Women, Peace and Security Focus Group Discussion during the first year of the NISAAM project.
Photo Credit: Women for Women International

NISAAM ('Nisaa wa Al-Salam'): Advancing Women, Peace and Security in Iraq

Learning Series: Women, Peace and Security Policy

October 2025

gaps uk
GENDER ACTION FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

WOMEN FOR WOMEN INTERNATIONAL

Contents

Acronyms and abbreviations

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

Introduction: Nisaa wa Al-Salaam (NISAAM)

Amid conflict, funding cuts and the rollback of women's rights in Iraq, the need for locally driven, gender-transformative 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 in both the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Federal Iraq.

Through a combination of direct funding, institutional support, network building and advocacy 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 (GBV), 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.

A core element of the NISAAM project is its commitment to influencing the international community and decision makers to adopt meaningful approaches to partnering with civil society groups in Iraq. To support this, we produced a series of reports: this WPS policy paper and two accompanying Landscape Analysis papers (one for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and one for Federal Iraq). Together, these reports:

1. 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 power-holders to account
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.

The consultation series employed a mixed-methods approach, engaging 51 individuals who are partners, decision-makers and civil society representatives through:

51 individuals

partners, decision-makers and civil society representatives

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

February – April 2025

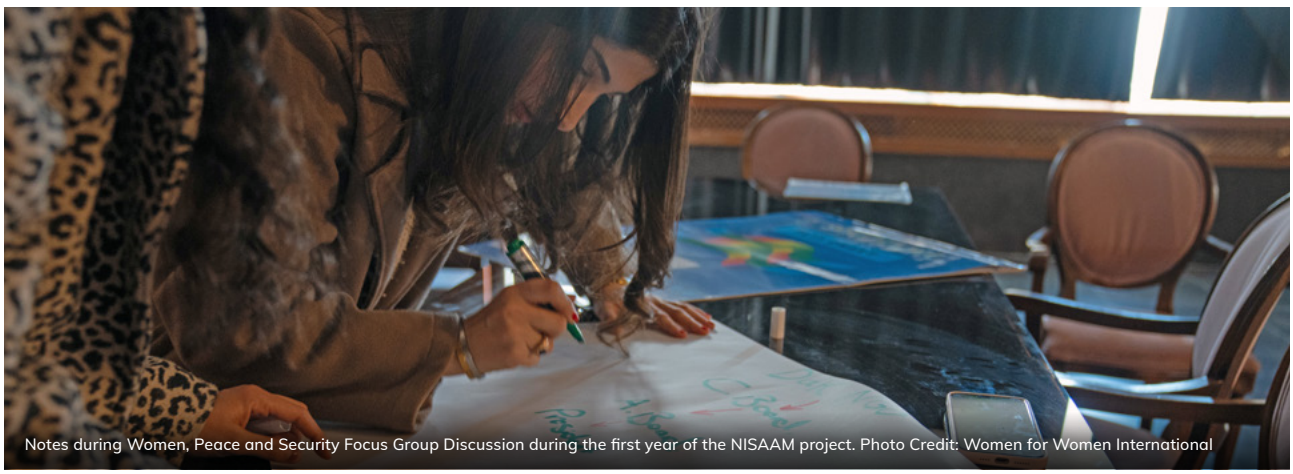
As part of NISAAM's commitment to influence the international community and decision makers, this policy report aims to critically examine the effectiveness of Iraq's implementation of the WPS agenda, with a particular focus on identifying the barriers that hinder progress and exploring ways to strengthen outcomes for those working on WPS in the country. By analysing Iraq's various National Action Plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace and Security, and their evolution over time, the role of CSOs and WROs and the broader, legal, institutional and political environment, this report seeks to provide policy recommendations that can help address existing gaps and challenges. The report draws on a combination of qualitative research methods – key informant interviews as well as focus group discussions with WPS organisations, including CSOs and WROs, government representatives, international NGOs (INGOs) and multilateral organisations, alongside desk-based research – to analyse the dynamics impacting WPS implementation across Iraq.

Background: Women, Peace and Security in Iraq

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, established through United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, calls for the inclusion of women in peacebuilding, security decision-making, and the prevention and resolution of conflicts. As part of the global commitment to gender equality, the WPS agenda offers a framework that underscores the importance of ensuring women's participation and their rights are protected during conflict, post-conflict, and reconstruction, relief and recovery. Iraq's engagement with the WPS agenda is also grounded in its international legal obligations. The country is a party to several important human rights instruments relevant to gender equality, most notably the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). These commitments reinforce Iraq's responsibility to ensure women's rights are protected and promoted, both in times of conflict and in peacebuilding efforts, across legal, political and social spheres.

In Iraq, a country that has faced years of conflict, political instability, and the rise and fall of violent extremists' groups, the WPS agenda is both highly relevant and challenging to implement. Throughout this period, women and girls in Iraq have faced disproportionally high levels of violence, displacement and exploitation. In the aftermath of the US-led invasion of 2003, and the rise of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), women – especially from marginalised groups such as the Yazidis – experienced extreme forms of gender-based violence, including abduction, sexual slavery and forced marriages.[2] These experiences have compounded the challenges women face in Iraq, making the implementation of the WPS agenda both urgent and critical.

Although both Federal Iraq and the KRI have made formal commitments to the WPS agenda, implementation has been hindered by deeply entrenched political, social and cultural barriers. These challenges are further exacerbated by the influence of conservative religious and political forces that often restrict women's rights and their participation in decision-making processes. The intersection of these factors creates an environment in which the rights and needs of women and girls are neglected, making progress difficult.



Notes during Women, Peace and Security Focus Group Discussion during the first year of the NISAAM project. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

1. Women, Peace and Security in Iraq

The Iraq context is a complex socio-economic environment. Iraq – a nation that has suffered decades of conflict, including the Iraq–Iran War (1980–1988), the Gulf War (1990–1991), the US-led invasion of Iraq and ongoing military presence (2003–), and the rise and fall of ISIS – has faced significant challenges in securing peace and stability. The aftermath of these conflicts, particularly the destruction of infrastructure, widespread displacement of people and proliferation of weapons, has created an environment in which women's rights and participation are often sidelined. While the Women, Peace and Security agenda formally began with the adoption of UNSCR 1325 in 2000 – which emphasised the need for women's active participation in all peace and security processes – Iraq's formal commitment began in 2014, when it became the first country in the Middle East and North Africa region to adopt a National Action Plan (NAP) for implementing the resolution. However, despite formal commitments, the actual implementation of the agenda in Iraq has been inconsistent and slow. This disconnect between policy ambitions and practical outcomes is evidenced through the evolution of the iterations of Iraq's NAPs, which have failed to deliver transformative change.

Formal commitments and National Action Plans (NAPs)

Progress relating to the WPS agenda in Iraq has been mixed. Iraq's adoption of UNSCR 1325 and its three successive National Action Plans (NAPs) – the first (2014–2018), the second (2020–2024) and the third (2025–2029) – signal an ongoing formal commitment to gender equality and the advancement of women and girls' rights. Alongside the NAPs adopted by Federal Iraq, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has developed its own parallel Regional Action Plan (KRI-RAP), with the first introduced in 2021 (2021–2024) and the second in 2025 (2025–2029)[3,4].

The development of separate Federal and KRI NAPs from the second cycle onward reflects Iraq's federal structure. However, this split has introduced challenges in terms of coordination, consistency and oversight between the two entities. While the existence of two separate NAPs – one led by the Federal Government and one by the Kurdistan Regional Government – is both necessary and reflective of Iraq's political and administrative structure, it is not clear whether the two plans are being coordinated in a cohesive and strategic way.

During consultations conducted for this report, civil society groups raised serious concerns about the development of the 2025–2029 NAPs, specifically regarding the absence of transparent coordination mechanisms between the Federal and KRI plans. While both governments have launched their respective NAPs for this period, research participants reported that they were not made aware of any cross-regional coordination platform or joint monitoring structure. Many WROs described the two processes as fragmented, with inconsistent priorities and limited communication between the drafting teams. As a result, civil society groups strongly emphasised the need for renewed coordination, either through a shared national WPS framework or, at minimum, a formal mechanism for joint planning and monitoring. This would be to ensure that both NAPs meaningfully contribute to a unified and equitable vision for gender equality, peace and security across all of Iraq.

While NAPs are a tool for implementation of the WPS agenda, their impact in Iraq has been inconsistent and, in many cases, superficial. During research for this report, we heard from some WROs that they were rarely consulted on international gender policies or how they are being implemented. While some WROs said they had contributed their expertise to the development of the third NAP, many described being excluded.[5]

> **"Decision makers in the NAP process are mainly lawyers and officials, while local voices from women and community members are not adequately represented in discussions and decisions. This lack of inclusivity hinders the effectiveness of the NAP."**

This reflects a broader and recurring pattern where state-led gender policy is often shaped top down by government officials and international donors instead of being informed by the needs and priorities of the communities affected.

The first National Action Plan 2014–2018

The first NAP, covering the period of 2014–2018, was developed through a collaborative process involving the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Implementation involved regional variation, but the drafting process remained centralised and integrative. The process was managed through a national coordination committee established under Diwani Order No. 138 (2017). This body included representatives from both Federal Iraq and the KRG, along with civil society organisations. Consultations were conducted across Baghdad, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, which helped align strategic pillars and priorities, even as local implementation began to take on a decentralised character in each region. At the time, it was a unified, national plan that included partners from both Baghdad and Erbil, making Iraq the first country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to adopt a NAP on UNSCR 1325.[6] However, its implementation faced significant challenges – and coincided with the ISIS insurgency, which resulted in an immediate and overwhelming security situation for the country.

The NAP also lacked sufficient resources – including dedicated funding – and was therefore redundant to respond to the security situation that drastically impacted women and girls, particularly Yazidi women and girls. The NAP was discarded and not considered as part of any response to the humanitarian crisis in the aftermath of the ISIS insurgency. This highlights how NAPs often fall short of addressing the specific needs of women and girls, especially in times of crisis, often due to a lack of allocated resources, political will and meaningful partnerships with civil society. These issues can render NAPs outdated or irrelevant when a context changes during the period of its implementation, hampering their ability to adapt and respond when crisis hits.

Women and girls, particularly those from marginalised communities such as the Yazidis, were disproportionately impacted during the ISIS insurgency – although they should have been protected as part of Iraq's (and the international community's) commitments to the WPS agenda. The failure to respond to the real-time needs of women in Iraq highlights the disconnect between policy ambitions and policy outcomes. Subsequent NAPs have fallen short for these same reasons, particularly the lack of consultation with important groups – such as WROs and CSOs – and the policies remained misaligned with actual realities faced by communities in Iraq.

The second National Action Plan 2020–2024

The second NAP (2020–2024) was developed with a vision to improve upon the lessons learned from the first NAP, as well as the ongoing immediate needs and priorities of women and girls, especially after the defeat of ISIS. As we heard from WROs during focus group discussions for this consultation:

> **"Iraq implemented 1325 agenda in 2014, but due to ISIS, plans were halted. Post-2019, Iraq resumed implementation, shifting from emergency response to long-term development, leading to the second action plan of 1325."**

During the second NAP, Iraq continued with a unified national approach and coordination. Although it remained a single national plan, the drafting process reflected a decentralised but collaborative model. The plan included a federal-level framework complemented by two parallel aligned planning tracks, one for Federal Iraq and the other for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Rather than two published NAPs, this instead resulted in region-specific components integrated into a single national plan. Coordination between the two was achieved through a series of national and regional consultations led by the

Ministry of Women's Affairs (Federal) and the High Council for Women's Affairs (KRI), with support from UN Women. These consultations, held in Baghdad, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, included civil society representatives and contributed to more inclusive drafting and shared priorities between the regions.[7]

This second iteration of the NAP focused on three major pillars: participation, protection and prevention. Even though civil society contributed significantly to the implementation of the second NAP – especially contributions from WROs – the drafting process was seen as exclusionary by some organisations. WROs observed the government's top-down approach to drafting the NAP, along with its validation, meant the plan's objectives were often misaligned with the needs and priorities of women and girls in Iraq. As one WRO shared during the FGD:

> **"The second draft of the national plan was supposed to strengthen women's role in leadership, governance and decision-making. But unfortunately, this wasn't obviously seen on the ground and in reality, since all the women engaged in politics are not decision-makers."**

WROs subsequently felt their views were not consistently represented in the second iteration of the NAP. However, the process for the second NAP was significantly more inclusive than for the third NAP, with workshops, consultations and engagement at the regional level, particularly in Erbil where organisations felt their voices were heard. In addition to consultations, WROs and CSOs were also able to provide feedback and review the final second NAP draft. As one representative recalled:

> **"In the second NAP, we were more engaged. There were detailed workshops at the Erbil level where consultants presented the plan structure, and we had space to give feedback. It was a much better process."**

Despite its shortcomings, the second NAP demonstrated important structural and procedural improvements compared to its predecessor. Drawing on the lessons learned from the first NAP (2014–2018), including underfunding and gaps in monitoring, the second plan introduced clearer thematic pillars, including participation, protection and prevention, social and economic support, and governance. Women's rights organisations particularly welcomed the existence of a more robust monitoring and evaluation framework with baseline indicators, which had been lacking in the first cycle. Consultations were expanded beyond Baghdad to Erbil and other governorates, enabling more contextually relevant inputs from regional WROs, although these were unevenly implemented. While not perfect, these advances suggested a real effort toward a more inclusive and institutionalised WPS agenda and laid the groundwork that civil society expected to be built on in later cycles.[8]

The KRI Regional Action Plan (2021–2024)

In parallel with the national WPS agenda, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) developed and launched its first Regional Action Plan (RAP) on UNSCR 1325, covering the period 2021–2024.[9] This marked the first time the KRG had produced an independent WPS framework, tailored specifically to the context and priorities of the Kurdistan Region. The RAP was developed under the leadership of the High Council of Women's Affairs (HCWA), with technical support from UN Women and other international organisations.[10]

Although the KRI-RAP (2021–2024) was introduced during the implementation period of Iraq's second National Action Plan (2020–2024), the two frameworks were not formally integrated. The NAP initially included commitments applicable across all of Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region, and

had been developed with inputs from KRI institutions. However, once the KRI-RAP was launched, this became the primary WPS framework in the region, effectively operating in parallel to the national NAP. This led to a situation where KRI-specific commitments were split: those under the Federal Plan technically remained valid but were gradually superseded in practice by the standalone KRI-RAP. Civil society groups in the KRI increasingly turned to the RAP as the more context-specific and accessible framework for engagement. While both documents aligned in principle around the WPS pillars, the lack of formal coordination or harmonisation mechanisms between the national and regional plans contributed to fragmentation in implementation, monitoring and resource allocation. This disconnect foreshadowed the fully separate approaches that emerged in the third NAP cycle (2025–2030), when Federal Iraq and the KRI each published their own independent action plans.

Despite being a notable step toward decentralised planning, women's rights groups reported that the development and implementation of the KRI-RAP varied in inclusiveness and impact across governorates. Some WROs in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah described the plan as more accessible and contextually grounded than the Federal NAP, while others noted limited follow-up or unclear accountability mechanisms.

The introduction of the KRI-RAP created new opportunities for localisation of the WPS agenda but also raised early questions about coordination and alignment with national efforts. These questions have become more pronounced in the third NAP cycle (2025–2030), where the Federal and Regional Plans have been developed and published as entirely separate frameworks.

The third National Action Plan 2025–2030

The 2025–2030 cycle marks the first time Iraq has published two distinct and separate National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security, one for Federal Iraq and one for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. At the time of writing, neither plan appears to explicitly reference the other. This fragmentation raises concerns about the absence of a cohesive national strategy, while research participants worry that women and girls across different regions may experience unequal support or protection under the WPS agenda.

The development of the third and most recent NAP (2025–2030) for both Federal Iraq and the KRI, has been marked by significant criticisms, particularly concerning the lack of inclusion and transparent consultation processes with civil society. While the first and second NAPs saw a higher level of engagement with CSOs (particularly with WROs), the third NAP's drafting process has been described as notably vague and exclusive. These concerns were consistently raised during consultations with WROs. This exacerbates the ongoing challenge where WROs and CSOs from particular geographies and political affiliations are prioritised in consultation processes; for instance, organisations based in Baghdad were widely consulted but many organisations outside – in Basra, Ninewa and Erbil – shared they had not been meaningfully engaged. As one organisation put it:

> **"When it comes to the WPS agenda itself, our understanding is grounded in practice. However, we were not consulted during the drafting of the third NAP. We only heard about it after it had been drafted and approved. Unlike the first and second plans, there was no community consultation, and the process was opaque."**

This exclusion from early consultation stages has been a major point of contention. WROs have expressed frustration at being invited only to 'general meetings' that did not involve in-depth discussions. The lack of a clear role for civil society in shaping the content of the NAP has led to a sense among women's rights leaders of being sidelined. One WRO leader explained:

> **We were invited to a couple of general meetings at the default level, but these were not in-depth or pillar specific. These discussions were broad, and we were not given a clear role in shaping or reviewing the actual content of the actual plan.**

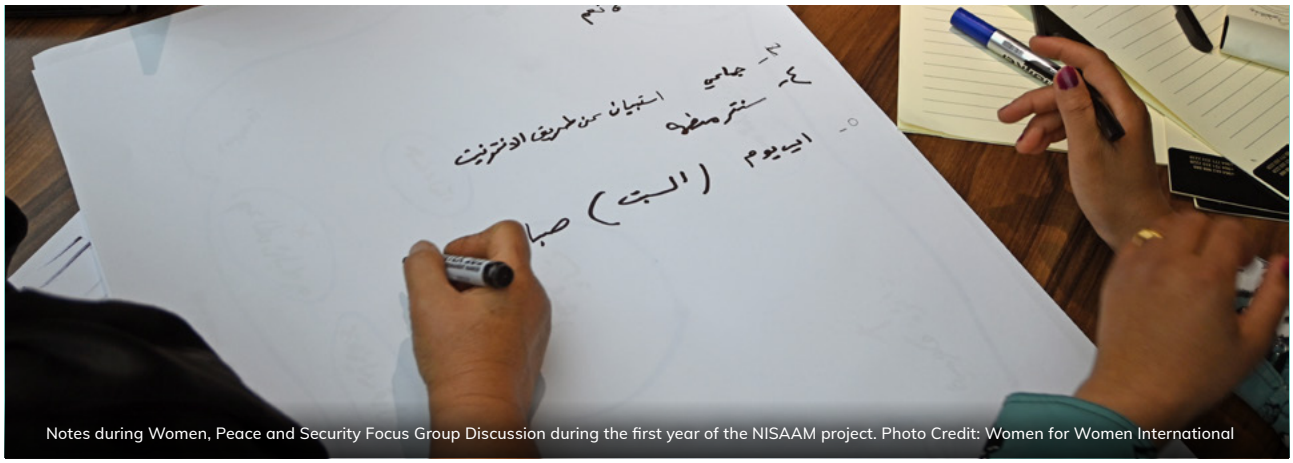
The gap between the previously described more inclusive process of the second NAP and the exclusionary approach of the third has led organisations to question the government's commitment to genuinely addressing the needs of women and minority groups. One representative shared their disappointment:

> **We don't know yet if our input was reflected in the third NAP. The plan hasn't been launched or shared with us for review, and we haven't had an opportunity to provide feedback.**

Even where there was some level of consultation, many felt that it was more of a 'tick box' exercise than a meaningful process. As one WRO noted:

> **What we observed was that the government had already prepared the draft and only invited civil society to comment afterwards. This undermines genuine consultation. Organisations should be involved from the outset – not just after decisions have already been made.**

Notably, this is the first NAP cycle where the Federal Government and the KRG have developed separate NAPs. While this reflects Iraq's political and administrative structure, women's rights organisations across both regions observed that there appears to be no shared coordination platform, joint development process or unified monitoring mechanism. This fragmentation has raised concerns about whether the two plans reflect a coherent national strategy or risk reinforcing regional disparities. As one participant described during consultations, the absence of transparency about alignment left many organisations feeling "completely disconnected from the national picture".[11]



Notes during Women, Peace and Security Focus Group Discussion during the first year of the NISAAM project. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

This exclusion not only undermines the credibility of the third NAP but also weakens the overall effectiveness of Iraq's commitment to the WPS agenda. The third NAP has also been criticised for what some organisations described as mirroring the approach taken for NAPs in countries such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in terms of framing 'the family' as the unit of analysis. While this framework might resonate culturally in some contexts, it risks marginalising women's individual rights and autonomy and legitimising some of the harmful narratives around WPS being a 'western agenda'.

Despite this challenge, civil society continues to represent diverse perspectives and approaches. Some WROs remain cautiously optimistic about the implementation of the third NAP, especially at this early stage. As one WRO shared during a KII:

> **"The implementation of the previous plans was not visible or measurable, but the current plan is promising, and we see that the government is working hard to implement it. However, we cannot judge if the first draft of the third plan was published only two months ago."**

A further criticism of the third NAP concerns the lack of clarity around its monitoring and implementation, which weakens its potential for achieving meaningful impact. Many WROs have raised concerns that the plan lacks clear accountability structures and indicators to measure progress. As one WRO shared:

> **"[The organisation] was deeply involved in drafting Iraq's first National Action Plan (NAP) on UNSCR 1325 but was excluded from consultations for the third NAP. While our programming aligns strongly with the WPS pillars especially protection and participation, [we are concerned] over the lack of monitoring and follow-through by the government."**

WROs across both Federal Iraq and KRI shared similar concerns: "The National Action Plan for WPS has not effectively supported women's participation. Implementation is weak, and there is no proper monitoring or evaluation framework."

The Regional Action Plan for the Kurdistan Region has introduced significant developments, including specific budget allocations for each pillar of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. These allocations are disaggregated across the Kurdistan Regional Government, academic institutions and the international donor community. Despite these advances, as women's rights organisations noted, the RAP for the Kurdistan Region had only recently been published. Therefore, its impact will ultimately depend on effective implementation and adequate resourcing.

Another significant concern raised by organisations is the lack of a localised approach. The situation has been further complicated by the withdrawal of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the diminishing role of UN Women.[12] Rather than ensuring a responsible transition or supporting the strengthening of local infrastructure and leadership, both entities have largely exited without leaving in place any meaningful answerability or investment in sustainable, locally led mechanisms. UNAMI's disengagement and UN Women's inconsistent presence have left behind a fragmented landscape, where national groups are expected to take ownership without the long-promised training or strategic support. This has further contributed to a planning process that feels externally imposed and disconnected from the realities of CSOs and WROs. Without genuinely localised plans and transparent follow-up processes – designed and led by Iraqi civil society and decision makers – the third NAP risks becoming yet another symbolic document instead of a genuine tool for change.

While some organisations shared concerns over the distinction between policy and practice in implementing a localised approach, this was not the case for all WROs. While there is a KRG localised plan, Iraq is a highly diverse country; WROs emphasised that a 'one size fits all' model would be both unrealistic and ineffective. Despite this, WROs shared during consultations for the NISAAM project how they had been navigating these tensions to advocate for their inclusion and for the diverse representation of civil society with decision makers for the third NAP. As one WRO shared during the FGD with organisations based in Federal Iraq:

> **"...After the government officially announced the [NAP], we launched a women's alliance in partnership with the local government... It was a huge step, and we targeted two groups including women leaders of the governorate and participants of the previous programmes of our [organisation]; this alliance was supported by [the] NAP."**

Given the political, social and security differences across Iraq, this example represents practice that should be replicated across the country to ensure the third NAP is grounded in the specific needs and priorities of each region.

Persistent challenges for WPS NAP implementation in Iraq

Over the course of the three iterations of the NAPs, Iraq's commitment to the WPS agenda has faced several challenges. These include shrinking civic space, insufficient resources, inconsistencies with budget allocations, and lack of capacity and meaningful participation of women in policy-making.[13] The influence of conservative and religious groups, political elites, and non-state armed groups also continues to impede women's rights and their inclusion in political and security decision-making.

In summary, Iraq's formal commitment to the WPS agenda, through its adoption of UNSCR 1325 and the development of multiple NAPs, has been significantly impacted by political fragmentation, sectarianism and an increasingly conservative cultural climate.[14] Despite these formal commitments, the implementation of the agenda has been undermined by deeply entrenched political, legal and social barriers, preventing meaningful progress in the country.

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

2. Challenges of sectarianism, political fragmentation and regional variations

Iraq's political system remains deeply entrenched in a sectarian power-sharing arrangement, which allocates political positions based on ethnic and sectarian quotas rather than merit.[15] This system often results in ministries frequently staffed with individuals chosen for their political affiliations instead of their expertise, which significantly undermines effective implementation of policies. This has had a direct and negative impact on the advancement of women's rights. As one WRO representative noted:

> **One of the most pressing challenges our organisation currently faces in advancing women's rights and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda in Iraq is the deeply entrenched and systemic corruption at the governmental level.[17]**

This lack of accountability, compounded by a lack of political will across both the KRI and Federal Iraq, weakens the effective implementation of the WPS agenda. Despite Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani's, who entered office in 2022, public support for the WPS agenda, as evidenced by references in his 2025 joint statement with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the political system presents significant barriers to implementation.[18] The entrenched sectarianism within the Government of Federal Iraq and the influence of religiously conservative militias and political factions, limit the depth of change and meaningful work towards advancing women and girls' rights. As one WRO representative noted:

> **When [the Prime Minister] is talking about WPS, he is genuine about this, but he is not in control of all the ministries which are politically affiliated.**

Notes during Women, Peace and Security Focus Group Discussion. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

The practical impact of these political divisions is felt at the community level. Internal political fragmentation between the Federal Government in Baghdad and regional or governorate-level authorities creates additional operational hurdles for implementing WPS or carrying out work on gender. As shared by WROs during the KIIs, these divisions make it difficult to secure approvals, build consensus around gender-sensitive programming or maintain consistent relationships with important decision makers. Two WRO representatives noted:

> **In some areas, we must negotiate separately with multiple authorities to implement a single project, which delays timelines, increases administrative burdens and sometimes results in conflicting requirements.**

> **Even after signing MOUs [memorandums of understanding] with several ministries and participating in joint initiatives, we face resistance from officials who perpetuate sectarian and patriarchal ideologies.**

These regional and political factors not only limit WROs' flexibility in carrying out their work, and put their staff and partners at risk, they can also complicate engagement with donors if their ability to fulfil objectives and obligations is hindered. Navigating these dynamics often requires not only technical abilities but also strong political awareness, constant coordination, and a flexible strategy that can adapt to shifting power structures and security situations. As a result, despite the formal political rhetoric, the tangible impact of the WPS agenda remains constrained.

However, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the reality is slightly different. The region is reported to be somewhat more progressive when it comes to women's rights. For instance, the KRI has enacted a law to prevent violence against women and within the family. While implementation gaps persist, the very existence of such legislation was described by WROs as a positive and encouraging step. In principle it provides a legal framework for addressing violence that can be built upon to offer protection to women. That said, challenges remain and, despite this relatively more progressive legal environment, the KRI is still impacted by broader political dynamics. As one WRO representative noted:

> **Public services, especially those targeting low-income communities are under-resourced. Since 2014–2015, political tensions between the KRG and the central government have led to repeated disruptions in budget transfers. These economic strains have weakened healthcare, education and other critical public systems, exacerbated social vulnerabilities and contributed to an increase in violence.**

The KRI also still faces the consequences of national tensions, which are marked by economic instability and political fragmentation. This disrupts its ability to implement gender equality policies and maintain consistent services for women, ultimately impacting the KRI's capacity to fulfil its commitments to women's rights.

3. Shrinking civic space and the anti-gender campaign

While the political fragmentation and sectarianism within Iraq's governance structure severely impede the implementation of the WPS agenda, these challenges are compounded by a growing anti-gender narrative that has escalated in recent years.

The operating environment for WROs, CSOs and women human rights defenders (WHRDs) in Iraq has also become increasingly hostile with significant shrinking civic space in recent years.[19] While civil society has long faced challenges, the escalation of state-led anti-gender rhetoric, particularly in 2023, marked a serious shift in the way gender equality work was perceived as a threat to traditional Iraqi culture and regulated across Iraq.[20]

In mid-2023, a coordinated anti-gender campaign emerged from Iraq's national security apparatus, when the Communications and Media Commission first issued a directive with the official notice of prohibition of using terms such as 'gender', 'empowerment' and 'equality' in official documents and programming. Although some of these bans were revoked in February 2024, the damage was already widespread, with WROs and CSOs operating in a climate of fear and securitisation.[21] It is clear from our consultation with WROs for this project that the 2023 anti-gender campaign has had far reaching consequences on the daily lives of women, particularly for those involved in work on gender and WPS advocacy. The public pushback against gender – framed as a 'threat' to traditional values – has led to an increasingly hostile environment for women's rights activists. Many organisations have reported a rise in threats, both physical and online, as they are accused of promoting a 'western agenda' and 'undermining Iraq's cultural norms'.[22] The rhetoric – which has been often state led – has created a climate of self-censorship, where many activists and civil society groups are now afraid to speak openly about gender issues for fear of reprisals. WROs find themselves walking a fine line between advocating for change and avoiding legal and social repercussions.

One WRO shared their experience:

> **"Our organisation operates in an increasingly challenging environment for promoting women's rights and implementing the WPS agenda in Iraq. The deterioration of developmental and democratic space has been accompanied by an alarming crackdown on women's rights discourse. Officially, terms such as 'gender' and 'equality' have been banned."**

Notes during Women, Peace and Security Focus Group Discussion. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

The legal environment for civil society organisations has also become increasingly complex. In 2024, amendments were made to Iraq's Anti-Prostitution Law (Law No. 8 of 1988),[23] expanding its scope through the introduction of the term 'sexual deviation'. While the stated aim is to strengthen protection for public morality, the lack of a clear legal definition of 'sexual deviation' has raised concerns among civil society groups about the potential for broad interpretation. Several WROs have noted that, in practice, the law may be applied in ways that restrict legitimate advocacy and community engagement. In particular, there are reports that organisations working on gender equality, youth support and rights education have faced increased scrutiny.[24] Some WROs expressed concern that the legal ambiguity could have a chilling effect on civic space and public dialogue, especially for groups contributing to the implementation of WPS agenda. Ensuring clarity in legal definitions and safeguards for civil society groups could help to reinforce Iraq's commitment to inclusive governance and the principles of UNSCR 1325.

WROs shared that they often face delays in receiving approvals for research, surveys and other activities, especially when coordinating programmes between the KRI and Federal Iraq, as this can require approvals from both governates. Security agencies regularly intervene in WRO programmes by having them seek approval before conducting field visits, deleting research questions or forcing changes to content to align with government-aligned narratives. Some organisations have even described being monitored during workshops, with intelligence agents attending to observe and intimidate:

> **"We've identified intelligence agencies as part of the participants to ensure safety. The level of monitoring is high, and it leads to self-censorship. We've had to review everything we do to make sure we don't create trouble for ourselves."**

The constant surveillance and the pressure to comply with government policies have forced many organisations to be more discreet about their work. One interviewee shared:

> **"We no longer disclose the location of our work, nor do we publish or speak about our activities until they are completed. Fieldwork has become especially dangerous."**

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

Many organisations are even reluctant to submit submissions to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), or report on their activities, fearing reprisal. One organisation noted: The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) shadow report – no Iraq NGO has submitted it directly. Those who have done so, did so through regional networks to keep their names hidden.

Reprisals faced by WROs and CSOs

WROs and CSOs described how they are routinely facing reprisals for their work. Both physical and online threats have been exacerbated, especially since the 2023 anti-gender campaign, making their work not only difficult but, in some cases, dangerous. Physical threats from both state and non-state groups and organisations remain a significant and ever-present concern, especially for organisations working on women's rights and gender-based violence (GBV), particularly in conservative areas. One organisation shared: "We face continuous digital and field-based threats to our safety. In recent waves of attacks, at least eight women rights organisations – including ours – were targeted. Accusations were made that we were receiving American funding to push 'suspicious agendas' and 'spread homosexuality', fuelling social backlash and stigmatisation."

These physical threats are not just directed at organisation leaders, but are often extended to staff members as well as volunteers. The susceptibility of those working on the frontlines has forced many to take precautions, including relocating staff and limiting the movement of those most at risk. One organisation recounted: "Some of our colleagues have been forced to relocate to the Kurdistan [Region of Iraq] for safety. The situation has become so volatile that we've had to limit our office presence and often work from home to avoid being targets."

WROs are not only exposed to physical threats, but online threats – digital violence is increasingly persistent and has become a tool for intimidation. Social media has been weaponised to spread mis- and disinformation about WROs and WHRDs, often accusing them of pushing 'western' agendas or undermining Iraq's cultural and religious values:

> **"Online defamation campaigns have targeted us directly. We've been accused of promoting 'homosexuality' and 'threatening traditional society'. The online harassment feeds into a larger social stigma and creates a hostile environment for us to continue our work."**

The online harassment faced by activists can range from coordinated smear campaigns to direct threats of violence.25 Measures to address online harassment and threats include encrypting communications, limiting the visibility of work until after completion and maintaining anonymity during project activities to reduce risk of retaliation. One WRO shared their strategy: "We no longer publish anything until after a project is finished. We've also trained our staff in digital and personal safety protocols to make sure we are protected both online and offline."

This pressure has also led to indirect reprisals, such as restrictions on funding and the suspension of critical programming activities. Fear of reprisal from state and non-state groups has forced many WROs to operate 'under the radar', reducing their visibility and scaling back their activities. The threat of retaliation has also forced many to re-evaluate their organisational strategy, as one WRO reflected: "We've had to rethink everything we do. The personal risks are so high that even basic tasks require careful planning. Our physical presence in offices has become limited, and we can't be too open about our activities. This is the reality of working as a women's rights organisation in Iraq right now."

Some WROs have sought to form strategic alliances with international organisations, advocacy networks or government institutions that can offer a layer of protection. Others have turned to regional networks to help shield their identities while still being able to contribute to collective advocacy and programming. These networks provide some a measure of security as well as solidarity.

Despite the reprisals that many WROs face, they often remain determined to push forward with their advocacy. They have found ways to adapt and continue their work, even under constant pressure. One of their major strategies has been shifting the language used in their work. With the risks associated with using the terms 'gender' and 'women's empowerment', organisations are increasingly adopting alternative, more neutral terms such as 'justice between genders' and 'the roles of men and women'.

However, some organisations have refused to adopt different language. One organisation shared:

> **"We decided not to change the concepts we're working on. We continue to use the word 'gender', but we explain more to the people what it means."**

Some organisations have reported having to have relocate to the KRI for safety, as the region offers relatively more freedom for civil society work compared to other parts of Iraq. For example, one organisation stated:

> **"We've had to relocate some of our colleagues to the KRG to ensure their safety. It's a safer environment, but we face our own challenges there as well."**

Organisations described having developed stronger alliances with security forces. While this may seem counterintuitive, working with national security actors has enabled these organisations to build relationships the groups, protecting them from the worst impacts of the surveillance and restrictions, and mitigating dangers. It has also created a small opening for continued advocacy. One organisation explained:

> **"We [were] working with national security advisory groups in 2024. This has been helpful because we can build relationships and have them defend us when we are attacked."**

WROs have also adopted strategic partnerships and networking by building relationships with other NGOs, regional groups and international organisations to create a system of support. This coalition and movement building strengthens WROs' collective voice and offers more resilience when facing threats or pushback.

Despite the challenges, WROs have been increasingly flexible and resilient – enabling them to continue their work. While they are often face barriers, these organisations have found ways to adapt, even in the face of severe opposition. Examples include navigating the hostile political landscape, employing different creative strategies and building alliances with local security forces. WROs have managed to create opportunities for their voices to be heard and have continued advocating for gender equality, despite external pressures and formal structures failing to provide support.

Conclusion

The implementation of the WPS agenda in Iraq has been significantly shaped by a range of political, legal and social challenges, which have undermined the full realisation of its goals. While Iraq's adoption of UNSCR 1325 and the development of successive National Action Plans signal a formal commitment to advancing gender equality, these plans have been far from successful in achieving sustainable impact. The discrepancy between policy ambitions and tangible outcomes reflects Iraq's complex post-conflict landscape, which is marked by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, sectarian fragmentation, and recurring cycles of violence and instability.

Despite these structural challenges, some progress has been made. The second NAP (2020–2024) introduced clearer thematic pillars, expanded geographic consultations and provided a more defined monitoring framework, representing an important evolution from the first NAP. The development of the KRI Regional Action Plan (2021–2024) further reflected growing regional ownership of the WPS agenda, offering a more context-sensitive planning tool for the Kurdistan Region.

However, the lack of coordination and joint mechanisms between the Federal Government and KRG has undermined cohesion. The evolution of Iraq's NAPs from a unified national framework in 2014 to parallel planning tracks in 2020 and, finally, to fully independent Federal and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) plans in 2025 demonstrates both a pragmatic adaptation to Iraq's federal structure and a fragmentated approach. While decentralisation offers space for more locally responsive planning, the absence of harmonised implementation and frameworks for answerability risks creating unequal protections for women across regions. WROs and CSOs have consistently raised concerns about their exclusion from meaningful participation in the design and implementation of these plans. The failure to engage such organisations, who are tied to communities and often better placed to understand the realities locally, has led to policies that do not reflect people's real needs and priorities. This is especially the case for marginalised communities, like the Yazidis. This top-down, government-driven approach has also contributed to the exclusion of women from important decision-making processes, further entrenching gender inequality and exacerbating their marginalisation in both crisis, conflict and post-conflict environments.

Women, Peace and Security Focus Group Discussion during the first year of the NISAAM project. Photo Credit: Women for Women International

The impacts of Iraq's political fragmentation, sectarianism, and the influence of conservative political and religious factions have also proved a significant barrier to the effective implementation of the WPS agenda. The political system, which promotes the appointment of individuals based on political affiliation rather than expertise, has hindered government capacity to implement gender-sensitive policies. Furthermore, the growing influence of anti-gender rhetoric, coupled with shrinking of civic space, has created a more hostile environment for WROs. These groups face increasing scrutiny, surveillance and harassment from both state and non-state groups, further undermining their ability to advocate for women and girls' rights.

In face of these challenges, WROs have demonstrated remarkable strength, finding ways to continue their advocacy despite threats to their safety. Adaptive strategies – such as adopting neutral language, building strategic alliances with networks and international organisations, and even engaging with security forces for protection – highlight the innovative approaches these organisations have taken to navigate a hostile environment. However, the fact that these groups must operate under constant threat of reprisals and censorship highlights the dire situation for gender equality work in Iraq.

The lack of adequate resources, sustainable funding and genuine political will, compounded by the growing influence of conservative, sectarian and tribal forces, continues to undermine the Iraqi Government's ability to meaningfully uphold its commitments under the WPS agenda. These constraints are not only financial or logistical but are also deeply structural, reflecting a broader pattern of institutional weakness, fragmented governance and resistance to gender equality at the highest levels of power. Although some progress has been made, particularly within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), where legal frameworks for women's protection and GBV have seen more progressive development, these advances remain localised and often poorly integrated with national policy. The KRG's relative autonomy and differing political culture have allowed for some reform, yet even there, implementation suffers from resource constraints and social resistance.

Looking ahead, Iraq's ability to deliver on the promise of UNSCR 1325 will depend not only on strong institutions, but on building and maintaining trust with civil society. More inclusive planning, harmonised monitoring across Federal Government and KRG frameworks, and equitable resourcing is vital. While formal commitments exist, the political, legal and social challenges facing the country create an environment in which these commitments have not been translated into effective action. The exclusion of critical groups, particularly WROs and CSOs, from decision-making processes, combined with sectarian fragmentation, corruption and a growing anti-gender movement, have hindered progress.

The path forward will require not only genuine political will but also a commitment to protecting the rights and safety of WROs, as well as WHRDs, and ensuring their meaningful and safe participation in public life. To strengthen Iraq's commitment to the WPS agenda, a fundamental shift in the political culture and an inclusive, bottom-up approach is essential, alongside increased investment in resources and support for WROs from the international community.

To further engage with this consultation series, refer to the detailed Landscape Analysis papers for Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which provide a deeper exploration of the evidence base across these geographies.

Recommendations

For donors:

1. **Provide core, flexible funding** to local women's rights organisations (WROs), civil society organisations (CSOs) and broader civil society to ensure long-term sustainability. This will enable WROs and women-led organisations and movements to:
   a) Strategically pursue their own priorities, beyond fulfilling donor, UN or international NGO (INGO) programme objectives.

b) Adapt and respond to crises more effectively, through reduced reporting burdens and increased flexibility to reallocate budgets and adjust programmes. This in turn allows them to focus on community needs and long-term priorities related to Women, Peace and Security (WPS).

2. **Invest in long-term, institutional funding for WROs** by shifting from short-term, project-based grants to multi-year core funding. This should support salaries, organisational planning, administrative systems, legal registration, safety measures and infrastructure. Funding should prioritise local-level and community-led WROs, not only urban-based organisations, and be provided directly where possible without requiring government intermediaries.

3. **Recognise and support WROs as frontline service providers** in underserved, rural and post-conflict areas. In these locations, WROs often provide essential services such as legal aid, emergency shelter, psychosocial support, mobile health services and case management in the absence of state institutions. They should be formally integrated into national coordination mechanisms for service delivery and provided with dedicated funding to support operations in areas with limited institutional infrastructure.

4. **Support gender-responsive approaches** that aim to enhance women's participation by challenging harmful social norms and addressing root causes of exclusion and inequality. Programmes should focus on local realities and be informed by the experiences of women in a variety of communities.

5. **Work with Iraqi Government institutions** to share good practices for engaging with civil society. Donors should facilitate knowledge exchange between government representatives and a diverse range of local groups to promote more participatory policy-making processes.

6. **Coordinate with other donors** to avoid duplication and promote complementary efforts in advancing the WPS agenda in Iraq. Donors should also engage directly with WROs to ensure programming reflects the priorities of affected communities.

7. **Ensure that third-party WPS funding** requires meaningful engagement with civil society, particularly WROs, at all stages of planning, implementation and evaluation.

8. **Monitor the operating environment for civil society** and acknowledge the risks that local organisations and activists may face. Donors should advocate for safe and inclusive participation and establish protection mechanisms, such as emergency support for legal assistance, relocation and well-being services, when organisations or individuals face restrictions or threats.

9. **Strengthen coordination between the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)** by supporting joint planning and aligned gender policies that enable effective implementation of WPS and gender equality frameworks across Iraq.

10. **Support institutional skills development within government ministries** by funding technical assistance and training in gender and WPS, ensuring that government organisations have the tools and knowledge needed to deliver on commitments.

11. **Support the establishment of inclusive platforms** that bring together WROs, CSOs and government representatives to monitor implementation of the WPS National Action Plan (NAP), offer technical expertise and contribute to evidence-based policy improvement.

For the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG):

1. **Establish a formal coordination mechanism between Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region** for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. This mechanism should include joint planning and monitoring structures, harmonised indicators, and aligned timelines for the development and implementation of NAPs. It should facilitate regular engagement between both governments and ensure a cohesive, national-level strategy that avoids duplication and fragmentation.

2. **Ensure that future National Action Plans (NAPs) are developed through transparent and inclusive processes.** The government must guarantee the early and meaningful participation of women's rights organisations (WROs), civil society organisations (CSOs) and other local groups from all regions and backgrounds. This includes organisations in rural, conflict-affected and minority communities.

3. **Institutionalise permanent platforms for civil society engagement.** Create formal structures through which WROs and CSOs can participate in all stages of the NAP cycle, from design to implementation and evaluation. These platforms should have clear roles, resources and decision-making influence, ensuring civil society is recognised as a partner.

4. **Develop and publish a unified national WPS monitoring framework.** Ensure both Federal and KRG NAPs report against shared indicators with disaggregated data to enable comparison, accountability and alignment with international standards. Monitoring systems should include civil society participation and be transparent and accessible to the public.

5. **Allocate dedicated, ring-fenced budgets for WPS implementation.** Guarantee that both Federal and KRG budgets include clear allocations for each pillar of the WPS agenda, and that these funds are accessible to civil society partners implementing frontline services. Transparent budget reporting must accompany this funding.

6. **Strengthen the capacity of ministries and local governments to deliver gender-responsive policies.** Invest in training and institutional frameworks within relevant ministries (for example, the Women's Affairs, Planning, Interior Ministries) to ensure that all levels of government can meaningfully implement WPS commitments and engage with civil society effectively.

7. **Protect civic space and the rights of women human rights defenders (WHRDs).** Reform laws and policies that restrict civil society operations. Ensure that organisations and activists, especially those working on gender equality, can operate without fear of reprisals, harassment or political interference.

For multilateral organisations and international NGOs:

1. **Provide technical support to the Iraqi Government** for the development and implementation of gender-responsive policies in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and recovery. Ensure that these efforts are shaped through ongoing dialogue with civil society and reflect realities at the community level.

2. **Promote transparency and inclusive participation in the development of future WPS National Action Plans (NAPs)** by facilitating early and meaningful engagement with a wide range of WROs. Special attention should be paid to ensure inclusion of voices from rural, displaced, minority and community-based organisations.

3. **Support localisation of the WPS agenda** by allocating funding directly to WROs through accessible small and mid-sized grants and embedding them in all stages of the NAP cycle, including design, implementation and monitoring. Support should include travel stipends, interpretation and digital access to enable equitable participation.

4. **Strengthen the skills of local WROs and CSOs**, particularly in areas affected by conflict or with limited infrastructure. This support should enable organisations to influence local and national policy processes effectively.

5. **Facilitate coordination between WROs and public service institutions** such as health directorates, legal aid providers and GBV response units. Partnerships should be developed to enhance service coverage, referral systems and shared protocols for survivor-centred care.

6. **Support secure documentation and data systems** to help WROs track service delivery and outcomes. These systems should be designed to protect confidentiality and centre the rights and safety of survivors.

7. **Advocate for implementation of international gender commitments**, including UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and support legal frameworks that provide tangible protections for women and girls across Iraq.

8. Advocate for there to be **a formal coordination mechanism** between the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government to align WPS NAP priorities, implementation strategies and reporting frameworks. This should include regular joint meetings, shared indicators and coordinated timelines.

8. Advocate for and **facilitate knowledge exchange and joint learning** between the two NAP implementation teams to identify best practices, address common challenges and ensure a more cohesive national approach to advancing Women, Peace and Security across all regions of Iraq.

For civil society organisations:

1. **Expand cooperation with regional and international partners** to strengthen advocacy efforts, especially in response to increasing constraints on civic space and growing public opposition to gender-related work in certain areas.

2. **Improve coordination among WROs and civil society networks**, including cross-sector and cross-region collaboration. Shared advocacy strategies should address political and social fragmentation and strengthen collective voice.

3. **Promote knowledge exchange between regions**, particularly sharing effective practices from the Kurdistan Region with organisations working in more conservative or less accessible areas.

4. **Develop advocacy strategies that respond to societal concerns**, using inclusive and locally relevant language to communicate the benefits of gender equality for national development, security and community resilience. Reframing this work in ways that align with local priorities and values can enhance impact and public support.

5. **Establish internal monitoring and accountability mechanisms** within civil society to assess how gender-sensitive recommendations are being implemented and to ensure feedback from community consultations informs ongoing policy and programming.

6. **Promote inclusive and representative coordination platforms** by ensuring diverse participation in national coalitions, including WROs from rural, minority or newly emerging organisations. Leadership structures should be transparent and allow for rotating leadership and mentorship opportunities to support broader engagement.

7. **Strengthen safety and protection mechanisms for civil society groups** by supporting collective risk management, legal and digital security training, and emergency response plans. Organisations should coordinate to ensure protective measures are in place across networks when threats arise.

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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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The learning presented in this paper comes from women's rights organisations in Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, working together as part of the NISAAM project funded by the UK Government.