the Qur’an to mourn the souls of the deceased. All these activities took place under the supervision of multiple armed groups. These behaviours are usually respected by society, so women were able, due to their relationships and reputation, to influence the behaviour and thinking of the parties to the conflict and mitigate the violence. A few days later, the protesters began to return to the protest arena.

¹⁵ Female interviewee, 24 years old, Basra, single, student. Interview date: 22 September 2023.

¹⁶ Female interviewee, 28 years old, Dhi Qar (as above).

Continuous negotiations and dialogue about the importance of protests and their role in peaceful political change helped to transform the attitudes of women's families towards their participation in the public sphere, and strengthened the bridges of communication between the protesters and society. When the movement first emerged, women initially participated in the protests without their families' knowledge. Later, they started to bring along their family members. According to one interviewee:

*"I saw a woman who used to come with her mother because her husband refused to come, but after a while she started coming with her husband, or her sister and brother as well, so she came with her family. I think she played a role in encouraging her family to participate in the protests. She obtained her family's support, which enabled her to participate and be active in the protests."*¹⁷

Women's mediation and their insistence on participating increased the momentum and sustainability of the peaceful protests and encouraged other women to get involved.

During the protests, the Iraqi authorities arrested numerous activists on flimsy legal pretexts, and in many cases subjected them to 'enforced disappearance' or detained them at unknown locations. Women lawyers followed up the cases of young protesters at police stations and filed lawsuits to demand their release on the grounds that they were being arbitrarily detained on the basis of legal provisions that criminalised protesters for acts they had not committed. These women negotiated with the police and presented legal arguments which eventually convinced them that the protesters were only exercising their right to protest as guaranteed by the Iraqi Constitution. They thus succeeded in mediating at the police stations and freeing the protesters detained there. One interviewee recalled an incident in which women succeeded in protecting many young protesters from arbitrary arrest by requesting the police to leave the young

men alone since they had not committed any offences that warranted their arrest.¹⁸

The interviews confirmed that women always stood up to the police when they tried to arrest a protester, asking about the charges and demanding clear answers. These mediation roles were not limited to women lawyers. Women journalists also contributed to the media coverage and exposed police attempts to detain people without charge:

*"A correspondent for a foreign satellite channel was arrested in Basra. One of the women journalists searched for him in Basra's police stations until late at night. She did not leave the Basra Operations Command building until they released him, and she published a post congratulating him on being released from custody. I have seen three or four similar cases."*¹⁹

Within the protest arenas, women also played active peaceful mediation roles between the government and the protesters, especially since most protesters were uneducated and had no previous experience of political and civil action. Women not only engaged in dialogue and discussions with the protesters about their demands, but also helped formulate these demands and send them in writing to the Prime Minister and the relevant government departments in the education, agricultural and economic sectors. They also formulated demands to improve the infrastructure, electricity and water supply, and even called for the disclosure of the names of those responsible for killing protesters. Women activists were also able to set out these demands in the form of policy papers, based on their experience in this field, which most of the young protesters lacked. The papers included specific recommendations for decision-makers on ways to resolve the problems and challenges facing the country.

17 Female interviewee, 27 years old, married, Baghdad, Bachelor's degree, public employee. Interview date: 26 August 2023.

18 Female interviewee, 24 years old, Basra, single, law student. Interview date: 22 September 2023.

19 Male interviewee, 39 years old, married, Basra, Bachelor's degree. Interview date: 30 September 2023.



Protestors gather to commemorate those killed. Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / AA | Murtadha Sudani

The media have long been used in social movements, protests and revolutions as a key instrument for changing public attitudes by spreading new ideas and challenging prevailing opinions within existing systems and institutions. Many of the women were aware of the importance of the media in preventing the distortion of information and ensuring that there was no misleading of public opinion, but the young protesters refused to allow the media, especially channels affiliated with government agencies, to enter the protest arenas. Some women intervened to educate these protesters about the advantages of allowing the media into the protest arenas, since they could shed light on what was happening and convey the voices and demands of the protesters not only to Iraqi society but to the entire world. These women were able to build bridges of communication between the young

protesters, media professionals and photographers, with the result that the media representatives were allowed to enter the protest arenas.²⁰

20 Female interviewee, 27 years old, married, Baghdad (as above).

4 Gendered dynamics shaping mediation roles in protest movements

As highlighted in the background section, gender norms and stereotypes affected the roles attributed to women in the protest movement. Similarly, gender and intersectional dynamics played both enabling and constraining roles in shaping women's mediation practices.

4.1 Gender attributes used as a resource for mediation

Many examples listed in the previous section on women's mediation practices rely on traditional perceptions of women's roles in Iraqi society. Women's effectiveness as bridge-builders and dialogue facilitators partly relied on stereotypical gendered perceptions of femininity and masculinity. Women are widely accepted by their communities for two main reasons: the fact that they do not pose a threat, and their roles in caring for family members, which extend beyond their immediate families to include their relatives and neighbours. This enabled women activists to intervene at protest sites and solve conflicts between protesters, or de-escalate violence with the police and other armed actors.

According to conventional gender norms, a man must be 'strong' and protect 'weak' women; it is therefore unacceptable for a man to attack a woman or touch a woman's body in public or in front of others. In some of the examples cited above, women therefore used their bodies as a shield to protect the protesters against the security forces' aggression. In doing so, they used tribal customs – which do not respect a man who assaults a woman in the public sphere – in their favour.

4.2 Gender-based obstacles to women's activism

Due to prevailing gender discrimination which marginalises women in the public sphere, many women also faced major obstacles and challenges that affected the level and frequency of their participation in the protests. Obtaining family approval was the first challenge, especially for young women. Other challenges included the stereotypical view that women's roles are limited to providing care within their homes, that they lack rational political awareness and that they are unable to make decisions. These were used as pretexts to oppose women's participation in the protests, in addition to the fact that large segments of society were against the protests in the first place. Women engaged in extensive negotiations with their families to obtain approval to participate. The challenges that prohibited women's participation did not exclusively emanate from their immediate families; some women faced opposition from relatives and neighbours, as well as from officials and colleagues at work.

In many areas with a conservative and extremist-leaning culture, such as Najaf Governorate, women are not allowed to be present in public spaces or engage in any kind of political activity. In addition, there are familial and social restrictions on women's use of social networking websites. Usually, women do not upload their pictures to their personal networking pages. During the protests, extremist religious political parties used various means to maintain gender segregation and patriarchal violence to prevent women's effective and equal participation, stigmatise women and girls, threaten their safety and damage their reputations. In Baghdad and Basra, women who participated in the protests were systematically targeted and killed

to deter others from taking on unconventional roles that attempted to challenge gender stereotypes (GICJ 2020, Johnston 2020).

In all regions, social norms dictate that women can only be present in public spaces within specific timeframes; there are also restrictions on their freedom of movement outside of the home and the guardianship of their family. Most women would leave the protest areas at sunset, which resulted in a lack of a female presence during the evenings. According to the interviews, many conflicts between protesters took place during this time. Due to the absence of women as mediators, some of these disputes became too complicated for the protesters to resolve. The security risks also increased at night, which further limited women's presence in conflict settings within the protest areas and their ability to stay late at night.

Additionally, various political parties attempted to impose gender segregation and patriarchal protection on women; however, these attempts were rejected by women themselves. Instead, they organised a feminist march with the slogans 'Your daughters, my homeland' and 'The Rose March'. The march was a response to religious leader Muqtada Al-Sadr, who ordered his followers to separate women and men and prevent them from mixing in protest squares.

4.3 Intersectionality

The interviews showed that the roles and opportunities available to women are influenced by various contextual factors. In some cases, women's engagement is constrained by a lack of education, lower economic and social status or age, all of which limit their options and opportunities. When women affected by these factors display behaviour that conflicts with gender stereotypes, they may face more severe penalties compared to those who have alternative options, sources of power, influence and resources. For instance, an educated, financially stable older woman may be better equipped to handle societal violence than a young woman with a poor educational background and low economic status. It is important to note that there is no one-

size-fits-all solution to breaking gender norms, and the consequences of doing so vary depending on the specific group of women involved.

Nevertheless, all the interviewees agreed that the participation of women from diverse backgrounds was helpful and supportive for the protests. For many interviewees, the Tishreen protests marked a departure from the traditional gender norms that previous generations had been accustomed to. The movement went beyond merely addressing gender discrimination, as the protesters, with their slogan 'We want a homeland', aimed to eliminate class differences across society.

In the context of the Tishreen Movement, women from diverse backgrounds and ages, including educated and uneducated women, challenged the gendered perceptions that politics and the public sphere are exclusively a male domain. Despite societal and structural restrictions, they have continued to be present even under the most volatile security conditions, some of them even participating in the confrontations with security forces. Their physical presence in various protest squares gave them the opportunity to intervene, mitigate conflicts and build bridges between protesters and other actors.

4.4 Challenging norms about women's presence in the public and political spheres

During the protests, some young women displayed remarkable leadership skills by facilitating dialogues and discussions that helped shape the direction of the demonstrations. This is in addition to their invaluable logistical support which ensured that the protests continued without interruption. These women challenged the traditional cultural divide between men and women by taking on leadership roles that were previously dominated by men. They shattered the stereotype that politics is solely the realm of men.

Women protesters did not limit themselves to discussing issues related to the women's rights

agenda. Instead, they discussed general political and security issues, breaking the stereotypical perception that women are apolitical. The interviews confirmed that women's knowledge and academic education proved effective in enhancing their authority and granted them the legitimacy they needed to take on a mediating role. For some young protesters, it was the first time they had spoken to educated women with experience in political and civil matters and skills in negotiation and dialogue, and this helped transform and resolve many conflicts between young people.

In Najaf Governorate, there were more difficult and complex challenges to women's participation, as the conservative religious culture in Najaf imposes greater constraints on women's freedom to participate in the public sphere than in other governorates. One of the interviewees therefore considered that Najaf and Karbala had witnessed two revolutions: a revolution for the homeland and another for women, because they took part in the protests despite the prevailing religious and traditional customs and strict social rules.

Some interviewees explained that women often perform stereotypical gender roles due to cultural assumptions which hinder their ability to achieve true partnership, given that the political/protest role is typically reserved for men. However, one interviewee acknowledged that the mere fact that women were participating and having an impact was a significant step towards acceptance of their presence in public arenas.

During an interview, one of the participants revealed that a positive shift had occurred in stereotypical perceptions of gender roles. This change is not limited to women, as many of the male interviewees expressed more progressive views and attitudes towards the traditional roles assigned to women. There is now a recognition of the importance of women and their strength and effectiveness in non-stereotypical roles. Their active participation in protests played a crucial role in influencing the course of the revolutionary movement. Women also played key roles that men could not, such as preserving the peacefulness of the demonstrations and ensuring the continued flow of people to the protest squares.

"I saw that women were the ones who took the leadership role in the meetings that decided the fate of the demonstrations, and there were special tents for women in Tahrir. Within Tahrir, I think there was widespread consensus about breaking the stereotypical barriers that had previously existed, such as not listening to women, not giving women a role and not hearing women's voices. They also provided unparalleled logistical support and played a strong role as activists. Their social media pages were effective tools, contributing to increasing the flow of people to the demonstrations and ensuring their sustainability."²¹

21 Female interviewee, 36 years old, married, Baghdad, public employee. Date of interview: 27 August 2023.



Iraqi Protestors gather at Tahrir Square. Photo © PICTURE ALLIANCE / AA | Murtadha Sudani

5 Women's trajectories after the protests

When a curfew was imposed in August 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the protests came to a halt. The women who had been protesting as part of the Tishreen Movement took different paths in the post-protest stage, according to their economic and educational situations, as well as their ability to move around and make decisions about participating in public activities. Educated women, particularly young women who could rely on the support of their families, developed a greater political awareness, which enabled them to engage in political activism and contribute to the establishment of political parties that emerged in the aftermath of the October 2019 protests. Remarkably, there was a significant increase in

the number of women who joined political parties after the October protests. This was followed by an increase in the number of women participating as candidates in the 2021 House of Representatives elections. Out of a total of 3,225 candidates, 946 were women, amounting to 29.3 per cent. Of these women candidates, 95 won parliamentary seats, increasing their representation in Parliament from the constitutional requirement of 25 per cent to 29 per cent. Moreover, 57 women won outside the quota system by obtaining the highest number of votes in their electoral districts (UNAMI 2022).

A group of young women formed active teams of volunteers to promote political and social

awareness and the importance of continuing the protests. These teams created safe spaces for dialogue and discussions on women's rights issues and ways to combat discrimination against women. They received support from international and local organisations, such as *The Revolution is Female*.²² Due to COVID-19, most of their activities were carried out online. Following the end of the curfew in August 2020, women's participation in seminars and discussions organised by civil society organisations increased.

However, despite the widespread popular movement, there was no significant change in the institutional and legal frameworks that regulate public freedoms and protect human and women's rights. Unfortunately, the security situation has not improved since the elections in October 2021. In fact, the security forces have adopted even more stringent measures to prevent public gatherings from taking place, fearing the resurgence of the protests. The conservative political parties that won the 2021 elections support these security measures, and many of them have a military wing or collaborate with armed groups that have been known to use violence against protesters.

Most women activists lost their freedom to be present in protest squares due to the strict security measures, as one of the interviewees confirmed:

“When we tried to set up a bazaar in Tahrir Square to display products that women had manufactured to support them economically, we failed to obtain security approvals, so we set up the bazaar in the building of one of the organisations instead. When we tried to demonstrate to demand the adoption of a law against domestic violence in the wake of the honour killing of a young woman [...] who was murdered by her father, as soon as we arrived in Tahrir Square, masked armed groups threatened us, prevented us from standing, and ordered us to leave the square

immediately, so we picked up our banners and left. We can no longer engage in political activities or protest in the public sphere as before. We have to obtain approvals, a process that the government has made very complicated to prevent people from protesting.”²³

Preventing protests and clamping down on activists created feelings of despair and frustration among the movement's members, who remained committed to achieving their goals of getting rid of the corrupt political class, reforming institutions, and uncovering and punishing the killers of fellow protesters. This frustration forced many activists, including women, to abandon their involvement in political activism.

This turbulent political and security environment continues to foster and consolidate the influence of conservative cultural norms and traditions against women's political activity. In mid-2023, conservative religious political parties launched a widespread campaign against the concept of 'gender'. The campaign was political and ideological in nature and aimed to restrict personal freedoms, impose guardianship and political hegemony, and limit the role of networks, human rights organisations, academic figures and progressive forces. It was apparent that the campaign's objective was not only to refuse recognition of LGBTQ rights but also to attack the concepts of 'equality' and 'women's empowerment'.²⁴ This campaign encouraged the targeting of women activists and the imposition of an atmosphere of terror and fear to suppress any attempt to demand women's rights, which is what these political forces have been seeking to achieve for years.

22 The Revolution is Female project website: Voice of the revolution - PAX (paxforpeace.nl).

23 Female interviewee, 37 years old, married, Baghdad (as above).

24 For example, the right-wing political parties forced the government to replace the concept of 'gender' with the concept of 'justice between the two sexes' in government policies and strategies, to avoid mainstreaming the concept of equality. The name of the government department concerned with women's affairs was also changed from the 'Department of Women's Empowerment' to the 'National Department for Women', dispensing with the concept of 'empowering women'.

6 Needs Assessment for Capacity-Building and Future Support

The active participation of Iraqi women in the protest squares had a significant impact in terms of raising political and civil awareness, even after the movement's demobilisation. As highlighted in the previous section, women established volunteer teams and played a vital role in the 2021 elections by joining civil parties that emerged from the protest squares. Today, some of the women protesters have political affiliations, some are active in civil society organisations and others are community activists in student unions.

“Therefore, it can be said that the October movement awoke a feminist consciousness among participants, and broke the gender barriers that had existed before. It dispelled popular doubts about women’s capabilities and the perception that they are weak, powerless or that their place is at home.”²⁵

For the women who acted as bridge-builders, as described above, the October protests helped enhance their skills in dialogue and negotiation. However, during the interviews, they also highlighted a wide range of support needs which would have helped them leverage the experiences they gained during the protests and continue to expand their engagement as (insider) mediators. Strengthening women activists’ mediation skills and mainstreaming institutional structures can improve the environment for women to participate in official and unofficial peace processes in the future. Each interview highlighted a different set of needs, which can be summarised in five thematic categories:

≡ Training to Build Capacities

Several interviewees expressed the need for training to be provided for women activists, with a specific focus on young women who participated in previous peacebuilding and training programmes and who have basic experience in this field. This previous training – arranged by United Nations agencies such as UNDP and international organisations in collaboration with national institutions – mainly emphasised facilitation and communication skills rather than negotiation and mediation. These women need to enhance their knowledge and skills through theoretical and practical training and participation in activities and simulation exercises that focus on mediation and dialogue, effective communication, negotiation, conflict resolution and conflict transformation, taking into account the Iraqi context and integrating gender into all stages of the training.

≡ Legislation

Many interviews confirmed that the lack of continuity in local mediation roles and the absence of women mediators at the official level are due to the non-existence of legal and legislative guarantees to ensure their participation in official Iraqi mediation and negotiation committees, such as the National Reconciliation Committee and the Committee for Peaceful Coexistence, as well as to the lack of women representing Iraq in regional or international mediation. This emphasises the need for legislation that supports women’s presence in local, government and international mediation and negotiation committees and contributes to achieving transitional justice for women.

25 Male interviewee, 30 years old, Baghdad, diploma, married, private sector employee. Interview date: 9 September 2023.

≡ **Dedicated Institutions**

Iraq lacks specialised mediation institutions. Although the government has set up various committees, they do not have a robust institutional structure or adequate financial and human resources and do not involve women. It is crucial to establish official government institutions that specialise in mediation and actively involve women. These institutions should also serve as a platform for training women to become mediators, which would enable them to participate in resolving conflicts at both the national and the international levels.

≡ **Curricula**

In general, the education programs at primary, secondary and university levels rarely include any content relating to conflict transformation and management. As a result, students do not have sufficient knowledge of, or skills in, dialogue, negotiation, communication and mediation. It is crucial to incorporate peacebuilding concepts into school curricula at every stage, from primary school to university. This will ensure that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills in conflict resolution, which are vital for building sustainable peace in Iraq.

≡ **Social Environment and Media Engagement**

The Iraqi cultural context does not support women in playing mediation roles; these roles are typically assumed by men, as confirmed by the interviews. There is thus a need to raise community awareness among Iraqi citizens about the importance of women's presence in these fields by influencing the family and addressing discrimination against girls and their unequal treatment compared to boys. This requires various social, psychological and counselling institutions and support centres. Finally, media outlets and journalists can help to raise awareness by publishing success stories of women who currently play mediation roles and contribute to breaking down stereotypes that limit mediation and negotiation roles exclusively to men.

7 Conclusion

The evidence collected for this study suggests that women's various roles during the protests made a vital contribution to maintaining the peacefulness of the protests, creating greater momentum and ensuring that the protests continued for some time in the face of considerable adversity. Despite their active participation in the public/political field, many women protesters acted in conformity with gender stereotypes linked to their reproductive role within the private sphere, and this image was utilised and exploited by some women to remain in protest arenas and gain greater societal acceptance. However, many women protesters also demonstrated behaviour inconsistent with gender stereotypes. Overall, women's mediation roles helped to de-escalate the violence, preventing further bloodshed and pushing young protesters to choose options other than armed conflict and address their grievances by peaceful means.

During the interviews, it was confirmed that women played a vital role in mediating between different parties involved in the conflict. Women's mediation practices focused on dialogue, bridging viewpoints, conflict analysis, facilitation and building trust between protesters. Most of these mediation roles were performed within protest arenas and also within the digital realm using social media. Women mediated between the protesters, society and the government, between protesters and unarmed police, and between the protesters, armed security forces and unknown armed groups. However, one interviewee argued that women faced difficulties in preventing or mediating conflicts between demonstrators and armed men. This was due to the high level of hostility between the parties, the presence of weapons and the lack of government accountability.

The interviewees stressed certain needs that will have to be met in order to strengthen women's mediation roles. This includes a top-down approach, by providing legal guarantees for women's participation in official Iraqi negotiating committees and institutions. Furthermore, curricula at all educational levels should include the concepts of peacebuilding, conflict analysis, negotiation and mediation. This should be complemented by a bottom-up approach consisting of theoretical and practical training courses conducted in a gender-sensitive way, focusing on practical simulation exercises for mediation roles, as well as community awareness campaigns on the importance of involving women in peacebuilding and mediation processes.

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