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**Panel Five:
Women in Positions of Leadership: Opportunities for
Empowerment**

- Muna Qawachi, Secretary of Kurdistan Parliament
- Vian Sabri, member of Council of Representatives, Iraq
- Kwestan Mohammed, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, KRG
- Sherri Kraham Talabany, Founder and Director, SEED Foundation (Moderator)



The best indicator of a nation's overall security and stability is not its GDP, nor the strength of its democracy, but gender equality. Founder and Director of SEED Foundation, **Sherri Kraham Talabany**, introduced the panel on female political leadership by unpacking the

correlation between war, instability, and gender inequality, referring to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security to which Iraq is a signatory.

“If you want peace, security, and stability, you need to be concerned with women... I can assure you that women have policy initiatives and power to make changes in Iraq.” - Sherri Kraham Talabany

In order to better understand the persistent instability of Iraq, Kraham Talabany highlighted key drivers of gender disparity within this context. She noted the endemic levels of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), including domestic violence, experienced by over 50% of women in Erbil alone; the inability of Iraqi females to attend 12 full years of formal education, averaging a mere 7 years per capita; and women’s low participation (14%) in the labour market. In addition, the federal government only has three females within its 23-member Cabinet, despite evidence that female participation in policy-making lowers levels of corruption. Such gender-based violence and discriminatory practices collectively heighten social insecurity for everyone.

While the quota for female participation in the Kurdistan Parliament has been successful in securing a 25% minimum, **Muna Qawachi** emphasised the urgency of both increasing this percentage and expanding the quota system into the executive, decision-making levels and the leadership of political parties. The KRG is considered significantly ahead of the federal government in relation to implementing the tools necessary to achieve gender equality, including: the quota system, the High Council of Women’s Affairs, The General Directorates and High Committee to Combat Violence Against Women; bills on domestic violence, SGBV, and Personal Status Code reform; and the creation of shelters for women. According to Qawachi, however, women remain excluded from certain areas of the policy-making environment. She referred, in particular, to the lack of female members in the Ministry of Peshmerga, as well as the relegation of female politicians to a ‘deputy’ status.

“We are begging participation in decision-making.” - Muna Qawachi

In her position as Secretary of the Kurdistan Parliament, Qawachi and her female allies work to break down the omnipresent patriarchy within existing governance structures. Women within the KRG are forced to navigate multiple vectors of pressure simultaneously; they are expected to prove their expertise in their political field, advocate for equality, and also successfully maneuver structures with engrained gender discrimination. Qawachi called on her fellow politicians, as well as the media, to assist women in ensuring the normalisation and visibility of female leadership, and in highlighting and tackling the many social barriers women face in securing it.

As a member of the Council of Representatives in Iraq, **Vian Sabri** complimented Kurdistan on the success of its civil society and government advocates in securing much-needed tools for the realization of equality. These achievements have also managed to increase the marketing of women’s participation and public awareness of the barriers toward it, an effort much needed in the federal government of Iraq. In consensus with other panelists, Sabri highlighted important articles related to women’s equality within the Iraqi constitution, which

both federal and regional governments have failed to champion and implement. After the instatement of the quota system, Sabri expressed how other regulations within the constitution were largely ignored; she therefore called for a review of the constitution to secure a better gendered perspective, stating that *“25% in Parliament won’t necessarily make things better.”* Concurring with Qawachi, Sabri saw operational gender discrimination within the government. For example, the judiciary council currently only has three female members. Furthermore, the political participation of women is regressing in some areas, with recent elections seeing women replaced by men.

“UNSCR 1325 was created nearly 20 years ago. We need research, data, and case studies to understand why we haven’t reached the place we’re looking for.” - Vian Sabri

In their policy and decision-making capacities, women need to actively provide a gendered perspective and insist on its integration. The Kurdistan High Council of Women’s Affairs, for example, saw a dangerous differentiation in the ‘levels of violence’ amended to the law against SGBV; male legislators had already reduced the number of articles presented to the legal committee from 32 to 8. Some male decision-makers have also interpreted the 25% as a cap to women’s participation, rather than a minimum, highlighting the need for deeper engagement and a review of patriarchal culture within the governance systems and public administrations of both governments.

As the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs within the KRG, **Kwestan Mohammed** observed that women’s participation is still seen as controversial. Despite the efforts of the KRG, progress is slow, largely symbolic, and has only this year secured female representation at the presidency level through the election of Dr Rewaz Fayege Hussein as Speaker of Parliament. Furthermore, parties and political blocs are not ‘trusting’ women to lead them. Mohammed pushed for a review of all structural barriers at the local, regional, and national levels and urged more women to fill roles at the governorship, district mayor, Director General, and Provincial Council levels. Other quasi-governmental structures in need of review and reform incorporate fundamental religious doctrines that exclude and discriminate against women. Mohammed emphasized that Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are essential for lobbying, pushing, and spreading awareness in the service of these changes.

“We must debunk social and religious beliefs that say that women are unfit to hold office or positions of power.” - Kwestan Mohammed

Contending with Qawachi, **Mohammed** argued that the controversial nature of female leadership is evidenced by the fact that women are increasingly *less* represented within leadership outside the political sphere. Women do not ‘make it’ to the top: while 60% of teachers are female, this is far from reflected at the educational management level; 48% of doctors are female, but hold only 2% of the seats within the Ministry of Health. *“We need a holistic approach to changing this,”* she declared. She highlighted the need to mainstream equality by instilling faith in women’s leadership across the public sphere, as well as among girls and women through education.

Across the panel, men were seen as central to the emancipation of women. In addition, panelists argued that the media only presents women as capable of speaking on ‘women’s

issues,' rather than on the platforms of their respective political campaigns. Panelists agreed that this is an unrealistic and unhelpful portrayal, as women should feature prominently in all ministries. Consensus also emerged that awareness is needed to secure a true change in public attitudes towards equality.

Qawachi argued that, while the law against SGBV has been around for 8 years, its implementation is far from complete. Oppressive, harmful practices persist, particularly in rural areas where disputes are settled tribally, rather than through a rights-based approach. Reporting violence still holds consequences for the victims. Therefore, there is a need to assess areas where violence is prevalent and increase the punishment for domestic violence. The negative impacts of endemic SGBV need to be well-established.

Given such social and cultural pathologies, women face multiple barriers to being on the ballot at all. Once elected, they have to wage continuous battles against oppressive structures within both governments, as well as male and female politicians who support and reinforce those structures. Sabri argued that women need to be confident, to feel responsible, and to lift other women up by building alliances and complimenting each other.

“The brothers are here in the audience today and it is a good sign - we cannot applaud with one hand, we need both (genders). Hopefully we won't need quotas in the future.” - Vian Sabri