



POLICY BRIEF: WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY IN IRAQ

MAY 2025

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY.....	3
POLITICAL AND SECURITY CONTEXT	3
WOMEN'S ROLES IN CONFLICT RESPONSE AND PEACEBUILDING.....	4
GENDERED IMPACT OF CONFLICT	4
EVOLUTION OF IRAQ'S WPS FRAMEWORK	5
KEY ACHIEVEMENTS	6
KEY CHALLENGES	7
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	8
CONCLUSION.....	9

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2014, Iraq has made formal commitments to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda through three successive National Action Plans (NAPs), becoming the first MENA country to adopt UNSCR 1325. These commitments emerged in the aftermath of protracted conflict, including the rise of ISIS, widespread displacement, and the deepening of patriarchal governance systems that have disproportionately affected women.

This brief is informed by qualitative data collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted with stakeholders across policymakers, civil society leaders and experts, and community-level actors, ensuring a multi-level perspective on WPS in Iraq. It examines the political and security context, the evolution of Iraq's WPS framework, and the impact of conflict on women's rights, agency, and participation. It also highlights both achievements, such as the Yazidi Survivors Law, localized action plans in Kurdistan, increased women's participation, and persistent challenges, including shrinking civic space, weak implementation, and resistance to gender-sensitive policies. While some regional efforts, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), have demonstrated participatory models and civil society engagement, national-level approaches remain fragmented and often symbolic. Iraq's third NAP lacks a clear strategy for participation, recovery, or transitional justice and was developed without meaningful civil society input or an evidence-based review of NAP II.

The research concludes that without institutional reforms, inclusive decision-making, and sustained investment, Iraq's WPS commitments will remain aspirational. The brief offers actionable recommendations to guide state actors, donors, and civil society

toward localized, survivor-centered, and structurally embedded approaches to peace and security.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Iraq's recent history has been marked by cycles of conflict, displacement, and political transformation, all of which have profoundly shaped the lives of women. From the Iran-Iraq War to the 2003 invasion and the rise and fall of ISIS, women have borne the brunt of insecurity while simultaneously emerging as critical actors in recovery, advocacy, and peacebuilding efforts. Within this context, the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, anchored in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, offers a vital framework for advancing gender-responsive peacebuilding, ensuring protection from gender-based violence, and promoting women's participation in decision-making.

Iraq's adoption of the WPS agenda has led to the development of three National Action Plans (NAPs), beginning in 2014. While these frameworks signify political recognition of women's roles in peace and security, their implementation has often fallen short due to political instability, underfunding, and limited civil society inclusion, especially at the federal level. In contrast, more localized and participatory efforts in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) have shown promising results, particularly in integrating minority women and survivor voices.

This brief synthesizes key findings from a comprehensive desk review and qualitative data gathered through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders across Track I (government institutions), Track II (civil society organizations and experts), and Track III (community-level actors and grassroots leaders). The methodology prioritizes triangulation of sources and perspectives to capture both institutional frameworks and lived experiences. The research explores political and security trends, gendered impacts of conflict, the evolution of Iraq's WPS policies, and the practical challenges facing implementation. This brief adopts a multi-track lens to examine how insights from community-based actors (Track III) and civil society leaders (Track II) can inform and influence formal WPS decision-making at the national level (Track I), thereby strengthening coherence and inclusivity across Iraq's peace and security landscape.

By highlighting both achievements and ongoing gaps, this brief aims to inform policy and programmatic action that moves Iraq's WPS agenda beyond symbolic commitments toward transformative change rooted in justice, inclusion, and sustainability.

POLITICAL AND SECURITY CONTEXT

Iraq's security landscape remains fragile due to decades of conflict, political fragmentation, weak governance, and militia dominance. The rise and fall of ISIS (2014–2017) left deep scars, especially for women, who were targeted with systematic sexual violence, trafficking, and displacement.

Political instability, sectarian power-sharing, and corruption hinder governance, while the exclusion of women from decision-making, especially in the security sector, undermines the WPS agenda. Women and children are the most affected and remain displaced, with women facing heightened risks in camps and limited access to justice and protection.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), relative stability and participatory approaches to WPS planning contrast with the federal government's top-down model. Across Iraq, shrinking civic space, external interference, and lack of gender-sensitive policies continue to threaten sustainable peace and inclusive recovery.

Women's Quota in Iraq

Since 2003, Iraq has applied a quota system to boost women's political participation, formalized in the 2005 Constitution, which reserves at least 25% of parliamentary seats for women. Electoral laws require parties to place women candidates prominently on lists, and if votes fall short, the highest-polling women fill the quota. This mechanism has increased women's representation: in 2021, women won 97 of 329 seats (29.4%), with 57 elected independently of the quota. At governorate level, women are also gaining seats beyond quota requirements. In the Kurdistan Region, the quota is higher at 30%. Despite numerical gains, women's influence in leadership and executive roles remains limited due to party dynamics and social barriers. The quota guarantees presence but not equal power.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN CONFLICT RESPONSE AND PEACEBUILDING

Despite systemic exclusion, Iraqi women have played vital roles in responding to conflict and driving recovery. Women-led civil society organizations have documented violations, advocated for justice, and supported survivors, particularly in areas affected by ISIS such as Sinjar and Ninewa.

Women have also led grassroots peacebuilding initiatives, acting as mediators and dialogue facilitators in divided communities. In the absence of state support, they have provided essential services, including psychosocial care and vocational training, often with limited resources and shrinking civic space. However, their contributions remain informal and under-recognized in national peace processes. Unlike in the Kurdistan Region, where women's groups were integrated into WPS planning, federal structures continue to marginalize women's leadership, reducing their participation to symbolic inclusion without real decision-making power.

GENDERED IMPACT OF CONFLICT

Conflict and displacement in Iraq have disproportionately affected women, intensifying gender-based violence, economic marginalization, and exclusion from justice. ISIS's use

of sexual violence against Yazidi and minority women left lasting trauma, yet many survivors still struggle to access reparations due to slow and retraumatizing procedures under the Yazidi Survivors Law.

Displaced women, especially those in camps, remain vulnerable to insecurity and exploitation, with limited access to services, legal protection, or sustainable livelihoods. Patriarchal norms and weak enforcement of laws continue to block women's ability to claim their rights.

Despite some legislative progress, implementation gaps persist, particularly for minority women and those with disabilities. Reintegration, psychosocial care, and economic support remain fragmented, prompting repeated calls from civil society for inclusive, survivor-centered responses.

EVOLUTION OF IRAQ'S WPS FRAMEWORK

Iraq became the first MENA country to adopt a WPS action plan. Since then, three NAPs have been developed—each reflecting varying levels of ambition, participation, and effectiveness.

NAP I (2014–2018): Iraq became the first MENA country to adopt a WPS action plan. However, its implementation was quickly overtaken by the war against ISIS. All strategic initiatives were effectively frozen and replaced by emergency response measures in 2018. The plan raised initial awareness of WPS but suffered from funding shortages, a lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and the absence of measurable indicators.

NAP II (2020–2024): This plan improved upon its predecessor through participatory consultations, localized action plans, and the introduction of a digital M&E portal. Yet it struggled with limited national budget allocations, fragmented implementation, and an absence of accountability mechanisms. The KRI's parallel NAP II demonstrated stronger civil society engagement and monitoring.

NAP III (2025–2030): Civil society actors report that the consultation process for NAP III was symbolic. The plan lacks clear strategies for participation, protection, and recovery. It omits references to transitional justice, sexual violence, and displacement, and does not build upon lessons learned from NAP II. The absence of an evidence-based framework and dedicated budget risks rendering it aspirational rather than actionable. NAP III in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is separate from that of federal Iraq, with each developed through distinct processes, priorities, and institutional frameworks.

The evolution of Iraq's WPS agenda reflects growing recognition but persistent gaps in accountability, inclusion, and long-term vision.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- **Passage of the Yazidi Survivors Law:** This law formally acknowledges the crimes committed against Yazidi women and other minority survivors by ISIS. It provides a legal framework for reparations, including compensation, healthcare, and psychological support. While the law sets a critical precedent, delays and procedural complexities have hindered its full implementation.
- **Gender-sensitive codes of conduct in some security institutions:** Select Iraqi security bodies (such as the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense) have introduced internal policies aimed at curbing gender-based violence and harassment. These efforts signal institutional awareness, but enforcement mechanisms are inconsistent, and broader reforms are still lacking.
- **30% quota for women in Kurdistan Parliament:** This policy has enhanced female political representation in the Kurdistan Region, helping to shift perceptions around women's leadership. Female legislators have increasingly influenced debates on gender and human rights, though challenges to equal participation remain.
- **Recruitment of women into security forces:** Women now serve in a variety of roles within police and security institutions, signaling progress in diversifying these sectors. However, they remain concentrated in lower ranks, and promotion to decision-making positions is rare.
- **Grassroots advocacy and services by women-led CSOs:** Civil society organizations led by women have played a pivotal role in providing psychosocial, legal, and vocational support in conflict-affected areas. Their work bridges the gap left by weak state institutions and fosters community resilience.
- **Inclusion of minorities and survivors in KRI NAP II implementation:** The participatory structure in Kurdistan enabled CSOs representing Yazidi and other minority women to contribute to both policy planning and service delivery, resulting in more targeted and inclusive programming.
- **External funding secured by KRI CSO-government partnerships:** Civil society engagement in Kurdistan facilitated access to international donor support, sustaining WPS activities even when government budgets were limited.
- **Joint CSO-government evaluations and inclusive monitoring structures:** Collaborative monitoring in the Kurdistan Region helped improve transparency and track the effectiveness of WPS efforts. Regular meetings ensured ongoing dialogue between stakeholders.
- **Awareness campaigns in Duhok, Sinjar, and other regions:** Public campaigns have introduced women to peacebuilding and conflict resolution concepts. These efforts have expanded women's engagement in civic life, though backlash remains a challenge.
- **Involvement of religious and tribal leaders and media in advocacy:** By working with key influencers, WPS advocates have countered conservative resistance and fostered broader community acceptance of gender equality principles.
- **Economic empowerment programs for displaced and vulnerable women:** Localized training, micro-grants, and workshops have improved women's

economic participation in select governorates. Nonetheless, most initiatives remain small-scale.

- Digital M&E portal introduced under NAP II: This tool aimed to increase transparency and data-driven policy tracking. While it has potential, its utility has been hampered by incomplete data inputs and operational issues.
- Establishment of family protection units and community policing: These units reflect improved collaboration between CSOs and state actors to address GBV. Their reach and enforcement power, however, are still limited.
- Programs addressing marginalized groups (Yazidis, women with disabilities, displaced): Some initiatives have sought to tailor services for highly vulnerable populations. However, gaps in coverage and institutional support remain.

KEY CHALLENGES

- Ongoing insecurity in conflict-affected areas: In regions like Sinjar and Ninewa, the absence of stable governance and continued militia activity undermine women's safety and access to justice. Returnees face threats and limited state presence.
- Displacement and under-resourced camps: Over one million Iraqis remain displaced. Women in camps suffer from poor living conditions, lack of services, and exposure to exploitation, with minimal targeted programming under NAP III.
- Exclusion from security-sector leadership roles: Despite WPS commitments, women rarely occupy senior positions in the military or police. Their input into peace and security decisions remains symbolic.
- Poor coordination between federal and regional governments: WPS efforts are fragmented across jurisdictions, limiting impact and causing duplication. The KRI model has not been harmonized with national strategies.
- Confusing institutional mandates for gender units: Overlapping responsibilities between women's departments and other gender mechanisms have led to inefficiency and implementation delays.
- Shrinking civic space and government restrictions on CSOs: Legal and administrative barriers, especially affecting women-led organizations, have reduced civil society's ability to participate in policy processes and access resources.
- Declining international funding and global policy shifts: Competing priorities, such as the crises in Ukraine and Syria, have reduced donor focus on Iraq. Sudden cutbacks have disrupted essential WPS programs.
- Resistance to gender-sensitive terminology and discourse: Political backlash has led to the removal of terms like "gender" and "empowerment" from public policies.
- Legal regression through amendments to Personal Status Law: Recent changes threatened women's legal protections in marriage, divorce, and custody. These reversals contradict Iraq's international obligations under UNSCR 1325.

- **Funding gaps and misallocation of WPS budgets:** Funds allocated for WPS-related activities are often diverted to other sectors, leaving programs under-resourced and unsustainable.
- **Technical and capacity constraints in institutions and CSOs:** Limited knowledge, staff shortages, and lack of training reduce the effectiveness of WPS implementation and monitoring.
- **Weak enforcement and oversight mechanisms:** M&E tools such as the digital portal lack real-time data and independent verification, impeding transparency and accountability.
- **Marginalization of Yazidis and other survivors in justice processes:** Survivors face retraumatizing bureaucracies, limited access to legal recourse, and weak implementation of the Yazidi Survivors Law.
- **Barriers to displaced women's economic reintegration:** Programs for livelihoods and skills-building remain underfunded and inaccessible, especially for those in rural and insecure areas.
- **Political backlash and harassment of women's rights defenders:** Activists face online harassment, threats, and, in some cases, state surveillance, restricting their ability to operate.
- **Lack of structured collaboration between stakeholders:** WPS efforts remain siloed due to inadequate cooperation among state actors, international agencies, and CSOs. This fragmentation diminishes program effectiveness. There is no structured mechanism to ensure that knowledge, initiatives, and leadership from civil society and grassroots actors inform WPS policy at the national level, creating a disconnect between Track II/III efforts and Track I processes.
- **Tokenistic or symbolic inclusion of women in peacebuilding:** Participation is often limited to procedural roles without decision-making authority or influence on outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While Iraq's adoption of three National Action Plans on WPS reflects institutional willingness, implementation has often lacked consistency, inclusivity, and sustainability. The following recommendations are based on field research, key informant interviews, and desk reviews. They aim to support government actors, civil society, and international partners in advancing a more accountable, survivor-centered, and locally grounded WPS agenda in Iraq.

Strengthen Institutional Frameworks and Accountability

- Fully operationalize the digital M&E portal with gender-disaggregated data and CSO participation.
- Clarify roles and coordination between federal and regional authorities.
- Invest in long-term capacity building for institutions, particularly in gender-responsive policy and service delivery.

Center Survivor Voices and Marginalized Groups

- Reform procedures under the Yazidi Survivors Law to be trauma-informed and accessible.
- Develop inclusive strategies that prioritize displaced women, minorities, and women with disabilities.
- Embed survivor-led perspectives in all WPS policy planning and review processes.

Inclusive Governance and Political Participation

- Enforce quotas beyond symbolic inclusion by ensuring real decision-making power.
- Support mentorship and leadership development programs for women in governance, peacebuilding, and the security sector.

Economic Empowerment and Livelihood Support

- Embed economic empowerment programs for women into national budgets.
- Prioritize long-term employment strategies over short-term vocational training.
- Ensure women's access to credit, mobility, and land ownership.

Localization and Civil Society Engagement

- Scale up successful localized WPS action plans (e.g., in Ninewa and Sinjar).
- Center planning on the needs of marginalized women, including minorities and persons with disabilities.
- Restore civil society participation in the full policy cycle as co-creators, not just implementers.
- Reframe civil society and grassroots actors as co-architects rather than contributors of WPS strategies by formally integrating their perspectives into national planning, review, and implementation mechanisms

International Support and Regional Coordination

- Encourage multi-year donor commitments aligned with local priorities.
- Protect civic space by advocating for legal guarantees for CSOs.
- Foster regional WPS platforms to address cross-border threats and share best practices.

CONCLUSION

The Women, Peace, and Security agenda in Iraq stands at a crossroads. While progress has been made in legislative reform and awareness, these gains are undermined by weak implementation, political resistance, and exclusion of civil society. To avoid rendering the WPS agenda symbolic, both domestic institutions and international stakeholders must prioritize survivor-centered justice, inclusive governance, and

sustainable funding. A unified yet localized approach that integrates regional diversity and amplifies women's voices will be essential for long-term peace and recovery in Iraq.

For more info, please contact:
elbarlament
Brunnenstraße 128
13355 Berlin
Tel.: +49 (0)1516 2733609
E-Mail: info@elbarlament.org

