



IMPLEMENTING WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY IN IRAQ: INSTITUTIONAL MODELS, PRIORITIES, AND CHALLENGES IN FEDERAL IRAQ AND KURDISTAN REGION

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Executive Summary

Despite sustained policy progress through successive national and regional action plans, implementation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in Iraq remains uneven, particularly at the subnational level where national commitments must translate into measurable local outcomes for women and girls. This study highlights the central role of governmental institutions in shaping the effectiveness of WPS implementation, with a focus on the Women, Family and Children Departments (WFCDs) in Federal Iraq and the High Council for Women and Development in the Kurdistan Region.

Using a **gender-sensitive mixed-methods approach**, including a nationwide survey of 131 WFCD staff, 15 key informant interviews, and a focus group discussion, the research **addresses a persistent gap in WPS literature by centering subnational governance structures as drivers of gender-responsive local action.**

Findings reveal a shared context shaped by three core constraints: **(1) insufficient and unpredictable funding, (2) shortages of qualified staff and systematic capacity-building, and (3) socio-cultural barriers limiting women's participation and access to services.** However, institutional models differ significantly across contexts. WFCDs in Federal Iraq operate as decentralized, multi-functional units with uneven authority and capacity across governorates, often relying on adaptive practices to navigate structural limitations. In contrast, the High Council in the Kurdistan Region reflects a centralized, policy-oriented model with clearer mandates and coordination functions but limited direct implementation reach.

These differences highlight the **need for context-specific strategies: strengthening authority, resourcing, and horizontal coordination for WFCDs in Federal Iraq, while investing in specialized expertise, partner implementation capacity, and enforcement mechanisms in the Kurdistan Region.** Despite existing constraints, the study documents **effective local initiatives and partnerships, demonstrating the potential of these institutions to catalyze WPS implementation when adequately supported.**

The report concludes that advancing Iraq's WPS commitments requires prioritizing subnational institutional strengthening through **predictable financing, clarified mandates, sustained capacity development, strengthened monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and reinforced coordination.** Participatory engagement with civil society and community actors will be essential to ensure that implementation remains **locally responsive and inclusive.** **Targeted support to these structures represents a strategic investment in inclusive governance, accountability, and women's meaningful participation in peace and security processes across Iraq.**

List of Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
INAP	Iraq's National Action Plan
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
LAP	Local Action Plan
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MOLSA	Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
NAP	National Action Plan
NDIW	National Directorate for Iraqi Women
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
n.d.	No Date
OHCHR	United Nation's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OSAGI	Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women
SAWA	Strengthening Agencies for Women's Advancements
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
VAW	Violence against Women
WFCD	Women, Family, and Children Department
WPS	Women, Peace and Security

1. Background

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 for Women Affairs (Arabic: Masar Al-Rahma), 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.

Strengthening Agencies for Women's Advancement (SAWA)

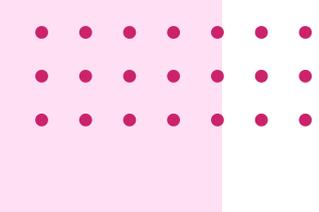
SAWA ("together" in Arabic) is a six-month project led by Mercy Path to enhance the operational capacity of the Women, Family and Children Departments (WFCD), a key governmental actor in advancing equity among men and women in Iraq. The first part of the project focused on capacity-strengthening of the WFCD in Baghdad Governorate through hybrid training courses, mentorship and hands-on implementation. Forty-two WFCD staff members underwent a comprehensive capacity-strengthening programme, culminating in the establishment of four collaborative thematic task forces. Through these task forces, the trained staff and local women leaders work together to address urgent women, peace and security (WPS) issues.



The second part of the project involves a nationwide research study to assess the structure, institutional strengths and challenges of the WFCDs, as well as identifying the most helpful forms of support for the departments in implementing the Iraqi National Action Plan (INAP) and contributing to the evolution of the WPS agenda. The following study is the result of this research.

During the research process, the research question was expanded to include the High Council for Women and Development in the Kurdistan Region in order to account for regional differences, given that there are no WFCDs in the Kurdistan Region.





2. Introduction

Across the globe, women’s rights are facing setbacks. The United Nations Security Council’s (UNSC) report on WPS in 2024 highlights that rising levels of conflict and violence are reversing decades of advances in women’s rights, threatening generational achievements and diminishing the potential of women’s leadership and participation in peace efforts. Increasing backlash and attacks on women’s rights activists undermine progress. In 2023, several governments, including Iraq, also restricted the use of gender-related terminology. In this global context, power and decision-making on peace and security matters are still dominated by men, and impunity for atrocities against women and girls continues. (UNSC, S/2024/671, paras 2-5)

The Iraqi context reflects these global trends with unique historical and political dimensions. The most recent large-scale armed conflict in Iraq’s history was the U.S. invasion of 2003, followed by the rise of ISIS/Daesh. This conflict occurred on top of decades of earlier conflicts, including the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and the Gulf War (1990–1991), which were compounded by UN sanctions in the 1990s. These cycles of violence and instability have disproportionately affected women and girls, reinforcing structural inequalities and restricting their participation in political, social, and economic spheres. (Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom, n.d.a.)

According to Chilmeran, since 2003 Iraq had to cope with challenges such as corruption, a lack of political commitment to women’s rights and a volatile security situation, which has made women’s rights activists particularly vulnerable (Chilmeran, 2022, p.757). In the UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index, Iraq ranked 148 out of 172 countries with just over 10% of women being part of the labor force compared to over 67% of men in 2023 (UNDP, n.d.). Across Iraq, women human rights defenders and women’s groups are increasingly exposed to threats, attacks, and hate campaigns fueled by the rise of anti-gender movements (Working Group on WPS, 2025, p.1; UNSC, S/2024/671, para 46). These movements included protests, online mobilization, and public debates led by conservative groups concerned that initiatives for equality between men and women conflict with cultural and religious values. The spread of misinformation further fueled resistance to progressive gender policies, highlighting the need to address misconceptions and promote inclusive approaches to women’s rights. (UN Women, n.d.)

As part of the process to achieve the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (gender equality and empowering all women and girls), Iraq has made progress, such as meeting quotas for women’s political participation (United Nations Iraq, 2025). One example is the 25% women’s quota introduced in Iraq’s parliament in 2005 by external forces but initially driven by Iraqi female activists under United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. This quota aimed to improve women’s political participation. Nevertheless, women remained underrepresented in local and national

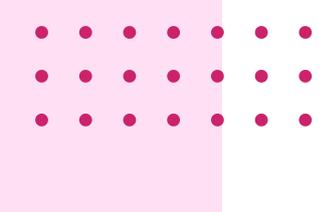


governments. Male-dominated parties co-opted their roles amid ongoing security concerns and exclusion from key reconciliation processes, ultimately reinforcing tokenism. (Khodary, 2016, p.502-503)

In 2015, when military conflicts with ISIS/Daesh peaked, the Iraqi government dissolved the Ministries of Women's Rights and Human Rights, stating that it was due to budgetary constraints (Puttick, 2024, p.14). The same year, the government established the National Directorate for Iraqi Women (NDIW), the highest governmental body dealing with women's affairs. It operates under the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers. Each Iraqi ministry has a Women's Affairs Unit which reports to the NDIW. The unit is responsible for integrating considerations regarding men and women into policies and programmes. At the subnational level, each governorate has a Women's Empowerment Department, now known as the Department for Women, Family and Children (WFCD), within the Governor's Office. Although these departments are administratively linked to the Governor, they technically coordinate with the NDIW to ensure alignment with national strategies and directives. Due to its position within the Governor's Office, the WFCDs can impact other government agencies and utilise local facilities, e.g., to increase the reach and impact of projects in collaboration with non-governmental organisations. This capability was demonstrated in a previous collaboration with Mercy Path, when the WFCD in Baghdad Governorate provided free premises, equipment and logistical support (Personal Communication with the Department for Women, Family and Children in Baghdad, July 2025).

According to a report from the Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights in March 2024, the lack of an independent budget and decision-making power poses challenges for the WFCDs (Puttick, 2024, p.14). Prior to this research, funding constraints were also discussed in informal conversations with heads of different WFCDs. Other challenges mentioned included limited institutional capacity, including gaps in specialized skills and high staff turnover, which undermine effective service delivery to sustainably support women, families and children.

In Kurdistan Region, there are no WFCDs. Instead the research includes the High Council for Women and Development (the High Council). The High Council is a ministerial-level body established within and affiliated to the Kurdistan Region Council of Ministers, chaired by the Prime Minister and deputized by the Deputy Prime Minister, with membership comprising relevant sector ministers and the Secretary General. It is administratively led by a Secretary General appointed by regional decree, who has the power to make decisions and issue decrees and oversees the High Council's organizational structure, including the Office of the Secretary General and the directorates of Relations and Media, Programs, Development, Planning and Research, and Administration and Finance. The High Council is supported by two specialized advisors and an internal advisory council chaired by the Secretary General, bringing together advisors and directors for regular consultation. The High Council may adjust its membership, invite non-voting experts, establish branch offices as needed, and issue internal procedures to regulate its work. (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2022)



This study examines the structure, capacity, and potential for improvement of the WFCD in Federal Iraq and the High Council in Kurdistan Region. By situating the WFCD and the High Council within the broader WPS agenda, and considering the challenges faced by staff and other women’s rights defenders, the research aims to identify ways to strengthen the WFCD’s and the High Council’s institutional capacities. Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing debates on how government institutions dedicated to women’s affairs can effectively promote equality between men and women and ensuring that women’s voices are meaningfully included in peace and security processes in conflict-affected areas like Iraq.

The purpose of the following conceptual framework is to provide a systematic basis for assessing the institutional capacity and coordination mechanisms of WFCDs and the High Council and examining resources, training, and support for implementing the WPS agenda.

3. Conceptual Frameworks

This section aims to explore core concepts and frameworks referred to in this research and linking them to the Iraqi context. Situating the research within these frameworks ensures that the assessment of institutional capacities, coordination, and needs is not only empirically grounded but also measured against recognized international standards and Iraq’s own policy commitments.

3.1. International Standards

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979 and came into force in 1981. With 189 States Parties it is one of the most widely ratified UN treaties. CEDAW establishes states’ obligations to eliminate discrimination and ensure women’s equal rights in political, social, economic, and cultural life. While it does not explicitly reference the WPS agenda, its preamble highlights women’s role in peace, and the CEDAW Committee’s General Recommendation No. 30 (2013) explicitly links CEDAW to WPS by outlining state responsibilities to protect women’s rights before, during, and after conflict. States parties must regularly report on their implementation of CEDAW, including in relation to WPS. (UNDP, 2019, p.5, 15-16)

Although Iraq ratified the CEDAW in 1986, it made reservations on articles 2, 9, 16, and 29 (OHCHR, n.d.). In 2014, Iraq withdrew its reservations on article 9 (UNDP, 2024, p.2).

In 2000, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1325, establishing commitment to the WPS agenda (Shepherd, 2016, p.324). This resolution recognizes the change of warfare especially in the 1990s and its disproportionate impact on women and girls (UNDP, 2019, p.2). It urges countries to systematically include women in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and -keeping processes, while urging measures to protect women and girls from violence in armed conflict (OSAGI, n.d.). The WPS agenda is structured around four key pillars: 1) prevention, 2) participation and equality in peace and security decision-making



processes, 3) protection from all forms of violence against women and girls (including sexual), and 4) relief and recovery. Since the adoption of UNSCR 1325, the WPS framework has been strengthened by practical guidelines, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Handbook for Parliamentarians, as well as nine additional Security Council resolutions, including Resolutions 1820, 1888, 1960, and 2106, which address sexual violence and rape as weapons of war (UNDP, 2019, p.2-4, 9).

The WPS agenda has played an important role in promoting women's participation in political processes and decision-making in Iraq. It is also used to promote discussion of violence against women and girls within the context of peacebuilding, post-conflict reconstruction, and displacement policies in Iraq. (Chilmeran, 2022, p.754)

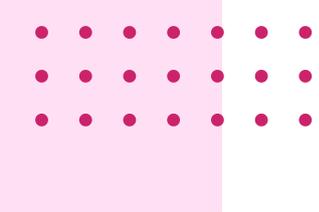
In their efforts to address the WPS agenda, governments began to implement National Action Plans (NAPs) (Shepherd, 2016, p.324). As of 2024, 112 countries adopted a NAP regarding WPS (Women's International League of Peace and Freedom, n.d.b.). Iraq was the first country within the Middle East and North Africa region to adopt a NAP in 2014 (Kaya, 2015, p.8; Achilleos-Sarll and Chilmeran, 2020, p.598; Chilmeran, 2022, p.748; Agency for Peacebuilding, 2025, p.4).

Iraq's third NAP was published in 2025, which demonstrates that the WPS issue remains highly relevant to both the Iraqi government and population. The following section describes the development of the Iraqi National Action Plans.

3.2. INAP I (2014-2018)

The First Iraqi National Action Plan (INAP I) was developed in 2014 by the Federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government with cooperation between the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense in Baghdad and the Ministry of Interior and the Women's High Council in Kurdistan along with the Iraqi NAP 1325 Initiative, a coalition of women's rights organizations. INAP I aims to enhance women's participation, safeguard their rights, and raise awareness of the WPS agenda. It is structured around six pillars: participation; protection and prevention; promotion; social and economic empowerment; legislation and law enforcement; and resource mobilization, monitoring, and evaluation. INAP I has an allocated budget based on strategic objectives and years. (Women's International League of Peace and Freedom, n.d.a.)

It has faced criticism for its externally driven origins, its limited participatory drafting process, and its incomplete coverage of the pillars of UNSCR 1325, particularly with regard to women's roles in conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding. INAP I aims to mainstream equality between men and women in policies and procedures regarding conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding, raise awareness, and empower women. However, the actions set out focus on women's protection within society and family instead of directly addressing conflict-related contexts. (Kaya, 2015, p.8, 15-16)



Implementation has been fragmented, with two active civil society networks pursuing parallel strategies that often reflect divisions over national versus local priorities. The larger 1325 Alliance (Al-Tahaluf) operates across Iraqi Kurdistan and Federal Iraq and was formed during the drafting of INAP I. The smaller Al-Shabaka network, led by the head of the Women’s Leadership Institute in Baghdad, focuses on developing local action plans (LAPs) for specific governorates, thereby expanding the framework beyond national-level efforts. The LAPs were often written in collaboration with women’s organizations within governorates of southern Iraq, instead of governorates in Kurdistan Region or northern governorates, which draw international attention because they were more affected by ISIS. While the two networks occasionally cooperate on national consultations or strategies such as during the development of an Emergency National Action Plan, significant divisions between them persist. (Chilmeran, 2022, p.758) Chilmeran criticizes the tendency of international actors to overlook the differences among Iraqi actors implementing WPS. Despite varying contexts and resources, these actors are often categorized under the same “local” label. (Chilmeran, 2022, p.748f.) Chilmeran also raises concerns that the NAP’s externally driven origins exposed divisions among Iraqi women’s groups and reinforced perceptions of them as recipients rather than drivers of global agendas, fueling resentment over lost ownership and diminished recognition of their agency (Chilmeran, 2022, p.759).

Overall, criticism resulted in a call for increased consultations for the development of the second INAP (INAP II), which was scheduled for 2019, but officially launched in December 2020 (Achilleos-Sarll and Chilmeran, 2020, p.603).

3.3. INAP II (2021-2024)

The INAP II was launched in December 2020 for the period 2021–2024. The development was led and facilitated by UN Women and involved consultations with more than 60 women-led organizations across Iraq, the Council of Ministers Secretariat, representatives from both the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Region, and 33 ministries and governmental institutions (UN Women, n.d.). This extensive consultation process addressed the criticism that the INAP I process was insufficiently participatory.

INAP II is structured around three strategic pillars: 1) Participation, 2) Protection, and 3) Prevention (WPS Focal Points Network, n.d.). This could make INAP II more focused than INAP I, which had six pillars.

However, both plans fail to include the fourth pillar included in the UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda, relief and recovery. This pillar addresses the specific relief needs of women and their ability to act as agents in relief and recovery actions in conflict and post-conflict situations (UNDP, 2019, p.5). However, INAP II pays attention to the situation of women and girls in refugee camps, settlements and areas of return (WPS Focal Point Network, n.d.).

INAP II set out nine objectives, ranging from enhancing women’s participation in peacebuilding and decision-making to ensuring protection and justice for women and girls affected by violence, promoting prevention within institutional frameworks, and strengthening resilience through livelihood opportunities (WPS Focal Point Network, n.d.).

A key innovation was the introduction of a digitalized monitoring and evaluation



framework hosted on an online portal to improve accuracy, ensure data flow, and avoid duplication or loss of information. While this shift to automation was designed to strengthen accountability and coordination, its effectiveness has been constrained by reluctance among stakeholders to use the INAP II web portal, partially due to the need for designated focal points to receive training. Thus, while INAP II marked progress in inclusivity, digital innovation, and comprehensive objectives, criticism has focused on challenges in implementation, particularly in ensuring consistent engagement with new monitoring mechanisms. (UN Women, n.d.)

3.4. INAP III (2025-2030)

In February 2025, UN Women and the National Directorate for Iraqi Women held a consultation with 75 government and civil society representatives to shape Iraq’s forthcoming third National Action Plan (INAP III). The consultation emphasized the essential contribution of civil society to the design and implementation of INAP III, with the discussions influencing the final draft to ensure that grassroots voices are integrated into national-level decision-making. (UN Women, 2025)

INAP III (2025–2030) reaffirms Iraq’s commitment to justice and equality between women and men, grounded in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, the National Strategy for Iraqi Women (2023–2030), and the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and its subsequent resolutions. The plan articulates a national vision based on inclusivity and equal rights for all citizens and emphasizes women’s effective participation in decision-making, peacebuilding, conflict prevention

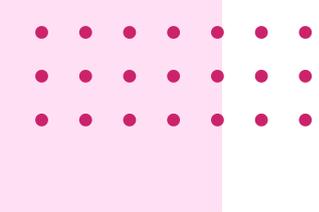
and recovery processes, alongside the protection of women and girls from violence and discrimination. INAP III is structured around four pillars: 1) Participation, 2) Protection, 3) Prevention, and, 4) Relief and Recovery. (Federal Government of Iraq, 2025)

Significantly, INAP III includes the fourth pillar, which was not sufficiently addressed in previous plans, thus taking an important step toward fulfilling the commitments of the UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda.

Figure 1: The Four Pillars of INAP III



Under the Relief and Recovery pillar, the plan outlines measures aimed at mitigating the impacts of conflict, displacement, crises, and disasters on women and girls through livelihood restoration, infrastructure rehabilitation, expansion of health and social services, psychosocial support, disaster risk reduction, and the promotion of resilience and social cohesion. The results framework includes nine recovery-related activities, such as the expansion of psychosocial and mental health services through new units in primary health care centers, targeted rehabilitation for women affected by ISIS-related violence and displacement, capacity-building for medical staff and senior emergency doctors in



survivor-centered case handling and forensic documentation, rehabilitation and reintegration programs for minority women, comprehensive services for survivors of violence against women, including sexual violence, rehabilitation programs for adult and juvenile perpetrators of violence, the expansion of reproductive health and family planning services, and awareness-raising on climate-related health risks with active participation of women. (Federal Government of Iraq, 2025)

For implementation, INAP III designates the National Directorate for Iraqi Women (NDIW) within the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers as the central coordinating mechanism responsible for overseeing implementation, monitoring, and follow-up in coordination with ministries, security institutions, judicial bodies, governorates, civil society organizations, and international partners, supported by a result framework with indicators and periodic reporting mechanisms across all four pillars. (Federal Government of Iraq, 2025). However, the result framework does not include estimated budgets, qualitative indicators or specific target values, which would be useful for planning and implementing specific measures, as well as evaluating their success.

INAP III refers to women’s departments embedded across ministries, security institutions, and governmental bodies. Coordinated by the NDIW, these departments are responsible for integrating WPS commitments into sectoral policies and programmes, supporting data collection and reporting, strengthening institutional capacity, and facilitating coordination with civil society and relevant actors. The plan positions women’s departments as accountability structures that link national WPS commitments

to institutional practice, particularly within security, justice, health, education, and social protection sectors. (Federal Government of Iraq, 2025)

Given the structure of these women’s departments, it can be assumed that this refers to the Women, Family, and Children Departments, which were renamed around the time of the publication of INAP III. (Internal Project Communication, August 2025)

INAP III does not explicitly reference the digital monitoring platform outlined in INAP II, raising questions about how previous obstacles in data collection and reporting will be addressed.

Ultimately, INAP III reaffirms Iraq’s commitment to all four pillars of the WPS agenda and calls for collective action to enhance women’s rights, strengthen their protection, and ensure their meaningful participation in peacebuilding and national recovery.

3.5. The Kurdistan Regional Action Plan

The Kurdistan Regional Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 (2025–2030) constitutes the second regional WPS action plan of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and is explicitly structured around the four pillars of Participation, Protection, Prevention, and Relief and Recovery. The plan builds on the first Regional Action Plan (2021–2024) and identifies persistent challenges related to women’s underrepresentation in decision-making, widespread violence against women, limited economic access, the impacts of violent extremism, displacement, and climate change. The Kurdistan Regional Action Plan situates its objectives within UNSCR 1325 and



subsequent WPS resolutions and frames women as essential actors in peacebuilding, security, and recovery processes. (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2025)

Participation is defined through measures to increase women's representation in political, executive, judicial, economic, and peacebuilding roles, including the establishment of a minimum 20 percent quota for women across legislative and executive institutions and expanded leadership and economic empowerment initiatives. The Protection pillar focuses on strengthening legal frameworks, institutional responses, and service provision for survivors of violence against women and conflict-related sexual violence, including legal reform, specialized courts, survivor-centered health services, shelter provision, and education for girls in shelters. Prevention addresses structural and emerging security risks by promoting women's roles in peacebuilding and countering violent extremism, integrating gender perspectives into climate change and security policies, combating electronic violence against women, and engaging men and community leaders in violence prevention efforts. Relief and Recovery includes comprehensive post-conflict support through psychosocial and trauma care, livelihood and vocational support for IDPs and returnees, safe housing, legal aid, reintegration programs, and expanded maternal and reproductive health services for conflict-affected women and girls. (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2025)

The Kurdistan Regional Action Plan establishes the High Council for Women and Development (the High Council) as the central coordinating and monitoring body responsible for overseeing implementation, data collection, reporting, and evaluation across all four pillars. The plan includes a detailed result framework, logframe, indicators, baseline and endline measurements, and a centralized monitoring and evaluation system supported by annual reporting, mid-term and endline evaluations. (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2025)

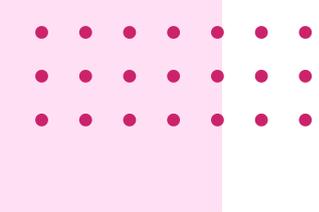
Similar to the “women’s departments” mentioned in INAP III, the Kurdistan Regional Action Plan mentions “gender units” within ministries. These are explicitly referenced as a key priority under the protection pillar with an aim of ensuring that 80% of ministries have functional gender units, and a minimum 10% of the national budget is gender-responsive (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2025, p.6). The logframe includes a section on operationalizing the mandates of gender units for enhanced WPS follow-up. According to the logframe, the Ministry of Interior is responsible for issuing binding policies for mandates for gender units. The High Council is responsible for overseeing the drafting of workplans for operationalizing the mandates for gender units, and the Ministry of Planning for ensuring budget allocations to the units. (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2025, p.11)

Overall, the Kurdistan Regional Plan presents a comprehensive and pillar-consistent regional articulation of the WPS agenda.

3.6. Other National Strategies

In addition, other national strategies have been adopted in recent years that influence the landscape of women's rights and protection in Iraq, directly or indirectly contributing to the WPS agenda in Iraq.

In collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund, the WFCD led the implementation of the National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women and Girls (2018–2030). The strategy focuses on preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in everyday and conflict contexts. The strategy does not explicitly refer to the WPS agenda or UNSCR 1325, but it includes a section on the causes of violence against women and girls in conflict, emergency and crisis situations. Rather than addressing the role of women as



active agents in peacebuilding, it addresses sexual violence as a weapon of war and the impact of conflicts on increasing violence.

Overall, the strategy emphasises the prevention of violence through the economic and educational empowerment of women, the changing of harmful cultural norms, and the strengthening of the family as a foundation for community peace. It calls for protective measures, including reviewing discriminatory legislation, enacting domestic violence laws, enhancing law enforcement capacities, and expanding services for survivors such as shelters, health services, psychosocial support, and legal assistance. It also prioritises the development of reliable data systems and the establishment of clear governance and coordination structures to ensure effective implementation.

The WFCD initiated the formulation of the National Strategy for Iraqi Women (2023–2030) and supervised its preparation. Anchored in the second INAP (2021–2024) and the National Human Rights Plan (2021–2025), the strategy places the WPS agenda and the implementation of UNSCR 1325 at its core. It aims to strengthen women’s role in peacemaking and peacekeeping, ensure their representation at all levels of decision-making related to peace and negotiations, and strengthen the capacities of women leaders as peace mediators. It is structured around five pillars: 1) political participation and empowerment, 2) economic empowerment, 3) social empowerment, 4) protection from violence, and 5) climate change management. The strategy seeks to expand women’s presence in leadership and decision-making, promote their economic and social rights, strengthen legal and social protections, and address emerging challenges such as environmental risks. In doing so, it

presents a comprehensive framework for advancing equality among men and women, and women’s empowerment in Iraq.

This chapter presented an overview of the core concepts and legal frameworks influencing the WPS agenda within the Iraqi context, including progress and the ongoing challenges. This establishes the framework within which the research questions outlined in the next chapter will be addressed.

4. Research Objective

This participatory and gender-sensitive research seeks to generate actionable evidence to support the effective implementation of the INAP in Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Action Plan in Kurdistan Region on WPS and enhance the responsiveness of local governance to the needs of women, especially in fragile and conflict-affected areas. The research aims to inform practical strategies for strengthening the role of the WFCD in Federal Iraq and the High Council in Kurdistan Region by identifying institutional and systemic factors that shape their ability to advance women’s peace, security, and empowerment and translating national WPS commitments into recommendations that responds to the needs of different governorates.

4.1. Key Research Questions

How can the institutional capacity and coordination mechanisms of the WFCD in Federal Iraq and the High Council in Kurdistan Region be strengthened to enhance gender-responsive local governance and inform the implementation of Iraq’s WPS commitments?



Sub-questions:

- What are institutional capacities? How could they be improved?
- What challenges do staff face?
- How can coordination mechanisms be improved?
- What are the most pressing needs of women with respect to peace, security, and empowerment?
- How can the WFCD and the High Council be better resourced, trained, and supported to implement the regional WPS agenda?

5. Methodology

5.1. Case Selection

The WFCDs were selected as the core cases of this study due to their central role as governmental actors responsible for advancing women's rights and promoting equality between men and women at governorate level in Iraq. As the WFCDs operate at the interface between national policy frameworks and local governance, they are key to understanding how WPS commitments are translated into practice. However, the institutional structure, mandates, and reporting lines of the WFCDs are not easily recognizable from the outside, which can create challenges for non-governmental organizations seeking to engage with relevant counterparts across different governorates. The initial case selection criteria aimed to include WFCDs from both Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region to allow for a comprehensive national perspective. During the research process, it became evident that the institutional architecture differs significantly between Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, requiring an adaptation of the selection

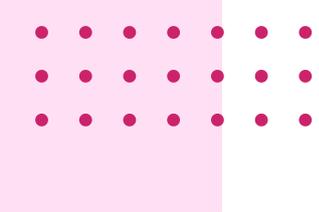
criteria. Consequently, all WFCDs in Federal Iraq were included, although response rates varied across governorates.

In the Kurdistan Region, there are no WFCD. However, the Kurdistan Regional Action Plan aims to operationalize "gender units" with a similar structure as the WFCD. At the time of the research, the gender units could not be reached. Therefore, the High Council for Women and Development was selected as the most relevant stakeholder due to its overarching mandate for women's affairs across the region. This adjusted case selection reflects the study's aim to identify institutional and systemic factors shaping the capacity of governmental mechanisms to effectively advance women's peace, security, and empowerment, while transparently accounting for structural differences across governance contexts.

5.2. Data Collection

For primary data collection, the research uses a nationwide online survey combined with key informant interviews (KIIs) and an in-person Focus Group Discussion (FGD).

The online survey was conducted between August and October 2025, reaching 131 responses. For the surveys, a link to a Google form survey was sent to the heads of the WFCD in Federal Iraq. After an initial low response rate, an online information event was held on Mercy Path, the SAWA project, and the research, to which the heads of the departments were invited. Following this, the number of responses increased, though not every governorate chose to participate. The three-month data collection period and the easy accessibility of the Google form enabled a large sample size, enhancing the generalisability of the results. The results are aggregated and the anonymity of participants ensured. The questionnaire contains a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions. Before



the survey was distributed to WFCD employees, it was reviewed with the Head of the WFCD Baghdad Governorate, to ensure its relevance and appropriateness.

Futhermore, 15 semi-structured in-depth KIIs were conducted in December 2025 and January 2026. The open-ended questions allow the research team to discover and gain an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and opinions, and explore new themes inductively. Invitations were sent to all WFCDs, the NDIW, and the Women's Affairs Department in the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA) in Federal Iraq, as well as the High Council for Women and Development in the Kurdistan Region to ensure comprehensive representation of women's rights work throughout Iraq. Those who participated in the interviews were high-ranking representatives of WFCDs across different governorates and MOLSA from Federal Iraq and the High Council from Kurdistan Region. As Chilmeran highlights, international attention and resources for the WPS agenda have been unevenly distributed, with a strong focus on Baghdad, Erbil, and post-ISIS areas, while southern governorates have been comparatively overlooked despite facing similar challenges. This uneven distribution has produced a gap in women's rights initiatives, leaving women in the south feeling excluded, underrepresented, and disconnected from broader NGO programming (Chilmeran, 2022, p.760). By covering all governorates, the methodology aims to overcome this imbalance, capture diverse regional perspectives, and generate evidence that reflects the needs and priorities of women across the entire country. Additionally, a representative from the Department for Women Affairs from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs was interviewed.

The FGD was held with staff members of the WFCD in Baghdad in January 2026. Group interaction was used to reflect on research findings from different perspectives, validate the results, and explore practice-oriented recommendations.

5.3. Limitations

This study faces several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. For the nationwide survey, initial feedback was obtained to ensure applicability and relevance. However, since it was obtained from the Head of the WFCD in Baghdad Governorate, it may contribute to a Baghdad-centered lens. Based on Mercy Path's experience, technical barriers to the online survey are not expected, as staff members of local government agencies typically have access to computers or smartphones. However, internet access may not always be consistent. This risk is mitigated by the survey's flexible design, which allows respondents to complete it at their convenience. Prior to the launch of the nationwide survey, an information session was held to brief Heads of the WFDs on the research objectives, methodology, and potential risks. This session aimed to ensure informed consent and to encourage participation. Participation in the online survey was voluntary, and not all governorates opted to take part. Consequently, the response distribution is uneven, with a higher concentration of responses from Baghdad, Nineveh, and Anbar, and fewer responses from Dhi Qar, Babylon, Karbala, and Diwaniyah. Variations in response rates should be interpreted in light of differences in governorate size, staffing levels within the departments, and the resulting option of eligible respondents.



A key limitation to the KIIs relates to institutional and geographical access in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. As there are no WFCDs in the Kurdistan Region, it was not possible to include heads of this department in the KIIs. Instead, a representative from the High Council was interviewed, whose mandate covers the entire Kurdistan Region rather than a single governorate. In addition, Mercy Path has to date been more active in Federal Iraq, which made it more challenging to identify and reach responsible stakeholders in the Kurdistan Region for participation in the research. Consequently, the study includes a higher number of interviews conducted in Federal Iraq than in the Kurdistan Region. This implies that the findings may reflect perspectives, institutional structures, and operational realities in Federal Iraq more strongly than those in the Kurdistan Region. To mitigate this risk, the analysis transparently distinguishes between data and findings referring to Federal Iraq and those referring to the Kurdistan Region. The researchers are deeply grateful for the participation of stakeholders from Kurdistan Region and for the newly established connections, which may facilitate more balanced engagement in future research.

As the National Directorate for Iraqi Women (NDIW) is a key stakeholder for women's affairs in Federal Iraq and the counterpart to the High Council in Kurdistan Region, the research would have significantly profited from including them in the KIIs. However, despite multiple attempts and the establishment of initial communication, an interview with the NDIW could not be conducted within the timeframe of this research.

Furthermore, the in-person FGD will take place in Baghdad with staff members of the

local WFCD. However, the survey and KIIs are conducted nationwide to compensate for this geographical concentration.

It should be noted that a considerable share of participants are female, which enriches the discussion but may not fully reflect the perspectives of male counterparts.

Additionally, the close collaboration with WFCD presents both strengths and limitations. While participants may be hesitant to critically reflect on challenges such as capacity gaps, this collaboration can also foster ownership, encourage high participation, and thereby increase the quality of responses.

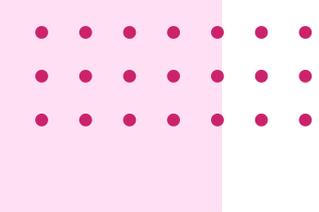
5.4. Ethical Considerations

Before conducting the research, an approval letter from the WFCD was obtained from the Baghdad Governorate.

Participation in the research is voluntary, and informed consent is obtained before data collection begins. Consent includes information on who will access the provided information, how it will be used, and the efforts that will be taken to maintain confidentiality. To minimize additional stress, interviews are conducted at a time convenient for the participant. Only the minimum necessary identifiable information is collected to minimize the risk of a confidentiality breach. Information provided during the interviews is aggregated to ensure anonymity.

5.5. Data Analysis

This research uses a mixed-methods approach. The survey data were analyzed primarily using descriptive quantitative



statistics. Selected quotes from open-ended written responses were included to contextualize and illustrate the key findings. Data collected through KIIs was analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which enabled a nuanced exploration of the dynamics and influences surrounding the WFC in different governorates. To ensure consistency, the transcripts were color coded in MAXQDA, using a prepared set of codes. A few unexpected patterns emerged from the free-response options of the semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions that did not fully align with the prepared categories. These patterns were summarized under the code "emerging topics."

This mixed-methods approach combines quantitative data with qualitative insights to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these complex issues. Triangulating and explaining the data obtained from this wide range of participants ensures the results will be useful for practitioners involved with the WPS agenda in Iraq.

6. Key Findings

The following chapter presents the key results that emerged across the different data sources, starting with the nationwide online survey.

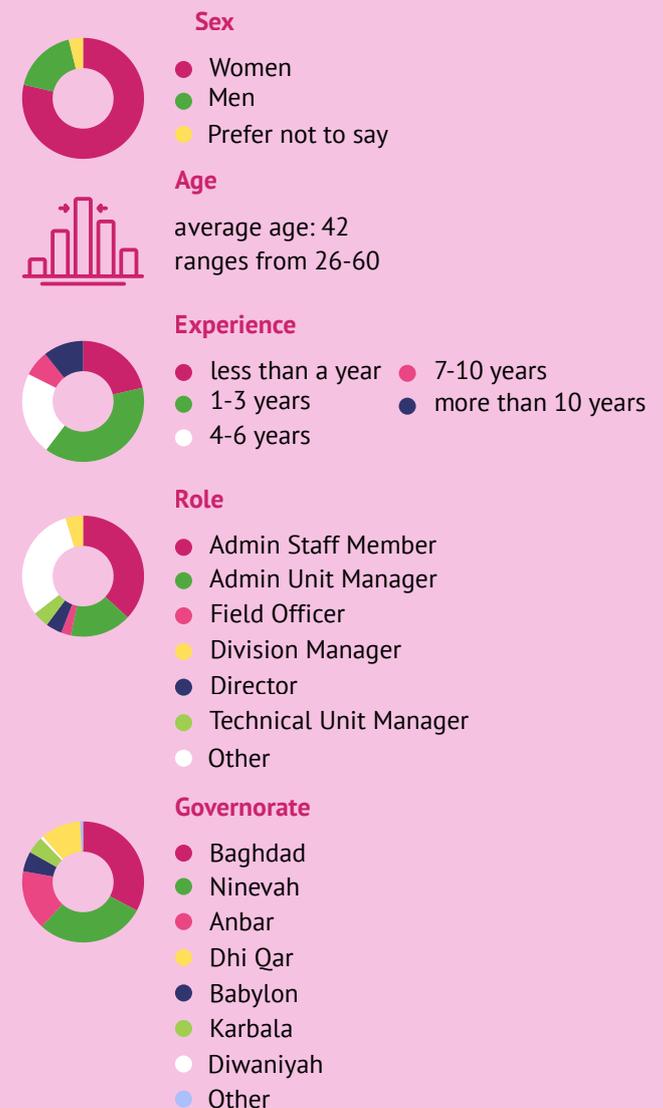
6.1. Online Survey

This chapter outlines the results of the survey, first describing the demographic profile of the respondents and then presenting the key findings.

A total of 131 staff from the WFC Department participated in the online survey between 01.09.2025 to 15.10.2025. Their age ranged between 26 and 60. They were 103 female,

23 male staff members and 5 preferred not to specify their gender. They came from at least 7 governorates with one not mentioning their governorate. Participants represented a broad spectrum of roles. Most participants held administrative or management positions, while smaller proportions worked in programmatic, technical, social work, field roles, and specialized positions such as women’s affairs leadership, engineering, health, legal, and liaison functions.

Figure 2: Demographic Information on Participants



Institutional Capacities

Fifty-three per cent confirmed that they had received formal training related to their work in the past two years. The topics covered in the training varied, with violence against women and protection being mentioned most frequently (22 times). Fourteen participants mentioned training on the National Strategy for Iraqi Women and Strategic Plans for Women's Rights. WPS, including training on UNSCRs 1325 and 2250, was mentioned 13 times; project design, strategy and planning, 12 times; and preventing or countering violent extremism, 11 times. Topics that were mentioned less frequently include, among others, case management, soft skills, IT skills and digital safety.

The average self-assessment results show strong confidence in Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) skills, and moderate confidence in proposal writing, project management, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, preventing violence against women, and advocacy and public campaigns. Staff members expressed the least confidence in their fundraising skills, indicating that they require external support in this area.

When asked which types of training or capacity building would be most helpful, the majority of staff answered case management for survivors of violence against women and girls (83 times), legal frameworks on women's rights (67 times), M&E (52 times), communication and media skills (45 times), proposal writing and project design (42 times), digital skills (39 times), working in conflict-affected settings (39 times), and other (9 times).

Challenges

After analyzing all the responses to the question about the top three challenges staff

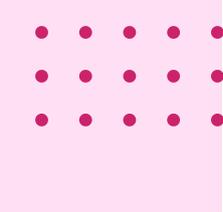
members face in performing their roles effectively, seven major categories of challenges emerged. The four most dominant categories were:

- Lack of financial and material resources (70%)
- Lack of institutional, moral, and leadership support (55%)
- Shortage of qualified staff and lack of capacity development (40%)
- Cultural and social barriers, including stigma around reporting violence against women (VAW), families blocking women from participating in programs, lack of community awareness about women's rights, negative perception of the women's department, weak coordination, and bureaucracy (25%)

Coordination

In terms of coordination, the staff assessment reveals a wide range of responses on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). On average, the WFCD staff coordinates frequently with NGOs and CSOs (3.63) and local government departments (3.56), and sometimes with other WFCDs (3.41).

An overwhelming majority identified the lack of resources as the main barrier to coordination with other stakeholders (94 times mentioned). Other barriers mentioned include, for example, limited leadership support (53 times), political and administrative obstacles (31 times), a lack of staff (26 times), and other issues (seven times). These include, for example, difficulties to receive official documents, lack of transportation, and lack of petty cash.



Positive Examples of Partnerships and Coordination

"The Women, Family, and Children Department recently coordinated a **partnership with the Directorate of Education and Civil Society Organizations** to implement a **psychological and educational support program for young girls**. The program included **educational workshops on mental health, leadership skills empowerment, in addition to awareness campaigns for parents**. This collaboration resulted in **raising the level of awareness and enhancing girls' participation in community activities**" - Babylon

1. In the field of **Health**: The Department **coordinates daily with primary healthcare units to follow up on cases of malnutrition** among children or pregnant women, where data is exchanged immediately, and families are directed to benefit from available health and nutrition programs.
2. In the field of **Social Protection**: The Department **periodically collaborates with the Social Protection Department to document cases of domestic violence and make direct referrals for legal support and financial assistance** to affected families.
3. In the field of **Civil Society**: The Department **coordinates with local non-governmental organizations to organize daily or weekly awareness sessions for mothers and children on child rights, positive parenting, and the risks of school dropouts**" - Anbar

"A **successful partnership with a local charity organization to provide training courses in embroidery and sewing for female breadwinners and widows** in the area. 50 women were able to participate in the courses and acquire new skills that helped them **improve their family income and increase their self-confidence**. This project contributed to **strengthening social cohesion and empowering women in the community**" - Baghdad

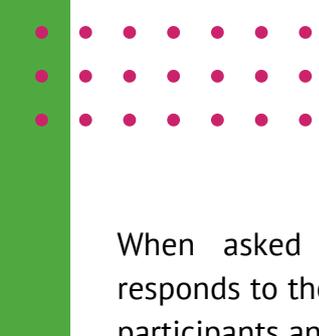
When asked about successful coordination or partnerships, respondents mentioned collaborating with community police, ministries, government departments, civil society, NGOs, and international organizations. The collaborations mentioned included workshops, trainings, and awareness activities; women's empowerment and protection; child protection and youth support; and service provision (health, social, and economic).

Support to Local Women

On a scale from 1 (not needed at all) to 5 (very much needed), the survey shows that staff members believe women in the communities they serve need support in several areas. The most pressing need is economic empowerment and livelihood

support (4.24), followed by psychosocial and health services (3.98), awareness of rights, including human and women's rights (3.89), participation in peacebuilding and decision-making (3.85), access to education and skills development (3.82), strengthening women's civil society organizations (3.80), digital literacy and access to technology (3.78), access to justice and legal reform (3.74), engaging men and boys in efforts for gender equality (3.65), access to safe public spaces and mobility (3.63), protection from violence against women (3.52), and support for women affected by displacement (IDPs, returnees, and refugees) (3.47).



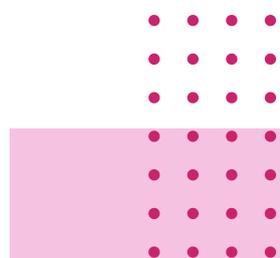
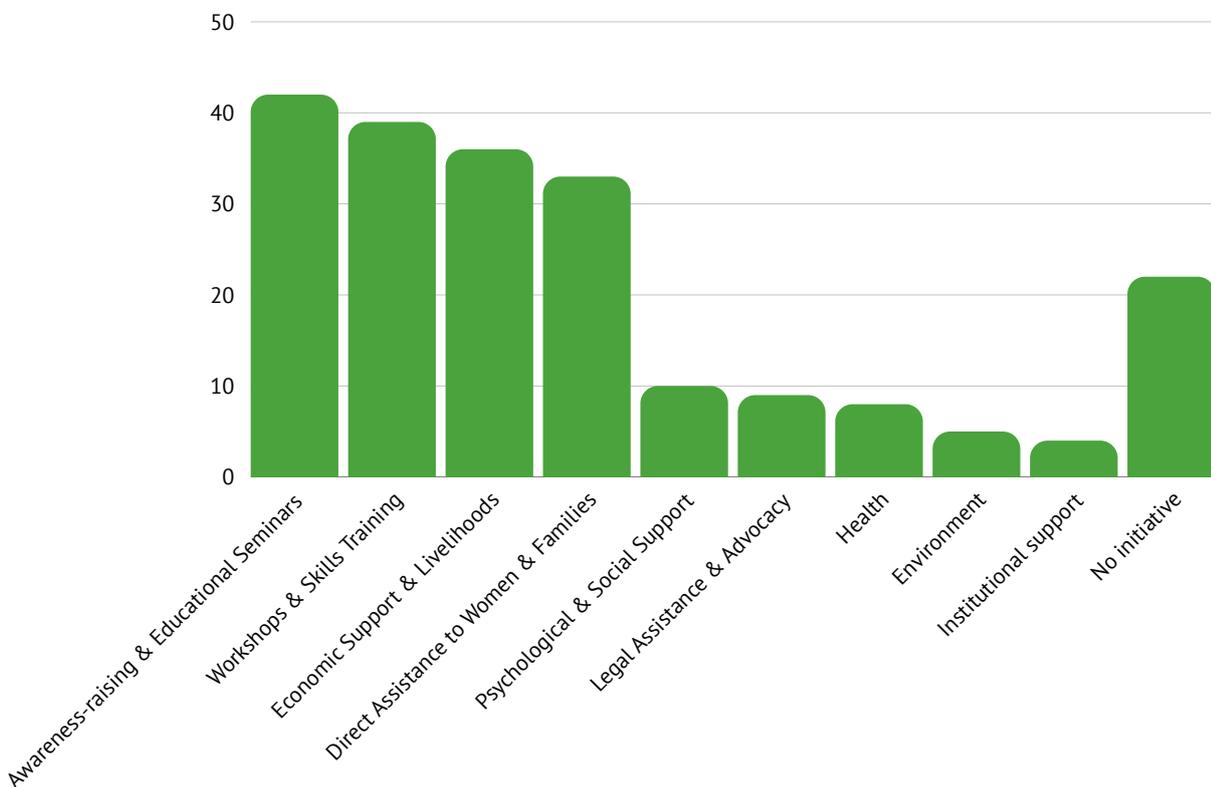


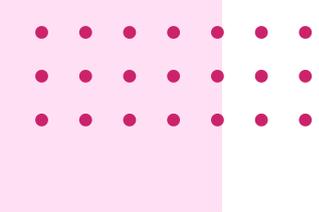
When asked how well their department responds to the needs of women in their area, participants answered with an average of 3.53 on a scale from 1 (very poorly) to 5 (very well).

According to the staff, the most underserved groups of women are rural women (mentioned 108 times), widows (74 times), female-headed households (72 times), women with disabilities (67 times), displaced women (52 times), and adolescent girls (41 times). Other groups include orphans (mentioned once) and women from modest families (mentioned once).

Respondents reported a diverse range of initiatives within their office to support women, with most activities focused on awareness-raising and education, skills training, and economic and livelihood support (see Figure 2). Direct assistance to vulnerable women and families was also commonly mentioned. Fewer initiatives addressed psychological and social support, legal aid, health, environmental actions, and institutional support. Notably, a significant number of offices reported no specific initiatives targeting women.

Figure 3: Recent WFCDs Initiatives to Support Women





Examples of Successful Initiatives

“The “My Project in My Hand” initiative, which trained women in local production skills (such as sewing, homemade food production, and handicrafts), while providing digital platforms for marketing through social media” - Anbar

“Extending a helping hand to widows and divorced women and striving to meet their rights, such as land plots for this segment. And encouraging and utilizing their talents and independent work to support them in society” - Dhi Qar

“The ‘Women’s Empowerment in Society’ initiative aims to support women in the New Baghdad district through: 1. Providing training courses in life and professional skills; 2. Offering suitable job opportunities; 3. Providing legal and psychological consultations; 4. Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. The goal is to enhance the role of women in society and empower them economically and socially.” - Baghdad

“The Women, Family and Children Department addressed the challenges faced by rural women, including difficult living conditions and climate change issues such as the drying of the marshes, high temperatures, and water scarcity, and discussed the use of alternative solutions like solar energy and well drilling, among others.” - Dhi Qar

Iraqi National Action Plan

When asked how familiar participants are with Iraq’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security on a scale from 1 (not at all familiar) to 5 (extremely familiar), participants’ answers ranged from extremely familiar to not at all familiar, with an average of 2,74 (see Figure 3).

The most relevant NAP-WPS priority areas differ among the governorates. The most important ones overall are economic empowerment (31%), women’s participation in decision-making (29%), and preventing VAW (27%). The survey results demonstrate varying response rates across different governorates. Table 1 illustrates the priorities for the governorates as percentages instead of total numbers to enable comparison.

Figure 3. Familiarity with the Iraqi National Action Plan

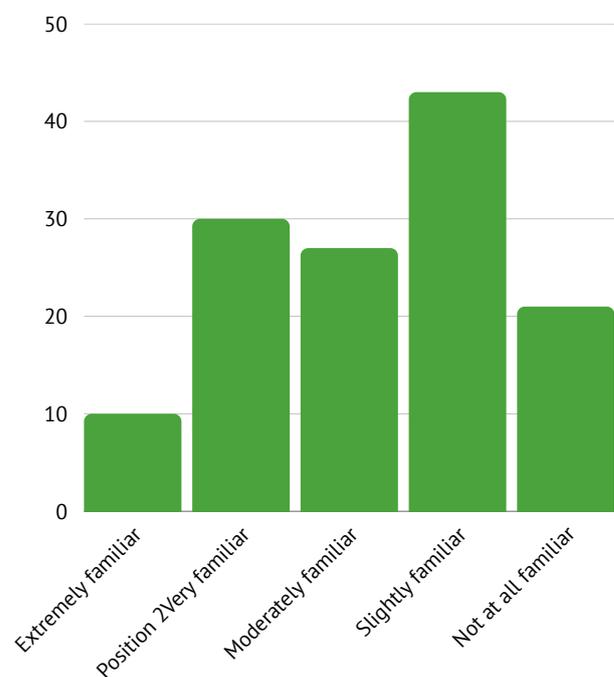


Table 1: NAP-WPS Priority Areas by Governorate

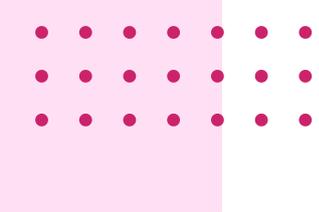
Governorate	Access to legal Justice	Economic Empowerment	Women's Participation in Decision-making	Preventing VAW	Protection of women human rights defenders	Others: Improve environmental situation	Total
Anbar	10%	35%	25%	20%	10%	-	100%
Diwaniyah	-	-	100%	-	-	-	100%
Babylon	-	29%	43%	14%	14%	-	100%
Baghdad	7%	37%	21%	35%	-	-	100%
Dhi Qar	7%	36%	29%	29%	-	-	100%
Karbala	-	33%	33%	33%	-	-	100%
Ninevah	16%	21%	42%	18%	3%	-	100%
Unknown Governorate	-	-	-	-	-	100%	100%
Overall	10%	31%	29%	27%	3%	1%	100%

Respondents overwhelmingly identified financial resources as the most critical form of additional support needed to better implement the NAP-WPS, with 55 mentions. Next were economic empowerment programs (22 mentions) and training and capacity-building initiatives (21 mentions). Additionally, respondents emphasized the importance of strengthening women's participation in decision-making processes (18 mentions) and enhancing efforts to prevent and respond to violence against women, as well as improving protection services (17 mentions).

In summary, the results of the online survey indicate that respondents have varying degrees of familiarity with Iraq's National Action Plan on WPS, with an average level of familiarity being moderate. Economic empowerment, women's participation in decision-making, and the prevention of violence against women

emerged as the most relevant priority areas overall, though governorate-level responses reflect differing local emphases. Respondents consistently identified insufficient financial resources as the primary constraint to effective NAP-WPS implementation, followed by gaps in economic empowerment programming and training opportunities. Overall, the findings highlight both recognition of core WPS priorities and persistent capacity and resource limitations affecting consistent implementation across governorates.

At the same time, respondents reported a range of successful initiatives across governorates, including effective coordination with government institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners, as well as targeted awareness-raising, economic empowerment activities, and localized prevention efforts, demonstrating existing capacity and good practice that can be built upon.



6.2. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Table 2 presents the number of coded segments from the KIIs transcripts by thematic code, disaggregated between Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. The codes are structured around four broad topic areas: (1) organizational structure and coordination; (2) institutional capacities and challenges; (3) needs of women with respect to peace, security, and empowerment; and (4) available and required resources, training, and support for the implementation of the INAP III.

In Federal Iraq, the highest number of coded segments is found under coordination (24). This is followed by challenges (19), structure (16), requested resources, training and support (15), and the capacity's sub-code contribution to the implementation of the INAP III (15). Additional codes and sub-codes include the needs of women regarding WPS and empowerment, capacities regarding the NAP/WPS, other emerging topics, activities, and available resources, training and support. Five additional codes reflecting MOLSA's perspective on the WFCDs are each represented by one coded segment.

In the Kurdistan Region, the number of coded segments is lower across all categories which reflects the smaller number of interviews and the different institutional setup in the region. Coordination, activities, other emerging topics and the sub-code about what helps women to feel secure and empowers them each have three coded segments. Structure, challenges, requested resources, training and support, and

the sub-code contribution to the implementation of the INAP III are each represented by two coded segments. One coded segment is recorded for available resources, training and support, and the subcodes knowledge of the NAP/ WPS, and participation in the development of INAP III.

The frequency of the codes does not provide information about the content or importance of the coded segments. The length of the coded segments varies. The content of the coded segments is further examined through qualitative content analysis in the discussion chapter.

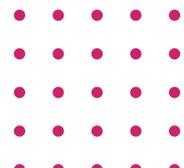
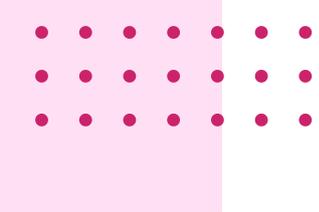


Table 2: Distribution of Coded Thematic Segments by Region

Codes	Number of coded segments in Federal Iraq	Number of coded segments in Kurdistan Region
Structure	16	2
Coordination	24	3
Activities	4	3
Challenges	19	2
Available Resources / Training / Support	4	1
Requested Resources / Training / Support	15	2
Capacities > Knowledge of the NAP / WPS	10	1
Capacities > Participation in the development of INAP III	7	1
Capacities > Contribution to the implementation of the INAP III	15	2
Needs of Women regarding WPS and Empowerment	5	-
Needs of Women regarding WPS and Empowerment > Limits women's participation in local decision-making and peacebuilding	10	2
Needs of Women regarding WPS and Empowerment > What helps women to feel secure and empowers them	14	3
Other Emerging Topics	5	3
Coordination between WFCD and MOLSA	1	-
Challenges (MOLSA perspective)	1	-
Requested resources for WFCD (MOLSA perspective)	1	-
Capacities > Knowledge of the NAP / WPS (MOLSA perspective)	1	-
Capacities > Contribution to INAP III (MOLSA perspective)	1	-



6.3. Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

The FGD was held in person with ten WFCD staff members from Baghdad Governorate, comprising five women and five men. It aimed to capture participants’ lived professional experiences and assess the accuracy and relevance of research findings from the nationwide online survey and KIIs. The FGD followed a semi-structured format. After an introductory presentation outlining the research key findings, participants were invited to reflect on whether these findings corresponded to their own experiences, to identify gaps or inaccuracies, and to discuss variations across governorates or professional roles. The final part of the discussion focused on generating practice-oriented recommendations for strengthening WFCDs, with specific attention to feasibility, and priority support needs from governmental and non-governmental stakeholders.

The FGD largely confirmed the preliminary research findings and underscored persistent structural and operational challenges affecting the effectiveness of WFCDs. Participants identified human resource constraints as a central limitation, including staff shortages, particularly at district level, gaps in role-specific qualifications, misalignment between staff specializations and assigned responsibilities, and high staff turnover, which undermines institutional continuity and reduces the long-term impact of training efforts. These constraints were described as directly limiting the departments’ ability to implement their mandates.

Financial and logistical limitations were identified as closely linked challenges. Participants reported insufficient budget allocations for activities and a lack of basic logistical support, particularly transportation, which restricts field engagement and in some cases requires staff to cover operational costs personally.

Participants emphasized a strong need for specialized, practice-oriented training and highlighted the absence of mechanisms to assess training effectiveness or ensure the application of acquired skills. This lack of monitoring was described as weakening institutional learning and performance improvement.

Participants also pointed to administrative challenges, including limited decision-making authority at lower administrative levels and the frequent assignment of tasks outside the core mandate, which disperses staff efforts and reduces institutional focus.

In terms of recommendations, the discussion converged on the need for systematic staff qualification and stabilization through continuous, role-specific training and measures to enhance staff retention and role clarity. This reflects a shared understanding that institutional strengthening requires sustained investment in human resources alongside financial and structural support.



7. Discussion

7.1. Federal Iraq

Structure Differences between Governorates

The organizational structures of the WFCDs across governorates display shared institutional logics and variations in scope, capacity, and formalization. All departments are situated under the Governor's Office and operate within a centralized administrative framework defined by national authorities. Governorates with more resources tend to have comparatively complex and differentiated structures, including four or more specialized departments or units that cover areas such as research, M&E, media and awareness, operations management, coordination, and technical support. These structures often emphasize clearer task distribution, alignment with national strategies (e.g., the National Strategy for Iraqi Women 2023–2030), and mechanisms to reduce overlap through specialization and staff training. Departments with two core units, in contrast, often face budgetary constraints and formal restrictions on establishing new units. These constraints limit institutional expansion and service delivery. Several departments have pursued adaptive strategies to compensate for structural limitations, including organizational restructuring, partnerships with CSOs, and utilizing voluntary advisory networks.

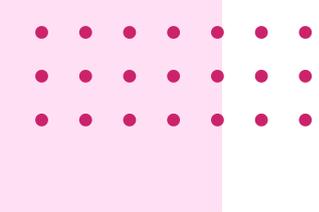
The absence of a fully unified national structure has contributed to variations in role definition and coordination mechanisms across governorates, occasionally leading to overlapping responsibilities or less clearly defined mandates. At the same time, these structural differences may also reflect diverse local contexts, including variations in

population size, geographic scope, and the specific needs and priorities faced by each governorate. Their organizational structures range from multiple specialized units with clearly delineated functions to more streamlined structures with units covering multiple responsibilities. This points to differentiated levels of institutional capacity and implementation potential across governorates.

Coordination and Communication

Internal coordination and communication are generally described as functional, relying on official correspondence, periodic meetings, and increasingly on digital tools such as WhatsApp groups to facilitate rapid information exchange. Several governorates have institutionalized internal coordination through the appointment of focal points or representatives in districts and sectoral institutions, enabling vertical communication. Where organizational structures are more differentiated and leadership engagement is strong, internal task allocation and coordination are perceived as clearer and more consistent. However, the online survey points to a more irregular coordination with other WFCDs across governorates in comparison to external communication. Qualitative data from individual interviews also indicate fragilities in coordination across governorates, including disruptions caused by interpersonal conflicts and weakened communication channels.

While survey responses suggest relatively frequent coordination with local government departments and NGOs/CSOs, the interview data indicate different communication approaches and outcomes for different WFCDs.



External coordination and communication with government departments and national-level bodies follow more formalized pathways, primarily mediated through the Governor’s Office and/ or official letters and complemented by electronic communication platforms such as WhatsApp. Many WFCDs report regular coordination with ministries and specialized units (e.g. health, education, work), as well as direct technical guidance from the NDIW. Engagement with CSOs and NGOs is more uneven. While some governorates maintain active partnerships through electronic coordination groups, joint committees, memoranda of understanding and regular meetings, others report more limited cooperation. This is often dependent on the initiative of individuals and the capacity of local organisations.

Respondents in the online survey overwhelmingly identified the lack of resources as key barriers to effective coordination. Additional obstacles included limited leadership support, political and administrative constraints, and staff shortages, alongside practical challenges such as difficulties obtaining official documents, insufficient transportation means and budget. Despite these constraints, survey respondents highlighted a range of successful coordination experiences, including partnerships with community police, ministries, government departments, civil society actors, NGOs, and international organizations.

Overall, the combined findings suggest that WFCD’s coordination is best understood as a context-sensitive and resource-dependent practice rather than a fully uniform or comprehensive system.

While certain coordination mechanisms are clearly institutionalized across governorates, most notably the reliance on official letters and governorate-level authorization, many coordination practices remain adaptive. Differences between governorates reflect variations in institutional authority, leadership engagement, civil society ecosystems, geographic scale, and available resources. While the qualitative data reveal the underlying structural and relational factors that shape how coordination is actually enacted on the ground, the survey findings reflect the ways in which staff navigate existing constraints to sustain coordination.

Main Challenges

Across governorates, WFCDs face interrelated challenges spanning resources, institutional capacity, and socio-cultural constraints. Financial and material limitations are the most pervasive, restricting program implementation, trainings, field activities, and national strategy execution. This finding is supported by survey responses, KIIs and the FGD. These constraints are compounded by institutional challenges, including frequent staff turnover, limited incentives, and shortages of specialized staff, which undermine continuity and technical expertise. Bureaucratic complexity, unclear mandates, and overlapping responsibilities further slow implementation and weaken coordination, with governorate-specific examples such as stalled shelter openings for victims of domestic violence or restricted approval to conduct field activities. The interviews highlight socio-cultural barriers, especially patriarchal norms, tribal dynamics, and stigma around violence against women, further limit participation and departmental legitimacy. This is in line with survey-reported stigma on reporting violence against women,



community resistance, a negative perception of the women's department, and weak awareness of women's rights. Overall, these findings suggest that WFCD's challenges are systemic and mutually reinforcing, with resource scarcity being the most pressing one.

Institutional Authority and Leadership Support

WFCDs face ongoing constraints in institutional authority and leadership support, which shape their operational effectiveness across governorates. Interviews indicate that departments often operate with limited formal powers, requiring approvals for field activities and program implementation, while bureaucratic complexity and overlapping responsibilities can slow decision-making. Leadership support varies, and stronger engagement from governors or ministries facilitates funding, strategy implementation, and inter-agency coordination. Survey data confirm that over half of respondents experience restricted decision-making, limited recognition, and varying leadership support, highlighting structural and administrative limitations. The FGD further notes that employees at lower administrative levels may lack sufficient authority, and that task allocation outside the scope of their responsibilities can negatively affect their performance. Together, these findings suggest that enhancing institutional authority and leadership engagement would strengthen WFCD's capacity to fulfill their mandates effectively.

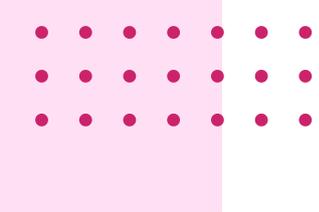
Resources, Training, and Support: Analysis of Institutional Capacity and Gaps

Analysis of the KIIs, supported by FGD findings, highlights a range of structural and operational factors that influence the ability of departments to effectively carry out their mandates.

While existing efforts demonstrate commitment and adaptability, the current situation limits the potential for sustained and scaled impact.

Access to stable financial resources and capacity-building opportunities varies across governorates, contributing to differences in operational effectiveness. Departments make constructive use of cooperation with CSOs to implement activities and share costs, particularly in contexts of constrained public budgets. However, these cooperations vary due to the different CSO landscapes in the governorates. Community contributions and self-initiated mechanisms across governorates reflect local initiative and responsiveness.

KIIs consistently point to the importance of strengthening financial and human resource support to enhance departmental performance. The allocation of dedicated budgets within governorate planning processes is widely viewed as essential to ensure continuity of activities, extend services to underserved areas, and support the implementation of national strategies. Alongside financial resources, respondents emphasize the value of continuous and specialized training, particularly for newly appointed staff, to reinforce role clarity, technical competencies, and institutional continuity. Not all KIIs specify training topics. However, several interviews identify capacity-building needs, including training on the implementation of national plans and strategies, communication and time management, advocacy and awareness campaigns, policy engagement and women's leadership, working with returnees and vulnerable populations, and the provision of legal and psychological support for abused women, alongside calls for continuous, job-relevant, and specialized training.



These findings are supported by the online survey, which shows that just over half of respondents received formal training in the past two years, most often on violence against women, protection, the National Strategy for Iraqi Women, WPS, project design, and preventing violent extremism. Less common were topics such as case management, soft skills, and digital safety. Staff most frequently expressed needs for training in case management for survivors of violence, women’s legal rights, M&E, communication and media, proposal writing, project design, digital skills, and working in conflict-affected settings. This highlights a demand for systematic, practice-oriented capacity development aligned with their responsibilities.

KIIs emphasized that incentives and measures promoting staff stability could maximize the impact of capacity-building. They also highlighted the importance of administrative and political support from higher authorities, including clear mandates, sufficient authority, and streamlined approvals. Several governorates noted the need to improve access to specialized services, such as legal and psychological support for vulnerable women, and identified women’s economic empowerment, including private-sector engagement, as an area for further development.

FGD findings align closely with the KIIs, reinforcing the need for training that is closely aligned with job functions and contextual realities. The FGD also noted the need to assess the effectiveness and practical application of training.

Overall, the findings suggest that with more structured resourcing, targeted capacity development, and strengthened institutional

support, departments would be better positioned to build on existing efforts and deliver more sustainable and equitable outcomes.

Factors Limiting Women’s Participation in Local Decision-making and Peacebuilding

The KIIs indicate that women’s participation in local decision-making and peacebuilding is constrained by a combination of structural, socio-cultural, political, and individual factors. Deeply rooted customs, tribal norms, and patriarchal attitudes across governorates consistently favor men in leadership and political roles, limiting social acceptance of women’s public participation. These norms are reinforced by weak political awareness among women, low self-confidence shaped by social pressure, and exposure to harassment, media incitement, and intimidation, which discourage women from seeking or maintaining leadership positions. Structurally, the absence or lacking enforcement of laws that mandate genuine female representation, alongside gaps in legislation protecting women’s and children’s rights, undermines women’s sense of security and limits their engagement. Politically, women’s participation is shaped by institutional and party-political dynamics that can limit access to decision-making bodies, including limited opportunities for performance-based advancement and the influence on appointments.

While quota systems have contributed to maintaining women’s representation, they are partially perceived as emphasizing numerical inclusion rather than enabling women’s full and effective participation in decision-making processes. Material constraints, including lack of financial support for candidates and initiatives, further limit participation. Together, these factors interact to reduce women’s effective involvement in peacebuilding and





local governance, despite formal mechanisms intended to support inclusion.

Factors Strengthening Women's Participation in Local Decision-making and Peacebuilding

Building on the factors that limit women's participation, the KIIs also identify a set of enabling conditions that support women's effective engagement in local decision-making and peacebuilding. At the community level, family and social support emerge as foundational, as acceptance and trust from families and surrounding communities strengthen women's confidence and willingness to participate publicly. The presence of positive female role models further encourages broader participation by demonstrating viable pathways to leadership. Economic empowerment is consistently highlighted as a critical enabler, with access to job opportunities, small income-generating projects, and private sector engagement reducing women's economic dependence and increasing their autonomy. At the institutional level, support from higher authorities and local government is identified as decisive, particularly when accompanied by a supportive work environment, reduced tribal influence, and explicit endorsement of women's leadership. KIIs also emphasize the importance of legal and policy frameworks that protect women's rights and safety, alongside more effective implementation of existing laws, protection mechanisms, and shelters. Training and awareness-raising, targeting both women and decision-makers, are seen as essential to building skills, shifting attitudes, and promoting acceptance of women in leadership roles. Finally, psychological and social support, combined with the strategic use of media to challenge stereotypes and highlight women's

contributions, is viewed as key to strengthening women's self-confidence and sustaining their participation in peacebuilding and governance processes.

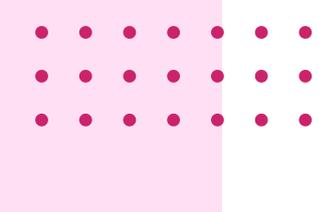
The Iraqi National Action Plan

Findings from the KIIs, complemented by the online survey, suggest that WFCD staff have a generally moderate but varied level of familiarity with Iraq's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. Several interviews indicate that experienced staff have developed a solid understanding of the plan through training, workshops, and the alignment of departmental workplans with national objectives, while newer staff would benefit from additional orientation and capacity strengthening. This is reflected in the survey results, where self-reported familiarity ranged across the scale, with an average score of 2.74 out of 5, pointing to a foundation of awareness that could be further consolidated.

Engagement in the development of INAP III also differed across governorates. In some cases, WFCDs contributed through national and subnational consultations, workshops, offering inputs on local priorities and implementation considerations. In other contexts, involvement was limited, reflecting the centralized nature of the planning process. As a result, some departments focus on developing locally adapted plans that align with the national framework.

WFCDs in some governorates report active contributions to the implementation of INAP III through awareness-raising activities, training courses, seminars, economic empowerment initiatives, protection and anti-violence programming, and coordination with government institutions, civil society, and





international partners. However, other WFCDs state that they do not participate directly in implementation but contribute with supervision and follow-up of the implementing bodies. Both KIIs and survey findings highlight opportunities to further strengthen implementation through enhanced resourcing, expanded mandates, and continued investment in staff capacities.

The online survey findings indicate partial and uneven alignment with the four pillars of UNSCR 1325 and the strategic priorities of INAP III. The average familiarity score of 2.74 reflects a moderate level of awareness of the NAP-WPS, with significant variation among respondents. This may constrain consistent implementation across governorates and is in line with challenges mentioned by participants such as a high staff turnover and the need for specialized skill training. Substantively, survey priorities align most strongly with the Participation, Protection, and Relief and Recovery pillars, as reflected in the emphasis on women's participation in decision-making (29%), prevention of violence against women (27%), and economic empowerment (31%). Financial resources were most frequently cited as a key form of additional support to advance implementation, followed by economic empowerment initiatives, training and capacity building, strengthened participation in decision-making, and enhanced protection and response services. Governorate-level variation in priorities suggests that context-specific differences are recognized and result in localized interpretations of INAP III.

Overall, the combined findings indicate that WFCDs are constructively engaged with INAP III, and that targeted investments in funding, capacity development, and decentralized

support would further enable consistent and effective implementation.

7.2. Kurdistan Region

Structure of the High Council for Women and Development

The KII indicate that the High Council for Women and Development (the High Council) is positioned as a high-level coordinating and advisory body within the Kurdistan Regional Government structure. It brings together eight line ministries alongside the General Secretariat. The General Secretariat oversees the High Council's internal functioning through formal internal instructions and is supported by specialized units, including research, planning, and development. Administratively, the High Council is centralized, with its main office located in Erbil, while maintaining subnational representation, such as in Suleimania, to ensure geographic reach and coordination across the Kurdistan Region.

In terms of activities, the High Council operates primarily at the policy and strategic level rather than as an implementing agency. Its core mandate involves developing strategies and policies related to women's rights, women's empowerment, and equality between men and women, and advocating for their endorsement and implementation within the government. While implementation is carried out through partnerships with governmental and non-governmental actors, the High Council plays a monitoring and accountability role, particularly in relation to agreed plans and targets. A key area of focus highlighted in the KII is advocacy around women's political participation.

Coordination and Communication

Internal coordination within the High Council is primarily structured around formal government procedures, complemented by informal communication for efficiency. Coordination with line ministries is conducted through official letters circulated to relevant ministries and departments, ensuring institutional compliance and clarity of roles. This formal process is supported by standing committees and high-level coordination platforms, as well as routine use of email and WhatsApp for follow-up and information exchange.

External coordination is characterized by strategic engagement with governmental, civil society, and international actors. The High Council maintains close and ongoing coordination with the NDIW in Federal Iraq, including regular coordination meetings facilitated by UN Women, which enable policy alignment between the Kurdistan Region and Federal Iraq. Engagement with INGOs, CSOs, and NGOs is largely conducted through email and digital platforms and focuses on partnership for implementation of strategies and policies developed by the High Council. Coordination with embassies and consulates is conducted through the Kurdistan Regional Government's Department of Foreign Relations. Overall, external coordination is consultative and inclusive, supporting advocacy, implementation through partners, and monitoring of priority commitments.

When asked directly about communication with the WFCDs, the respondent did not provide a definitive response. Instead, they described coordination with other ministries as occasional and issue-specific, suggesting that such communication is limited and not systematically institutionalized.

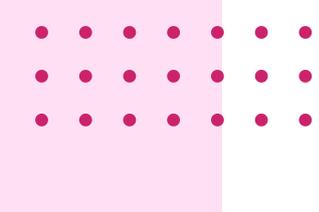
The respondent contrasted this with the High Council's more regular and structured coordination with the NDIW, which was presented as a primary partner due to closer alignment in mandates and strategic objectives.

Main Challenges

Similar to the WFCDs, the High Council faces interrelated financial, human resource, and contextual challenges. The most pressing constraint is inadequate and uncertain funding from government and international donors, which limits the translation of strategies and policies into implementation by partner actors. This is compounded by shortages in human and technical capacity, including understaffing and limited specialized expertise, particularly for advancing complex agendas such as the WPS agenda. These internal constraints are further exacerbated by broader political and economic instability, which can slow decision-making and implementation processes and may reduce the overall effectiveness of the High Council's strategic and advocacy work.

Resources, Training, and Support: Analysis of Institutional Capacity and Gaps

The KII indicates that the High Council's institutional capacity is constrained by gaps in resources and specialized expertise. While budgetary limitations remain a persistent challenge, the respondent emphasizes that funding alone is insufficient without corresponding technical skills, experience, and exposure to best practices. Key capacity gaps are identified in specialized thematic areas, particularly WPS and women's economic empowerment, where advanced technical knowledge is required to



inform effective advocacy and policy development. These findings suggest that targeted training, access to comparative experiences, and sustained technical support are critical to strengthening the High Council's ability to develop evidence-informed policies and advocate effectively on women's rights.

A comparison of institutional capacity across Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region highlights both shared constraints and context-specific differences. Both regions show budget constraints, limited human resources, and gaps related to specialized expertise. However, KIIs focusing on the WFCDs in Federal Iraq underscore the need for administrative and political support from higher authorities, including clear mandates, appropriate levels of authority, and streamlined approval processes. In contrast, the Kurdistan Region's Council exhibits comparatively stronger institutional positioning and mandate clarity.

Factors Limiting Women's Participation in Local Decision-making and Peacebuilding

The KII indicates that women's participation in local decision-making and peacebuilding is constrained by structural, contextual, and security-related factors. While the High Council tracks women's participation through a dashboard with multiple indicators, primarily focused on political participation, these data highlight persistent gaps across sectors. The respondent emphasizes that instability and insecurity at the local level significantly limit women's ability to engage in decision-making processes, particularly in volatile contexts. Fluctuating security conditions and broader instability do not necessarily reverse progress but act as blocking factors, restricting women's sustained and meaningful participation in

political and peacebuilding spaces despite existing monitoring and policy frameworks.

Factors Supporting Women's Participation in Local Decision-making and Peacebuilding

The KII highlights several supporting factors that can strengthen women's participation in local decision-making and peacebuilding. The respondent emphasizes the importance of institutional mechanisms, particularly quota systems, as a critical entry point for increasing women's political participation and overcoming structural barriers. Collective action also emerges as a key enabling factor, with coordinated efforts between government actors and civil society, especially women-led organizations, seen as enhancing effectiveness and impact. In addition, while legal frameworks are recognized as essential for advancing women's empowerment, the respondent stresses that their impact depends on the existence of clear and functional implementation mechanisms, underscoring the need to move beyond formal legislation toward practical enforcement and accountability.

The Iraqi National Action Plan

With respect to the INAP III, the High Council positions itself outside the formal development process, emphasizing non-interference and limited direct participation. The respondent notes that the INAP is developed independently to reflect the legal, political, and social context of Federal Iraq, which is described as significantly different from that of the Kurdistan Region. The High Council did not participate in federal drafting meetings and did not provide substantive inputs into the national plan. However, coordination occurs through information-sharing, including mutual presentation of draft plans and exchange of final versions.

This indicates a relationship based on alignment and transparency rather than joint ownership or co-development.

The Kurdistan Regional Action Plan

In contrast, the High Council plays a central and active role in the development and promotion of the Kurdistan Regional Action Plan.

The Kurdistan Regional Action Plan is described as having been developed through a participatory and inclusive process involving consultations with a wide range of stakeholders, whose inputs directly informed the plan's content. The process was supported by UN Women, reinforcing technical rigor and alignment with international frameworks. While the High Council is not an implementing agency, it assumes responsibility for mobilizing, disseminating, and advocating for the plan's implementation among partners and government actors. This positioning underscores the High Council's role as a strategic convener and coordinator, with strong ownership of the Kurdistan Regional Action Plan and a clear emphasis on participation, contextual relevance, and contribution at the regional level.

7.3. Comparison

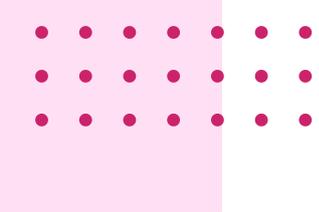
Institutional structures

The institutional structures of the WFCDs and the High Council cannot be directly compared, as they operate at different administrative levels and hold fundamentally different mandates, with the former functioning as decentralized, governorate-level implementing bodies and the latter positioned as a centralized, high-level strategic and coordinating institution. As a result, observed differences reflect institutional design rather than relative

performance or capacity. Future research would therefore benefit from a focused examination of the NDIW as the federal-level counterpart to the High Council, enabling a more appropriate comparison of mandate, authority, and coordination roles. In addition, further analysis of the gender units referenced in the Kurdistan Regional Action Plan would allow for a more meaningful comparison with WFCDs, particularly with regard to subnational implementation, coordination mechanisms, and operational capacity.

Coordination Practices

The research revealed differences and common challenges in communication practices across institutional contexts. Coordination in Federal Iraq is characterized by a mix of formalized procedures and adaptive, relationship-based practices. Internal coordination within WFCDs is generally functional, relying on official correspondence and informal digital communication. External coordination with ministries, NGOs, and CSOs is widespread but frequently procedural rather than institutionalized, with effectiveness dependent on leadership support, personal relationships, and available resources. Based on the research findings, coordination in the Kurdistan Region appears to be more centralized, which could be due to the High Council's position and mandate. The High Council employs formal government procedures, standing committees, and high-level platforms to coordinate with line ministries, complemented by digital communication for efficiency. The KII with a representative from the Kurdistan Region explicitly noted the use of email as part of routine coordination, a practice that was not directly emphasized in KIIs with



representatives from Federal Iraq. At the same time, the data collection process indicated that, in both the Kurdistan Region and Federal Iraq, reliance on email alone often proved insufficient for timely communication. In practice, follow-up through messaging applications or direct phone calls was commonly required to establish contact and facilitate engagement, suggesting that communication effectiveness is shaped less by formal channels than by personal contact and prevailing administrative practices.

Resources, Institutional Authority, and Capacity Constraints

Both Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region face persistent resource constraints, including limited and uncertain funding, staffing shortages, and gaps in specialized expertise. In Federal Iraq, these constraints are compounded by limited institutional authority, bureaucratic complexity, and reliance on higher-level approvals for routine activities. Variations in leadership support further shape departments' access to resources, decision-making power, and inter-agency coordination. Taken together, results imply that limitations in resources, institutional authority, and administrative processes interact in ways that shape the operating environment of the WFCDs, affecting their capacity to expand activities and ensure consistent implementation of national strategies. These findings support the request from WFCDs for targeted administrative strengthening and institutional support to enhance staff capacities, efficiency, coordination, and sustainability.

The High Council in Kurdistan Region faces similar budgetary and human resource limitations but operates from a position of comparatively stronger institutional authority and mandate

clarity. In Federal Iraq this could be more comparable to the NDIW, while the WFCDs take on a diverse range of activities, including implementation. While funding constraints limit the translation of strategies into action by partners, the High Council's placement at the executive level enables it to bring stakeholders together, advocate for policy priorities, and monitor commitments more effectively. Capacity gaps in specialized thematic areas, particularly WPS and women's economic empowerment, highlight the need for advanced technical support rather than administrative strengthening.

Women's Participation in Decision-making and Peacebuilding

Across both contexts, women's participation in local decision-making and peacebuilding is constrained by structural, socio-cultural, and political factors. In Federal Iraq, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, tribal dynamics, stigma around violence against women, lacking legal enforcement, and material constraints interact to limit women's effective participation in local decision-making and peacebuilding efforts.

In the Kurdistan Region, while socio-cultural barriers persist, the High Council's monitoring tools and quota-focused advocacy reflect a more institutionalized approach to tracking women's political participation. Future research would benefit from examining the corresponding monitoring and advocacy approaches of the NDIW, which would enable a comparison of federal and regional practices in this area. However, the findings indicate that instability and security dynamics remain critical blocking factors in Kurdistan Region, restricting sustained engagement even where policy frameworks and monitoring mechanisms are in place.

In both contexts, enabling factors, including economic empowerment, family and community support, institutional endorsement, effective legal implementation, and targeted training, are broadly aligned, suggesting shared pathways for strengthening participation despite contextual differences.

Engagement with National and Regional Action Plans

Engagement with the INAP on WPS further illustrates the contrast between decentralized implementation and centralized strategic ownership. In Federal Iraq, WFCDs demonstrate varying levels of familiarity and engagement with INAP III, with some actively contributing to implementation and others conducting supervisory roles. Resource limitations, uneven capacity, and centralized planning processes influence to which extent governorates are able to engage in implementation.

Regarding the INAP, the High Council positions itself outside the formal development, emphasizing contextual differences and non-interference, while maintaining alignment through mutual information-sharing with the NDIW in Federal Iraq. At the Kurdistan Regional level, however, the High Council assumes strong ownership of the Kurdistan Regional Action Plan, which was developed through an inclusive, participatory process.

Summary

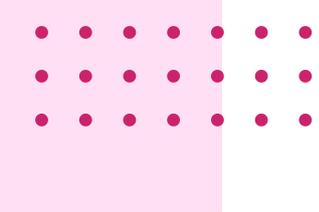
Overall, the comparison highlights a shared landscape of resource constraints and socio-cultural barriers, but divergent institutional models. Federal Iraq's WFCDs operate as decentralized, multi-functional units with uneven authority and capacity, requiring adaptive practices to navigate structural limitations. The High Council in Kurdistan

Region, by contrast, embodies a centralized, policy-oriented model with stronger mandate clarity and coordination capacity, yet limited direct implementation leverage. These differences suggest that strengthening women's governance and protection mechanisms in Iraq requires context-sensitive approaches: enhancing institutional authority, resourcing, and horizontal coordination for WFCDs in Federal Iraq, while investing in specialized expertise, partner implementation capacity, and enforcement mechanisms in the Kurdistan Region.

As stated before, further research examining the respective institutional counterparts, particularly the NDIW at the federal level and the gender units in the Kurdistan Region, would contribute to a more holistic understanding of how women's governance systems function across both contexts.

8. Conclusion

This research highlights the shared challenges and distinct institutional paths of women's governance in both Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. Across both contexts, WFCDs and the High Council face persistent resource constraints, capacity gaps, and socio-cultural barriers that affect their ability to support women's participation and protection. At the same time, the two systems reflect divergent institutional models. Federal Iraq's WFCDs operate as decentralized, multi-functional units with varying levels of authority and structural capacity, requiring adaptive practices to navigate operational limitations, while the High Council embodies a centralized, policy-oriented model with stronger mandate clarity and strategic coordination, without implementing activities themselves. These differences underscore the



need for context-sensitive approaches to strengthen women's governance and protection mechanisms across Iraq.

Survey and interview data indicate that priorities such as economic empowerment, women's participation in decision-making, and preventing violence against women are widely recognized, aligning with the pillars of UNSCR 1325 and the strategic objectives of INAP III and the Kurdistan Regional Action Plan. While there are notable examples of successful initiatives, such as coordinated awareness-raising, economic empowerment programming, and collaboration with civil society and government partners, effective and sustained implementation is often constrained by structural and operational limitations within the WFCDs, highlighting the importance of targeted administrative strengthening and capacity-building measures. The most pressing constraint for both, the WFCD and the High Council is the lack of sustainable and sufficient budget, which is also reflected by the lack of sufficient staff for the extent of responsibilities and the high staff turnover.

The research also points to broader institutional dynamics shaping governance effectiveness. Even if some communication channels were well established (e.g., between the NDIW and the High Council), communication challenges persist across both federal and regional contexts. One example is the reliance on official documents, and delays in response, which emphasize the practical importance of adaptive and multi-channel coordination strategies. While such practices promote ongoing communication in light of limited resources, they may be more likely to depend on personal relationships and individual engagement. Different administrative levels may benefit from a more

standardized, yet less formal, communication channel, such as the systematic use of email addresses to enhance efficiency and consistency.

The lack of direct access to the NDIW limits the ability of this research study to fully assess federal approaches to monitoring, advocacy, and coordination. Similarly, the gender units in the Kurdistan Region represent an important but underexplored component of regional structures that requires further research.

In sum, this study demonstrates that while both Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region have made significant strides in institutionalizing women's governance, ongoing constraints in resources, authority, and administrative processes limit the depth, consistency, and scalability of interventions. Strengthening institutional capacity, clarifying mandates, investing in technical expertise, and supporting partner implementation are critical steps for enhancing the effectiveness of women's governance structures. Future research examining federal and regional counterparts, alongside continued monitoring of WPS commitments would provide valuable insights to inform evidence-based interventions and policy reforms aimed at advancing women's participation in local decision-making and peacebuilding, protection, and their empowerment throughout Iraq.



9. Recommendations

Recommendations are marked according to indicative implementation timelines:

- ⌚ Actions suitable for short-term implementation (3–6 months)
- ⌚⌚ Actions requiring medium- to long-term implementation



For Both Governments (Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government)

- ⌚ **Establish regular communication between WFCDs and “gender units”** to exchange best practices and promote mutual learning.
- ⌚⌚ **Introduce standardized induction and continuous training pathways for staff** in all women’s affairs institutions, **alongside retention measures** to reduce turnover and preserve institutional memory.

For the Government of Federal Iraq

- ⌚ **Clarify and standardize WFCD mandates** through a Council of Ministers directive, defining roles, decision-making authority, and coordination responsibilities to strengthen institutional recognition and prevent tokenism.
- ⌚ Assume primary responsibility for the sustainable resourcing of WFCDs and **allocate dedicated budget lines at the governorate level** to ensure sustainable service delivery.
- ⌚ **Earmark part of this funding for INAP III indicators** to strengthen accountability and effective translation of WPS commitments into local action.
- ⌚⌚ **Institutionalize and resource Local Action Plans** developed by women-led civil society **by formally linking them to INAP III** and integrating them into governorate planning and budgeting while allowing flexibility for local priorities.
- ⌚⌚ **Built on INAP III by strengthening its monitoring framework through the addition of clear, time-bound targets and qualitative indicators** to capture program impact. Peer exchange with the Kurdistan Region could support practical learning, drawing on elements of the Regional Action Plan, such as qualitative indicators, targets, timeframes, and estimated budgets.

For the Kurdistan Regional Government

- ⌚⌚ **Ensure “gender units” within ministries are functional** as outlined in the Kurdistan Regional Action Plan. Exchange experiences and best practices with Federal Iraq, where a similar institutional structure has already been established through the WFCDs.
- ⌚⌚ **Operationalize sustainable funding** for gender initiatives in line with commitments under the Second Kurdistan Regional Action Plan.

For International Organizations, UN Agencies, and Donors

- ⌚ Where **Local Action Plans on WPS** already exist, support their formal adoption by governorate authorities and alignment with **INAP III** rather than promoting parallel planning processes.
- ⌚ **Recognize and invest in institutional readiness and leadership** as WFCDs and the High Council demonstrate strong commitment to strengthen technical capacities, coordination mechanisms, and collaboration with international partners to advance the Women, Peace and Security agenda.
- ⌚⌚ **Adopt differentiated, needs-based support across governorates**, with sustained assistance for post-ISIS areas and underserved southern and rural regions.
- ⌚⌚ **Shift** from short-term training to **multi-year capacity-strengthening partnerships** that include mentoring and on-the-job support.
- ⌚⌚ **Support WFCDs and “gender units” as implementing partners through sub-grants and joint pilot initiatives.**

For National and Local NGOs and CSOs

- ⌚ **Support other NGOs and share contacts** of important stakeholders. Once contact is established, **formalize collaboration through structured mechanisms** such as MoUs to reduce dependence on informal, personal relationships.
- ⌚ **Align advocacy with INAP III and national strategies to reinforce women’s rights as state commitments.**
- ⌚ **Expand community-based awareness efforts**, particularly in rural areas, to **reduce stigma around WFCDs and reporting violence against women.**
- ⌚⌚ **Integrate economic empowerment, psychosocial support, and participation across programs.**
- ⌚⌚ **Engage WFCDs as long-term partners by involving them early in program design and advocacy.**

For All Stakeholders (Cross-Cutting)

- ⌚ **Recognize women’s economic empowerment as a core peace and security priority.**
- ⌚⌚ **Apply differentiated, governorate-specific approaches to WPS implementation based on localized needs assessments.**

“ But one of the things that we are making sure we have to empower, for example, the civil society organization, especially the women-led organization. So in this case, **when you are working collectively and then you will see more effective results.** ”
- Kurdistan Region

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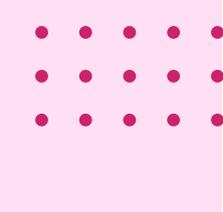
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Annex

Annex I: Survey Questionnaire

Institutional Capacity & Coordination Survey – Women, Family and Child Department, Iraq

Description

This nationwide survey is conducted by Mercy Path as part of the SAWA Project. It aims to assess the institutional capacity, coordination, and responsiveness of Women’s Empowerment Departments (WED) across Iraq to inform the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (NAP-WPS). Your participation is voluntary but greatly valued, as it will help improve and guide our ongoing programme development.

Your responses are confidential and will only be used to improve service quality and interdepartmental coordination.

Time to complete: 10–15 minutes

Section 1 – Background Information

1. Governorate

2. Age

3. Sex

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

4. Your current role in the Women, Family and Child Department office

- Director
- Division Manager
- Admin Unit Manager
- Technical Unit Manager
- Program Staff
- Field Staff
- Administrative Staff
- Social Worker
- Community Mobilizer
- Other (Please explain)

5. Years of experience working in Women, Family and Child Department

- Less than 1 year
- 1–3 years
- 4–6 years
- 7–10 years
- More than 10 years

6. Have you received any formal training in the past 2 years related to your work? [Yes/No]

If yes, please specify:

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Section 2 – Institutional Capacity

7. How would you rate your office's capacity in the following areas?

Please use the scale below:

- 1 = Very Weak** → No staff skills/resources, cannot perform this function at all
2 = Weak → Minimal skills/resources, only able to perform with outside support
3 = Moderate → Some skills/resources, can perform basic tasks but with challenges
4 = Strong → Good skills/resources, able to perform effectively with minor support
5 = Very Strong → Excellent skills/resources, fully independent and effective

- Project management
- Fundraising
- Proposal writing
- Conflict resolution and peacebuilding
- Advocacy and public campaigns
- Prevention of violence against women
- Monitoring and evaluation

8. What are the top three challenges you face in performing your role effectively?

9. Which types of training or capacity-building would help you most?

- Proposal writing
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Legal frameworks on women's rights
- Digital skills
- Working in conflict-affected settings
- Case management for violence against women
- Communication & media
- Other (Please explain): [Short answer]

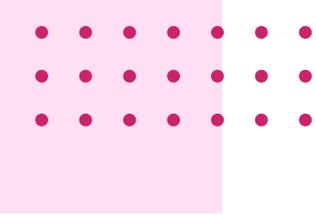
Section 3 – Coordination & Collaboration

10. How frequently does your Women, Family and Child Department office coordinate with the following? [Never (0 times/year) / Rarely (1-3 times/year) / Sometimes (4-6 times/year)/ Often (7-12 Times/year) / Always (more than 12 times/year)]

- Other Women, Family and Child Department offices in Iraq
- Local government departments
- NGOs / civil society organizations

11. What barriers limit your Women, Family and Child Department office's coordination with others?

- Lack of resources
- Lack of staff
- Unclear communication channels
- Political or administrative obstacles
- Lack of leadership support
- Other (Please explain): [Short answer]



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12. Provide one example of successful coordination or partnership your WED office led recently:

Section 4 – Responsiveness to Women’s Needs

13. In which topics do women in your area need support? [1–5:1 Not needed at all/ 2 Slightly needed/ 3 Moderately needed/ 4 Highly Needed/ 5 Very much needed]

- Protection from Violence against Women
- Access to Justice and Legal Reform
- Participation in Peacebuilding and Decision-Making
- Economic Empowerment and Livelihood Support
- Psychosocial and Health Services
- Access to Education and Skills Development (literacy, vocational training, etc)
- Access to Safe Public Spaces and Mobility (safe transportation, freedom of movement)
- Digital Literacy and Access to Technology (internet, digital tools, online safety)
- Awareness of Rights (human rights, women rights, UNSCR 1325)
- Support for Women Affected by Displacement (IDPs, Returnees, Refugees)
- Engagement of Men and Boys in Equality for men and women Efforts (community-based programs)
- Strengthening Women’s Civil Society Organizations (capacity building, networking)

14. How well does your Women, Family and Child Department office respond to the needs of women in your area? [1–5: Very Poorly → Very Well]

15. Which groups of women are most underserved in your area?

- Rural women
- Displaced women
- Widows
- Female-headed households
- Women with disabilities
- Adolescent girls
- Other (Please explain): [Short answer]

16. Share one example of a recent initiative your office took to support women in your area:

Section 5 – National Action Plan on WPS

17. How familiar are you with Iraq’s National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (NAP-WPS)?

- Not at all familiar
- Slightly familiar
- Moderately familiar
- Very familiar
- Extremely familiar

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18. Which NAP-WPS priority areas are most relevant to your governorate?

- Women's participation in decision-making
- Prevention of violence against women
- Economic empowerment
- Access to legal justice
- Protection of women human rights defenders
- Other:

19. What additional support would help your Women, Family and Child Department office better implement the NAP-WPS?

Section 6 – Final Comments

20. If you could change one thing to improve the Women, Family and Child Department's work nationwide, what would it be?

21. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview or focus group?

- Yes
- No
- If yes, please provide your preferred contact info:

Annex II: Key Informant Interview (KII) Guidelines

Objective:

The participatory, gender-sensitive research aims to generate actionable evidence to inform Iraq's National Action Plan (INAP) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) and enhance the responsiveness of local governance to the needs of women, especially in fragile and conflict-affected areas. Its objective is to strengthen the institutional capacity and coordination of Women, Family and Children Departments across Iraq by providing information on:

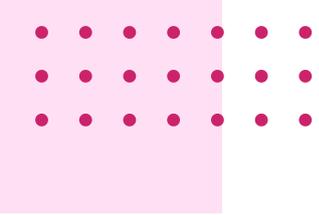
- Institutional capacities
- Challenges of WFCD staff
- Coordination mechanisms
- Needs of women with respect to peace, security, and empowerment
- Available and required resources, training, and support to implement the INAP

Key Research Questions:

How can the institutional capacity and coordination mechanisms of the Department for Women, Family and Children across Iraq be strengthened to enhance gender-responsive local governance and inform the implementation of Iraq's National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security?

Sub-questions:

- What are the WFCD's institutional capacities? Where could it improve?
- What challenges do WFCD staff face?
- How can the WFCDs improve coordination mechanisms with other WFCDs in Iraq, local government departments and NGOs / civil society organizations?



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- What are the most pressing needs of women with respect to peace, security, and empowerment?
- How can WFCs be better resourced, trained, and supported to implement the INAP?

Gaps after the online survey/ emerging themes:

1. Coordination mechanisms, including structure of/ around the WFC
2. Institutional capacities/ Challenges of WFC staff
3. Needs of women with respect to peace, security, and empowerment
4. Available and required resources, training, and support to implement the INAP

Description of the subject of the interview:

Today I would like to ask you some questions first about the structure and the capacities of the Women, Family and Children Department and then move on to Women, Peace and Security. Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers, I would like to hear your perspective on this subject, so feel free to answer as you please and as honestly as you can. If you do not know the answer to a question, please feel free to say so. The interview should last approximately one hour. Please let me know if you need a break or if you want to stop at any time. During our interview we will be making some notes, if that is okay with you. Those notes are only for us, so we can quickly come back to the main points of our conversation.

Confidentiality clause and recording consent

Please note that this research is anonymous. All information allowing identification of the participants will be deleted. No names or other personal information will be used or stored. If you don't mind, we'd like to record our interview. The purpose of the recording is to prepare a transcript to ensure accuracy. We will use an encrypted app for the transcript, which does not store the data. When the transcript is finished, we will send it to you so that you can review it and make sure that the conversation was accurately recorded. The recording will be deleted immediately after you approve the transcript. Please note that you can withdraw your consent at any moment without giving me any reason and without consequences. I will then immediately delete all the information you provided.

Please note that if you feel uncomfortable you have the right to skip any question without providing a reason. However, please remember that your point of view is very important for us and we will be very grateful for your answers.

Do you have any additional questions?

Do you agree to participate in the interview?

Do you agree that the interview will be recorded?

Okay, thank you very much. We will start recording now.

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Questions:

Theme 1: Structure

1. Could you please describe the organizational structure of the Women, Family and Children Department (WFCD) and how responsibilities, and decision-making processes are organized?
2. How does your office communicate and coordinate within and with other WFCD offices?
3. How does your office coordinate with other government departments, NGOs, or community groups?

Theme 2: Institutional capacities/ Challenges

1. From your perspective, what are the main challenges your office faces in carrying out its work?
2. What kinds of support would help your office deliver services more effectively?
- 3.

Theme 3: Needs of women with respect to peace, security, and empowerment

1. In your view, what factors support or limit women's participation in local decision-making and peacebuilding?
2. What would help women feel safer, more empowered, and more able to influence their communities after years of conflict?

Theme 4: Available and required resources, training, and support to implement the INAP

1. From your perspective, how familiar are WFCD staff with the goals of the Iraqi National Action Plan (INAP) on Women, Peace, and Security?
2. Was your office involved in consultations or discussions related to developing INAP III? If yes, how were your inputs, or the needs of the community you serve, reflected?
3. In what ways is your office currently contributing to implementing the INAP? What mechanisms or activities support this work, and what would improve it?

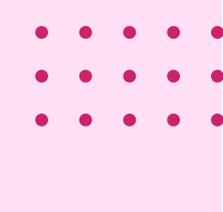
Closing Section

This is almost the end of the interview, and thus I would like to ask you if there is something you feel you may wish to add?

Thank you again so much for your time. Hearing your perspective was very interesting to me and it has a great importance for our research! In case of any questions related to the interview, please contact me via email: mareike.egbers@mercy.path.org

Annex III: Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guidelines

Objective: Validate and contextualize research findings on the structure, strengths, and support needs of WFCDs across Iraq, while generating practice-based recommendations for institutional strengthening and stakeholder engagement.



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Specific Objective:

- Capture lived professional experiences of WFCD staff
- Validate accuracy and relevance of preliminary research findings regarding
 - structural, operational, and coordination challenges
 - existing strengths and good practices
- Co-develop feasible, context-appropriate recommendation

Participants: 10 staff members from the WFCD (Baghdad Governorate), 5 female and 5 male

Introduction: Greeting and presentation of the agenda by the facilitator

Content:

1. Present Preliminary Key Outcomes of the Research

- a. Resource Constraints: Both interviews and the online survey identify limited resources as a central constraint. Interviews speak about being underfinanced, overstretched, understaffed, and unable to implement mandates, while the survey quantifies this. Approximately 70% cite lack of budget and resources as the primary barrier.
- b. Institutional Authority and Leadership Support: Interviews highlight weak institutional backing, person-dependent coordination, and limited authority.
- c. The survey confirms this from a staff perspective: more than half of respondents report limited decision-making power, weak recognition, and lack of leadership support. Both point to WFCDs being marginalized within government hierarchies.
- d. Strong Demand for Resources, Training, and Technical Support: Interviews call for more training, technical guidance, and tools. The survey strongly reinforces this with high demand for advanced, practice-oriented training. While many staff have received training, particularly on violence against women, Women, Peace and Security, and national strategies, critical skills such as fundraising, proposal writing, M&E, and case management are self-assessed in the survey as moderate. The most frequently requested capacity-building needs focus on violence against women case management, legal frameworks on women's rights, M&E, proposal writing, digital skills, and working in conflict-affected settings.
- e. Women's Needs and Vulnerability: The interviews identify structural and social barriers to women's participation, safety, and empowerment. Women's participation and safety in empowerment and peacebuilding are primarily limited by deeply rooted patriarchal norms, political marginalization and interference, and the absence of genuine institutional, legal, and material support, resulting in symbolic inclusion rather than real power. Women need strong social (family and community) and institutional support, access to jobs to be self-reliant, and effective legal protection against violence. According to the survey, rural women, widows, IDPs, women with disabilities are most vulnerable and they need first and foremost economic empowerment, psychosocial support, and case management services.

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FGD Questions:

- Does this reflect your reality?
- What is missing or inaccurate?
- Does this differ by governorate or role?

Recommendations

- If you could change three things to strengthen WFCDs over the next 2–3 years, what would they be?

Follow-up questions:

- What is realistically achievable?
- Who needs to act? (e.g. Ministry, Governorate, NGOs, donors)
- What support would make the biggest difference?