



NISAAM partners during capacity strengthening sessions. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

NISAAM ('Nisaa wa Al-Salam'): Advancing Women, Peace and Security in Iraq Learning Series: Kurdistan Region of Iraq Landscape Analysis

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Acronyms and abbreviations

FGD	Focus Group Discussion	NISAAM	Nisaa wa Al-Salam/ 'Women and Peace' (project)
GAPS	Gender Action for Peace and Security	ODA	Official Development Assistance
GBV	Gender-Based Violence	UN	United Nations
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant	UNSCR	UN Security Council Resolution
KII	Key Informant Interview	USAID	US Agency for International Development
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq	WfWI	Women for Women International
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government	WPS	Women, Peace and Security (agenda)
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding	WRO	Women's Rights Organisation
NAP	National Action Plan		

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

In the aftermath of 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,¹ 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 the Kurdistan Region and Federal Iraq.

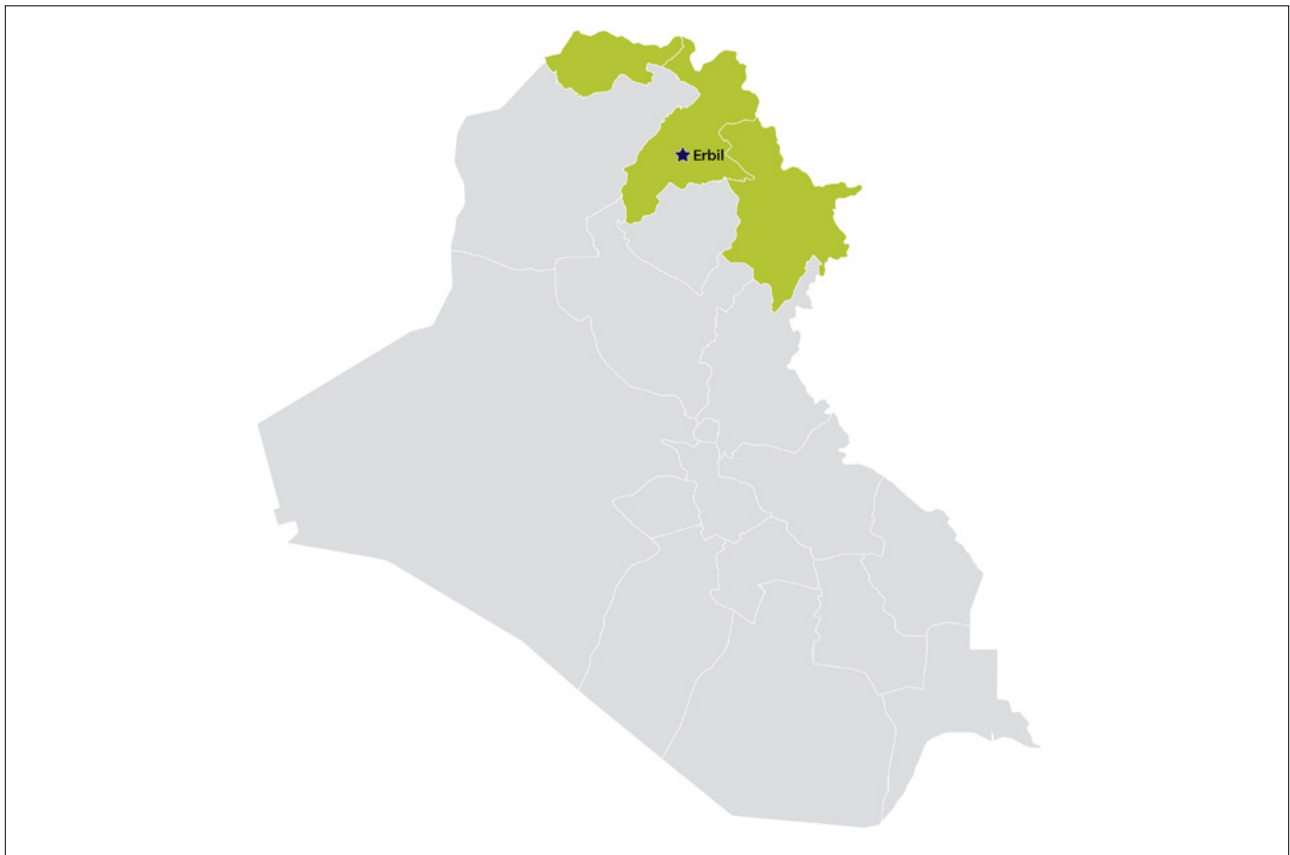
By providing a combination of direct funding, institutional support and network building opportunities, NISAAM enables women-led and women's rights organisations (WROs) to design and implement their own Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agendas – prioritising issues such as gender-based violence, economic support, political participation and climate resilience. In doing so, the NISAAM approach represents an intentional shift from top-down donor models to a sustainable, inclusive and locally owned approach, contributing to a void in the WPS space and reinforcing the essential role of women leaders in Iraq.



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

Methodology

Kurdistan Region of Iraq



This Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)-focused Landscape Analysis report draws on a mixed-methods qualitative approach to explore the priorities, challenges and adaptive strategies of WROs operating in the KRI within the current funding landscape. It is one of three reports in a series, alongside a Federal Iraq Landscape Analysis and a WPS Policy Paper. Together, these reports:

1. map the expertise of WROs leading the implementation of the WPS agenda in Iraq
2. identify the barriers to implementation
3. outline evidence-based, locally informed recommendations to strengthen programmes, service delivery and gender-transformative change for WPS in Iraq

For this report, data collection involved consultations that took place from February to April 2025. This was a crucial time in the transformation of the operating environment for CSOs and WROs globally: the US Agency for International Development's (USAID's) stop-work orders² were announced in January 2025, while the UK's reduction in official development assistance (ODA) from 0.5 per cent of gross national income (GNI) to 0.3 per cent was announced in February 2025.³

These consultations included diverse groups of women's rights leaders and women's rights organisations, lawyers, and activists across Duhok, Erbil, Sinjar, Mosul and Kirkuk in the KRI and northern Iraq. They took place through:

- key informant interviews with representatives from WROs
- focus group discussions with WROs 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.

In total, this research includes direct input from more than 51 civil society representatives and decision-makers, many of whom are involved in the implementation of the WPS agenda at the local, regional or national levels. Their testimony highlights the compounding effects of funding withdrawal on frontline services, legal advocacy and organisational sustainability. These insights form the evidentiary backbone of the report's analysis and recommendations. The methodological approach aimed to identify recurrent patterns across responses. It includes direct quotations and content referencing institutional challenges, donor dependency, sociocultural backlash and internal organisational strain.

The methodology centres the expertise of those directly implementing women's rights work in the KRI. 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.

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: Kurdistan Region of Iraq

In recent years, the KRI has witnessed a significant contraction in funding for WROs, particularly following decisions by major donors, including the UK,⁴ US⁵ and Sweden,⁶ to reduce or withdraw financial support. As a result, many organisations are now at risk of not being able to meet even the most basic needs of the communities they serve. As one WRO shared, “Trump’s decisions to cut USA funds affected us for more than 50 per cent of the funding we used to get... European donors cannot fill the vacuum.”⁷ This retreat in investment has coincided with a period of escalating regional insecurity, worsening economic fragility and ongoing post-conflict recovery.

The funding challenge is unfolding within a broader socio-political context in the KRI. The region continues to face economic pressures linked to global oil price fluctuations and periodic delays in budget transfers, which have an impact on public service delivery and development planning. The KRI also hosts a significant number of internally displaced persons and refugees, placing further demands on infrastructure and social services. WROs have played a critical role in supporting community strength and access to services, yet their ability to sustain these efforts is increasingly affected by resource limitations.

The global reduction in overseas aid spending is not only causing WROs’ work to be underfunded, but has actively sidelined them. It has stripped 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, and widening geographic inequalities between the centre and periphery. In the KRI, this global retreat manifests in both funding scarcity and increased risk to WROs. 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;⁸ yet they continue their work – at great personal cost.

These realities mirror a broader global trend. In May 2025, UN Women published a global survey that revealed:

- **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.⁹

Despite their central role in service delivery and peacebuilding, local feminist groups receive only 1 per cent of gender-focused official development assistance.¹⁰ These global trends are mirrored in the KRI. WROs in Iraq operate within this constrained environment yet continue to play a vital role in post-conflict recovery, gender justice and transitional justice. From supporting Yazidi survivors of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) violence to responding to gender-based violence (GBV), they work across all four pillars of the WPS agenda: protection, prevention, participation, and relief and recovery. This report demonstrates how funding cuts and inadequate resourcing mechanisms are severely undermining the operational capacity, safety and long-term sustainability of feminist organisations in Iraq. These constraints are compromising legal protection and psychosocial services for women and their communities, widening the implementation gap for Iraq’s National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS, and threatening to weaken feminist civil society in the KRI. These findings offer an evidence base to better understand the evolving challenges WROs face and to inform more effective, locally grounded approaches to WPS programming.

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.

Findings

1. Funding climate in the KRI

The funding landscape for WROs in the KRI has become increasingly fragile. Recent shifts in global aid priorities, abrupt donor exits and exclusionary funding systems have left many local organisations struggling to sustain vital protection and peacebuilding services. This section outlines important challenges identified through consultations, alongside emerging opportunities for strengthening financial resilience and inclusion.

Funding climate in the KRI: Challenges

Global reductions in aid

Throughout this consultation, key informant interview (KII) and focus group discussion (FGD) participants consistently highlighted the destabilising effect of sudden donor withdrawals in the KRI, particularly following US policy shifts and shifting regional priorities.¹¹ USAID's termination of all programming, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency's (SIDA's) exit from Iraq, and the redirection of donor attention toward Ukraine, Syria and Palestine have depleted funding streams for critical programming.

This abrupt exodus has especially affected protection-related initiatives, such as gender-based violence (GBV) response and transitional justice. Several programmes have been halted mid-cycle, leaving survivors without support and staff without work. Women's rights organisations (WROs) reported a high dependence on USAID and similar donors to fund legal aid, GBV services and support for survivors of domestic violence. One WRO explained: "Many projects supporting suicide survivors and domestic violence victims were reliant on US funding. When it stopped, we had nothing to continue the work."

The sudden loss of external funding has left organisations susceptible to project abandonment, staff attrition and operational shutdowns. With no transition planning or support for training, the shift from emergency relief to development-focused funding models has created a 'funding cliff' for many. As one participant shared during an FGD: "When funding ends, we don't just lose money. We lose safe spaces, legal access, mental health support – everything women depend on."¹² This vacuum reveals an urgent need for contingency planning, core funding and skills strengthening to better prepare WROs for financial shocks.

Top-down donor priorities and thematic shifts

The retreat in funding has coincided with rapid changes in donor priorities, contributing to an unstable funding environment. Many WROs in the KRI described increasing pressure to align with emerging global themes, such as climate change and digital innovation, even when these diverge from their core expertise. As one WRO observed:



The overall donor landscape has shifted, with many funders redirecting their attention to emerging global crises or thematic priorities such as climate change or digital innovation, leaving fewer opportunities for organisations working on grassroots women's rights, protection and peacebuilding in Iraq. This shrinking space for targeted, gender-focused funding makes competition more intense and sustainability increasingly precarious.



These shifts, often accompanied by short-term funding cycles, force local organisations to rebrand or pivot quickly. This happens despite their limited resources or lack of expertise to do so effectively. Survey responses echoed this:

"Organisations are vulnerable to changes in donor policies or political instability in donor countries."

"Many lack core funding to cover operations or build capacity. Donor funding is activity-focused, and competition for limited opportunities is intense."

As evidenced by the NISAAM consultations, changing donor priorities are often coupled with short funding cycles and political donor shifts that undermine organisational strength. The funding landscape favours surface-level innovation over sustained structural reform, making it harder to address root causes like legal inequality or GBV.

Institutional readiness and exclusionary donor requirements

While KRI-based organisations are often more institutionally stable than those in federal areas, gaps still exist in strategic planning, fundraising diversification and donor compliance. Many smaller or rural based women's organisations lack strong connections to international coalitions, regional advocacy platforms or high-profile donor convenings. As one WRO shared through the consultation survey:



Some donors require complex reporting or systems to track their funding, requiring additional resources that organisations may have limited capacity for.



This creates structural barriers that often favour larger, urban-based NGOs that are perceived as being more 'credible' or 'ready'. These organisations are more likely to receive funding, participate in training initiatives and engage in strategic partnerships. As a result, smaller, often minority- or survivor-led groups remain excluded.¹³ Yazidi-led and other minority-focused organisations described frequent exclusion from larger donor platforms.¹⁴ This is partly due to them lacking the financial systems needed for large grants and partly because well-established urban NGOs dominate coalition spaces.

This donor preference perpetuates a cycle in which smaller, local-level organisations, many of which are minority- or survivor-led, face exclusion from visibility and funding. This in turn undermines their ability to scale, build coalitions or exert policy influence. Without international investment in inclusive network building and coalition support, these WROs remain disconnected from the very systems designed to support them.¹⁵

Within coalitions, especially the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Network, some interviewees reported power centralisation among more established organisations that control visibility, funding and donor relationships. This excludes emerging groups, breeds mistrust and inhibits collaborative momentum. This complex combination of external exclusion and internal disempowerment weakens the ecosystem. Internal gatekeeping inhibits new organisations, weakens trust and undermines collaboration. Without governance reform, inclusive coalition design and intentional investment in network building, these structures risk reinforcing inequities rather than enabling support.

Funding climate in the KRI: Opportunities

Targeted skills strengthening and institutional support

The NISAAM project is responding directly to these challenges through skills development, peer learning and increased access to funding. By reconnecting under-resourced WROs to advocacy spaces and donor networks, NISAAM helps build a more resilient and inclusive women's rights ecosystem. We have already seen positive shifts through integrated programming. For example, one WRO in the KRI shared:



“...some international partners like Women for Women International have started prioritising the intersection of climate and gender. Through our partnership with them, we’ve integrated climate considerations into our programming... We’ve found that when we link climate resilience or environmental approaches to our existing programming, especially within women’s empowerment or protection projects, it enhances our proposals and makes our interventions stand out. This has opened up new funding streams and helped us attract interest from donors who are prioritising integrated and innovative approaches.



Through NISAAM, WfWI and GAPS, partners with WROs and CSOs not only through financial resources, but also with technical assistance, organisational development and strategic planning – enabling them to build more resilient and autonomous operations.¹⁶ This directly responds to the ‘funding cliff’ many organisations have experienced, by providing support that is better aligned with local needs, institutional sustainability and long-term protection goals. 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 susceptible to abrupt funding transitions. In doing so, it serves as a model for how feminist funding initiatives can prioritise both answerability to communities and sustainability for frontline organisations.¹⁷



Women for Women International-Iraq coordinating session on Women Peace and Security. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

Funding climate in the KRI: Recommendations

Provide long-term, flexible core funding to WROs

The withdrawal of major donors, combined with humanitarian funding shortfalls, has resulted in short-term, project-based funding cycles that leave women's rights organisations (WROs) highly marginalised. Many WROs have been forced to make staff redundant, losing critical internal expertise, and to suspend essential services such as GBV case management and legal aid. The current funding landscape also disproportionately favours large, well-connected urban NGOs, further marginalising emerging and rural WROs.

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

1. Establish **multi-year institutional funding** aimed at strengthening WROs' organisational resilience. This should cover:
 - **robust financial management systems** to improve accountability and enable WROs to access and manage larger and more complex portfolios
 - **human resources and compliance mechanisms**, including the development of safeguarding policies, anti-corruption measures and equitable recruitment practices
 - **organisational strategy development** to collaborate with WROs in setting long-term priorities, diversifying funding streams and adapting to shifting contexts
 - **succession planning and leadership development** to reduce reliance on a small number of individuals and build a pipeline of skilled women leaders, particularly from under-represented communities
2. Ensure that funding includes **adequate overhead core costs** (for example, rent, utilities, information technology (IT) systems) and **staff well-being budgets** to address the high risk of burnout among frontline workers. This may cover mental health support, manageable workloads and professional development opportunities.
3. Create **flexible funding pools** that can respond to contextual volatility and emerging crises. These would enable WROs to reallocate resources to urgent needs (for example, sudden surges in GBV cases during conflict) without requiring lengthy donor approvals.
4. Prioritise **funding accessibility for community-led and rural WROs** by simplifying application and reporting requirements, providing training support during the grant process, and ring-fencing a proportion of funds specifically for smaller or emerging organisations.



NISAAM partners during focus group discussion for the learning series. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

2. Political, legal and institutional environment

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has made notable progress in establishing legal and institutional frameworks to support women's rights, including the 2011 Law to Prevent Domestic Violence, and the creation of the Directorate to Combat Violence Against Women and the High Council for Women and Development.¹⁸ These bodies can provide opportunities for engagement between state institutions and civil society. At the same time, WROs continue to face serious challenges. Legal inconsistencies between the KRG and Federal Iraq, overlapping jurisdictions, and politically motivated disruptions all hinder effective programming. Bureaucratic delays, lack of coordination and systemic exclusion, particularly of minority-led groups, weaken trust in institutions and slow the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Political, legal and institutional environment: Challenges

Fragmented governance and legal inconsistencies

Organisations working across both the Kurdistan Region and Federal Iraq face significant bureaucratic and political challenges. Misaligned laws, duplicative approval processes and contested jurisdiction between Erbil and Baghdad disrupt programming, particularly in areas like Sinjar, Ninewa and Kirkuk. As one WRO shared: "If you work in Kirkuk or Nineveh, you have to get approval from both the Baghdad side and the Erbil side. Sometimes neither will approve unless the other does first."

In one case, a WRO described having to cancel a law reform project after Baghdad suspended the Kurdish Parliament, demonstrating how federal-level political disruptions can undermine local initiatives. Obtaining permits frequently requires security clearance from multiple authorities, often resulting in months-long delays. One participant described during the FGD: "Our permit was delayed because the Federal Office asked for KRG clearance, and KRG wouldn't act without Baghdad's input – we lost three months."

This operational paralysis stems from Iraq's dual-governance system, where the KRG and Federal Government maintain separate and often conflicting legal and administrative frameworks. Each project, registration or initiative requires navigating multiple layers of approval: from ministries and directorates to security forces and militia groups. As one WRO shared: "Each side wants control. We go to the Federal Offices, and they tell us: go back to the KRG side. This is common in Ninewa."

The lack of coordination not only delays service delivery but disproportionately affects minority-led organisations, particularly Yazidi groups, who already face systemic exclusion. As one Yazidi WRO shared: "Yazidi-led groups are not trusted. They ask more questions, request more paperwork. We always need someone to 'vouch' for us." Even well-established NGOs find themselves forced to redirect entire projects due to administrative or political shifts, highlighting how fragile the operational landscape is. These delays can have acute consequences for service provision, particularly in cases involving GBV survivors, where timing and confidentiality are critical. In practice, this means that minority-led groups must expend far greater resources on navigating bureaucracy, leaving fewer resources for frontline work.

The fragmented system also results in legal gaps, especially in areas such as GBV prosecution, marriage rights and service mandates, and exposes women's rights work to politicisation. In marginalised communities like Sinjar, these bureaucratic barriers function as tools of exclusion, silencing minority voices and slowing rights-based interventions that are often time-sensitive and lifesaving. As a result, the delivery of critical support becomes arbitrary, dependent not on need or rights, but on which authority holds sway in each area at a given time.

Political, legal and institutional environment: Opportunities

Government engagement in the KRI

Despite the challenges with legal inconsistencies, WROs working in the KRI, particularly in Duhok and Erbil, observed relatively stronger relationships with government organisations. Compared to

Baghdad, where civil society often faces opacity or intimidation, KRG institutions were described as more accessible and open to engagement. Several WROs reported signing memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with KRG ministries, participating in regular coordination meetings and co-delivering GBV response programmes. This degree of institutional openness allows WROs to integrate programming within legal frameworks, reduce public suspicion and pursue policy advocacy with greater safety and legitimacy. One WRO highlighted:

“

We've had better access to government stakeholders here. Dialogue is regular, and projects are often approved without the same delays we face in federal areas.

”

This re-emphasised the need for context-specific responses for women's rights work in Iraq, not just between the KRI and Federal Iraq but within each geography too.

This enabling environment is critical for long-term impact. It provides a platform for civil society to collaborate with state actors, co-create policy responses and operationalise Iraq's WPS commitments. The presence of mechanisms such as coordination meetings, joint committees and MoUs helps formalise civil society engagement, allowing for longer-term planning and accountability. However, the strength of these opportunities should not be overstated. Implementation remains uneven, especially outside urban areas, and some KRG institutions lack funding or political authority, limiting the impact of partnerships. Nonetheless, the presence of institutions willing to engage meaningfully with women's rights groups is a rare asset in Iraq's fragmented governance context. Through the NISAAM project, Women for Women International and its partners will continue to collaborate with KRG institutions to reinforce this enabling environment and build momentum toward sustainable, rights-based reform.

The KRI context reveals critical entry points where donor investment can be not only impactful, but catalytic. Harmonising legal frameworks across KRG and Federal Iraq would untangle operational paralysis in disputed territories. Long-term, flexible funding for WROs would anchor the sustainability of programming. And new legal protections for civil society organisations would future-proof the sector against ideological threats.



Women for Women International-Iraq meet with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq High Council of Women Affairs. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

Political, legal and institutional environment: Recommendations

Streamline legal and administrative processes for WROs

Women's rights organisations (WROs) often navigate complex legal and administrative environments due to overlapping systems between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Federal Iraq. This can result in duplicated procedures, slower programme implementation, and challenges in accessing certain areas or resources. Minority-led WROs, including Yazidi groups, may face additional barriers related to their political and ethnic contexts..

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

1. Facilitate **collaboration between KRG and the Federal Government** to develop joint civil society protocols that support WRO operations. This includes:
 - shared registration processes to reduce duplication and delays
 - coordinated security clearance mechanisms to streamline access approvals
 - legal recognition of women's rights protection frameworks to ensure consistency across jurisdictions
2. Develop **integrated permit and licensing procedures** across ministries, directorates and governorates to create a more enabling environment for WROs.



NISAAM partners during focus group discussion for the learning series. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

3. 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 accountable to gender equality commitments, particularly through pre-election advocacy and coalition building. Although elections in Iraq are often marred by political instability, sectarian tensions and limited civic space, they also represent one of the few moments when political actors actively seek public legitimacy.

Election cycles and women's political participation: Challenges

Tokenistic quotas

Despite formal legal commitments, there remains a significant gap between legislation and its effective implementation. Many of the current legal provisions include caveats that undermine women's ability to participate fully, equally and meaningfully in society. For instance, Article 38 of the Constitution of Iraq guarantees freedom of expression – but limits it where 'public order' and 'morality' are deemed to be at risk.¹⁹ This clause has been widely used by authorities in both the KRI and Federal Iraq to justify broad restrictions on freedom of expression, disproportionately affecting minorities and women.

Similarly, Article 49 of the Constitution establishes a quota to promote women's political participation, mandating that at least 25 per cent of seats in the Council of Representatives should be held by women.²⁰ 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 and 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. Political parties, seeking to meet quota requirements, often nominate female relatives of male party leaders or affiliates, many of whom lack political experience or independent influence. This practice limits the transformative potential of the quota system and reinforces tokenistic forms of inclusion.

As one WRO identified:



While women may occupy seats in councils or serve in formal roles, many are excluded from the actual decision-making processes that shape policies or allocate resources. Their presence is often symbolic, fulfilling quota requirements rather than reflecting genuine political inclusion. Furthermore, patriarchal norms within political institutions and parties tend to sideline their input, and few women hold senior leadership positions or influence over core agendas.



The withdrawal of flexible, pre-election support that has resulted from the loss of key donors, combined with funding shortfalls is particularly damaging because it eliminates one of the few moments when WROs can operate in public without backlash, either as candidates or campaign advocates. Civic and political education framed around elections is often more 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.

Election cycles and women's political participation: Opportunities

Collaborative approaches from diverse women candidates

Iraq's upcoming election cycle nevertheless offers a window for visibility and a pivot in approach. In the last election cycle, WROs across both the KRI and Federal Iraq managed to secure public commitments from candidates to repeal discriminatory laws, including parts of the Personal Status Law. While follow-through remains a challenge, the process of securing public pledges and engaging the media helped elevate women's issues in political platforms.

During this upcoming election period, WROs are strategising on activities to encourage women's access as both voters and elected officials. This includes integrating risk mitigation work to protect women human rights defenders (WHRDs) throughout their campaigns and working with independent election bodies such as the Kurdistan Women's Alliance and the High Council of Women, which have successfully advocated for protections against hate speech. Some cross-regional collaboration is also taking place, particularly through WRO coalitions and informal advocacy networks that link groups across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Federal Iraq. However, institutional coordination between the Kurdistan Regional Government and federal structures remains limited, and many women's rights organisations navigate both spaces separately depending on their registration and operating base.

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 a critical entry point for mainstreaming WPS and gender equality narratives, especially in public discourse and party platforms. WROs can use this moment to shape candidate agendas, mobilise women voters and form alliances with reform-minded candidates.²¹ Donors and partners should invest in pre-election skills development, including media campaigns, candidate training and monitoring political commitments related to women's rights.

Election cycles and women's political participation: Recommendations

Support WROs to leverage elections as a platform for gender equality

Iraq's upcoming national elections in 2025 provide a strategic opportunity for women's rights organisations (WROs) to influence political discourse, support women candidates and hold political parties accountable for their gender equality commitments.

Despite formal legal provisions, such as the parliamentary quota for women, structural and cultural barriers persist, limiting women's meaningful political participation. Tokenistic nomination practices and entrenched patriarchal norms reduce women's roles to a symbolic presence rather than having substantive influence. Pre-election periods offer a critical window for WROs to conduct civic education, raise public awareness and advocate for women's rights with relatively less backlash.

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

1. Provide **targeted, flexible pre-election support** to WROs. This could include:
 - training for women candidates, focusing on campaign skills, public engagement, and digital and physical security
 - public outreach and media campaigns to mobilise women voters and highlight gender equality in political platforms
 - advocacy support for engagement with political parties and independent election bodies to secure and monitor commitments to women's rights
2. Collaborate to implement **risk mitigation strategies** to protect women human rights defenders (WHRDs) throughout electoral campaigns, including through legal aid, psychosocial support, and rapid response mechanisms to counter hate speech and harassment.
3. Support ongoing **monitoring and accountability efforts** to track political parties' and candidates' follow-through on gender equality commitments beyond the election period.
4. Facilitate partnerships between WROs and independent bodies such as the Kurdistan Women's Alliance and the High Council of Women to institutionalise gender-responsive electoral reforms and protections.

4. Shrinking civic space and gender backlash

The KRI is a semi-autonomous region with its own government, parliament and security forces. This autonomy has historically enabled a more open civic space than in Federal Iraq, particularly for WROs and CSOs. However, these freedoms are increasingly under threat. Rising ideological conservatism, restrictive legislation, and growing hostility from public and governmental organisations are contracting civic space across the KRI. While the severity of restrictions often differs from Federal Iraq, WROs observed a chilling effect on their work, forcing them to adapt their strategies, language and organisational identities.

Shrinking civic space and gender backlash: Challenges

Rising ideological conservatism and legal constraints

In the KRI, the contraction of civic space reflects both top-down and bottom-up pressures. Legislative changes have enabled closer monitoring and targeting of WROs, while a surge in right-wing religious ideals has emboldened conservative groups and individuals. One WRO participating in the FGDs observed, “The rise of Salafi extremism in Sulaimani has shrunk the space for civil society organisations. The authorities often support these groups because they don’t challenge the government.” This alignment between political elites and regressive social groups has marginalised organisations working on human rights or feminist causes. They face stigmatisation, direct threats and limited access to communities. Notably, this environment discourages government institutions from countering extremist narratives, leaving WROs without state allies to protect their operational space.

Self-censorship of language and organisational adaptation

Although the civic space in the KRI is more open than that in Federal Iraq, sensitivities still shape how WROs operate, particularly around the use of rights-based or gendered language. In conservative or rural areas even the term ‘gender’ can be perceived as foreign, western or destabilising. This leads WROs to self-censor, avoid explicit language and operate ‘below the radar’.²²

This challenge reveals the double bind women’s rights groups face: they must advance transformative agendas without triggering public backlash. This erodes authenticity and impedes broader coalition building. It also highlights a critical gap in state and community education, where concepts like gender equity or bodily autonomy remain misunderstood or taboo. In some conservative or traditional communities and institutions, explicit use of feminist or gender-based rights language often leads to backlash, rejection or exclusion. As a result, organisations have adapted by reframing their advocacy using more ‘neutral’ or culturally acceptable language to secure access to universities, local councils and donor spaces.

This self-censorship of language and navigation of social norms and customs highlights the socio-political volatility of gender discourse in the KRI.²³ This ‘soft censorship’ extends to organisational identity. Some groups avoid describing themselves as feminist or rights-based to maintain access, minimise backlash and protect staff. Women activists and women’s rights leaders also described personal reputational costs, including community mistrust and accusations that they “promote divorce” or “undermine culture”. As WROs shared during the FGDs: “If certain language is deemed problematic or controversial, we adapt by using alternative, less confrontational language while still advancing our mission.” Another WRO shared that they had:



...adopted a diplomatic approach...if certain terms are unacceptable to stakeholders, we use alternatives. This flexibility is especially important in working with conservative or traditional institutions that might be resistant to feminist or gender-specific language.



With widespread targeted attacks, organisations are left with few options other than self-censorship. As one WRO shared: “We deal with a lot of threats on a daily basis, we have very popular platforms on Facebook...dedicated to the Personal Status Laws and domestic violence.”

Geopolitical and sectoral variations in restrictions

One significant outcome of the consultations for this report are the distinct geopolitical differences not just between Federal Iraq and the KRI, but within Federal Iraq and the KRI. Within the KRI itself, attitudes towards gender discourse vary sharply. In comparison to the clear pushback referenced above, we heard that for some WROs, they face relatively little challenge in navigating gender terminology. As one WRO noted:

“

In the region [KRI], the restrictions are much lower, so there is no major challenge in the use of language for words like ‘gender’ and others that are forbidden in the South and Baghdad.

”

Affirming the geopolitical differences across regions in Iraq when it comes to the implementation and regulation of restrictions, another WRO in the KRI shared:

“

At the time of implementation, we feel freer because the Nineveh Plain communities are fairly open-minded and there is no barrier to using the language freely.

”

Similarly, as with geopolitical differentiation through the consultations for this project, we also heard about differentiations within sectors – not all academic settings pushed back on gender discourse. In fact, one WRO in the KRI shared that they:

“

... feel more freedom to use gender-related terms in research settings. The academic environment allows for a more formal and professional use of gender terms, as these discussions are generally accepted in academic discourse.

”

During KIs, WROs shared starkly different experiences, with one WRO operating within Kirkuk sharing:

“

The extremist groups within society always accuse us of working on international agendas against our societies and working to break up families. This started in recent years because of social media and the great use of social media platforms by clerics and extremists. They work systematically to distort the image of women and hold women's organisations responsible for the disintegration of families and society.

”

The rhetorical environment is highly politicised, where language itself becomes a barrier to advocacy. This forces WROs to walk a tightrope, pushing for transformative change while avoiding terminology that triggers conservative gatekeepers. Such adaptation is necessary but also restricts authenticity and boldness in rights-based work. It reflects a deeper structural resistance to gender equality. This underscores the highly localised nature of civic space restrictions, requiring tailored strategies for different geographies and institutional settings.

Shrinking civic space and gender backlash: Opportunities

Strengthening networks and coalitions

Despite the restrictive environment, WROs in the KRI have a long history of resilience. Civil society networks provide critical support by enabling organisations to share knowledge, amplify advocacy and engage with policymakers. WROs participating in the NISAAM consultations described active involvement in platforms such as the WPS Network, the Coalition for Just Reparations, the Kurdistan Women's Lobby, and Women for Women International's NISAAM programme. These networks facilitate regional advocacy, provide visibility, and align local initiatives with donor priorities like climate resilience and economic support.

In Iraq's fragmented civil society landscape, networks serve a dual role: they provide collective protection and enable coordinated responses to donor demands for intersectional, multi-thematic programming. When funded sustainably and structured equitably, these coalitions can mitigate the impact of donor withdrawal by pooling resources and creating shared infrastructure. Civil society groups and spaces play critical roles in enabling women to access and influence decision-making by creating safe spaces, providing trainings and resources, and building awareness and support from the community for women's rights and participation.²⁴

To sustain civic space and advance gender equality, WROs recommend a multi-agency approach that includes building alliances within existing power structures in which women feel safe to participate. This approach would include building new networks of allies within existing power structures, like community police departments, the governor's office and activists, in partnership with WROs. This is an important implementation gap that the NISAAM project seeks to address sustainably throughout the project and beyond, by strategically connecting WROs with power structures to ensure that initiatives led by security groups such as community policy departments are gender sensitive and informed by the priorities and expertise of the communities they seek to serve.²⁵



NISAAM partners during focus group discussion for the learning series. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

Shrinking civic space and gender backlash: Recommendations

Strengthen legal protections and support mechanisms for civil society

Women's rights activists, particularly in conservative areas such as Sulaymaniyah and Halabja, face increasing ideological backlash and threats. Civic space is narrowing as extremist individuals and groups gain influence, and activists often feel compelled to self-censor to avoid retaliation. These pressures place women's rights organisations (WROs) and their staff at heightened risk and limit their ability to advocate effectively. Coalitions and networks, such as the WPS Network and the Kurdistan Women's Lobby, are powerful tools for advocacy but suffer from urban elitism and gatekeeping. Community-led and minority WROs are often excluded from leadership and decision-making.

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

1. Collaborate with national and regional authorities to develop and implement a **civil society protection framework**, supported by the international community. This should include:
 - anti-discrimination provisions to safeguard activists and organisations from harassment
 - guarantees of institutional autonomy for NGOs to operate independently and free from undue interference
 - practical security measures and rapid response mechanisms for at-risk activists
2. Embed these protections within **national legal reform agendas** and align them with international human rights frameworks.
3. Encourage the international community, including donors, international NGOs (INGOs) and UN agencies to:
 - **advocate for enabling civic space** as part of their diplomatic and development engagement
 - **provide technical and financial support** for the creation of protection mechanisms
 - fund **protection programmes for frontline activists**, such as emergency relocation, psychosocial support and digital security training
4. Support coalitions and networks to adopt **transparent and inclusive governance practices**, such as clear selection criteria, rotating leadership roles, and mentorship for emerging and local-level WROs.



NISAAM partners workshops for the learning series. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

Conclusion

In the KRI, WROs continue to carve out spaces for gender justice in an increasingly complex and constrained environment. While their strength and ingenuity are evident, these efforts unfold against a backdrop of donor withdrawal, shrinking civic space and political challenges that threaten to erode hard-won gains.

Taken in conjunction with the WPS Policy Paper as part of this NISAAM consultation series, this paper has detailed how the operating environment for WROs working on WPS priorities has become markedly more precarious. Successive donor exits have created funding gaps that compromise the sustainability of core programming, from GBV services to legal aid and community outreach. Political dynamics, such as tokenistic gender quotas, continue to limit women's meaningful participation in decision-making. At the same time, tensions between the KRG and Baghdad create legal ambiguities that hinder cross-regional work. Civic space is becoming increasingly restrictive, with heightened surveillance, bureaucratic hurdles and ideological backlash exposing activists to significant risks.

Yet within these constraints, WROs in the KRI are demonstrating adaptive strategies. They are reframing rights-based language to navigate conservative spaces, integrating gender concerns into broader recovery and climate agendas, and forging cross-sector coalitions that maintain a fragile foothold in policy-making processes. The relative openness of the KRI's legal framework, although unevenly enforced, has allowed some institutional partnerships to flourish. However, local-level organisations, particularly those outside urban centres, continue to struggle for visibility and access.

This mixed picture suggests that the KRI is not simply a space of feminist possibility but also one of fragility and dispute. Donor approaches must account for this complexity with institutional support, skills strengthening and investment in safe civic space. Harmonising legal frameworks across the KRG and Federal Iraq could reduce operational paralysis. Long-term, flexible funding is essential to buffer WROs against austerity cycles, while legal protections for civil society groups are critical to safeguarding those who are driving change.

Finally, although feminist coalitions remain vital platforms, their governance structures also require democratisation. Greater inclusion of rural, youth and minority-led WROs would strengthen the credibility and sustainability of these networks and model the equity they seek to advance externally.

The recommendations on inclusive coalition building, mentoring pipelines and internal reform are not just structural tweaks, they are political acts of feminist redistribution. This report marks an invitation to invest in what is already working, on the terms, priorities and expertise of WROs themselves.



NISAAM partners during focus group discussion for the learning series. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

References

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- ¹¹ KII participant, WRO, KRI, April 2025: "Humanitarian assistance has been shrinking partly due to shifting international priorities, such as the impact of the Trump presidency, USAID cuts, the Ukraine war, and the Turkey-Syria earthquake."
- ¹² FGD participant, WRO, KRI, February 2025: "When funding ends, we don't just lose money. We lose safe spaces, legal access, mental health support, everything women depend on."
- ¹³ KII participant, Yazidi-led WRO, KRI, April 2025.
- ¹⁴ FGD participant, WRO, KRI, April 2025: "There are some organizations pretending to support women but are in fact marginalizing minorities like Yazidis... we've faced racism even from other women's groups. Sometimes it feels like we have to fight just to be seen."
- ¹⁵ FGD participant, WRO, KRI, February 2025: "We are isolated. Even other women's groups don't include us in their platforms because we are new or from the villages."
- ¹⁶ Women for Women International, NISAAM (<https://womenforwomen.org.uk/nisaam>)
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- ¹⁸ UN Women, Iraq (2024), 'Empowering Women for a Brighter Future in Iraq', 5 November (<https://iraq.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2024/11/empowering-women-for-a-brighter-future-in-iraq>)
- ¹⁹ 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)
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ KII participant, WRO, KRI, April 2025: "We've started holding candidate roundtables and town halls for women to meet and question local politicians directly." Another KII participant in Ninewa: "In the last election cycle, we partnered with two candidates to develop a gender-sensitive platform and campaign materials."
- ²² FGD participants, WROs, KRI, February 2025: "We can't talk openly about gender justice here. We work through service delivery and only bring in rights language once trust is built."
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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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