

Women's rights leader during consultations for the learning series. Photo Credit: Women for Women International



# **NISAAM ('Nisaa wa Al-Salam'):** **Advancing Women, Peace and Security in Iraq** **Learning Series: Federal Iraq Landscape Analysis** October 2025

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

CSO	Civil Society Organisation	NISAAM	Nisaa wa Al-Salam/ 'Women and Peace' (project)
DRL	US State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor	ODA	Official Development Assistance
FGD	Focus Group Discussion	UN	United Nations
GAPS	Gender Action for Peace and Security	UNSCR	UN Security Council Resolution
GBV	Gender-Based Violence	USAID	US Agency for International Development
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation	WfWI	Women for Women International
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant	WHRD	Women Human Rights Defender
KII	Key Informant Interview	WPS	Women, Peace and Security (agenda)
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq	WRO	Women's Rights Organisation
NAP	National Action Plan		

## NISAAM ('Nisaa wa Al-Salam'): advancing a localised WPS agenda

Amid conflict, funding cuts and the rollback of women's rights in Iraq, the need for locally driven, gender-responsive interventions has become increasingly urgent. The NISAAM ('Nisaa wa Al-Salam') project,<sup>1</sup> a UK-Government funded initiative delivered by Women for Women International (WfWI) in partnership with Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), addresses this critical gap by partnering with 34 local-level women-led and civil society organisations (CSOs) across all 19 governorates of Iraq, including in both the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Federal Iraq.

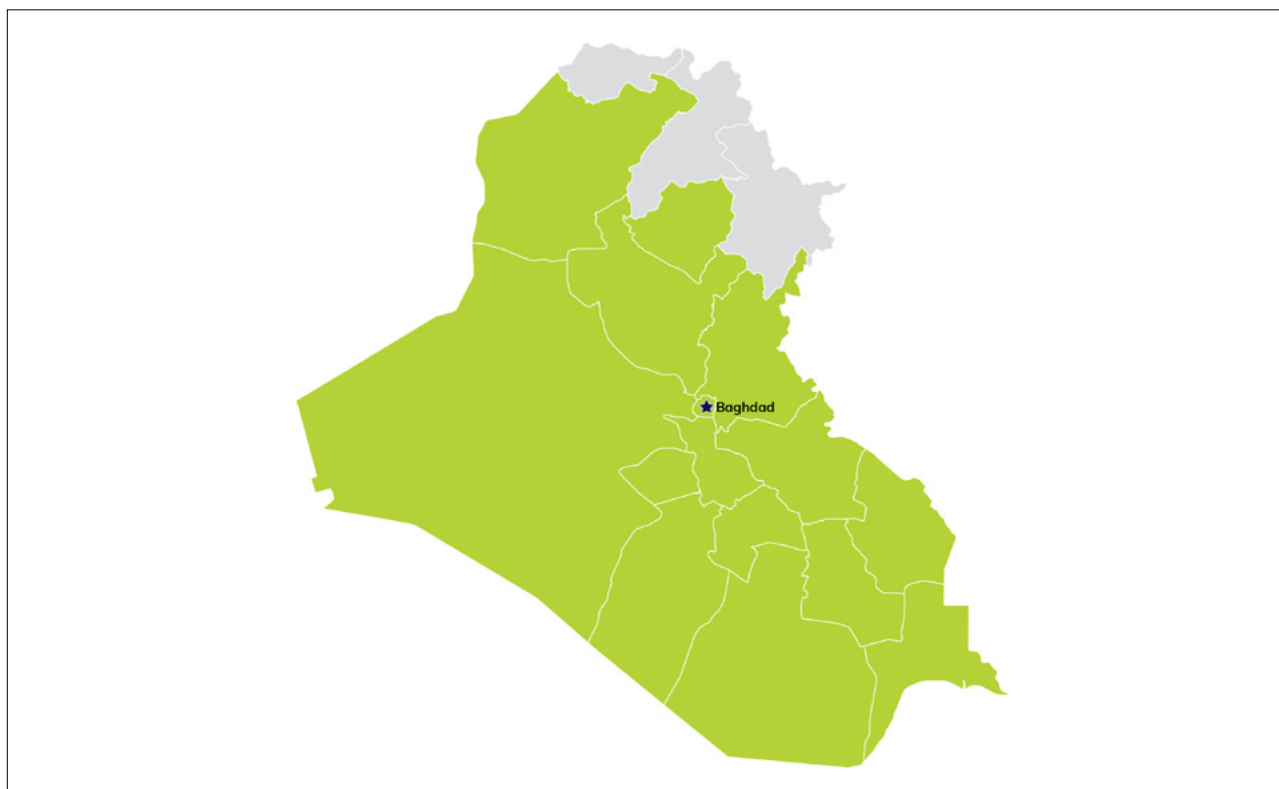
By providing a combination of direct funding, institutional support, network building and advocacy opportunities, NISAAM collaborates with women-led and women's rights organisations (WROs) to design and implement their own priorities that fall under the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda – prioritising issues such as gender-based violence, economic support, political participation and climate resilience. In doing so, NISAAM shifts from top-down donor models to a sustainable, inclusive and locally owned approach to reinforce the essential role of civil society contributions to peace and security in Iraq.



NISAAM partners during the first year of the project. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

# Methodology

## Federal Iraq



Consultations for this report were designed to capture firsthand perspectives on how WROs are responding to shifting donor dynamics, including reductions in international aid, and to identify the contextual barriers affecting their ability to implement and sustain programming. Specifically, this Landscape Analysis report investigates how funding loss and shrinking civic space are reshaping the operational capacity, safety and sustainability of WROs engaged in the WPS agenda. It finds that, far from merely being 'underfunded', many of these organisations are actively sidelined – financially, politically and institutionally – even as they continue to fill governance and service gaps left by the state. The findings offer an evidence base for understanding the evolving needs and constraints facing Iraqi WROs and CSOs, and for informing more effective, locally grounded approaches to WPS programming and policy.

This Landscape Analysis report, focused on Federal Iraq, draws on a mixed-methods qualitative approach to explore the priorities, challenges and adaptive strategies of WROs and CSOs operating in Iraq within the current funding landscape. Findings are organised into three sections: challenges, opportunities and recommendations, to reflect both structural constraints and avenues for strategic action. This framing was chosen to guide policy, funding and coordination decisions by national and international groups working in the women's rights space. It is one of three reports in a series, alongside a Landscape Analysis on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and an overarching WPS Policy Paper.

Together, these reports:

- Map the expertise of WROs contributing to the implementation of the WPS agenda in Iraq, including through the delivery of their own projects and programmes and holding relevant powerholders to account
- Identify the barriers to implementation
- Outline evidence-based, locally informed recommendations to strengthen programmes, service delivery and gender-transformative change for WPS in Iraq

Consultation and qualitative data collection from across Federal Iraq, specifically from Baghdad, Basra, Diyala, Najaf and Kirkuk, involved:

- Key informant interviews with representatives from WROs
- Focus group discussions with WROs and CSOs that partnered with the NISAAM project during the first year of its implementation
- Targeted surveys with women leaders and decision-makers across diverse geographic and thematic areas.

## The Learning Series: Consultation Process

### Who:



**51** individuals

partners, decision-makers and civil society representatives

### How:



**2** focus group discussions

with 37 women's rights organisation representatives across the 13 organisations engaged with the first year of the NISAAM project



**21** Key Informant Interviews (KIIS)

virtually conducted in Kurdish, Arabic and English



**A Survey distributed**

to both civil society organisations and WROs

### When did we consult:



**February – April 2025**

The NISAAM Learning Series was conducted as part of a wider project across both the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Federal Iraq



Notes during Women Peace and Security focus group discussion.  
Photo Credit: Women for Women International

## Context: Federal Iraq

While this Landscape Analysis report focuses on Federal Iraq, it is worth noting that the challenges faced by Federal Iraq and the KRI differ significantly in their geopolitical dynamics and socio-cultural landscapes. The KRI operates under a semi-autonomous government and presents itself as more progressive in comparison to Federal Iraq in governance and gender policies, which attracts international support. Compared to the KRI, the Federal Government in Iraq faces challenges rooted in centralised governance, sectarian divisions, and the influence of tribal and religious groups, particularly in southern regions. These dynamics have constrained women's rights activism and reinforced gendered social norms. Recent legislative efforts have also sought to limit rights-based discourse, including language around 'gender' and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual and other diverse gender (LGBTQIA+) issues. While both regions face shrinking civic space and extremist pressures, the KRI has relatively smoother bureaucratic processes and international alignment, whereas WROs in Federal Iraq confront more direct governmental hostility and societal backlash, especially in conservative areas like Diyala, Basra and parts of Baghdad.

In Federal Iraq, the last several years have brought a sharp retraction in donor support for WROs, marked most visibly by the withdrawal or downsizing of funding from important institutions such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the US State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), and other traditional Western donors.<sup>2</sup> This has led to the shutdown and reduction of critical services in Iraq such as gender-based violence (GBV) response and legal aid. These combined cuts have not only underfunded WROs but actively sidelined them – stripping away financial, political and institutional scaffolding just as they are needed most to fill governance and service voids left by a constrained state. This pullback has occurred amid mounting political volatility, growing sectarian polarisation,<sup>3</sup> and widening geographic inequalities between the centre and periphery.

The withdrawal of consistent, long-term support has forced organisations to shut down critical protection services, scale back programming for adolescent girls, and retreat from rural and conflict-affected areas. The effects are starkest in places where donor funding was the only lifeline keeping legal aid offices open, survivor shelters staffed and peacebuilding forums operational.

These national dynamics echo a broader global pattern of the impact of foreign aid cuts on WROs. According to a May 2025 UN Women global survey:<sup>4</sup>

- **Over 50 per cent** of WROs operating in crisis-affected areas expect to **shut down within six months** due to aid cuts.
- **Only 1 per cent** of official development assistance (ODA) for gender equality is directed **to women's organisations directly**.
- **Ninety (90) per cent of local WROs** report receiving **less than USD (\$) 100,000 annually**, often with no core or institutional support.

In Federal Iraq, this global retreat manifests in both funding scarcity and increased risk. WROs face intensified government scrutiny, donor conditionality that prioritises 'low-risk' partners and widening inequality between urban and peripheral organisations. Many now operate without office space, physical security or digital protection, yet continue their work at great personal cost.

This report offers an analysis of how these funding patterns are impacting WROs in Federal Iraq, and their contributions to the implementation of the WPS agenda. It documents the cascading effects of financial instability on participation, protection, prevention and recovery, and calls for renewed, strategic investment in localised, resilient feminist infrastructure. Without this, Iraq's ambitions for gender equality – including in the third National Action Plan for WPS and the broader promise of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 – risk becoming hollow commitments

With many organisations forced to downsize or close entirely, the retreat of international funding risks unravelling years of hard-won progress on the WPS agenda. As the international community marks the 25th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, this report calls for urgent re-engagement and strategic investment in sustainable, locally led feminist infrastructures. Without this, the promise of peace and security for women in Iraq will remain unfulfilled.



Photo Credit: Women for Women International

# Findings

## 1. Funding climate in Federal Iraq

Access to sustainable, flexible funding for women's rights work in Iraq is increasingly constrained. International donor priorities are volatile, highly politicised and often favour government-affiliated or politically neutral organisations, leaving independent WROs sidelined and marginalised.

### Funding climate in Federal Iraq: Challenges

#### Global reductions in aid

For many WROs in Iraq, the past two years have seen a dramatic shift as major donors, including the UK,<sup>5</sup> US<sup>6</sup> and Sweden,<sup>7</sup> have reduced or withdrawn financial support. The abrupt withdrawal or suspension of US Government funding in February 2025 dealt a significant blow to dozens of organisations, exacerbating an already dire funding landscape.

Several interviewees described having to shut down entire programmes or terminated the contracts of staff when these funds disappeared. As two WROs in Federal Iraq shared:



**Many local organisations, including ours, are forced to operate with minimal resources, relying on short-term grants, adapting our programs to fit donor priorities, or scaling back critical activities despite persistent community needs.**



**Interventions should be shaped by what communities want, not by what the international community wants to impose.**



#### Shifting top-down donor priorities

This reduction in funding occurred amid a broader realignment of international donor priorities, often framed as a response to domestic political changes or 'security concerns'. In Iraq, international funding was heavily tied to the Humanitarian Response Plans launched after the 2014 ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) takeover and administered via the UN-led cluster system.<sup>8</sup> As the humanitarian response was decategorised and the cluster system phased out – which happened formally at the end of 2022 – funding began to shrink from 2023 onwards.<sup>9</sup> For Iraqi WROs, the result has been a shrinking pool of donors and a growing dependency on those who require alignment with government channels. As one WRO in Federal Iraq shared: "Donor priorities often don't align with our mission or community needs, and funding is typically channelled toward short-term projects or high-level themes that bypass grassroots realities."

Interviewees reported that local authorities and power brokers often act as 'gatekeepers' between international donors and local-level organisations. In Kirkuk, for example, the provincial council once issued an order that no NGO could receive external funding unless it passed through them – a form of resource capture that marginalised independent groups.<sup>10</sup> Organisations without political connections or government alliances were effectively excluded from funding eligibility.

In Basra and Najaf, organisations reported having to cancel planned projects mid-cycle due to suspended funding from the US, while others described shutting down offices and going "completely virtual" to cut costs. As one WRO in Federal Iraq shared: "DRL funded our community protection program. After it ended, we couldn't even cover office rent. We were forced to close the centre and now work from home." The lack of core funding was especially damaging to initiatives involving adolescent girls and survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), whose needs require consistent support over time, rather than one-off interventions.<sup>11</sup>

## Geographic inequities

The funding landscape has also highlighted geographic disparities in access to support. WROs based in Baghdad, or those with stronger institutional ties to government structures, have been more likely to maintain donor engagement. In contrast, organisations in the South and other regions have experienced greater challenges in sustaining funding, partly due to their distance from Baghdad, where most donor coordination and decision-making are concentrated. This difference does not necessarily reflect ideological alignment, but is often a result of varying levels of access to information, networks and opportunities for engagement. Organisations with closer proximity, geographically or institutionally, to relevant ministries and directorates are generally better positioned to stay informed of evolving policy priorities and operational frameworks, allowing them to navigate the funding environment more effectively.

This has led to a stratified field for WROs, where only the more visible organisations with greater proximity to funders and powerholders remain resourced while more radical, independent or rural groups are sidelined.<sup>12</sup> As one WRO from Federal Iraq shared during a key informant interview (KII),

“

**We feel invisible outside Baghdad. The ones who stay quiet get the funds, the ones who speak critically get blacklisted.**

”

## Short-term, project-based funding cycles

Further compounding the issue is the fragmentation and short-term nature of the funding available. Most grant funding is for small-scale projects, lasting only a few months. This prevents strategic planning, discourages structural reform work and traps organisations in cycles of project-based survival. As one KII participant put it: “We don’t get funding for long-term impact – only for emergency responses.” Critical, long-term work on gender equality, WPS and legal reform is underfunded or abandoned as respondent organisations described the shutdown of their operations after donor exit.<sup>13</sup> The funding ecosystem rewards compliance over innovation, reducing space for feminist leadership and critical voices. Donor dependence on government guidance risks reinforcing exclusionary and politicised funding practices, as one WRO in Federal Iraq shared: “The government chooses who participates, not based on merit, but loyalty.” Many impactful, independent WROs are operating with minimal resources, placing essential services and staff at risk.



Focus group discussions with NISAAM partners from the first year of the project. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

## Funding climate in Federal Iraq: Opportunities

### Innovative programming

The NISAAM project is responding to these challenges through targeted training, peer learning and providing access to funding. This approach fosters trust, visibility and collaboration by reconnecting under-resourced organisations to advocacy and funding spaces, strengthening the broader women's rights ecosystem, and ensuring that transformational change is driven by diverse, community-rooted voices. Through NISAAM, WfWI partners with WROs not only through financial resources, but also with technical assistance, organisational development and strategic planning – enabling them to build more resilient and autonomous operations. By embedding resilience and preparedness into the design, NISAAM addresses not just the immediate funding gaps, but also the deeper structural weaknesses that leave WROs vulnerable to abrupt funding transitions. In doing so, it serves as a model for how feminist funding initiatives can prioritise both accountability to communities and sustainability for frontline organisations.<sup>14</sup>

Vitaly, these types of funding models prioritise WROs' own priorities and recognise their own expertise in contributing to the implementation of WPS in Iraq. It is through projects like these, which prioritise an intersectional lens, that diversified groups enter the WPS space. As we heard from one WRO during consultations for this report, this enables adolescent girls' access and understanding of peace and security:



**Our project [which is funded through the NISAAM project] is aiming to target adolescent girls to be aware of the 1325 and we reached almost 70 of them. Before the start of the project, we did an assessment that showed [they had] zero knowledge about the 1325 law and now almost before we finish [the first year] of the project, the same participants showed an increase of knowledge by 50 per cent. By this we can include the adolescent girls to the same alliance that involves community leaders and young women, from different ages, backgrounds, ethnicities and religions.**



This demonstrates how flexible and responsive funding can lead to more inclusive decision-making processes within the WPS agenda. By supporting WROs, especially those working with marginalised groups, these models help ensure that diverse voices, particularly those of adolescent girls, are meaningfully included in shaping peace and security policies.

## Funding climate in Federal Iraq: Recommendations

### Invest in long-term, flexible funding for independent women's rights organisations (WROs)

In Federal Iraq, many WROs rely on short-term, project-based grants that can be unstable and influenced by political factors. Funding often goes to government-aligned or neutral groups, while independent WROs, especially those working on legal reform or in rural and conflict-affected areas, may have less access to resources. This situation limits their ability to plan strategically, retain staff and expand successful programmes. Without flexible, multi-year funding, WROs face ongoing challenges that can hinder sustained progress on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

**Proposed action: Donors, international non-governmental organisations, multilateral agencies and national partners** should:

1. Provide **multi-year core funding** to support essential organisational needs such as salaries, office space, security, institutional development and innovation.

2. Prioritise funding for **independent, local-level WROs**, particularly those operating in rural, tribal and conflict-affected areas where needs are often greatest and access is more limited.
3. Encourage **direct partnerships between donors and women's rights organisations**.
4. Invest in **institutional strengthening** activities such as staff training, legal registration assistance, monitoring and evaluation systems, and coalition-building. This will help support long-term sustainability and influence.
5. Provide **tailored technical assistance and training** for WROs based on their self-defined priorities.
6. Promote **coordination among international organisations** to harmonise funding approaches and reduce administrative burdens on WROs. This will allow for more effective and sustained programming.
7. Allocate **dedicated National Action Plan (NAP) funding streams** that go directly to independent, local WROs, not through government ministries or political intermediaries.



NISAAM partners during workshop. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

## 2. Shrinking civic space and gender backlash

Backlash against gender equality-focused movements and organisations in Federal Iraq is part of a broader, well-coordinated anti-gender campaign fuelled by conservative religious institutions, armed groups and segments of the political establishment. While similar narratives exist globally, in Federal Iraq the repression has taken a distinct form entrenched through both official policies and informal coercive practices. Activists reported that the term ‘gender’ itself had become politicised and dangerous. In Women for Women International’s (WfWI’s) 2024 research titled ‘Listen to Women: Identifying Barriers to and Opportunities for Women’s Participation and Leadership in Iraq’, this trend was shared.<sup>15</sup> WROs interviewed for this research, across both the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Federal Iraq, also highlighted that there are some policies and practices being introduced by the government that restrict the civic space for existing non-governmental programmes and efforts to increase women’s participation. In particular, they highlighted the challenges posed to their work when a national ban on the use of the term ‘gender’ was introduced in Iraq in the latter half of 2023.<sup>16</sup> The ban was contextualised mainly through framing gender equality in opposition to traditional and religious values and aligns with a broader global pushback against gender equality and the use of ‘gender’ language.<sup>17</sup>

### Shrinking civic space and gender backlash: Challenges

#### **Anti-gender campaigns, language restrictions and political suppression**

WROs in Federal Iraq have faced increasing pressure from both state and non-state actors, including armed groups<sup>18</sup>. This has significantly affected funding decisions, policy advocacy and safety for WROs. Threats were received in response to WROs challenging personal status laws, changes that sought to lower the age of marriage and legalise marriage outside of the formal court system as well as conducting public campaigns, with the aim of restricting their gender-focused work. WROs were forced to submit formal written commitments agreeing not to use gender-related terminology in their communications. These measures were implemented following accusations that organisations were promoting ‘foreign’ or agendas, narratives deliberately used to stop CSOs working on women’s rights.<sup>19</sup> This campaign has infiltrated government institutions. A notable example is the rebranding of the Women’s Empowerment Department to the National Directorate for Women, effectively eliminating the concept of ‘empowerment’ from official discourse. Interviewees saw this as symbolic of the growing influence of anti-gender ideologues within government. As one participant shared: “We had to submit a commitment that trustees and members will not use the term ‘gender’.”<sup>20</sup>

Organisations that focus on politically sensitive areas such as gender justice, legal reform or protection face particular difficulty. Multiple KII participants confirmed this dynamic throughout consultations. Some international agencies have even blacklisted or avoided working with ‘outspoken’ WROs, fearing backlash from government partners.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the funding landscape is increasingly shaped by risk aversion and political expediency, not actual needs or effectiveness, as respondents stated that donors increasingly select safe or “quiet” partners to avoid government backlash.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Limited access to convening spaces and coalition strengthening**

As a result of funding cuts, access to influential UN platforms and major donor consortia is now increasingly monopolised by organisations that maintain close ties with the state or adopt non-confrontational language.<sup>23</sup> This reflects a trend where UN agencies and multilateral donors, operating under pressure to maintain government relations, deprioritise engagement with independent or critical voices. Organisations that advocate for transformative change, particularly those pushing for legal reform or calling out state neglect, are systematically sidelined from resource allocation and decision-making spaces. These exclusionary dynamics have deepened the fragmentation within the women’s movement.

Several interviewees described how attempts to build solidarity or coordinate collective resistance among NGOs have been stifled by a pervasive climate of fear.<sup>24</sup> This atmosphere has discouraged open criticism, limited opportunities for joint advocacy and contributed to the erosion of collective

feminist infrastructure. At the same time, smaller and rural organisations, especially those in Basra, Diyala and Kirkuk, reported that their chances of accessing donor consultations or UN-led WPS processes were virtually non-existent.<sup>25</sup> This reinforces a two-tiered system, where visibility and proximity to power, not effectiveness or community relevance, determine access to funding and policy spaces. Consequently, CSOs, particularly independent and rights-based WROs, are increasingly being excluded from formal governance processes and face systemic restrictions on language, funding, participation and operations.

### **Threats to the implementation of Iraq's third NAP and WPS ambition**

This ideological shift has had direct consequences on national policy-making. During the development of Iraq's third National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security (which will run from 2025 to 2030), many active WROs were not consulted. While the government claimed that civil society was engaged in the process, evidence from the consultations suggests that only politically compliant or neutral organisations were invited.<sup>26</sup>

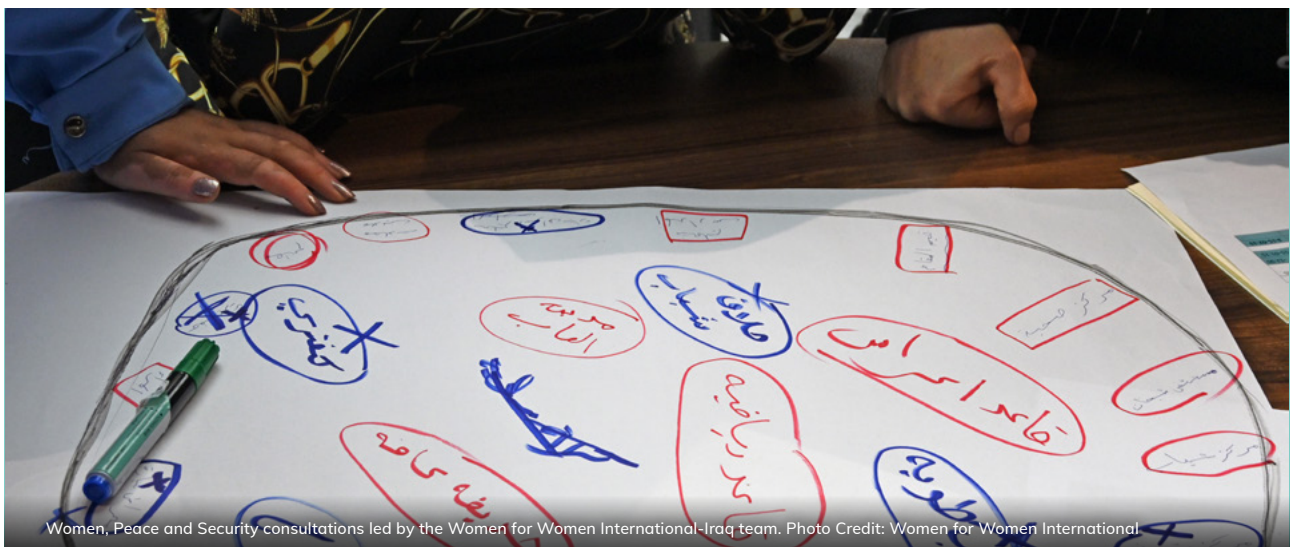
Additionally, fear permeates daily operations. WRO leaders describe being under surveillance,<sup>27</sup> receiving threats and being infiltrated by intelligence agents during events. Digital security threats, such as hacking attempts on public awareness campaigns, have also been reported. In one case, a WRO leader relocated her family from Kirkuk to Sulaymaniyah due to escalating threats, travelling hours daily to continue her work. Others described shutting down offices and operating entirely from home. As one WRO shared,



**We went low profile, limited our physical presence in offices, and worked from home.**



This shows that the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is at risk of being co-opted and stripped of its transformative intent. The exclusion of local-level WROs undermines the relevance, effectiveness and credibility of the NAP. This shrinking civic space violates not only national norms of democratic participation but also Iraq's international obligations under UNSCR 1325<sup>28</sup> and the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>29</sup>. Under UNSCR 1325, Iraq has committed to ensuring women's full, equal and meaningful participation in peace and security processes, a commitment that becomes hollow when civil society groups are monitored, censored or blacklisted. The resolution further emphasises the need to protect women's civil and political rights, especially in transitional and post-conflict settings. When women rights defenders are silenced and organisations shuttered, these commitments are not only unmet but actively undermined.



Women, Peace and Security consultations led by the Women for Women International-Iraq team. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

## Shrinking civic space and gender backlash: Opportunities

### **Tactical language shifts and strategic adaptation**

Faced with growing repression and anti-gender narratives, many WROs in Federal Iraq are adapting through creative framing, indirect advocacy and culturally grounded messaging, which allows them to continue essential work under restrictive conditions. In response to the backlash against gender discourse – where even terms like ‘gender’ and ‘empowerment’ have become politically dangerous – WROs have developed a strategic language shift.

Rather than halting their work, the WROs we interviewed for the NISAAM project described how they have reframed their programming using locally accepted terms such as ‘family protection’, ‘women’s well-being’, or ‘social harmony’. This adaptive advocacy enables them to continue addressing core issues like gender-based violence (GBV), early marriage and reproductive health – often using alternative terminology that allows them to work with a lower profile. One organisation, for example, renamed its gender awareness training as a ‘citizenship and coexistence workshop’, allowing it to operate in conservative districts without triggering security crackdowns. This highlights the importance of donors taking a flexible, context-specific approach to programming – guided by those with lived expertise in the environments where these interventions take place.

Another WRO based in Mosul said they removed all references to gender from their website and project materials but continued to provide legal aid to survivors of violence and to conduct community sensitisation. In many cases, WROs observed that this silent resilience was the only viable path forward in regions where religious or political groups closely monitor NGO language and activities. Beyond just avoiding risk, this strategy has proved effective in building local trust. Activists who once faced resistance from community leaders say that, by using culturally relevant framing, they have been able to secure buy-in from religious figures and tribal elders – even when the work remained substantively feminist.

In restrictive environments, language is power. Strategic framing can enable WROs to survive, serve and even grow their influence. Donors and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) must respect and support this approach and not pressure partners to use ‘official’ gender terms in contexts where it puts them at risk. Localisation strategies should include narrative adaptation tools and messaging training, especially for frontline and rural organisations. This adaptive and flexible model demonstrates the resilience and agile ability of community-led WROs to respond in authoritarian or conservative spaces.



Women, Peace and Security consultations led by the Women for Women International-Iraq team. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

## Shrinking civic space and gender backlash: Recommendations

### Protect and reclaim civic space by funding women's rights organisations under threat

Across Federal Iraq, independent women's rights organisations (WROs) are increasingly constrained by shrinking civic space, surveillance and ideological backlash. Many groups, particularly those engaged in legal reform, protection services or rights-based advocacy, operate in environments where staff face harassment, blacklisting or even forced closure. Despite their central role in advancing the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, these organisations often lack access to secure, flexible funding to cover safety measures, legal aid or institutional continuity. Without dedicated resources for protection, advocacy work becomes dangerous and unsustainable, leaving critical voices silenced and communities underserved.

**Proposed action: Donors, international non-governmental organisations, multilateral agencies and national partners** should:

1. **Establish donor-funded protection pools** to provide rapid support for emergency relocation, legal assistance, and psychosocial care for at-risk WRO staff and activists.
2. Fund **digital security infrastructure**, including encrypted communications systems and cybersecurity training, to help organisations counter surveillance and protect sensitive data.
3. Support **collective security planning within WRO networks** to enable shared risk assessments, coordinated crisis responses and joint protection strategies.
4. Provide **core operational grants** that give organisations the flexibility to adapt, sustain their work and continue serving communities in restrictive environments.
5. Require **inclusive civil society consultation** as a condition for funding any government-led initiatives related to WPS or gender equality. Ensure independent WROs are not excluded from decision-making spaces.
6. Encourage international donors and multilateral agencies to **coordinate efforts on civic space protection to avoid duplication** and to build a stronger, unified response to threats facing local women's movements.



NISAAM partners during workshop. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

### 3. Prevention under pressure

Although prevention is one of the core pillars of the WPS framework, its implementation in Federal Iraq remains fragile and politicised. Civil society groups working to prevent GBV or radicalisation often face suspicion, surveillance and legal obstruction.<sup>30</sup> Efforts to promote gender justice are frequently conflated with 'foreign agendas',<sup>31</sup> creating both political and social risk for those involved.

#### Prevention under pressure: Challenges

##### **Effective prevention programming under threat**

The fragility of prevention work has deepened with the withdrawal of flexible funding streams, leaving a gap in support for community-based efforts that are now difficult to sustain under restrictive government climates. Organisations that once operated across multiple governorates now described working at minimal scale – or not at all. Even basic awareness activities, such as workshops on legal rights or early marriage, are increasingly difficult to sustain amid resistance from both the state and local communities. Without sustained, politically sensitive funding for prevention, the WPS agenda risks becoming reactive not transformative, focused only on post-conflict humanitarian response, rather than the deeper work of cultural and institutional change.

There is currently no early warning system in Iraq that integrates gender-sensitive indicators or allows community-level reporting of threats or violence.<sup>32</sup> This lack of infrastructure for prevention aligns with what women in Iraq shared during Women for Women International's 2024 global consultation, 'From Asking to Action'. Through this process, 306 individual women in Iraq were consulted on the pillars of the WPS agenda, their priorities and recommendations for change.<sup>33</sup>

When asked whether they had participated in efforts to prevent violence against women, 65 per cent of respondents said that neither they nor anyone they knew had been involved. Slightly more women (20 per cent) said they knew someone who had participated in prevention efforts than those who said they had participated themselves (14 per cent). Women also identified the following major challenges facing those who engage in prevention efforts:

- a lack of community or family support (76 per cent)
- stigma against women who speak out (76 per cent)
- fear of retaliation (67 per cent)

The climate of fear surrounding prevention work is acute for both WROs and women across Iraq.<sup>34</sup> Women leaders and educators face direct threats when addressing prevention topics, especially in religious or politically sensitive contexts.

##### **National level-NGOS favoured over WROs' long-term presence**

These challenges are amplified by the funding climate, which has turned increasingly hostile. The withdrawal of important international donors has placed immense strain on exactly the kinds of community-rooted organisations that are best positioned to engage in fragile areas. In many cases, these WROs built their legitimacy not through state affiliation or donor branding, but through years of sustained presence, dialogue with tribal and religious leaders, and direct service delivery to women who otherwise would be excluded from protection and participation mechanisms. Yet despite this locally embedded trust, many such organisations reported being overlooked in new funding frameworks that favour national-level NGOs or government-partnered entities.<sup>35</sup> This shift in funding priorities threatens to sever the fragile social contracts WROs have built with their communities.

## Prevention under pressure: Opportunities

### Navigating restrictions and local authority partnerships

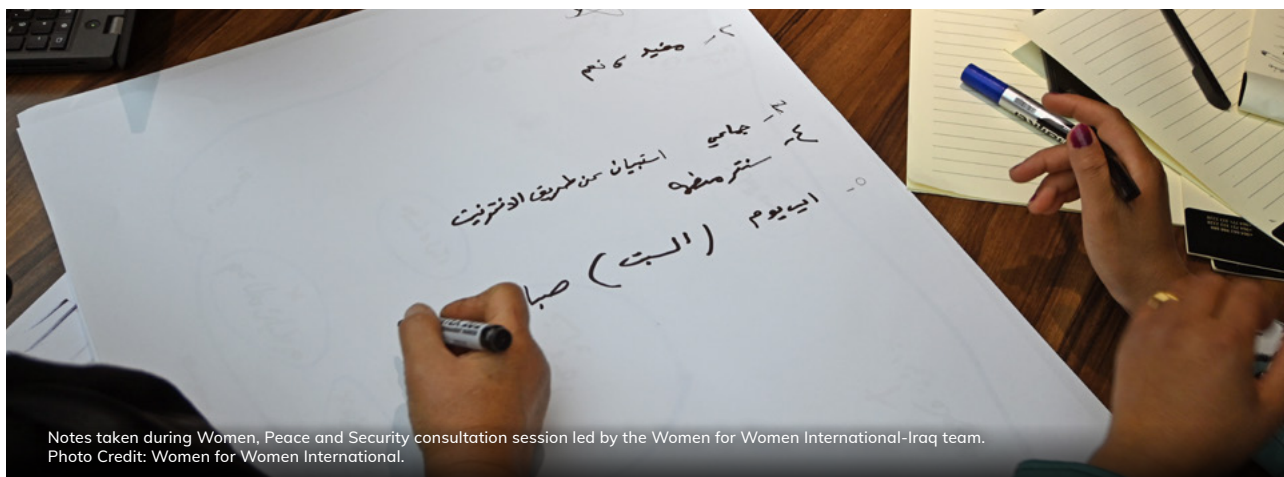
WROs have developed strong, trusted relationships at the community level, especially in places where tribal, ethnic and religious identities hold significant influence.<sup>36</sup> These relationships have opened unconventional doors for participation, protection and advocacy. One strategy that has proved effective for some organisations is re-framing gender work using safer, more culturally accepted language, such as 'justice for women' or 'family harmony or safety'. This careful navigation of restrictive terminology, alongside efforts to seek support from local authorities and participate in public awareness campaigns, has emerged as a crucial mechanism for gender-sensitive conflict prevention. These strategies were highlighted not only as part of the NISAAM consultations but also within 'From Asking to Action' consultations. When asked about the actions that women take in times of conflict or crisis to prevent escalation, women in Iraq reported:

- seeking support from local authorities and institutions (82 per cent)
- advocating for peace and conflict resolution (75 per cent)
- participating in education and awareness campaigns (54 per cent)

In regions like Kirkuk and Ninewa, WROs have learned to operate through quiet diplomacy. One organisation described working with multiple sects and ethnicities, leveraging inter-sectarian competition to secure space for women's work. Others described how tribal leaders opened their 'men-only' gathering spaces to women during elections, signalling a shift in societal norms and informal authority structures.<sup>37</sup> This is welcome progress in Federal Iraq, as during election campaigns, women are often uniquely and disproportionately subjected to character assassination or hate speech through the media and social media. This targeting is intended to discourage them from continuing their campaigns, or speaking out for women's rights or against widely accepted social norms.<sup>38</sup>

Organisations also observed that community-based legitimacy often offers more protection than legal registration or donor affiliation. By investing in years-long local engagement, offering tangible services like legal aid or humanitarian assistance, and involving religious and tribal leaders in training or dialogue, some WROs have created localised 'pockets' of safe civic space – even in hostile environments.<sup>39</sup> These opportunities are particularly significant in areas or regions recovering from ISIS occupation, where state services are weak and civil society is often the only group trusted by communities. The interviews suggest that trust, not formal policy, is the real currency of impact and WROs have become skilled in building it.<sup>40</sup>

While national policy is constrained, community-based change is often led by WROs who have embedded themselves in local contexts. These organisations can serve as vital connectors between formal governance structures and community needs if supported. Donors and international partners should invest in long-term, community-trusted groups rather than bypassing them for larger or capital-based organisations.



## Prevention under pressure: Recommendations

### Implement culturally grounded prevention strategies

In Federal Iraq, efforts to prevent gender-based violence (GBV), violent radicalisation and harmful practices often encounter resistance, with prevention work frequently misrepresented as promoting 'foreign agendas'. Programmes addressing sensitive issues may be blocked, activists harassed and even basic rights education viewed as controversial. In response, many WROs have adapted their approaches, embedding prevention efforts in culturally and religiously resonant frameworks to maintain community trust and minimise backlash. A culturally grounded prevention strategy does not dilute the aims of the WPS agenda; instead, it ensures that these aims are locally owned, context sensitive and sustainable.

**Proposed action: Donors, international non-governmental organisations, multilateral agencies and national partners** should:

1. **Develop prevention toolkits and curricula** that use locally resonant language and framing, such as 'family safety' or 'community harmony' in place of potentially contested terms like 'gender equality' or 'women's rights'.
2. **Connect and partner with local educators, community leaders, officials and religious figures** to build long-term relationships to ensure that they can act as allies delivering prevention messages that align with shared cultural and ethical values.
3. Support the establishment of **anonymous, community-based early warning systems** to enable discreet reporting of threats, incidents of violence or rising community tensions.
4. Fund **media and public education campaigns** that promote widely valued principles such as dignity, justice and coexistence, helping to shift public discourse in non-confrontational ways.
5. Provide **protection and psychosocial support** for frontline prevention advocates and staff, many of whom face threats or harassment in the course of their work.
6. Encourage **international donors and multilateral agencies** to invest in long-term prevention programming that strengthens local ownership and supports collaboration with diverse community groups. This includes ensuring that funding allows sufficient time for trust building and adaptation to local dynamics.



NISAAM Partners Operations Room workshop with local decision makers workshop. Photo Credit: Women for Women International.

## 4. Election cycles and women's political participation

Iraq's upcoming national elections in 2025 present a strategic opening for WROs to influence political discourse, support women candidates and hold parties answerable to gender equality commitments, particularly through pre-election advocacy and coalition-building. Although elections in Federal Iraq are often marred by political instability, sectarian tensions and limited civic space, they also represent one of the few moments when political groups actively seek public legitimacy.<sup>41</sup> Several WROs identified this as a rare period when advocacy becomes possible if strategically framed.

### Election cycles and women's political participation: Challenges

#### **Funding for political advocacy has dropped**

The ability of WROs to fully capitalise on the 2025 elections is increasingly constrained by a tightening funding landscape. In past cycles, donor support enabled organisations to run nationwide media campaigns, organise candidate forums and deploy civic education materials tailored to women voters. Now, many of these same groups reported being unable to replicate such efforts due to the collapse of core funding and the end of multi-year programmes tied to previous election cycles.<sup>42</sup> The withdrawal of flexible, pre-election support is particularly damaging because it eliminates one of the few moments when WROs can operate in public without backlash. Civic and political education framed around elections is often better tolerated by authorities, even in conservative areas. Without adequate funding, WROs lose not only outreach capacity but also the protective shield that electoral discourse provides. At the same time, independent or rural women candidates rarely have access to the donor networks that larger capital-based NGOs enjoy. Local-level WROs who are located within the same geographies as these candidates and are therefore positioned to support them due to the contextual knowledge they hold, often lack the resources to provide media training, policy briefings or logistical help, even though such support could decisively shape candidate platforms.

In addition to funding cuts, quotas for women's political participation exist but have no transformative impact on voting processes or the broader political climate in Federal Iraq. Iraq's existing mandate calls for 25 per cent of seats in the Council of Representatives to be held by women.<sup>43</sup> Since its introduction, this quota has significantly increased women's parliamentary representation, from around 6–8 per cent prior to the 2005 Constitution to between 25–29 per cent in subsequent elections. While this mechanism has been instrumental in improving numerical representation, the way it is implemented reflects deeper structural and cultural barriers. As one WRO shared of their political advocacy:



**We actively work on enhancing women's participation in decision-making. However, the electoral system and dominant political parties have marginalised women's political roles. The quota was reduced to 25 per cent, and women are often used by parties for optics during elections without being given real power or responsibilities. The government's support for women's participation has declined. Previously, six ministries were headed by women now there are only two. Women remain largely sidelined from real influence.**



### Election cycles and women's political participation: Opportunities

#### **Collaborative approaches from diverse women candidates**

A promising trend is the increase in new and independent women candidates, especially from tribal or rural areas, some of whom are openly backed by local leaders. These candidates are often more open to collaborating with community-led organisations and can serve as entry points for gender equality messaging in conservative regions. Respondents emphasised that election periods allow WROs to publicly discuss sensitive topics like early marriage or personal status laws under the

banner of voter education or civic responsibility. In polarised political climates, women's rights often become a target for backlash, but they are also elevated as part of broader debates about reform, legitimacy and representation.

In the last election cycle, WROs managed to secure public commitments from candidates to repeal discriminatory laws, including parts of the Personal Status Law. While follow-up remains a challenge, the process of securing public pledges and engaging the media has helped elevate women's issues in political platforms. One WRO advocate noted:

“

**We worked with women candidates; we got them to commit on paper before they were elected.**

”

Elections provide a fleeting but critical opportunity to push gender equality into normal political discourse. Without targeted support now, that window may close, reinforcing the marginalisation of feminist voices in Iraq's next political chapter. Election cycles are an important entry point for mainstreaming WPS and gender equality narratives, especially in public discourse and party platforms. WROs can use this moment<sup>44</sup> to shape candidate agendas, mobilise women voters and form alliances with reform-minded candidates. Donors and partners should invest in pre-election skills development, including media campaigns, candidate training and monitoring political commitments related to women's rights. Elections can help reclaim public space for women's advocacy in a climate where civic activism is otherwise repressed.



Focus group discussions with NISAAM partners from the first year of the project. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

## Election cycles and women's political participation: Recommendations

### **Leverage election cycles and establish formal women-led platforms to amplify women's rights agendas**

Election periods in Federal Iraq, though often marked by instability, offer rare opportunities for women's rights organisations (WROs) to elevate gender equality issues, support reform-minded candidates and influence political discourse. However, most WROs lack the flexible, pre-election funding and institutional access needed to make use of these openings. Beyond elections, women's participation in peacebuilding and governance remains largely symbolic, particularly in regions where tribal and religious authorities dominate. Without formal and inclusive platforms, women and girls continue to be excluded from meaningful decision-making processes.

### **Proposed action: Donors, international non-governmental organisations, multilateral agencies and national partners should:**

1. **Provide funding based on WROs' self-identified needs to ensure that WROs can utilise funds for** election advocacy such as voter education campaigns, candidate training and gender-focused platform analysis.
2. Fund **WRO-led coalitions** to engage political parties and independent candidates, aiming to secure public commitments to repeal discriminatory laws and strengthen gender equality provisions.
3. Support the development of **media toolkits, monitoring dashboards and social media campaigns** that amplify feminist narratives during election cycles.
4. Allocate **travel, communications and coordination budgets** to enable rural and regional WROs to participate in national, election-focused advocacy.
5. Invest in **technical assistance** such as speechwriting, policy coaching and debate preparation for women candidates, particularly in conservative or tribal areas.
6. Establish **formal, women-led participation platforms** linked to relevant ministries, ensuring women's voices shape policies and peacebuilding efforts at both the national and regional levels.
7. Facilitate the inclusion of **adolescent girls** in governance and peacebuilding initiatives, using age-appropriate tools informed by UNSCR 1325.
8. Design and implement **national listening sessions**, facilitated by WROs, to channel community priorities directly into federal and regional policies.
9. Promote **leadership development programmes** for women in local governance to strengthen their influence and build long-term capacity.
10. Encourage **international donors and partners** to prioritise flexible funding and technical support for WROs. This will enable them to plan strategically and sustain advocacy efforts beyond election periods.



Women for Women International-Iraq Country Director discussing NISAAM partnership approaches. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

## 5. Protection for women human rights defenders

While election cycles can offer rare openings to elevate gender equality in public discourse, women's rights advocacy in Federal Iraq largely unfolds in a climate of repression and fear. Outside these fleeting windows, WROs and activists face persistent threats – both online and offline – without adequate protection, legal recourse or psychosocial support. Security risks force many to self-censor, dilute their agendas or withdraw from public life, underscoring the urgent need to prioritise protection and digital security within the WPS agenda.

### Protection for women human rights defenders: Challenges

#### **Fragmented services and protection risks**

Protection remains one of the most urgent and complex dimensions of the WPS agenda in Federal Iraq. Protection systems remain fragmented and under-resourced. Safe shelters and trauma support services are scarce, particularly in rural and tribal regions. There is no streamlined process for returnees to obtain legal documentation, and no national framework for supporting women returning from conflict zones. Returnee women and their children, especially those emerging from displacement camps or ISIS-affected zones, often lack basic identification documents, cutting them off from education, services and legal protections. One KII interviewee mentioned that



**Children returning from camps like Al-Hol don't even have ID papers...We are the only organisation here responding.**



Legal protections are weak or actively under threat. Proposed amendments to existing laws often further erode rights, while hate speech and online harassment go unpunished. Women activists face increasing harassment and attacks, particularly when they organise protests or speak publicly.<sup>45</sup> In Najaf and Karbala, demonstrators opposing amendments to the Personal Status Law were pelted with stones by community members – an incident that highlights the significant resistance faced by those advocating for legal reforms. Notably, some of the opposition came from women themselves, illustrating the complex influence of deeply entrenched religious and traditional values on public attitudes towards such reforms. This dynamic underscores how prevailing social norms and interpretations of faith shape not only legislation but also community responses, occasionally resulting in women opposing other women in defence of established practices.

Several WROs that once provided mobile clinics, psychosocial support and safe shelters described how they had either suspended or dramatically scaled down these services due to the collapse of international support. The lack of consistent funding not only leaves survivors without support but also increases the vulnerability of frontlines workers, many of whom operate without security protocols or institutional support.

Despite these challenges, local organisations have built substantial trust within their communities and continue to deliver life-saving services. However, there is a clear disconnect between the trust they inspire at the community level and the influence they can exert at the regional or governmental level. Several respondents observed that the government's post-conflict reconstruction plans could serve as a powerful entry point for coordinated protection and service delivery – if these plans were better integrated with civil society.

To make such integration effective, respondents emphasised the need for transparent planning processes, safe and depoliticised spaces for dialogue, and the formal inclusion of trusted, community-rooted WROs in decision-making structures. During consultations for this report, WROs described feeling excluded or tokenised in official processes. They reported that meaningful participation is often undermined by surveillance, political pressure and a lack of genuinely safe spaces for dialogue. Many organisations working in Ninewa, Diyala and Anbar – despite being trusted at the local level – are not invited to participate in official platforms or consultations.<sup>46</sup>

## **Physical attacks and closing offices**

Women rights defenders and organisations across Federal Iraq – particularly those engaged in advocacy, legal reform and peacebuilding – face sustained digital and physical threats. These come from armed groups, state actors and community members, severely undermining their safety, operations and well-being. Additionally, the withdrawal of core funding has critically weakened the capacity of WROs to protect themselves from physical and digital threats. Previously, flexible donor support allowed organisations to invest in basic security infrastructure: secure office spaces, digital security tools, staff training in risk mitigation and relocation support for at-risk activists. With the exit of important donors, these protections have largely vanished. One organisation described having to shut down its physical office due to lack of funds for basic security upgrades and now operates exclusively online, despite the heightened risks of cyber harassment. Another said that psychosocial support and legal aid for targeted staff members had to be discontinued after a long-standing donor exited in 2023.<sup>47</sup>

This vacuum leaves WROs and their staff dangerously exposed. The absence of emergency response funding, legal protection networks or safe relocation options means that threats, once manageable, can now force entire organisations offline or into silence. In this environment, the lack of donor support does not just limit programming, it endangers lives and silences feminist advocacy at its most urgent moments. The risks facing women activists in Federal Iraq are not abstract, they are personal, persistent and often life-threatening. Several interviewees shared detailed accounts of being monitored by intelligence services, targeted online, harassed on social media or even forced to move cities due to escalating threats.<sup>48</sup>

These threats are not limited to extremist groups; state-aligned militias and security agencies are also frequently implicated. WROs observed intelligence officers attending their workshops under false pretences, hacking of organisation pages and frequent ‘visits’ from authorities under the guise of national security checks. One respondent explained that during a campaign against the Jaafari Law (a version of the Personal Status Law applying specifically to Shiite Muslims in Iraq), unknown individuals contacted them to warn they would be “punished for working against religion and sect”.<sup>49</sup> Another described having to move from Kirkuk to Sulaymaniyah after their family was threatened.<sup>50</sup> In extreme cases, activists have experienced physical violence, intimidation and personal loss. One long-time advocate described being kidnapped and targeted in armed attacks at their home, emphasising the interconnected personal and political work of women human rights defenders (WHRDs). Others shared that ongoing threats had forced staff to resign, led to family estrangement, or compelled entire organisations to close their physical offices and shift to remote operations for safety.

## **Online and digital attacks**

Online attacks are widespread across social media platforms. WROs using platforms like Facebook to promote awareness on Personal Status Law reforms or domestic violence often become targets for online smear campaigns. Many reported that their pages were constantly under threat of hacking. The politicisation of the internet, combined with limited technical protections, has created a hostile online environment that mirrors the dangers in the physical world. Some organisations have adapted by working more discretely, minimising their social media presence, using encrypted communication, conducting risk assessments before each project and by designing activities without explicitly using gender language. While these adaptations may ensure survival, they also represent a form of forced censorship that curtails transparency and undermines advocacy goals.

## **Protection for women human rights defenders: Opportunities**

### **Growing youth engagement and the positive use of digital platforms**

Amid growing restrictions on civic space, a new wave of young activists, university students and digital campaigners are engaging with feminist ideas, pushing boundaries and creating alternative spaces for advocacy, particularly through social media, podcasts and informal networks. While traditional civil society organisations are under pressure, many interviewees pointed to an encouraging shift:

younger Iraqis are showing greater openness to gender equality and inclusive dialogue. In particular, student-led initiatives, small-scale podcasts and digital storytelling projects are helping normalise conversations about consent, family dynamics, early marriage and violence, especially in urban areas like Baghdad, Basra and Sulaymaniyah. As part of the NISAAM project, organisations have used their funding to resource youth initiatives. For example, one WRO launched an online advocacy campaign on preventing GBV; this was one of many collaborative efforts including an art series, sports activities and youth theatre. One WRO based in Baghdad reported launching an Instagram and TikTok series that reached thousands of young women with information on legal rights and safe relationships.<sup>51</sup> Another WRO described how university clubs and informal campus groups are discussing feminist topics, even if they cannot formally register.<sup>52</sup> These youth-driven efforts often avoid formal labels but are doing the slow cultural work of changing norms.

Despite the momentum of youth-led activism, this space remains under-resourced and increasingly susceptible to collapse due to donor withdrawal. Flexible funding that once supported experimental formats, such as digital storytelling, student engagement or small-scale outreach, has largely dried up as major donors exit or redirect resources through formal institutions. Interviewees stated that mentorship programmes, safe dialogue spaces and creative media projects were among the first to be cut after 2021, when USAID and other agencies began winding down civil society portfolios.<sup>53</sup>

Without small grants or unrestricted support, most youth-led initiatives now rely on volunteer labour and peer-to-peer organising, limiting their reach and sustainability. One youth organiser in Baghdad reported that their digital campaign on early marriage “reached over 20,000 views, but we couldn’t continue; there was no funding for follow-up or protection against online backlash”. The absence of investment in digital safety, media training and intergenerational bridges weakens what could otherwise be a powerful engine of feminist continuity in Iraq. Donor retreat at this stage risks severing the pipeline of emerging leaders, leaving the movement more fragmented and less resilient over time.

Social media also offers a relative haven from direct government interference, particularly when content is framed as ‘lifestyle’, ‘health’ or ‘personal development’. While platforms are still monitored and activists remain cautious, many are using creative formats like animation, comedy and anonymous testimonials to make gender topics more accessible and harder to censor. Some organisations observed that youth engagement had become a form of strength in itself. In a context where senior WRO leaders are fatigued, traumatised or targeted, younger activists are stepping in with new language, fresh energy and strong peer networks. They represent a critical continuity link for the broader feminist movement in Iraq.

Youth engagement offers a long-term investment in social change and feminist continuity, even when formal space is shrinking. Donors and allies should fund youth-led digital initiatives, mentorship programmes and safe training spaces, recognising that change often begins in informal networks. Building digital resilience (for example, cybersecurity, media literacy) is essential to sustain this momentum and protect young activists. Intergenerational bridges between established WROs and new youth groups could strengthen the movement's adaptability, reach and sustainability.

## **Protection for women human rights defenders: Recommendations**

### **Strengthen decentralised protection systems led by local women’s organisations**

Women and girls in Federal Iraq continue to face serious risks, particularly in rural, tribal and conflict-affected areas where access to legal protection, shelters and trauma support is limited. Centralised approaches often fail to meet the needs of diverse communities, making locally led, decentralised protection systems essential. International partners have a critical role in ensuring these local efforts are resourced and resilient.

**Proposed action: Donors, international non-governmental organisations, multilateral agencies and national partners** should:

1. Establish **well-resourced protection hubs** in underserved areas, prioritising regions with high numbers of returnees and survivors of violence.
2. Collaborate with local women's rights organisations (WROs) in providing **trauma-informed, culturally grounded services**, including legal aid, psychosocial care and safe referrals.
3. Train police, judicial officials and civil authorities on **gender-based violence (GBV) prevention** and survivor-centred practices.
4. Build **multi-sector referral networks** linking health, education, legal and protection services at the community level.

### **Invest in youth-led and digital feminist initiatives to build resilient advocacy networks**

As civic space contracts in Federal Iraq, young women and men are increasingly using digital platforms to promote gender equality and engage communities on sensitive issues such as early marriage, mental health and family safety. These decentralised efforts, often led by informal groups, require dedicated support to strengthen their impact and ensure the next generation of advocates can safely continue this work.

**Proposed action: Donors, international non-governmental organisations, multilateral agencies and national partners** should:

1. Provide **small, flexible seed grants** for youth collectives, digital creators and informal groups.
2. Fund **digital security tools, training and media literacy programmes** to protect civil society, including young activists, from harassment and surveillance.
3. Support **mentorship initiatives** linking experienced WROs with emerging youth leaders to strengthen skills and networks.
4. Invest in **creative platforms** such as podcasts, online campaigns and storytelling projects to expand visibility in culturally appropriate ways.
5. Offer **training stipends** to help both WROs and youth activists develop expertise in law, communications, negotiation and community organising.
6. Design **youth-accessible funding mechanisms** with reduced administrative burdens to reach informal networks effectively.
7. Encourage regional exchanges and partnerships between young activists to amplify their voice and share strategies.



## Conclusion

This Federal Iraq Landscape Analysis, taken in conjunction with the WPS Policy Paper as part of this NISAAM consultation series, reveals a deeply challenging and deteriorating environment for WROs operating within the WPS agenda. Despite their critical role in delivering legal aid, protection services, civic education and community reconciliation, WROs in Federal Iraq are being systematically sidelined politically, financially and institutionally.

The withdrawal of long-term, flexible donor funding has created a vacuum that threatens the survival of community-led and independent organisations. Without core support, many have been forced to shut down vital services, withdraw from public engagement and operate under increasingly precarious conditions. This is not merely a financial shortfall; it represents a structural collapse that is suffocating the feminist infrastructure that is essential to advancing Iraq's commitments under UNSCR 1325. Compounding this crisis is a coordinated anti-gender backlash that criminalises feminist language, restricts civic space and favours politically compliant groups over those with genuine community legitimacy. The politicisation of terms such as 'gender' and the exclusion of dissenting voices from policy processes, including the development of Iraq's third NAP, have made the WPS agenda a high-risk space. WROs are increasingly compelled to reframe their work in culturally acceptable terms simply to survive.

Yet even in this hostile environment, WROs continue to demonstrate extraordinary resilience. They build trust with communities, adapt their language creatively and maintain services in regions neglected by the state. Often operating without physical security, digital protection or reliable funding, these organisations are more than service providers; they are frontline defenders of justice and inclusion in an increasingly authoritarian context.

Despite the barriers, opportunities remain. Community-based legitimacy, strategic engagement during electoral windows and youth-led digital activism offer avenues to reclaim and expand feminist space, if adequately supported.

However, without sustained investment in locally rooted WROs, Iraq's WPS agenda risks becoming hollow and performative. Short-term, project-based funding and risk-averse donor practices must be replaced with core, multi-year, flexible funding that prioritises feminist leadership, particularly from under-represented regions such as Diyala, Basra, Anbar and Kirkuk.

To move beyond symbolic gestures and towards meaningful change, this analysis calls for a structural realignment of priorities and resources. Donors, policymakers and international partners must shift from extractive, compliance-driven approaches to models that recognise, protect and invest in the political labour and lived expertise of Iraq's feminist groups. Only through such realignment can Iraq's WPS agenda move from transactional to transformative and fulfil its promise to women as agents of peace, justice and systemic change.

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- <sup>1</sup> 'Nisaa wa Al-Salam' is Arabic for 'Women and Peace'. The term 'NISAAM' blends these two words to symbolise the integration of women and their priorities across all aspects of Iraq's WPS agenda. See: Women for Women International, NISAAM (<https://womenforwomen.org.uk/nisaam>)
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- <sup>3</sup> International Crises Group (2018), 'Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State', 30 July ([www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state](http://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state))
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- <sup>7</sup> Donor Tracker (2024), 'Sweden slashes ODA budget amid domestic priorities', 17 September ([https://donortracker.org/policy\\_updates?policy=sweden-slashes-oda-budget-amid-domestic-priorities-2024](https://donortracker.org/policy_updates?policy=sweden-slashes-oda-budget-amid-domestic-priorities-2024))
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- <sup>10</sup> KII, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "We feel invisible outside Baghdad. The ones who stay quiet get the funds, the ones who speak critically get blacklisted."
- <sup>13</sup> KII participants, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "DRL funded our community protection program. After it ended, we couldn't even cover office rent." Others mentioned that WPS work had been "paused indefinitely" due to lack of multi-year support.
- <sup>14</sup> Women for Women International, NISAAM (<https://womenforwomen.org.uk/nisaam>)
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- <sup>18</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "Extremist groups are involved in the Iraqi Parliament and have loose armed groups that run freely and work against organizations, activists, and anyone who stands up to them."
- <sup>19</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "We were accused of promoting LGBTQ+ ideas just because we worked on gender training. It became impossible to continue under that label."
- <sup>20</sup> KII, WRO, KRI, April 2025.

- <sup>21</sup> Focus group discussion (FGD) participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, February 2025: "UN Women are excluding civil society and working only with the Government. They just invite organizations that have similar discourse." Another participant added: "We had to submit a commitment... that Al Amal trustees and members will not use the term 'gender'."
- <sup>22</sup> FGD participants, WROs, Federal Iraq, February 2025: "The ones who stay quiet get the funds, the ones who speak critically get blacklisted." Another participant added: "Donors work only with NGOs registered in Baghdad. Others are invisible."
- <sup>23</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "UN Women are excluding civil society and working only with the Government. They just invite organizations that have similar discourse."
- <sup>24</sup> FGD participant, WRO Federal Iraq, February 2025: "If you speak up, they blacklist you. Others see what happens and stay quiet to survive."
- <sup>25</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "If you're not in Baghdad or already known to the government, you don't get invited."
- <sup>26</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "It is performative there is no real meaningful participation."
- <sup>27</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "We went low profile, limited our physical presence in offices, and worked from home."
- <sup>28</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted on 31 October 2000 ([www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2022/10/in-focus-women-peace-and-security](http://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/in-focus/2022/10/in-focus-women-peace-and-security))
- <sup>29</sup> United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015 (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>)
- <sup>30</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, February 2025: "Workshops are monitored, intelligence services send people to sit in the room pretending to be participants."
- <sup>31</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "We were accused of promoting LGBTQ+ ideas just because we worked on gender training. It became impossible to continue under that label."
- <sup>32</sup> Interviews confirmed that WROs rely on informal networks to assess risk, with no government mechanism to collect or act on community-level gender threats.
- <sup>33</sup> Women for Women International: 'From Asking to Action' (<https://womenforwomen.org.uk/fromaskingtoaction>)
- <sup>34</sup> FGD participants, WRO, Federal Iraq, February 2025: "We stopped public events after receiving warnings. It's not safe to talk about these topics."
- <sup>35</sup> FGD participants, WRO, Federal Iraq, February 2025: one group working in Ninewa shared that after their multi-year programme ended, "we were told the next round would go through Baghdad".
- <sup>36</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "religious or tribal figures often become the gatekeepers", and "building trust with them has been key to accessing communities".
- <sup>37</sup> FGD participants, WRO, Federal Iraq, February 2025.
- <sup>38</sup> Women for Women International (2024), 'Listen to Women: Identifying Barriers to and Opportunities for Women's Participation and Leadership in Iraq' ([https://womenforwomen.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/listentowomen-iraq\\_women\\_for\\_women\\_intl\\_2024.pdf](https://womenforwomen.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/listentowomen-iraq_women_for_women_intl_2024.pdf))
- <sup>39</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: One respondent stated that even though their organisation had lost registration due to political friction, they were still welcomed by local leaders because of long-standing community ties. Others noted that local trust "keeps us safer than any official paperwork", especially in areas with heavy surveillance or militia activity.
- <sup>40</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "After ISIS, community trust in state structures was low, and it was civil society actors, especially WROs, who re-established basic services, helped survivors, and mediated between authorities and affected populations."
- <sup>41</sup> FGD, Federal Iraq, February 2025.
- <sup>42</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: One organisation that had mobilised rural women voters in 2021 observed: "We had a playbook, we knew what worked. But without funding, we can't even reach half the governorates this time."
- <sup>43</sup> Women for Women International (2024), 'Listen to Women: Identifying Barriers to and Opportunities for Women's Participation and Leadership in Iraq' ([https://womenforwomen.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/listentowomen-iraq\\_women\\_for\\_women\\_intl\\_2024.pdf](https://womenforwomen.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/listentowomen-iraq_women_for_women_intl_2024.pdf))
- <sup>44</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: "We've started holding candidate roundtables and town halls for women to meet and question local politicians directly." Another KII participant: "In the last election cycle, we partnered with two candidates to develop a gender-sensitive platform and campaign materials."

- <sup>45</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: “When women activists in Najaf and Karbala protested the amendment of the Personal Status Law, members of the community threw stones at them.”
- <sup>46</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025
- <sup>47</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025.
- <sup>48</sup> FGD participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, February 2025: “We know they [intelligence officers] send people pretending to be participants... especially when the topic is about gender or law.”
- <sup>49</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: “During the Jaafari Law campaign, I got anonymous calls telling me I’d be punished for going against Islam.”
- <sup>50</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025: “I had to move my family from Kirkuk to Sulaymaniyah. They threatened my daughter... we had no choice.”
- <sup>51</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025.
- <sup>52</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025
- <sup>53</sup> KII participant, WRO, Federal Iraq, April 2025



**Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS)** is the UK's Women, Peace and Security civil society network. GAPS is a membership organisation of NGOs and experts in the field of development, human rights, humanitarian response and peacebuilding. GAPS was founded to progress the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The role of GAPS is to promote and hold the UK Government to account on its international commitments to women and girls in conflict areas worldwide.

**Women for Women International (WfWI)** supports women living in some of the world's most dangerous places, including Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Kosovo, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Sudan. Since 1993, the organisation has reached nearly half a million marginalised women survivors of war, helping them rebuild their lives through skills training, rights awareness and economic empowerment. Through its programmes, partnerships and advocacy, WfWI ensures that women are not only equipped to earn and save money, improve their families' health and exercise their rights, but are also connected to wider networks that amplify their voices. By engaging with policymakers, civil society and community leaders, the organisation advocates for systemic change so that women's priorities and perspectives shape decisions in their homes, communities and beyond.



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