

Displacement and Women's Economic Empowerment: Voices of Displaced Women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Executive Summary

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Shireen's Story

Shireen fled the war in Syria in 2014 and has lived in the KRI ever since, now living in a host community. She is 39 years old, married with 4 children.

Back in Syria, we were middle class. There were women who worked, but many educated women still stayed at home, because of the cultural norms. Now, everyone who fled Syria has to work – even 6-year-old children. It's not something we have chosen, but I think this situation has created a chance for women to work here in the KRI. Many more jobs are open for women who have skills and who want to work – jobs like sewing, hairdressing, handcrafts and restaurant work.

When I started working, I understood what it meant for a woman to be financially independent. She can get space to do what she likes, she can take decisions on her own. The negative side of working was that I was away from my children so much, but what kept me going was knowing that I was working for them.

My friend told me about the women's centre. Back in Syria, I had a hairdressing certificate. I thought, I can gain more experience and knowledge, and meet new people. It was nice to get to know other Syrian women in Sulaymaniah. There are many Syrian women here, but I had only met a few of them before going to the centre.

After the course, I tried opening a hairdressing salon with one of my friends from Sulaymaniah, but unfortunately the location was far from my house and with the travel expenses I couldn't make a profit, so I had to quit.

Many big businesses in the region are closing because of the current economic situation, even the people from Sulaymaniah are struggling. If I was able to open another hairdressing place, I would create job opportunities for other women.

When you see that your children and husband need help, every woman naturally goes into action. There is no room for fear. And work teaches a woman a lot of things – it teaches her to be strong, it gives her confidence. She can meet people, and it helps her psychologically. I encourage every woman to find work.

Executive summary

Conflict-related displacement has increased the number of women among displaced communities who engage in livelihood activities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Women's increased role as income providers has led to some change in men's and women's perceptions of women's economic roles. However, this change appears to be temporary and instrumental, meaning that when people return home or life goes back to normal, perceptions of women's economic position will return to what it was before. Nonetheless, the positive changes described by the participants of this study of women's roles in income generation and their impact on attitudes can be built upon to generate transformative change both for women's economic empowerment and their empowerment in general.

There are significant structural and cultural obstacles hindering women's ability to engage in livelihood activities and to increase their economic empowerment. The wider institutional and legal system that discriminates against women and perpetuates patriarchal gender norms, the economic crisis, and the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) and the Government of Iraq's (GoI) political priorities that overlook women's rights and their economic empowerment create structural obstacles hindering displaced women's short-term opportunities to engage in livelihood activities and their long-term economic empowerment.

The main barriers to women's engagement in livelihood activities are: restrictions to their mobility due to long travel time and costs of commute; perceived risks to their safety and security; societal and family pressures that confine women and girls to the domestic private sphere; a lack of educational and skills background to take up work; a lack of or limited job opportunities; heavy responsibilities and childcare at home that put pressure on women's time; and health problems. On the other hand, due to the inability of male members of their families to earn (enough) income, women are forced to work. In this respect, the harsh conditions of conflict and displacement have forced families and communities to make space for women's engagement in livelihoods and this is an opportunity that can be built upon with careful national and international planning.

There is huge variation in women's experiences of displacement, their livelihood needs and their access to economic opportunities in the KRI. The variation depends on the place of settlement and origin, whether they are a refugee or an IDP,¹ whether they have a rural or urban background, their level of education, literacy, occupational skills, age, and specific family circumstances and needs. Therefore, one particular model of a livelihood programme might cater for only one section of displaced women but may exclude



Photo: Emily Kinskey

other displaced women. As such, the variation in needs and circumstances needs to be reflected in the design of livelihood programmes, as well as in their implementation. National and international actors should avoid gendered stereotyping and strictly categorising women based on cultural and communal identities when seeking to understand barriers and opportunities to livelihoods for displaced women.

Most of the displaced women engaged in current livelihood opportunities and training programmes offered by local and international organisations find them beneficial and appreciate the safe spaces these provide. However, these activities are not seen as having the potential to turn into sustainable income generation activities for three reasons. First, the current economic crisis and the wider conflict context lead to a lack of jobs and market opportunities, rendering it difficult to maintain a business or find a job.

Second, the economic empowerment of women is not a government priority in Iraq or the KRI. Third, most livelihood programmes follow a one size-fits-all model that is short-term and does not always address the specific livelihood needs of different women living in a context of displacement.

Local and international organisations working on displaced women's livelihood security do so with limited resources and do not receive sufficient national and international support for their work. Therefore, it is hard for them to develop long-lasting and effective programmes that cater to different needs and circumstances. Although existing livelihood programmes are unlikely to be transformative in the long term, they have led to small-scale transformations in displaced women's lives and changed perceptions of their role in the household.

Recommendations for international governments and donors

1. Ensure livelihood support for women is part of a longer-term approach to supporting women's economic empowerment:

The duration and effects of conflict and displacement are not short-term. Largely borne of necessity, work for displaced women can prompt positive changes in gender dynamics and allow women to access new opportunities. For these changes to effectively support the fundamental goal of women's rights, women's livelihood support should be leveraged as an entry point for long-term, transformational change needed for women's economic empowerment. Building on the positive small-scale changes from livelihood programmes is key.

Specifically:

- **Urgently increase funding for women's rights organisations** to support them to deliver vital, needs-based long-term and varied programming, including economic empowerment. Such support will allow them to continue to provide effective responses, promote long-term change and build their capacity and service provision.
- Donors should **prioritise holistic support for women** where livelihood programmes must go hand in hand with services and supporting women's rights.
- **Support women's livelihood programmes that include men in their programme design.** Such programmes should help raise men's awareness of women's rights, including violence against women and girls whilst continuing to prioritise women's rights. They should also support the proactive involvement of men in unpaid care work.
- **Work with national and regional partners to build political and institutional support** for both women's economic empowerment and fund local and international organisations that provide such support.



Photo: Emily Kinskey

2. Support context specific responses to the wide variety of factors that influence women's livelihood needs:

The livelihood needs of women displaced by conflict in KRI are multiple and complex. Needs are affected as much by their current context as by their life prior to being displaced, as well as the nature of their displacement. These factors also intersect with women's specific vulnerabilities, meaning that women who were marginalised prior to displacement are less likely to access opportunities and effectively benefit from those they can access.

Specifically:

- **Prioritise the more marginalised women** – including those who have had the least access to opportunities, including education and work – to ensure that programmes effectively respond to their multiple and complex needs.
- **Ensure livelihood programming is complemented with support for women's decision-making.** It is vital that women's voices are heard – both to support women's empowerment in the long-term as well as to promote a more nuanced understanding of their needs, requirements and what works. Programmes should therefore increase women's participation in the structures that represent their communities, including women in the camps. Donors should support the development of toolkits to include women in camp management through working with the government offices, organisations responsible for each camp and women themselves.
- **Support holistic, adaptable programming** and avoid one-size-fits-all approaches. Programmes should be grounded in effective needs-assessments where women's voices are front and centre.
- When understanding barriers and opportunities to livelihoods for displaced women **avoid gender stereotyping and strictly categorising women based on cultural and communal identity.**

3. Provide livelihood support as part of a range of services for women displaced by conflict:

Women displaced by conflict face multiple barriers and challenges in accessing livelihood opportunities in KRI that are not directly economic. For example, the impact of health needs, including those directly associated with conflict as well as needs within their current context, affect women's abilities to work, increase their care burden and can incur financial costs. Women also have specific needs due to their gender, including protection from violence against women and girls.

Specifically:

- **Establish and maintain women-friendly, safe places.** Women's safe spaces are essential for women's wellbeing and social support mechanisms, developing their self-confidence in their capabilities, which is essential for their empowerment including economic empowerment.
- Support a range of **affordable, accessible and quality health services for women** displaced by conflict, with a focus on displacement-related psychological and physical health needs.
- **Ensure livelihood support is accompanied with legal and justice programming** that allows, for example, women access to official documentation and report safely to local decision-makers (e.g. camp managers, host communities, etc.). Such programming should be complemented by diplomatic efforts to build political and institutional capacity and support for women's access to justice.

4. Respond more effectively to the needs of women displaced by conflict:

Women and girls have specific needs related to their experiences of conflict, journeys from (and into) conflict, and in their 'new' environments. Their needs and experiences must form the foundation of all programming, including economic empowerment.

Specifically:

- **Diversify income generation opportunities based on regular, participatory needs assessments** which take into account different circumstances and needs among displaced women and changing environments. The economic crisis in KRI, for example, should prompt a re-assessment of women's needs and programmatic changes.
- **Diversify training packages to include non-traditional gendered and cultural skills** (IT, English, other local languages, legal rights, how to access information) different from traditional livelihood programme activities such as sewing, etc.
- International donors and governments should **engage with national and regional authorities to encourage them to increase support to displaced women and women in host communities** in the job market and increase their economic empowerment. This should include diplomatic support to change discriminative legislative and institutional rules and practices against women.

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