



## Iraqi Women Get Posts, but Want Power and Respect

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by: *Hadeel al-Shalchi, The Associated Press*

Baghdad - Women candidates are expected to fill many of the seats on provincial governing councils when results of last month's nationwide elections are certified later this week. But winning public acceptance in this male-dominated society is another matter.

Iraqi law requires that about 25 percent of the 444 seats on the 14 new provincial councils go to women - even if it means giving a position to female candidates who didn't win as many votes as some men in the Jan. 31 balloting.

The quota, which already gave 75 women seats in the national parliament, was established under U.S. pressure to open the door to political representation by women and encourage a new generation of Iraqis from all sectors of society. But female candidates say they experienced wide rejection.

Sabah al-Tememy, 35, is one of about 3,900 women who were among the more than 14,400 candidates who ran for the 444 seats on councils in all but four of Iraq's 18 provinces.

She drew some notoriety by plastering campaign posters on buildings and the blast walls lining Baghdad's streets with posters showing her face - and showing it without her hair covered.

"I refused to trick people," al-Tememy told The Associated Press recently.

"I don't wear a head scarf in my daily life, so why should I pretend for votes?"

But even her family objected to the posters, she said.

Iraq's constitution provides that men and women have basic legal rights such as voting, owning property and suing in court. But deep differences exist on the role of women in society.

Inaam Hamid, a former political prisoner, campaigned for a spot on the Baghdad provincial council wearing a traditional black robe, known as an abaya, but said even that drew objections.

"If you're covered or not, you can't win," said Hamid. "I heard: 'Don't you have shame - wearing the abaya and still putting your face on a poster?'"

Even women in government posts have complaints.

Nawal al-Samarraie, Iraq's minister for women's affairs, recently quit her post to protest a lack of resources for the agency, which focuses on offering help to women who lost husbands or other male relatives to violence or detention since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion.

Al-Samarraie said the ministry's budget was slashed from \$7,500 to \$1,500 a month.

Sameera al-Moussawi, head of the Iraqi parliament's department of women's affairs, supports reserving legislative seats for women, but says there is a long way to go.

"Women don't need a ministry to represent us. We need effective women in every ministry of the country," al-Moussawi said, adding that women in political posts need financial support and commitment from the government.

She said electoral officials had guaranteed to her that the 25 percent quota for female council members would be met from the Jan. 31 elections. But is waiting to see the allocation of seats.

"The quota is a good strategy, but the problem is in applying it," al-Moussawi said. "Iraq remains a patriarchal society and the election of a woman is not really valued."

Women who have tried to venture into the public sphere have been criticized for defying traditional norms that discourage them from mixing with men or occupying a public role.

"For three years, I had to disguise myself in different clothes so that I could get my work done," said Hamid, who in 2005 accepted a provincial council seat in Baghdad with the main Shiite party, the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council.

Hamid, 43, has helped establish vocational workshops for women and worked to ensure that victims of violence are properly compensated.

But her accomplishments mattered little to some when she campaigned before last month's elections. She said many Iraqis told her they were not willing to accept a woman in such a public role.

"Some men - many educated - told me they would be ashamed to vote for a woman," she said. "Women also believe that only a man has the power to claim what's rightfully hers."

Al-Tememy campaigned partly on a platform to help women and partly to serve as an example to other women.

"Let this be an experiment for us," she said. "People in Iraq just need to get used to seeing women as leaders."

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