Building Holistic Security

Addressing Security Risks of Women Peacebuilders Through Partnerships

CASE STUDY: IRAQ

Highlighting patriarchal norms and lack of protection for women peacebuilders in Iraq

This case study is part of the Building Holistic Security: Addressing Security Risks of Women Peacebuilders Through Partnerships *report created by the Women PeaceMakers program.*

Addressing the risks women peacebuilders face

Women peacebuilders inevitably face risks and insecurity in their daily work. International partners have an important role to play in supporting their safety and protection. Understanding women peacebuilders' roles and the types of risks they face is the first step in ensuring an adequate response. This case study forms part of the *Building Holistic Security: Addressing Security Risks of Women Peacebuilders Through Partnerships* report, focused on how international partners can better partner with women peacebuilders to address the risks and insecurity they face in the different facets of their work.

The report addresses how international partners who wish to work with women peacebuilders and support them in addressing the risks and insecurity they face need to recognize the scope and nature of peacebuilding work, which is often cross-cutting, overlapping with humanitarian response and development work. Understanding the nuances and breadth of women peacebuilders' work is crucial to identifying the risks they face and providing them with effective legal, political and financial protection — and is thereby essential to creating partnerships that mitigate and address these risks.

This report is co-created as part of the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship, led by the voices and perspectives of the 2020-2021 Women PeaceMakers Fellows. This report provides both a global analysis and context-specific case studies.

Since 2002, the Kroc IPJ has hosted the Women PeaceMakers Fellowship program. The Fellowship offers a unique opportunity for women peacebuilders to engage in a cycle of learning, practice, research and participation that strengthens peacebuilding partnerships. The Women PeaceMakers Fellowship facilitates impactful collaborations between women peacebuilders from conflict-affected communities and international partner organizations. The Fellows also co-create research intended to shape the peacebuilding field and highlight good practices for peacebuilding design and implementation. This case study was created as part of this process and is also featured in the full *Building Holistic Security: Addressing Security Risks of Women Peacebuilders Through Partnerships* report.

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Iraq Case Study: International presence as a form of protection

By Nesreen Barwari

Highlighting patriarchal norms and lack of protection for women peacebuilders in Iraq

CASE STUDY

Context

The situation in Iraq is challenging for women peacebuilders because of both existing cultural norms and security conditions.[1] The security situation in the Kurdistan region is stable, with freedom of expression and movement. The central and southern governorates, however, are rife with multiple official and unofficial militaries and militias, deliberately obstructing peacebuilding and women's work.[2] International assistance has had some positive impact on the activities and the people directly involved, but much progress is needed. In Iraq, women peacebuilders who are activists are divided along ethnic and religious factions — Sunni Muslim and Shia Muslim, Christian, Turkmen, Yazidi and Kurdish. Interviewees reported that women do not necessarily work together across these divides and are often in conflict with each other. The respondents also noted the perception of many Muslim women is that many Kurdish and Yazidi women get a lot of support from international partners, while they do not.

"...continuing to work in this field is not an easy task. It is challenging to secure funding for your organization... being a mother... coordinating between family matters, other interests, and work is a big burden...so is working in "hot spots" ... I work in a multi-forces area and there are conflicts between them. It is possible that I and other civilians might be victims of these conflicts." — Suzan Safar, DAK Organization for the Development of Yazidi Women, Mosul

Key findings

There is no common definition for or use of the term "woman peacebuilder." Women are involved in key humanitarian, human rights and development work — even sometimes in community mediation. The most commonly used term for women engaged in this work in the Iraqi context is "activist." Some of the women interviewed are active at the political level, while others work on community rehabilitation or community integration, or on providing psychological support for women who have suffered from violence during the war. Participants noted that it is very difficult for women peacebuilders to put themselves "on the map." Only those who are connected through women's networks are successful in building these desired relationships. Susan Aref from the Women Empowerment Association in Erbil stated, "My presence in women's networks at the regional and national level put me on the global, regional and local map." Women peacebuilders also believe that funding from international partners is often directed towards larger organizations and that the process involved in acquiring funding is too challenging, complicated and cumbersome. This is compounded by the tendency of international partners not to accept activists' ideas, initiatives or feedback.

> "Believing in the cause is the most important way that helped me reach my goals, and I always tell the international bodies, I do not work for you, I work for my family and my people... You will leave, but I remain and work here, and I am known to the community, and I work to meet their needs and interests. I derive my strength from strong women, such as the widow who raises her children alone in the light of difficult circumstances and despite poverty as well when I see that women are the ones who support each other. I do not believe in the saying that the women are their own worst enemy." — Siroud Muhammed Faleh Ahmad, Iraqi Al-Amal Association

Women peacebuilders feel they face a number of obstacles in accessing and receiving support from international or regional actors. One of these obstacles is the fact that the culture is very patriarchal, and the peacebuilding environment is dominated by men. Men do not create "space" for women activists and often question their capabilities, leaving them out of spaces where they may have access to international partners.

In addition to the precarious security situation and the weakness of state institutions, women peacebuilders face numerous risks and obstacles to their work. There is no structure in place to protect women, not even in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). As noted by Dr. Nada Muhammad Ibrahim of the Iraqi Organization for Women and Future and member of the Iraqi Council of Representatives for the Iraqi National Front, "Even though there are better laws and regulations in KRI, especially family law and the active role of women in society, there is no sufficient protection for women at all." The situation is worse in the rest of Iraq where these laws are not in place.

Furthermore, patriarchal norms and the limitations they impose on women's role in society in general mean that women are expected to tend to family duties and their husbands, or they are shamed for working in public spaces. The peacebuilders interviewed reported that they are subjected to smear campaigns and defamation, including being accused of being "prostitutes" or "promoting homosexuality." Their family members receive threats, and often male family members are encouraged to stop their work. For example, male relatives might receive a call saying, "If you don't stop her, we will kill her." In addition, women's freedom of movement may be limited in areas where male accompaniment is required. According to Huda Rafid Ahmed of the Women's Protection Project, "It is not easy for women to work in such areas or sectors connected to security… The issue of mixing men with women is very sensitive which poses a restriction on building peace comprehensively." In other words, restrictions on women's mobility can have a clear impact on the ability of women peacebuilders to do the work they need to do.

The extent of the limitations posed by patriarchal norms varies from region to region, with the Kurdistan region being more open. In KRI, women have greater freedom of movement, independence and means to participate in public life. In southern regions, the norms are more conservative, meaning that women's freedom of movement and participation in public life are both restricted.

Women peacebuilders make efforts to address the risks they face. Some of these include:

- Disappearing for a while and not appearing in the media;
- Not publishing activities on social media until they are completed;
- Coordinating with the security authorities when moving around;
- Wearing locally accepted clothing so as not to be identified as an "outsider";
- Obtaining necessary permits to work officially;
- For female activists in the central and southern governorates, traveling to the Kurdistan region as a safe haven or outside the country for a period; and
- Maintaining community support for their work.

International organizations support women peacebuilders in several ways. They support the participation of women peacebuilders in regional and international networks and events, which is an area where women noted that they have found the greatest benefit. They feel that it "helped… a lot in getting to know the suffering of women in other countries and communicating with them and benefiting from their own experiences." International partners also provide support that strengthens and encourages women peacebuilders and gives them visibility in international fora such as the UN Security Council.

International organizations have been supporting women peacebuilders through capacity strengthening activities such as training and courses. Women peacebuilders have found this type of support to be very helpful. However, they also noted some challenges:

- Activities are limited to a small group of women — often elite, educated and well-connected (the "usual suspects").
- Partnerships are limited to large organizations that are already acknowledged in the international arena.
- Activities lack comprehensiveness, often working on superficial issues; there is too little diversity of choice offered, and trainers often lack knowledge about local context and cultural and religious gender dynamics.
- Funded programs often emphasize the number of participants included but do not necessarily address gender norms, gender issues and gender dynamics.

The capacity to continue working after an international, regional or national organization's projects are completed depends on the extent of the impact and duration of the programs and projects: the longer the period, the greater the benefit. Women peacebuilders feel strongly that their knowledge and understanding of the local community and of the local context, and their own priorities and needs, should be taken into consideration and supported by international partners. A common view among interviewees is that the priorities imposed by international partners often do not match the needs of local communities.

> "The support that is provided by the international communities must target projects that are coming from within, in coordination with the concerned and affected population. There must be deeper communication with the concerned authorities and the people to bridge the reality and avoid the superficial solutions." — Ban Najeeb, Women Minorities Forum, Iraq

Women peacebuilders feel that the presence of international partners by their side provides much-needed protection. However, Feryal Al Kaabi of Awan Organization for Awareness and Capacity Development in Diwaniyah noted that there is an "urgent need for legal support centers affiliated with international partners to provide legal advice and maintain the safety of the women defending and attempting to build peace. The influence of international partners is considered vital."

It is important for partners to recognize that international presence is a form of protection, and creating more equitable partnerships is critical for supporting the protection of women peacebuilders in Iraq.

Conclusion and recommendations

Women peacebuilders in Iraq face serious security threats and are often restricted by patriarchal norms. Partnership with international organizations offers key protections, but peacebuilders often feel that their priorities and feedback are not taken into consideration. In light of this case study's findings, international partners should:

- Support the Government of Iraq in creating a legal framework and mechanisms to protect women in general.
- Provide legal support centers for women activists.
- Design projects in collaboration with local partners, so they are part of the design process as well as implementation.
- Fund projects longer term, helping to sustain results and achieve desired goals.
- Conduct trainings related to the field of security and safety that include methods and tools for protection.
- Provide support for health-related and social needs when women peacebuilders are exposed to risks.
- Recognize the work women peacebuilders do in public settings and political discussions.
- Provide ongoing psychological support for women peacebuilders.

Endnotes

1   Geneive Abdo, "Violence Against Women Permeates All Aspects of Life in Iraq," Wilson Center Middle East Women's Initiative, November 29, 2022, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/violence-against-women-permeates-all-aspects-life-iraq.

2   United States Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Iraq," *2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* (Washington, DC: United States Department of State, 2022), https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/iraq/.

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