

Executive Summary

This report presents the main findings, conclusions and recommendations of the country portfolio evaluation (CPE) of the UN Women Iraq Country Office. A CPE is a systematic assessment of the normative, coordination and operational aspects of UN Women's contribution to development results related to gender equality and the empowerment of women at the country level.

Iraq country context



Iraq is an upper middle-income country, highly dependent on fossil fuel revenue, with the fifth largest oil reserves in the world.¹ In 2024, the estimated population of Iraq was approximately 46 million with 56.85 per cent under 25 years of age.² Iraq's Gross National Income per capita for 2022 has decreased by 24 per cent since 1990.³



Iraq ranked 143 out of 162 countries in the 2022 Global Gender Inequality Index⁴ and 154 out of 156 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2021.⁵ The 2005 Iraqi Constitution enshrines equality before the law and prohibits discrimination based on sex (Article 14).⁶ Iraq ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1986, with reservations to Articles 2, 16, and 29, and has yet to ratify the Optional Protocol on violence against women.⁷ The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has enacted Law Against Domestic Violence (No. 8) in 2011.⁸ The National Strategy on Violence Against Women and Girls (2018–2030) and National Development Plan (2018–2022) ensures the mainstreaming of women's empowerment strategies into national policies. Vision 2030, adopted in 2019, aims to ensure overall implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly target 5.1 on ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls.⁹



In 2014, Iraq became the first country in the MENA region to develop a National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325.¹⁰ The second National Action Plan was launched in December 2020 by the Council of Ministers in partnership with UN Women¹¹. In the October 2021 parliamentary elections, Iraqi women won 95 of the 329 seats—an increase in representation from 25 per cent in 2018 to 29 per cent¹². Notably, 57 of these women were elected outside the 25 per cent constitutional quota.¹³ The cabinet formed in October 2022 included three women among 23 ministers: the Ministers of Finance, Migration and Displacement, and Communications.¹⁴

¹ US Energy Information Administration, 2024, last accessed 14 April 2024

² 49.48 per cent of the population is female and 50.52 per cent is male. Worldometer. 2024. "Asian Countries by Population" Accessed 16 March 2024.

³ UNDP.2022. "Human Development Summary Iraq." Accessed 16 March 2024

⁴ Up three places since 2019.

⁵ World Economic Forum. 2021. "Global Gender Gap Report", pp.10

⁶ Article 14 under the Civil and Political Rights Chapter, states that "Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, colour, religion, sect, belief or opinion or economic or social status".

⁷ Iraq maintains reservations to Article 2(f) and (g), which call on states to modify or abolish existing laws and penal codes that discriminate against women; Article 9, which requires equal rights regarding changes and transfers of nationality; Article 16, which concerns the elimination of discrimination in marriage and family relations; and Article 29, paragraph 1, regarding the principle of international arbitration on the interpretation or application of the convention.

⁸ The High Council of Women's Affairs was set up to develop government policies and strategies on women's issues in political, economic, social and cultural spheres. The law mandates the provision of shelter for violence survivors. (UN Women & Oxfam, Gender Profile – Iraq: A situation analysis on gender equality and women's empowerment in Iraq. 13 December 2018)

⁹ UN ESCWA. 2019. "Concluding Observations on the seventh periodic report of Iraq." Accessed 16th March 2024

¹⁰ The second National Action Plan (2020-2024) was launched in December 2020.

¹¹ National Action Plan II 2020-2024, is structured across three strategic pillars - participation, protection and prevention - and integrates key lessons learned from the first National Action Plan, building on the challenges and opportunities identified and outlining the mechanisms necessary for implementation.

¹² UNAMI. 2022, "Gender Analysis of Iraq's October National Elections", Accessed 16th March 2024, pp 4

¹³ ibid. pp.17

¹⁴ S/2024/373 Security Council - UN Digital Library

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In the 2023 Provincial Council elections, women exceeded the quota by securing 76 of 285 seats.¹⁵ Since 2009, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has legislated gender quotas that guarantee 30 per cent of the seats in parliament for women¹⁶; as of 2018, women's representation in the regional parliament reached 27 per cent.¹⁷



Despite these advances, women's participation in the labour market is only 12 per cent. Women earn 12 per cent of what men earn, and female-headed households – particularly among the internally displaced – are especially vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity.¹⁸

UN in Iraq

The United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in Iraq comprises 24 UN agencies, funds and specialized programmes, including 19 resident and five non-resident agencies. The UNCT delivers under the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2020–2024. The United Nations in Iraq comprises two field missions, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD). UNITAD's mandate ended in September 2024 and UNAMI's transition and liquidation is expected to be completed by 31 December 2025.

UN Women in Iraq

UN Women has been present in Iraq since 2010. The Country Office has an established operational presence in Iraq at federal and regional levels with offices in Baghdad and Erbil. Between 2019 and 2023, the UN Women Iraq office clustered with the Yemen office to form a temporary Multi-Country Office – the Iraq–Yemen Cluster Office. In late 2023, the office was declustered following a recommendation from an Internal Audit Service operational risk assessment. Delinking of the two offices was finalized in December 2023.

The UN Women Iraq current Strategic Note (2022–2024) was conceptualized and developed to align and contribute to the Iraq UNSDCF outcome areas. It addresses several priorities for women's empowerment in the following outcome areas: Women, Peace and Security, Humanitarian Action and Disaster Risk Reduction; Women's Economic Empowerment, with links to impact on violence against women; and Women's Political Participation.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, by law, at least 30 per cent of seats are allocated to women and the minimum age for parliamentary candidates was lowered from 30 to 25 years in February 2009.

¹⁷ Gender Quotas in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Obstacles, Resistances and Possibilities, October 2023

¹⁸ Iraq Labour Force Survey, ILO, 2021

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Evaluation purpose, objectives, scope and use

The CPE was conducted by the UN Women Independent Evaluation Service (IES) in close collaboration with the UN Women Iraq Country Office as a formative (forward-looking) evaluation to support the Country Office and national stakeholders' strategic learning and decision-making for the next Strategic Note. The evaluation also had a secondary summative (retrospective) perspective to support enhanced accountability for development effectiveness and learning from experience. The CPE was conducted alongside an internal audit to reduce the burden on stakeholders and Country Office personnel and to leverage learning opportunities.

The following evaluation objectives were developed in consultation with the Country Office at the outset of the evaluation process:



- Analyse how women's empowerment principles are integrated in the design and implementation of UN Women's work in Iraq and contribute to the sustainability of efforts.



- Assess effectiveness and organizational efficiency in progressing towards achieving empowerment of women results.



- Assess the relevance and coherence of the UN Women programme vis-a-vis national commitments and the UN system; the added value of UN Women; and identify contributions to Iraq's United Nations Development Assistance Framework (2015–2019) and UNSDCF (2020–2024) women's empowerment outcomes.



- Provide lessons learned and actionable recommendations to support UN Women's strategic positioning.

The scope of this CPE included all activities undertaken by the Country Office under its previous and current Strategic Note from 2019 to 2024, including operational work, support to normative policy and UN system coordination. Programme work was considered in relation to the thematic areas established by UN Women's Strategic Plan 2022–25. The evaluation was conducted between March and June 2024. Most of the interviews were conducted either in-person or virtually with stakeholders in Baghdad, the capital, where normative, coordination and programmatic activities were implemented; in refugee camps in the Kirkuk governorate; and in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in Erbil and refugee camps in the Dohuk governorate.

The primary intended users of this evaluation are UN Women management and Country Office personnel, the UN Women Executive Board, UN Women Regional Office for the Arab States, UN Women headquarters and other Regional and Country Offices outside the Arab States region; target groups, their households and community members; programme and project partners; national and local governments in Iraq; civil society representatives; the donor community and other development partners; and the UNCT.

Intended uses of the evaluation include learning and improved decision-making to support development of the next Strategic Note; accountability for the development effectiveness of UN Women's contribution to gender equality and women's empowerment; and capacity development and mobilization of national stakeholders to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women.

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Evaluation methodology and data collection

The CPE followed gender-responsive evaluation principles and had a utilization-focused lens. It used a theory-based design to assess the performance of the Strategic Note based on its stated assumptions about how change happens. The evaluation used contribution analysis to assess the contribution made by the Country Office towards its Strategic Note thematic areas of work. The evaluation used the Gender at Work Analytical Framework and the Gender Results Effectiveness Scale to assess the extent to which the Country Office had been gender transformative.

DATA COLLECTION OVERVIEW



100 key informant interviews

with a diverse range of stakeholders from donors, UN-INGO partners, implementing partners and civil society



80+ documents reviewed

policy documents, programme documents, knowledge products, partner reports and monitoring data



191 people consulted

37 men
154 women



2 surveys

with Country Office Personnel and Implementing Partners



9 Focus Groups

held during field visits to Baghdad, Erbil, Dohuk and Kirkuk governorates reaching 82 beneficiaries.

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Conclusions

Conclusion 1: The Country Office's 2022–2024 Strategic Note was relevant and responsive to national, international and UN priorities for gender equality and the empowerment of women. Given the Country Office's resource constraints, the placement of development pillars in humanitarian programmes was innovative. However, the Country Office's relevance as a strategic player to lead the women's empowerment agenda faced significant challenges in 2023, particularly due to issues related to UN Women's country leadership transition. At the programmatic level, the Country Office needs to further strengthen mechanisms to ensure continued meaningful consultation with key stakeholders so that programmatic approaches remain relevant to the local context. As the government takes more ownership of humanitarian operations and coordination, and transitions to the development and resilience space, all UN entities (including UN Women) have to be prepared to support the government with relevant technical and advisory services for sustainable development. In this context, there was increasing demand for gender data and statistics and social norms change expertise.

Conclusion 2: The Country Office had leveraged its coordination mandate, but there remains untapped potential to extend gender mainstreaming and further capitalize on the office's UN system coordination mandate. The Country Office was recognized as an important player in gender equality; however, it needs to further strengthen its thematic technical capacities to make the most of strategic partnerships. There is an opportunity for the Country Office to leverage existing partnerships and goodwill to strengthen its government partnerships and those with donors and civil society organization (CSO) stakeholders to amplify a common and collective advocacy voice on women's rights and gender equality in Iraq. The Country Office's coordination work on gender equality should be supported by a dedicated coordination strategy and resources.

Conclusion 3: The Country Office needed to focus on further improving its overall efficiency, value for money and oversight

arrangements. Its staffing structure needs to be “fit for purpose” to ensure it meets the strategic requirements of the portfolio, with dedicated technical expertise and a well developed second line of leadership. Some of its modalities, such as third-party contracting for some key core functions like communications, had affected value for money. Monitoring, evaluation, knowledge management and communication functions need strengthening to capture programme impact and learning. At the time of the evaluation, there were some indications that the working environment was not functioning optimally due in part to some leadership transition issues. Given the changing political context and sensitivity, regional management oversight needed to be more regular, alongside better communication with UNCT leadership. More systematic communication was required between the Country Office, Regional Office and headquarters to ensure early identification and mitigation of risks related to gender backlash and leadership transition. The Country Representative also required timely support and guidance to achieve greater impact on gender equality and women's empowerment issues in the country.

Conclusion 4: The Country Office has made progress in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment through supporting women's political representation, leadership and peacebuilding. It has contributed to creating space for women to take leadership roles in informal spaces and continued to prioritize efforts to address the needs of the most vulnerable Iraqis, including internally displaced persons and refugees, to build their resilience and support national efforts for reintegration. However, the Country Office needs to strengthen its preparedness and capacity to identify and address gender backlash. Efforts to transform gender social norms need strengthening and a more intentional approach to engagement of women with disabilities is needed to ensure adherence to the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy.¹⁹ Stakeholders emphasized the need to strengthen UN Women's presence in more traditional and conservative rural governorates, particularly through joint programming with other UN entities. Due to the nature of funding in crisis countries, the Country Office did not include a sustainability perspective in its projects, which were relatively short-term without explicit exit strategies.

¹⁹ See: UN Disability Inclusion Strategy - <https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/>

Recommendations

• Recommendation 1:

The Country Office should consider its longer-term strategy towards transition to a development and resilience focus in its next Strategic Note ensuring that, in addition to the Women, Peace and Security portfolio, the development pillars of the portfolio (such as Gender Data and Statistics, Women's Economic Empowerment, Women's Political Participation, Ending Violence Against Women and Gender Social Norms Change) have a clear focus and receive adequate resourcing.

• Recommendation 2:

The Country Office should strengthen its coordination and convening role with respect to its relationships with the UNCT, donors, civil society and government. It should reposition itself as a technical lead in the area of gender equality and women's empowerment.

• Recommendation 3:

The Country Office should strengthen the monitoring, learning and evaluation function to better support strategic learning, decision-making and communications of results.

• Recommendation 4:

The Country Office should strengthen its approaches to leave no one behind, including implementation of the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy. It should play a stronger role in gender social norms change efforts in the country.

• Recommendation 5:

The Country Office should strengthen its programmes through better financial and institutional sustainability, including explicit project exit strategies.



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Advisory Note



· The Country Office to implement internal audit recommendation 7²⁰ on a “fit for purpose” staffing structure, aligned with the focus and priorities of its forthcoming Strategic Note and in the context of delinking from the Yemen Country Office.

· UN Women's regional and corporate management to be more proactive in identifying and assisting the Country Office in managing risks and disruptions, such as those related to gender backlash, and support the stronger positioning of Country Offices in times of transition and changing contexts.

· The Regional Office should maintain a stronger feedback loop with the UN Resident Coordinator.

· Rotation of Country Representatives should be more strictly implemented.

· The Country Office has an opportunity to utilize the ongoing pivot to the countries and regions initiative to strengthen its geographical reach to more traditional and conservative rural governorates.

²⁰ Internal Audit Report UN Women Country Office in Iraq, 2025