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VISUAL RESILIENCE

HOW IRAQI WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS
REFRAME CLIMATE RESILIENCE
THROUGH COUNTER-ARCHIVING



Khamael Al Safi, Zainab Mahdi and Noor Omer

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Visual Resilience: How Iraqi Women Photographers Reframe Climate Resilience Through Counter-Archiving

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Abstract

Climate change is often narrated through metrics and models. Whilst these are core to understandings of climate change, this paper finds that, in Iraq, local women and communities render environmental harm through memory, intimacy and place. We draw on the experiences of women photographers in Iraq who illustrate climate change on communities through photography work. We find that the photographers enact what we label 'visual resilience', where they use visual tools to communicate climate change and the need for action. Specifically, we observed how (1) the photography work of Iraqi women photographers makes climate change experiential, personal and emotionally resonant, rooting climate change resilience in the human and cultural spheres, (2) the use of photographic storytelling produces a counter-archive of climate change impacts in ways that decentralise what 'counts' as legitimate evidence, beyond a national-level top-down discourse, and (3) the photographers' positionality as women enables them to gain trust and access to other women's experiences of localised climate change. Our paper reveals how women photographers' capture of local women's climate change experiences brings a gendered perspective to cultural dimensions of climate change communication.

Introduction

Climate change is one of the most urgent global challenges of the twenty-first century.¹ The long-term shifts in global weather threaten biodiversity, food security, water availability, and economic stability. Climate change is primarily about people's lived experiences, as landscapes shift, rivers vanish and seasons change.² However, the view of climate change as a global phenomenon often overlooks cultural, human and gendered dimensions of how local communities interact with and respond to climate change.³ Consequently, we know little about how women and communities, particularly in climate-vulnerable countries such as Iraq, navigate climate change's impact on their daily lives.⁴

Specifically, untold stories of women whose lives, memories, and identities are interwoven with the environment are often locked away behind 'big data' that typically characterise official climate archives.⁵ To understand how such experiences can be leveraged in climate change discourse, we seek to answer the following question: *In what ways does the photographic archiving of climate change by Iraqi women reframe resilience beyond institutional and policy discourse?* Specifically, we focus on how the work of female photographers in Iraq shapes critical counter-archiving of climate change,⁶ rooted in lived and cultural experiences of local women and communities experiencing climate change.

The gendered aspect of climate change, especially in climate-stricken regions, remains underrepresented in dominant climate change policy and discussions.⁷ While overlooked by state-level conversations on climate change, the perspectives of women are especially critical⁸ to climate risk profiling and understanding resilience. This paper reveals how the

¹ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (Geneva: IPCC Secretariat, 2007). Available at: <https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~lebel/PSC643IntPolE-con/IPCCClimateChange2007.pdf> (accessed 10 August 2025).

² Jean S. Renouf, 'Making Sense of Climate Change—the Lived Experience of Experts', *Climatic Change* 164/44 (2021).

³ Eira Tansey, 'Archival Adaptation to Climate Change', *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 11/2 (2015), pp. 45–56.

⁴ International Energy Agency (IEA), *National Climate Resilience Assessment for Iraq* (Paris: IEA, 2025). Available at: <https://www.iea.org/reports/national-climate-resilience-assessment-for-iraq> (accessed 12 August 2025); Zeinab Shuker, 'The Deep Roots of Iraq's Climate Crisis', *Century Foundation*, 11 July 2023. Available at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-deep-roots-of-iraqs-climate-crisis/> (accessed 13 August 2025).

⁵ Julia Olson & Patricia Pinto da Silva, 'Meaning Across Context: Oral Histories, Big Data, and Climate Change', *Weather, Climate, and Society* 16/2 (2024), pp. 331–349.

⁶ Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan & T-Kay Sangwand, 'Critical Archival Studies: An Introduction', in 'Critical Archival Studies', eds. Michelle Caswell, Richardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand. Special Issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1/2 (2017); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁷ Sherilyn MacGregor, 'Only Resist: Feminist Ecological Citizenship and the Post-politics of Climate Change', *Hypatia* 29/3 (2014), pp. 617–33; Neil Adger, Jon Barnett, Nadine Marshall, & Karen O'Brien, 'Cultural Dimensions to Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation', *Nature Climate Change* 3 (2013), pp. 112–117.

⁸ Eira Tansey, 'Archives in the Anthropocene', *Ithaka S+R*, 28 August 2023. Available at: <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/archives-in-the-anthropocene/> (accessed 13 August 2025).

work of female photographers in Iraq builds alternative archives to official documentation of climate change. This form of archiving through the female lens offers insights beyond quantitative assessments of resilience.⁹ Specifically, we find the photographers capture ecological and cultural transformations faced by communities affected by water scarcity and environmental degradation, such as the southern Iraqi Marshes.¹⁰

Our findings illustrate a distinguished form of resilience to climate change we label *visual resilience*. Visual resilience illustrates a form of subtle and implicit climate change resilience that the female photographers exercise, by documenting localised impact on women and communities through an unregulated, unmediated, yet powerful medium of photography. We see visual resilience as positioned within proximity to conceptualisations that bring about the potential of visual culture to create and inspire change. On the one hand, literature has proposed that *visual activism* conceptualises the intersection between activist practices and contemporary visual culture to advocate for change.¹¹ On the other hand, *critical archiving* suggests the application of critical studies to the practice of creating, curating, and interpreting visual materials, so archival practices from systems upholding dominance are transformed into practices that are more inclusive, just, and emancipatory for communities.¹² We propose that *visual resilience* implicitly draws on aspects of these conceptualisations, where women photographers enable resilience to climate change through their work, whilst also enabling alternative archives of climate change representative of marginalised women and communities.

The findings reveal how visual resilience fosters an inclusive representation of climate change by (i) democratising and decentring climate change archiving from institutional-level to community-level records, (ii) rooting climate change representation in the cultural memory and identity of Iraqi communities, and (iii) building relationships and trust with local women and communities, accessing the public and private experiences of climate change in their everyday lives. First, democratising climate records through the photographic work of Iraqi women offers a 'bottom-up' approach to documenting climate change, recognising a more nuanced range of climate impacts as legitimate evidence, and amplifying voices typically underrepresented in formal documentation.¹³ Second, by connecting resilience to culture and social practices, the photographers document how climate change is inseparable from people's identity and communal belonging.¹⁴ Third,

⁹ Tariro Musere, Lungile Augustine Tshuma & Mthokozisi Phathisani Ndhlovu, 'The Role of Photography in Communicating Climate Change in Zimbabwe', *African Journalism Studies* (2025), pp. 1–19.

¹⁰ Elisa Pierandrei, 'Reimagining Iraq's Marshes with Photographer Tamara Abdul Hadi', *The New Arab*, 19 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.newarab.com/features/reimagining-iraqs-marshes-photographer-tamara-abdul-hadi> (accessed 13 August 2025); 'Iraq through the Eyes of Female Photographers', *Global Bar Magazine*, 18 February 2023. Available at: <https://globalbar.se/iraq-through-the-eyes-of-women-photographers/> (accessed 15 August 2025).

¹¹ Deena Chalabi, 'Visual Activism in the Arab World: Image, Protest, and the Digital Commons', *Journal of Visual Culture* 20/3 (2021), pp. 367–85.

¹² Hannah Grout, 'Archiving Critically: Exploring the Communication of Cultural Biases', *Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal* 4/1 (2019), pp. 1–16.

¹³ Caroline Wang & Mary Ann Burris, 'Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment', *Health Education & Behavior* 24/3 (1997), pp. 369–87.

¹⁴ Joy Bhowmik, Haseeb Md. Irfanullah, Samiya Ahmed Selim & Mohammad Budrudzaman, 'Assessing Climate Change-Induced Losses and Damages to Coastal Ecosystem Services: Empirical Evidence from

considering women experience climate change differently due to social roles, norms and their relationships to the environment, their gendered perspectives¹⁵ through the photographers' visual work are critical. As such, the photographers' positionality as women themselves shapes their access to public and private spaces to gain the trust of local women within these vulnerable communities. Their visual narratives enrich climate discourse with gendered perspectives,¹⁶ taking into account the gendered nature of environmental vulnerability.¹⁷ This paper illustrates that resilience as a concept is not solely technical but also lived, cultural and gendered, where women who are under increasing pressures from a changing climate must also be an active part of the climate change response.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Climate change images in Iraq have showcased for years the impact on the landscape, water, and infrastructure. Environmental historians note how the Ba'ath regime's drainage of the marshes in the 1990s was not only an ecological but a visual and cultural catastrophe, erasing the life worlds of marshland communities that had been extensively photographed and romanticised by colonial and postcolonial observers.¹⁸ At the same time, literature has illustrated how climate change images interrogate the visual legacies of the US War on Iraq, militarisation, oil extraction and displacement.¹⁹ More recently, scholarship in environmental humanities and art history has foregrounded how visual culture articulates environmental grief and infrastructural violence in Iraq's post-2003 landscape.²⁰ Collectively, these works illustrate environmental degradation in the region is not merely an ecological process but a visual and cultural one.

The Role of Photography in Climate Change

Photography and images are central to climate communication beyond quantitative metrics, given their emotionally connotative nature.²¹ Photography becomes a powerful

Manpura Island, Bangladesh', *Climate Risk Management* 45 (2024), 100641.

¹⁵ Subhra Rajat Balabantaray, 'Gendered Vulnerabilities and Resilience in the Face of Climate Change: An Analysis of Women's Experiences and Adaptation Strategies', *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation* (2023).

¹⁶ Douglas Harper, 'Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo-Elicitation in Qualitative Research on Climate', *Visual Studies* 17/1 (2002), pp. 13–26.

¹⁷ Zeinab Shuker, 'The Gender Dimensions of the Climate Crisis in Iraq', 1001 *Iraqi Thoughts*, 21 May 2023. Available at: <https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2023/05/21/the-gender-dimensions-of-the-climate-crisis-in-iraq/> (accessed 5 August 2025).

¹⁸ John Richardson, *The Vanishing Marshes: A Photographer's Journey into Iraq* (London: Penguin, 2005); Emily O'Dell, 'The Marshes of Mesopotamia: Environmental Change and Visual Memory', *Middle Eastern Studies* 55/4 (2019), pp. 567–86.

¹⁹ Anneka Lenssen, Sarah A. Rogers & Nada Shabout, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018).

²⁰ Roanne Khalil, 'After the Flood: Visualizing the Marshlands in Post-Saddam Iraq', *Third Text* 34/5–6 (2020), pp. 721–740; Yasmeen Al-Kassim, 'Ruins and Residues: Ecologies of Reconstruction in Contemporary Iraqi Art', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 18/3 (2022), pp. 297–315.

²¹ Betsy Lehman, Jessica Thompson, Shawn Davis & Joshua Carlson, 'Affective Images of Climate Change', *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019), article 960.

tool for communicating environmental issues when it delivers a positively charged²² emotional engagement,²³ making environmental issues experientially accessible to people.²⁴ For instance, in Jamaica, women have utilised photography to inform policymakers about how climate change impacts local communities, and thus influence National Adaptation Plans (NAP).²⁵ Similarly, in Zimbabwe, photojournalism motivated community-led efforts to address and develop mitigation strategies. In Iraq, the potential for female photographers to leverage their positionality can enable documenting climate stress and environmental degradation through a visual medium. More importantly, the female lens frames adaptation as a human, relational and emotionally resonant process, one that official and institutional documentation, archiving and global policymaking tend to overlook.

Photography in Climate Change and Critical Archiving

The photography work capturing climate change's impact on women and local communities illustrates a form of counter-archiving: creating inclusive records surfacing marginalised experiences and contesting official omissions.²⁶ Critical archival studies is a field applying critical theory to challenge traditional archival practices, expose power dynamics and promote social justice. It examines how institutions and individuals create and manage archives in ways that can perpetuate oppression and silence marginalised voices, aiming to build archival practices that resist these injustices based on race, class, gender and other factors.²⁷ Rather than focusing on what information archives contain, critical archiving focuses on *how* archives are made – power dynamics, social anxieties and political contests within the space of archiving that are actively performed and negotiated.²⁸ In the context of climate change, state-led archives and institutional archives often focus on quantitative measures,²⁹ data collection,³⁰ and policy documentation.³¹ Whilst the role of photography in climate change has been studied, this has been in isolation

²² Gabby Salazar, Martha C. Monroe, Megan Ennes, Jennifer Amanda Jones & Diogo Veríssimo, 'Testing the Influence of Visual Framing on Engagement and Pro-Environmental Action', *Conservation Science and Practice* 4/10 (2022), p. e12812.

²³ Regina Kempen & Shirin Betzler, 'More than a Thousand Words? The Effect of Photographic Material on Problem Awareness and Behavioral Intentions Regarding the Sustainable Consumption of Mobile Phones', *Cleaner and Responsible Consumption* 3 (2021): 100018.

²⁴ Daniel A. Chapman, Adam Corner, Robin Webster & Ezra M. Markowitz, 'Climate Visuals: A Mixed Methods Investigation of Public Perceptions of Climate Images in Three Countries', *Global Environmental Change* 41 (2016), pp. 172–82.

²⁵ National Adaptation Plan Global Network, 'Envisioning Resilience in Jamaica: Women use Visual Storytelling to Influence the National Adaptation Plan', *National Adaptation Plan Global Network*, 20 June 2023. Available at: <https://napglobalnetwork.org/2023/06/envisioning-resilience-in-jamaica-women-using-visual-storytelling/> (accessed 10 August 2025).

²⁶ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, p. 4.

²⁷ Michelle Caswell, 'Owning Critical Archival Studies: A Plea', *Archival Education and Research Institute (AERI)*, July 2016. Available at: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/75x09odf> (accessed 9 August 2025).

²⁸ Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, p. 4.

²⁹ Shno M. Ali, 'Climate Change in Iraq: A Comprehensive Analysis', *International Journal of Environmental Impacts* 8/2 (2025), pp. 361–69.

³⁰ World Bank, Iraq, *Climate Change Knowledge Portal*. Available at: <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/iraq> (accessed 8 August 2025).

³¹ Iraqi Ministry of Environment, *Climate Change*. Available at: <https://moen.gov.iq/en/climate-change> (accessed 5 August 2025).

from climate change archiving. Studying the intersection between these two literatures can provide insights into novel and innovative forms of resilience to climate change that are inclusive, equitable and democratised.³²

A Gendered Perspective on Cultural Communication of Climate Change

Climate change resilience has traditionally been defined in terms of adaptation capacity, infrastructural robustness, and in some cases, policy-driven strategies.³³ Other resilience research, most notably the Equitable Resilience Framework,³⁴ emphasises social and environmental justice where adaptation is discussed in relation to technical interventions, resource distribution, and sometimes in terms of costs.³⁵ While these offer important frameworks for managing climate risk, they overlook gendered experiences that provide the blueprint for understanding cultural dimensions and thus resilience. This paper contributes to climate change resilience by providing a gendered perspective on climate change communication, revealing community-level experiences and identities intertwined with environmental change.

Methodology

Sampling

Participants were selected through purposive sampling,³⁶ a technique used to select information-rich cases for studying a phenomenon where participants are knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest.³⁷ Our selection criteria were that participants should (i) identify as photographers, (ii) be female, (iii) be based in Iraq, (iv) showcase photographs featuring climate change, and (v) have a publicly accessible platform showcasing their work. Through the Iraqi Female Photographers Collective, an established photography network, we selected four photographers. They were given clear, accessible, and full information about the project's aims, objectives and methods, and consent was provided by all four participants. Two photographers were based in Baghdad, one in Kurdistan, and one in southern Iraq. This allowed us to understand how motivations, experiences and challenges faced in distinct regions varied.³⁸

³² MIT Climate Grand Challenges, 'The Equitable Resilience Framework', *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (2021). Available at <https://climategrandchallenges.mit.edu/research/the-equitable-resilience-framework/> (accessed 22 August 2025).

³³ Adger et al., 'Cultural Dimensions to Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation', p. 4.

³⁴ MIT Climate Grand Challenges, 'The Equitable Resilience Framework'.

³⁵ Adger et al., 'Cultural Dimensions to Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation', p. 4.

³⁶ Michael Patton, 'Two Decades of Developments in Qualitative Inquiry: A Personal, Experiential Perspective', *Qualitative Social Work* 1/3 (2002), pp. 261–83.

³⁷ John Creswell & Vicki Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2011).

³⁸ Michael B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman & Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (London, 2014); Albine Moser & Irene Korstjens, 'Series: Practical Guidance to Qualitative Research. Part 3: Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis', *European Journal of General Practice* 24/1 (2017), pp. 9–18.

Methods

Since we were concerned with the *process* through which women photographers in Iraq captured climate change, a qualitative interpretive approach was appropriate.³⁹ We sought to capture participants' subjective descriptions of their experiences through semi-structured interviews.⁴⁰ Interview questions focused on three aspects: the photographer (motivations, backgrounds), their work (photography work, climate change documentation) and their aspirations. We also integrated photo elicitation in our interviewing, where participants were asked to discuss the story behind a photograph of choice documenting climate change.⁴¹ Through discussing photographs taken, they were able to discuss issues important to both themselves and the communities with whom they worked.⁴²

As Iraqi female researchers, we recognise our positionalities inevitably shape how we approach the narratives of participants in this study. We are situated in a space of both connection – sharing cultural roots, language and gendered experiences with our participants – and distance from them, viewing their realities through the lens of diaspora. As two of us are based outside of Iraq, our interpretations may be shaped by this lens, while as one author lives in Iraq, their interpretation could also intersect with contextualised understandings. We approached this research with reflexive awareness of how our own histories, privileges and locations intersect with those of our participants, and how these dynamics may have shaped both the research process and our understanding of women's resilience to climate change.

Analysis

We followed a thematic analysis approach.⁴³ Each author first transcribed the interviews we conducted and we then individually coded our transcripts. In this coding process, sections and quotes were assigned short, descriptive codes or labels. Similar codes were then grouped into themes reflecting certain patterns within each of the four participants' interviews. Following this, we grouped our themes for a cross-case comparison of the four interviews, identifying commonalities and differences. Through this inductive process, grouping similar first-order codes into second-order themes meant we were then able to abstract these themes into aggregates. Discussing these aggregates on photography work, archiving, resilience and gender led us to identify 'visual resilience' as a core conceptual construct. Throughout the analysis, we continuously moved between data and theory through the process of abductive coding, identifying literature relevant to our data as themes emerged.⁴⁴

³⁹ Miles et al., *Qualitative Data Analysis*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Harper, 'Talking about Pictures', p. 22.

⁴² Caroline Wang & Mary Ann Burris, 'Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment', *Health Education and Behaviour* 24/3 (1997), pp. 369–87.

⁴³ Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3/2 (2006), pp. 77–101; David Harper & Andrew Thompson, eds, *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy: A Guide for Students and Practitioners* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

⁴⁴ Miles et al., *Qualitative Data Analysis*.

Findings

Photography as Resilience

Across interviews, participants framed photography as a form of documentation. Rather than positioning themselves as campaigners, they stressed responsibility to witness and share. One of the photographers, Raghad, explicitly described her work as ‘the weakest form of resistance’. The paradox is productive; calling photography ‘weak’ refuses activism heroics. Raghad’s work is grounded in sparking care for places (markets, marshes, forgotten and deserted villages) and for people, particularly women whose labour and losses are rarely discussed or documented. Another photographer, Forqan, also stressed that being visibly present on the street with a camera is itself a form of resilience in places where women’s public visibility is guarded. However, Kali was more declarative about advocacy, describing photography as ‘my means of advocacy, as I use images to raise awareness about environmental hazards facing our unique region’. Her work documents specific threats, tourist waste, deforestation and pollution.

Figure 1: Plastic Waste Entangled along the Banks of the Little Zab River



Source: Kali Mamand

Another photographer, Saba, discussed how a palm tree motif turns advocacy into a cultural analogy. She documented how development and neglect ‘kills’ palms by cutting the crown, ‘they cut the top of the palm tree, so it dies slowly. It’s literally torture. A palm tree represents so much about our culture and our identity as Iraqis’. She returned to the same roads across time, documenting the slow disappearance of palms, ‘the same area that I used to pass by every day as a child was filled with the dark green of palm tree tops. Now it’s bare land with chopped up palm trees’. Her photography of dying palm trees transforms private grief into public recognition. This grief emerges not as paralysis

but as a paramount feeling, a ‘mobilising and sustaining emotional force’⁴⁵ that prompts action within communities. Advocacy also makes loss count by channelling ‘private grief into public work of mourning, we can render ecological losses visible, point out their root cause, and bring tragedies – from spoiled farms to vanishing species – into the realm of mattering.’⁴⁶ Yet for many indigenous communities, grieving is not just about livelihoods, but about kinship with land and water. In the marshes, landscapes and species are mourned like family members, and loss is felt as the death of kin. Interspecies commonalities and inclusion of other-than-human entities within social relationships⁴⁷ are central to indigenous lifeworlds. Forqan echoes this relational grief: ‘A whole marsh disappears from existence. It’s frightening this can happen to a marsh that is home to indigenous people. It disappears and its people disappear, and we lose our identity.’

Figure 2: Palm Trees with Crowns Cut, Symbolising Ecological Loss and the Aftermath of Environmental Degradation in Iraq



Source: Saba Kareem

⁴⁵ Jacob Seagrave, ‘Protest in the Face of Catastrophe: Extinction Rebellion and the Anti-Politics of Grief’, *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 47/2 (2023), pp. 49–73.

⁴⁶ Britt Wray, *Generation Dread: Finding Purpose in an Age of Climate Crisis* (Toronto: Knopf, 2022).

⁴⁷ Sophie Chao, ‘In the Shadow of the Palm: Dispersed Ontologies among Marind, West Papua,’ *Cultural Anthropology* 33/4 (2018), pp. 1–25.

Figure 3: The Human and Ecological Toll of Marshland Displacement



Source: Forqan Salam

Democratising What Counts As Legitimate Evidence for Climate Change

The photographers' work functioned as a counter-archive, widening climate change evidence from state-level documentation to include gendered and localised impact. It foregrounds local women's experiences of slow harms rarely appearing in official reports, villages thinned by migration until erased from the map; lush palm groves turn to barren land; domestic routines re-engineered. Each photographer positioned her work as a counter to erasure: Forqan's photography documented the present: 'I want to archive these places because they may not exist in a few years'. She viewed places as archives in flux. Raghda critiqued Baghdad's rapid vertical development as it eroded the city's character and green spaces, highlighting mismatch between new forms and old climates: 'It's not just affecting marshes...temperatures are rising...we used to be able to go out at night, but now temperatures at night are just as high as day. There is concrete everywhere and no green spaces'.

We found through their positionality as women, the photographers were able to gain access and trust of other local women in capturing experiences through photographs. Kali built trust in conservative rural communities where women avoid speaking to male photographers, and Saba was allowed to photograph women in conservative settings where men would not be permitted: 'As a female photographer, I can gain access; when it's a woman with a woman, it's different'.

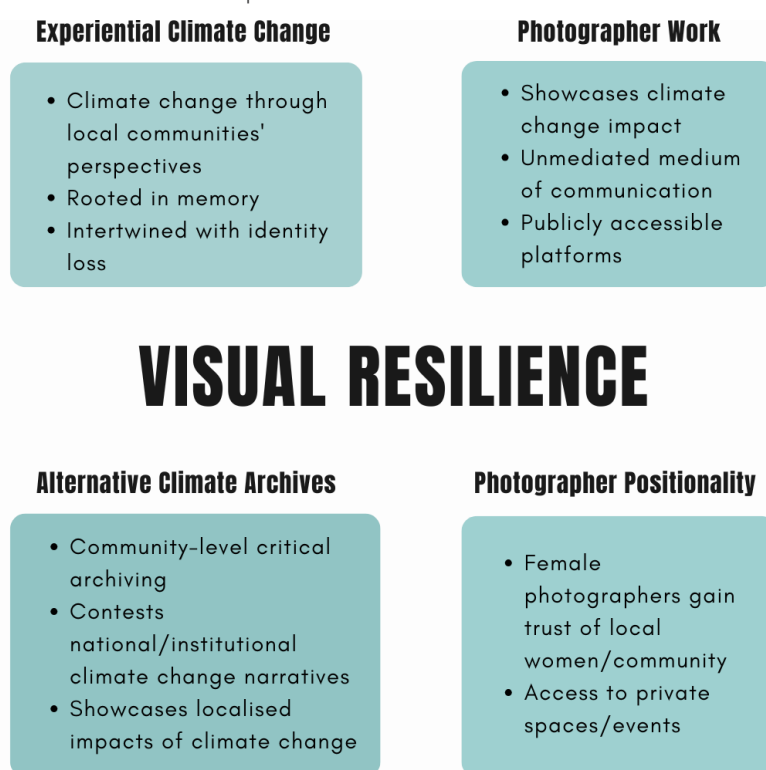
Cultural and Experiential Sense-Making

We also found the photographers were driven by an understanding of climate change through culture, identity and memories. Kali grew up in the Balakyati mountains, where proximity to ecosystems forged a protective attachment: 'Photography has become my means of advocacy... to raise awareness about environmental hazards facing our region'. Raghad's movement from digital media to still photography was a way to preserve a feeling about Baghdad amid rapid climate change: 'Even if the pictures aren't perfect they document and convey a feeling – my feeling'. Photography here is autobiographical, rooted in survival, memory and attachment to place. For Saba, it emerged under war and instability; for Kali, rhythms of a mountain ecosystem; for Forqan and Raghad, from a desire to preserve vanishing urban and cultural worlds. These memories and attachments were deeply intertwined with climate change and resilience.

All four embed climate change narratives within human and cultural frames. Forqan connects marsh drainage to state-led oil expansion, framing it as cultural erasure. She asks, 'When your land is your identity and heritage and is vanishing, what is left?'. Raghad links heat, sandstorms and migration to a loss of belonging in Baghdad:

to me a land is connected to its people and people are connected to the land, and so if these people leave the marshes they will go to a world that doesn't look like them, the city and the society there is different, a person stripped of their identity is very hard and I focus on that in my work.

Figure 4: Visual Resilience Conceptual Framework



Source: Visual Resilience

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper focuses on the role of women photographers in enabling a ‘visual resilience’ to climate change. We share insights on how the work of these photographers enables storytelling about climate change – a cultural medium of communication resonating strongly with communities in Iraq,⁴⁸ which is influential in climate change communication, creating stronger emotional cues that render climate change ‘consumable’ for the public.⁴⁹

Importantly, this paper illustrates how a gendered perspective on cultural communication of climate change⁵⁰ is important in understanding equitable resilience.⁵¹ Whilst archives are far from neutral, and are made rather than found,⁵² the photographers illustrate how documenting everyday experiences of climate change converts ‘social facts’ into knowledge and legitimate evidence excluded from national and traditional archives.⁵³ Whilst power characterises every aspect of the archive,⁵⁴ women’s community-level photography expands what institutions can recognise as climate evidence. Rather than focusing on grand, universal narratives of climate change, the photography work illustrates how paying attention to the specific and ‘patchy’ details of lived experiences reveals climate change and resilience.⁵⁵

Rooting climate change in life experiences makes visual resilience even more crucial in the Iraqi context, given the potential for imagery to encode huge amounts of information in single representations.⁵⁶ For instance, the images revealed the kinship of Iraqi women and communities with non-human species, the environment, and animals, challenging human exceptionalism in climate change discussions in favour of multispecies relationships.⁵⁷ The effectiveness of capturing lived experiences of climate change resonates with research suggesting photojournalism invokes instant emotional reactions with a lasting

⁴⁸ Ruba Ali Al-Hassani, ‘Storytelling: Restorative Approaches to Post-2003 Iraq Peacebuilding’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15/ 4 (2021), pp. 510–27.

⁴⁹ Lulu Rodriguez & Daniela V. Dimitrova, ‘The Levels of Visual Framing’, *Journal of Visual Literacy* 30/1 (2011), pp. 48–65; Diana Anne DiFrancesco & Nathan Young, ‘Seeing Climate Change: The Visual Construction of Global Warming in Canadian National Print Media’, *Cultural Geographies* 18/4 (2011), pp. 517–36.

⁵⁰ Adger et al., ‘Cultural Dimensions to Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation’.

⁵¹ MIT Climate Grand Challenges, ‘The Equitable Resilience Framework’.

⁵² Michelle Caswell, Anahi A. Migoni, Nadia Geraci & Marika Cifor, ‘To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise: Community Archives and the Importance of Representation’, *Archives and Records* 38/1 (2016), pp. 5–26.

⁵³ Stoler, *Along The Archival Grain*.

⁵⁴ Caswell, ‘Owning Critical Archive Studies’.

⁵⁵ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, ‘Arts of Noticing’, *Cultural Anthropology* 30/4 (2015), pp. 534–51.

⁵⁶ John Grady, ‘Becoming a Visual Sociologist’, *Sociological Imagination* 38/1–2 (2001), pp. 83–119.

⁵⁷ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

impression.⁵⁸ As previous literature observes, how individuals understand climate change and its consequences is highly dependent on stories connected to it.⁵⁹

Photography work translates planetary risks into lived and situated meaning. All four photographers locate their entry into photography in deeply personal contexts, shaped by childhood memories, personal bonds with time and place, and a desire to capture individual experiences. Whilst previous literature has showcased how lived experiences of climate change are gendered, this research shows how the photography work of women can showcase other women's lived experiences, archiving global climate change in a localised, denationalised manner. Most importantly, it illustrates how their photographs are not merely static images, but represent relationships between the photographers, the women they capture, and the public. Engaging with their photographs requires recognising a responsibility towards women in Iraq impacted by climate change.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Michael P. Ewbank, Philip J. Barnard, Camilla J. Croucher, Cristina Ramponi & Andrew J. Calder, 'The Amygdala Response to Images with Impact', *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 4/2 (2009), pp. 127–33.

⁵⁹ Marjolein van Herten & Paquita Perez, 'Ecocritical Analysis of "Glocal" Essays on Lived Experiences of Climate Change in Higher Education', *Frontiers in Sustainability*, 2 December 2022. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/frsus.2022.980530> (accessed 25 August 2025).

⁶⁰ Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Verso, 2015).

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A girl rows in silence, carrying grass in her boat to feed her buffalo resisting the death of the marshes.





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