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NONVIOLENT PEACEFORCE

Women of Ninewa: From Bearing the Burden of Conflict Legacies to Leading in Peace and Security



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Context

While formally and constitutionally included in public life, women in Iraq face significant constraints on their political agency. As a result of conflict legacies and systemic discrimination, their space to lead and exercise power is often restricted. Indeed, cycles of violent conflicts have not only sharply deteriorated the quality of life and access to essential services across the population at large but have had a specific, layered impact on women. Ninewa, the governorate that bore the heaviest consequences of the so-called Islamic State (IS) rule between 2014 and 2017, provides a vivid example of these challenges. Decrease in quality and access to education, and subsequently reduced livelihood opportunities, and potential for social, political and cultural participation have reinforced patriarchal norms and restricted women's role in the community – creating multilayered vulnerabilities that undermine their ability to exercise leadership and influence. Nevertheless, women have consistently demonstrated their leadership and capacity, particularly through their ability to overcome unspeakable hardship. In this way, Iraqi women navigate complex and multifaceted roles – from victims of multilayered vulnerabilities to agents of leadership and peacebuilding – and terrains across which rights, security, and recognition intersect.

Unpacking these dynamics is essential to understanding both the persistent barriers and the opportunities for women's role in Iraq's peace and security landscape. Examining women's lived experiences through the lens of rights, leadership, and systemic discrimination helps understand the unfinished business of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, where national commitments are yet to translate to the daily realities of Iraqi women. Drawing on observations and findings from Nonviolent Peaceforce's (NP) work in Ninewa, this brief explores how women's roles are shaped and constrained in practice, while also identifying spaces where their leadership is already driving protection and peacebuilding. It seeks to inform policymakers, practitioners, and donors about the steps needed to strengthen women's role in peace and security, and to ensure that national commitments under the WPS agenda translate into tangible outcomes on the ground.

Challenges

As noted above, barriers rooted in conflict legacies and structural discrimination continue to limit the role of women in Iraq. Key issues include:

1. Unequal access to basic services

For women in Ninewa, the already challenging access to services is compounded by cultural norms that create additional risks and barriers. Physical movement to district centres and to Mosul city as the capital of Ninewa for accessing health, education, legal, livelihood, and other services is often hindered by societal norms that stigmatise women who travel independently, resulting in unwanted attention, rumours and social approval. Moreover, opportunities for women and girls in education, particularly in the rural areas of the governorate, are often compromised due to limited resources. Many schools face shortages of teachers and classroom space, and as co-education is not accepted, schools resort to doing "shifts". Such arrangements leave many families with no choice but to withdraw girls from school due to inconvenient shift times.

2. The legacy of conflict in shifting role of women in society

The preponderance of female-headed households present in Iraq in the wake of IS atrocities and aftermath is an affront to traditional cultures in Ninewa, where women were not traditionally responsible for being the breadwinners for their families. More women now carry dual burdens of being the primary carer and provider of labour in the home, as well as the primary income-earner. This includes internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees, many of whom do not have access to education and can only access limited job opportunities. Within this context of limited access and societal stigmas, women face an uphill battle in navigating male-dominated spaces and effectively fulfilling these roles.

3. Unaddressed societal trauma responses

Women who survived IS atrocities, including survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV), continue to bear profound psychological impacts. Access to mental health and psychosocial support services is extremely limited, particularly in rural areas. In that sense, there remains a need for comprehensive support remains a pressing need to help these women cope with and adapt to the lasting mental and emotional hardships they endure.

4. Barriers to participation in peace and security processes

Though women in Ninewa can and have played public positions in their communities, women's traditional roles also embody soft power that is not often well-understood or recognised. In many traditional households, the role of 'mother' is central, particularly for older matriarchs, and their influence on broader decisions in their families can often shape the course of events, including in peace or lack thereof. Attention to this soft power in research, policy, and programme design has been minimal, which prevents the full realisation of women's potential and power. This is linked to patriarchal assumptions about women as caregivers that do not reflect the myriad of ways they can and do engage in community dynamics, including peace and conflict management efforts.

5. Underrepresentation in security structures

In Ninewa, women are disproportionately affected by domestic violence and digital extortion. Though well-established security infrastructures and legal proceedings are in place, the number of female law enforcement personnel is minimal, and in many locations in Ninewa, there are no female security personnel. The lack of female representation within safety and security systems is a factor that deters women experiencing violence from accessing services and ensuring their safety.

6. Unmet transitional justice needs

As a governorate of survival and resilience, Ninewa continues to rebuild itself, including all components of transitional justice that are necessary for the collective recovery of the community. Women's needs and participation in relation to transitional justice have seen some positive developments, including the introduction of the Yazidi [Female] Survivors' Law. For many women – including the survivors of IS-related CRSV - however, wounds remain unhealed, and needs are not met. This is exacerbated by unrehabilitated infrastructure, the slow exhumation of mass graves, and the continued absence of missing persons from the IS atrocities.

Locally led responses enhancing women's positive role

Since NP started working in Ninewa, we have prioritised the investment in local peace infrastructures, including Women Peace Teams (WPTs) - which are groups of women working towards achieving peace in their community in collaboration with NP. The experience of women in different locations and contexts within Ninewa, as diverse as they are, has demonstrated positive impacts on protection, de-normalisation of violence and exclusion, and women's roles in peace and security. Women from internally displaced persons (IDPs) groups in locations like South Mosul, Talafar, Sinjar, and Baaj, as well as returnees and survivors of IS atrocities, have played a pivotal role in leading recent community initiatives that promote peaceful co-existence, efforts to address community recovery needs, and bridge the trust gaps between the community and duty bearers.

In Hardan, a village that has once collectively rejected any peace efforts, one young Yazidi WPT member is leading by example. The Hardan WPT has been at the forefront of advocating for improved access to services to their community and has also initiated exchanges and joint activities with Community Peace Teams (CPTs) from other ethnic groups. Each step towards (re)connection counts.

In Baaj, a community where women are not traditionally accepted in public spaces, a group of women members of the WPT successfully led advocacy to open a community police centre in their town. Since its opening, the community police have not had sufficient staffing to respond to all needs. In this gap, the WPT members have stepped in and started volunteering to facilitate receiving and responding to relevant cases from women in the area.

While women in Ninewa share common structural hardship, their lived experiences are as diverse as the fabric of this governorate. Sunni Arabs, Sunni Turkmen, Shia Arabs, Shia Turkmen, Yazidis, Christians, and many other groups have all survived the rule of one of the most brutal groups in the recent history of the region. Every step these survivors take to participate in the collective healing of their communities means increased resilience and prevention.

Sinjar, Iraq. 2025 © NP

Way Forward

While some positive steps have been made by the Iraqi government, community leaders, civil society, as well as international actors, to address ongoing needs and capitalise on the potential of women in Ninewa, more investment in collective action is needed. This includes:

1. **Expand service delivery in rural areas** that are sensitive to the specific needs of women and girls, including mobile health and legal aid units, increased female teachers, and segregated classrooms to reduce the dropout of girls. This needs to be complemented with investment in safe and affordable means of public transportation for women to access education, health, and livelihood services.

2. **Increased outreach of services tailored to women's needs,** including mental health support to survivors of CRSV, vocational training and livelihood programs for women with low literacy and formal education and female-headed households, and targeted social protection measures (cash, subsidies, food assistance).

3. **Proportionate mental health support for CRSV survivors** and their families, where the scale and complexity of trauma is taken into account. The nature of IS atrocities against Yazidi women and other groups needs to be the core of design and delivery of impactful mental health support in a context-sensetive and informed manner that enables survivors to cope healthily with the constant triggers.

4. **Increased support to locally led initiatives** that amplify women's voices in conflict prevention and mediation. The aim here is not only to increase the numeric representation in decision-making structures and peacebuilding but rather to recognise and integrate women's informal influence through "soft power" into local peace and reconciliation efforts.

5. **Capitalise on the potential of women in Ninewa** to make law enforcement bodies more inclusive, through increased recruitment, training, and deployment of female police and security personnel in the region. This can also be complemented by enhancing support for women and girls to access law enforcement and judicial institutions.

6. **Acceleration of existing transitional justice processes** with priority to community-based healing initiatives, with explicit attention to women's perspectives. This includes accelerated implementation of the Yazidi Survivors' Law and the extension of provisions to other survivors of IS crimes, dignified handling of mass graves, expanding reparations and memorialisation, and ensuring women's participation in truth-seeking.