

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION REPORT: STRENGTHENING THE RESPONSE TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN BAGHDAD NOVEMBER 2025

Published by Mercy Path for Women's Affairs
Authors: Mareike Egbers and Sura Al Zahid

This project is implemented by Mercy Path for Women's Affairs with funding provided by Mercy Hands for Humanitarian Aid.

Table of Content

Introduction	02
Objective	03
Methodology	03
Participant Demographics	03
Discussion	03
Key Findings	05
Recommendations	05
Conclusion	06



Introduction

Mercy Path for Women's Affairs

Mercy Path originated as a grassroots initiative named Lawyers for Women, spearheaded by a collective of Iraqi women lawyers and psychosocial specialists in 2017. It evolved into a registered NGO, officially named Mercy Path (Arabic: Masar AL-Rahma) for Women Affairs, in 2023, accredited by the Directorate of NGOs in Baghdad. Mercy Path has its headquarters in Baghdad and conducts nationwide operations leveraging a network of volunteers and partners.

Mercy Path's mission is dedicated to fostering equality among men and women in Iraq by offering protection services to women and girls, empowering them, and advocating for their rights.

In line with our mission to advance Protection and Women's Rights, Mercy Path is committed to the prevention of human trafficking and to supporting survivors. Mercy Paths's current efforts focus on providing emergency assistance, including hygiene and food kits, to highly vulnerable cases of suspected labour trafficking. We work in close collaboration with governmental bodies, international organizations, and partner NGOs to help facilitate safe repatriation processes for affected individuals.



Through this engagement, Mercy Path has gained deeper insight into the persistent and complex challenges surrounding human trafficking in Iraq. To address these issues more comprehensively, we have adopted a twin-track approach: delivering direct assistance to victims while simultaneously strengthening prevention efforts through awareness-raising and capacity building. This strategy enables us to respond to immediate protection needs while contributing to longer-term solutions aimed at reducing trafficking risks nationwide.

Objective

The objective of this focus group discussion (FGD) was to identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities in the current government response to human trafficking in Baghdad. The discussion aimed to explore coordination mechanisms between relevant departments, assess the availability and accessibility of protection services, and examine how the health and psychosocial needs of trafficked women and children are being addressed.

Methodology

The FGD brought together key stakeholders from governmental bodies, international organizations, and civil society actors engaged in anti-trafficking efforts in Iraq. The session followed a semi-structured discussion format facilitated by Dr. Sarah Amir from the Iraqi Telemedicine Center, who is experienced in providing medical support to human trafficking victims. Participants were invited to reflect on their institutional roles, share good practices, and identify existing challenges and areas for improvement in multi-sectoral coordination and service delivery.

The discussion was qualitative and interactive, allowing participants to collectively analyze current systems, share experiences, and develop practical recommendations for strengthening national and local responses to trafficking in persons.

Demographics

Demographic Information on the 29 Participants

Gender



- 17 Women
- 12 Men

Affiliation:



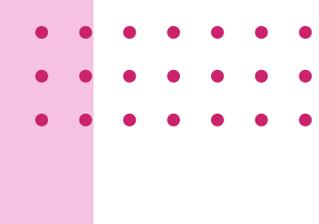
- 24 representatives from the Women, Family and Children Department (Baghdad)
- 1 representative from UNODC
- 4 representatives from the Anti-Human Trafficking Department (including Police Forces)

Discussion

The FGD began with an overview of systemic challenges faced by government institutions and international organisations in identifying and responding to human trafficking cases. Participants emphasized that administrative delays and inconsistent coordination, partially due to high staff turnover, have historically hindered the efficiency of the local anti-trafficking response. However, participants agreed on substantial progress that has been achieved. This progress and recurring obstacles are explained below.

1. Progress in Institutional Coordination

Mr. Luay Imad Mahdi, Administrative Assistant at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) highlighted notable progress in recent months, noting that the Ministry of Interior (MoI) now responds more effectively to reported cases and provides detailed follow-up information.



This improvement reflects an enhanced institutional performance and a reduction in bureaucratic delays. Participants agreed that effective inter-departmental coordination remains essential and should continue to be strengthened through standardized communication channels and joint operational procedures.

2. Barriers to Reporting and Community Engagement

Mr. Ibrahim Abdul Sada, Senior Police Commissioner from the Anti-Human Trafficking Directorate, identified major barriers to case reporting, including the reluctance of citizens to come forward due to social stigma, tribal dynamics within the society, and fears regarding confidentiality. He emphasized that the MoI maintains strict confidentiality in all reported cases to protect informants' identities.

Participants agreed that **building trust between communities and state institutions is crucial to overcoming these barriers**. Awareness-raising efforts alone were deemed insufficient without measures to increase public confidence in law enforcement and protection mechanisms.

3. Public Awareness and Prevention

The Anti-Human Trafficking Directorate disseminates informational brochures about human trafficking. These brochures include the general emergency number 911, which can be contacted anywhere in Iraq, as well as an email address for contacting the Directorate and reporting cases: human-ts@moi.gov.iq. While this information is essential, Mr. Mahdi (UNODC) stressed that awareness campaigns should go beyond distributing brochures to

include interactive and ongoing educational initiatives targeting all segments of society, including vulnerable groups such as the elderly and the illiterate. Lieutenant Colonel Fatima Nasser from the Anti-Human Trafficking Directorate shared that **awareness courses have already been conducted in schools and institutes**, but agreed with the **need to expand coverage to address all forms of trafficking**, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, organ trafficking, and forced begging.

Participants highlighted that effective awareness must be coupled with trust-building and behavioral change strategies, enabling citizens to recognize and safely report trafficking cases.

4. Victim Protection and Rehabilitation Services

Lieutenant Colonel Fatima Nasser also noted that specialized detachments within law enforcement are trained to distinguish genuine cases of exploitation from false claims. Regarding victim care, she explained that the **Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) operates dedicated shelters for trafficking survivors**, where the **Ministry of Health provides medical care**. Additionally, **psychological support and rehabilitation programs** are offered by specialized staff. These services include developmental and recreational activities, such as sports, handicrafts, and art therapy, conducted in collaboration with international organizations, supporting victims' psychosocial recovery and reintegration.



Key Findings

- **Improved coordination** between the Ministry of Interior and other governmental agencies has enhanced case handling efficiency.
- **Reluctance to report** remains a major barrier, influenced by social stigma and lack of trust in authorities.
- **Public awareness** is growing but remains limited in scope and outreach. It needs to be expanded to include marginalized and hard-to-reach populations and to include all types of trafficking.
- **Victim care services** are provided by MOLSA and the Ministry of Health. However, access to shelters can be constrained due to administrative and procedural requirements.
- **Inter-agency collaboration** between government, civil society, and international partners requires further institutionalization through clear referral pathways and joint monitoring mechanisms.
- Increase training for law enforcement on victim-centered and trauma-informed approaches.
- Facilitate clarity in referral pathways and access to victim shelters to further enhance service reach.
- Invest in long-term rehabilitation and livelihood support for survivors to reduce re-victimization risks.

For International Organizations

- Provide technical assistance and capacity-building for government partners on case management, data collection, and monitoring.
- Support the development of national awareness campaigns using diverse communication channels.
- Strengthen coordination platforms bringing together NGOs, government, and donors to harmonize anti-trafficking interventions.
- Facilitate knowledge exchange and best practices from other regional contexts.

For NGOs and Civil Society Organizations

- Focus on community trust-building and culturally sensitive outreach to encourage case reporting.
- Offer legal aid, psychosocial counseling, and reintegration support to trafficking survivors.
- Partner with government shelters to provide skills training and livelihoods programs.
- Advocate for policy reforms that enhance victim protection and address root causes such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality between men and women.



Recommendations

For Government Authorities

- Institutionalize standard operating procedures (SOPs) for inter-ministerial coordination and case referrals.
- Expand community-based awareness programs in cooperation with local leaders, schools, and religious institutions.
- Strengthen confidential reporting mechanisms and ensure protection for whistleblowers and informants.

Conclusion

The FGD highlighted both progress and persistent challenges in Iraq's anti-trafficking response. While institutional coordination and service provision have improved, sustained efforts are required to strengthen community trust, expand awareness, and ensure holistic protection and rehabilitation for survivors. Continued collaboration among government agencies, NGOs, and international partners remains essential to build a comprehensive, survivor-centered approach to combating human trafficking in Iraq.



How to receive assistance?



- **In emergencies: Call 911.** Multilingual assistance is accessible throughout Iraq.
- **Case referrals:** To refer a suspected human trafficking case to the Anti-Human Trafficking Directorate, contact human-ts@moi.gov.iq (English or Arabic).



Contact Us

- ☎ +1 4055017835
- ✉ director@mercy.path.org
- 🌐 www.mercy.path.org
- 📍 Q. 929/ Street 4/ H. 36/1; Karrada, Babel Quarter; Baghdad; Iraq