Gender found guilty: The anti-gender backlash in Iraq and the politics of (dis)translation

ABSTRACT

The Iraqi Federal Supreme Court banned the term gender in February 2024, resulting in a crackdown on gender equity and significantly undermining the space for feminist activism and advocacy. This article examines the conditions leading to the 2023 anti-gender backlash in Iraq, the discursive strategies of the backlashers, and its broader implications for feminist activism. The backlash was rooted in ongoing socio-political repression following the 2019 Tishreen [October] protests and a climate of widespread disinformation. It gained traction by weaponizing concepts of gender and homophobia. Opponents framed the term gender as a Western plot aimed at undermining Islamic values and societal norms. They exploited the problematic relationship between gender and translation, using deliberate misinterpretations to construct a narrative that demonizes gender and those who support gendered understandings of social relationships. Analyzing the backlashers' discourse and incorporating local feminist voices, this study highlights the backlash on gendered activism, academic inquiry, and women's rights. The article concludes by discussing the intertwined nature of discursive and material violence, emphasizing the erosion of human rights in post-2003 Iraq and contributing to the broader literature on gendered activism in the Middle East and globally.

Keywords: gender backlash, Iraq, translation, distranslation, Islam, feminist activism.

INTRODUCTION

In February 2024, the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court banned the term gender and ruled that any articles or texts containing the words gender or *al-naw'al-ijtimā'y* [social type] are unconstitutional (Shareekawalaken 2024). Prior to the court ruling, the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission (CMC), Iraq's official media regulator, ordered media outlets in August 2023 to ban the word gender and "homosexuality", replacing the latter with "sexual deviance" in both published and broadcast reports (Amnesty International 2023a). In April 2024, the Iraqi parliament passed an amended version of the 1988 anti-prostitution law with "sexual deviance" added to its title. This version criminalizes same-sex relationships and transgender individuals with prison sentences and fines (Agence France-Presse 2024). Additionally, it made the promotion of homosexuality punishable by using vague and confusing language that makes any Iraqi citizen vulnerable to prosecution (Shafaq News 2024). These developments emerged in the aftermath of a hostile anti-gender campaign that erupted in July 2023 and was fueled by widespread disinformation. This campaign conflated gender with moral corruption while framing it as a foreign concept that threatens Iraq's cultural and religious values. Why did this campaign take place? Why was it effective?

This article addresses these questions by making two interconnected arguments. First, the latest gender backlash in Iraq is the most visible and hostile episode of an inherent, continuous, and systematic discrimination against women and gender non-normative communities perpetuated by laws and accompanied by rising cases of gender-based violence. It did not emerge in a vacuum. Nor was it disconnected from other countries where similar movements have gained regional and global traction. In this regard, I draw on a body of literature that expands the meanings of backlash to iterate its inherent, continuous, pre-emptive, and proactive nature (e.g., Browne 2013; Rowley 2020; Townsend-Bell 2020; Alter and Zürn 2020; El Rahi and Antar 2024) while emphasizing its transnational links. Having a forward-looking objective, the Iraqi

backlashers sought to reinforce and exacerbate an existing reality in which women and other vulnerable groups, namely LGBTQ+, are marginalized and oppressed. Second, alienating the concept of gender from the Arabic language, Islamic religion, and Iraqi culture was a linguistic and cultural dispossession that made it a condition of distranslation. Distinguishing between mistranslation and distranslation, Ali Darwish (2011, 33) defines the latter as "the result of intentional interference with the source text's information content, informative intent, and communicative intent." In this article, I use the term in a broad sense as a misleading translation of foreign terminologies and their Arabic equivalents within definitions designed to spread disinformation. Focusing specifically on the term gender, I show how the term is distranslated, deliberately constructing narratives of egalitarianism to mean otherwise, and exploit people's anxieties and fears about social disorder, which then serves to reclaim a threatened socio-political legitimacy.

Therefore, not only was gender rejected, but also its Arabic equivalent *al-naw'al-ijtimā'y* [social type], was used in the official discourse in federal Iraq. As such, by making gender resistant to translation (see Butler 2021), it was easily distranslated into different meanings, including homosexuality and pedophilia (namely children's rapists, as appeared in an official document issued by Basra Governorate Office).[1]Distranslation, as I demonstrate, denies the translatability of gender, presenting the term as a tool of linguistic and cultural imperialism that threatens the cultural and religious values of the Iraqi people and their society. This discursive tool was highly effective, leading to the term's outright banning in Iraqi institutions.

This article makes two simultaneous contributions: first, to the field of translation studies, and second, to the global scholarship on anti-gender movements (see Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Darakchi 2019; Ging and Siapera 2019; Zaremberg, Tabbush, and Friedman 2021). It is among the first examinations on gender and (dis)translation in the Iraqi context. While I highlight the specificities of the local context, and the specific Iraqi manifestations, I also provide an

analytical framework applicable to other contexts. Its findings reiterate the transnational and interconnected nature of anti-gender movements, effective in oppressing women activists, feminists, and LGBTQ+ persons.

The article will proceed as follows. First, it introduces a contextual background on the status of Iraqi women following the US-led invasion, the entry of gender (*al-naw'al-ijtimā'y*) into official discourse, and the internal and external factors contributing to the 2023 anti-gender backlash. Second, it outlines the theoretical framework that supports the article's two main arguments about the nature of Iraq's backlash and its link to (dis)translation. Third, it presents the article's main data and methods. The remainder of the article is dedicated to exploring the repertoire of actions employed by backlashers and analyzing the major themes emerging from their discursive strategies. Insights from Iraqi women activists are incorporated to explain the broader implications of this backlash for feminist activism and women activists in Iraq.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

The US-led invasion and its aftermath have deeply impacted Iraqi women's status. The fragmentation of the Iraqi state along ethno-sectarian lines, the fragility of laws, the privatization of public institutions, especially education, and the rising influence of tribal norms with legal loopholes or justifications have had severe consequences. This environment has allowed for increased and widespread gender-based violence, with authorities unwilling to address the situation despite women's ongoing demands to reclaim their rights. Continued backlashes against women's rights have marked the new reality. For example, Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt documented the abuses and threats women not wearing a headscarf or adhering to a specific dress code were subjected by Shia and Sunni Islamist militants and terrorist groups in public spaces, including on university campuses, in the early years following the invasion (Al-Ali and Pratt 2006). The unconstitutional enforcement of the hijab and abaya on girls and

women in different places across the country has become widespread in recent years (Izz 2024). Moreover, recurrent attempts to abolish or amend Law 188 of the 1959 Personal Status Code (PSC)—a set of laws based on selected interpretations of Sharia that regulate personal matters for Iraqis, specifically Sunni and Shia Muslims (Efrati 2012; Ali 2018)—have recently culminated in amendments approved by the Iraqi parliament.[2] These amendments stipulate the establishment of a *Mudawana* [Code] based on the Jaafari Shia school of thought, allowing Muslim couples to marry according to Shia jurisprudence (Sadek 2025). While the *Mudawana* has not yet been written, concerns remain about women's rights, especially in relation to child custody and inheritance, the establishment of a religious authority "parallel" to that of the state, and the exacerbation of sectarian tension (Hasan 2024).

Paradoxically, the post-2003 era has been marked by attention to gender equity, albeit in theory. Gender as "al-naw' *al-ijtimā'y*" [social type or construction in reference to men and women] was officially recognized and adopted by the post-2003 Iraqi governments in several documents and projects since 2006 (El Hasan 2023). In 2016, following the dissolution of the Women's Ministry in 2015 under the Al-Abadi government[3], the Women's Empowerment Directorate was established by the Iraqi Cabinet. It resulted from an initiative by the Central Bank of Iraq in collaboration with the Iraqi Bank Association and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. The Directorate falls under the "Community Development Division", and one of its responsibilities was to incorporate the concept of gender into government plans and policies. Hence, it included a section labelled *al-naw' al-ijtimā'y*, with a strategy tailored towards enhancing "Iraq's international and regional standing."[4]

Hence, the Iraqi state officially recognized gender with reference to inequalities in the social roles of men and women, seeking to advance the status of the latter. Most ministries opened new sections and departments for women's empowerment. Concurrently, civil society

organizations and NGOs launched training programs dedicated to promoting gender equality (Hameed 2023). Despite their importance, these programs were not wide-reaching. Instead, they were primarily limited to certain groups of activists and journalists (interviews with activists). Moreover, though critical, the recognition of gender inequalities in many state institutions remained largely symbolic. Their activities were superficial and limited, often reinforcing gender stereotypes about women's traditional societal roles (Kamal 2023).

Despite such recognition, laws that protect women and children have been poor because of Islamist parties' strong opposition to legislation that criminalize child marriage or domestic violence.[5] The quantitative and descriptive representation of women in parliament has not yielded a substantive change to women's legal and social status (Alkhudary 2023). Therefore, discriminatory laws in the Iraqi Penal Code of 1969 have remained unchanged. Such laws include legitimatizing gender-based violence whilst mitigating sentences of appalling crimes against women, including the so-called "honor killings" under the pretext of "honorable motives" (Puttick 2015). The lack of a political will to enact legislation protecting women and children has been framed by a broader narrative of Western interference. Post-2003 Islamist parties have instrumentalized this narrative as a scapegoat to reclaim their legitimacy continuously questioned by Iraqi citizens disillusioned with the political system and its leaders (Mustafa 2022).

The 2019 Tishreen [October] protests and their aftermath underscore the salience of the narrative around Western interference used in tandem with a morality discourse to slander male and female protestors, disproportionately impacting women in the long term. Although protest cycles have been recurrent since 2011, Tishreen was distinguished by its radical demands for a complete overhaul of the status quo. As a result, it faced an unprecedented security clampdown that led to the murder, kidnapping, arrest, and enforced disappearance of many protesters, including women (Human Rights Watch 2020). Equally significant was the formidable

participation from women, including a young generation of feminist activists not affiliated with NGOs or women's rights groups (Al-Hassan 2022; Hammadi 2021). The presence of women protestors from all walks of life in public squares "challenged the dominant militarized, privatized, and masculine space," producing "an alternative social space" (Rasheed and Ali 2023, 77). Therefore, posing a challenge to patriarchal gender norms was seen as a threat to the entire system.

It was no surprise that the authorities' response was largely gendered. The protests were slandered as immoral, and protestors were smeared for engaging in corrupt acts in protest tents (Al-Hassan 2022; Rasheed and Ali 2023). Clearly, the aim was to cause moral panic, inciting public opinion against Tishreen in general and women's participation in particular (Rasheed and Ali 2023). Women demonstrators were stigmatized "as sexual objects occupying tents" (Al-Hassan 2022). The moral panic discourse was intended to push women into silence and fear, and it was particularly effective in highly conservative areas in the south (Al-Hassan 2022).

The morality discourse has framed policies and regulations in the years following Tishreen. Under the premiership of Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani (since 2022), affiliated with the Iran-backed Coordination Framework, an ongoing crackdown on civil society and freedom of expression in Iraq has taken place. For instance, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior introduced the *Balgh* [Report] online platform in January 2023, which asks users to report "immoral" social media content without clarifying what content would be classified as such (Amnesty International 2023b). Since then, the platform has served as a tool for repression and "arbitrary arrests," targeting activists and content creators, many of whom are women (Article 19 2025).

Against this backdrop, the plans to support youth development, including women's empowerment, announced by Al-Sudani on May 23, 2023—just two months before the anti-

gender backlash under the "National Document for Population Policy in Iraq"—could be seen as a virtue-signaling tactic. The goal was to legitimize the Iraqi government in the eyes of the international community (Al-Kubaisi 2023). Nevertheless, these plans were exploited by anti-gender backlashers to politicize gender and rally against the government, benefiting from other local, regional, and transnational factors.

Internal factors that triggered the backlash can be summed up as follows. Firstly, a similar anti-gender campaign in Kurdistan in 2022 targeted the Centre for Gender and Development Studies and its founder, Choman Hardi, a Kurdish scholar and writer (Hardi 2023). The academic use of gender in this context to encompass gender identity, non-binary, trans, and LGBTQ+ issues was cited by the anti-gender backlashers in federal Iraq to demonize gender and its supporters. Consequently, and secondly, it paved the way for the politicizing of gender by rival political figures and parties in Federal Iraq in a tit-for-tat fight to de-legitimize one another (Alarab 2023). Social media became a site of political conflict where political rivals and their followers accused one another of supporting gendered analyses and the usage of the term. In this antagonism, gender was framed as a Western conspiracy to promote what was labelled the "mimy gender" project. *Mimy* is a derogatory term coined by Muqtada al-Sadr, a powerful Shia cleric and leader of the Sadrist movement, to smear the LGBTQ+ community.[6]

Thirdly, around the same time, news about a $4 million US grant solicitation for "American style" universities in Iraq to develop programs and courses on climate change and gender equity was posted on a conservative rightist website (Schmad 2023).[7] The news shortly went viral on Iraqi social media through distranslation by deleting the adjective "American" and claiming that fund was for three Iraqi universities to design homosexuality curricula. Technology for Peace Organization (Tech4Peace), a registered Not-for-profit Corporation specializing in digital fact-checking and news verification, issued a statement correcting the disinformation (Alsumaria 2023). Nevertheless, the damage was already done. Rich and Zaragoza (2016, 62)

point out that people rely on “discredited misinformation, even when they can remember and report the correction.” The above distranslation (a term I will explain subsequently) continued to dominate the campaign’s discourse.

Similar anti-gender or anti-LGBTQ+ discourses were apparent in this geopolitical region. For example, in Libya, the term gender was banned in October 2023 (The Law Society of Libya 2023). In Lebanon, the late Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah, assassinated by Israel in 2024 (Aljazeera 2024), escalated his rhetoric against Lebanon’s LGBTQ+ communities between June and July, accusing NGOs and educational institutions of promoting same-sex relations among children in schools, urging the Ministry of Education to act (France 2024). Nasrallah’s discourse mirrored similar narratives in Iran. Following Tishreen protests, Iranian media redirected its antagonism against protestors, as well as NGOs and civil society organizaitons, labelling them as “jokers”, “Baathists”, or “agents of embassies” (e.g., Alkhanadeq 2021). Although not directly related to the anti-gender campaign, Iran influenced Iraqi Islamist parties and the Shia religious authorities in Karbala in the context of the 2022 protests against compulsory wearing of the hijab. A fear that Iranian women protestors would inspire Iraqi women prompted ruling authorities to intensify their rhetoric around the religious importance of veiling and the Takleef ceremonies (Izz 2024). Lastly, the backlash cultivated the Arabic translation and widespread online dissemination of English-language videos endorsing the “ideology of gender” by notorious Western conservative or far-right figures, such as Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate, and Matt Walsh (Al Aqeedi 2023), along with anti-sex education protests in some Western countries (see Hameed 2023).[8]

Given the socio-political landscape in post-2003 Iraq and its neighbors around gender-related struggles, antagonism, and disinformation, the anti-gender campaign that erupted in July 2023 must be understood through the broader theoretical lens of backlash. This framework helps explain the intensifying opposition to gender equality and women’s rights.

LOCALIZING BACKLASH

Anti-gender campaigns are a transnational phenomenon. From Europe, the US, and Latin America to Turkey (e.g., Corredor 2019; Darakchi 2019; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Martinsson 2020; Özbay and Ipekci 2024; Zaremberg et al. 2021), both gender as a concept and gender studies are being attacked by a range of actors, including religious conservative groups, the Far Right, populists, fundamentalist Christians and Islamists. The concept "ideology of gender" and its academic variants that "explore gender critically, the theorists and researchers who verbalize feminist/queer theory, the dissemination of knowledge, and the policies that aim to mainstream gender equality and sexual diversity" (Özbay and Ipekci 2024, 92) are central actors targeted by these mobilizations.

The term *backlash* has been used in Western scholarship to examine antifeminist and anti-gender movements in European and American contexts. Susan Faludi's seminal book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, first published in 1991, brought scholars' attention to the potential of backlash as a theoretical framework for analyzing and critiquing such attacks. Focusing on the American context, Faludi (2006, 10) defines backlash as "episodes of resurgence… to women's advancement… they have always been triggered by the perception—accurate or not—that women are making great strides." Therefore, according to Faludi, backlashes are primarily reactions to progress achieved by women.

Although foundational, Faludi's conceptualization of backlash has been subject to academic critique by several scholars. Rather than a temporary reaction, backlashes are continuous and tactical (El Rahi and Antar 2024). They are inherent within the system (Rowley 2020), with a "retrograde" objective to return "to a prior social condition" (Alter and Zürn 2020, 741). Judith Butler explains how this past patriarchal status can be a "dream-order that may never have existed, but that occupies the place of 'history' or 'nature'—an order that only a strong state

can restore" (2024, 7). Backlashes incite, and are intensified by various negative emotions such as fear, anxieties, rage, and resentment (Alter and Zürn 2020; Butler 2024), strengthening polarization and inhibiting productive and constructive debates (Butler 2024).

These approaches to backlash shape my understanding of the Iraqi gender backlash as preemptive, proactive, and preventive, seeking to reinforce already existing gendered inequalities. Furthermore, such politics is also a forward-looking "moment of revelation" (Townsend-Bell 2020, 287–288), affecting future trajectories. These future trajectories constitute an invention of tradition rather than a reversion to prior social relations (see Alter and Zürn 2020). Notably, the Iraqi backlash had a deeply entrenched linguistic and cultural dimension. The problematic relationship between gender and translation, complicated by widespread disinformation, provided fertile ground for the distranslation and distortion of the term gender.

(DIS)TRANSLATING GENDER

As a foreign concept embedded in the English language and history, the term gender disrupts any language it enters. This disturbance makes the term resistant to translation (Butler 2021; Spivak 2012). In the context of the Arabic language, though, despite being a challenging task, translating gender was not impossible. Significant efforts by Arab feminists reflect an academic engagement that goes beyond just a "vernacularization" of the term—i.e., making it resonant locally (Merry 2006). Rather, there has been an epistemic effort to produce localized knowledge in which an Arabic understanding of gender is developed.[9]Nonetheless, as Hala Kamal (2008; 2016) points out, though crucial, these attempts are often scattered and disconnected, failing to produce a unified and agreed-upon terminology.

Why, then, has gender faced strong opposition in Iraq and other countries despite the existence of an Arabic translation? Kamal (2016, 68) reflects on the challenges of translating gender into

Arabic, pointing to the linguistic and cultural gaps that arise when the concept travels from "Western feminist thought" to a completely different context. As a result, the terminology becomes "charged with all the history involved in its inception and stabilization" (68). Translating gender into any Arabic equivalent does not resolve this issue. Butler (2021, 19) explains that gender is seen as a "foreign incursion," triggering a Western discourse detached from the locality of the new language and context. However, contrary to Butler's (2021) argument that translation opens up possibilities for the localization and acceptance of gender, the Arabic context, especially in Iraq, demonstrates the opposite. The perception of gender remains unchanged, even when an Arabic translation is available, because what is rejected is not merely the linguistic terminology but, more significantly, the underlying principles of equality and equity.

In Iraq, this dilemma is further complicated by the country's unique history. The intermittent wars during the 1990s, combined with harsh international sanctions, led to Iraq's political and economic isolation. This situation created a rupture in the historical trajectory of the women's rights movement, which dates back to the first half of the 20th century (Efrati 2012). Under the Baathist regime and Saddam Hussein's rule, this movement began to falter and reached a peak of disruption in the 1990s. As discussed earlier, when the term gender was introduced into Iraqi official and activist discourse after 2003, it traveled through translation into Arabic, mainly referring to the social construction of characteristics, status, and roles between men and women. In particular, the earliest Arabic vernacular equivalent, *al-naw'al-ijtimā'ī*, used in political and social sciences as well as in development studies (Kamal 2008), was adopted in Iraq. Yet the vernacularized equivalent did not amount to a comprehensive theorization of gender shaped by the local context (e.g., Paternotte & Kuhar 2017; Corredor 2019).

This knowledge gap was seemingly filled with many translated videos in which the "ideology of gender" was prominent (Hameed 2023). I contend that this translated material was more

wide-reaching than the limited circulation of gender by state institutions or women's rights NGOs, primarily due to rapid dissemination via social media platforms. Furthermore, as indicated earlier, the local backlash in Kurdistan, where gender in reference to identities and sexual orientation became visible, along with disinformation surrounding the American grant, created perfect conditions for distranslating gender. Distranslation—the intentional distortion of the English term gender and its Arabic equivalent *al-naw' al-ijtimā'ī* through translation and dissemination—became the key mechanism driving the Iraqi backlash. In this process, the term was redefined, and gender egalitarianism was alienated from Iraqi society and religion.Distranslation was not merely a rejection and redefinition of a foreign concept but a profoundly political and strategic tool to maintain legitimacy and control of Shia Islamist parties As Butler (2024, 6) argues, the weaponization of gender masks an array of "legitimate anxieties" about corruption, an abysmal economy, fragile laws and institutions. Both gender and *al-naw'al-ijtimā'ī* were transformed into a phantasm engineered to "frighten people to come back into their ranks, to accept censorship, and to externalize their fear and hatred onto vulnerable communities" (Butler 2024, 6). Shia clerics, politicians, and social media influencers have employed various tactics to discredit gender as a legitimate term and to suppress feminist discourse. Conflating gender with homophilia or, in some instances, pedophilia, Iraqi backlashers attempted to hit two birds with one stone: women's rights and feminism and LGBTQ+ identities. Distranslating gender limited feminist or gender-based knowledge production through stigmatizing the concept of gender itself as anti-Islamic. The repertoire of discursive strategies invoked different yet overlapping themes, including Western imperialism, gender culture, traditional gender roles, and the demonizing of feminist activists. Additionally, timing played a paramount role in the success of the forward-looking backlash. This portrayal, in turn, accelerated social rejection, which gave credence to institutional bans,

ultimately endangering the lives of gender activists. As will be discussed later, these tactics had significant consequences.

Before empirically exploring the anti-gender themes, the following section outlines the paper's methodology and dataset that inform the analysis section.

DATA AND METHODS

The analysis relies on a manually curated archive of three primary datasets, totaling 105 written and multimodal online texts published in Iraq between July and September 2023. This timeframe was chosen because it represented the peak of the backlash and its consequences, during which the Iraqi mainstream and social media were flooded with anti-gender content. I used specific search terms on Google, YouTube, Facebook, and X to find and collect relevant data. These were the Arabic terms and phrases: *jandar fi al-Iraq* [gender in Iraq], *al-naw'al-ijtimā'y* [social type], *jandar marfoudh*[social type is rejected].[10] The latter corresponds to a hashtag that went viral on X. Other similar hashtags were *al-naw' al-munḥarif* [the perverted type] and *al-naw'al-ijtimā'y shudhūdh* [social type is perversion].[11] These terms were selected to capture key themes associated with the anti-gender backlash.

The first dataset consists of twenty-two news items, reports, and articles collected from local media outlets and governmental and institutional websites, including universities' webpages. The second dataset encompasses thirteen YouTube videos showing interviews with anti-gender activists, including clerics broadcast on mainstream TV channels, as well as videos produced and posted by anti-gender activists. The third group of data comprises 70 social media posts from Facebook and X posted by pro-backlash accounts. The primary criterion for selecting this data set is the popularity of accounts associated with anti-gender media personalities or posts shared under the previously mentioned hashtags. Additionally, this group contains re-posted videos of Shia clerics, which amplified the backlash on social media. Si ofmilar online data

outside this timeframe was also collected to contextualize the anti-gender movement and explain its outcomes. I employed critical thematic analysis (Lawless and Chen 2019) to explore the campaigners' repertoire of discursive strategies and identify recurrent themes and underlying ideologies.

This archive is supported by email interviews (e.g. Hawkins 2018) conducted with six women activists and feminists, including a transgender woman, all of whom I met online after serving as an instructor for an online course organized by a local feminist organization between December 2023 and March 2024.

Furthermore, the study's analysis draws from my online interactions with Iraqi women activists, and follow-up conversations with four feminists I had previously interviewed for a larger research project on cyberfeminism in the Arabic-speaking world. I obtained informed consent from all ten activists prior to conducting the interviews. It is important to highlight the difficulty of approaching Iraqi feminists following the gender backlash. Many declined to speak due to safety-related concerns. I use pseudonyms to maintain participant anonymity. Additionally, to protect all my interviewees, I chose not to reveal the names of cities where they live.

THE BACKLASH REPERTOIRE

The timing of the backlash played a significant role in its influence. July marked the Mourning of Muharram, in reference to the first month of the Islamic calendar, during which Shia Muslims observe a set of religious rituals commemorating the death of the third Shia Imam, Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of prophet Muhammed, on the 10th of Muharram. Muharram's rituals include mourning gatherings held separately by men and women in the "*husayniyyat* (halls dedicated to *majalis'aza*' [mourning gatherings])" (Szanto 2021, 47). Also, they involve

a pilgrimage to Karbala, where the shrine of Imam Hussein, who was killed during the Battle of Karbala, is located. *Latmiyyat* (rhythmic laments accompanied by chest-beating) and *mawakib*, groups organizing religious activities and setting up "hospitality tents on major roads and [distributing] food or drinks to the pilgrims," are other aspects of Muharram's rituals (Szanto 2021, 47). The religious occasion provided a perfect environment for pushing the anti-gender narrative by Shia clerics and eulogy reciters, who collectively subscribed to the demonizing language and discourse around gender. The anti-gender campaign drew its repertoire from these rituals, specifically speeches given by Shia clerics in the *husayniyyat* and through *latmiyyat*. Dissemination of such speeches and *latmiyyat* on YouTube and other social media platforms helped accelerate the campaign. Mainstream media channels and TV shows platformed preachers and other anti-gender actors who lashed out against gender, women's rights, and equality activists. Across all these channels—in person speech acts, social media dissemination of such speech, and mainstream media channels— the following arguments were made, iterated, and circulated, which I discuss in detail.

Western Imperialism and Gender Culture

In the campaign, gender was constructed as an alien term imposed by the West to destroy Iraqi family, society, and Islam. For example, in a video titled *CEDAW Conventions, the mainstreaming of gender and sexual deviance culture: Episodes of the destructive project series*, Sheikh Mohammed al Yaqoubi, a Shia self-claimed Marji' who was the spiritual leader of Fadhila [Islamic Virtue] party (Institute for the Study of War 2008), alluded to the West as enemies.[12]Al Yaqoubi explicitly mentioned the United Nations CEDAW convention and its articles as instrumental to destroying family, morals, and religion. He accused CEDAW of deception through choosing attractive titles, including domestic abuse law, sarcastically asking whilst drawing on prophetic hadith about women's status in Islam:

> Do I need you to teach me how to avoid domestic violence? I am the son of Islam, the son of the Quran! Are you teaching me the laws of honoring and protecting women and children?! They had a plan underlining these titles. Unfortunately, Islamic countries signed the convention…We should not be ignorant and satisfied with emotional reactions.[13]

His statement reiterated the opposition of Islamist parties and their leaders, including the Fadhila Party, towards the anti-domestic abuse bill, deterring its enactment into law under the pretext of destroying the family (Saadoun 2020). The anti-gender campaign was an opportunity to enhance their position. In one of the Husseini Marches during Muharram at al-Habbousi Square in central Nasiriya province, a group of women pilgrims appeared in a video collectively repeating after a man chanting: "No, no to gender! No, no to domestic abuse law! No, no to homosexuality!"[14]

Shia preacher Sheikh Jafar al-Ibrahimi dedicated one of his speeches in a mourning gathering to educating his audience of men that gender was part of an international conspiracy against nations to erase their identities.[15] The binary between Islam and gender was reinforced by resorting to the term "gender culture", which can be seen as the equivalent to gender ideology or gender theory, both employed in anti-gender movements in the West (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Corredor 2019). This dichotomy was evident in a statement by Iraqi Shia Scholar Seyyed Ali Al-Talqani, Preacher of the Kufa Grand Mosque in Najaf province: "Today, Islamic countries, including Iraq, are threatened by the culture of gender". He went on to mock what he called the "modern" world, urging the youth to take a defiant position.[16] Gender here was posited as a threat to the supposedly biological differences between men and women's roles in society. Both Al-Talqani and al-Ibrahimi, mentioned earlier, strategically resorted to Quranic verses, such as "We created you as a male and female", stressing how gender contradicts the

principles of *al-fiṭrah al-salīmah* [natural instinct]. *Al-fiṭrah al-salīmah* is an Islamic principle referring to "the innate nature of human beings that inclines them towards recognizing and submitting to the existence and oneness of Allah…and adhering to moral and ethical values" (Abubakar 2023). The term *al-fiṭrah* was cited as the main rationale for amending the anti-prostitution law mentioned in the introduction.[17]

Another Shia Marji', 'Ayatollah' Alaaeldeen bin Musa bin Mohammed Ali Almusawi Alghurayfi, employed his preaching platform to attack gender mainstreaming in Iraqi institutions, framing his attack within *al-fiṭrah al-salīmah* narrative, and calling related budget allocations a "disaster". To guard against this looming danger posed by gender, he cultivated the repertoire of Husseini *mawakib* and *majalis* as the bulwark against this new menace. His speech was circulated on social media platforms, including X.[18]

Traditional Gender Roles

The campaign emphasized women's traditional societal roles threatened by gender. In a TV interview, Sheikh Majeed al-Iqabi, Head of Fikr Centre for Dialogue and Reform, criticized women workers, who, according to him, are imitating men, favoring their jobs over their husbands. Moreover, he opposed women's appointments in the Ministries of Interior and Defense. Addressing civil society organizations, he exclaimed, "The woman is weak, and these organizations want to make an officer out of a woman. Where are our values? When Sabiha al-Shaykh Dawud [in reference to the late Iraqi prominent women's rights activist and first lawyer] dared to remove her hijab in 1947, Iraqi people protested. We are people of honor. Why do you want to distort us?"[19]His statement communicated a deeply sexist and misogynistic tone that reinforced Iraqi women's supposed inferiority, opposed their fundamental rights, and sought to maintain traditional gender roles. As a source of legitimacy, al-Iqabi cited the previously mentioned Quranic verse that endorsed biological essentialism. Then, he firmly

rejected *al-naw' al-ijtimā'y* [social type] claiming that these were attempts to export gender to some ministries through international conventions. In his words, "If true, this would be a stain on our Iraqi history. If this happens, it will shame the politicians and anyone who wears a turban." Gender was rendered into a slur and a stigma that needed immediate erasure.

Demonizing Feminist Activists

Gender activists and feminists have become the target of online and offline anti-gender campaigners. Within the domain of women's rights groups and organizations, activists had to sign pledges under duress from authorities that their activities would not mention the word gender or involve any gender-related training. Shadha, who previously led a small feminist team in the south of Iraq doing various offline and online activities related to women's issues, told me about her hard decision after signing one of these pledges. She and her colleagues completely withdrew from activism, stopping the activities of their local team. The priority was to protect herself and her team members.

Within academia, the situation has not been different. Workshops and seminars around gender-related topics have been banned. Individual efforts to research women's issues from a gender perspective have also been undermined. Baraa, a feminist activist and writer, spoke about the restrictions she faced when invited to hold seminars in some university departments. She had to follow specific guidelines that prevented her from using politically problematic terminology, including gender and empowerment. Her presentations were often monitored and censored by the authorities. Baydaa, an Iraqi academic, described the campaign as "unfair and based on illusions and distortions".

One of such distortions was equating gender to homosexuality. This discourse was particularly dominant in social media posts and videos shared by anti-gender accounts. Distranslating gender as "sexual deviance" and *al-naw' al-ijtimā'y* as transgender or non-binary persons,

these actors selectively drew upon English-language content mimicking similar anti-gender narratives in the West.[20]Furthermore, similar regional sentiments, attacking homosexuality as a malicious conspiracy by the West targeting Islamic societies and cultures, helped to reinforce the position of Iraqi anti-gender backlashers. These constituted their "discursive opportunities", i.e., elements of a regional and global public discourse that helped their message to resonate in the Iraqi "public sphere" (Koopmans and Olzak 2004, 202).

For all my interviewees, equating gender with homosexuality has had repercussions. First and foremost, it was a successful strategy for foregrounding misconceptions and myths about gender, mobilizing society against gendered analyses and those who endorsed such analyses. Marina, a transgender activist writer, noted, "The campaign emerged initially with the rise of hate campaigns against the LGBTQ+ community during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, reaching the point where the term's usage has now been prohibited." Baydaa was writing a research paper on suicide among young girls in a southern city where she resides but could no longer pursue her research due to threats. Similarly, Sura, a young university graduate with a master's degree in English literature, said gender was part of her master's thesis. For Sura, gender is integral to many disciplines, including sociology and the English language; banning it, she noted, has "confused the educational system as a whole." After the campaign, her research was thwarted because she no longer felt safe or free to incorporate gender into her future work. Fay, a feminist and physician, explains the repercussions of banning gender in her medical field: "Gender is now taboo even in the medical field… I personally can no longer speak about any topic, even medically or scientifically, because when I do, death threats do not just target me individually but also my friends due to their affiliation with someone opposing the campaign and considering it hate speech." Individual silences become necessary to protect others as well.

Intimidation and forms of censorship have extended to digital spaces. Online anti-gender groups have been formed on Telegram where activists who supported gender are traced, their posts screenshot, and disseminated within the group, inciting a torrent of derogatory and hateful comments.[21] These groups act as "crowd-sourcing" mechanisms for cyberattacks, enabling them to "do the security work of the patriarchal state" (Megary 2020, 147; Citron 2014). In such online groups, gender activists and feminists have been smeared as *janādir*, *abnā'* or *banāt al-janādir* [the genderists, sons or daughters of genderism, respectively]. All are pejorative labels that mimicked the anti-Tishreen protestors terminology, such as "*jokeriya*" [jokers] and "sons of embassies". These terms were weaponized by Iranian media and their proxies in Iraq to demonize and dehumanize the protestors (Mustafa 2022).

According to my interlocutors, online smearing campaigns, particularly by Telegram anti-gender groups, have jeopardized feminists and women. Nawal, a feminist writer who writes under multiple pseudonyms to avoid persecution, describes this stage as the "most dangerous" for feminists. She adds, "We cannot speak or criticize any institution, law, or decision. They can now track the comments and posts of ordinary people and activists. Loose laws and harsh penalties now threaten online rights activism." Tara, who ran a women's rights organization from outside Iraq, was similarly threatened. After her name appeared among the list of signatories on a petition titled "On Gender, Freedoms and Social Justice", condemning the attack on gender, she received online derogatory comments and threats.[22] The privilege of her residence in a European country outside Iraq meant she was safer than her fellow activists. Nevertheless, the emotional impact was severe, and she was more careful in her online approach to ensure the safety of other activists working within her organization inside Iraq.[23]

The consequences reveal how discursive and material acts of violence are intertwined. As Sara Ahmed reminds us (2000; 2012), representations cannot be reduced to meanings about their subjects. Instead, they transform the latter into signs circulated through the dissemination of

negative emotions about them (Fernando 2016). Because the boundaries between offline and online are constantly blurred, online harassment functions in parallel with the policies, fulfilling their objectives of demonizing feminists and suppressing their voices. Official directives and online smearing work in tandem to limit freedom of speech, censor activists—particularly women—and intimidate them into silence.

CONCLUSIONS

This study's findings show how a local campaign against gender rapidly escalated into a successful backlash, perpetuating existing conditions and impacting future trajectories. Although not detached from similar global or regional anti-gender movements, the Iraqi anti-gender backlash was the visible culmination of the inherent and systematic legal, political, social, and everyday misogyny and gender-based violence. It occurred in the context of continuing clampdowns on human rights and freedom of speech that have gripped the country following the 2019 Tishreen protests. Weaponizing gender went hand in hand with the weaponization of homophobia.

The Iraqi backlash demonstrates the complicated relationship between gender and translation. Translating gender into Arabic is not just a linguistic and cultural exercise but a political and ideological one. Not only was gender and its Arabic equivalent *al-naw'al-ijtimā'y* vehemently attacked, but they were also distranslated and redefined. Rejecting an already existing translation was rooted in disinformation aided by translated material where the "ideology of gender" was highlighted. Distranslating gender as a Western plot designed to corrupt Islamic and societal values served as a political tool for consolidating power.

The timing and venues of the backlash played a crucial role in its momentum. In addition to powerful Shia Maraj', clerics, and politicians, anti-gender activists leveraged their social media platforms to intensify their antagonistic rhetoric, attacking and slandering gender proponents,

particularly feminist activists. They also benefited from the global anti-gender atmosphere to validate their position and appeal to people. The consequences of the anti-gender campaign were multifaceted. They ranged from governmental directives banning gender-related terminology, the anti-prostitution law, to widespread censorship and intimidation. These repercussions reflect the chilling effect on activism and academic inquiry, as well as the erosion of women's rights. The interviews with Iraqi feminists demonstrate the disproportionate impact of the backlash on women activists and academics, as well as its emotional toll. Threats and harassment led some women to abandon their work due to safety concerns. How can feminist activists and academics resist? This question requires close scholarly attention in future research.

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[1] See ديوان محافظة البصرة - حكومة البصرة تحظر الفعاليات التي تستعمل مصطلح (النوع الاجتماعي)

[2] Article 2 of the PSC states, "The provisions of this law apply to all Iraqis except for those exempted by virtue of a special law." See Iraq Personal Status Law of 1959 (ABA Translation).

[3] For a contextual background around the Ministry of Women's Affairs formation, consult (Puttick 2015).

[4] See بيت الحكمة العراقي (baytalhikma.iq).

All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[5] The Iraqi constitution contains contradictory provisions, including the following: "No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam... No law may be enacted that contradicts the principles of democracy." Islamist parties exploit the former to justify their opposition to bills protecting women and children (Puttick 2015). See Constitution of Iraq: UNAMI English Translation (refworld.org).

[6] See: قناة أهل البيت on X: " إسمها فاحشة #الشذوذ_الجنسي #أمَّة_الفاحشة و #مجتمع_الشذوذ و ليس المجتمع الميمي #النوع_المنحرف وليس #النوع_الإجتماعي الجندر أو النوع الإجتماعي و امثالها من المصطلحات المخادعة،ليست #مؤامرة بل #حرب على الفطرة و القيم_السيد سجَّاد المُدرّسي https://t.co/ln0cpfPsxP" / X (published 05 August 2023) and محمد الاحمدي on X: " عمار الحكيم يدعو لدعم ثقافة #الجندر !!! في سابقة متوقعة من قبل هذا الزنيم .. #السفيرة_السفيهة المطعم التركي الجندر عمار الحكيم https://t.co/UINEyuRnd2" / X (twitter.com) (published 24 July 2023).

[7] See Supporting-American-Style-Higher-Education-in-Iraq-2023.pdf (freebeacon.com).

[8] جوردان بيترسون في اختلاف الرجال عن النساء - YouTube (Published 8 November 2019).

See في المناهج الدراسية للأطفال "إقحام الجنسية المثلية"مظاهرات في كندا ضد - YouTube (Published 20 September 2023).

[9] Consult Kamal (2008; 2016) for a summary of the available Arabic translations.

[10] See #الجندر_مرفوض - Search / X.

[11] See #النوع_الاجتماعي_شذوذ - Search / X ; #النوع_المنحرف - Search / X.

[12] CEDAW stands for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. See Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women New York, 18 December 1979 | OHCHR. In 1986, Iraq acceded to CEDAW, but with

reservations on some of its core articles, including Article 2, “which call for states parties to abolish laws which discriminate against women” (Puttick 2015, 6).

[13] Video link: المرجع اليعقوبي | اتفاقية سيداو ونشر ثقافة الجندر والشذوذ حلقات من سلسة المشروع التدميري - YouTube (published 7 August 2023).

Al Yaqoubi follows wilayat al-faqih [Guardianship of the Islamic jurisprudence] doctrine and has a powerful outreach across Iraq. See his website: Eminence The Religious Marja Sheikh Muhammad Yaqubi - In The Name of Allah The Most Merciful The Most Compassionate (yaqoobi.net).

[14] See في ساحة الحبوبي من خلال ركضة طويريج نساء الناصرية ترفض قانون العنف الأسري وقانون الجندر (النوع الاجتماعي) وتندد بكل قانون يساهم في تفكك الأسرة العراقية | مجمع المبلغات الرساليات By | Facebook (published July 31 2023).

[15] Video link: #محرم_1445هـ# الشيخ_جعفر_الابراهيمي ما السبب برأيك بصراع الناس لأتفه الأسباب - YouTube (published 5 August 2023).

[16] Video link: (الجندر) موضوع خطر وثقافة تخالف الاسلام وعلى الشباب المؤمن أن يكون لهم دور في رفض هذه الثقافة - YouTube (published 2 August 2023).

[17] See السومرية تنشر نص قانون مكافحة البغاء والشذوذ الجنسي | سياسة (published 24 April 2024).

[18] See الأستاذ في الحوزة العلمية السيد علاء الدين الموسوي ينتقد بشدّة محاولات فرض مفهوم " النوع الاجتماعي اللواطة والسحاق (الجندر)في العراق ويطالب الحكومة ومجلس النواب باتخاذ ما يلزم لإلغاء أي معاهدة أو التزام بهذا الصدد لما يتضمنه هذا المفهوم من مخالفات تقف بالضد من الفطرة السليمة !! https://t.co/JGoDG3aQPF" / X (twitter.com) (published 24 July 2023).

[19] Interview link: أنور الحمداني.. هل من المعقول الشيخ مجيد العقابي من الداعمين لمجتمع الجندر؟ - YouTube (published 27 July 2023).

[20] See خطـورة النوع الإجتماعي - الجندر (اخطر من الشـواذ) - YouTube (published 18 July 2023).

[21] Telegram: Contact @agonist_iraq.

[22] عن الجندر والحريات والعدالة الاجتماعية (google.com).

[23] Online smearing has recently targeted female activists and lawyers opposing the latest amendments to the PSC, and ordinary women not wearing the hijab or abaya. The incitement appears to be organized rather than arbitrary, with Shia military factions associated with Hashd al-Sha'bi [Popular Mobilization Forces] reportedly behind such campaigns (Independent Arabia 2025).