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Community-Led Analysis of Women, Peace and Security in Ninewa: Insights from Tel Afar, Sinjar, and Ba'aj



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Executive summary

Women in Iraq continue to face structural barriers shaped by restrictive social norms, unequal access to resources, and limited participation in public and political life.[1] These challenges are often exacerbated in conflict-affected areas such as Ninewa, where displacement, return dynamics, and insecurity have reinforced existing inequalities while introducing new protection risks. Within this context, opportunities for women to engage in peacebuilding, access services, and seek protection remains constrained.

This participatory analysis of Women, Peace and Security (WPS) dynamics in Ninewa focuses on Tel Afar, Sinjar, and Ba'aj. Tel Afar is highlighted due to its complex social dynamics and the layered impacts of conflict, return, and inter-community tensions. Insights from Sinjar and Ba'aj complement this analysis by reflecting broader patterns across Ninewa, while also capturing variations across contexts.

The analysis is grounded in the experiences and perspectives of Women Peace Teams (WPTs), whose community-level engagement offers critical insight into the realities shaping women's roles in peacebuilding, social cohesion, and protection. It is informed by a participatory approach that included focus group discussions and individual interviews with WPT members, whose perspectives reflect their ongoing engagement with women and communities across multiple locations and protection concerns. This process created space for women to articulate their own priorities and shape the analysis based on lived realities.

The findings highlight how restrictive social norms, economic exclusion, and limited access to services and protection shape women's participation and access to support – and how community-led protection efforts like the WPTs work to address these harms.

Key findings:

-Increased awareness of women's rights has, in some cases, led to backlash from families and communities

-Social and economic pressure on women to limit their movement, withdraw from community engagement, or avoid participation in public roles

-Negative perceptions of women's work or participation, including within WPTs and in more severe instances, exposure to threats within their households

-Persistent social barriers that prevent women from reporting harm and violence and accessing support and legal services.

By grounding the analysis in these perspectives, the paper moves beyond top-down interpretations of WPS and instead foregrounds locally driven insights. The findings are intended to directly inform programme design and advocacy, ensuring that interventions respond to identified gaps, strengthen women's roles as peace actors and community-based protection actors, and sensitively consider the risks that women face as they engage in this work. In doing so, the paper also highlights how these risks are actively mitigated and managed by WPTs in practice and identifies areas where additional support is needed to sustain and strengthen these efforts.

[1] Rewaq Baghdad Center for Public Policy, Iraqi Women and Societal Challenges :https://rewaqbaghdad.org/en/publications/iraqi-women-and-societal-challenges

Challenges

1. Restrictive social norms limiting women's mobility, participation, and protection

Across Tel Afar, Ba'aj, and Sinjar, social norms continue to shape women's roles and participation in public life. In many cases, women's engagement beyond the household remains limited, and navigating public spaces often requires negotiation with family and community expectations. Girls drop out of school at an early age, and child marriage remains common in some areas, particularly in Tel Afar.

Women's movement and visibility in public spaces can be sensitive, with concerns around reputation influencing their ability to engage in daily activities or community initiatives. Participation in NGOs or WPTs, especially for younger and unmarried women, is sometimes met with hesitation or resistance. At the same time, women who do engage often demonstrate strong agency. For example, WPT members support women affected by online extortion, facilitate awareness sessions on early and child marriage, and create safe spaces for dialogue within their communities, despite the social constraints they face.

These norms also extend to women's access to employment, particularly in roles that are perceived as socially inappropriate. For example, a woman working in a beauty salon faced severe threats from within her own family, including death threats from her grandfather, due to perceptions that her work violated community norms. This reflects the extent to which social expectations are enforced through fear and control, limiting women's choices and exposing them to protection risks within their own households.

"Even going to a small shop can affect a woman's reputation."
WPT member, Tel Afar
"If a girl joins us, people say she will change and lose her values."
WPT member, Ba'aj

Even when women are employed in more socially accepted roles, such as teaching, they often have limited decision-making power within their households. These patterns reflect a broader dynamic where increased awareness and participation by women can lead to backlash from families and communities, particularly when they challenge established social expectations.

2. Economic exclusion undermining women's agency and sustained engagement

Women face notable barriers to economic participation and financial independence. Access to employment is limited, and certain professions are stigmatised. Inheritance rights are often denied in practice or reduced to symbolic shares, reinforcing economic dependency on male family members.

Women who are active in groups such as WPTs face additional pressure and critique due to the voluntary nature of their work. Families and communities often question why women engage in unpaid work and seek to restrict their participation in such activities. This pressure limits their ability to attend trainings or conferences outside their local area, where travel often requires the approval of, or accompaniment by, a male family member.

In Ba'aj, for example, **out of 18 WPT members** invited to attend a conference in Erbil, **only 4** were able to participate – the remaining 14 women did not attend due to family restrictions.

"They keep asking why we work for free and go out."
WPT member, Ba'aj

"We want to help our community, but we also need support to continue."
WPT member, Sinjar

3. Barriers to accessing protection, services, and trusted support mechanisms

Violence against girls and women, including domestic violence and online extortion, remains widespread across all locations. However, reporting remains low due to stigma, fear of retaliation, and concern over family and community reactions. Survivors are often blamed, and women risk further harm if they speak out.

Cases of online extortion are particularly sensitive, as women are often threatened with exposure and violence if they report. In one case, a woman facing online extortion was also at risk of severe harm from her own family, including threats to her life. Through intervention, WPT members engaged with the family and coordinated with relevant security actors, helping to de-escalate the situation and prevent further harm. WPTs also conduct community-based awareness and outreach efforts, including discussions on online extortion, available support pathways, and girls and women's protection, which contribute to increasing trust and encouraging women to seek support. Together, these efforts reflect both the severity of the risks women face and the critical role of trusted, community-based actors in enabling safe and locally accepted responses.

Women face additional barriers in accessing services, including the limited presence of female staff in the local institutions and the availability of services at the local level, particularly in Ba'aj, where women often need to travel to Mosul. Engagement with security actors such as National Security Services (NSS) and Community Police remains sensitive, with women often requiring male intermediaries and facing scrutiny when interacting directly.

"Women come to us because they cannot speak to anyone else."
WPT member, Ba'aj

"If she reports, the blame will be on her, not the man."
WPT member, Sinjar

Intervention and Impact

Women Peace Teams (WPTs) are trusted, community-based actors at the frontline of peacebuilding and protection, working through Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) approaches that emphasise relationship building, accompaniment, and locally accepted practices. Their close connection to women in their communities has enabled safer disclosure of highly sensitive issues, particularly cases of online extortion and domestic violence that would otherwise remain hidden due to stigma and fear.

Through direct intervention, WPTs have supported women facing serious risks, including cases where survivors were threatened by their own families. By engaging families, mediating tensions, and coordinating with security actors, they have contributed to de-escalating situations and preventing further harm. These interventions have not only addressed immediate risks but have also created safer pathways for women to seek support.

As a result of sustained outreach and trust building, reporting of cases through WPTs has increased, particularly in Tel Afar, where women are increasingly approaching WPT members as a first point of contact for support. This reflects growing confidence in community-based mechanisms and the ability of WPTs to operate within socially accepted spaces.

"For months, we stayed silent because of fear and what people would say. Through the sessions and ongoing engagement with the WPT members, we started to feel safe and built trust, which helped us come forward and share what was happening."
Woman from the community, Tel Afar

WPTs have also contributed to strengthening trust between communities and institutions, with some local authorities shifting from initial scepticism to recognising the value of their engagement. In contexts such as Sinjar, where communities have experienced severe trauma, WPT efforts have supported women in becoming more confident and willing to speak up despite ongoing constraints.

While structural barriers remain, WPTs have created tangible entry points for women to access support, reduce risks, and participate more actively in their communities.

"We solved cases where the girl was at risk, even from her own family."
WPT member, Sinjar
"Now women trust us and come to us first."
WPT member, Tel Afar

Building on these findings, the following recommendations reflect priorities identified by WPTs to address key gaps and strengthen community-based peace and protection efforts. They are intended to inform the actions of local and national authorities, security actors, and international stakeholders, including NGOs and donors, in supporting community-led approaches.

At the same time, WPT engagement can increase risks for some members, particularly in contexts where women's public participation is contested. These risks may include social backlash, reputational pressure, or exposure when handling sensitive cases such as online extortion or family-related violence. In practice, WPTs mitigate these risks through careful and context-sensitive engagement, collective decision-making, and by relying on trusted relationships with families and community members, including careful case handling and accompaniment where needed. Support from NGOs and CSOs further strengthens these efforts by enabling safe accompaniment, facilitating engagement with authorities, and reinforcing protective presence and coordination in line with community-based protection practices.

Moving forward, sustained support is needed to reinforce these approaches, including continued accompaniment, context-sensitive risk assessment, and measures that protect the safety, acceptance, and independence of WPT members. **Taken together, these approaches explain how WPTs actively manage risk in practice, enabling them to sustain engagement in contested environments.**

Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen community-led participation and peace roles of women

a) Recognise and support key women-led community-based peace actors, such as WPTs, and ensure their inclusion in local coordination and decision-making spaces, including regular engagement with the Mayor's office and relevant service directorates at the district level. This can be supported through small grant mechanisms to sustain their activities, regular opportunities for engagement with local authorities, and increased visibility through public communication and engagement with local stakeholders.

b)Strengthen trust and direct engagement between women and security actors by improving accessibility, increasing recognition of WPTs, and supporting relationship building between communities and institutions.

c) Support locally led women's groups to strengthen their collective voice and influence by enabling them to collectively identify and present shared priorities to local authorities, and by creating pathways to elevate these priorities to national-level dialogue where relevant.

2. Enhance community- based and survivor-centred protection and peace pathways

a)Strengthen trusted reporting and referral mechanisms by including local women groups to increase confidentiality and safety, by engaging them as trusted focal points and linking them to discreet, community-based reporting pathways and responsive service providers

b)Increase the presence of female staff within institutions, including National Security Service (NSS) and Community Police, particularly at the local level, to improve women's access to confidential and gender-sensitive services, while strengthening coordination with locally led-women's group.

c)Support continued accompaniment, mediation, and referrals in high-risk cases through flexible funding to community-based protection actors for safe case follow-up and referrals.

3. Prevent violence through community engagement and norm change

a) Support women-led local groups, like WPTs, to lead dialogue with families, men, and community leaders to address restrictive norms and reduce backlash by providing safe spaces and support from local authorities and community leaders for inclusive dialogue

b) Expand locally grounded awareness efforts, including digital safety and online extortion.

c) Promote narratives that frame women's participation as contributing to community safety and social cohesion through public awareness campaigns and community dialogues.

4. Sustain women's engagement through community supported structures

a) Establish dedicated, community-based physical spaces for women's groups to meet, organise, and deliver activities, to enhance their visibility, accessibility, and recognition as trusted local actors.

b) Expand access to women's livelihood opportunities to reduce economic barriers to participation.

c) Strengthen coordination between women-led community groups, local authorities, security actors, and service providers to improve trust, access, and responsiveness.

d) Support sustained relationship-building between women-led groups and local authorities and security actors to enable more consistent engagement and follow-up.

e) Promote the integration of community-based peace and protection approaches into local governance and security structures to enhance responsiveness and sustainability, while ensuring voluntary participation, do-no-harm safeguards, and protection of women-led groups' independence and community trust.



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