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LISTENING TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS **THE UK'S GENDER AND WPS PRACTICE IN IRAQ**

ZEYNEP KAYA • ILHAM MAKKI HAMMADI • EVA TABBASAM



Cover image An Iraqi woman holds a sign during a demonstration against the draft of the Al-Jafaari Personal Status Law on International Women's Day in Baghdad, 8 March 2014. The sign reads, **'On women's day, we mourn women'**. © REUTERS/Thaier al-Sudani.

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THE ORGANISATIONS

The Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield is one of the top-ranked departments for the study of politics worldwide, and has an exceptional reputation for research. The Department seeks to promote global citizenship and awareness and explores politics in a variety of national contexts, from the local to the global. Departmental staff have international reputations for research excellence and they all contribute to the thriving research environment, specialising different areas of politics and international relations.

Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) is the UK's Women, Peace and Security civil society network. GAPS is a membership organisation of NGOs and experts in the field of development, human rights, humanitarian response and peacebuilding. GAPS was founded to progress the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The role of GAPS is to promote and hold the UK government to account on its international commitments to women and girls in conflict areas worldwide.

ABBREVIATIONS

BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSSF	Conflict, Stability and Security Fund
CT	Countering Terrorism
DFID	Department for International Development
FCDO	Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
FCO	Foreign Commonwealth Office
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
I-NAP	Iraqi National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex
NAP	National Action Plan
ODAL	Official Development Assistance
P/CVE	Preventing / Countering Violent Extremism
UK-NAP	United Kingdom National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UN-OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolutions
WPS	Women, Peace and Security
WRO	Women's Rights Organisation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender equality is an increasingly important component of the foreign policies of many Western states. This is particularly true for their security and development policies. For example, the UK incorporates gender into its development and security policies most notably through a Women, Peace and Security (WPS) National Action Plan (NAP). Its 'Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative' and 'What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women Programme (2014–20)' are other examples of its gender-focused policies. The UK's commitment to incorporating gender into its foreign policy is particularly visible in its engagement in conflict-affected countries, including Iraq. Indeed, Iraq has been one of the UK-NAP focus countries since 2018.

However, a key issue with the UK's – and other international donors' – gender policy is the way they link gender to security. Connecting gender, development and security can lead to the instrumentalisation and securitisation of the women's rights agenda. Where gender is included in foreign policy, the aim should not be to make 'development' and 'security' policies more effective. Instead, a gender perspective should be adopted in order to critically assess existing approaches to development and security, to ensure they are not one-size-fits-all policies, and to prevent them from causing harm and perpetuating hierarchies and privileges.

During our fieldwork in Iraq, we asked women's rights defenders and women's rights organisations (WROs) about their view on existing international gender policies and how these policies are being implemented. Interestingly, they told us that they are rarely asked for their perspective on international engagement. Women and men we spoke to have been taking part in women's rights and civil rights activism for decades, some since long before the 2003 invasion. Their insights are important for UK policymakers and other international actors.

Our fieldwork showed that international support for enhancing gender equality has led to positive outcomes. It has increased the visibility of Iraqi women and awareness about women's issues. International funding has expanded the space for women's rights activism and reinforced support for women in general. Engagement with international actors, especially with regional WROs, has strengthened their work and allowed Iraqi activists to learn about new practices, approaches and solutions. The Iraqi Government has become more aware of international resolutions, policies and laws related to gender equality, such as CEDAW and WPS.

However, those interviewed also raised several issues related to international engagement and funding.

1 The contractual engagement implemented by most funders generates and perpetuates hierarchical relationships between Iraqi organisations on one hand and international organisations and donors on the other. In response, they highlighted the benefits of genuine long-term genuine partnerships that build on meaningful consultations with Iraqi organisations, giving them ownership of the design, implementation and outcomes of projects. These partnerships are seen as more egalitarian and inclusive, helping Iraqi organisations build their capacity and expand their network.

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- 2 Iraqi WROs expect better communication and transparent relationships with funders, embassies, UN agencies and INGOs.** In their opinion, international actors usually engage with a select group of organisations on the ground. They do not always widely distribute funding calls and do not follow up on applications. Interviewees wanted to understand how much funds are allocated to gender equality by donors, such as the UK, and what percentage is directly spent on this issue. Despite being the key implementers of international programmes, Iraqi WROs and CSOs rarely receive direct funding, which is instead disbursed through intermediary international organisations such as UN agencies.
 - 3 Iraqi women's rights defenders and WROs feel let down by donors and international actors when it comes to support for advocacy.** Most funded projects do not include any allocated budget or time for advocacy work. Iraqi WROs were also excluded from consultations during the development of the second Iraqi NAP, making them disappointed with UN Women on this issue.
 - 4 The exclusive nature of funding distribution was another important issue raised by WROs.** In their opinion, the same organisations repeatedly receive financial support, showing a non-inclusive distribution of funds. Funding is also not sustainable because it is mostly allocated for short-term projects, making it difficult for Iraqi WROs to plan long-term, retain staff, and sustain their organisation. Moreover, overhead expenses are typically not eligible for funding, which prevents them from investing in their staff and organisational capacity.
 - 5 International actors are seen as disconnected from the reality on the ground.** According to WROs, projects prioritised by international actors do not always align with the needs and demands identified by WROs. Lack of meaningful partnerships and the top-down manner of distributing funding further exasperate the issue, preventing international donors from understanding the context. As a result, they are unaware of the risks current forms of international engagement create for women's rights defenders.

1 INTRODUCTION

This report assesses WPS, gender development, and security policies and programming in Iraq by looking at three key areas: 1) the relationship between women's rights organisations and donors; 2) funding and how it is distributed; and 3) the understanding of the context it operates within. The focus of this report is specifically on the UK's gender practice in security and development in Iraq.

The report seeks to close the gap between the current approach of international donors and organisations to gender programming in development and security, and the self-identified needs and priorities of women on the ground. This is no easy task – it is a highly complex undertaking which involves numerous stakeholders, often with different strategies, and challenging national and regional contexts.

This report adopts a holistic view of gender within development and security programming. Successful policy development in any area requires a solid grasp of the bigger picture coupled with an understanding of how these policies play out on the ground. To reflect this, the report looks at the UK's gender practice in Iraq and compares it to international donor community practices. It does this by adopting a particularistic and evidence-based approach using original empirical data.

Between January and April 2022, we asked a number of Iraqi women's rights defenders, activists¹ and organisations for their views on international policies towards gender in their country. We subsequently used this data to generate an evidence-driven conversation at a workshop organised in Amman in June 2022. Attendees included Iraqi women's rights defenders, Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) representatives, United Nations (UN) and other international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) representatives, as well as Women, Peace and Security and gender experts. Participants discussed the research findings and reflected on what it tells us about international gender policies and programming as well as their impact on the ground, especially for women, girls and WROs. This report builds on the research data and workshop discussions and outlines findings and recommendations to the UK Government and the international community for better gendered policies and programming.

¹ The terms 'defender' and 'activist' are used interchangeably to refer to women and men working individually or as part of organisations to raise awareness on women's issues, promote gender equality, and advocate for change.

DFID tents are loaded up at a warehouse in Dubai ready to fly to Erbil, Iraq, August 2014.
© David Quinn/Department for International Development.



2 THE UK'S GENDER PRACTICE IN DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY IN IRAQ

The current security and development policies of most Western states, or of the Global North,² often position gender at the centre of their diplomatic, aid, security and trade policies. Some, such as Sweden, Canada and France, as well as countries not typically considered part of the Global North, such as Mexico, have even defined their foreign policies as 'feminist'.³ States that include gender in their foreign policy typically prioritise issues such as women's participation in peace processes, economic empowerment and preventing sexual violence.⁴ Gender is also widely incorporated into foreign policy through the WPS agenda⁵ that promotes gender equality, political participation, women's involvement in peace processes, and preventing conflict-related gender violence. This is usually done through National Action Plans, a national-level strategy document. However, states interpret WPS principles in different ways and often relate the agenda to traditional security concerns rather than addressing structural gender inequalities.⁶

The UK incorporates gender into its development and security policies most notably through a WPS National Action Plan (UK-NAP). Its 'Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative' and 'What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women Programme (2014–20)' are other examples of its gender-focused policies.⁷ The UK Government also heavily focuses on girls' education, albeit its approach to the issue has been criticised as failing to adopt a holistic enough approach.⁸ The UK's commitment to incorporating gender into its foreign policy is particularly visible in its engagement in conflict-affected countries, including Iraq, which has been one of the UK-NAP focus countries since 2018.

The UK Government is committed to investing in Iraq, stating that its motivation behind providing aid and loans to the Iraqi Government is to support regional security, reduce migration flows, prevent potential terrorist attacks, and mitigate the impact of conflict and insecurity on minorities, women and children.⁹ However, these policies have a number of shortcomings.

Investment in this area has significantly decreased over the last couple of years, especially after the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO) were merged to form the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). DFID's Iraq budget, which stood at £30m in 2018–19, shrunk to £20m the following year.¹⁰ The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund's (CSSF)¹¹ Iraq budget halved from £55.64m in 2019–20 to £26m in 2020–21.

While the UK Government explicitly includes gender in its foreign policy towards Iraq, funding allocated to gender programming is very minimal. For instance, only £0.05m of CSSF's total Iraq budget of £26m was dedicated to gender-related activities, specifically WPS scoping.¹² It is also unclear how much of CSSF's funds are actually spent on gender and, as it currently stands, little UK aid goes towards supporting Iraqi WROs.¹³

² These are political rather than geographic terms. They represent the states that are powerful and influential in world politics, international security and development, and that fund the UN and its various agencies. Geographically understood divisions of the West–East and Global South–North overlook the complexity of the picture, such as BRICS' growing contribution to the UN budget for instance.

³ Baroness Sugg, '[Launch the UK's First Feminist Foreign Policy](#)', *Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security*, 1 December 2021.

⁴ Karin Aggestam and Jacqui True, 'Gendering Foreign Policy: A Comparative for Analysis', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, March 2020, 16(2), p. 158.

⁵ Nine United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) constitute the WPS agenda. The first UNSCR, Resolution 1325, was launched in 2000.

⁶ Paul Kirby, 'Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict: The Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative and its Critic', *International Affairs*, May 2015, 91(3), p.460.

⁷ UK Government Press Release, '[Foreign Secretary Launches Campaign to Tackle Sexual Violence in Conflict around the World](#)', 16 November 2021.

⁸ Sophie Efange, '[Written Submission to the International Development Committee on the Impact of UK Aid Cuts](#)', *Gender and Development Network*, 28 May 2021.

⁹ HM Government, '[Ending Violence against Women and Girls 2016–20: Strategy Refresh](#)', March 2019.

¹⁰ Department for International Development, '[Profile of Development Work: Iraq 2018–20](#)', 2 September 2020.

¹¹ CSSF is a cross government fund which supports and delivers activity to prevent instability and conflicts that threaten UK interests.

¹² Includes Official Development Assistance (ODA) and non-ODA. See: Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, '[Iraq Programme Annual Review Summary: 2020–21](#)', 15 July 2021.

¹³ Gender Action for Peace and Security, '[Assessing UK Government Action on Women, Peace and Security in 2019](#)', 13 July 2020, p.5; Ameira Sawas and Isabelle Younane, '[A Global Force for Good: Four Pillars for UK Leadership on Gender Equality](#)', *Action Aid UK*, 2 September 2020, p.2.

¹⁴ DFID, 'Profile of Development Work'.

¹⁵ AWID, 'Only 1% of Gender Equality Funding is Going to Women's Organisations - Why?', 2 July 2019.

¹⁶ Here 'local' refers to national non-state organisations and CSOs.

¹⁷ Columba Achilleos-Sarli and Yasmin Chilmeran, 'Interrogating the "Local" in Women, Peace and Security: Reflections on Research on and in the UK and Iraq', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, September 2020, 22(4), p. 598.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 599.

¹⁹ The UK Government also contributes to the IMF, World Bank and G7 coordinated loan package to 'unlock Iraq's economic potential for UK companies'. See: DFID, 'Profile of Development Work'.

²⁰ Includes ODA and non-ODA.

²¹ CSSF, 'Iraq Programme Annual Review Summary'. As mentioned above, WPS scoping is allocated £0.05m, including programme delivery costs.

²² Sawas and Younane, 'A Global Force for Good', p.3.

²³ The Philosophy and Culture of UK Aid Inquiry published its first report '[Racism in the Aid Sector](#)' on 23 June 2022. The 'Future of UK Aid' ended the evidence gathering period in March 2022. See: International Development Committee, 'Racism in the Aid Sector', *The Philosophy and Culture of UK Aid Inquiry*, 23 June 2022.

²⁴ See the [programme's call](#).

A further shortcoming is that, in Iraq, UK aid allocated for development and humanitarian work is provided through international organisations, and not directly allocated to Iraqi women-led organisations. In 2019–20, almost all of DFID's £20m Iraq funding was channelled through the UN and its agencies,¹⁴ with less than 1% of its gender equality budget sent directly to WROs.¹⁵ Current international policy framing in the UK considers 'localisation'¹⁶ as essential for developing 'authentic and frontline programming'.¹⁷ In implementing its WPS agenda, the UK seeks to consult Iraqi organisations but does not always engage with them directly or in an inclusive way. Instead, engagement with WROs and CSOs happens through INGOs based in the Global North who act as intermediaries and filter information back to the donor.¹⁸ Findings and recommendations often do not make it into policy and programming unless they fit with state priorities, which hinders engagement with women's rights movements and the ability to identify the right course of action.

The current model raises important questions: Are resources distributed to the right people, in an inclusive manner and for the right kind of activities? How useful are available resources for women's rights activism? Does the current distribution of resources create further problems, privileges and hierarchies? How well is the resource channeling informed by contextual analysis? Addressing these questions is now more crucial than ever considering increasingly limited funding.

Finally, perhaps the most significant problem with the UK's – and other Western states' – approach to gender practices abroad is that their policies connect gender directly to security. UK aid to Iraq is directly linked with achieving security – and economic – goals.¹⁹ Hence, security-related items account for the bulk of aid spending.²⁰ For instance, in 2019–20, £10.74m of CSSF's £20m Iraq budget was allocated to security-related items, such as security sector reform and UNDP's stabilisation work, while the rest was distributed among thirteen other items.²¹

Therefore, it is important to adopt a critical stance towards the current form of engagement, or lack of engagement, with women's rights activism and civil society. This report argues that the FCDO should take a holistic view and increase funding for, and investment in, expertise around gender. It should first, develop more meaningful partnerships with WROs and second, reflect on how its activities in trade and security affect gender equality.²² Parliamentary inquiries into the 'Future of the UK's Aid' and the 'Philosophy and Culture of UK Aid', led by the Parliamentary International Development Committee, are steps in the right direction.²³ The 'Advancing Gender Equality through support to Women's Rights Organisations and Movements' announced by the UK Government on 25 August 2022 is also a welcome development.²⁴

3 LESSONS FROM THE ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT



Woman and children at a collective informal shelter for Yazidi refugees who fled ISIL attacks in Iraq, 23 November 2014. © Caroline Gluck/EU/ECHO.

²⁵ Marsha Henry, 'Gender, Security and Development', *Conflict, Security and Development*, April 2007, 7(1), pp. 61–84.

²⁶ Maria Stern and Joakin Öjenda, 'Mapping the Security–Development Nexus: Conflict, Complexity, Cacophony, Convergence?', *Security Dialogue*, February 2010, 41(1), pp.8–17.

²⁷ For an analysis of how gender intersects with other factors to create risks, insecurities, safety and advantages for women, men and LGBTQI community members, see: Sofia Patel, 'Representations of Women and Gender in DFID's Development–Security–Counterterrorism Nexus', *European Journal of International Security*, May 2022, p.14.

²⁸ Ann-Kathrin Rothermel, 'Gender in the United Nations' Agenda on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism' *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2020, 22(5), pp.720–5.

²⁹ Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman Rosamond, 'Re-Politicising the Gender–Security Nexus: Sweden's Feminist Foreign Policy', *European Review of International Studies*, 2018, 5(3), p.36.

³⁰ Aggestam and True, 'Gendering Foreign Policy', p.147.

³¹ Zeynep Kaya, '[Feminist Peace and Security in the Middle East and North Africa](#)', OXFAM, September 2020, p.7.

³² Dianne Otto, 'Women, Peace and Security: A Critical Analysis of the Security Council's Vision', *LSE WPS Working Paper Series*, January 2016, p.10; Sara Meger, '[The Fetishization of Sexual Violence in International Security](#)', *International Studies Quarterly*, March 2016, 60(1), p.153.

³³ Ann-Kathrin, 'Gender in the United Nations' Agenda on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism', p.729.

Feminist scholars have extensively discussed the incorporation of gender into development and security, which can lead to the instrumentalisation and securitisation of the women's rights agenda. Where gender is included in foreign policy, this should not be done to make 'development' and 'security' policies more effective. Instead, a gender perspective should be included in order to critically assess these policies and ensure that they are not one-size-fits-all. This prevents them from causing harm and perpetuating hierarchies and privileges.

The concepts of 'development/aid' and 'security' carry political and historical baggage.²⁵ The relationship between them is highly contested, especially because of the way they are framed within peacebuilding and military intervention agendas. The assumed connections between the two are used to justify interventions and gloss over the 'differences, politics and ethical implications of the practices' they enable,²⁶ leading to counterproductive and even harmful outcomes.

When 'gender' is brought into this nexus, it further complicates matters. The politics of security often obscure the question of whose security is being considered. The gender–security–development nexus can, and often does, use gender to refer to 'women' and 'female biological sex', rather than a social construct.²⁷ It essentialises gender and presents women as victims, 'natural peacemakers', economic entrepreneurs, 'untapped resources' and 'viable investments'.²⁸ It promotes women's rights for military and security-related causes and justifies humanitarian, development and military interventions for women's 'protection'.²⁹

WPS is an agenda with one foot planted in traditional security ideas and structures (e.g. the UN Security Council's conception of security and peace) and the other in transnational, feminist peace activism. It is questionable how well state-led frameworks can achieve feminist political aims because 'patriarchal, hierarchical and oppressive power structures' are embedded in state institutions and everyday practices.³⁰ Therefore, although the WPS agenda is widely welcomed by feminist scholars and activists, it does not represent feminist peace and security.³¹ Most states only use it to ensure wars are safer for women by taking military measures to protect women from sexual violence rather than promote a rights-based agenda or tackle institutionalised patriarchy and existing structures that often drive conflict in the first place.³²

One of the UNSCR resolutions that constitute the WPS agenda, Resolution 2242, merges gender, security and development under the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) agenda. The UN's P/CVE agenda incorporates counterterrorism (CT), one of international politics' most radical security policies. It then links it to peacebuilding and development work aimed at preventing terrorism. P/CVE typically defines women as victims and men as perpetrators of violent extremism,³³ where women are seen as tools to influence their male relatives and to gain access to

communities' network.³⁴ The current UK-NAP incorporated Resolution 2242 into its strategies, therefore directly linking women and gender to counterterrorism.³⁵ This is a clear example of securitisation and instrumentalisation of the WPS agenda.

Finally, when it comes to formulating gender policies, orientalist thinking still influences Western policies and approaches. Western states and international organisations face ethical and practical issues, especially when working in the Middle East. Misconceptions and stereotypes about the region, its culture, social fabric and institutional structures negatively influence Western development and security policies. These policies use gender as a criterion for differentiating between cultures, leading in extreme cases to the use of women to justify military interventions, which some might call colonialist enterprises such as in Iraq.³⁶

Issues around the perception of women and women's rights movements in Iraq, and in the wider Middle East, by Western donors and international organisations still exist. Their view heavily focuses on Islamic culture and religion as the source of patriarchy and gender inequality. Most notably, it links violence against women in the region to culture and religion, and fails to attribute it to political, economic, legal and social conditions, including conflict.³⁷ It overlooks the fact that religion played a varied role as it interacted with pre-Islamic, tribal and imperial traditions, as well as with Western capitalist influences.³⁸ This view also turns a blind eye to the role Western states have played in the underdevelopment of these countries.³⁹ It overlooks the diverse conditions and experiences of women across the region. This 'culturalist' and 'simplifying' approach, which reifies and essentialises culture, religion and women, has become embedded in foreign policy.

Western criticism of Islam regarding the treatment of women creates huge risks for women's rights activists. It encourages conservative forces in the Middle East to defend such treatment as part of a reaction against Western control and invasion, as a patriotic act, or a defence of their culture and religion. This puts women's rights activists in a difficult position, making them appear as not patriotic, nationalist, or religious enough, and allies of colonising Western forces.

Western actors should reconsider how their engagement with the powerful political and economic elite, and their security policies in this context, support existing power dynamics in Iraq and therefore, buttress patriarchy. Western actors should recognise that conflict, the proliferation of arms and the lack of accountability (by both Iraqi and international actors) enable an environment of exploitation and violence, validating militarised masculinity. The perpetuation of these patriarchal values hinders women's rights activism and LGBTQI rights.

³⁴ Gender Action for Peace and Security, '[Prioritise Peace: Challenging Approaches to Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism from a Women, Peace and Security Perspective](#)', 18 June 2018.

³⁵ Patel, 'Representations of Women and Gender in DFID's Development–Security–Counterterrorism Nexus', p. 1.

³⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

³⁷ Nadjie Al-Ali, 'Sexual Violence in Iraq: Challenges for Transnational Feminist Politics', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 2018, 25(1), pp. 10–27.

³⁸ Nikki R. Keddie, *Women in the Middle East: Past and Present* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006)

³⁹ Henry, 'Gender, Security and Development', p.62.



4 LESSONS FROM IRAQI WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVISTS FOR THE UK GOVERNMENT

For policies to be well developed and implemented, they must be based on evidence. Research can also bring nuance and subtlety to the development of policies.⁴⁰ Evidence-based policies lead to consistent, relevant and genuine change.⁴¹

We asked WRO and CSO representatives in Iraq about their thoughts on international gender policies and how these policies are being implemented. Interestingly, most pointed out to the fact that they are rarely consulted on the matter. Women's rights activists do not take part in defining how international engagement in their own countries takes place and what kind of support they need. Evidently, states with pro-gender equality foreign policies should engage with WROs and CSOs when developing and implementing their policies. Women and men we spoke to have been taking part in women's rights and civil rights activism for decades, some since long before the 2003 invasion.

Undoubtably, as stated by Iraqi WRO representatives, international efforts aimed at enhancing gender equality have increased the visibility of Iraqi women and awareness around women's issues. International funding has expanded the space for women's rights activism and support for women in general. Respondents emphasised that engagement with international actors at meetings and workshops, especially with other WROs from the Middle East and North Africa region, has strengthened their work and helped them discover new practices, approaches and solutions. They also stated that the Iraqi Government has become more aware of international resolutions, policies and laws related to gender equality, such as CEDAW and WPS.

Previously, they [government officials] used to laugh at us when we opened this topic [CEDAW and Resolution 1325] but now, **there is awareness.**

These two [Resolution 1325 and CEDAW] are very important because they raised the level of awareness amongst women, and people more generally. For example, around the prevention of sexual harassment and civil rights policies, as well as political participation. She [referring to Iraqi women] changed a lot; **she wants to learn, gain access and empower herself.** The Iraqi government signed many strategies, including the strategy to reduce violence, and endorsed I-NAP for the implementation of Resolution 1325.

Clearly, insights from Iraqi WRO representatives showed that there is a need and desire for international support, and that the support received so far has had some positive impact.

However, they also revealed that there are significant issues with international approaches and practices and that there exists an urgent need to improve the way support is provided. According to WRO representatives, existing models should change to generate useful, harmless, egalitarian and transformational outcomes. Unfortunately, it is impossible to provide a full account of all that was shared.⁴² Instead, we have identified three key

⁴⁰ Bryony Everett et al., '[What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls: Research and Innovation Programme](#)', *DFID*, March 2020.

⁴¹ Patel, 'Representations of Women and Gender in DFID's Development-Security-Counterterrorism Nexus', p. 19.

⁴² These will be published in an upcoming journal article.

⁴³ Oxfam was also mentioned as an organisation that builds meaningful relations with Iraqi WROs.

areas that repeatedly emerged during the interviews, which are particularly relevant for policymakers and donors:

- a. WROs–donor relations: hierarchies and lack of meaningful partnership
- b. Funding, distribution and inclusion
- c. Contextual understanding and risks for women's rights defenders

A. WROs–DONOR RELATIONS: HIERARCHIES AND LACK OF MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIP

While different forms of donor engagement exist, ranging from meaningful partnerships to contractual and hierarchical relationships, most in Iraq fall under the latter category. North European organisations, especially those representing the Swedish and Danish governments, are perceived to be more directly engaged with Iraqi WROs and CSOs. They better consult Iraqi organisations and build meaningful, long-term partnerships, helping WROs build their institutional capacity. International donors typically expect WROs and CSOs to meet certain institutional and structural requirements as a condition for funding. Partnerships built by some North European donors help small and newly established organisations develop their capacity through project implementation, training and knowledge exchange. As part of these partnerships, WROs feel heard and actively part of the decision-making process around how funding is spent.⁴³

The good thing is that the vision of the [Swedish] international organisation was in line with that of the local organisation in which I work and with my personal beliefs [...] **they help connect us with other influential actors and organisations concerned with gender issues** [...] we participated in the design process.

[Oxfam] work on gender and they worked a lot on displacement. They are interested in human rights [...] **Their representatives are usually active and mingle with people,** socially interact, **but do not interfere in our affairs.**

Oftentimes, WROs feel they are treated as subcontractors, when taking part in consortiums led by the UN and funded by Western states. These projects are typically pre-designed, and the role of the Iraqi organisations is simply to implement. The agenda is designed around the donors' understanding of the issues and their interests, leaving CSOs with little space for genuine participation in the decision-making process.

There is no space for consultations. **From design to implementation, all depends on what the donor wants,** the type of activity the donor would like to implement, and what the donor's end goal is. [...] **Each donor has a specific goal and organisations propose projects which align with those goals.**

The International community works based on its own priorities. This is one of the negative aspects of the international community. **Everything revolves around funding.** Imagine if the whole world worked on preventing underage marriage. They neglect many issues faced by Iraqi women because they are not part of their policies and priorities. **Their policy puts CSOs on their path.** Thousands of women in Iraq are victims of human trafficking, but this is not their priority. The Iraqi state does not spend money on these issues either. The role of the private sector is absent. There is no investment. **We only have foreign funding, but foreign funding has a defined identity.**

How many of these policies have Iraqis been involved in formulating? Was the opinion of Iraqis on the plan taken into account during the design phase and before implementation? They do not ask for their opinion, or perhaps do so in a superficial way.

The problem is that [...] **international organisations act as if they are kind of superior to local organisations.** Their roles are not complementary.

When I withhold important documents from you, this means that I prevent you from accessing information or knowledge that helps you improve your performance. Therefore, this is intentional. **They do not want to show us the full picture, so as not to be surprised by the small value of our allocated share** compared to the project's total budget.

The problem is that **we offer what satisfies these organisations and donors in order to get the project** and we do not tell the truth or what we exactly need because it is possible that these organisations may not accept it.

Respondents criticised the lack of communication and engagement between donors (including the UK) and WROs. They reported that when some submitted applications, they never receive a response, not even a rejection. Most of the respondents, some directors of leading WROs, were unaware of what exactly the UK funds. In a country like Iraq, which is a UK-NAP 'focus country', WROs should have a clear idea of what the UK's funding priorities are, and how the UK uses its aid as a tool of foreign policy. Given that the funding is distributed through international organisations, WROs do not have direct engagement with donors. This lack of transparency hinders equitable relationships and partnerships.

Frankly, in terms of gender, so far, I saw only one project. I once worked on a project on education that was funded by the FCO. **I don't see any other UK-funded projects.**

I think the UK's involvement in general, including in gender, is very weak. Its policy towards Iraqi organisations is bad. They do not effectively engage with Iraqi civil society, excluding some who defend this issue, and withholding the opportunities from them. I remember that they did not respond, either positively or negatively, to a local organisation when they submitted a funding proposal.

⁴⁴ Since 2003, international actors supported the writing of many policies and strategies, including the non-discrimination against women law, but these simply remain on paper and have not been implemented.

Finally, Iraqi WROs feel let down by donors and international actors when it comes to support for advocacy, with most projects lacking budget or time allocation for advocacy work. Some representatives of WROs mentioned that while donor states adopt a pro-gender equality foreign policy, they stop short of putting pressure on the Iraqi government on the issue. They also highlighted how Iraqi women's rights and civil society organisations were excluded from the development of the second I-NAP. They feel particularly let down by UN Women on this issue.⁴⁴

If we want to engage in advocacy, the funder tells us that they do not have a budget.

I see that they define the activities from start to end [...] We do not feel we receive any real support.

Organisations working on the Domestic Violence Law, the Diversity Protection Law or the Journalistic Work Law put great effort into mobilising the Iraqi people around Article 57. **But sometimes, they are guided to the beginning of the road and then left. This is a mistake.**

The problem is that changing the laws is not easy for us. For example, the Public Prosecution Law is very old, dating back to 1979. We proposed a draft change which was a challenge to the Government, to the powerful decision-makers. This is our problem. There is no advocacy support, **they [donors] are supposed to possess the means of pressure the government, but unfortunately the UN organisations take care of the government more than the citizens.**

Is it reasonable that European countries, who always talk about violations of human rights, did not read Paragraph 1, Article 41 which states that a man has the right to discipline his wife? This law has been in place since 1969, it is not new. **How have these countries not been able to influence decision-makers since 2003?** They interfere in everything. If they were serious, couldn't they influence this? In 2003, we rejected the former regime, overthrew it, changed it and built a new state. **How can the new state be based on old laws?**

B. FUNDING, DISTRIBUTION AND INCLUSION

While Iraqi WROs are dependent on international funding to carry out their work, they face significant challenges because of the way funding is allocated. Most times, the same organisations repeatedly receive direct funding, meaning funds are not distributed in an inclusive manner.

The UK works with specific organisations and opportunities for participation for other organisations are scarce. They are the same faces they relied on in the past... Unfortunately, **these consulates and embassies focus on some organisations and marginalise others.**

The FCO funded a project led by a Dutch organisation whose gender expertise is weak. Why? The reason, frankly, is the **lack of confidence on the part of the British actors in Iraqis.** Unfortunately, they insist on working in the same old way.

Existing long-term partnerships do not allow funders to expand their horizons towards other organisations. For example, we have been a long-term partner to an organisation since 2010. Despite knowing that there are other active people and organisations on this issue with experience, they still give funding to their partners. UN-OCHA always does this.

The way UN funding is distributed has changed. Let's say ten organisations are accepted after the call of proposal. The General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, who would be a partner with the UN, has a say on which of these ten organisations will be funded.

If you look at the conferences that take place in prestigious hotels outside Iraq or in Kurdistan, you will find the same faces and personalities [...] Why do they always meet the same people? **If they diversified the presence at these meetings, they would hear more than one opinion, idea, or proposal.**

I think that [donors] are the ones who created this problem. They decided that 'these are solid organisations and these are not solid. These are effective and these are ineffective. These organisations are large and these are small'.

It is some international organisations that create the distinctions. **They highlight some organisations over others and work authoritatively.**

Lack of sustainable funding is another problem that was often mentioned by respondents. Funding is typically allocated for short projects, making it difficult for Iraqi WROs to plan long-term, retain staff and sustain their organisations. Overhead expenses are typically not eligible for funding, which prevents them from investing in their staff and organisational capacity.

UNICEF provides overhead to foreign organisations, but not to local organisations. Local organisations must pay a 1% bank fee but do not receive overhead to cover this cost. **Projects end but there are requirements that still need to be met; so where will the organisation bring funding from and who will manage the project after its end date?** Local organisations are then forced to find revenue from other sources. This might lead to corruption. Most importantly, they do not become stronger or more influential as a result of the project.

There has always been a fear of lack of sustainability of projects. The project ends and we must then wait for another application call. When we receive funding for a project, our staff count can reach up to 28, so I have 10 non-permanent employees, who I train and develop. After the project ends, I can no longer cover everyone's salaries. We only keep permanent employees and are forced to let the rest go.

There is no sustainability. We work on the project for two years, or even less. After that, **the donor cuts off the funding and people are still in need.** There are cases of GBV [gender-based violence] that we must close or transfer to another organisation, so **trust is shaken between us and the community.** The survivor puts her trust in us, and suddenly, we tell her that the programme has ended.

C. CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING AND RISKS FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS DEFENDERS

International actors are seen as disconnected from the reality on the ground. According to WROs, projects prioritised by international actors do not always align with the needs and demands they identified. Lack of meaningful partnerships and the top-down manner of distributing funding further exasperate the issue, preventing international donors from understanding the context.

In some sessions with international actors, I can see that they somewhat understand, but no matter how much we talk about the environment in which women live, they cannot fully comprehend what we are talking about [...] **sometimes they are upset because the policies they have do not apply everywhere.**

Some organisations work with these donor organisations and implement projects that are basically not applicable and do not correspond to our reality. So international actors do not understand, but Iraqi organisations implement anyways because they need the job. From where do they [funders and embassies] collect the information? **They don't live with us, and they don't know the truth, but we provide the information. The problem is that we offer what satisfies them just to get the project.**

Since Iraqi feminist organisations are completely dependent on these funds, **you will find that most consider the oppression of women as one of the most important problems we have.** There are many other problems, such as those faced by working women, those in the media, civil society, in government, and others. **But international organisations only provide funding for projects relating to certain topics.**

International actors live in the Green Zone, **they think the whole of Iraq is like the Green Zone.** They do not leave the Green Zone and only deal with around 12 to 15 organisations that are on their records.

Respondents also stated that international organisations and donors are unaware of the risks that women's rights defenders face, highlighting the risks that international engagement can create for women. Several women activists have been killed in Iraq; others face security issues and physical and online harassment doing their day-to-day work.

The main problem for [women's rights defenders] is that **there is no protection or insurance for them because this work is not a job.** Sometimes the international community is condemned by some groups within the country, and as happened with the activists, what happened in the demonstrations and the accusations against them... We are exposed to such matters, and sometimes **we are subjected to insults and defamation because we adopt issues related to international organisations.**

Sometimes we do not mention the name of the international organisations, especially relating to women's issues, **because they accuse us of following a foreign agenda or of trying to introduce Western culture into our society over our cultures, customs and traditions.** There are some organisations that are working on gender, which includes homosexuality as well, but we are afraid of bringing this issue up. So the project might be on that topic, but in its name it can be presented in a different way. Diplomats and donors do not always understand this.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

POLICY APPROACH

Consider the negative impacts of combining security and gender, leading to the instrumentalisation of gender. Re-develop policies in line with these considerations, particularly challenging the 'Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism' agenda.

Develop a comprehensive understanding of the diverse roles women, girls, men and boys may take in conflict, of pre-existing gender norms, and of the specific gendered impacts of conflict.

Implement equitable practices of engagement with WROs and CSOs rather than adopting a hierarchical approach.

Hold inclusive and meaningful consultations with women and civil society on the design, monitoring and evaluation of all UK policy and programmes in FCAS (fragile and conflict-affected situations), disseminate findings of these consultations across UK Government (including posts, country offices and missions and thematic teams) and amongst those consulted. Develop an accountability mechanism to report on how findings and recommendations have shaped UK government policies and practices.

Develop and implement evidence-based policies building on robust research, leading to consistent, relevant and genuinely transformative outcomes.

Consult the '[Handbook on Gender Dimensions of Criminal Justice Responses to Terrorism](#)' in the design, implementation and reporting stages of the project.

FUNDING ALLOCATION

Increase direct gender-equality funding to WROs and CSOs working on women's issues.

Adopt a more holistic, integrated and context-specific approach to priorities, themes and focus areas of funding. Donors should ensure that funding is aligned with WROs methods, practices and objectives.

Develop a fair system of distribution of funding. For instance, incorporate overheads in the budgets of national organisations, and ensure the UN and other INGOs receiving UK funding also provide support for overhead expenses.



Prioritise long-term, core, flexible, transformative funding for WROs to bring about real change. This should be aligned with their self-defined priorities rather than those of donors. This would allow WROs to advance their priorities beyond delivering on donor, UN or INGO programming priorities and service delivery. It would give them the flexibility to adapt and respond to shocks and crises through the reduction of reporting requirements and allowing for budget reallocations and programme adaptations. They can then focus on community/context demands and needs, rather than donor requests and priorities.

Incorporate funding for advocacy in programme development and develop strategies to support WROs during the advocacy stage.

Improve communication with WROs about funding calls and post-application follow-up.

CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Expand the network of WROs in countries of work. For instance, the British Embassy in Baghdad and the Consulate in Erbil could be more inclusive in their approach to engagement with Iraqi CSOs rather than only communicating with a select group of organisations.

Develop meaningful and long-term partnerships, involving WROs in projects from the design stage onwards. Encourage and expect INGOs and UN agencies that disburse UK funding to follow these principles.

Create an inclusive forum open to an array of WROs and CSOs working on women's issues which allows these groups to communicate their needs and expectations. This would enable WROs to set the agenda around international engagement, funding and projects.

The British Council and its activities are generally perceived in a positive light in Iraq. The Council could have a potentially valuable role to play in creating and maintaining contacts with Iraqi organisations.

METHODOLOGY

Research for this report was conducted between March and June 2021. A qualitative methodology was adopted with two components: a comprehensive and systematic survey of the empirically grounded academic literature and grey literature,⁴⁵ and semi-structured interviews with women's rights defenders, representatives of WROs and CSOs working on women's issues. Ten interviews were conducted in Baghdad, the capital of the Republic of Iraq, and a further ten in Erbil, capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Potential respondents were approached by Dr Makki, who is an Iraqi project lead, an anthropologist and women's rights activist herself, and is therefore familiar with WROs and CSOs. Some of the respondents were her existing contacts or those she reached through contacts. Respondents included representatives from leading organisations as well as organisations that are smaller and less known. Most of the respondents were founders or directors of organisations, or project managers. There were four men and sixteen women respondents.

Interviews were conducted in Arabic and Kurdish. They were audio recorded, transcribed and translated into English. All data and documents were encrypted and immediately anonymised after transcription. All recordings were deleted after transcription. Written consent forms in Kurdish and Arabic were provided to all interviewees and consent was obtained from all respondents. Respondents preferred to remain anonymous. As much as possible, the report draws on direct quotes from interviews to allow Iraqi women's rights defenders and activists' voices to be heard.

RESPONDENTS WERE ASKED THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- 1** Please tell me about your work.
- 2** Have you worked with – or received funding from – an international organisation/donor to work on a project relating to women's rights? What was/were the project(s) about and who was/were the funder(s)?
- 3** Can you please tell me about your experience of working with or receiving funding from an international organisation/donor: What was good about it? What could have been improved or what did you find difficult?
- 4** For you, what are the most important policies by international actors (states or international organisations) that affect women and girls in Iraq? Please feel free to give specific examples of programmes, states or organisations.

⁴⁵ Policy reports, research reports, issue papers, government reports, fact sheets, newspaper articles, conference proceedings, etc. from a variety of national and international resources.

- 5** How have Iraqi women and women's rights activists benefited from international engagement with women's and gender issues?
- 6** What are the limitations of (problems with) international engagement with women's rights and gender issues for Iraqi women and women's rights activists?
- 7** Do international actors support women during the advocacy stage of funded projects through promoting project findings and recommendations among Iraqi policymakers and legislators?
- 8** Do you think international actors understand the underlying reasons of issues women experience in Iraq?
- 9** Do you feel listened to, or consulted, around women's issues and how these should be resolved? (by international organisations or states)
- 10** Which foreign countries and organisations do you find positively impactful? Why?
- 11** How would you rate the UK's gender policy in Iraq compared to other states' in terms of positive impact on women and on the country in general? Why?
- 12** If you were to make a recommendation to improve international actors' and/or the UK's gender-related policies in Iraq, what would that be?

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