

The Triangle of Struggle: Violence, Disempowerment, and the Reality of Daily Life for Iraqi Women

Muaad Al-Jumaah*¹, Yoshida Osamu²

^{1,2}Hiroshima University, Japan

*Correspondence: muaad.alumaah@gmail.com

Abstract

Iraqi women have lived for decades under cycles of war, sanctions, dictatorship, and fragile democracy. While much scholarship has presented them as either resilient survivors or passive victims, less attention has been given to what women themselves identify as their most pressing daily struggles. This study investigates Iraqi women's own perspectives, focusing on the struggles they named when directly asked about their biggest daily problems. By centering their voices, the paper aims to move beyond symbolic representations and document the lived realities of disempowerment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 Iraqi women aged 20–75 between September 2023 and March 2024, across Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, and semi-rural towns. Data were analyzed thematically, leading to the development of a “triangle of struggle” model. Ethical safeguards and anonymity were maintained in line with institutional approval. The findings reveal a triangular structure of struggle: violence at the apex, with harassment, tribalism and insecurity, regression, and daily burdens forming its base. Violence was reported as pervasive, while harassment restricted mobility, tribal dominance weakened legal protections, regression reflected fragile institutions, and daily burdens highlighted unemployment and exhaustion. These interconnected struggles reinforce cycles of fear and fatigue.

Keywords: Iraqi Women, Gender-Based Violence, Harassment, Tribalism, Disempowerment, Resilience Rhetoric

1. Introduction

For decades, the lives of Iraqi women have been shaped by overlapping crises: prolonged wars, dictatorship, sanctions, occupation, terrorism, and fragile state-building efforts. The result has been a volatile environment where women remain at the intersection of political, cultural, and economic pressures [1]. Existing scholarship has examined the representation of women in times of conflict, often portraying them either as symbolic carriers of national resilience or as passive victims of violence [2], [3]. While these perspectives are valuable, they often fail to capture the everyday voices of women who navigate these struggles directly [4].

The historical trajectory of Iraqi women's roles has been highly contradictory. During the 1970s, under the Ba'athist state, some legal reforms advanced women's rights in education, employment, and family law. However, these gains were largely instrumentalized by the regime, designed to serve nationalist projects rather than to create gender equality. The

*Corresponding author
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: muaad.alumaah@gmail.com

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devastating Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, followed by the Gulf War and international sanctions in the 1990s, reversed many of these gains and left Iraqi women among the most vulnerable groups in society [5]. Studies on sanctions emphasize the disproportionate impact on women, particularly through rising poverty, weakened public health systems, and reduced access to education [6]. These cycles of progress and regression created a fragile landscape where women's rights were often tied to shifting political and economic conditions rather than embedded protections.

The 2003 U.S.-led invasion was often framed in international discourse as an opportunity for democratization and women's empowerment. Yet, in practice, it unleashed profound instability. Sectarian violence, the rise of militias, tribal dominance, and weakened state institutions left women exposed to new forms of violence and insecurity. The imposition of parliamentary gender quotas was heralded internationally as a landmark achievement, but in practice it became a symbolic gesture, failing to translate into substantive improvements in women's lives [7]. As Zahra Ali argues, Iraqi women have often been caught between being celebrated as symbols of liberation and simultaneously marginalized in political practice [3].

At the same time, cultural narratives of endurance have glorified women's ability to "survive" crisis, producing what Kandiyoti terms "resilience rhetoric" [8]. While international organizations, media, and even state actors frequently highlight Iraqi women's "strength," such discourses risk masking the structural injustices they endure. Being celebrated for survival does not alleviate the burdens of violence, harassment, and poverty; rather, it normalizes them by suggesting women's suffering is both inevitable and admirable [9]. This reflects a broader feminist critique of post-conflict contexts in the Middle East, where women are often asked to bear the costs of instability while their endurance is romanticized [10].

Iraqi women's struggles must also be situated within broader regional and global frameworks of gender-based violence. Across conflict-affected societies, women often face a continuum of violence that links domestic abuse, public harassment, and political instability [11]. In Iraq, this continuum is particularly acute: private and public insecurities overlap, as militias, weak institutions, and patriarchal norms reinforce one another. Comparative studies from Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen similarly highlight how war and state fragility amplify gender inequalities [12]. Yet, Iraq's context is unique in its mixture of modern legal frameworks, entrenched tribal customs, and decades of geopolitical intervention that have fragmented women's rights protections [13].

Despite these challenges, relatively little scholarship has asked a direct and simple question: What do Iraqi women themselves identify as their biggest daily problem? Instead, much research has emphasized either broad institutional analyses or external representations of women's struggles. By contrast, this study centers women's own voices, collected through qualitative fieldwork between 2023 and 2024. When asked what their greatest struggle was, participants consistently articulated a triangular structure of oppression, with violence at its apex and harassment, tribalism and insecurity, regression, and daily burdens forming its base [10].

This paper argues that centering women's voices in this way is not only methodologically important but also politically necessary. By listening to how women themselves define their struggles, researchers can move beyond symbolic representations and engage directly with the conditions that shape everyday survival. Moreover, situating these testimonies within feminist scholarship on violence, state fragility, and resilience rhetoric allows us to understand

them not as isolated experiences but as part of broader structures of disempowerment [2], [8], [13].

In doing so, this article contributes to Middle Eastern gender studies by bridging the gap between abstract institutional analysis and the lived realities of women. It shows that Iraqi women's testimonies demand urgent action: the dismantling of violence, harassment, and tribal dominance, the strengthening of legal protections, and the expansion of economic and educational opportunities. Without such interventions, women will remain trapped in cycles of fear and exhaustion, where survival is valorized but dignity is denied [1].

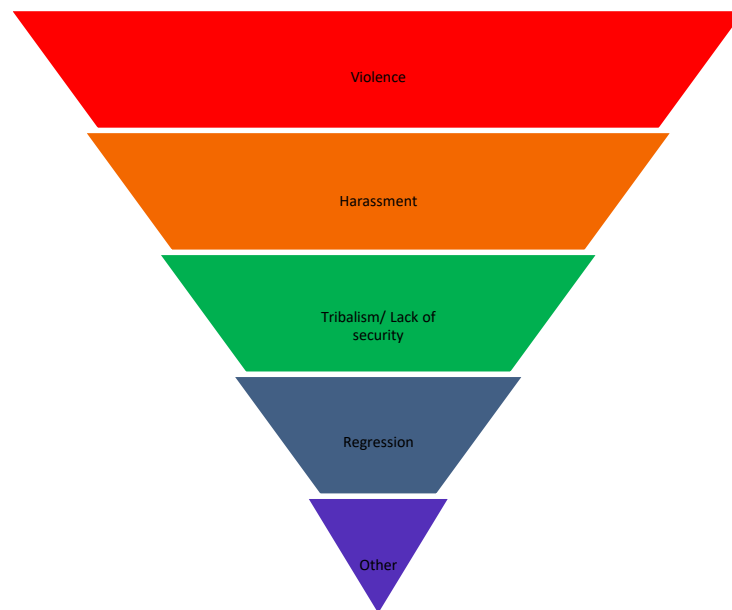


Figure 1. The Triangle of Struggle for Iraqi Women
(Source: Author's fieldwork, 2023–2024)

Note: This diagram, developed directly from participants' responses, illustrates the hierarchy of struggles identified by Iraqi women. Violence sits at the apex as the most urgent concern, supported by the layered struggles of harassment, tribalism and lack of security, regression, and daily life burdens.

2. Research Method

This study is based on 60 semi-structured interviews with Iraqi women aged 20–75, conducted between September 2023 and March 2024. Participants were recruited through social media advertisements and snowball sampling. They came from Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, and several semi-rural towns.

Interviews were held in participant-chosen locations to ensure comfort and privacy. The guiding question was: What is the biggest problem you face in your life today? Responses were recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and coded thematically. The coding process revealed five major themes, which were represented through a triangular structure: violence, harassment, tribalism and insecurity, regression, and daily burdens [13].

Strict ethical safeguards were followed: participants gave informed consent, identities were anonymized, and sensitive details were removed or altered. The study was approved by the ethics committee of Hiroshima University.

3. Results

The Triangle of Struggle

The testimonies of Iraqi women revealed a striking triangular structure of struggle. At its apex stood violence, described as the most urgent and pervasive issue, while the base layers consisted of harassment, tribalism and insecurity, regression, and daily burdens. These categories were not isolated, but woven together in ways that sustained cycles of fear, exhaustion, and disempowerment.

Violence

Violence was consistently named as the most pressing problem, cutting across age, class, and geography. Women described both private forms (domestic violence, marital abuse) and public forms (militia violence, political intimidation, gun culture) as shaping their lives. Many emphasized that violence was not episodic but continuous:

- a. "Violence is in every place — at home, in the street, in work. It follows us." – Participant, 33, Baghdad
- b. "If you complain, they say this is our culture. So, we stay silent." – Participant, 47, Najaf
- c. "We live with the fear of guns, militias, kidnappings. It is always in the background of our lives." – Participant, 38, Basra

These testimonies confirm what Kelly [11] termed the continuum of violence: the inseparability of public and private violence. What begins as "domestic" abuse extends into public insecurity, and vice versa. Women repeatedly emphasized that violence shapes decision-making about marriage, mobility, and employment, revealing its centrality in structuring everyday life [13], [14].

Harassment

Younger participants particularly stressed harassment in public spaces as a major struggle. Unlike "spectacular" violence, harassment was described as exhausting in its daily repetition and its power to shape women's choices.

- a. "Before leaving the house, I think: how many times will I be harassed today?" – Participant, 21, Basra
- b. "We are told to stay home if we don't want harassment. Why is the solution always for us to hide?" – Participant, 25, Baghdad
- c. "Harassment kills ambition. Girls drop out of school not because they fail, but because their parents fear the streets." – Participant, 19, rural north

These testimonies reveal harassment as a form of structural exclusion: it polices women's visibility and constrains educational and professional participation. Scholars have shown that harassment functions not merely as annoyance but as a mechanism of social control [15]. In Iraq, it compounds women's dependency, pushing them back into the private sphere, and reinforcing gender hierarchies in everyday practice [2].

Tribalism and Lack of Security

Participants from semi-rural and rural areas described tribal dominance as a defining feature of their struggles. In many cases, tribal arbitration overrode state law, leaving women vulnerable in matters of divorce, custody, and inheritance. Some testified to being treated as bargaining objects in tribal settlements.

- a. "If you are a woman, you do not trust the police. The tribe will decide your fate." – Participant, 40, Najaf
- b. "Tribal laws take women as exchange, as compensation. We are bargaining chips." – Participant, 29, rural south

Alongside tribal dominance, women also described wider insecurity linked to militias, kidnappings, and extortion.

- c. “There is no law for us. Security depends on who you know, which militia controls your neighborhood.” – Participant, 35, Baghdad

These accounts reinforce earlier studies noting that, in fragile states, informal power structures often replace formal protections, to the detriment of women [3], [5], [6]. Women’s testimonies highlight the erosion of trust in state institutions and the reliance on male-controlled networks for survival.

Regression

A strong theme across interviews was the sense of social and legal regression. Women reported frustration that formal rights existed in theory but disappeared in practice.

- a. “We are told we have rights, but when we try to use them, they disappear.” – Participant, 29, Basra
- b. “They say women are in parliament, but nothing changes for us. It is all numbers and pictures.” – Participant, 31, Baghdad
- c. “Instead of progress, we are going backward. They want to marry girls as children again.” – Participant, 52, Najaf

These reflections resonate with Pratt’s [4] warning about symbolic reforms: quotas and constitutional guarantees without enforcement. The proposed amendments to lower the legal marriage age [15] were repeatedly cited as evidence that the state was sliding backward. This regression left participants with a strong sense of fragility: that even limited rights could be rolled back at any moment.

Daily Burdens

Beyond structural violence, women repeatedly emphasized exhaustion from daily burdens: unemployment, poverty, lack of services, and constant caregiving. While less visible than violence, these burdens were described as equally heavy, because they shaped every decision about survival.

- a. “We carry everything, and still they call us strong, as if that is enough.” – Participant, 50, rural south
- b. “No jobs, no stability, no future. We are always told to be patient, but until when?” – Participant, 24, Baghdad
- c. “Even if you want to study, poverty will stop you. Girls give up their dreams because survival comes first.” – Participant, 22, Basra

This reflects Kandiyoti’s [8] critique of resilience rhetoric: women are praised for endurance while structural neglect continues. In practice, these burdens sustain gender inequality by forcing women to prioritize survival over empowerment, perpetuating cycles of fatigue and dependency [9], [10].

4. Discussion

The “triangle of struggle” articulated by Iraqi women demonstrates how their daily problems are not separate or sequential but mutually reinforcing. Violence, harassment, tribal dominance, regression, and daily burdens combine to create a cycle of disempowerment that is both structural and psychological. This section situates the findings in relation to feminist theory, regional scholarship, and global debates on gender and conflict.

Violence as the Apex

The centrality of violence in women's testimonies reflects its role as both cause and consequence of other struggles. As Kelly [11] describes in her continuum of violence framework, violence cannot be confined to either the domestic or the public sphere; rather, the two reinforce each other. Women described violence in their homes, in their streets, and in their workplaces, showing that it is not episodic but continuous and normalized. This aligns with reports by Amnesty International [13] and Human Rights Watch [14], which document the failure of Iraqi institutions to protect women. What the testimonies add is the emotional geography of violence: the fear that "follows" women wherever they go. Violence thus emerges not just as an event but as a structuring condition of daily life.

Harassment as Structural Exclusion

Harassment, while sometimes trivialized in public discourse, was described by participants as an everyday assault on dignity and ambition. Feminist scholarship frames harassment as a mechanism of exclusion, restricting women's access to public space and institutional life [15]. The testimonies illustrate how harassment functions like an invisible law: it dictates clothing choices, limits mobility, and influences family decisions about education and work. One participant noted that girls "drop out not because they fail, but because their parents fear the streets." In this way, harassment works alongside violence to shrink the horizons of possibility for women, reinforcing dependency and narrowing futures.

Tribalism, Insecurity, and the Fragility of Law

The findings also confirm the tension between formal law and tribal or militia power. Women emphasized that disputes were often resolved not in courts but through tribal arbitration, where women could be exchanged as compensation. This echoes Al-Jawaheri's [5] analysis of sanctions-era Iraq, when state fragility opened space for tribal dominance, and Zahra Ali's [3] argument that women's citizenship is fragmented by competing legal systems. Women's voices in this study underscore the lack of trust in police or judicial institutions: security depends "on who you know" or "which militia controls your neighborhood." These accounts reinforce UN Women's [6] observation that legal protections for Iraqi women exist more on paper than in practice. The result is a landscape where women's rights are negotiable commodities, subordinated to patriarchal and militarized structures.

Regression and Symbolic Politics

The sense of regression voiced by participants—parliamentary quotas that bring no change, proposals to legalize child marriage, and the rollback of protections—speaks to what Pratt [4] calls the symbolic politics of women's rights in the Middle East. Numbers and images of women in parliament provide international legitimacy, yet on the ground women experience little substantive transformation. The testimonies echo this critique directly: one woman noted, "It is all numbers and pictures." This sense of moving backward despite surface reforms shows how fragile rights are in contexts where patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded in political culture. The proposed marriage law, reported by TIME [15], illustrates how easily symbolic progress can mask substantive regression.

Daily Burdens and the Rhetoric of Resilience

Finally, the testimonies highlight the heavy weight of daily burdens: unemployment, poverty, and constant caregiving. These struggles reflect Kandiyoti's [8] critique of resilience rhetoric—the celebration of women's strength while ignoring the structural neglect that forces them to be strong. Participants resented being called "strong" when what they wanted was stability, opportunity, and relief from exhaustion. As one put it, "We carry everything, and still

they call us strong, as if that is enough.” These testimonies remind us that survival is not empowerment; it is often the evidence of systemic failure.

Interlocking Struggles

Taken together, the triangle of struggle reveals that Iraqi women’s problems cannot be addressed in isolation. Violence feeds on harassment, which in turn thrives under insecurity, which is reinforced by regression and daily burdens. Each struggle multiplies the effects of the others, creating cycles of fatigue and fear. This interconnectedness reflects what feminist conflict studies describe as webs of disempowerment, where gender inequalities are sustained not by one institution but by the overlapping failures of law, culture, and economy [9], [10].

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The testimonies of 60 Iraqi women reveal a triangular structure of struggle that defines their daily lives. At its apex is violence, the most urgent and pervasive threat, while harassment, tribalism and insecurity, regression, and daily burdens form its base. These struggles are not isolated; rather, they interlock to create cycles of disempowerment. Violence thrives in environments where harassment is normalized, where tribal customs override state law, where symbolic reforms mask regression, and where women carry overwhelming economic and emotional burdens.

What emerges from these voices is a clear rejection of glorification. Iraqi women are not asking to be called resilient or strong; they are asking for the conditions that would make resilience unnecessary. As one participant put it, “We carry everything, and still they call us strong, as if that is enough.” Their testimonies call for urgent structural change: stronger legal protections, effective enforcement against domestic abuse and harassment, the dismantling of tribal dominance over women’s rights, and the creation of meaningful economic and educational opportunities.

The measure of progress, therefore, cannot be symbolic representation or the international praise of women’s endurance. It must be whether Iraqi women can live without fear, whether their rights are respected in both law and practice, and whether survival ceases to be their defining achievement. Until violence and its supporting structures are dismantled, Iraqi women will continue to live within the triangle of struggle. Real liberation requires that dignity, safety, and opportunity replace fear, exhaustion, and fragility as the foundations of daily life [1], [8], [13].

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