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We are the first spark:

The quest of women peacebuilders in Iraq for a more peaceful and equal society

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This brief examines how the women members of peace groups, established through a UNDP initiative in Iraq, overcame traditional barriers to play the role of peacemakers and social developers in their communities. From their perspective, the brief highlights the opportunities made available in post-conflict Iraq and identifies three realms that remained key in assuming their new roles in society: family dynamics, interactions with male community members and the media. Thus, it provides an understanding of the pathways through which women in traditional and conflict-affected societies like Iraq assumed the responsibility to rebuild their communities and initiate a structural shift in gender equality and social norms.

Introduction

For decades, the people of Iraq have suffered from successive wars, sanctions and social unrest, leading to economic stagnation, reduced access to essential services and social rifts along ethnic, religious and political identities. In combination with patriarchal cultural, religious and social norms, Iraqi women have been disproportionately affected by the consequences of conflict. The rule of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) over large parts of Iraqi territory from 2014 to 2017 exacted a particularly high cost from women. They

experienced excessive violence and restrictions under the violent extremist group, further limiting women's access to education and employment and constraining them to traditional reproductive roles.² According to UNDP's 2021 Gender Inequality Index, Iraqi women's participation in the labour market stood at a mere 11.6 percent in comparison to 71.8 percent for men. In total, Iraq ranked 145 out of 170 countries and significantly lower than the average of the Arab States. With regards to women completing at least a secondary level education,

Iraq's proportion of 42 percent fell behind other countries, such as Jordan (77.4 percent), Libya (70.5 percent) and Tunisia (42.9 percent).³ Furthermore, institutional and legal barriers have limited their political participation and inclusion in decision-making processes.⁴ Yet, in the Parliamentary elections of 2021, women won 29 percent of the seats (95 out of 329) for the first time. This significant victory demonstrated a shift in Iraq's political outlook and a positive change regarding the role of women in the country.

Understanding these dynamics, UNDP Iraq through its social cohesion programme created community-based, community-oriented peace groups for women and youth⁵ in the regions most affected by the conflict with ISIL. Covering the five northern governorates of Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa and Salah al-Din, UNDP trained a total of 200 women and youth through workshops on gender, conflict analysis, Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) and project management. Following these capacity-building activities, they received grants to develop and implement their own peacebuilding and social development initiatives in their communities. The women and youth peace groups were established to complement Local Peace Committees (LPC), previously created by the Government of Iraq and UNDP to facilitate the return of people displaced by the conflict to their communities of origin through reconciliation processes, local peace agreements and enhancements of social cohesion. Effective in some ways, the LPCs were once dominated by men, i.e. tribal and religious leaders, with women playing a marginal role at best.⁶ In sum, this initiative provided an opportunity for UNDP to increase local Iraqi women's understanding and role in all four priority pillars of UNSCR 1325 and also achieve the priorities of the Iraqi National Action Plans of 2014 and 2021.

This brief highlights the ways in which the women members of the peace groups overcame

traditional, social, customary and other barriers to play the role of peacemakers and social developers in their communities. In this capacity, they became agents of change themselves, creating more opportunities for women and girls in their communities. The women directly influenced and improved women's economic empowerment opportunities within their communities, playing an active role in enhancing the management and distribution of financial grants and identifying and conveying additional vocational training needs to their community leaders. They were also involved in identifying educational opportunities for young girls by interacting with local and religious leaders to overcome religious and cultural barriers to girls' education. In addition, they supported women who faced increased violence at home by engaging directly with such families and mediating solutions to reduce violence. By assuming such roles, the members of the women peace groups initiated a shift in structural gender roles within their society, allowing women to have effective participation in their community, which had been previously unacceptable.

Focusing on the women's own perspective, this brief is based on qualitative data collected in June and July 2022. UNDP Iraq's social cohesion team held five focus group discussions (FGD) and conducted 20 individual interviews with women members of the peace groups in all five target governorates, reaching a total of 79 women.⁷ Complementarily, the team interviewed 12 male youth group members and five female experts, among them women's rights activists and peace mediators from across Iraq, to inform the analysis. The findings presented in the following paragraphs are further validated and put into a national perspective through additional literature on women's role in peacebuilding and community work in Iraq.

Opportunities in the face of entrenched adversities

Five years after the conflict with ISIL ended, the interviews with women peace group members confirmed women's constrained roles in all spheres of Iraqi society, but the findings also highlighted opportunities opening up for women. Examples of constraints mentioned by the research participants included cases of discriminatory divorce laws, women being restricted from travelling alone within and outside of Iraq due to customary norms, domestic violence and disadvantages in the job

market, such as women being overlooked for promotions by default. Especially with regards to decision-making roles, most research participants agreed that women's roles remained marginal both at the communal and national levels. Despite the positive shifts towards greater inclusion of women in Parliament as highlighted in the introduction, the perception of a 'glass ceiling' hindering women's meaningful inclusion in political and legal institutions

was widespread among research participants, as the following quote highlights:

So far, there have been limited roles for women in decision-making, despite the increased awareness and the need and importance of women's participation in the community and the increase in women's empowerment programs. Women's opinions and ideas are not given importance by community leaders, male ones in particular, or by concerned parties, thus limiting women's roles.

Female peace group member, Ninewa

These entrenched adversities notwithstanding, the end of the conflict with ISIL created momentum in which women began claiming new roles outside the household more frequently than previously seen in Iraq. While the end of the violence was a necessary condition for society to move forward, two main factors contributed to this progress according to the research participants. The first was the unprecedented growth of the NGO space and civil society fuelled by international support that provided new job profiles for women and capacity building activities. The second contributing factor was the displacement of large parts of the population in the five governorates, which exposed the displaced to different norms and cultures and led to an exchange of ideas and experiences between rural and urban communities.

The growth of the NGO space and civil society

In the wake of immense humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding needs caused by the conflict with ISIL and previous conflicts, international organizations (IO) and non-governmental organizations (NGO) implemented a wide array of interventions to support Iraqi communities while relying on local staff. While some of these interventions, including UNDP's women and youth peace groups, explicitly aimed to empower women, others had an indirect and positive effect on roles acceptable for women by making jobs reserved for them available. For example, one research participant explained how she only started to work because a health organization needed women specifically to visit displaced families in camps. Her motivation for taking on this job was to serve her community as well as to support her family financially, but along the path, she learned that women can play a more active in society than previously was the case in Iraq.

After 2016, the governorate's situation was very bad, and it needed everyone's solidarity in order to revive the governorate again. As well as to help displaced families and families returning from displacement, I decided to work to help my family because of our need for material income. Our family is large and there were no other job opportunities.

Female peace group member, Anbar

Research participants – all experienced activists and social developers – further explained that dedicated capacity-building programmes for women provided them with the necessary skills and confidence to claim positions outside the household and take on leadership roles. Thus, in the absence of other opportunities (i.e. in the private sector), volunteering roles in NGOs and civil society organizations paved the way for many of the women to take on public roles for the first time. The interviewed experts confirmed that NGO work helped many women to overcome traditional barriers and, for example, enable them to leave the house or travel alone at night. A project manager for a local NGO in Kurdistan urged that continued capacity building activities for women were necessary, because otherwise “the women lose their reason to be outside the house.”⁸

Organizations have played a major role in promoting female leadership.

Female peace group member, Diyala

Interventions of IOs and NGOs can help provide safe places for women to work and build their capacities. The women peace groups were set up to give members a high level of autonomy when designing their own initiatives, encouraging local ownership. Notably, the women applied their professional and educational background to these initiatives, such as a team of trained female lawyers in Ninewa supporting women who had become victims of blackmail and extortion online. Another team worked on the inclusion of disabled people and drug abuse – issues not yet tackled by the international community in the context of Iraq in the wake of more urgent crises. Giving women the chance to build on their skills and implement initiatives was seen as the most relevant contribution for their communities. These opportunities boosted their confidence, created local ownership and contributed to the sustainability of the initiatives and projects they launched. Some women even created their own local volunteer teams to continue working in their

communities after participating in the UNDP peace group activities.

Iraqi women's increasing engagement in civil society could be witnessed in recent years particularly through the 2019 October Uprising⁹ and protests against legislative amendments that opposed women's rights.¹⁰ The women peace groups initiated by UNDP have in recent times played a critical role with the national government and religious leaders, in protecting the legal rights of returnee women and children. They remain a crucial focus in consultations regarding the ongoing repatriation of perceived ISIL-affiliated Iraqi citizens from North-East Syria under the UN Global Framework.¹¹ The groups have also remained central to consultations for the development of the National PVE Strategy, 2021 for Iraq and its implementation.

Displacement as a driver of change

Among research participants from all five governorates, the view prevailed that the forced displacement of communities during the ISIL occupation was a driving factor for women's empowerment. They considered the displacement of women from rural communities to urban centres positive in the sense that it exposed them to different lifestyles and new opportunities. In the cities, displaced women took on jobs as hairdressers or salespersons and enjoyed more freedom of movement than in their home communities. Several research participants shared that many displaced women were not willing to return to their places of origin in fear of losing their new liberties. Even research participants from some of the most severely affected areas such as Tuz in Northern Salah Al Din or Mosul in Ninewa acknowledged the catalyzing effect the displacement had on their communities' perception of the roles women could take in society.

ISIL caused a lot of displacement, which was very disastrous, yet there was a positive aspect as people were exposed to different cultures. For example, the Shabak are a very closed community in Mosul; we were not even interacting with the other citizens in Mosul, but when we were displaced to southern areas of Iraq and saw other cities, our perspective about many things changed. Before ISIL, many families didn't allow their girls to pursue their studies or an education. But after ISIL, girls are going to secondary and high schools, and they work in civil society organizations.

Female peace group member, Ninewa

The research participants acknowledged the crucial role they could play in building bridges between women returning from displacement and the communities of origin and showed empathy towards families with perceived affiliation to ISIL and the need to support such families. However, the women saw their roles usually within existing and potential future frameworks of the local authorities (who welcomed such community level participation and representation) and NGOs rather than starting their own projects. By envisaging their role in such a manner, the women understood the critical part they played as informal transitional justice actors, by checking the readiness among host community members to accept returnees identified directly or indirectly with ISIL. This cautious approach to reintegration in communities that were not ready to accept persons responsible for past abuses (e.g. in Anbar), highlights the place of women peace groups in Iraq as peacemakers, peacekeepers and providers of early warning services.

Evidence of women taking on new roles due to their changed realities during times of conflict goes far back and has been highlighted by research on conflict and women's empowerment in various contexts.¹² In Iraq, the recency of atrocities committed by ISIL and the continued suffering of people displaced by the conflict has largely overshadowed such positive notions. Moreover, the pre-existing patriarchal cultural and social norms pose additional challenges for women affected by the conflict and displacement, particularly if they are perceived as affiliated with ISIL or have lost their male breadwinners, which forces them to take on new responsibilities for themselves and their dependents.¹³ However, the signs of gender reconfiguration happening in the wake of the conflict is an important dynamic creating opportunities for women to assume new roles and responsibilities.

The barriers for Iraqi women to be peacebuilders

The women members of the peace groups had diverse backgrounds and expertise, and they were at different stages in their lives. While some had been engaged in community work for 20 years, others were young university graduates and hopeful that their generation of Iraqi women would have more opportunities than previous ones. The research participants saw evidence towards a generational shift in the fact that young women are more inclined to finish their studies and increasingly started to engage in civil society activities. At the same time, the interviews with different members of the peace groups highlighted that their individual pathways to becoming peacebuilders and social developers were influenced by similar barriers independent of their age. These barriers were mainly situated in three domains: within their families, in relation to male community members and the media.

The family as gatekeeper of women's participation

The family plays a pivotal role in enabling or hindering a women's participation in public life in Iraq. Whether a woman can work and engage in community work usually depends on her family's approval. As one FGD participant from Diyala bluntly said, *"Honestly, if we were not supported by a father or a husband, we could not be here today."* The current members of the women and youth peace groups individually had to convince their families to let them become peacebuilders and social developers. To participate in the group's activities, some were accompanied by a brother or mother in the beginning to reassure the family that they did not engage in inappropriate behaviour, face harassment or encounter other socially unacceptable situations. According to many accounts of research participants, gaining the approval of their immediate family – parents and brothers – was crucial. Once this was achieved, their new allies would help them convince the broader family.

My brother and sister, they didn't allow me at all to work at any NGO. My mom was not letting our relatives know that I go to training and workshops. Now, I work in Baghdad, and I stay there for weeks because of my job. It was not easy.

Female peace group member, Ninewa

Family members' individual attitudes must be understood in relation to the patriarchal norms prevailing in Iraqi society. Indeed, many interviewees cited their family's fear of judgement or repercussions by the community as a main obstacle. Additionally, some families' fear for the safety of their female members contributed to their reluctance to letting her engage in activities outside the house. This is closely linked to Iraq's violent history and some families' own experiences of missing or killed relatives, highlighting the indirect ways in which women suffer disproportionately from the consequences of conflict. The potential for violence sets additional barriers for their inclusion in public life.

My family said, 'We trust you, but we don't trust the surroundings.' They don't have a negative opinion of women working, but they are afraid of society. There is a change in mind and thought, though, of my family towards the others in the community.

Female peace group member, Diyala

The research participants helped in shaping their families' views of women's roles and conveying the idea of a more inclusive society. Beyond their own families, they further played an important part in convincing other families to let girls participate in the community initiatives of the women and youth peace groups. Some women visited the families of interested girls several times until a family would allow a girl to join an activity. The members being part of the communities they work in is one of the main strengths of the women and youth peace groups. Their knowledge of local dynamics combined with personal engagement and perseverance enables them to engage with community members that would otherwise be beyond the scope of UNDP's programmes. A seasoned expert for women's empowerment in Iraq confirmed that paving the way for women to be heard within their families is the basis for societal change as *"the family is the core to raise violence or build peace in Iraqi society."*⁴

Navigating male dominated communities

The research participants shared both positive and negative experiences of interactions with male members of their community. Some said that men were generally supportive of their initiatives, while others felt belittled or rejected as women in their role as social developers and explained that men

did not initially trust their abilities. However, by believing in themselves and proving their potential, the women managed to change some of the critics' minds.

Some men just came to see our initiative to see us fail, to prove that women can't achieve anything. But when they came, they were surprised that we do good work and changed their minds.

Female peace group member, Anbar

According to the research participants, a major issue was receiving approvals to implement their initiatives from male dominated local authorities. The reasons for the struggles were diverse. Some women were bluntly rejected because of their gender, others were suspected of being agents of foreign powers, which is a common fear in Iraq's fragmented society. This is especially true with regards to the promotion of women's rights, which are perceived by some elements as a Western agenda incompatible with Iraqi customs.¹⁵ However, having the support of UNDP was considered an asset in dealing with authorities in general, as this gave credibility and prestige to women and youth initiatives.

In Mosul, we used to be afraid to speak to the local authority. Because we are women, they would not listen to us. After joining the group of UNDP, we were able to reach the local authority.

Female peace group member, Ninewa

UNDP Iraq aims to pave the way for Iraq's future male and female leaders to collaborate by bringing men and women together in the youth peace groups. The interviews with male peace group members highlighted that men participating in the youth peace groups became allies of the women, supporting them to claim their rights and achieve their potential. As one male youth group member explained:

I distributed brochures among people on SGBV [sexual and gender-based violence]. I was interested in working on this initiative because this should be the concern of men as well. Men usually don't work on this topic. I wanted to encourage others to do so as well. However, from the community, it is more acceptable if women work on SGBV.

Male peace group member, Kirkuk

Gender equality cannot be achieved without having men on board. Men should not feel on the losing side while women take on new responsibilities and roles in traditionally male dominated sectors. This is crucial for women to avoid resistance from male leaders and eventually be able to break through the glass ceiling preventing women from fully participating in decision-making processes and institutions in Iraq.

Media as a mirror of conservative sentiments

Media and social media are ambiguous tools for women in Iraq. The peace groups used media platforms, especially social media such as Facebook, as a tool to spread messages of peace and advertise for their initiatives. One research participant mentioned that she learned about UNDP's peace group from social media, highlighting that it can serve as an effective tool particularly for engaging with the younger generation. On the other side, however, the media sphere reflects the challenges women face in Iraqi society. A woman activist interviewed as an expert on the matter explained that conservative segments of society were afraid women would be inspired to claim new roles by seeing other women in public roles and thus denounced any media appearance of women as inappropriate. Indeed, the peace group members reported difficulties recruiting participants for their initiatives when media activities were involved. Many women feared reputational damage for being seen participating in an activity outside the household. Others were forbidden to participate by their families if media activities were involved for the same reason.

The research participants further gave their own accounts of threats and harassments they experienced on social media. According to their accounts, the social media sphere became a mirror of misogynist behaviour observed in the real world, as the following quote highlights:

When posting pictures of activities on Facebook, we hear 'these women mingle with men.' We are subject to harassment. When a man sees a beautiful woman, he tries to befriend her. and if she doesn't accept, he will bother her.

Female peace group member, Salah Al Din

This finding corresponds with other studies highlighting rising online violence against women in the Middle East. According to a study by UN Women¹⁶ during 2021, 60 percent of respondents from across the region including Iraq reported

exposure to online violence, contributing to self-censorship by women or their exclusion entirely from online social media spaces. The accounts of the women peace group members showed that social media pose both as an enabler and a barrier for women's engagement in Iraq. While a useful tool to showcase the successes of the

peace groups and engage more volunteers, it also became a driver of polarization, hate speech and verbal violence against women. As such, it must be cautiously navigated by the women members of UNDP's peace groups.

Conclusion: How women peace group members spark societal change

This brief provides insights into the pathways through which women members of UNDP peace groups in Iraq assumed the responsibility to rebuild their communities after decades of conflict and thus initiated a shift in gender equality and social norms. The findings highlight how civil society and NGOs can provide an entry point for women to play a more active role in their communities, especially in light of social upheavals such as massive displacement that creates new needs for engaging vulnerable groups. The pathways of these women show their individual strength and perseverance in gaining the support of their families, male community members and community leaders for the benefit of the whole community. Finding allies in these realms is a crucial step for women towards gradually changing their communities' perception of women's capabilities and appropriate roles.

The findings also make clear that change does not happen overnight as shifts towards a more inclusive and equal society in Iraq thus far have mainly occurred at the family level. Brothers, fathers and uncles became supporters of their female family members. The family can be understood as the nucleus of society and is considered a crucial reference frame in Iraq. Thus, when speaking about societal change, the natural pathway leads through the homes of families brave enough to let their sisters, wives or daughters explore new grounds. In Iraq, more time and effort will be needed to institutionalise these changes, but the pathways of these women have highlighted that the foundation for strong women leaders is there. As a woman peace group member from Salah Al Din said: *"We are the first spark to dare to start this thing, and people know what we're doing is not wrong."*

Recommendations

Learning from the experiences of Iraq, this brief identifies the following pointers for the international community's future engagement in addressing structural transformations of gender norms in post-conflict communities:

- In conservative societies, where changed realities after a conflict usher in new opportunities for women, a conflict sensitive, gender inclusive approach is necessary in order to avoid backlash and exacerbate existing threats to women. Engagement and investment in community-based groups becomes critical in these contexts as they buffer the socio-religious backlash to individual rights and liberties.
- Programme designs should be flexible to enable women to build on their existing skills and implement initiatives they see most relevant for their communities. Especially with regards to peacebuilding initiatives, the women know the context they work in best – including tension triggers and important stakeholders – and have already built a rapport with the community. Designing programmes to enable these women to use their skills and networks creates ownership and thus contributes to the sustainability of the programme.
- To support women who have previously established a rapport with their community and have the capacity to develop their own projects, the international community can facilitate access to a wider audience and enhance their visibility with adequate protections. This is an important factor in bringing community leaders on board to support women's initiatives – making efforts to initiate small changes that can create a ripple effect in society rather than seek radical shifts.
- Women are willing and capable of engaging with the most vulnerable community members, such as stigmatized returnees or disabled people. Through a conflict-sensitive approach, international partners can support creating an

environment where women's resources can be applied effectively. This includes awareness-raising among communities and their leaders of the need to include women for the benefit of all as well as creating a safe and 'respectable' environment for women to work.

- In patriarchal societies such as Iraq, the family is the most important reference for a woman. Building initiatives for women, that identify the family as the primary beneficiary rather than individuals (i.e. business start-up support for women that benefits the entire family) can support shifts in gender norms and redefine the understanding of gender equality. This engages all domains of change, i.e. inter-generational shifts in understanding gender equality within the family, as well as the social, economic and religious domains of a family's engagement in society.

- Gender equality cannot be achieved without bringing men on board. Younger men are especially open to work with women towards more inclusive communities, as the example of the youth peace groups in Iraq highlighted. Complementary to supporting women in achieving their potential, celebrating examples of positive masculinity is important to make men feel appreciated as allies in their commitment to achieve more just and equal societies.
- Capacitating women with media and communication skills and sensitizing women to the pitfalls of social media has become crucial in literally any country's context. Capacity-building initiatives should include topics such as how to deal with online hate speech and harassment against women, how to counter false information and how to communicate the benefits of an egalitarian society.

Key Insights for the Operationalization of UNDP's Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2025

- Long-term investments are necessary from UNDP to see redefined power dynamics at the societal level, with an adaptive approach. Short-term initiatives will not be sufficient to support the changes required in conservative and patriarchal societies.
- Investments for gender equality must be integrated into all post conflict initiatives. Opportunities to redefine gender norms are available in the event of widespread destruction and changes posed by conflict, and UNDP is uniquely situated to identify and leverage these opportunities.
- To ensure the above recommendation can be fully realized, UNDP must invest extensively in gender and conflict advisors, especially in post-conflict contexts. This presents an excellent opportunity for the organization to identify the opportunities to design and implement initiatives for gender equality at the start of stabilization and reconstruction efforts, rather than at later stages.
- Families and males in the communities must be engaged in women empowerment programmes to break the silos and enhance support and positive perception of women's roles and abilities.
- Look beyond traditional actors in the government and society. UNDP must engage beyond the traditional power brokers and use non-conventional approaches to support the discussions on gender equality. Women as peacebuilders in Iraq offered a novel approach to the Iraqi context and was built through the leadership of women and youth themselves.

Endnotes

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- 6 UNDP (2022). Community-based reintegration and reconciliation in Iraq (C2RI): Conflict Analysis 2022, p. 50.
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