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# WOMEN, LAW AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE

CLOSING THE GAP IN IRAQ'S  
LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Alannah Travers

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# Women, Law and Climate Resilience: Closing the Gap in Iraq's Legal Framework

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## Abstract

Iraq is among the world's most climate-vulnerable states, facing severe heat, desertification, dust-storms, rising salinity and water scarcity. These harms also serve to deepen existing gender inequalities in the country, with women, particularly those from rural and displaced communities, carrying disproportionate burdens – from lost livelihoods and health risks to early marriage, violence and exclusion from decision-making. Yet Iraq's environmental laws remain gender-blind, outdated and weakly enforced. This paper, informed by lived experiences and comparative insights, considers this legal invisibility in climate frameworks. Combining legal mapping with insights drawn from 26 interviews with women in rural and urban areas, activists, lawyers, journalists and officials across ten provinces in Iraq, our research explores this disconnect between abstract ideas of the law. By mapping Iraq's domestic laws and international obligations, our paper examines how gendered climate-harm is recognised (or rendered invisible) by the legal system. We argue that Iraq's environmental instruments, including the 2009 Environmental Protection and Improvement Law No 27, constitutional Article 33, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and 2024–2030 Strategy, are poorly enforced and detached from women's lived realities, which should be urgently addressed.

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## Introduction

From dust-laden summers in Anbar to heat-stressed neighbourhoods in Baghdad and Basra, Iraq's climate is a crisis impacting our community's health and safety.<sup>1</sup> Women carry a disproportionate share of this burden, facing heightened exposure to pollution, heat and, our research suggests, increased risks of violence.<sup>2</sup> However, the principal legal instruments shaping the state's environmental response, such as Iraq's Environmental Protection and Improvement Law No 27 of 2009, Article 33 of its Constitution, and climate planning through its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), still treat climate-harm as a technical matter, not as this core issue of injustice.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their vulnerability, women remain absent from climate-related laws – and conversations. Drawing on interviews with 26 individuals across ten provinces, this project considered how gendered climate-harm is recognised in Iraq. Our roundtable event in Baghdad, in October 2025, presented our paper and welcomed feedback from guests ranging from government ministers to civil society actors.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1: Alannah Travers, Yahya Ihsan Jaber, Ahang Habib Hawrami and Sama Yas presenting this paper's findings at a roundtable event in Baghdad, October 2025



Source: Meethak Al Khatib

<sup>1</sup> Alannah Travers, 'Extreme Heat Hits Iraq, as Temperatures Exceed 50 Degrees Celsius', *Al Jazeera English*, 4 August 2023. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/4/extreme-heat-hits-iraq-as-temperatures-exceed-50-degrees-celsius> (accessed 10 September 2025); Meethak Al Khatib, 'Farmers in Southern Iraq Hit by Water Crisis', *Action Against Hunger*, 5 June 2024. Available at: <https://www.actioncontrelafaim.org/en/news/headlines/farmers-in-southern-iraq-hit-by-water-crisis> (accessed 21 September 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Oxfam, 'Unfarmed Now, Uninhabited When? Agriculture and Climate Change in Iraq', *Oxfam International*, 1 April 2022. Available at: <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/621360/4/bn-unfarmed-now-unlived-when-310322-en.pdf> (accessed 10 September 2025); Audrey Pirzadeh et al., 'Gendered Analysis of the Impact of Climate Change on Poverty, Productivity and Food Insecurity', *UN Women*, 28 November 2023. Available at: [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/gendered\\_analysis\\_of\\_the\\_impact\\_of\\_climate\\_change\\_on\\_poverty\\_productivity\\_and\\_food\\_insecurity.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/gendered_analysis_of_the_impact_of_climate_change_on_poverty_productivity_and_food_insecurity.pdf) (accessed 3 December 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Environmental Protection and Improvement Law No 27 of 2009, (13 December 2009), *Iraqi Gazette* No 4142, 25 January 2010. Available at: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/irq100188E.pdf> (accessed 10 September 2025).

<sup>4</sup> LSE and Moja Organisation for Human Rights project roundtable on Women, Law and Climate Resilience, *Moja YouTube*, 25 October 2025. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVpioq3d-KXg&t=3934s> (accessed 16 November 2025).

Complaints about polluted water, flaring-related emissions, or heat-linked illness are not framed as legal matters and heard by courts, meaning that there is no pathway here for relief.<sup>5</sup> An unpublished research paper prepared for Iraq's Women Empowerment Directorate, under the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, by Dr Aamer Abed Resan Al-Moswi, Deputy Head of Iraq's Federal Revenue Allocation Oversight Authority, additionally helped to recognise this lack of legal protection.<sup>6</sup> By reframing climate-harm as a legal issue, not just a technical one, this paper seeks to lay a foundation for potential Iraqi-led grassroots campaigns to bring about change. A growing body of scholarship is connecting gender, environment and law. Scholars like Margaret Alston and Sherilyn MacGregor argue that climate justice must account for structural inequalities and need gender-responsive legal frameworks.<sup>7</sup> Building on justice frameworks such as the 2021 Yazidi Survivors' Law (YSL), our project examined whether similar legal frameworks might be extended to the climate.

## Methodology and Findings

Our project sought to examine how Iraq's laws recognise (or fail to recognise) women affected by climate-linked environmental harm. Through 26 semi-structured conversations with researchers, activists, lawyers and policy-makers, we documented how environmental harms appear in everyday life and where women's voices are excluded. Interviews were conducted in English, Arabic and Kurdish, with informed consent and the option of anonymity in accordance with LSE's Research Ethics Policy. Our project also produced a mapping of Iraq's legal and policy landscape and identified gaps that restrict recognition and remedy for climate harms. Legal analysis extended beyond domestic law to international frameworks. Zahra Ali's call to imagine another form of knowledge production reminded us of the importance of local realities.<sup>8</sup> This meant starting from the lived experiences, expertise, and intellectual traditions of Iraqis.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Alannah Travers, 'How Would You Survive?: Desperation Grows in Iraq Water Crisis', *Al Jazeera English*, 28 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/28/how-would-you-survive-desperation-grows-in-iraq-water-crisis> (accessed 10 September 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Aamer Abed Resan Al-Moswi, *Environmental Impacts on Rural Women Farmers in Southern Iraq: Climate Migration, Livelihoods, and Socio-Economic Challenges* (Baghdad, 2025), pp. 6–2.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Alston, 'Environmental Social Work: Accounting for Gender in Climate Disasters', *Australian Social Work* 66/2 (2013), pp. 218–33; Sherilyn MacGregor, 'A Stranger Silence Still: The Need for Feminist Social Research on Climate Change', *The Sociological Review* 57/2 (2010), pp. 124–40.

<sup>8</sup> Zahra Ali, 'Politicizing Ethics: Decolonizing Research on Iraq', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 44 (2024), pp. 420–2.

<sup>9</sup> Zahra Ali, 'On the Politicization of Ethics and Decolonization in Research on Iraq', *Jummar Media*, 8 July 2025. Available at: <https://jummar.media/9053> (accessed 21 August 2025).

Figure 2: Participants at the LSE and Moja Organisation for Human Rights roundtable on Women, Law and Climate Resilience in Baghdad, October 2025. The event gathered feedback from government ministers to civil society actors and experts



Source: Meethak Al Khatib

Table 1: Mapping Iraq's Legal Framework

Framework / Treaty	Details
<b>Article 33, Iraq's 2005 Constitution</b>	Establishes the right of every Iraqi to live in a clean and unpolluted environment.
<b>Law No 27 of 2009 on Environmental Protection and Improvement</b>	Regulates water discharge and air pollution, noise, biodiversity protection and waste management.
<b>Law No 37 of 2008</b>	Established Iraq's Ministry of Environment and set out its tasks.
<b>Law No 3 of 2010</b>	Established the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)'s Environment Protection and Improvement Board, overseen by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).
<b>Iraq ratified the Paris Agreement in November 2021</b>	Iraq submitted its first Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) under the Paris Agreement in 2022.

Article 33 of Iraq's 2005 Constitution establishes that, 'Every individual has the right to live in safe environmental conditions' and 'the State shall undertake the protection and preservation of the environment and its biological diversity'.<sup>10</sup> Iraq's 2008 Law establishing the Ministry of Environment, its 2009 Environmental Protection Law and related Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) instruments articulate general duties on pollution control and environmental improvement.<sup>11</sup> However as lawyer Shokhan Samin confirmed, 'I have

<sup>10</sup> Iraq Constitution, 2005, Article 33. Available at: [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq\\_2005](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005) (accessed 10 September 2025)

<sup>11</sup> Law No 37 of 2008 on the Establishment of the Ministry of Environment, defining its tasks, 9 October 2008. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC147086> (accessed 10 September 2025); Environmental Protection and Improvement Law No 27 (2009); Law No 3 of 2010 on the Establishment of the Environment Protection and Improvement Board in Iraqi Kurdistan, 8 July 2010. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/en/c/LEX-FAOC147237> (accessed 10 September 2025).

read all environmental laws and directives, none of them talks about the environmental harm on women.<sup>12</sup> Other lawyers similarly reported that climate-linked harms are treated as acts of nature, rather than infringements requiring administrative protection or sanctions. The current laws lack clear enforcement mechanisms, making them more of a theoretical framework than a practical one (see Table 1). New legislation under discussion is focused on technical regulation, with parliamentary perspectives confirming the absence of any substantive gender provisions in the drafts.<sup>13</sup>

Formal avenues for remedy do not exist. ‘It’s not the climate alone, it’s the mitigation efforts and mismanagement... Judges don’t know which laws to use,’ Khaled Sulaiman explained.<sup>14</sup> Parliamentarian Amanj Harki MP described Iraq’s primary instrument, Law No. 27, as outdated and failing to address modern climate-related issues like migration, water allocation, and the specific protection of vulnerable groups.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Dr Sameh Al-Muqdadi, the Chairman of Sanad Organisation, explained that while domestic laws exist on paper, they are not enforced.<sup>16</sup>

Table 2: Summary of Iraq’s International Obligations

Framework / Treaty	Status	Climate, Environment and Human Rights Obligations
UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)	Ratified 25 April 2009	To report emissions, GHG stabilisation measures, and adaptation strategies. Available at: <a href="https://unfccc.int/node/180426">https://unfccc.int/node/180426</a> (accessed 15 September 2025).
Paris Agreement (under UNFCCC)	Ratified 1 November 2021	Iraq’s Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) pledges. Available at: <a href="https://climatepromise.undp.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/iraq">https://climatepromise.undp.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/iraq</a> (accessed 15 September 2025).
Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)	Ratified 2009	Obligates conservation, explicitly says biodiversity loss is climate-linked. Available at: <a href="https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?chapter=27&amp;mtdsg_no=XXVII-8&amp;src=TREATY">https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?chapter=27&amp;mtdsg_no=XXVII-8&amp;src=TREATY</a> (accessed 15 September 2025).
UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)	Acceded to 10 December 2011	Commits to combat desertification and mitigate drought through multilevel cooperation. Available at: <a href="https://www.unccd.int/search?search=iraq">https://www.unccd.int/search?search=iraq</a> (accessed 15 September 2025).
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)	Ratified 25 January 1971	Recognises rights to life, equality, and protection from discrimination BUT does not have individual complaint mechanism in Iraq (no ratification of Optional Protocol).
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)	Ratified 18 February 1969	Guarantees rights to health, adequate living standards and an adequate environment. Iraq has also not accepted the Optional Protocol allowing individual complaints.
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	Ratified 13 August 1986	CEDAW obligates gender equality in law and policy, but Iraq has not ratified the Optional Protocol, so there is similarly no access to complaint mechanisms via the CEDAW Committee.
International Court of Justice (ICJ) Jurisdiction (Article 36(2) of the ICJ Statute)	No optional clause	Iraq has not accepted ICJ compulsory jurisdiction, and thus cannot be brought before the ICJ unless there is consent. Available at: <a href="https://www.icj-cij.org/en/declarations">https://www.icj-cij.org/en/declarations</a> (accessed 15 September 2025).

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Shokhan Samin, lawyer from Sulaimani (10 August 2025).

<sup>13</sup> Interview with MP Amanj Harki, Member of Iraq’s Parliament, Baghdad, 5 August 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Khaled Sulaiman, Environmental researcher and journalist, 21 July 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Harki.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Dr Sameh Al-Muqdadi, Chairman of Sanad Organisation, Baghdad, 5 August 2025.

Iraq acceded to the Paris Agreement in 2021.<sup>17</sup> Iraq is also a signatory to international treaties including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) – see Table 2. Together with Article 33 and Law 27, in the absence of strong domestic climate obligations, these treaties should be read to require action on environmental harm.<sup>18</sup>

Human rights law provides a path to recognising gender-differentiated climate-harm.<sup>19</sup> As explained by Dr Sally Thin, instruments across a range of UN human rights treaties expect regard for differential impacts on women and marginalised groups.<sup>20</sup> However a key constraint in Iraq is remedial access. Although Iraq has ratified the ICCPR, ICESCR and CEDAW, it has not accepted their Optional Protocols that enable individual complaints, meaning that Iraqis cannot access individual complaint mechanisms to hold the state to account and, for instance, women facing climate-harm have no legal avenue to seek recourse or file complaints with international bodies, leaving them without accountability mechanisms.

## Women and Climate-Harm

Our interviews across Iraq showed the gendered impacts of climate change, and how climate-harm manifests in three primary ways – health, livelihoods, and psychosocial well-being – all of which worsen women’s vulnerabilities. In southern Iraq following inter-tribal conflict, for instance, Sulaiman reported a case where ‘women were the prizes of the fight’, effectively married off to bring about reconciliation, showing how crises reinforce patriarchal control.<sup>21</sup> He also cited climate-linked economic stress as a driver of both early marriages and girls being pulled out from school to meet farm labour needs.<sup>22</sup>

Dr Saba Khair from the University of Mosul’s Environmental Research Centre told us that agricultural decline has pushed women into precarious work while raising maternal health risks.<sup>23</sup> In Sharya, Gulchin Murad described losing income from agriculture compounded by household tensions linked to heat and scarcity.<sup>24</sup> In Duhok and Sharya, women complained of dust, heat and unreliable power unsettling sleep and schooling.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>17</sup> United Nations, ‘Iraq’s ratification of the Paris Agreement’, UN, 1 November 2021. Available at: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/CN/2021/CN.358.2021-Eng.pdf> (accessed 21 September 2025).

<sup>18</sup> Iraq Constitution, Article 33.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Dr Sally Thin, Assistant Professor of International Law, Radboud University, 30 July 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Sally Thin, ‘From Paris with Love: The Systemic Integration of Environmental Law in the Interpretation of UN Human Rights Treaties’, *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* (2025), pp.150–71.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Sulaiman.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Dr Saba Khair, Director of Environmental Research Center of Mosul University, 4 August 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Gulchin Murad, from Sinjar, now in Duhok, 6 August 2025.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid; Interview with Kani Ahmed, a social worker with WADI Organisation, Erbil, 5 August 2025.

Testimonies from Kalar, Mosul and Sulaimani connected extreme heat, water scarcity and pollution to miscarriages, premature births, infertility, dehydration in pregnancy, and chronic respiratory conditions. Women described long, hot journeys for drinkable water and clinic visits and asked for more information about water rotations and clinic hours.<sup>26</sup> A Kalar resident described how they had seen ‘so many cases of premature birth.’<sup>27</sup> In Duhok, Saja Mohammed shared how her newborn nephew is suffering from severe health issues including a heart condition, due to air pollution from nearby oil refineries.<sup>28</sup>

Laila Ahmed, a journalist and women’s rights advocate in Kifri, rural Diyala, told us how agricultural collapse has also stripped women in her community of seasonal earning opportunities.<sup>29</sup> Aya Jala, from a Yazidi IDP camp in Duhok, described the psychological distress from prolonged drought and intense heat in her camp.<sup>30</sup> The loss of civil documentation resulting from displacement blocks access to healthcare and education, deepening vulnerabilities.<sup>31</sup> Razaw Salihy, Amnesty International’s Iraq Researcher, explained the nuance of the correlation between climate change, reduced household income, and domestic violence.<sup>32</sup> ‘Having access to civil status documentation is another problem... as we’ve documented across Iraq, when you don’t have access to civil status documentation, your rights are impacted, access to health, access to education, access to freedom of movement will be challenging,’ Salihy added.<sup>33</sup>

Our transcripts are filled with accounts of the direct physical toll of environmental degradation. In interviews in Nineveh, Basra and Baghdad, climate-harm is described as a set of daily, cumulative burdens. Hero Ahmed, based in Sulaimani, explained how her family relies on water from neighbours when municipal supply fails.<sup>34</sup> Laila Ahmed recounted how pregnant women are suffering from low blood pressure and dehydration, leading to a high rate of miscarriages.<sup>35</sup> She also noted an increase in respiratory illnesses like asthma, particularly among children and young girls, attributed to dust storms that are

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Hero Ahmed, Sulaimani, 15 July 2025.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Khalat Salih, Kalar, Garmyan, Sulaimani, 10 July 2025.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Saja Mohammed, Bardarash, Duhok, 4 August 2025.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Laila Ahmed, Kifri, Diyala, 11 August 2025.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Aya Jala, Duhok IDP camp, 10 July 2025.

<sup>31</sup> IOM, ‘Migration, Environment, and Climate Change in Iraq’, *IOM Iraq*, 11 August 2022. Available at: <https://iraq.un.org/en/194355-migration-environment-and-climate-change-iraq> (accessed 21 September 2025).

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Razaw Salihy, Amnesty International’s Iraq researcher, 11 August 2025.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.; Amnesty International, ‘Marked for Life: Displaced Iraqis in Cycle of Abuse and Stigmatization’, *Amnesty International*, 24 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde14/3318/2020/en> (accessed 5 August 2025).

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Hero Ahmed.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Laila Ahmed.

now a regular feature of Iraqi life.<sup>36</sup> ‘A women in Tazade village in Kifri told me when the last dust storm did hit our village that she found herself in a very bad psychological situation and was really under stress... It was driving her mad,’ she said.<sup>37</sup>

As explained by Dr Khair, the loss of arable land in Nineveh and Sinjar has stripped many women of their financial independence.<sup>38</sup> Sarwin Hussein, who lives in the Hawraman region, provided further examples of how women’s roles in managing daily household resources, particularly water, have become a source of physical and financial stress.<sup>39</sup> Khalat Salih and Chiman Duhoki described how the stress of losing livelihoods and homes is leading to increased social problems, including early marriage for girls and a rise in domestic violence.<sup>40</sup> As Rangin Salam, an activist and journalist from Halabja, noted, ‘women and nature are 100% connected’, and when that connection is broken, it affects everything.<sup>41</sup> Party loyalty and political ignorance often trump expertise in project selection, she added, citing small initiatives as proof of civic capacity.<sup>42</sup> Dr Khair’s observations from Mosul situate these harms within overstretched health systems.<sup>43</sup>

In Dhi Qar’s southern marshes, too, Raad Alasadi confirmed how women are absorbing the psychological and physical toll.<sup>44</sup> The president of the Chabayish Ecotourism Organisation explained the disparate pathways for support, from tribal sheikhs who might get officials’ attention, to NGOs and municipalities or departments themselves.<sup>45</sup> Men are affected by the loss of agricultural production and experience these needs too, of course, but retain greater mobility to seek out alternative survival options, Dr Al-Zuwaini said, most notably by migrating from Basra, Nasiriyah and Amarah.<sup>46</sup>

Ban Flieh, Climate Change Coordinator in the Prime Minister’s office, agreed that women are physically more vulnerable.<sup>47</sup> According to Flieh, while Iraq has a variety of environmental laws and climate plans, there are no specialised policies or laws that specifically consider women, noting that this ‘absence of this dimension makes women in rural areas

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Khair.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Murad.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Chiman Duhoki, Country Director of WADI Organisation, Duhok, 5 August 2025.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Rangin Salam, a women’s rights activist in Halabja, 4 August 2025.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Khair.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Raad H Alasadi, Environmental activist and President of Chabayish Ecotourism Organisation, Dhi Qar Governorate, Chabayish Marshes, 14 September 2025.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Dr Ihsan Al-Zuwaini, Professor at the University of Kufa, Diwanyah, 16 September 2025.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Ban Flieh, Climate Change Coordinator, Directorate of International Relations, Prime Minister’s Office, 15 September 2025.

and areas affected by desertification more vulnerable.<sup>48</sup> Flieh explained how political and security priorities are often placed above environmental issues, and that these institutional and social challenges make environmental laws and policies in Iraq ineffective, which leads to weakening women's access to environmental justice, increasing their vulnerability, and restricting their opportunities to be an active component of community resilience.<sup>49</sup> Flieh identified key challenges including 'a weak institutional and oversight framework, administrative and financial corruption, [and] political and security priorities that are often prioritised over environmental issues.'<sup>50</sup>

Figure 3: Discussions with key policy-makers and activists in Iraq, including co-founder and director of the Moja Organisation for Human Rights, Yaser Mekki (right), relating to governance and the political economy of climate policy



Source: Meethak Al Khatib

## Governance and Iraq's Political Economy

The interviews suggest that the legal gap is a consequence of Iraq's dysfunctional governance and political economy, with the political elite having little incentive to address climate change. Interviewees also emphasised that where decisions are made matters.<sup>51</sup> Decades of war, sanctions and corruption have entrenched infrastructural decay and

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Khanum Lateef, Head of Asuda NGO and Former Presidential Advisor, Baghdad, 27 July 2025; Interview with Murad; Interview with Salam.

rentier dependencies.<sup>52</sup> Iraq's climate vulnerability is inseparable from this.<sup>53</sup> Across the country, oil-sector influence, procurement capture and inter-agency rivalry weakens monitoring and allows gas flaring and contamination to persist.<sup>54</sup> Journalists and activists repeatedly lamented that authorities invoke 'climate change' to explain crises that are actually preventable mismanagement – such as salinity and canal maintenance, grid failures, and stalled water projects.<sup>55</sup>

Muhammed Al-Sahlani, a lawyer in Basra, described the range of challenges hindering the implementation of environmental reforms, including a weak monitoring and a regulatory environment in which oil and gas operations proceed with minimal deterrence.<sup>56</sup> The weak oversight of polluting companies persists despite the clear environmental damage they cause.<sup>57</sup> They operate without real oversight, posing a direct threat to the environment and the health of the population, particularly women, affected by these deadly pollutants.<sup>58</sup> Dr Zeinab Shuker explained how Iraq's climate crisis is inseparable from its rentier political economy, where the state's legitimacy is based on distributing oil revenue, not on serving its citizens for this disconnect.<sup>59</sup> Environmental protection and enforcement would threaten the economic interests of these elites by challenging corrupt practices.<sup>60</sup> The state's rentier structure demands nothing less than a difficult but necessary journey of institutional reform and social rebuilding – empowering communities, protecting activists, and ensuring that environmental policies include women – including its laws.

Conflict and climate feed one another, with environmental degradation intensifying grievances.<sup>61</sup> Shuker also cautioned against a Western 'green' frame that can alienate Iraqi officials and households. A survival frame, such as 'climate is water, bills and health', would better connect to lived experiences.<sup>62</sup> The true power of international law, Shuker suggests, would be its ability to frame a problem symbolically and create international awareness that might eventually force the elite to respond. In this light, the emergence of protest movements and women-led initiatives are incredibly important.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>52</sup> UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), 'The interlinkages between climate, peace and security in Iraq', UNDPPA, April 2023. Available at: [https://dppa.un.org/sites/default/files/dppa\\_desk\\_study\\_on\\_the\\_interlinkages\\_between\\_climate\\_peace\\_and\\_security\\_in\\_iraq.pdf](https://dppa.un.org/sites/default/files/dppa_desk_study_on_the_interlinkages_between_climate_peace_and_security_in_iraq.pdf) (accessed 21 September 2025).

<sup>53</sup> Zeinab Shuker, 'The Deep Roots of Iraq's Climate Crisis', *Century International*, 11 July 2023. Available at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-deep-roots-of-iraqs-climate-crisis> (accessed 15 September 2025).

<sup>54</sup> Alannah Travers, 'Refugees claim gas flaring cancer link in northern Iraq', *Al Jazeera English*, 19 April 2023. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/4/19/refugees-claim-gas-flaring-cancer-link-northern-iraq> (accessed 10 September 2025).

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Sulaiman.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Muhammed Al-Sahlani, Lawyer and climate change activist, Basra, 10 August 2025.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Dr Zeinab Shuker, 19 September 2025.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

On 21 September 2025, Iraq's government launched a series of documents to support its Updated NDC under the Paris Agreement.<sup>64</sup> The Climate Vulnerability Index (CVI) mapping showed how southern governorates are among the most climate-vulnerable.<sup>65</sup> Another report, Iraq's Climate Investment Plan (CIP), frames climate action as an engine for economic diversification.<sup>66</sup> It also provides a potential route for requiring sex-disaggregated baselines and potential grievance routes in climate-related investment.<sup>67</sup> The CIP also names women directly, which is language that could be leveraged to argue for mandatory gender annexes and targeted benefits in services and financial access. An Energy Transition Framework Study funded by the UK Government suggests decarbonisation pathways, grid reliability, tariff reform, and investment roadmaps.<sup>68</sup> This would have been the natural entry-point for considering 'just transition' measures that protect women's livelihoods, not only the impact that diversification-related reforms mean in 'addressing labor force participation constraints, particularly for women.'<sup>69</sup>

All three reports are largely technical and economic in focus, but provide a policy opportunity to increase gender-responsive metrics and measures, and could be leveraged to close the recognition gap documented in this study. In our interview, Dr Ibrahim Al-Sudani from the National Negotiating Team told us that women are 'at the heart' of Iraq's current climate decision-making, yet was frank about implementation barriers.<sup>70</sup> He added that the core legal instrument, Law No 27 of 2009, is undergoing consideration for amendments to broaden its scope and align with Iraq's international climate commitments, but identified three binding constraints – selective enforcement of laws and policies, resource and capacity limitations, and patriarchal norms that reduce women's ability to access and influence remedies.<sup>71</sup> Al-Sudani pointed to women's increasing participation in several technical committees, in some instances exceeding men's representation, as evidence of some change – nonetheless, what he terms a 'patriarchal authority in legislation' is still shaping the outcomes.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>64</sup> UNDP, 'Iraq Launches Background Documents for its Updated Nationally Determined Contribution to Advance Climate Action', *UNDP Iraq*, 21 September 2025. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/iraq/press-releases/iraq-launches-background-documents-its-updated-nationally-determined-contribution-advance-climate-action> (accessed 21 September 2025).

<sup>65</sup> UNDP, 'Climate Vulnerability Index of Iraq', *UNDP Iraq*, 18 September 2025, pp. 121–30, 60. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/iraq/publications/climate-vulnerability-index-iraq> (accessed 21 September 2025).

<sup>66</sup> UNDP, 'Pathways for Climate Investment in Iraq – Technical Investment Report', *UNDP Iraq*, 8 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/iraq/publications/pathways-climate-investment-iraq> (accessed 21 September 2025).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>68</sup> UNDP, 'Energy Transition: From Policies to Actions in the Power Sector of Iraq', *UNDP Iraq*, 18 September 2025. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/iraq/publications/energy-transition-policies-actions-power-sector-iraq> (accessed 21 September 2025).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Dr Ibrahim Al-Sudani, Member of the National Negotiating Team for Climate Change Issues, 18 September 2025.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

Interviewees from all regions consistently pointed to a lack of political will to change this, compounded by a lack of coordination between different government agencies, conflicting authorities and ineffective policies. For Alasadi, this is reflective of a system that lacks a 'gender perspective' with deep 'cultural and social barriers' preventing women from participating.<sup>73</sup> Iraq's YSL provided a reparations framework in a specific context, yet implementation lags and its scope remains narrow, excluding men and other groups, mirroring the tendency of transitional justice frameworks to elevate certain categories of harm in a way that means selective accountability undermines justice.

Figure 4: Hasan Atrushi Jameel, Criminal Justice Working Group focal point at the Coalition for Just Reparations (C4JR), contributing to the roundtable discussion on the systemic issues of governance and legal reform required for climate resilience in Iraq



Source: Meethak Al Khatib

## Recommendations

So what would 'closing the gap' look like in practice? We conclude that this would require addressing the systemic issues of governance, political will, and social fragmentation. Drawing on the suggestions of our interviewees, and collaboratively developed in our Baghdad workshop in October 2025, we propose the following recommendations which we hope lays the groundwork for the more longer-term transformation required.<sup>74</sup>

### Legal and Institutional Reforms

Iraqi courts and government agencies must read constitutional and legislative provisions as well as environmental norms in international human rights law, such as the rights to

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Alasadi.

<sup>74</sup> LSE and Moja round-table on Women, Law and Climate Resilience event in Baghdad overview, *Moja YouTube*, 25 October 2025. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVpioq3dKXg&t=3934s> (accessed 16 November 2025).

life, health, water and non-discrimination, strengthening the justiciability of gendered climate-harm. Existing laws can be amended and strengthened with clear accountability mechanisms and coordination between the federal government and the KRG.

Gender considerations must be meaningfully integrated into environmental policies, not merely superficially, to ensure fair and effective representation for women. We suggest introducing a mandatory ‘Gender Annex’ as part of all environmental impact assessments and permits. This would force developers and government agencies to report the impacts of their projects, providing a legal basis for future accountability.

### **Governance and Participation**

Access to justice is difficult for women due to weak institutions, and trust between society and the government must be built through transparency and awareness. We suggest legislating to provide seats for representatives from women’s organisations and environmental groups on government councils related to water, agriculture and security. This would ensure that women’s voices are heard at the decision-making level.

The government must also provide explicit legal protection for environmental and women’s rights activists and end all forms of political co-optation, censorship, and harassment. As Dr Shuker argued, the mere existence of these movements, and the state’s response to them, shows their potential for creating change. We must let them.

### **Community and Social Resilience**

Support community-based initiatives that empower women and rebuild public spaces, both physical projects and social. As many interviewees told us, really listening to communities is the first step for getting communities to advocate for themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Climate change is a justice and governance crisis, and law can help to reframe priorities through gender-responsive obligations.<sup>75</sup> Extreme heat, localised pollution and water scarcity is putting everyone at risk, but we must be alert to the specific health risks for women – who are often unable to share their experiences.<sup>76</sup> Without this recognition, and if Iraq’s government does not address this fundamental problem, women will remain invisible in Iraq’s legal framework and will be failed by the country’s climate response.

<sup>75</sup> World Bank, ‘Climate Change Inaction Threatens Iraq’s Social Stability and Long-Term Economic Development Prospects’, *World Bank Press Release*, 9 November 2022. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/11/09/climate-change-inaction-threatens-iraq-s-social-stability-and-long-term-economic-development-prospects> (accessed 21 September 2025).

<sup>76</sup> Travers, ‘How Would You Survive?’.

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Jack McGinn

**Cover Image**

The interior view of the ruins of a formerly submerged school, uncovered due to low water levels in the lake behind the Mosul Dam, near Duhok, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 26 December 2021.

Source: Alannah Travers

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