Women's Economic Empowerment in Iraq: A Double-Edged Sword?

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Summary : Within the ongoing research project "The Condition of Life of Women in Iraq and the Kurdistan region", Dr Ana Cristina Marques analyses the preliminary results focusing on women's economic empowerment through paid employment.

Particularly since the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, women and girls gained centre stage on development discourses against poverty (Chant, 2016). Women's economic empowerment[1] has been seen as a panacea for countries and regions socio-economic development. More recently, the Sustainable Development Goals 2015-2030 (SDGs) show a strong concern with women's position in society, with Goal 5 specifically addressing gender equality (Ravazi, 2016). There is an important recognition that "women's oppression is grounded in structural forces and institutions, both public and private, characterised by deeply embedded power inequalities and discriminatory social norms which cut across economic, social, and political arenas" (Ravazi, 2016, p29). Goal 5 pays specific attention to "gender inequality in the distribution of unpaid care" (*ibid.*, p27). In this, the value of care work, usually conducted by women around the world, is recognised. And states are called upon to reflect on its value in their social policy — for instance, in the form of development of public care services, social protection policies, and promotion of a more equal share of care work (Ravazi, 2016). Further, Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth) calls for the full inclusion of women in equal terms as men, in decent paid work, where access to social protection is provided (Ravazi, 2016). These concerns can now be seen transposed in the strategies of international governance organisations' (IGOs), such as the World Bank or the International Labour Organisation (ILO), becoming part of their security and development agendas, and aid programmes.

With a strong presence of Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) and international (non)governmental organisations (I[N]GOs), particularly since the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and reinforced with the conflict against Daesh, there has been a commitment to 'support' the country's nation-building. The government of Iraq (GoI) and the government of the Kurdistan region (KRG) have embarked on their own journey to empower women economically. Since then, a particular focus on women has been incorporated in a plethora of policy for the country and the region's development. In these programmes, the GoI and the KRG show their commitment to transnational agreements and programmes, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda. Alongside the protection of women and girls against violence (VGAW) and the increasing participation of women in decision-making positions, women's economic empowerment in federal Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region appears at the forefront of local and international (non)governmental strategies for security and development. Women's economic empowerment is seen as an untapped resource that, when used, will contribute to national economy, sustainable development and the improvement of society (Lugo, Muller and Wai-Poi, 2020; Ismail, Qarout and Sen, 2022; Sen, Afif, Gauri and Mohamed, 2022). For instance, in 2019, the GoI presented a 5-year plan to empower women economically, which, among others, pledges to: "strength[en] the social, legislative and administrative environment that can increase women's economic empowerment"; prepare a "public gender-responsive budget"; "increase [the] participation of women in entrepreneurship"; integrate "women's housework and informal work in the national economy"; and "increase women's access to financial resources and economic opportunities" (Republic of Iraq, 2019a, n/p). As part of this process, the Iraq vision of Sustainable Development 2030 (Republic of Iraq, 2019b) and the Iraq Reconstruction and Investment Framework (Republic of Iraq, 2018) underscore the importance of including women in the processes of reconstruction and development, and of integrating them in the labour market. In this context, several trainings (e.g., handicrafts, sewing or hairdressing) were offered to strengthen women's capabilities (UNESCO, 2019). In 2021, the GoI, with the support of the World Bank, launched a plan to "remove constraints and create more economic opportunities for women" (World Bank, 2021). In addition,the GoI forbade discrimination on women's access to credit in 2022 (World Bank, 2023). Yet, Iraq has one of the lowest presence of women in paid work in the world, particularly when 'non-conflict' areas are considered (Redaelli, Lnu, Buitrago, Paola and Ismail, 2023).

In this paper, I look into meanings, experiences and expectations of women's economic empowerment, particularly as expressed in women's paid work, in federal Iraq and in the Kurdistan region. I ask: what is the importance of paid work for women? What are the obstacles that women face and the support they receive to engage in paid work? How does women's access to paid work relate to their family life? This paper discusses preliminary results of an ongoing project on "The Condition of Life of Women in Iraq and the Kurdistan region". The main aim of the project is to provide comprehensive and in-depth information on the main achievements and obstacles concerning women's empowerment —

understood as women gaining control of their lives and being able to participate in society (Kabeer, 2012) — in federal Iraq and in the Kurdistan region.

The project is being carried out by CFRI, under the scientific direction of Dr. Adel Bakawan and the research coordination of Dr. Ana Cristina Marques, and is funded by Vision Education. In addition to documental analysis, the team of the project conducted: a questionnaire, 45 semi-structured interviews, and 9 life-stories in Southern Iraq, Central Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. Additionally, three roundtable discussions were held in Baghdad, Mosul and Erbil. For this paper, I am drawing upon data from the semi-structured interviews (SSI) and the roundtables (RTs). The SSIs took between 45 minutes and 3 hours; they were conducted in Arabic and Kurdish, and were transcribed and translated into English. The RTs were all-day events, with 16 participants in each area (48 in total). They were also conducted in Arabic and Kurdish, with live translation, and the research coordinator taking notes. All names were changed, and participants were given pseudonyms.

While the project looks into several domains of women's lives, such as family life, sexual division of labour, political participation, involvement in civil society organisations (CSOs), and perceptions of support received from different people and institutions (family members, community, religious or political organisations, national and local governments, and financial institutions), in this paper I only look into women's experiences, expectations and perceptions of paid and unpaid work, particularly in relation to family life. It is also important to note that the women that participated in the research were selected purposively, for their diverse positions in the life-cycle (ages, and positions regarding conjugality and parenthood), education, participation in the labour market, religious and ethnic belongings — as it was our aim to have a diversity of women's voices. Thus, the results of the research cannot be generalised to all Iraqi women. These are also the results from a first analysis of the data and a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis is still ongoing. What is more, though it was our initial intention to reach women from diverse social backgrounds, particularly in southern Iraq and in the Kurdistan region, many of the women that agreed to participate in the research were qualified (having a degree or more). Furthermore, the project does not account for men's own gendered experiences of (economic) empowerment, thus leaving an important sector of the population out; especially when considering gender as relational, and therefore, that women's experiences and expectation need to be analysed in relation to men's experiences and expectations (Connell and Pearse, 2015).

Despite these limitations, in this paper I reflect on the narrative of women's economic empowerment in a (post)conflict context, where women have conditioned possibilities for action[2]. I will argue that paid work is seen as a key strategy for women's (economic) empowerment. In this context, families are of central importance for women's (lack of) presence in paid employment, with 'understanding' families supporting women's 'choices', while 'conservative' families hinder their possibility of economic independence, at least outside the house. However, families alone do not explain everything. As I am going to briefly discuss bellow, other material, cultural and social structural factors, such as everyday violences, lack of transports, problems in access to jobs in the public sector and the insecurity of private sector, and deficient legislation or its lack of implementation, are important factors to understand women's opportunities, experiences, and perceptions of paid work (see, for instance, Kabeer, Deshpande and Assaad, 2019). In what follows, I will start by presenting a general overview of women paid and unpaid work in Iraq. I will then shortly discuss the cultural, social, political-legal and historical contexts that can be said to support or to create obstacles for women's presence in the public sphere, particularly in paid work outside the house, in federal Iraq and the Kurdistan region. Following this, I will present women's own meanings, experiences, and expectations of paid and unpaid work, particularly in relation to family life. Finally, I will end with a reflection on the potential lack of (or even harmful) consequences of governmental strategies on women's economic empowerment if structural changes are not made. Notwithstanding the need for more analysis on the data from the "Women's Conditions of Life" project, this paper aims to add to the discussions of women's (economic) empowerment in Iraq and in the Kurdistan region, as promoted by international government organisations (IGOs) and applied by the GoI, the KRG, and local and international (non)governmental organisations (I[N]GOs).

Women paid and unpaid work in Iraq: an overview

An increasing number of reports published by international governance organisations (IGOs) focus on women's economic empowerment in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, including in Iraq and the Kurdistan region (Kabeer et al., 2019; Lugo, et al., 2020; Ismael et al., 2020; Redaelli et al., 2023; Sen et al., 2022). The MENA region is described as the area of the world with the smallest number of women having a paid job outside the household (e.g, Kabeer et al., 2019; Lugo, Muller, and Wai-Poi, 2020). The increasing number of women in education, namely in higher education, in the region, is said not to correspond to an increase of women in the labour force — in what is described as the MENA paradox (Kabeer et al, 2019). Structural barriers considered to hinder women's access to paid jobs are often related to unequal gender power relations. These tend to be defined in terms of patriarchal relations[3], which can be expressed, among others on: women's respectability, their responsibilities of unpaid domestic and care work, their presence in informal, family or voluntary work, spatial segregation, legislation, women's possibility of ownership, and their access to institutions and to credit (Kabeer et al., 2019).

Within this context, and as above-mentioned, Iraq is said to have one of the lowest number of women with paid work in the world (Ismael et al., 2020; Lugo, et al., 2020; Redaelli, et al., 2023; Sen, et al., 2022). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO,2022), the female labour force participation is only of 10,6% (with a 68% male labour force participation). Female unemployment rate is also almost twice as high as the male unemployment rate (28,2% and 14,7% respectively). Women engaged in paid jobs tend to be employed in the public sector (70,5%), having a lower participation in the private sector (33,7%)[4]. Women also tend to be more represented than men as early childhood, primary school and secondary education teachers, and as garment workers. The majority of women with a paid job are employees (77,3%), or contribute as family workers (14,4%), with only a minority of women being employers (0,5%) or independent workers (7,8%)[5]. Despite women being less present than men in the informal sector (44,8% of women compared to 69,5% of men) (ILO, 2022), they still have a significant presence in small-scale family farms and in the domestic industry, where they tend to be the majority of workers (for example, in the manufacture of textiles, bakery products, and dairy products) (UNESCO, 2019). It is important to note that the higher women's educational level, the higher tends to be women's participation the labour market, with single women being more present in the labour market than married women, and in particular than mothers of young children (ILO, 2022; Lugo et al., 2020; Ismail et al., 2022; Redaelli et al., 2023). Still, women are the majority of people outside the labour force, with 84,4% of women outside the labour force compared to 32% of men (ILO, 2022). Similarly, women tend to work less hours than men in paid employment (an average of 29,9 hours and 43,8 hours usually worked per week respectively) (ILO, 2022).

However, this pattern is reversed when considering the number of hours women usually work at home. According to a survey conducted by the World Bank, in 2021, in the Mashreq countries (Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan), mothers in Iraq spend 4h34m per day in childcare and 5h25m in unpaid domestic chores, whereas fathers spend 2h17m per day in unpaid domestic chores and 1h59m in childcare (Redaelli et al., 2023). When mothers have paid work, they still tend to be the ones conducting domestic chores and caring for children. Working mothers tend to spend 5 hours per weekday in paid work and an additional 7 hours in unpaid care work. While unemployed or outside the 'workforce' women tend to work 11 hours in unpaid care work. Thus, working mothers carry the double burden of paid and unpaid work, having a higher workload in comparison to women not in paid work. The main reason given for mothers "not participating in the labour market" are "family responsibilities", particularly for mothers with preschool children (Redaelli, 2023a, p37). In Iraq and in the Kurdistan region, there is also a perception that husbands or other members of society disapprove of women, especially mothers, who work outside the house, even if this perception might be inflated, not actually corresponding to people's own opinions (Sen et al, 2022; Ismail et al, 2022). Nevertheless, the perception that women have of their husbands, families and communities' opinions on women's work has an impact on their own practices and expectations (Lugo et al., 2022, Ismail et al., 2022; Redaelli et al., 2023; Sen et al., 2022).

Not surprisingly then, as in other areas of the MENA region (Kabeer et al., 2019), the most mentioned obstacle to the increase of women in the labour market in Iraq and the Kurdistan region, tends to be 'patriarchal' gender relations (Lugo et al., 2020; Ismail et al., 2022; Redaelli et al., 2023; Sen et al., 2022). Women are often seen as the bearers of family's respectability, and their movements are controlled by other men and women in the family and the community (Al-Ali, 2007; Begikhani et al., 2018). Women with children are considered first and foremost as mothers, with a duty of conducting domestic chores and the care for children and adults in need in the family (the elderly and people with special needs). Care work, as well as concerns with safety and respectability, might limit women's possibility of: working after 5pm, working alongside men (who are not members of their family), or working in the private sector (Lugo et al., 2020; Ismail et al, 2022; Sen et al., 2022).

Other obstacles to women's participation in the labour market in Iraq are also attributed to several factors, including the lack of safe public transportation, discrimination and harassment in public spaces, limited access to financial capital, the 'quality' of the private sector, lack of 'suitable' jobs, deficiencies in legislation or its lack of implementation, difficult access to education, particularly in rural areas, and the inexistence of a care support network (ILO, 2022; Lugo et al., 2020; Ismail et al., 2022; Sen et al., 2022). For instance, there is a lack of childcare services in Iraq, and those that exist tend to be private, not always financially accessible to families (Lugo et al., 2022; Ismail et al., 2022; Redaelli et al., 2023). However, in Iraq most women are the main carers of their children, 'preferring' to have a family member caring for them, when they cannot (Redaelli et al, 2023; Ismail et al, 2022).

It is also noteworthy to point that, at a time when the GoI and the KRG, following international directives, are trying to downsize the number of public workers (Sryoka, 2023), there is a general understanding that people tend to privilege work in the public sector for women. This is because work in the public sector is considered to have higher prestige, shorter working hours, more benefits and a lower pay gap between women and men (Ismail et al, 2022; Sen et al, 2022; Sryoka, 2023). In contrast, the private sector tends to be seen as not safeguarding women's rights and security, and being more discriminatory with wages. Furthermore, in both federal Iraq (Ismael et al, 2022) and the Kurdistan region (Sen et al, 2022) there is a perception that women working in the private sector will be negatively spoken of by other members of the community. Being a masculine, oil-dominated economy, the private sector tends also to have less opportunities for women, with "employment opportunities for women" being mainly concentrated in the public sector (Lugo et al, 2020, p46). Still there appears to be a growing acceptability for women to engage in paid work both in federal Iraq and the Kurdistan region (Lugo et al, 2020; Ismael et al, 2022; Sen et al, 2022). Was it always like this?

Women's public participation: advances and setbacks

Women have an important place in the history of Iraq. As in other countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, women's rights have been co-opted by different sides of the political spectrum and used in a symbolic battle for power (Kandiyoty, Al-Ali and Poots, 2019). On one hand, both in federal Iraq and the Kurdistan region, women's 'advancement' is posited as a symbol of development of the nation (e.g., Begkhini et al, 2018; Efrati, 2012). On the other hand, the respectability of women is seen as in need of protection against moral corruption, often in the form of a 'westerner' other (Hammadi, 2023). Yet, more than simple victims that need saving or pawns in the hands of powerful actors, women in Iraq have demonstrated their agency and resilience (e.g., Efrati, 2012; Ali, 2018; Joly, 2022).

Throughout Iraq's history, artists, intellectuals, politicians and women activists have defended women's right to education, protection against violence, safe mobility in public spaces, and rights within the family (Al-Ali, 2007; Efrati, 2012). During the first half of the 20th century and until the Ba'ath regime, women participated in civil society organisations, with a political, humanitarian or women focus[6]. The implementation of the Iraqi republic, in 1958, brought with it important gains for women, such as the personal status code (PSC) (1959) — considered at the time as one of the most advanced in the region (Efrati, 2005). Despite coming short of feminists' demands, the PSC defended the rights of women as citizens

under the state, challenging sectarianism and the power of the tribes. Also, in 1959, the first Iraqi labour code was created, guaranteeing equal pay, forbidding gender discrimination in the workplace, protecting women from "dismissal during pregnancy" and giving women maternity leave (Sryoka, 2023, n/p). Yet, at the same time, the code prevented "women from working at night and performing arduous or harmful physical work" (*ibid.*) — restrictions that continue until these days.

The Ba'athist regime also used the 'advancement' of women to its advantage. Trying to 'displace' women from under the control of their families towards the control of the state, and using them as a resource for the 'economic development', 'industrialisation' and 'modernisation' of society, the Ba'ath regime promoted women's participation in the public sphere (Al-Ali, 2007; Joseph, 1991). Alongside the rise of literacy, the regime put forward several measures aimed at improving women's conditions of work, and, consequently, increasing their participation in the labour market. These included free childcare, child allowances, time off work to care for the children, free transportation, pensions, training, and medical care. The labour law of 1987 guaranteed equal employment, rights and protection for women workers, including maternity leave. Particularly in the urban areas, it became acceptable, even prestigious for women to work outside the household (Al-Ali, 2007).

The constitution of 2005, implemented after the toppling of Saddam, in principle guarantees equality for Iraqi men and women. Yet, by accepting Islam as the official religion of the state, and by stating that no legislation should contradict its principles, feminists believe that the constitution opens the door for religious leaders to limit women's rights (Ali, 2007; Efrati, 2005). More recently, the labour law n. 37 of 2015[7], reinstates equal opportunities and rights in employment for women, guarantees equal pay for equal work, gives protection to women workers, such as maternity leave — with 14 weeks (98 days) of paid leave — and forbids discrimination and sexual harassment. However, the prohibition of women to work at night time (with some exceptions within the services sector) and in 'arduous' or 'harmful' jobs, as well as the fact that employers have to bear the financial 'burden' of maternity provisions might contribute to gender discrimination, particularly in the private sector (Redaelli et al., 2023). Still, in 2023, a new Social Security Law for Private Sector workers was approved, expanding "legal coverage of the social security system" to informal workers, independent workers and contributing family workers, including maternity and unemployment benefits, and health insurance (ILO News, 2023). Also in 2023, the Kurdistan region saw a new labour law approved in parliament (KRG News, 2023). This law prohibits any form of discrimination in employment and sexual harassment, while guaranteeing equal pay and promoting provisions for women with children. Yet, the parliament dissolved shortly after, which might hinder the implementation of the law.

Significantly, however, throughout Iraq's history, women's rights have also suffered several setbacks: from the incorporation of the 'tribal law' in the 1925 Iraqi constitution with the support of the British colonial power, to the 2000s renewed conservatism of political Islam and the militias (Efrat, 2012; Ali, 2018). Furthermore, despite all the advances in legislation, programs for women's education, and support for women's participation in paid jobs outside the household, these changes did not reach all women, with rural and working-class women often not benefiting from them, nor being supported by all (Al-Ali. 2007). Values of honour, respectability and shame continued to shape gender norms, and subjecting women's bodies, practices and mobility to the control of the family and the community (Al-Ali, 2007).

Of particular significance are the four decades of intermittent armed conflict. These include the Iraq-Iran war and the Anfal campaigns in the Kurdistan region in the 1980s, the conflict with Kuwait and the UN imposed sanction in the 1990s, until the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the presence of the coalition forces led by the American administration and the rise in armed militias in the first decade of the 2000s, and the conflict against Daesh during the 2010s. These conflicts affected the Iraqi population and continuously worsened women's position in society. Conflict promoted militarised masculinities, with women being praised as mothers, reproducers of the nation, and keepers of the country's honour (Al-Ali, 2007, 2018). The destruction caused by these conflicts came with the death of male relatives,

the progressive destruction of infrastructures and the welfare-state, the limitation of available jobs, and the increase of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) inside and outside the household (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009; Al-Ali, 2018). Militias and police forces were 'justified' in their use of force, with a normalisation of violence (Hammadi, 2023). Insecurity in the streets rose, 'forcing' women once again inside their homes. The need for tribal and religious support, led politicians to make concessions, particularly when women's issues were concerned. Sectarianism, insecurity, and the increased power of religious and tribal leaders contributed to a heightened environment of conservatism. Domestic violence and honour crimes continue to affect many women, with limited possibilities to bring perpetrators to justice (Al-Ali, 2018). Significantly, the last Women Peace and Security (WPS) Index, for 2021 (GIWPS and PRIO, 2022) positioned Iraq among the 5 worst performing countries, in the 166th place, having the highest rate of current intimate partner violence (45%).

Still, particularly since 2003, the number of NGOs in the country has increased massively (Ali, 2018; Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009), bringing women's rights once again to the centre of attention. Gender equality, women's empowerment and the protection from VAWG are values espoused by these organisations and thought of as essential for economic development and good governance. Local and I[N]GOs are particularly active in trying to influence the GoI and the KRG to improve women's conditions of lives, at national and regional levels. The popular demonstrations of the 2010s, and particularly the Tishreen revolution, also brought (young) men and women to the streets to reclaim better conditions of life, and to protest against the high level of corruption of the country, the increase of social inequality, deficiencies in the infrastructures, and the lack of quality of governmental services (Ali, 2023). These protests brought about a new generation of women activists, with an increasing presence in the streets, but also online and in 'new' political parties (Ali, 2023; H. Ali, 2023).

Women activists continue to face prejudice and persecution, with their actions being curtailed by government and conservative sectors of society (Ali, 2018; Hardy, 2023; Mohammed, 2023). A recent example is the prohibition of mentioning the word "gender" in the country (Hammadi, 2023). However, the political action of (young) women in the streets and online (Ali, 2023; Joly, 2022), the presence of local and international civil society organisations (CSOs), and the willingness of the GoI and the KRG to comply with international governance processes aimed at empowering and protect women — even if mostly on paper — can signal the presence of sectors of society working to bring about positive change for women. But what do women themselves think?

Women between home and the labour market: experiences and aspirations

Preliminary results from the ongoing research on "The Conditions of Life of Women in Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region" are in many ways similar to the above-mentioned results on Iraqi and Kurdish women's participation in the labour market (ILO, 2022; Lugo, et al., 2020; Ismael et al., 2020; Redaelli et al., 2023; Sen, et al., 2022). However, it is worthwhile to briefly present some key ideas that point to the complexity and diversity of women's situation in the country, specifically in relation to paid and unpaid work.

Of particular significance is the importance given to paid work for women's (economic) empowerment. Economic empowerment, and particularly women's access to paid jobs and creating their own businesses, is perceived as a solution for women to get independence from their families. Women who have a paid job tend to be proud of it, and stress its positive impact in their lives, while several women that do not have a paid job express their wish to have one. Economic independence is seen as being able to give women power within the family, an increased capability for decision-making, and higher freedom of movement. Women that have a paid job can also be responsible for their own expenses and contribute to the needs of their families, such as in Lana's case (SSI, Central Iraq): "Working outside the home is very important to me because it enables me to meet my needs and expenses, as well as helping my family". Paid work is a source of fulfilment, personal development and socialisation.

Important is also women's volunteer work, which is often seen not only as a source of gratification, a way of giving back to the community, but also as a strategic door into paid work within civil society organisations (CSOs), as can be seen by Hadel's (SSI, Southern Iraq) example:

"I worked at first as a volunteer, then as a trainee, and then with low wages. But I agreed to that, because I wanted to have a suitable CV that would qualify me to get a job with good pay; [one] that corresponds to my needs. […] Financial independence is a very important thing for a woman, as it gives her strength and does not make her an easy prey."

On the contrary, not having a paid job means being dependent on family members and having to follow their decisions.

Families are, in fact, a central aspect of women's lives. As stressed by Joly (2022), families often give women a sense of belonging and stability. For Bahra (SSI, Kurdistan region): "Family is incredibly important […], as they form the core of my emotional and social support network". Families can support women on their personal, educational and professional paths or they can greatly limit women's mobility and opportunities outside the household. 'Understanding', 'open' families allow (young) women to have 'freedom' and to make their own decisions. In contrast conservative, tribal and religious families are accused of not allowing women to express their opinions, study, work, go outside the house by themselves or use social media. These families are understood as controlling women's decisions (for instance whom to marry and at what age) and not giving them their rights. They are said to promote discrimination between men and women, with men controlling the family and women growing with shame and lack of self-confidence. However, several qualified women in the RTs referred to the existence of conservative and oppressive families in society, in contrast with their own situation, since these women tend to have the support of their own families to study and to engage in paid work outside the household. As stated by Ismael et al. (2022) and Sen et al. (2022), this shows a discrepancy between perceptions of what other people think and what women themselves experience.

Furthermore, in 'open' families, when women have a paid job, there is an increasing share of domestic and care work with (or at least support from) husbands, siblings, children or with outsourced paid work. This is the case of Nada's family (SSI, Southern Iraq):

"We cooperate in household chores, and it is not much, because we all work outside the home. [..] We do not have enough time to do the housework. Recently, we hired a housemaid to help us".

In contrast, in more 'conservative' families, women are the main responsible for all domestic and care work. This is Myriam's (SSI, Southern Iraq) situation since she got married: "I am exhausted with housework. Everything I do inside the house is washing dishes, cooking, cleaning, ironing clothes, washing clothes. And everything outside the house is done by the men of the family".

Importantly, it is often considered that it is shameful for men to do domestic chores, whereas it is shameful for women to neglect their home. Consequently, even when studying or having a paid job outside the house, women have to prioritise their home, or run the risk of being "seen as less" (RT Erbil). For working women, this increases the risk of a double burden, which — in addition to several other existing problems in society and, more specifically, in the labour market — might lead women to 'decide' not to work or to quit their jobs. But women might also be an important source of income for the family. In Nineveh, the region of Iraq with the highest rate of unemployment in 2021 (ILO, 2022), women's salary often contributes to support their families, when men cannot find jobs (RT Mosul). In Baghdad, families are accused of exploiting working women, while they are gaining their independence in exchange for supporting their families (RT Baghdad).

When working outside the house, women are faced with several other interconnected challenges. Despite mentioning changes in society, such as women's increasing access to (higher) education, the labour market, and the internet, women

continue to point to the masculine domination within Iraqi and Kurdish societies, as well as the harassment and discrimination that come from it. Particularly, in relation to the labour market, a central obstacle is access to jobs. For many women leaving university, the lack of jobs leads them to marry men with economic resources — 'a job and a salary' (RT Mosul). Finding a job in the public sector, while often desired, is seen as difficult. Governmental jobs are associated with corruption, with jobs, promotions or benefits being given to people with personal connections or to those who can pay large sums of money. In contrast, the private sector tends to be thought of as having a high number of working hours with low salaries. Private companies are associated with precarity and insecurity. Women are said to not be paid for their work, to be easily fired or not to be able to make complaints, due to the verbal character of their contract. Interestingly, in Baghdad, it is believed that women are being objectified in the labour market, with companies preferring 'beautiful', 'open' women — that is, women that do not wear the hijab — in a 'marketing' strategy, which, on one hand, pressures women to pay attention to their image, and on the other hand, discriminates against women that wear the hijab. What is more, and despite the Labour Law of 2015, women often suffer from sexual harassment, usually with no consequences to the perpetrators. This was the case of Nada (SSI, Southern Iraq):

"I also worked in an electrical equipment company, in the accounts department, but I resigned, because I was harassed by the director of the institution. As well as, I resigned from the institutes [where she had previously worked], due to mismanagement, mishandling of the employees, and low wages, in comparison with long working hours."

Sexual harassment is also common in the streets, and particular in private transport, such as taxis. Mechanisms for complaints tend to be ineffective and women are prevented from doing so by their families, communities and governmental staff. Lack of efficient, safe and low-cost public and private transport makes women's mobility outside the household difficult. And while there is an increasing acceptability of women's driving, they often still face prejudice and stereotypical comments, considered as being 'bad' drivers.

Working inside the house can be seen as a strategy that some women have to generate income for themselves and their families. This was Sarah's (SSI Central Iraq) strategy: "I started a small project [hairdressing] inside my room. […] I cannot work outside the home, because I have children". However, the lack of financial capital and access to funds and the instability of the informal sector create obstacles for women, not only to open their own businesses, but also to keep them open. This is what Myrian's (SSI, Central Iraq) case shows: "[I] rely on myself. That is why I opened my own project that specialises in preparing different meals for all occasions. But at the present time it stopped working, because my funding is weak".

Nevertheless, women might defend the right of choosing if they want to have or not a paid job, therefore refusing 'external' impositions. These women might value their (or others') positions as housewives or refuse being forced from one 'paradigm' — respectable housewives — to another — paid workers — underscoring the importance of choice. As Ranya (SSI, Southern Iraq) stated:

"Frankly, I do not like pressure on women; as if they are without value if they decide not to work. We must appreciate the woman's choice, if she wants to be a housewife and her project is the family; which is an important goal".

However, we cannot forget that deep entrenched material, spatial, historical, cultural and social structures condition women's choices (Connell and Pearse, 2015; Kabeer et al., 2019; Ravazi, 2016). In Iraq and the Kurdistan region, (though at different levels) this can be seen, for instance, in the: existence of conservative sectors of society upholding patriarchal gender relations; continuous of violence (inside and outside the home) that pervade Iraqi women's everyday lives; lack or weak implementation of legislation and social policy, often failing to protect and support women; degradation of the welfare system and infrastructures, which puts extra pressure on women's care and domestic responsibilities, and that further conditions their mobility; systematic corruption at different levels of society, affecting women's access to paid employment and services; and lack of or low income among many people and families, which not only impacts on their

survival, but also might increase tensions within the family (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009; Al-Ali, 2018; Ali, 2018, 2023; Hammedi, 2023). Significantly, these social structures are deeply interconnected, impacting and reinforcing each other. For example, by seeing women as the 'natural' carers of the home, under the 'protection' of their 'male guardians' and older women, and family issues as private, 'conservative' sectors of society will create difficulties in the development and the implementation of laws to protect women or to enable their participation in the public sphere. Similarly, lack of infrastructures, violence and harassment might transform the streets, transports and workplaces into unsafe spaces for women. In turn, this can reinforce the gender power relations within the family, in a cycle that is not easy (but not impossible) to break. And while, in this paper, I focus mainly on women's economic empowerment in its intersections between paid and unpaid work, where the family is of central importance, this does not mean that family relations can explain everything. The interconnectedness of different domains of the social world (such as politics, religion, education, economics or the family), at different 'geopolitical' levels (particularly at international, national, and community levels) impact women's lives (Kandiyoti et al., 2019); consequently making a holistic, multi-layered approach to women's everyday lives all the more needed. Accordingly, we also need to take into account that women themselves have diverse capabilities to access resources, at the intersections of their social positions (such as age, educational level, social class, religious belongings or ethnicity), and thus, different capabilities for agency and diverse needs.

Final remarks

While being promoted by IGOs, I[N]GOs, the GoI and the KRG, women's participation in paid work in Iraq and the Kurdistan region is low. Similarly to results from previous research (ILO, 2022; Kabeer et al., 2019; Lugo, et al., 2020; Ismael et al., 2020; Redaelli et al., 2023; Sen, et al., 2022), a preliminary analysis of the ongoing project on the "Conditions of Life of Women in Iraq and in the Kurdistan Region" has shown that many women are the main carers inside the house, having their movements controlled by more 'conservative' families and communities. Women who have or want to have paid work, even with support of their family, tend to face other obstacles, such as lack of access to jobs, discrimination, corruption, objectification and harassment in the workplace, lack of transport, and lack of security, particularly in the private sector. Gender power relations pervade different domains of society. Women's responsibilities as carers and their symbolic position as the upholders of family honour have wide-ranging effects on their mobility, decision-making capability, amount of unpaid work conducted in the house, and access to paid work, among others.

It is noteworthy though that women's paid work is seen as being essential to their empowerment, particularly within the family, and is increasingly accepted. Having paid work is considered to give women a sense of fulfilment, a possibility to socialise with others, more capability for decision-making and greater mobility. But, women's economic empowerment cannot be considered in isolation from the other areas of their lives, particularly their family life. For many Iraqi women, family is a central aspect of their everyday lives, which can either hinder or support their efforts. It is against 'conservative' families that women rebel against or acquiesce to, when they do not see another way forward. It is with supporting, understanding families that (young) women often thrive in their studies, their paid jobs and/or their own businesses.

As academic research (Al-Ali, 2007, 2018, Ali, 2018; Begikhani et al, 2018) has shown, there is a diversity of women's experiences, perceptions and expectations in Iraq and the Kurdistan region. Women are not necessarily equal in interests, experiences, or access to resources, which implies a nuanced, complex response to support their needs. For instance, while for some women, access to paid work can mean gaining independence from their family; for other women access to paid work, while being important to meet their needs, is also a way to contribute to the wellbeing of their families; for yet other women, caring for their families is itself self-fulfilling and valuable. Further, we cannot forget women's resilience and capability of agency (Al-Ali, 2007; Al-Ali and Pratt, 2009; Ali, 2018, 2023; Joly, 2022). While this is also not new, our research points to interesting strategies that women make use of to gain power within the family, to meet their families' economic needs or to gain access to paid work. For instance, women's involvement in voluntary work might have

humanitarian value, but it is also a strategy to reach paid employment in CSOs. Businesses developed within the house allow women to articulate the need to improve theirs and their families' economic situation, while keeping their responsibility for care and domestic work. Yet, limitations in (accessing) funding might create difficulties, not only for women to develop their own business, but also to keep them working.

State support for women's legal rights, programs to increase women's economic empowerment, policies that strengthen the welfare system (such as, public care for children or maternity leave), and the regulation of private and informal work, in accordance to the SDGs, can indeed support women to enter the labour market (Ravazi, 2016). However, if an 'actual' implementation of this legislation and monitoring of these programs is not done, the result is a continued discrepancy between the policy and practice, which might have negative results on women's everyday lives. In a country like Iraq, where both men and women share a strong belief that women are responsible for domestic and care work, and where women's respectability is reflected on family's prestige, the implementation of social policies, without structural changes, can result in women facing a dual workload and encountering heightened obstacles. Any solution for women's economic empowerment needs a holistic approach that acknowledges gender power relations, the importance of family for women, and other structural factors that can hinder women's 'choices'. These include the lack of infrastructures and a limited welfare state, which tend to increase women's unpaid work. Issues of security and of a supportive environment for women's mobility outside the house also need to be addressed. Legislation can go so far, if women can be attacked in the streets, harassed in transports, and discriminated against in the workplace. While laws are indeed essential to take perpetrators into account, and to (re)enforce women's rights and (economic) empowerment; if they are not supported by the population, there is the risk that they will continue to be broken, with the compliance of families, the community, and governmental staff.

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[1] Women's economic empowerment can be understood as women's "capacity to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognise the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth" (OECD, 2011 cited in Kabeer, 2012, p8).

[2] I use the term conditions of action, to denote not only the limits of action, but also its possibilities, as expressed on debates on structure and action that go beyond Giddens structuration theory and Bourdieu's habitus—particularly the work of Mouzelis (1995), Archer (1995) and Lahire (2001).

[3] 'Classic' patriarchal relations can be understood as men and older women, having control over (younger) men and women. Yet, these relations are dynamic. While they can be followed, they can also be resisted and changed (Kandiyoti, 1988).

[4] In contrast, men tend to have a higher rate of employment in the private sector (65,9%), having a 33,7% rate of employment in the public sector (ILO, 2022).

[5] The correspondent percentage of men is 67,4%, 14,4%, 5% and 24,2% (ILO, 2022).

[6] During the Ba'ath regime, most women civil society organisations were outlawed, with the exception of the General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW), who was integrated in the state machinery (Joseph, 1991).

[7] Available at: https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=96652 [Accessed on: 15 September, 2023].