

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

Event Summary

1. Context:

In April 2018, the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security, Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) and Women for Women International convened a roundtable to discuss the findings from their research report: *Displacement and Women's Economic Empowerment: Voices of Displacement Women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*. The full report, executive summary and videos of interviews with three women displaced in the KRI are available online: www.womenforwomen.org.uk/livelihoods-research.

This research, undertaken by the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security, aimed to understand the effects of conflict-related displacement on women's economic wellbeing and empowerment, focusing on livelihood needs and opportunities. It provides further evidence and understanding of: the short and long-term needs of women displaced by conflict; the specific challenges they face in accessing livelihoods; gendered livelihood needs among communities affected by conflict; and to what extent any existing policies support the needs of displaced women.

The research interrogates current concepts and approaches to Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) and 'resilience' within humanitarian policy to better understand their limitations, advantages and suitability for women in displaced by conflict. The research also outlines specific recommendations for international governments and donors to better meet the needs and experiences of women displaced by conflict. This research is timely for both the international community's increased focus on WEE; and in the UK, the UK Government's National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security which includes Iraq as a focus country.

This Event Summary provides an outline of the event at which LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security, GAPS and Women for Women International launched their report with WEE, gender and women's rights experts and practitioners.

2. Research Methodology, Findings and Recommendations:

The research was carried out by the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security through interviews and focus group discussions. It was an opportunity to hear directly from women: their voices; their reflections on their economic needs; and perceived obstacles to their livelihood.

The LSE listened to the women, analysed the findings and brought expertise on WEE to the perspectives of the women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Key findings from the research:

Most women welcomed the livelihood support they already receive and found it beneficial. However, it was not considered support which would be long-term and sustainable. Currently, most livelihood support focuses on low-income activities. Funding constraints for those delivering the livelihood support is a key factor affecting the support provided; short bursts of projectised funding do not allow for a market analysis or long-term needs assessment.

i. Barriers to women's livelihood activities:

- Women engaged in livelihood activities face concerns for their safety, and already have heavy care responsibilities at home. Many suffer physical and psychological health problems because of stress and the substantial burdens of work.
- Economic context: Since 2014 there has been a severe economic crisis in the KRI, the scale of which has led to a decrease in employment opportunities for displaced and host communities. Livelihoods interventions need to be flexible to respond to a changing economic environment.
- Political will: There is a lack of conscious focus on WEE by the government in the KRI. This is linked to patriarchal practices, structures and norms.

ii. Patterns of difference

There is huge variation in women's experiences of displacement, livelihood needs, and economic needs. Displacement is a complex process with multiple layers. Patterns of difference were observed, including:

- Between Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and refugees;
- Age;
- Level of education affecting likelihood to be involved in livelihood activities;
- Urban or rural background – urban IDPs and refugees were more likely to work when displaced;
- Experience and perception of harassment and violence against women and girls;
- Yezidi or Iraqi – Yezidi women were more likely to pursue livelihood activities, training and awareness raising, and report a shift in the mentality of men towards women's mobility;
- Camp resident or host-community resident – it is deemed easier to find a job in host communities because of proximity. As camp residents receive greater support, they are also seen as able to be paid less;
- Amount of time a camp has existed – older camps have better infrastructure and residents have more knowledge and connections. Newly displaced communities have very different experiences; and
- Female-led households – the extra responsibility of providing for their family and the stigmatisation of widowhood.

iii. Necessary change rather than transformational change

Most women's participation in economic activity is out of necessity – changing circumstances because of conflict-related displacement. This suggests that it is not a transformative change but temporary, with life and women's rights going "back to normal" when they return.

For transformative change to happen, existing livelihood programmes should be changed substantially. They need more long-term and sustainable funding, and need to meet the diverse needs of the displaced communities more effectively.

Livelihood interventions must take a holistic approach to WEE, intersecting with: women's representation; protection from violence; access to health; realisation of rights; and change in legal and institutional structures.

iv. Recommendations:

The overarching research recommendations are as follows (detailed recommendations can be found in [the report](#)):

- Ensure livelihood support for women is part of a longer-term approach to supporting women's economic empowerment.
- Support context specific responses to the wide variety of factors that influence women's livelihood needs.
- Provide livelihood support as part of a range of services for women displaced by conflict.
- Respond more effectively to the needs of women displaced by conflict.

3. Roundtable discussion

The Roundtable discussion covered the following themes:

i. Connecting long-term, transformative change and livelihood support:

- Whilst there can generally be risks around livelihood skills reinforcing gendered norms and marginalisation, such as focusing on hairdressing and sewing, women participating in the research did not identify these activities as disempowering. These were felt to be appropriate for women and their needs. The biggest concern was that these activities are not as lucrative as others, rather than to do with social norms.
- The research found that many women already participated in financial decision-making in the home, even those not engaged in income-generating activities.
- Being displaced often means being constantly on the move. Some livelihood programmes include inputs. Selling these inputs in order to move elsewhere is common. This makes long-term monitoring difficult since following up with individuals who have moved away is difficult or impossible. The Roundtable participants agreed with this observation on livelihood interventions sometimes becoming the source of income opportunity. The group agreed that these are complex contexts where people have to make practical decisions.
- Communities more accustomed to NGO interventions would negotiate with those delivering the programme, for example on transportation allowances or on what intervention was being offered. Others who are 'new' are less able to negotiate or have their voices heard.
- Engaging women without engaging men was often seen as a waste of resources – the whole community needs to be engaged for the engagement of women to be facilitated and encouraged and, therefore, more impactful.

ii. Likelihood to Return:

- Intention to return to their country or area of origin had a major impact on research participants' likelihood to participate in livelihood activities. For example, those newly displaced tended to feel they would return soon and were less likely to engage in learning new skills and finding employment. The researchers had to reorganise the order of their research questions to understand participants' visions for the future first to have an idea as to how women's perception of the likelihood of return affected their engagement in livelihood activities.
- Governments have also been quick to integrate incentives to return into livelihoods initiatives. However, it is still vital that governments participate in the design of economic empowerment programmes.

iii. Institutional support and rule of law:

- Limitations on access to work permits and the importance of political and legal literacy was noted as a concern by the roundtable participants. However, the issue of work permits was not raised often in interviews with research participants.
- In the context of the KRI there is a lack of implementation of rule of law. Rule of law and knowledge of rule of law has implications in terms of workplace abuse and employee protections.

iv. Funding:

- Roundtable participants acknowledged that multi-year, long-term funding is essential to support transformational change but that (some) donors are more attracted by short-term gains. They felt that unless implementers can point to evidence on the lasting impact of safe spaces, donors and governments are reluctant to take on these programmes – despite their importance. Donors and policy makers want clear action plans and are less interested in the subtleties of experience.
- Engagement in livelihood programmes have long-term benefits – Trainings can provide a safe space, raised awareness, a place to engage with other people. Women for Women International's work in Dohuk demonstrates that programmes can also create networks of women who continue to support each other.
- Local women's rights organisations need core funding so that they can provide their vital services, and because they are best-placed to understand what is needed.

- Building solidarity with women’s movements and women’s rights organisations is essential. Roundtable participants noted that women’s rights organisations often lack the capacity to be able to document the impacts of long-term funding.

v. Violence against Women and Girls:

- Although the research did not specifically explore Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), the researchers noted anecdotal indicators on the prevalence of VAWG and ensured there was space to talk about VAWG if participants wished. There were also varying perceptions of violence based on how normalised it was prior to displacement, and the levels of stigma of sexual violence. This prompted a brief discussion at the roundtable on the challenges around designing ethical research projects on VAW.

4. Next steps and follow up

In addition to the roundtable, the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security, Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) and Women for Women International will:

- Write to Government ministers and officials to share the report and recommendations.
- Write to the organisations that participated in the research and worked with the women participants to share the LSE Women, Peace and Security Centre, GAPS and Women for Women International’s thanks, the report recommendations and follow-up plans. The group agreed this is a key part of research and consultation: to ensure that women in communities who participated are aware of how it was used globally.
- Share the report and videos of women living in the KRI on Women for Women International, GAPS and the LSE Women, Peace and Security Centre’s various social media channels and with the breadth of GAPS members.
- Include the report and videos in the monthly GAPS newsletter which is sent to parliamentarians, civil society organisations and academics.
- Hold a follow-up event in July with experts on WEE where we will be sharing the report findings and recommendations to a new, broader expert audience.
- The Head of Policy and Advocacy at Women for Women International UK will be going to Iraq and will share the findings and research with the organisations who participated in the research and mobilised the women who participated. Carron will also be working with the Women for Women International team in the KRI to develop a plan for national dissemination.

5. About the organisers:

The **LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security** is an academic space for scholars, practitioners, activists, policy-makers and students to develop strategies to promote justice, human rights and participation of women in conflict-affected situations around the world. Through innovative research, teaching, and multi-sectoral engagement, the Centre for Women, Peace and Security aims to promote gender equality and enhance women’s economic, social and political participation and security. www.lse.ac.uk/wps

Since 1993, **Women for Women International** has worked with more than 479,000 marginalised women survivors of war in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kosovo, Iraq, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Sudan. Our core work is centred on a holistic, rights-based programme to address the needs of marginalised year-long programme to address the needs of marginalised women in conflict-affected countries. www.womenforwomen.org.uk

Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) is the UK’s Women, Peace and Security civil society network. We are a membership organisation of 17 NGOs and experts in the fields of development, human rights, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. We were founded to promote the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Our role is to promote and hold the UK Government to account on its international commitments to women in conflict areas worldwide. www.gaps-uk.org