

# Empowered Women Empowered Children

A focus on Iraq



## General

Women and children remain the most vulnerable groups worldwide of people. The pervasive trend of gender inequality and violence against women and children is particularly challenging in Iraq, where 1.3 million people are at risk of gender-based violence,<sup>1</sup> 75% of whom are women and adolescent girls<sup>2</sup>. The problem of violence against women and girls is a serious breach of human rights. Moreover, violence against women and gender inequality have cross-generational consequences for children whose emotional and mental wellbeing are adversely affected by seeing women in their families and communities facing discrimination and violence.

In 2021, World Vision conducted a regional study examining the relationship between women's socio-demographic and empowerment factors and child wellbeing using mixed methods in the Middle East and Eastern European Region, including Iraq. Study participants included World Vision beneficiary children (male and female) (11-12 years) and mothers of the children. In addition, key community representatives were also interviewed.

### **Full Report:**

<https://www.wvi.org/publications/iraq/empowered-women-empowered-children>

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<sup>1</sup>Humanitarian Needs Overview for Iraq, 2021

<sup>2</sup>Ibid

## Statement of the Problem

Gender norms and prejudice, economic crisis, decades of conflict and the resulting displacement have led to pronounced inequality between men and women in Iraq. In addition, COVID-19 lockdowns and the resulting stress on the economy have further exacerbated these challenges. Despite several policies and initiatives aimed at advancing gender equality by the federal and regional governments in Iraq as well as civil society and non-governmental organisations, much more needs to be done to address inequalities between men and women, girls and boys in Iraq. There is strong evidence to illustrate that child wellbeing is strongly linked to the level of empowerment of women in the communities, and the need for addressing entrenched inequalities is vital for the country's recovery.

## How empowered are women in Iraq?

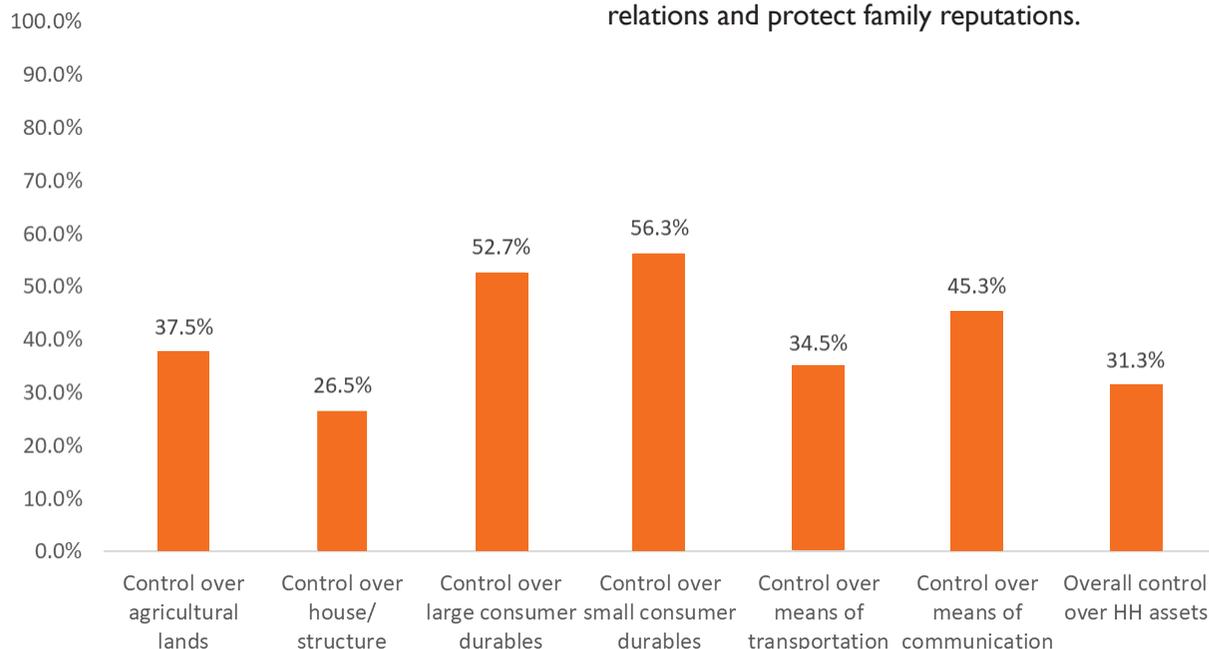
The study found that three-quarters of survey participants (women) in Iraq reported that they did not have decision making power in the family or the ability to influence the husband's decision. The prevailing patriarchal norms mean that men are the decision makers in Iraq, while women's primary roles involve domestic duties and childcare. As a result, women tend to have limited authority in domestic consumption and expenditure decision making (41%) and lesser control in the activities that involve business and capital transactions (35%).

When looking at gender and asset ownership, only 27% of women owned a house, 34% had access to transportation, and 38% owned agricultural land.

Further, findings show that a quarter of women participants experienced several forms of GBV, with 81 % experiencing domestic violence. Emotional violence marked the most significant factor (22%), followed by physical (15%) and sexual violence (15%). It was also found that the majority of surveyed women in Iraq accept different forms of GBV (69%) while only 31% reject it. Restrictive gender norms are disabling influences that impact women's mental and emotional wellbeing. Almost all participants (96%) claimed the impact of harmful norms on their lives, particularly in distributing domestic tasks and access to resources.

Indeed, Social norms prevent families from sending daughters to school or continuing school to avoid contact with males. Furthermore, most women (94%) were restricted from having freedom of movement, which directly cuts them all from education, livelihood, and seeking service opportunities. Housewives with no income are also limited from accessing legal services (9%). This can be explained by the semi-tribal patriarchal system that stigmatises women who try to recoup rights against men and the constitution allowing tribal-religious interpretation of the laws.

In addition, child marriages continue to be common. All participants indicated they were aware of recent examples of child marriages in their social circles. In Iraq, child marriage continues to be practised as some families believe this is a method to protect the purity of their daughters. At other times, it is used to create social ties between tribes or to avoid pre-marriage romantic relations and protect family reputations.



## So what do gender inequality and gender-based violence mean for the children of Iraq and their empowerment?

The study aimed to measure children's wellbeing on different levels to illustrate the link between empowered women with empowered children.

The majority of surveyed children in Iraq were registered in primary schools (83%) however only 20% of girls were able to complete intermediate school due to traditions. Up to 47% dropped out of school due to lack of financial resources, with 29% joining labour force to contribute financially.

Regarding physical wellbeing, 90% of children showed good diet status, although 67% do not exercise, and only two children were exposed to smoking.

When asked about their experience of violence, 39% of surveyed children in Iraq reported they had been subjected to violence. 34% Exposed to emotional/verbal abuse, and 26% to physical abuse with no difference between girls and boys.

However, despite the negative influences, the children showed empathy and an average level of resilience with an excellent relationship with their caregiver (87%) and good mental health (87%).

Research outcomes show that a child's wellbeing depends on the mother's physical, emotional, and educational wellbeing. Unbounded women positively influenced children's attitudes towards education and learning. Mothers that had control over household assets showed a higher protecting attitude toward their children. In addition, children with healthy behaviour indicators were more likely to belong to mothers that were unexposed to forms of GBV. Finally, survey findings show that the mother's mental and emotional wellbeing is closely related to the child's mental wellness.

## What is World Vision doing about this?

Through its experience delivering life-saving and livelihoods and resilience programming in Iraq, World Vision in Iraq has been supporting women with multi-purpose cash assistance to help them overcome shocks or meet immediate needs and WASH needs, among others. In addition, longer-term assistance projects have also assisted women with engaging them in cash-for-work opportunities to provide short-term income and help them break into the labour market and providing start-up and scale-up grants to support them to run their own small business.

A pilot women's economic empowerment project identified ways to be further engaged in economic activities in Iraq, recognising that they face additional challenges in this regard. These initiatives can be further mainstreamed in program design and implementation around livelihoods in Iraq and built upon to better reflect and address links between economic inclusion and violence against women and girls.

## Programming and advocacy recommendations

- Mainstream GBV prevention and referral across all interventions, especially in mapping existing GBV referral pathways and training staff on referral to specialised services, as well as monitoring reported incidences of GBV.
- Ensure staff understand GBV risk mitigation mechanism as a core component of their programming responsibilities and can identify gendered risks and work with technical specialists to mitigate them across the program cycle.
- Provide mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for mothers and their children, especially those affected by GBV and intimate partner violence.
- Target mothers for cash for food or vouchers provision to ensure their children's nutrition, instead of the traditional approach of targeting households.
- Provide income-generating activities for women and potentially create sustainable economic participation opportunities within the community.
- Provide mothers with education opportunities connected with future employment to improve their basic literacy and numeracy skills.

## Recommendations What more can we do?

- Consider women's empowerment as a critical precondition for achieving children's wellbeing and embed women's empowerment approaches into the pathway of change of child-focused programmes/interventions.
- Integrate gender-transformative interventions to change harmful social norms across all sectoral programmes. This will enable to address power dynamics (gender relations) and cultural norms (gender norms), a key component for women's empowerment, especially from the relational standpoint.
- Invest in addressing harmful social and cultural norms, through awareness-raising and advocacy, in close partnership with local faith leaders, as the leading power holders for social change.
- Work with the formal gatekeepers, particularly with the gender focal points and working groups in Ministries, Municipalities and other public institutions, to ensure their enhanced capacity to perform gender equality initiatives and develop strategies.
- Implement World Vision GESI Management Policy (effective as of October 1, 2021) and integrate GESI lens in every project implementation cycle across all sectors.
- Engage UN agencies, Civil Society Organizations and organisations focusing on women's rights and empowerment for effective coordination and work alignment.

## Donor and funding recommendations

- Invest in addressing Iraqi population displacement and its implications, by providing sustainable funding and durable solutions to IDPs.
- Prioritize women empowerment projects, with strong focus on addressing GBV and Women's Economic Empowerment.
- Ensure women's voices of different age to be heard and considered while developing funding strategies and policies.