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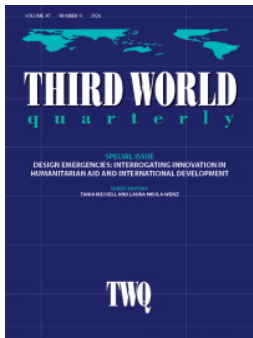
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Beyond the binary: why nuanced gender backlash analysis matters in Iraq

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines how to understand the backlash against gender in Iraq. The international policy and development world adopts a predominantly essentialist approach to gender in Iraq, and in most of the Middle East, viewing any gender clamp-down as a manifestation of age-old patriarchy. The postcolonial feminist perspective, on the other hand, rightly questions the applicability of Western explanatory frameworks to non-Western contexts, refusing the Western hegemonic conception of progress and inviting a complex analysis of power. While acknowledging the validity of postcolonial feminist critiques, this article argues that what is considered 'Western' may not be that different from the 'non-Western'. It suggests that there are shared dynamics even across seemingly disparate contexts. Drawing on extensive empirical data, it demonstrates that the backlash in Iraq simultaneously shares characteristics with, and exhibits unique features from, the backlash elsewhere, shaped by specific long-term contextual factors. This nuanced perspective is crucial: oversimplified 'difference' arguments inadvertently bolster claims by backlash proponents who frame feminism and gender equality as alien, Western impositions, thereby hindering effective advocacy for gender rights.

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Introduction

On 21 January 2025 one of the worst nightmares of women's rights activists in Iraq became real. The parliament passed the infamous Ja'afari Law, which reduced the legal age for marriage to nine for Shi'a girls. Conservative Shi'a parliamentarians had been proposing this law for the last 10 years without success. The timing of the passing of the law is not a coincidence. A backlash against progressive gender norms in Iraq has further escalated in recent years, especially after the 2019 October protests, also known as the Tishreen Protests, to which large numbers of women joined, and after a systematic social media campaign against gender in the summer of 2023. Since then, a series of legal and institutional changes have been introduced by the government, including a ban on the concept of 'gender' in civil society, university and government sectors in late 2023, the criminalisation of homosexuality in 2024 and changes to the Personal Status Law affecting marriage age in 2025. All this

mostly went unnoticed by the international community; or, if noticed, it was understood as another clamp-down that was the product of the age-old patriarchy that typified Iraq. A similar interpretation can be observed towards backlash cases in other Middle Eastern countries.

The scholarly literature on backlash against gender has mainly focused on the US, Europe, Latin America and the transnational backlash mobilisation in global spaces such as the United Nations (UN) (Anduiza and Rico 2024; Sanders 2018; Sandler and Goetz 2020). Scholarly attention to the Middle East and the Global South is also growing (Ali 2023; Almazidi 2024; Altay, Al-Ali, and Galor 2024; Mustafa 2025; Cole and Moore 2020; Edström, et al. 2024; El Rahi and Antar 2024; Kandiyoti 2025a, 2025b; 2019; Kandiyoti et al. 2019; Unal 2024; Zaremborg, Tabbush, and Friedman 2021). Most Middle East scholars have considered the analytical framing on backlash as incapable of fully capturing the backlash in the Middle East. This feminist scholarship challenges the dominant Western analytical frameworks for good reason. Analytically universalist claims rooted in Western orientalist perspectives overlook the variety of gender dynamics affecting women and men *differently* and the negative gendered experiences of colonial/neocolonial economic and military involvement. This article follows these feminist, transnational and queer feminist critiques that challenge essentialist views on gender relations in the Middle East and the dichotomies embedded in the universalised frameworks. It emphasises the role of long-term structures, interactions between national and international processes, global capitalism and military interventions (Abu-Lughod 2002; Kandiyoti 2007; Mohanty 2003).

This article agrees with this critique and offers a contextualised analysis of the backlash against gender in Iraq, while suggesting a more nuanced approach to the *difference* argument. The different manifestations of the backlash against gender across the world share significant similarities, attesting to universal dynamics and shared experiences of gender politics. Recognising this similarity has value because defining the 'universal' only in terms of 'Western hegemony' ends up benefiting authoritarian and patriarchal actors. The feminist scholarship's argument that 'backlash' as a concept does not capture the circumstances of the Middle East hinders overcoming the dichotomies embedded in a Western-centric view of the Middle East. However, there is a lot to be gained analytically by drawing on a universal perspective – not 'universal' as understood in the Western intellectual tradition, but a 'universal' perspective that truly draws on shared global human experience across different temporal and spatial scales. Rejecting 'universality' as an idea altogether inadvertently risks confirming particularistic arguments about difference, which backlash actors capitalise on.

Therefore, this article argues that existing analytical frameworks developed to explain the gender backlash phenomenon outside the Middle East have some explanatory power in this region. This is because backlash against gender is a transnational and global phenomenon and knowledge produced about it is not necessarily 'Western'. This article questions the idea of a rigid division between 'Western' and 'non-Western' approaches to understanding political phenomena in the world (Bilgin 2008, 5). As Bilgin argues, what is considered as 'non-Western' may not be that different from the 'Western'; it can be 'similar' but in a 'different' way (2008, 6). Using Iraq as a case study and building on Bilgin's framing, the article argues that the backlash against gender in Iraq is 'similar' to that elsewhere but in a 'different' way due to long-term contextual factors. Like other cases, the backlash against gender in Iraq has a reactionary character that challenges women's rights activism and pro-equality laws. It shares characteristics with other cases of backlash around the world, specifically: emphasis

on the discourse and values related to traditional family and 'natural' order; new sexism embedded in backlash actors' attitudes; and pairing of 'undesirable' ideologies with gender-progressive ideas.

What differentiates the backlash in Iraq is not some unique dynamic underpinning gender relations in the region, but context-specific political, socioeconomic and legal factors shaped by complex interactions between national and international processes, which create conditions for how gender norms are agreed or contested (Ergas 2013; Rothermel 2020). Throughout these processes, assumptions about what is 'Western' and 'non-Western' have constantly shaped each other, making it difficult to claim that social and cultural norms in Iraq are uniquely different from those of the rest of the world. For instance, backlash actors in both Eastern Europe and Iraq use a counter-rhetoric against an 'undesirable' ideology to delegitimise gender progressive norms. What is different is that those in Poland adopt an anti-European rhetoric, whereas those in Iraq use an anti-Western one.

To develop these arguments, the article draws on the critical feminist literature on the Middle East and the recently growing literature on the anti-gender and backlash against gender focusing on Europe, the US, and Latin America and other countries in the Global South. It uses 30 in-depth interviews and conversations that took place during seven field trips between 2018 and 2025 to Baghdad and Erbil. The interviews gathered factual information about official decisions and regulations and first-hand accounts and insights from women's right activists and public servants. The field trips were conducted in partnership with Iraqi women's rights organisations and activists, whose names are kept anonymous for safety reasons.¹ The data includes interviews and conversations with representatives of seven civil society organisations, nine women's rights organisations and two international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and with four Iraqi civil servants, two academics, two independent human rights activists, one investigative journalist, one lawyer, one medical doctor and one UN representative (23 women and seven men). The article also draws on discussions from three workshops that the author co-organised in 2018, 2022 and 2024 in Amman and London. The participants at these workshops included women's rights organisations from Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries, INGOs, UN agencies, academics, and Iraqi and British civil servants.

Approaches to studying the backlash against gender

This article is interested in the question of how to examine the backlash against gender in the Middle East without making essentialist assumptions or overemphasising the 'unique difference' of the region. Drawing on the international norms and social movements literature, existing scholarship explains the backlash against gender as a reaction to feminist achievements (Corredor 2019), a counter-movement against what conservative actors view as potentially reversible feminist successes (Chappell 2006, 498–502), or as an effort to spoil and contest gender norms (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020; Sanders 2018). At the core of these conceptions are Faludi (2006) and Walby's (2003) definitions of gender backlash as a recurrent patriarchal persistence against progress in women's legal, political, social and economic rights. As Cynthia Enloe states, conservative actors throughout history have always challenged any changes to gender norms, so 'patriarchy is not some old-fashioned notion ... it is up-to-date [and] sustainable ... [and] finds ways of adapting and surviving' (Enloe 2017, 59). Today's gender backlash is an escalated and intensified form of patriarchal reaction to

change that is in a co-constitutive relationship with authoritarianism, far-right movements, conservatism and the wider politics of polarisation around values and culture (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018).

Existing scholarship on the Middle East avoids certain concepts used to define political phenomena in regions like Europe, which exceptionalises not only the Middle East but also Europe (Altay, Al-Ali, and Galor 2024, 14).² 'Backlash' is one such term. Arguing that 'backlash' does not capture the complexity of the situation in the Middle East, Kandiyoti has suggested using 'masculinist restoration' instead (Kandiyoti 2013). Others have argued the inappropriateness of the concept by emphasising the different logic and framework of anti-gender and anti-queer campaigning in the Middle East from those in Europe, for instance in the case of Kuwait (Almazidi 2024, 13), or emphasised the existence of unique factors such as deeply embedded patriarchy and its violences in social and political life in Lebanon through the institutionalised religion and sectarianism (El Rahi and Antar 2024). On the other hand, some have found 'backlash' a useful framework for explaining the intensifying opposition to gender equality in this region (Mustafa 2025, 517). Even Kandiyoti, in her more recent work, changed her position slightly and argued that today the concept of backlash could be considered appropriate given the impact of global economic inequalities and anti-gender reactions in countries where women and queer rights have been institutionalised (Kandiyoti 2025b, 202).

This article uses the term 'backlash' but acknowledges that it is not a perfect term,³ not because it is inapplicable to other contexts but because it implies an oppositional situation and leads to constructions of two hostile groups. This view imagines clear boundaries between two delineated groups and traps us into a polarised framework, which backlash actors aim to promote. Therefore, the language of 'backlash' could hinder dialogue, alliance building and finding open doors and opportunities in unexpected places (Sanders and Jenkins 2022, 372). Also, the term 'backlash against gender' gives the impression that gender equality is a stand-alone agenda. However, this perception has been corrected through work that shows the co-constitutive relationship between backlash and authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, racism, conservatism and the far right globally (Paternotte 2020). Moreover, the concept of backlash captures the regressive nature of anti-genderism, highlighting its inability to offer a way forward and its obsession with an ideal past.

Most policy perspectives in the Global North also perceive the concept of backlash as inappropriate for the Middle East context but for different reasons. Influenced by the essentialist and orientalist view of the region and Islam, they believe gender hierarchies in this region have a fundamentally different nature and that little or no progress has been made on women's rights in this region. Therefore, a 'backlash as reaction' would be seen as unlikely. The region indeed has lower levels of female participation in economic, political and public affairs and women experience more legal discrimination there compared to other parts of the world. But Western policy perspectives take a 'monolithic conception of male dominance' in this region (Kandiyoti 1988, 285) and overlook the significant progress that has been made to advance women's positions (Jones, Mitchell, and Martin 2021, 278; WEF 2024).

The perceived uniqueness of the Middle East is rooted in essentialising narratives of the colonial past that construct a binary framing of the *orient* as opposed to the civilised, developed and rational West (Said 2001). The widespread stereotypical perception that women in the Middle East, specifically Muslim women, are passive and powerless has somehow stuck (Charrad 2011, 418). The 'plight of Muslim women' and 'saving Muslim women' rhetoric

used in Afghanistan and Iraq by international intervention actors has essentialised women and has failed to see the diversity of women's voices and agencies (Abu-Lughod 2002). The governance feminism in international gender frameworks, such as the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, perpetuate the hierarchical division between the 'white West' and the other (Henry 2021).

Essentialising and orientalist perceptions of gender relations in the Middle East have prevailed even though the scholarship on gender and women in the Middle East has dismantled them (Charrad 2011, 418). This scholarship has shown that there is no universally accepted interpretation of Islamic rules pertaining to societies and women, and there is huge temporal and geographic variation (Abu-Lughod 2002; Kandiyoti 2007; Keddie 2007). It has rightly questioned hierarchies between the knowledge created in the West and in other contexts, and criticised the application of theoretical lenses developed in the West or the Global North to other contexts. This literature has demonstrated that the continuation and reinforcement of patriarchal legal, economic, social and political structures is caused by structural factors related to institutions, international processes, conflict, colonialism, neo-liberal economic interventions, the security interests of international actors, and the interests of the national elite (Abu-Lughod 2009; Al-Ali and Pratt 2009; Charrad 2011; Kandiyoti 2007; Kandiyoti et al. 2019; Mohanty 2003, 2013). This scholarship has also shown that women in the Middle East are not passive actors, tracing how women have withstood difficulties caused by unemployment, low wages and patriarchal structures, and found ways of pushing the boundaries, and bending and changing the rules through their agency (Charrad 2011, 426–427; Kandiyoti 1988).

While it is necessary to challenge the claim to the universality of 'Western' approaches and their portrayal of gender dynamics in the Middle East as uniquely different, it is also important to appreciate the complex web of long-term interactions between different experiences, processes and bodies of knowledge globally. Bilgin questions some of the postcolonial approaches' overemphasis on the 'difference' between 'Western' and 'non-Western' approaches to understanding world politics (Bilgin 2008, 5). She states that "'Western" and "non-Western" dynamics as well as interpretations, over the years, clashed and fused in far too many different ways – ways that are not always acknowledged'; therefore, what is considered 'non-western' may not be that different from the 'western', or it can be 'similar' but in a 'different' way (Bilgin 2008, 6–7). She questions the assumption that the "'non-Western" ways of thinking and doing world politics' are radically 'different' and that one should expect to see 'difference' in non-Western ways to deem them 'interesting' (Bilgin 2008, 19). In doing this, she draws our attention to how 'Western' ideas and ways of doing world politics are a product of the co-constitutive relationship between so-called West and non-West.

Indeed, even though traditional rigid gender roles and patriarchy are deeply structural and institutionalised in this region, leading to non-conforming men and women facing significant hostility, discrimination and gender-based violence, this does not mean that the nature and mechanisms of patriarchy are uniquely different from those in other regions. There are more similarities than expected between what is perceived to be 'Western' and 'non-Western'. On close inspection, the backlash against gender in this region looks very similar to backlash in Western countries.

What is important to note is the unintended consequences of global encounters on women's rights advocacy in the Middle East. Post-1990 neoliberal policies understood women's experiences only through the lens of the 'empowerment' agenda. The gender norms

institutionalised through the UN system were instrumentalised by military interventions (Abu-Lughod 2002, 2009; Kandiyoti 2025a, 42–43). All these enabled and bolstered Middle Eastern conservative actors' claims that feminism is a form of Western imperialism and the West is a source of moral decadence. Such perceptions categorise the West as a unitary entity and overlook the existence of patriarchy and the ongoing feminist struggle in the West. Therefore, we should avoid categorising the West as a unit and attribute unique characteristics to it emphasising its *difference* as well. Such views deepen the cleavages among feminists of different geographies. This benefits conservative actors in both the Global North and Global South. These actors co-opt anti-imperialist critiques, instrumentalise the post-colonial critique and interpret it in culturally essentialist terms, as the Vatican's rhetoric shows. They do so in the name of protecting the 'authentic' culture, family and tradition against perceived attacks from a feminist global elite (Unal 2024, 18).

Finding 'the imagination and wisdom to forge a new politics of feminist solidarity that resonates around the globe' (Kandiyoti 2025a, 45) requires going beyond the North and South, and West and Middle East, binaries and being more comfortable with concepts travelling across geographies. For instance, we should welcome initiatives such as implementing the concept of 'far right', typically understood as a term that captures an aspect of European politics, in the Middle Eastern context and de-exceptionalises the Middle East as well as Europe (Altay, Al-Ali, and Galor 2024, 1–12, 16). This paper sees backlash against gender as a transnational and global phenomenon and questions the Westernness of both the phenomenon of backlash against gender and the knowledge produced to explain it. It argues that the existing analytical frameworks have explanatory power for the gender backlash in the Middle East.

The not so extraordinary case of gender backlash in Iraq

The last decade showed that, despite decades-long activism at national, global and transnational levels (Keck and Sikkink 1998), progress in women's and queer rights can be overturned. This has pushed women's rights activists to shift from fighting for rights to fighting to prevent rights being taken away (Zaremborg, Tabbush, and Friedman 2021, 527). Backlash politics in different countries are connected to each other, synchronous, deliberate, and transnational. They target women's and queer people's economic, social, political and reproductive rights, normalise misogynist language and try to revoke progressive rules (Goetz 2020, 162). Utilising the opportunities provided by global governance structures and transnational spaces, like-minded conservative actors around the world establish alliances, such as the 'unholy alliance', to generate a counter-gender discourse to shape public opinion and a value-based contestation (Cupać and Ebetürk 2020, 703; Sanders and Jenkins 2022, 278). Cases of gender backlash around the globe share three common features: (1) they promote similar discourses and values, (2) they have characteristics of a 'new sexism', and (3) they pair anti-gender sentiment with other counter-ideologies. The empirical data from Iraq shows that the backlash against gender in this country also shares these characteristics.

Firstly, a key shared feature of gender backlash is the promotion of a discourse and set of values through norm contestation to undermine the normative frameworks that constitute women's and queer rights (Lewin 2021, 254; Sanders 2018, 273). Norms are standards of 'appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity' and they reflect judgements about what behaviours are appropriate and which are not (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891).

Backlash actors project the norms related to feminism, same-sex relationships, reproductive rights and sexual education as dangerous. Underpinned by misogyny and male supremacy that blame women's rights for men's loss of power, they polarise the public through the propaganda of fear. They use 'metaphors, symbols and cognitive cues' to frame norms as right or wrong to redefine the standards for 'appropriate' behaviours and ideas (Chappell 2006, 499). The Vatican labels gender equality norms as 'gender ideology' threatening 'natural' (meaning heteronormative and traditional) family values, the moral social order and the 'complementary difference' between men and women (Biroli and Caminotti 2020, 1). They normalise such knowledge claims on gender, which is a form of 'epistemic power' (Korolczuk 2021; Unal 2024, 7). Far-right actors in Europe target such norms in the name of protecting the traditional family (Anduiza and Rico 2024, 2) and white male supremacists in the US see women pursuing careers, reproductive rights, and same-sex and mixed-race relationships as threats to the future of the white race (Mills, Schmuhl, and Capellan 2020, 571).

Backlash actors in Iraq frame feminism and gender equality in a similar way. Since mid-2023, media outlets and social media platforms controlled by dominant conservative political actors and religious authorities started an organised and well-funded misinformation campaign against 'gender' driven by 'the conservative military factions and certain political actors with lots of money and power'.⁴ The concept of gender was incorporated into the official language as *al-naw al-ijtimai* (social type) in 2006 (Mustafa 2025, 512) and was used in government policies and documents since then until its prohibition. For instance, the human rights curriculum delivered at the Iraqi Armed Forces' military education and training institutions included the term gender until its prohibition in 2023.⁵ However, despite its translation, gender has not been defined in a contextualised way and continued to be seen as an alien concept (Mustafa 2025, 518). Backlash actors such as Shi'a clerics political parties such as the *Fadhilla* (virtue) Party, and their militia factions and social media outlets, utilised this gap in meaning. They claimed that 'gender' has been injected into Iraq to destroy the moral, religious and national fabric of society by encouraging homosexuality and immoral sexual behaviour among women and girls (Alkhudary 2023).⁶ They deliberately misinterpreted the term and attributed negative meanings to it to demonise women's rights activists and queer people (Mustafa 2025, 518–519).

The anti-gender campaign used curated and expensive videos on platforms such as Telegram to disseminate content hostile to the anti-domestic violence bill, giving messages such as 'if you don't want your daughter to bring a boyfriend to your house or if you don't want your wives to cheat on you, oppose the bill'.⁷ A women's rights activist working for a women's rights organisation said 'It is well known that the campaign is funded by religious militia and political groups'.⁸ They criticised the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, for destroying the Iraqi family, society and Islam. They blamed working women for 'imitating men, favouring their jobs over their husbands' and considered the appointment of women by the Ministries of Interior and Defence as a shameful moment in Iraqi history (Mustafa 2025, 523). The campaign targeted women's rights activists and women with public profiles as agents of external (Western) influence. Their promotion of binary and polarising conceptions of the West vs Middle East, blaming women's human rights defenders for supporting the West, leads to attacks against these women for being 'traitors', forcing them to make difficult choices in their struggle for justice.⁹

A similar rhetoric of norm contestation and the demonisation of gender and queer people is observable in other Middle Eastern countries as well. Islamic entities in Egypt opposed

the minor reforms to the divorce law in 2017 (El Kholy et al. 2019). The Sharia Research and Studies Council in Libya released a *fatwa* prohibiting the use of the term gender in 2023 (The Libya Observer 2023). Rainbow-coloured children's toys were confiscated in the Gulf countries, and in Kuwait a social media campaign called the *Fetrah* (human nature) was started in 2022 against the 'Western promotion of homosexuality' and 'moral corruption targeting children' (Almazidi 2024, 10, 12). The backlash against queer people in Lebanon has been escalating since 2023 (Haidar 2025).

Secondly, gender backlash around the world manifests aspects of new sexism¹⁰ and Iraq is no exception to this. New sexism denies the existence of gender discrimination and argues that women no longer have anything to complain about. It even claims that empowerment has gone too far, and women are now stuck between emancipation and fulfilment (Vint 2007, 167). The denial rhetoric questions the legitimacy of women's rights organisations' efforts, gender equality measures and the study of gender (Anduiza and Rico 2024, 3). In Iraq it is not uncommon to hear denials of discrimination against women because 'women can go to school and join the labour force'. Women's subordination in private life is also denied through claims that women have powerful positions at home. Interviewees said it is common to hear statements like 'women are the queens of their homes' and 'they manage and rule the men of their households'.¹¹ According to them, this is a reflection of the perception that if a man is providing for a woman, this means the woman has an elevated status at home and is valued.¹² This view echoes the Vatican's rhetoric of differentiated roles for women and men instead of equality.

New sexism resents the favourable treatment of women, which, it is argued, victimises men and violates their rights. The fear of emasculation, diminishing privileges and reduced economic opportunities lead to 'gender panics' (Cole and Moore 2020). Right-wing misogynist political movements bolster the fear of loss of power and a desire to return to an idealised past, a past where men were entitled to 'jobs, land and sex', to which Trump's 2016 campaign promised to return (Cole and Moore 2020, 284). Such resentment can lead to violent male aggression. The phenomena of incels (involuntary celibates), pick-up artists and men's rights activists, and far-right homicidal violence against women in the US are linked to a perception of diminished position (Mills, Schmuhi, and Capellan 2020, 571). In Iraq men's rights groups claim that women are victimising men. They target progressive activists, women who go against traditional norms and gender studies programmes (Hardi 2023). Several women's rights activists, politicians, women with high public profiles, social media influencers and vloggers have been slandered, harassed and even kidnapped and murdered (Chulov 2018; Rubin 2024).¹³ As a result of the increasing number of attacks, in early 2024, the Social Media Directory ordered the removal of hate materials from circulation and started to regularly check material related to the anti-gender campaign that might put anyone at risk.¹⁴

Thirdly, the backlash against gender is often linked with another ideology seen as alien, threatening or harmful. Depending on the context, backlash actors associate feminism with communism, Nazism, Marxism, Westernisation or colonialisation. For instance, backlash actors associate feminists and progressive gender norms with Nazism in Spain (Anduiza and Rico 2024, 6),¹⁵ with Marxism and neo-colonialism in Latin America (Biroli and Caminotti 2020, 3), with Nazism, Stalinism and Maoism in the US (Sanders 2018, 280), and with EU colonisation and cosmopolitan imperialism in eastern Europe (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). The Holy See regularly objects to UN resolution proposals in the name of opposing Western

liberal bias and cultural colonialism (Corredor 2019). Its rhetoric is a purposeful, clumsy, selective and distorted appropriation of the valid concerns of post-colonialism (Lewin 2021, 261).

Again, Iraq is no exception to this trend. Backlash actors bolster their anti-gender rhetoric by pairing it with anti-Westernism. The instrumentalisation of women's rights in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the invading forces strengthened the already existing anti-Western rhetoric and led to an association between progressive gender norms and Western interests. The next section explains this aspect of the backlash against gender in Iraq. It contextualises the backlash through unpacking the dynamics of national–international interaction in this context, which has put women's rights activists in a difficult position because they are framed as agents of Western powers and promoters of Western values due to the perception that the women's rights agenda is a Western imposition.¹⁶

The long-term context that shaped the gender backlash in Iraq

Iraq is a militarised country that experienced decades of conflict, insecurity, military intervention and sanctions and has a history of colonial administration. Throughout these processes, a complex web of interactions has emerged between international and national actors (state and non-state) and their different and overlapping politics and norms. This section discusses the context-specific long-term processes that inform and shape gender norm contestation in Iraq. The transformation of the state's approach to women's rights, specifically in the legal and institutional space, happened in connection with the impacts of conflict and military interventions. Social, political and institutional outcomes of these processes not only created mixed and mostly negative outcomes for women's rights but also shaped the backlash against gender in Iraq. This wider context of national, international and transnational processes constitutes the changing landscape of women's rights and gender equality in Iraq and impacts how gender norms are negotiated on an everyday basis.

The legal system and institutional policies are key sources of legitimacy shaping what norms are appropriate and where battles for women's rights have been fought (Sanders and Jenkins 2022, 373). They are also where the backlash against gender manifests most prominently in Iraq, which is unsurprising because Iraq is a highly institutionalised and bureaucratised state. As a leading Iraqi women's rights defender often stated during our conversations, 'the legal system and institutions are where women's rights defenders should stand firm and fight.'¹⁷ Throughout its history, the Iraqi state has introduced both progressive and discriminatory laws and policies that influenced institutions, politics and social norms around gender. They led to changes in women's position in society, sometimes advancing equality and sometimes maintaining discrimination, and impacted the ability of women's rights defenders to influence relevant rules and practices.

In terms of positive changes, the state-led top-down modernisation and nation-building efforts from the 1940s to 1970s, combined with the relative strength of left-leaning and progressive ideologies and the influence of women's organisations, improved women's educational, economic, social and political status. Although the 'benevolent sexism' of the state reinforced gender stereotypes, it had positive impacts and enlarged the space for women's rights struggle (Efrati 2012).¹⁸ Women's rights organisations' efforts to improve women's education, and to advocate for suffrage and the right to work, played an important role in the pro-equality discourse of General Qasim's regime (1958–1963) and the passing of the

progressive Personal Status Code (1959) that deals with marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody (Efrati 2012, 113). Under Ba'ath rule, especially during its first 10 years or so, women's participation in education and employment significantly improved and women attained the right to vote.

Some positive changes were witnessed also in post-2003 Iraq, including the amendment of some discriminatory laws and the introduction of new laws,¹⁹ the adoption of new policies such as the quota system and national action plans to implement the WPS agenda from 2014, and the formation of new institutional bodies, such as the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs in 2004. The Ministry was abolished in 2015 as part of a campaign to reduce corruption and mismanagement (Forman-Rabinovici 2022, 1085). Women's rights organisations also found the ministry ineffective in pushing for change.²⁰ The Women's Empowerment Department was set up in 2016 in its place with responsibility to incorporate a gender perspective across ministries and increase women's representation in government offices.

These changes were partly an outcome of the pressure from the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq, the work of Iraqi bureaucrats sympathetic to gender equality and, most importantly, the efforts of women's civil society.²¹ The growing civil society sector after 2003, and since 1991 in the Kurdistan region, gave women new opportunities for employment, skills development, class mobility and access to transnational and regional women's rights networks. Conferences, events and workshops enabled engagements between women's rights activists and policymakers, which facilitated raising awareness around issues women face in Iraq and created new platforms for advocacy and activism. Some of these organisations collaborated with government ministries in developing policies and providing training to civil servants.²² They played a key role in the development of the first WPS national action plan and the six local action plans for specific governorates in the South (Chilmeran 2022, 749; Kaya 2016).²³

However, these changes did not lead to the desired outcomes, and many remained mostly symbolic (Mustafa 2025, 513). Throughout Iraq's history, efforts to advance women's rights have been contested by religious and tribal authorities – a response that is not specific to Iraq. What is significant is that their contestation is closely associated with decades of conflict and international involvement, including the British mandate, the Gulf War and particularly the 2003 invasion. Even in the early years of the Iraqi state, an anti-colonial sentiment underpinned the nationalist state formation, and this was reflected in the approach to women's rights. State-led progress was framed in terms of a national identity marker, of being Iraqi against the coloniser, i.e. “Our culture is different from yours” often translated into “Our women are different from yours” (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009, 167).

This emphasis on national difference began to have more religious and patriarchal undertones in the 1980s, accompanied by increased militarisation and political violence as a result of wars and economic sanctions – including the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), the Gulf War (1990–1991), the international economic sanctions (1990–2003), and the 2003 US-led invasion. From the 1980s, the Ba'ath regime began to bolster the power of religious and tribal authorities, change the discourse about women's rights and adopt gender-discriminatory and violent practices (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009, 24). It allowed early marriage and encouraged women to have more children, defining the ‘good’ Iraqi woman as the mother of future soldiers. Its ‘faith campaign’ banned women from travelling abroad without a male relative and lightened punishments for ‘honour’ killings. The regime also used sexual violence, abduction and rape against women and men who opposed the regime (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009; Ali 2018, 2023; Hardi 2011).

The 2003 invasion by the US-led coalition deepened the influence of religious forces in political and socioeconomic life and the militarisation of the country. States affected by prolonged conflict, including international military intervention, experience issues with security and the rule of law. In these contexts, religious, ethnic and sectarian divisions are often used as a source of power in conflictual dynamics. More importantly, international engagement often enables powerful religious and sectarian actors rather than strengthening state institutions (Kandiyoti 2007, 503–504). The new Iraqi regime emerged on the shoulders of religious and tribal authorities, Shi'a clerics and conservative Islamic factions, whose power significantly increased during the sectarian conflict (2006–2008) and ISIS's insurgency (2014–2017). Economic deprivation, the destruction of infrastructure, the proliferation of arms, corruption and weakened the rule of law eroded women's positions, increased sexual and gender-based violence, and hindered women's rights (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009; Ismael and Ismael 2009).

Like other military interventions in the post-Cold War period, the invasion did not lead to positive outcomes for women, and it even caused harm (Al-Ali and Pratt 2006, 2009; Ali 2018; Banwell 2015; Caprioli and Douglass 2008; Ismael and Ismael 2009; Kandiyoti 2007). The oppressive gender politics that started under the Ba'ath regime became more extreme, especially after the invasion (Ali 2023, 408). The US-led Coalition prioritised their security and economic interests and made political, economic and security pacts with conservative forces, particularly the Shi'a bloc, that led to concessions around women's rights. The Coalition encouraged the sectarianisation of the state and supported the Shi'a bloc. Its de-Baathification policy created a vacuum that was filled by sectarian and radical religious groups, political blocs and militias, many of which are supported by Iran and consider the Ayatullah as the highest clerical authority. De-Baathification fuelled the emergence of military fundamentalism among newly disenfranchised Sunni groups. The Shi'a elite was against incorporating a gender perspective into constitution writing and the US was willing to bargain on this issue (Banwell 2015). In this process, women's rights defenders and experts were not consulted, and their concerns and protests were ignored (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009). As a result, regressive clauses were included in the 2005 constitution (Banwell 2015), such as Article 41, which states that 'all Iraqis are free in their commitment to their personal status in accordance with their beliefs, sect or choice'. It equates religious law with civic law, dilutes the universality of law and creates opportunities for religious sects with conservative views on women to push for the implementation of their interpretation of the Islamic law and for the abolishment of the progressive 1959 Personal Status Code (Ali 2023, 408; Efrati 2005; Forman-Rabinovici 2022, 1085).

More recently, hardliners in the government have further consolidated their position and sidelined moderate actors on gender issues.²⁴ Religious, political and military actors have begun to assert heteropatriarchal gender and sexual norms even more strongly and violently, especially since the October protests (Mustafa 2025). Protesters, framed as a threat to Iraqi society's morality and religion, objected to ugly slander, such as spreading claims that immoral things were taking place in tents (Ali 2023, 413). Protesting women were exposed to a violent campaign in the streets and online; many were arrested, forcefully filmed in sexualised scenes and threatened with the release of these videos if they share their experience of torture or if they continue to take part in the protests (Ali 2023, 413–414). The illegal enforcement of headscarves or specific dress codes on women and girls by Sunni and Shia militia groups has arisen (Mustafa 2025, 512) and sexual and gender-based

violence against women and men has increased, including in prisons and police stations (Makki 2023).

The slandering campaign that began with the protests turned into a well-organised and systematic backlash campaign against gender in mid-2023. Powerful religious factions within the government used the campaign as an opportunity to introduce their long-sought goals related to curbing women's rights activism. In August 2023, the Communication and Media Commission, Iraq's official media regulator, banned the use of the terms 'gender' and 'homosexuality' (replacing it with 'sexual deviance') in all public communications including in the higher education, civil society and government sectors (Reuters 2023). This was followed by a Ministry of Education letter (8 October 2023) to all state institutions and universities ordering them to not work with certain organisations because of their focus on gender.²⁵ Then, the Federal Supreme Court temporarily halted the activities of the Women's Empowerment Department due to its use of 'gender' in official documents, and renamed it the 'Department of Women's Affairs' in March 2024.²⁶ In addition, the Department of NGOs gave a directive to all civil society organisations to sign a document in person stating they will not use the concept 'gender' and otherwise face possible closure. This led to a purging of organisations, and cancellation of projects and funding.

The campaign led to changes in the law as well causing significant damage to women's and queer people's rights. On 27 April 2024, the parliament passed an amendment to the 1988 Anti-Prostitution Law (no. 8), and renamed it the 'Anti-Prostitution and Sexual Perversion Law', which became official on 1 July 2024. The new law criminalises same-sex relations, gender-affirming medical interventions, 'imitating women' and 'promoting homosexuality'.²⁷ Another bill, known as the Ja'afari Law, passed on 21 January 2025, amended the progressive 1958 Personal Status Law. This law gives religious authorities the power to decide on family affairs, drops the marriage age for girls from 18 to nine if they are Shi'a and to 15 if they are Sunni, and allows religious councils to draft legal codes without parliamentary or public oversight (Talal and Abdullah 2025). This dramatically derails the universality of the law and the state's responsibility to safeguard citizens' rights, and is a direct outcome of the constitutional Article 41.²⁸ Finally, the parliament once again rejected the Anti-Domestic Violence Bill based on the claim that it would destroy Iraq's social fabric.²⁹

The backlash hugely affected the work of activists and academics as well as their well-being. Some women's rights defenders received death threats and had to leave their cities of residence. A women's rights activist who currently leads a minority women's rights organisation, and used to work in the government as an expert on gender issues, had to move to Erbil due to threats to her safety. She said, 'after having lived and worked in Baghdad for so many years, I find it difficult to rebuild my work in a new city'.³⁰ Another Iraqi woman working for an international organisation focusing on women's issues said 'since the campaign we are increasingly forced to stay silent on several issues and I find this hard'.³¹ Initially, they felt unsupported by their international partners as the latter remained silent in the face of the government's decisions.³² A project manager at a civil society organisation in Baghdad said 'we even had to remove the option to say "other" or "prefer not to say" in the sexual identity section of our surveys because of the pressure'.³³ The head of a women's rights organisation in Erbil said 'even the cover of a school textbook with a rainbow was a problem. They [the Department of Education in the Kurdistan Region] withdrew all the books from the schools that were already distributed and reprinted them with the same cover design but painted the rainbow in different colours!'³⁴

The coupling of anti-genderism with a 'dangerous' ideology characteristic of other cases of backlash around the world can be observed in Iraq as well. Backlash actors frame gender and women's rights as a Western ideology and claim to counter it in the name of protecting the Iraqi family, social norms and religion. Women who speak up about women's rights, engage in social media and work with national or international organisations are labelled 'embassy's children' or 'daughters' (*awlad-i safara*) (Kaya and Makki 2021, 83). The same label was attributed to the protesters as well. The authorities considered the challenge posed by the protests, especially the presence of women among them, as part of Western interference (Mustafa 2025, 513–514). A representative of a European funding organisation said their Iraqi civil society partners 'don't want to use our name and logo so as not to be seen as associated with Western actors. One of our partners had to remove their location from Google Maps for safety'.³⁵

The history and nature of the national–international interactions inform this coupling of anti-Westernism and anti-genderism. The dichotomous and culturally relativist framings of West vs Islam essentialised gender norms and instrumentalised 'the plight of women' rhetoric during the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (Abu-Lughod 2002, 783; Kandiyoti et al. 2025a, 39) and reinforced the false binary of 'the Middle Eastern tradition/Western modernity' (Charrad 2011, 431). By stereotyping and essentialising Iraqi women, international actors recreated patriarchal norms.³⁶ In turn, patriarchal and religious actors whose power was bolstered by the intervening powers framed the interventions as 'cultural imperialism', while hypocritically overlooking how the same 'imperialism' funnelled them enormous amounts of money, investment, military equipment and political support. The US-led Coalition made it clear that they had no real commitment to women's rights, which was proven in their inclusion of Article 41 in the constitution, similar to the British Mandate's decision almost a century ago to allocate women's legal issues to religious courts in cities and tribal courts in rural areas, which institutionalised patriarchal and patrimonial gender hierarchies in Iraq (Efrati 2012, 51–55). In the aftermath of 2003, coalition forces not only ignored the historical presence of a women's rights movement, overlooked the diversity of gendered experiences, and isolated women from their political and social contexts, but also provided minimal and conditional funding to women's rights organisations, reducing them to 'contractors' and implementers of projects designed by the internationals (Kaya, Makki, and Tabbasam 2022).

As a result, rather than developing the women's civil society in Iraq, as it claimed, the US-led coalition ended up harming women and the women's rights movement and preventing its further development in a strong and safe way. Its approach bolstered the backlash actors' rhetoric that pairs feminism and women's rights with Western imperialism, turning international gender mainstreaming into 'poisoned gifts' (Kandiyoti 2004, 134). These dynamics bolstered the claim that women's rights is a Western agenda and that international actors impose it on Iraq to harm Iraqi society and Islam. This puts women's rights activists in a difficult position because they are framed as agents of Western powers and promoters of Western values.³⁷ It exposes women and girls, and queer people, to new types of violence and insecurity. The creation and reinforcement of dichotomies through emphasising the *difference* argument in the name of challenging Western universalism leads to false faultlines for all actors involved. Most importantly, it leads to notorious dilemmas for women and the defenders of women's rights. While, thanks to the postcolonial approach, we are able to be aware of the epistemic hegemonies and their material outcomes, we are also stuck in a place

where feminist critique is perceived as an attack against national, religious norms and 'natural family' across the world.

Conclusion

A gender backlash is happening concurrently in Western and Middle Eastern contexts but with similar discourses, values, mechanisms and outcomes. Through an empirical analysis of the backlash against gender in Iraq, situated within a long-term context, this article showed that the hallmarks the backlash in Iraq displays are decidedly 'similar' to other backlashes albeit in 'different' contextual ways. Like other cases, it has a reactionary character that challenges women's rights activism and pro-equality laws. It shares key characteristics, such as a conservative discourse on traditional family values and 'natural' order, a new sexism embedded in backlash actors' attitudes, and the pairing of 'undesirable' ideologies with gender-progressive ideas. Where the backlash in Iraq is different, this is not due to unique cultural or religious dynamics underpinning gender relations in the Middle East, but rather due to context-specific political, socioeconomic and legal factors shaped by complex interactions between long-term national and international processes.

The interactions between these processes have led to certain outcomes for how gender norms are negotiated in Iraq, creating the context for the backlash against gender. The appreciation of context-specific factors while also linking the backlash in Iraq to the global gender backlash challenges the view that gender norms have 'exceptional' or 'unique' characteristics in the Middle East. It also challenges the view that backlash against gender and the analytical frameworks that explain it are necessarily 'Western'. The article argued that the emphasis on 'difference' from the 'West' bolsters the claim of conservative Iraqi actors that feminism and gender equality are alien ideas and tools of Western domination. This undermines the work of Iraqi women's rights organisations and creates risks for women and queer people.

How can we move away from relativist particularism towards global universal solidarities without reinforcing Western hegemonic epistemologies and power dynamics? There is no immediate and clear answer to this, but I suggest that we avoid getting stifled by arguments about labelling political phenomena, such as whether to use the concept of 'backlash' or not. Instead, we should use the conceptual debates to highlight the different dimensions of a phenomenon, to raise awareness about epistemic violences and to avoid hegemonic language while also being open to revealing shared experiences and similarities in a contextualised way.

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Notes

1. The projects were initiated, developed and implemented in line with equal and non-extractive partnership principles and full institutional ethical approval was obtained. Consent was obtained from all participants. The total number of interviews undertaken across these projects is over 150 but, in this article, only those relevant to the topic have been used.
2. Altay et al. use 'far-right' to describe politics in the Middle East in their queer feminist critique (2024).
3. Other terms used in the literature are 'anti-genderism', 'anti-feminism', 'post-feminism', 'resistance to gender equality', 'gender wars', 'masculinist restoration' and 'backlash against gender equality'.
4. Interview with a women's rights activist, Baghdad, 14 January 2024.
5. Information shared by the Director of Human Rights at the Ministry of Defence (19 September 2023, Baghdad). The 2023 version of the curriculum in Arabic and English is in the author's possession.
6. Interviews: Civil society organisation (CSO)-3, Baghdad, 27 October 2020; academic in law department, Baghdad, 28 October 2020.
7. Interview: Women's Rights Organisation (WRO)-3, Baghdad, 20 September 2023.
8. Interviews: CSO-4, Baghdad, 08 November 2020; CSO-5, Erbil, 01 November 2020.
9. Interviews: WRO-1, Baghdad, 14 March 2022; CSO-2, Erbil, 13 March 2022.
10. Sexism is a belief or attitude that reflects negative evaluations of individuals based on their sex and enables the maintenance of sex-based inequalities in society.
11. Interviews: senior civil servant in the Council of Ministers, Baghdad, 29 October 2020; a civil servant working on women's affairs, Erbil, 28 November 2020.
12. Interviews: medical doctor, Baghdad, 01 November 2020; CSO-4, Baghdad, 08 November 2020.
13. Interview: lawyer, Erbil, 12 November 2020.
14. Follow-up conversation with women's rights activist, Baghdad, 29 November 2024.
15. They label feminists as 'feminazis' (Anduiza and Rico 2024, 6).
16. Interviews: WRO-6, Erbil, 22 February 2022; WRO-7, Baghdad, 03 March 2022; CSO-6, Baghdad, 24 March 2022.
17. Conversations with founder of one of the largest and oldest Iraqi WRO, Amman, 27 September 2018 and Baghdad, 02 December 2018.
18. Benevolent sexism refers to attitudes and beliefs that appear positive or well-intentioned but ultimately reinforce traditional gender roles and maintain male dominance.
19. Interviews: lawyer, Erbil, 12 November 2020; WRO-8, Baghdad, 27 October 2020; senior civil servant working on women's affairs, Erbil, 30 November 2020.
20. Interviews: WRO-2, Baghdad, 18 October 2020; senior civil servant in the Council of Ministers, Baghdad, 29 October 2020.
21. Conversation with ex-representative of UN Women-Iraq, Amman, 27 September 2020.
22. Conversations: senior civil servant at a ministerial women's affairs department, Baghdad, 17 January 2024; CSO-1, Baghdad, 30 April 2024.
23. Conversation with director of an Erbil-based WRO, Amman, 07 June 2022.
24. Interviews: WRO-5, Erbil, 01 February 2024; WRO-3, Baghdad, 20 September 2023.
25. A copy of the letter dated 8 October 2023 in possession of the author. Interviews: INGO, Baghdad, 18 January 2020; WRO-4, Baghdad, 19 January 2024.

26. Follow up conversation with a senior civil servant in the Women's Affairs Department, Baghdad, 30 April 2024.
27. *Iraq Law Newsletter* dated 1 July 2024, in possession of the author.
28. Interviews: lawyer, Erbil, 12 November 2020; WRO-8, Baghdad, 13 April 2020.
29. Interviews: activist (a founder of the Civil Women Rally protest movement), Baghdad, 01 November 2020; investigative journalist, Erbil, 04 November 2020.
30. Interview: WRO-5, Erbil, 01 February 2024.
31. Interview: INGO, Erbil, 07 February 2024.
32. On 16 Nov. 2023, the Ministry of Education letter was revoked by the Council of Ministers (copy of letter in possession of the author) and another letter issued on 5 March 2024 removed the ban on eight of the 10 organisations but not on the Women's Freedom in Iraq and United Nations Population Fund (a copy of the letter in possession of the author). Interviews: WRO-5, Erbil, 01 February 2024; INGO, Erbil, 07 February 2024.
33. Interview: WRO-3, Baghdad, 20 September 2023.
34. Interview: WRO-9, Erbil, 24 December 2025.
35. Interview: INGO, Erbil, 07 February 2024.
36. Interviews: Academic, Erbil, 11 March 2022; CSO-7, Erbil, 19 June 2022.
37. Interviews: WRO-6, Erbil, 22 February 2022; WRO-7, Baghdad, 03 March 2022; CSO-6, Baghdad, 24 March 2022.

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