

# Empowering Communities in Post-Conflict Iraq

Insights from the Community Security Integration Pilot (CSIP III) in Sinuni, Sinjar district.

A UNDP Project Brief | January 2024

**Summary:** This brief highlights the impact of the UNDP Iraq Community Security Integration Pilot (CSIP III) on communities in Sinjar district, Ninewa Governorate in Northern Iraq with a focus on women participants' experiences.

## Background/ Context

The Community Security Integration Pilot (CSIP) approach in Iraq was designed to assist Disengaged Volunteer Fighters (DVF) and their home communities after the demobilization of the armed forces. The CSIP components are based on the UN Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) framework,<sup>1</sup> while only focusing on the reintegration aspect of DDR. Specifically, CSIP aims to improve the access of DVF to economic opportunities through vocational training and business support and strengthen their psychosocial resilience through Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) activities. Applying a whole-of-community approach, the pilot further includes rehabilitation schemes for critical infrastructure and information and outreach centres serving the target communities, particularly women. Thereby, CSIP seeks to improve security, stability, and social cohesion in the target communities by addressing root causes and conditions that made militia

membership an attractive, or perhaps necessary, choice for some individuals.

UNDP Iraq's Security Sector Reform/Rule of Law Programme designed and implemented the two initial pilots targeting DVF in Qurna, Basra (CSIP I)<sup>2</sup> in 2020 and in Qairawan, Sinjar (CSIP II)<sup>3</sup> in 2021. Subsequently, UNDP Iraq's Social Cohesion Programme implemented CSIP III in Sinuni, Sinjar from August 2022 to January 2023. For reasons of conflict and women/girls' situation sensitivity, CSIP III extended the target group to include other vulnerable people in the project, especially female family members of DVF and women household heads. Women in Sinjar suffered disproportionately from the atrocities committed by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) against the Yezidi population living in the district, causing massive displacement and leaving many families without a male breadwinner, which necessitates special attention to women-headed households.<sup>4</sup> Based on these considerations, the project included 200 direct participants (120 men and 80 women) from the Yezidi village complexes of Borek, Zorava, and Guhbal.

<sup>1</sup> For more information see [UNDP Practice Note: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Ex-combatants](#), January 2012.

<sup>2</sup> For more information see: [Policy Brief: Community Security Integration Pilot \(CSIP\) in Iraq | United Nations Development Programme \(undp.org\)](#), January 2021.

<sup>3</sup> For more information see: [Policy Brief: Community Security Integration Pilot \(CSIP-2\): Qairawan, Sinjar in Iraq | United Nations Development Programme \(undp.org\)](#), January 2022.

<sup>4</sup> [Seven years on: Rebuilding Sinjar, restoring dignity | United Nations Development Programme \(undp.org\)](#), August 2021.

This brief highlights the impact of the project on the participants and their families with a focus on women. It brings attention to women's limited roles in marginalized communities in Sinjar and emphasizes how the women participants' lives as disengaged fighters, household heads, and victims of ISIL were transformed by the project through enhanced access to economic opportunities, mental health support, and safe spaces at the outreach centres. The findings are based on data collected throughout the project implementation period and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) conducted with project participants at the end of the project in January 2023 (two FGD with women, two FGD with men).

## Dynamics between men and women in target communities



An assessment at the project start highlighted that women's and men's roles in the target communities in Sinjar were largely consistent with the prevalent patriarchal and conservative cultural and social norms in Iraq. Women had limited influence in decision-making processes at the family and community levels, carried the main responsibility for household work, and had limited freedom of movement outside the house. Opportunities for women to socialize even among themselves were scarce – which is critical for fostering structural change in women's acceptable roles within societies.

Finding employment was difficult for both women and men in their marginalized communities. The communities considered men as the main breadwinners and unemployment in their case as a main problem. On the other hand, they considered unemployment less of a problem for

women in light of their more or equally important roles as housewives and mothers. Job opportunities considered suitable for women were sewing, sweets making, or farming – all operated from home, allowing them to take care of other household responsibilities simultaneously.

*"I think we cannot say women are unemployed, because I believe being a housewife and a mother is harder than basic work, so their roles in the community are positive [whether employed or not]."*

*A male community leader from Zorava, January 2023.*

While this perception may relieve women of the burden to find jobs outside of home, it also perpetuates ingrained social norms that dictate women stay at home while men assume the primary responsibility for earning income. This is particularly difficult for the many women in Sinjar who lost their husbands in the conflict with ISIL and are solely responsible for their families. Nevertheless, negative comments regarding women finding work were rare in the data collected for CSIP III. Community leaders and family members interviewed supported the idea of working women and highlighted the importance of women improving their skills and attending training courses. They saw the business support provided by UNDP, particularly to women heads of households, as a valuable resource to help them support their families.



## Participant profiles: low number of disengaged women fighters

Among the 200 project participants, 125 (62.5%) identified as DVF, and 75 (37.5%) were other vulnerable community members. Only 7 out of 80 women identified as DVF. Illiteracy was more widespread among women participants than men. According to the pre-test, 21% of women and 13% of men were illiterate and 54% of women and 32% of men only had limited literacy capacity. This corresponds with lower levels of education among the women participants, with 65% of women having never attended school as compared to 38% of men. Additionally, 36 of 80 women participants (45%) were household heads.

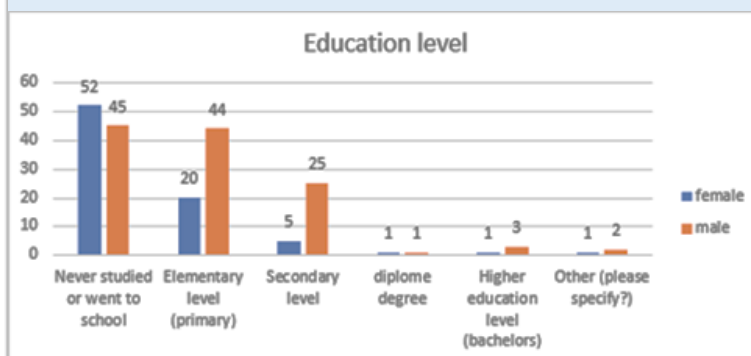
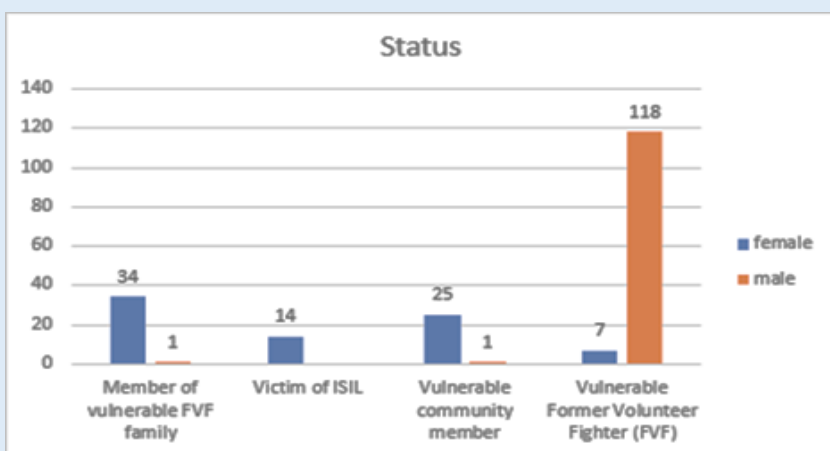
Inquiries with community leaders pointed to two reasons for the low turnout of disengaged women fighters. Firstly, some women do not identify as former fighters because they were not active combatants but acted in supporting roles (cooking, bread-making, etc.). According to UNDP's definition, disengaged personnel in supporting roles qualifies them for reintegration projects as well. Secondly, women in Sinjar are reluctant to openly talk about their engagement in the battle, as they fear future accountability or repercussions from the government for supporting non-state armed groups such as the Turkish PKK and affiliated Yazidi armed groups.

However, perceptions of DVF were consistently positive within the community, both for disengaged women and men fighters.

*"I can say that women fighters were bigger than men. They were like heroes! Not only fighting but also involved in other roles like making food, preparing logistical stuff for fighters... They have a very great role, and I have never seen something like them."*

*A male community leader, Borek, January 2023.*

These obstacles highlight the difficulty of assessing how many women DVFs live in the target communities in the first place and secondly, approaching them to participate in activities targeted at DVFs. Thus, defining the target group as DVFs and family members appears the right approach to reach an adequate number of women participants affected by conflict and government neglect.



## Experiences of participants: Women gain increased agency

All direct participants received a similar reintegration package with separate activities for women and men for the vocational training and MHPSS sessions. For the vocational training courses, topics for men included Sustainable Agriculture; Home Appliance and Mobile Maintenance; Electrical Installation and Maintenance; Doors and Windows Installation and Maintenance, and topics for women included Sustainable Agriculture; Printing, Event Services, Stationery; and Tailored Goods Production. Both men and women participants reported positive experiences at the end of the project, albeit with a different focus. In the Focus Group Discussions (FGD) conducted at the end of the project, men primarily focused on the business part of the project and on the hard skills they had acquired through the activities. They further mentioned the positive effect their occupation had on their mental health, without explicitly mentioning the MHPSS activities part of the project.

*“Whenever you are occupied with work you forget about the misery of your previous life.”*

Male FGD participant in Zurava, January 2023

The feedback of female participants more often focused on the empowering experiences they had as women participating in the project. By acquiring marketable skills and knowledge from vocational training and starting their own businesses, they gained the agency to contribute to their family’s income and become active members of their community.

*“The motivation to participate was not only financial, the motivation was to show that women can do anything, as a woman to go out. Before in our community, there was a stigma that women couldn’t work and couldn’t go out of the house. This project has empowered me to work as a woman.”*

Female FGD participant in Zurava, January 2023.

The agency gained through the project also gave them a better standing within their families.

*“Before, our husbands maybe didn’t think our opinion was important but now they take us more seriously because we left the house and have more experience and skills.”*

Female FGD participant in Zurava, January 2023.

Men who participated in the project also highlighted the empowering impact the project had on their female peers.

*“One of the women, she got that project, and she has more freedom to go to the market and deliver her products now and engage with the community.”*

Male FGD participant in Zurava, January 2023.

*“It was good to have women in the project as well. We have women headed households. Especially those widows who run their families, they have an opinion. They are equal to men, and they can work to support their family.”*

Male FGD participant in Borek, January 2023.

The FGD further highlighted the diversity of benefits for participants beyond the stated project goals of CSIP III. For example, they frequently mentioned the literacy course embedded in the training curriculum as an added value in the daily lives of the previously (partly) illiterate participants. Other course components considered useful included the safety training for the work environment and the first aid courses.

*“In the First Aid course, I learned how to deal with medical issues happening in the house. I also learned new agricultural skills and I can teach these skills to others in the community.”*

Female FGD participant in Borek, January 2023.

The quote above also hints at the potential positive effect this project had on the entire community, as participants vowed to share the knowledge and skills acquired from the project with other community members. Men also mentioned networking as an important benefit of the project, which has the potential to increase positive relationships between community members and eventually enhance social cohesion.

## Enhancing the project's impact on women through outreach centres

The two information and outreach centres established in Borek and Zorava provided the local communities with information on services offered by other organizations and referrals of individuals to these services, which included livelihood opportunities and MHPSS. The centres further included safe spaces for women as they hardly had the opportunity to interact socially in the marginalized and patriarchal communities of Sinjar. With 330 women and girls accessing the safe spaces during the implementation period of CSIP III, this model provided an additional support system for women in the three villages. Anecdotal testimonies of women visiting the spaces highlighted that the women used the spaces to discuss community and health issues and share their grief about family members lost at the hands of ISIL. To ensure the centres sustainability, local youth volunteers received training on how to run them and continued operating the centres after the project closure.

## Conclusion

The CSIP approach in Iraq was specifically designed to assist disengaged fighters, but as the pilot evolved, participants from other vulnerable groups were included and information and outreach centres were added as activities to strengthen the pilot's whole-of-community approach. These adaptations mainly intended to reach more women in the insular and patriarchal societies of Sinjar, particularly the many women household heads and victims of ISIL. The findings above highlighted that this approach indeed contributed to strengthening the role of women in the target locations. The evidence showed that including women in economic activities empowered them to provide for their families and thus increase in status vis-à-vis their husbands, families, and the community as a whole. While women's role in Sinjar remains to be improved, the project considerably contributed to laying the groundwork for women to be accepted as active members of their communities, as the comment of a local community leader below highlights:

*"I think women's role in the community improved as many women now want to join projects like this after they saw who joined and became business owners, and if we talk in general, I think women's role in our community is weak because they don't have freedom and rights."*

*Male community leader, Gohbal, January 2023.*

## Recommendations

- Set a quota for women and women-headed households in reintegration projects. Expand the criteria of the target group to reach the quota, if necessary, especially if the definition of the main target group does not correspond with women's own understanding of their role (i.e., qualifying as a disengaged fighter despite not having actively participated in combat).
- In patriarchal societies particularly, include women in economic activities to help reduce stigmatization of working women and thus contribute to empowering women and fostering positive community dynamics.
- Encourage project participants of socio-economic reintegration projects to establish joint ventures or shared businesses with pooled funds. This is beneficial for the sustainability of businesses and supports networking in the community, which ultimately contributes to social cohesion. If women participants aim to open joint ventures with male relatives, ensure that the women remain independent and keep oversight of their grants.
- Provide vocational training instructors with -inclusivity and conflict-sensitivity training before teaching project participants. Awareness of women's and men's perspectives and needs as well as conflict dynamics supports them in creating a positive learning environment for everyone and approaching the specific needs of participants individually.
- Include information and outreach centres in reintegration projects in order to support the entire community and reach social groups not directly targeted as participants. Ensure integrating this component well with the other activities (i.e., bring direct beneficiaries to the centres for parts of the activities) and communicate its services widely in the target community. This also helps avoid sentiments of unfair selection by community members who were not selected as direct participants.