

Assessment on Employment and Working Conditions of Conflict-Affected Women Across Key Sectors in Iraq

December 2019

In 2020 and beyond, UN Women plans to work with the Ministry of Labour and Social Services (MoLSA) to promote decent work opportunities for conflict-affected women in Iraq. To inform this work, REACH Initiative (REACH) conducted a qualitative assessment on behalf of UN Women to provide an indicative, evidence-based understanding of the challenges faced in accessing employment opportunities and current working conditions for these women.

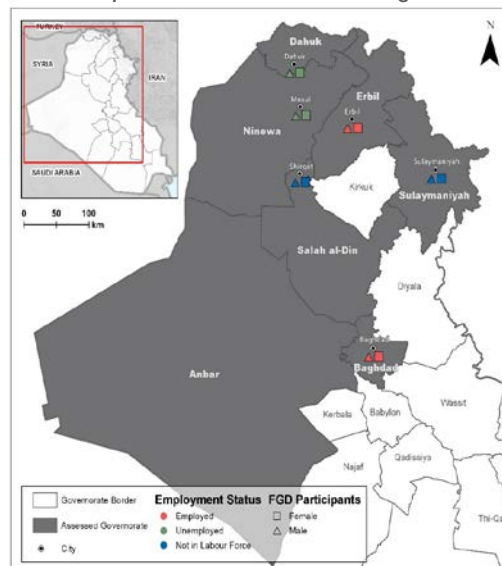
Overview and Methodology

Women's labour force participation in Iraq is low: as of 2018, only 12.3% of women of working age were either employed or looking for work.¹ Conflict-affected women, specifically, face numerous challenges in accessing employment, including limited economic opportunities, individual- and community-level barriers, legal restrictions, and exacerbated vulnerability, particularly for displaced women and female-headed households.² These factors, coupled with changes in government funding allocations have left limited job prospects for women. As Iraq enters a phase of recovery and seeks to address the short- and long-term consequences of recent conflict and population displacement, these issues will be increasingly salient.

This assessment specifically focused on Syrian refugee and Internally Displaced Person (IDP), both in and out of camps, returnee, and host community women. The key employment sectors targeted were agriculture, education and health. In addition to understanding the challenges faced in accessing employment and the current working conditions for women in these sectors, the assessment sought to highlight how women's employment experiences and challenges vary based on their displacement status, as well as what programmes and policies are being implemented to foster women's employment.

REACH carried out qualitative data collection between 22 January and 10 March 2019. A total of 655 women and 46 men participated in the assessment through a combination of individual interviews (IIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs). Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling using REACH and UN Women networks; findings from the interviews are therefore indicative only and cannot be generalised to the populations of interest. Data was analysed using quantitative and thematic content analysis. Validation workshops were held in Erbil and Baghdad in April and May of 2019 to solicit feedback on initial findings and collaboratively develop recommendations.

Map of Data Collection Coverage



Key Findings

Women's engagement in the labour force and enabling factors driving access to employment:

- There are several existing government policies and strategies aimed at promoting and protecting women's employment and economic empowerment. These laws provide paid maternity leave, prohibit discrimination against women during recruitment and in the workplace, and increase female participation in the public sphere.
- However, findings from this assessment indicate that the implementation and enforcement of these policies is inconsistent, particularly in the private sector.
- The primary factors that II respondents reported as enabling women who were seeking employment to get a job include work experience and expertise (281 out of 416 female respondents who were currently or previously employed), educational attainment (195 out of 416 respondents), and technical training (85 out of 416).
- Most respondents who were currently employed or who had ever sought employment reported that the need for additional income was the primary motivation for them to seek employment (475 out of 499 respondents).

¹ International Labour Organisation, "World Employment and Social Outlook," accessed October 2019, <https://www.ilo.org/wesodata/>

² UN Women, "Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016: Transforming Economics, Realizing Rights." 2015, http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW_progressreport.pdf; Jayasinghe, D, "Choices, changes, and safety in crisis: A model for women's economic empowerment," January 2019, International Rescue Committee, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/choiceschancesandsafetyincrisis2019final.pdf>

- Respondents reported that they used **connections of family and friends** to find a job (407 out of 499 respondents who were employed or ever sought employment), while both male and female FGD participants commented that connections were a critical enabling factor in securing employment.

Challenges and barriers faced by women in accessing employment:

- Of the 11 respondents who decided to search for employment and reported facing challenges (212 respondents), **increased competition for jobs** (127), **a lack of jobs relevant to their previous experience** (57), and **insufficient education** (51) were reported as the main barriers.
- Some refugee respondents felt that they were **denied jobs because of their status as refugees** (4 of 17 refugees in camps who reported challenges in finding employment, and 12 of 27 refugees out of camps who reported challenges).
- With respect to accessing education necessary for desired jobs, being able to **complete primary and middle school** (44 out of 89 respondents who had ever sought employment and reported challenges in accessing education and training necessary to get a job) was the most commonly reported challenges.
- Many 11 respondents and female FGD participants identified challenges for women engaging in the labour force, including the **demands of domestic responsibilities and being the perceived primary caregivers for children**.
- Over half of 11 respondents reported they believed their chances of being hired were the same as men. However, FGD participants commented that **hiring discrimination based on gender, age, and physical appearance** were common, particularly in the private sector.

Conditions and risks faced by women accessing employment in key employment sectors:

- A total of 167 out of 416 respondents who were currently or had previously been employed reported not being aware of any labour laws or policies. In parallel **only four respondents reported that they were aware of laws related to discrimination or harassment in the workplace**.
- **Slightly more than half of currently employed respondents reported having an employment agreement** (178 out of 330). Of those with an agreement, **most had a written contract** (169 out of 178).
- Respondents commonly reported **walking as their form of transportation to work** (124 out of 330 currently employed respondents), though IDPs living out of camps and non-displaced respondents most often reported **carpooling** (29 out of 79 and 32 out of 40 respondents, respectively).
- **A small proportion of female respondents reported that they or someone they knew had experienced issues related to both verbal and sexual harassment at work** (17 out of 614 respondents). However, due to the sensitivity of this question, there is likely underreporting on this topic; FGD participants indicated that this was a much wider issue.
- Female respondents employed in all three key sectors reported facing challenges as a result of conflict and the economic crisis. **11 respondents employed in agriculture reported the most sector-specific challenges**.

Recommendations

Based on a presentation of the findings of this assessment, representatives from the government, NGOs and private sector employers who participated in the two validation workshops developed a series of policy and programmatic recommendations, as reported below.



Government and Policymakers: Governments should ensure that labour laws reflect gender equality and enforce compulsory education and laws against child labour to enable more girls to access education and training. It was also recommended that the government should continue to prioritise investment in the reconstruction of key sectors, and the development of public-private partnerships to increase employment for women in these sectors.

Finally, it was agreed that raising awareness among women from all population groups on their labour rights is a key priority.



Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs): NGOs should develop advocacy strategies to promote enforcement of labour laws and compulsory education, and host workshops on ensuring gender balance in the workplace and adhering to labour laws. NGOs could offer trainings for women, small business grants, or short-term livelihoods programming prioritizing the rehabilitation of infrastructure for key sectors in conflict-affected areas.

Such programmes should include opportunities to sensitise men to women working to mitigate intra-household tensions.



Private Sector Employers: Private sector employers should focus on the development of policies that allow for part-time opportunities or flexible working hours for women, to mitigate the challenges they face in balancing work and domestic responsibilities. Participants also recommended that private sector employers implement hiring practices that prioritise opportunities for women and provide affordable and quality childcare and safe transportation.

It was also recommended that private sector companies be required to host educational sessions on employee labour rights.