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# COUNTRY PORTFOLIO EVALUATION

## IRAQ

SYNTHESIS REPORT  
2019 - 2024

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services of UN Women (IEAIS) led this evaluation under the supervision of Chaitali Chattopadhyay (Regional Evaluation Specialist for the Arab States region) together with International Evaluation Expert, Rosie Aubrey and National Evaluation Expert, Shams Kamal. The evaluation was conducted between March and June 2024. The evaluation team is grateful to the stakeholders, including government counterparts, development partners, civil society representatives and individual women consulted and to personnel from the

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# ACRONYMS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
CPE	Country Portfolio Evaluation
CSO	Civil Society Organization
ESCWA	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia
EVAW	Ending Violence Against Women
ILO	International Labour Organization
LEAP	Leadership, Empowerment, Access and Protection
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNICEF	United Nations Fund for Children
UNITAD	United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
UN-SWAP	UN System-Wide Action Plan for Gender Equality
WFP	World Food Programme
WPHF	Women, Peace and Humanitarian Fund

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# 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.<sup>1</sup> In 2024, the estimated population of Iraq was approximately 46 million with 56.85 per cent under 25 years of age.<sup>2</sup> Iraq's Gross National Income per capita for 2022 has decreased by 24 per cent since 1990.<sup>3</sup>



Iraq ranked 143 out of 162 countries in the 2022 Global Gender Inequality Index<sup>4</sup> and 154 out of 156 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2021.<sup>5</sup> The 2005 Iraqi Constitution enshrines equality before the law and prohibits discrimination based on sex (Article 14).<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has enacted Law Against Domestic Violence (No. 8) in 2011.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>



In 2014, Iraq became the first country in the MENA region to develop a National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325.<sup>10</sup> The second National Action Plan was launched in December 2020 by the Council of Ministers in partnership with UN Women<sup>11</sup>. 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 cent<sup>12</sup>. Notably, 57 of these women were elected outside the 25 per cent constitutional quota.<sup>13</sup> The cabinet formed in October 2022 included three women among 23 ministers: the Ministers of Finance, Migration and Displacement, and Communications.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>1</sup> US Energy Information Administration, 2024, last accessed 14 April 2024

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> UNDP.2022. "Human Development Summary Iraq." Accessed 16 March 2024

<sup>4</sup> Up three places since 2019.

<sup>5</sup> World Economic Forum. 2021. "Global Gender Gap Report", pp.10

<sup>6</sup> 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".

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> 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)

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

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

<sup>11</sup> 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.

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

<sup>13</sup> ibid. pp.17

<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> Since 2009, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has legislated gender quotas that guarantee 30 per cent of the seats in parliament for women<sup>16</sup>; as of 2018, women's representation in the regional parliament reached 27 per cent.<sup>17</sup>



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.<sup>18</sup>

## 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.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> 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.

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

<sup>18</sup> Iraq Labour Force Survey, ILO, 2021

# Executive Summary

## 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.

# Executive Summary

## 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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 7<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> Internal Audit Report UN Women Country Office in Iraq, 2025



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# 1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

## 1.1 Iraq country context

Iraq is located in the Middle East and North Africa region. It is an upper middle-income country, highly dependent on fossil fuel revenue, with the fifth largest oil reserves in the world.<sup>21</sup> In 2024, the estimated population of Iraq was approximately 46 million.<sup>22</sup> The country has a high youth population with 56.85 per cent under 25 years of age.<sup>23</sup> Iraq's Gross National Income per capita for 2022 has decreased by 24 per cent since 1990.<sup>24</sup>

Iraq is a federal democratic parliamentary republic consisting of 18 recognized governorates. The four northern governorates (Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Halabja and Duhok) make up the semi-autonomous administrative entity known as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

After four decades of conflict since the US invasion of Iraq and subsequent civil war against ISIL, Iraq is experiencing relative stability and economic growth driven by an increase in oil and gas revenue.<sup>25</sup> However, the country continues to face protracted humanitarian and development needs in a complex political environment and volatile security situation. The Tishreen Movement protests that emerged in 2019<sup>26</sup> calling for an end to corruption and political reform and which led to the collapse of the government in 2021, has further added to insecurity and political instability. A new Government, led by Prime Minister Mohammed S. Al-Sudani, was formed in October 2022. The most recent attacks by Iraqi militias on US positions inside the country amid the Israel– Hamas war in Gaza, risk undermining security gains.<sup>27</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened pre-existing gender inequalities and exposed vulnerabilities in social, cultural, political and economic systems. This amplified the impacts of the pandemic, with a greater care burden placed on women and a greater number of women losing their jobs. Across every sphere, women and girls suffered disproportionately from the impact of COVID-19, with increased incidence of gender-based violence; greater inequalities and vulnerabilities relating to income generation; and restrictions imposed on women's participation and capacities in peacebuilding and decision-making.<sup>28</sup>

## 1.2 Gender equality in Iraq

Iraq ranked 143 of 162 countries in the 2022 Global Gender Inequality Index, up three places since 2019<sup>29</sup> and 154 (of 156 countries) in the Global Gender Gap Report 2021.<sup>30</sup> The 2005 Iraq Constitution enshrines Iraqis' equality before the law and prohibits discrimination based on sex, as set out in Article 14.<sup>31</sup> Iraq's legal framework for women's political representation and participation is laid out in its Constitution in Articles 49.<sup>32</sup> However, as the Iraq UN Common Country Analysis 2021 indicates, by stipulating that "no law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam", the Constitution opens the door for more conservative interpretations that could limit women's rights.<sup>33</sup>

Iraq ratified CEDAW in 1986 with reservations to articles 2, 16 and 29,<sup>34</sup> and the government is yet to ratify the Optional Protocol on violence against women. In 2011, the Law on Protection Against Domestic Violence was drafted by a committee of experts in partnership with CSOs in line with article 1 and 2 of CEDAW. 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; and 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.<sup>35</sup> Iraq was the first country in the MENA region to develop a National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2014. National Action Plan II<sup>36</sup> was launched in December 2020 by the Council of Ministers in partnership with UN Women. The Yazidi Women Survivors Bill, passed in 2021, provides some protection and addresses the crimes committed against Yazidi women by ISIL.<sup>37</sup>

Iraq presented its second Voluntary National Review in 2021<sup>38</sup> which highlighted the need for investment in gender-responsive policies and programmes, including gender-responsive social protection policies and programmes. It also underscored the urgency of addressing new forms of inequality and investing in the capacities of the state and society to ensure gender inequality is systematically addressed in crisis and post-crisis contexts.

<sup>21</sup> US Energy information Administration, 2024, last accessed 14 April 2024.

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> Statista. 2024. "Iraq: Age structure in 2003. Accessed 16 March 2024.

<sup>24</sup> UNDP.2022. "Human Development Summary Iraq." Accessed 16 March 2024.

<sup>25</sup> UNCHR. 2024. "Situation Overview Iraq". Accessed 16 March 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Arab Center Washington DC. 2021. "Iraq's Tishreen Protest Movement: The Exceptional Domestic Pressure Tool", Accessed 16 March 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Economist intelligence. 2024. Accessed 16 March 2024.

<sup>28</sup> UN Women, UNODC. 2017. Gender Sensitive Police Response in Addressing Violence Against Women in the Arab States

<sup>29</sup> UNDP.2022. "Human Development Summary Iraq." Accessed 16 March 2024.

<sup>30</sup> World Economic Forum. 2021. "Global Gender Gap Report", pp.10

<sup>31</sup> 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".

<sup>32</sup> Article 49 part four on the Council of Representatives states that "The elections law aims to achieve a percentage of women representation not less than one-quarter of the Council of Representatives members".

<sup>33</sup> Iraq Common Country analysis 2021. Accessed 22 October 2024.

<sup>34</sup> 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.

<sup>35</sup> UN ESCWA. 2019. "Concluding Observations on the seventh periodic report of Iraq." Accessed 16th March 2024.

<sup>36</sup> 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.

<sup>37</sup> As outlined in Iraq UNSDCF 2020-25

<sup>38</sup> The Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Planning, National Committee for Sustainable Development. 2021. The Second National Voluntary Review Report on the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals



Iraq has experienced a series of armed conflicts, violence and several displacements. This includes displacement of 270,000 Syrian refugees who fled the war in Syria and internal displacement of over 6 million Iraqis who fled areas controlled by ISIL.<sup>39</sup> In late 2023, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported 1.14 million internally displaced people, 5 million returnees in Iraq and 25 camps hosting 175,000 people in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.<sup>40</sup> Internally displaced persons continue to face significant barriers to return or to effective local integration<sup>41</sup> and have been subject to sexual exploitation by camp authorities or local security, in some cases in exchange for humanitarian protection and assistance.<sup>42</sup> In addition, women perceived to be affiliated to ISIL are disproportionately affected by economic and social upheavals, isolation and exploitation.<sup>43</sup> The parliamentary elections, held in October 2021, saw Iraqi women gain 95 of 329 seats, demonstrating a positive increase in their representation from 25 per cent in 2018 to 29 per cent;<sup>44</sup> and 57 women won outside the 25 per cent minimum constitutional quota.<sup>45</sup> In the 2023 Provincial Council elections, women exceeded the quota by securing 76 of 285 seats.<sup>46</sup> Since 2009, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has legislated gender quotas that guarantee 30 per cent of the seats in parliament for women<sup>47</sup> and women's representation in parliament reached 27 per cent in 2018.<sup>48</sup> The Iraqi cabinet constituted in October 2022 included three women out of a total of 23 ministers namely the Ministers of Finance, Migration and Displacement, and Communications.<sup>49</sup> Female candidates faced challenges during campaigns, including reported security challenges and issues of defamation, cultural barriers and societal norms which often hinder their active participation and leadership in politics.<sup>50</sup>

Poverty remains a constraint to growth and a serious challenge for many Iraqis, especially women. Iraqis suffering from resource deprivation are often subject to multidimensional poverty due to societal insecurities, gendered norms and traditions, and a lack of sufficient public investment in social services, education and work opportunities.<sup>51</sup> Only 12 per cent of women actively participate in the labour market<sup>52</sup> and women earn 12 per cent of what men earn. Female-headed households – particularly among the internally displaced – are especially vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity. While most women active in the workforce are concentrated in the public sector, particularly in health and education, their presence in the private sector is minimal. Despite legal frameworks such as the 2015 Labour Law, which prohibits discrimination based on sex and ensures equal pay, inconsistent enforcement hinders women's ability to start businesses or access financial resources.

Women and girls face additional challenges rooted in entrenched discriminatory gender-related practices and societal norms. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq Parliament enacted Act No. 8 in 2011<sup>53</sup> to combat domestic violence, but rising cases and institutional gaps continue to challenge protection efforts for women and girls. Access to reliable data on violence against women is limited and gender-based violence survivors face challenges in accessing quality basic essential services, including social, economic and legal assistance. Women also experience challenges to affordable healthcare services, including sexual and reproductive health, with a lack of protection and referral mechanisms.

The gender equality portfolio in Iraq is shared among a number of government institutions, including the Council of Ministers National Department of Iraqi Women (formerly Women's Empowerment Department); the Prime Minister's Office; the Parliamentary Committee on Women, Children and Family; and, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the High Council for Women and Development is responsible for protecting women's rights.<sup>54</sup> In 2023, Iraq witnessed the emergence of an anti-gender campaign and government directive banning the use of the term "gender". UN Women's programmes have faced significant challenges in terms of backlash against the UN and threats to women's rights defenders and CSOs. This has mirrored similar regional pushbacks against gender equality gains and shrinking civic space.

### 1.3 UN in Iraq

The United Nations in Iraq comprises two field missions, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), a special political mission established in 2003 by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1500, at the request of the Government of the Republic of Iraq; and the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD). UNITAD's mandate came to an end in September 2024. Following UN Security Council resolution 2732 (2024)<sup>55</sup> to complete the UNAMI transition and liquidation by 31 December 2025, it is expected that UNAMI will begin to scale back its political mission and begin to transfer functions to the Government of Iraq and relevant United Nations Country Team (UNCT) members.

The 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

<sup>39</sup> UNCHR. 2024. "Situation Overview Iraq". Accessed 16 March 2024.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> UNDP. 2022. "Affiliated with ISIS: Challenges for the return and reintegration of women and children", Accessed 16th March 2024, pp. 23

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. pp. 1

<sup>44</sup> UNAMI. 2022, "Gender Analysis of Iraq's October National Elections", Accessed 16th March 2024, pp. 4

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. pp. 17

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> 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.

<sup>48</sup> Gender Quotas in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Obstacles, Resistances and Possibilities, October 2023

<sup>49</sup> S/2024/373 Security Council - UN Digital Library

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. pp. 17

<sup>51</sup> Sida, 2020. "Multidimensional Poverty Analysis, Iraq" Accessed 16 March 2024

<sup>52</sup> Iraq Labour Force Survey, ILO, 2021

<sup>53</sup> 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)

<sup>54</sup> The Ministry of Interior, the High Council of Women's Affairs was established in 2010

<sup>55</sup> <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15714.doc.htm>

Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) 2020–2024. Human rights, women's empowerment and disability have been mainstreamed across the UNSDCF, which is framed around five strategic priorities mirroring the key findings from the Common Country Analysis:<sup>56</sup> social cohesion, the economy, governance, the environment and sustainable solutions for internally displaced populations.

## 1.4 UN Women in Iraq

The UN Women Iraq Country Office was established in 2012. The Country Office supports the Federal Government, the Kurdistan Regional Government and other partners to implement global norms and standards on gender equality and women's empowerment; enhance women's political participation and leadership; support women's economic empowerment; eliminate all forms of violence against women; and forward the Women, Peace and Security agenda to ensure women's full and equal representation and participation in peace processes and security efforts.

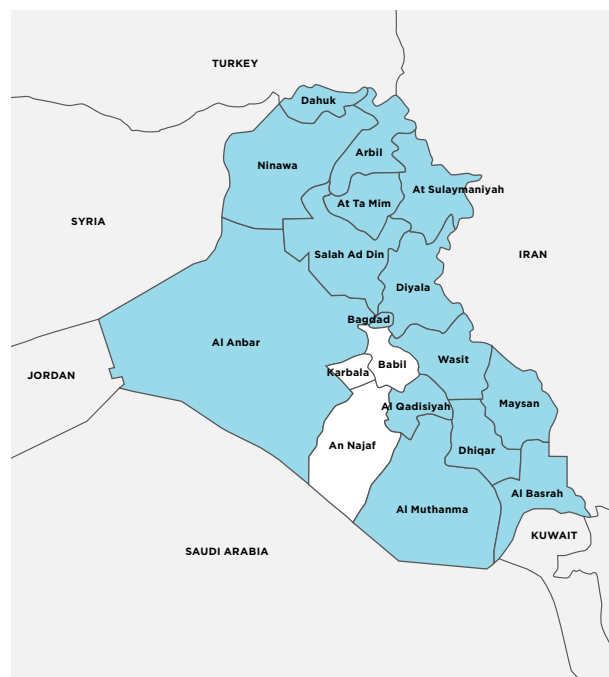
The Country Office's engagement is built on partnerships with the women's affairs offices in the national and regional government, particularly with the National Directorate for Iraqi Women, the Prime Minister's Office and the Kurdistan Regional Government High Council for Women and Development, Directorate General to Combat Violence Against Women, and Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The Country Office has collaborative relationships with other public stakeholders, including CSOs, the women's movement, academia, private sector, UNCT and international development players. UN Women is Chair of the UN Gender Task Force and provides technical support to the UNCT in mainstreaming gender to develop comprehensive joint programmes to address the needs of Iraqi women and girls. Through the Gender Task Force, UN Women is also responsible for providing technical inputs to develop and implement a gender-responsive UNSDCF.

The Country Office has an established operational presence in Iraq at federal and regional levels with offices in Baghdad and Erbil. Figure 1 shows the geographical intervention sites, highlighted in blue.

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. At the time, the decision to cluster the offices was based on the need to address immediate capacity and budget issues, not on a formal needs assessment.<sup>57</sup> However, in late 2023, the cluster structure was reversed following a recommendation arising from the Internal Audit Service's

operational risk assessment. Delinking of the two offices was finalized in December 2023.<sup>58</sup> The former Country Representative left in September 2023 and the Iraq office entered a transitional leadership arrangement led by the Regional Office, with an interim Country Representative appointed in December 2023.

Figure 1: Intervention sites, UN Women Iraq<sup>59</sup>



Source: UN Women Iraq Country Office, March 2024

The UN Women Strategic Notes 2016–2020 and 2022–2024 address several priorities for women's empowerment in Iraq over 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. The current Strategic Note (2022–2024) was conceptualized and developed to align and contribute towards the Iraq UNSDCF outcome areas (see Annex 3).

The Strategic Notes identify leave no one behind as a key operating principle.<sup>60</sup> The status of displaced minority communities presents a particular vulnerability as they are consistently targeted by ISIL and other armed extremist groups (either as targets of violence or for forced recruitments). The most vulnerable women, such as those belonging to religious minorities (Christians, Mandaeans and Yazidis), are particularly at risk of violence and discrimination.

<sup>56</sup> United Nations Iraq, 2022. "Iraq Common Country Analysis", Accessed 16 March 2024

<sup>57</sup> Internal Audit Service (2022) Operational risk assessment of UN Women Iraq and Yemen Cluster Office 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Note that training was delivered to government representatives across Babil, Karbala and Najaf, but no project interventions were delivered across these governorates.

<sup>60</sup> The Strategic Notes identify vulnerable individuals and groups such as women with disabilities, female heads of household, gender-based violence survivors, survivors of forced marriage and sexual violence during conflict, widowed and divorced women, ethnic and religious minority groups, foreign migrants, victims of trafficking, refugees and stateless persons.

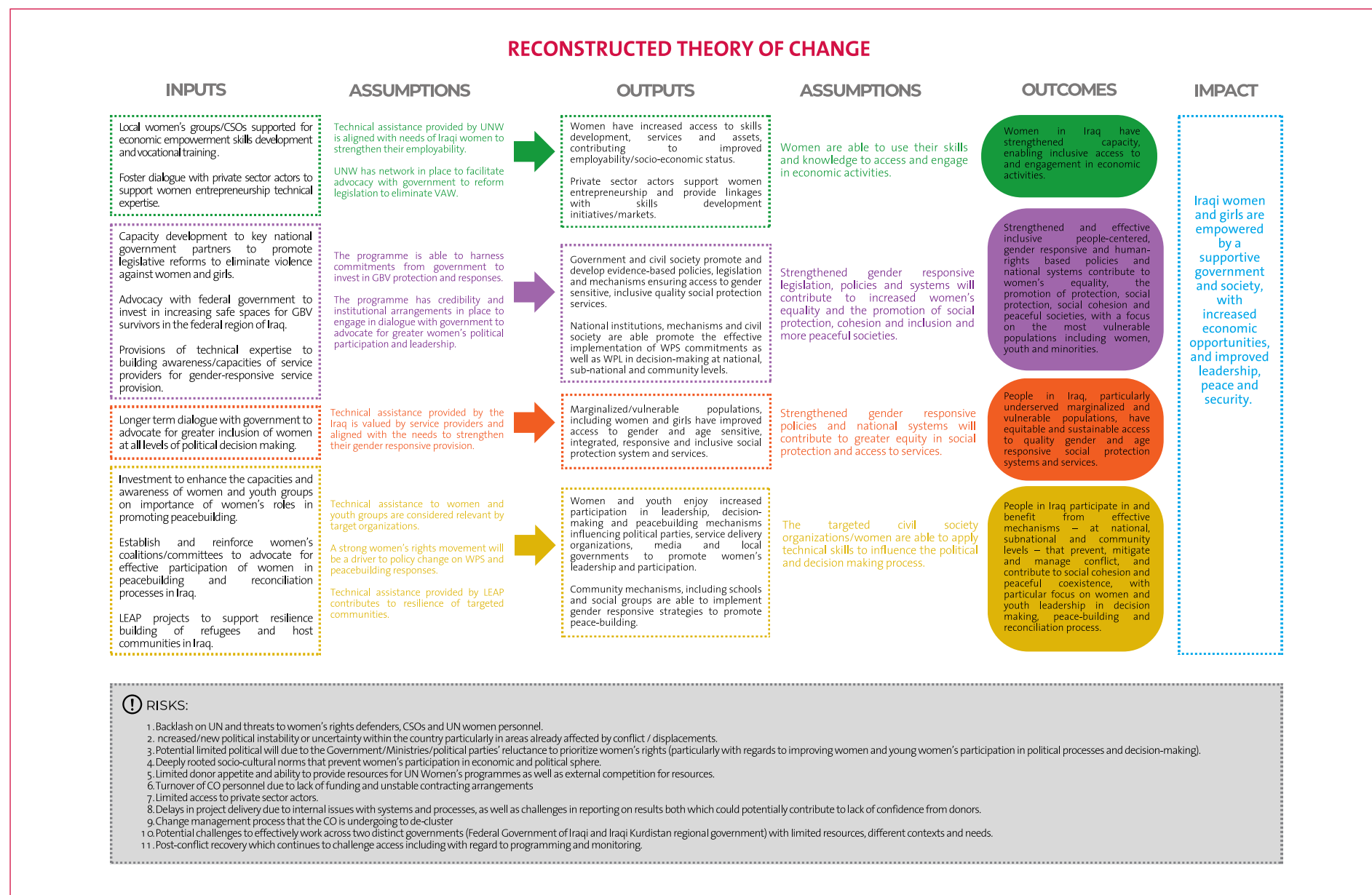
## 1.5 Theory of change

The Country Office's Strategic Note 2022–24 contains a theory of change, as follows:

*If (1) national legislation, policies, plans and budgets are gender-responsive and promote peacebuilding, social cohesion, protection and inclusion;  
And if (2) women and girls have equitable and sustainable access to income, security and decent work;  
And if (3) national institutions have strengthened capacity to deliver gender and age-responsive services;  
Then (4) women and girls in Iraq will be able to claim their human rights;  
Because (5) women and girls will be empowered by a supportive government and society, increased economic opportunities and improved leadership, peace and security.*

While the Country Office's current Strategic Note contained a theory of change, during the inception phase of the evaluation, it was evident it did not capture the Country Office's full performance framework or approach. As a result of these gaps, the evaluation team reconstructed the theory of change to inform the evaluation (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Reconstructed theory of change (prepared by the evaluation team)



## 1.6 Budget and human resources

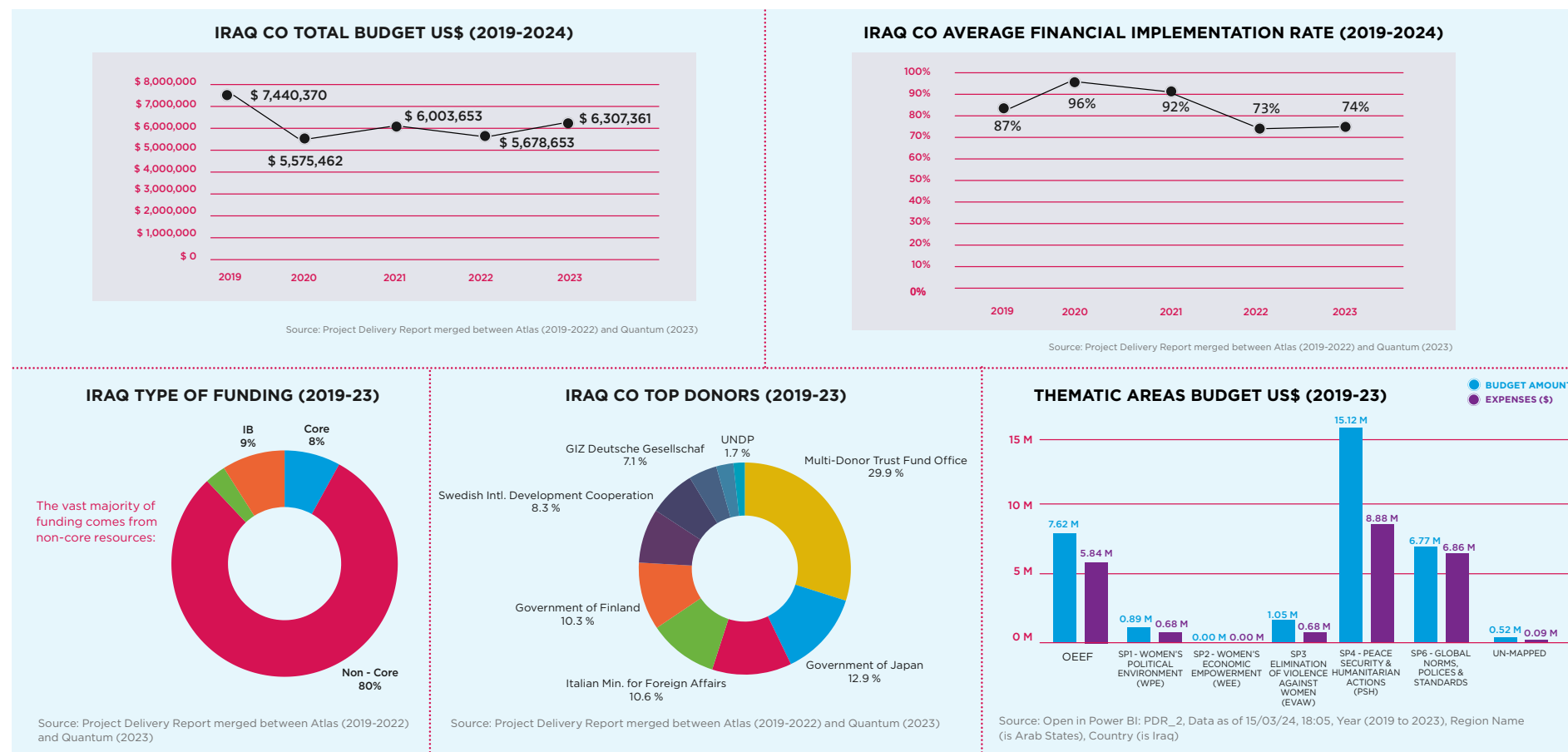
The Country Office has offices in Baghdad and Erbil. As of April 2024, it employed a total of 26 personnel, including roles held by consultants and UN volunteers (see Annex 2). Compared to the 15 personnel employed in 2019, this reflects nearly 73 per cent growth. The Country Office's budget for the 2019–2023 period was US\$ 32,300,000. Non-core funding is the main source of Country Office funding, amounting to 80 per cent of total funding during 2019–2023. This represents an increase in non-core funding of 8 per cent, compared to 72 per cent for 2016–2018.

Women, Peace, Security and Humanitarian Action was the Country Office's highest funded thematic area of work, with the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund the highest non-core funding source.

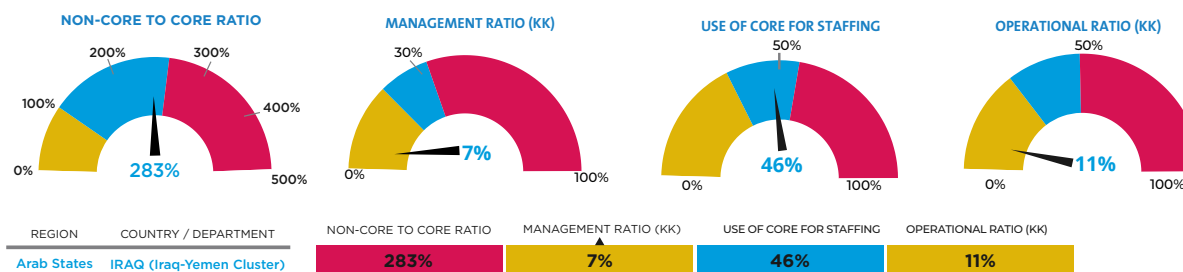
Key Country Office donors include the Multi-Donor Trust Fund Office, Government of Japan, European Commission, Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Government of Finland, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, US Department of State, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ), World Food Programme and United Nations Development Programme (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Country Office portfolio financial resources data, prepared by the evaluation team with information from the UN Women Dashboard (2019–2023)



## IRAQ-YEMEN CLUSTER CORPORATE PERFORMANCE INDICATORS FOR THE SN PERIOD OF JANUARY 2019-TO MAY 2022



(1) Data is available up to May 2022 for Iraq-Yemen Cluster only

Data Source: COAT dashboard



Photo©UN Women Iraq

## 2. EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

## 2.1 Evaluation purpose

This 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<sup>61</sup> to reduce the burden on stakeholders and Country Office personnel and to leverage learning opportunities.

## 2.2 Evaluation objectives

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 the achievement of empowerment of women results.
- Assess the relevance and coherence of UN Women's programme vis-a-vis national commitments and the UN system; the added value of UN Women; and identify contributions to the Iraq United Nations Development Assistance Framework (2015–2019) and UNSDGF (2020–2024) women's empowerment outcomes.
- Provide lessons learned and actionable recommendations to support UN Women's strategic positioning.

## 2.3 Key evaluation questions

The following evaluation questions were developed in consultation with the Country Office at the inception phase of the evaluation process:

Q1. To what extent is the Country Office's Strategic Note aligned to national priorities and regional and international commitments? (Relevance)

Q2. Is the Country Office's thematic focus and strategy for implementation coherent for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in Iraq considering its added value vis-à-vis other actors and its coordination mandate? (Coherence)

Q3. To what extent have UN Women's contributions across its integrated mandate advanced gender equality and the empowerment of women in Iraq, including through the UN system and Government of Iraq? (Effectiveness)

Q4. Does the Country Office have appropriate governance, capacity and capability to ensure good use of resources (personnel, funding and assets) to deliver results?<sup>62</sup> (Efficiency)

Q5. To what extent does the Country Office have effective evidence, learning and knowledge management systems and culture in place? (Efficiency)

Q6. Has the Country Office's portfolio been designed and implemented according to leave no one behind principles, including a disability perspective? (Human Rights and Gender Equality)

Q7. To what extent have Country Office interventions been gender transformative, identifying structural gender inequalities and addressing them systematically? (Human Rights and Gender Equality)

Q8. To what extent has the Country Office embedded sustainability principles and practices into its interventions? What are the key lessons and areas of improvement? (Sustainability)

## 2.4 Evaluation scope

The scope of this CPE included all activities undertaken by the Country Office under its previous and current Strategic Notes 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 the UN Women Strategic Plan 2022–25.

The evaluation was conducted between March 2024 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 city and refugee camps in the Dohuk governorate.

## 2.5 Intended users and uses of the evaluation

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 effectiveness of

<sup>61</sup> UN Women Iraq Country Office Audit (IEAS/IAS/2024/006)

<sup>62</sup> Please note that this has been covered comprehensively through the internal audit.

UN Women's contribution to gender equality and women's empowerment; and the capacity development and mobilization of national stakeholders to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women.

## 2.6 Evaluation design

The evaluation methodology applied the OECD-DAC criteria, including relevance, coherence, effectiveness and efficiency as well as gender equality and human rights. The CPE followed gender-responsive evaluation principles and had a utilization-focused<sup>63</sup> lens to generate forward-looking, actionable recommendations ensuring the information needs of the Country Office and stakeholders are met. The evaluation applied 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- see Annex 11. The evaluation also used the Gender at Work Analytical Framework<sup>64</sup> and the Gender Results Effectiveness Scale to assess the extent to which the Country Office had been gender transformative.<sup>65</sup>

The evaluation followed the United National Evaluation Group (UNEG) Ethical Guiding Principles. To operationalize these principles and UN Women policies, a Data Management Plan guided the evaluation team on how data was managed and stored, and the ethical protocols adopted during data collection.

A mixed-methods approach utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data was used to triangulate and verify data, increasing the internal reliability and consistency of findings. The evaluation used a participatory approach to ensure the perspective and voices of all the stakeholders were considered, paying specific attention to the inclusion of women, individuals and groups who are vulnerable and/or discriminated against.

The inception phase included an evaluability assessment; a consultation with Country Office personnel to discuss elements of the evaluation approach; review of the theory of change for the Strategic Note concerned; and a stakeholder mapping exercise to inform the design, evaluation questions and support analysis. The evaluation matrix can be found in Annex 5.

## 2.7 Evaluation limitations and risk-mitigation strategies

During the inception phase, the evaluation team identified the following key limitations:

**Context sensitivity:** The evaluators ensured that participation

in the evaluation was voluntary, informed consent obtained and that confidentiality and anonymity was protected. The evaluators ensured the approach was relevant and respectful and adhered to "do no harm" principles. The well-being and safety of participants was prioritized, especially when dealing with sensitive topics related to gender-based violence and conflict-related issues.

**Language and cultural barriers:** Language and cultural differences can pose challenges during consultations. To mitigate this barrier, interview tools were translated into Arabic to aid data collection and response. The team included a national evaluator with Arabic language expertise and contextual knowledge, as well as an Arabic interpreter. The consultations were conducted in Arabic as required.

The **time frame** available for data collection, which took place during the month of Ramadan did affect the level of access to stakeholders, resulting in a protracted period of data collection. Where possible, the evaluation team conducted in-person data collection, with additional virtual interviews conducted after the mission travel to ensure the selected sample of stakeholders were consulted.

The main stakeholders consulted were chosen from the Baghdad and Kurdistan regions given the security situation. This may present some selection bias. The evaluation team noted that not all targeted stakeholders were available for interview, which impacted the scope of stakeholders reached. Some stakeholders were new to their posts which may have caused some recall bias. A full list of stakeholders consulted is provided in Annex 6.

## 2.8 Data collection and analysis

Multiple methods of data collection and analysis were carried out using both primary and secondary data to triangulate evidence, including desk review, quantitative and qualitative analysis, and analysing and cross-referencing past evaluations. The evaluation team collaborated closely with the IAS team, which conducted an internal audit from March to July 2024 to triangulate and validate data and evidence.<sup>66</sup>

Specifically, the evaluation conducted:

- A review of more than 80 documents, including key policy documents, UN Women programme documents and other reports from the UNCT and donors, project progress reports, annual workplans, reports from partners and other documents (see Annex 7).
- 100 key informant interviews.
- Field visits to four areas: Baghdad, Erbil, Dohuk and Kirkuk governorates to consult with programme partners and targeted populations, including nine focus group discussions with a total of 82 community members.

<sup>63</sup> The evaluation team will be guided by the following documents and guidance: Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in 26 Evaluation -- Towards UNEG Guidance; UNEG Handbook for Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality Perspectives in Evaluations in the UN System; and UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation, Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct.

<sup>64</sup> Gender at Work Framework, Accessed 16 March 2024.

<sup>65</sup> UNDP Gender Results Effectiveness Framework (GRES).

<sup>66</sup> UN Women Iraq Country Office Audit (IEAS/IAS/2024/006)

- Two online surveys (see Annex 8): online survey for Country Office personnel sent to 25 personnel with responses (56 per cent response rate); and one online survey for implementing partners sent to 48 partners with 17 responses (35 per cent response rate).
- Review of previous corporate and regional evaluations and audits. One regional evaluation and one corporate evaluation have included Iraq Country Office programmes during the Strategic Note period concerned (see Annex 4 for a review of the findings of these evaluations). The Internal Audit Service also conducted an advisory operational risk assessment of the UN Women Iraq and Yemen Cluster Office in 2022.<sup>67</sup>

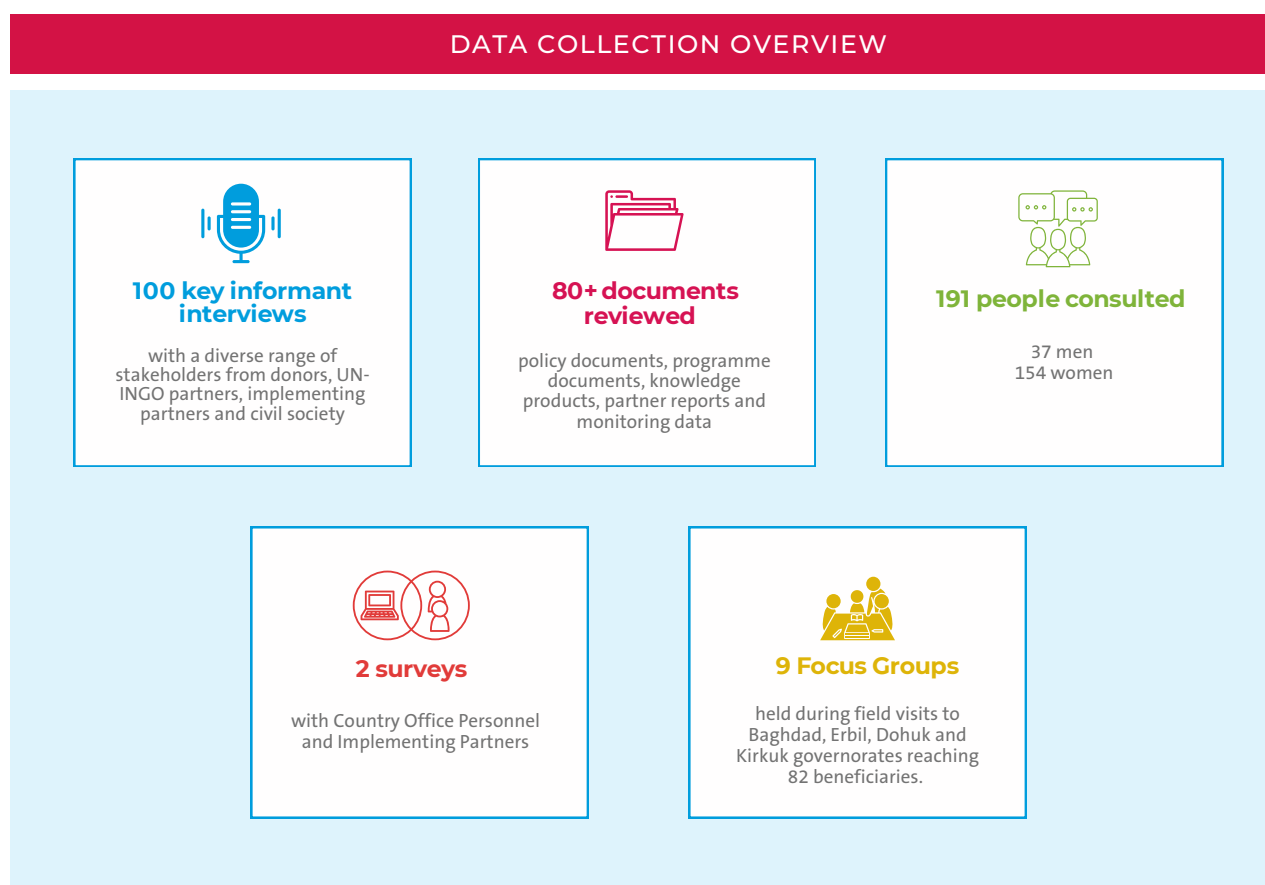
See also Figure 4.

## 2.9 Evaluation governance and quality assurance

The evaluation team comprised the Regional Evaluation Specialist for the Arab States, who is a member of UN Women's Independent Evaluation, Audit and Investigation Services (IEAIS) and acted as the team lead for this evaluation process; an international independent evaluator; and a national independent evaluator. The evaluation team collaborated with IAS, who concurrently delivered an internal audit. The Country Office provided administrative, technical and logistic support for this exercise.

This evaluation report was validated by the Country Office. The draft report was shared with key management stakeholders for validation and their feedback and comments were integrated into the report. IEAIS provided quality assurance support to the process. The Director, IEAIS; IES Chief and IAS Chief provided oversight and methodological guidance.

Figure 4: Sources and methodology for data collection



Source: Compiled by the evaluation team

<sup>67</sup> The report was issued in February 2023.





Photo©UN Women Iraq

## 3. FINDINGS

THE FINDINGS ARE ORGANIZED BY  
KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS.

### 3.1 Relevance

To what extent is the Country Office's Strategic Note aligned to national priorities, regional and international commitments?

**FINDING 1. Development of the Country Office's Strategic Note was consultative and its design was found to be responsive to subnational, national, international and UN priorities for gender equality and the empowerment of women. However, the Country Office's relevance as a strategic player to lead the women's empowerment agenda faced some significant challenges in 2023, particularly issues related to UN Women's country leadership transition.**

The core principles underlying the Country Office's portfolio are to support the gender equality machinery in Iraq to strengthen policy, strategy and financing that are gender responsive and promote peacebuilding, social cohesion, protection and inclusion, providing women with equal access to sustainable incomes and gender-responsive services.<sup>68</sup>

The Country Office developed its Strategic Note following a wide range of stakeholder consultations at the country and regional level. The Strategic Note took into consideration and reflected the different contexts and needs within the Federal and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Strategic Note was aligned with national priorities, including key Government of Iraq strategies such as Iraq Vision 2030<sup>69</sup> and the Kurdistan Regional Government's 2020: "A Vision for the Future;"<sup>70</sup> the National Development Plan (2018–2022);<sup>71</sup> Iraq National Framework for Reconstruction and Development;<sup>72</sup> and the Iraq National Action Plan II on implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Despite these inclusive consultations, at the time of the evaluation, some key government officials stressed the need for greater alignment of UN Women's programmes with national strategies such as Iraq Vision 2030 and the Kurdistan Regional Government's vision.

UN Women Iraq was the first Country Office in the Arab States region to proactively align its Strategic Note to the UNSDCF,<sup>74</sup> (even before UN Women's corporate directive and guidance on alignment with UNSDCFs were issued). In doing so, the Strategic Note made commitments to increasing equal access and engagement in economic activities; strengthening access to gender-responsive protection and social protection services; and supporting women and youth engagement in leadership, decision-making and peacebuilding processes (see Annex 3 for details).

The Strategic Note is also aligned to the Regional Office's Strategic Note (2022–25) focusing on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action; and UN Women's global

Strategic Plan (2022–2025), particularly Impact 4 (Women, Peace and Security, Humanitarian Action and Disaster Risk Reduction) and Impact 2 (Women's Economic Empowerment) with links to Impact 3 on Ending Violence Against Women and Impact 1 on Women's Political Participation.

The Strategic Note was also in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in terms of increasing the participation of women in peacebuilding efforts; and with international normative frameworks for women's empowerment and gender equality, e.g. CEDAW (Articles 7 and 9 and General Recommendation 30), Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (particularly the commitment to women in power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms and ending violence against women: and Agenda Vision 2030, supporting the attainment of SDGs (1, 5, 8, 16 and 17).

UN Women personnel and implementing partner surveys and consultations largely reaffirmed the relevance of UN focus areas. Seventy-six per cent of implementing partners (N=13) felt UN Women's strategy was relevant, and 86 per cent of Country Office personnel (N=12) felt it was well aligned to the most pressing needs of women in Iraq (see Annex 8 for survey responses). Specifically, partners stressed the importance of sustained commitment to women's economic empowerment and building effective responses to end violence against women.

Although the development and design of the Strategic Note was relevant, it had yet to be fully translated into action. At the time of the evaluation, feedback from some key government partners reflected that while UN Women played a relevant role within the Women, Peace and Security area through the second National Action Plan, the Country Office needed to step up its focus on women's economic empowerment and political participation. They emphasized

<sup>68</sup> UN Women Iraq Strategic Note Narrative 2022–24

<sup>69</sup> Republic of Iraq Ministry of Planning (2019) "The future we want" - Iraq vision for Sustainable Development 2030 last accessed June 2024

<sup>70</sup> Ministry of Planning Kurdistan Regional Government (2020) Kurdistan Regional Government 2020: A Vision for the Future last accessed June 2024

<sup>71</sup> Republic of Iraq Ministry of Planning (2019) National Development Plan 2018–22 last accessed June 2024

<sup>72</sup> Iraq reconstruction Investment 2018–30, accessed 10 June 2024

<sup>73</sup> Federal Government of Iraq and Regional Government of Kurdistan National Action Plan II 2021–2024 last accessed June 2024

<sup>74</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework Iraq 2020–2025

the need for more systematic and regular communication from UN Women to maintain its relevance and provide greater visibility to UN Women's work.

Most UNCT stakeholders emphasized the strategic relevance of UN Women as the specialist UN entity for women's empowerment issues in the context of Iraq but indicated that, with its limited resources, UN Women's approach should be more strategic and focused on normative and institutional-level engagement. It should prioritize a more advisory, technical and policy support function rather than focusing on small scale projects. 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 through relevant technical and advisory services for sustainable development.<sup>75</sup> In this context, there was increasing demand for gender data and statistics, social norms change, women and technology expertise and in supporting a coherent CSO perspective.

Some UNCT stakeholders indicated that as they had experienced backlash towards use of the term "gender" since mid-2023, they needed UN Women's leadership to guide and support them on gender equality and women's empowerment issues. However, UN Women was going through a local leadership transition at the time, which compromised the relevance of the Entity in a rapidly changing context.

The evaluation observed that with the leadership change in December 2023, there were indications that the Country Office was reinvigorating its key normative and coordination role on gender equality and women's empowerment by leading the development of UN positioning and engagement on the gender backlash, including on the use of terminology and in relation to amendments to the Personal Status Law. The Regional Office and headquarters need to continue the support provided to the current country leadership to ensure the sustainability of such actions.

Some stakeholders consulted also noted that the decision to create the Iraq-Yemen Cluster Office in 2019 did not appear to have realized the anticipated resource leveraging across the two offices. In reality, such an arrangement did not allow for adequate personnel investment and management oversight. Some personnel assigned to the cluster were not eligible to work in Yemen, which resulted in the Country Representative being further stretched over multiple office locations, eventually affecting the visibility and relevance of UN Women in Iraq.

In the context of Iraq, there was limited funding for development work. Therefore, the portfolio of programmes and associated thematic attention was largely dominated by resilience and humanitarian funding. The evaluation acknowledges that given limited financing options for

long-term development, the nesting of development issues within resilience and humanitarian programming was a good pragmatic approach. For instance, the key Resilience/Humanitarian and Women, Peace and Security programmes – LEAP and the first National Action Plan – both contained elements of key development pillars including Women's Economic Empowerment, Women's Political Participation and Ending Violence Against Women programming. Due to the rapidly changing country landscape and priorities, the Strategic Note would have benefitted from a mid-term review to facilitate its strategic re-alignment and focus. Given that Iraq is an upper middle-income country and expected to be funding its own national development and social protection programmes, UN Women needed to prepare for a transition from traditional donor funding arrangements towards domestic/national financing mechanisms. In light of such transition, the Iraq office also needed guidance and support from the Regional Office and headquarters.

At the project level, despite the consultative design process reported by UN Women personnel, it was observed that some key project designs were not well informed in terms of the specific needs of targeted women and the context (for details see evaluation findings on LEAP, green economy and the Women, Peace and Security in Section 3.3 on Effectiveness). Project stakeholders felt local contextual relevance needed to be further strengthened and that activities should be more tailored to the needs and vulnerabilities of different target populations. Over reliance on standard models of operation and regional approaches limited localized contextualization. A more intentional approach was required to establish a link between outcomes at the national and regional level and interventions at the community level.

The stakeholders consulted appreciated UN Women's adaptability in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly its online implementation modalities to continue programming with minimal disruption. The response to COVID-19 included reorientation of project funds to address key identified capacity gaps among programme partners through the development of an online learning portal.<sup>76</sup> UN Women also supported women affected both socially and economically by the COVID-19 pandemic through cash-for-work income-generating opportunities, humanitarian assistance and gender-based violence support services.

During the pandemic, the Country Office conducted gender analysis in collaboration with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA) and produced six joint knowledge products (three for Iraq and three for Yemen) on the impact of COVID-19 on social protection, women's political participation and women's economic participation, which aimed to support the Government of Iraq in its efforts towards implementing a gender-responsive COVID-19 response. The Country Office also contributed to a rapid assessment on the impact of COVID-19 on ending

<sup>75</sup> Iraq Humanitarian transition overview-2024

<sup>76</sup> However, the evaluation noted limitations with the value for money of this portal and that it was not further utilized beyond the pandemic period. Details covered under Section 3.4 Efficiency.



violence against women and gender social norms,<sup>77</sup> and guidance on a gender-response to the pandemic.<sup>78</sup> However, the evaluation was not able to comment on the reach or level of utilization of these knowledge products as relevant monitoring data was not available and the evaluation evidence did not specify the use of the products.

Overall, while the Strategic Note and areas of focus were relevant, the Country Office's relevance as a strategic player to lead the women's empowerment agenda faced some

significant challenges in 2023. Moving forward, the Country Office will have to rethink its value proposition and strengthen its strategic focus and business model in the new development and resilience sphere. The Country Office also needs to maintain the good practice of wide consultation with partners and stakeholders. Greater collaboration with the government, UNCT and CSO partners is crucial to maintain the relevance of the Country Office's portfolio and associated programming.

### 3.2 Coherence

Is the Country Office's thematic focus and strategy for implementation coherent for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in Iraq considering its added value vis-à-vis other actors and its coordination mandate?

**FINDING 2. By virtue of its mandate, the Country Office is well positioned in the UNCT and is represented in relevant coordination platforms to advance women's empowerment priorities. The Country Office has leveraged its coordination mandate by making contributions to a gender-responsive UNSDCF and has initiated joint programming across UN entities. Opportunities to strengthen gender coordination results across the UNCT remain to be further explored and leveraged. (UNCT coordination)**

By virtue of its mandate, the Country Office is well positioned in the UNCT and is represented in relevant coordination platforms, through the following engagement mechanisms:

- UN Women co-chairs the inter-agency Gender Task Force in Iraq with UNDP and UNAMI, which plans and delivers integrated strategies for gender equality and women's empowerment; and supports gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive joint programming at the country level.
- Represented on UNCT's strategic communications group in Iraq and leads coordination of International Women's Day and the 16 Days of Activism campaigns and Women, Peace and Security-related communications.
- Member of the Programme Management Team, thematic working groups, including prevention of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation groups.
- Represented on the UNCT SDG Group, Women's Political Participation Group and UNCT Coordination Group.
- Represented on the Monitoring and Evaluation Group and active engagement on UN INFO.

UN Women collaborated with the UNCT, Gender Task Force and other UN working groups in the development of the new UNSDCF (2020–24)<sup>79</sup> as the government was transitioning

its strategy and focus from humanitarian assistance to sustainable development. UN Women contributed to the Common Country Assessment in 2021 and specifically advocated for it to highlight the need to approve the (draft) Anti Domestic Violence Law in Iraq and for a continuation of the National Action Plan on implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The UN Iraq Common Country Analysis constituted the basis for elaboration of a UNSDCF which was endorsed by the government in June 2021.<sup>80</sup> The UNSDCF also reflected the 2018 UN-SWAP Gender Equality Scorecard recommendations – an exercise led by UN Women in partnership with UNDP – to expand coverage on development and normative results tied to the SDGs and with a focus on leave no one behind.

Gender equality and women's empowerment was embedded as a core priority in the UNSDCF, with gender outcome indicators detailed in the results framework. The revised cooperation agreement in 2021 increased emphasis on reaching the most marginalized and vulnerable groups (particularly displaced persons and refugees). However, some initiatives were delayed, such as a planned review of the UNCT SWAP in 2020, due to COVID-19; UNCT gender-marker training; and the updated Country Gender Equality Profile planned for 2023 to guide the new UNSDCF was also delayed.

<sup>77</sup> UN Women (2020) Rapid Assessment: The Effects of COVID-19 on Violence Against Women and Gendered Social Norms - A Snapshot from Nine Countries in the Arab States, Accessed 24 May 2024.

<sup>78</sup> UN Women (2020) A Gender Response to COVID-19 in Iraq: A Guidance Note on Actors' Engagement, Accessed 24 May 2024.

<sup>79</sup> United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework-Iraq UNSDCF 2020-2025

<sup>80</sup> While the Iraqi constitution (under article 29) expressly prohibits "all forms of violence and abuse in the family," only the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has a law on domestic violence (Domestic Law no. 8 Kurdistan Region of Iraq).

UN Women has supported the Gender Task Force's focus on gender mainstreaming in achievement of UNSDCF outcomes and provided some agencies with technical expertise to develop gender-sensitive policies and gender-responsive approaches. Pre-COVID-19, monthly sessions of the Gender Task Force appeared well moderated, but stakeholders indicated that the Task Force needed senior personnel representation from various UNCT agencies and, at times, meeting agendas could be more focused. Meeting minutes across different coordination meetings were not systematically kept (or tracked) to measure UN Women's contributions.

The stakeholders consulted acknowledged UN Women's mandate and role as the dedicated UN entity for gender equality and women's empowerment and felt that UN Women had good visibility and positioning within relevant UNCT coordination mechanisms. However, some of the stakeholders interviewed expected UN Women to be more proactive in providing subject matter expertise and advising other UNCT members on how to mainstream gender into their programmes. Some of them also expected UN Women to lead them to facilitate a dialogue and build a collective "One UN stance" following a governmental shift away from using the term "gender" in mid-2023 as outlined under the relevance section.

At the time of the evaluation, some stakeholders highlighted that the previous Country Representative was not always present at various UNCT deliberations, perhaps because of the need to manage two offices across complex areas, i.e. Iraq and Yemen.<sup>81</sup> A UN Women personnel filled in for the former Country Representative, attending UNCT meetings but the absence of a senior personnel with decision-making authority and relevant knowledge, reportedly, at times, created a gap.

The evaluation observed that with the leadership transition towards the end of 2023, UN Women was seen to be re-engaging at the UNCT level, taking charge of the gender task force and beginning to provide leadership in coming to a common UN position on gender terminology, and in engaging on the draft amendments to the Personal Status Law, which threaten to undermine the rights of women and girls in profound ways. The delinking of the Cluster Office arrangement also provided the interim Country Representative with greater capacity to support UNCT and Humanitarian Country Team functions.

Limited corporate financial support was provided to the Country Office's coordination mandate, requiring the office to use non-core funds, which might not be sustainable in the long term. The evaluation noted that as UNAMI scales back its operations, UN Women will be required to play an even more prominent role in the women's political participation and women, peace and security space. During interviews, Country Office personnel indicated that they are

preparing to play a more strategic role within the UNCT.

During the evaluation period 2019–2024, the Country Office initiated five joint programmes with UNAMI, ESCWA, UNDP, WFP and UNFPA (see Table 1 below). However, two programme with UNDP did not come to fruition due to termination of the UN-to-UN Agreement in 2023.<sup>82</sup> The effectiveness of these joint programmes is covered under the Section 3.3 on Effectiveness.

The evaluation team heard there was some competition among UN agencies in the country for limited resources, which raised the risk of mission creep. For a small entity such as UN Women, with limited resources, it is important to have a clearer vision, focused strategy and dedicated resources for its coordination work, which should be well communicated to external stakeholders.

The UNCT stakeholders consulted indicated that Iraq needs better gender data to report on SDGs and suggested that they would strongly benefit if UN Women could systematically share more knowledge and information on the current gender equality and women's empowerment situation in Iraq. From 2019 to 2021, UN Women produced 23 knowledge products (see Annex 9); however, knowledge generation has stalled since mid-2022. Prioritizing implementation of the IAS operational risk assessment<sup>83</sup> recommendations was cited as the reason for this. The Country Office needs to further strengthen its approach to knowledge generation, harvesting and dissemination and there are opportunities for UN Women to lead in the data and statistics space.

<sup>81</sup> The evaluation recognizes that some respondents had been in their respective position for about a year and therefore could not speak about the entire time period covered by the evaluation.

<sup>82</sup> The Project with UNDP was apparently discontinued due to performance concerns and funding challenges.

<sup>83</sup> Conducted in May 2022



**TABLE 1. Description of joint programming across UN entities (prepared by the evaluation team, March 2024)**

UN partner	Description	Key achievements	Status
<b>UNAMI</b>	Joint work on women's political participation in the lead up to 2021 parliamentary elections.	Nominated to sit on the government inter-agency committee established for the 2021 National Parliamentary elections to strengthen women's political participation.	- Completed
<b>ESCWA</b>	Signed a Memorandum of Understanding to conduct gender analysis in collaboration with ESCWA and produced three joint knowledge products.	- Three knowledge products on the impact of COVID-19 on social protection, women's political participation and women's economic empowerment in Iraq. <sup>84</sup>	- First phase study completed - Subsequent study on violence against women ongoing
<b>UNDP</b>	Signed a Memorandum of Understanding to work on Women's Political Participation (US\$ 800,000) Signed Memorandum of Understanding on "Gender Study to Strengthen the implementation of the WPS Agenda in the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces" (US\$ 200,000)	- None	- Projects were discontinued due to termination of the UN-to-UN Agreement in 2023
<b>WFP</b>	Signed a Memorandum of Understanding to work together on resource mobilization and provide technical support on gender mainstreaming. Signed agreement as well as a joint programme on the green skills economy and gender and food security in the south of Iraq. Opportunities for future joint programming on micro-financing and to leverage government co-funding is under consideration.	- Capacity-building activities with women's empowerment units within ministries federally and regionally. - Detailed mapping of programme areas identifying opportunities for the green skills economy programme.	- First phase pilot completed - Second phase discontinued due to leadership transition and donor redirection of funds to Gaza.
<b>UNFPA</b>	Joint programme on ending violence against women enhancing government capacity in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to improve access and quality of gender-based violence protection services.	- Training of judges, police and frontline staff. - Development of standard operating procedures and institutional capacity-building.	- Ongoing
<b>UNICEF</b>	Potential collaboration opportunity with UNICEF on maternal care, girls' education and social norms, where UN women's existing CSO networks could be utilized.	- None to date	- Potential opportunities in the pipeline.

<sup>84</sup> UN Women and ESCWA (2021) Impact of Covid Studies

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**FINDING 3.** The Country Office has established a wide range of partnerships to strengthen the women's empowerment agenda in Iraq, with an operational presence at federal and regional levels. At the national level, most government stakeholders wanted to see better communication of UN Women's impact. UN Women had limited leadership in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, despite several programmes in Kurdistan or neighbouring governorates. There is scope to further amplify a common, collective advocacy voice on women's rights and transformative action in Iraq. (Government, donor and CSO coordination)

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The Country Office has established a wide range of partnerships to strengthen the women's empowerment agenda in Iraq, including with the government, donors and civil society organizations to contribute towards the fulfilment of the Country Office's gender equality mandate across the following thematic areas Women, Peace and Security; Women's Political Participation, Women's Economic Empowerment and Elimination of Violence Against Women. The Country Office has an operational presence in Iraq at federal and regional levels.

Government partners gave mixed feedback about UN Women's role at the national and regional level, some of which was more critical compared to the feedback received at the time of the IAS operational risk assessment in May 2022. At the national level, most of the government stakeholders that the evaluation team spoke with were critical about UN Women's role and performance. They commented that UN Women's communication on its plans and activities in Iraq needed to be stronger to ensure transparency, joint working and to minimize duplication and misalignments. Country Office leadership and personnel indicated that the details of programmes were shared with the government through the UNCT, and that the Country Office was taking further steps to ensure that these issues are addressed by providing the requested institutional support and documentation to the government.

Some stakeholders wanted to see more focus on capturing and communicating the impact and value for money of UN Women's activities to show that the resources spent on women's empowerment produced tangible change and results, even if slow or small. The stakeholders consulted also expressed a desire for more substantial support beyond training, urging UN Women to strengthen its focus on policy and institution building to enhance women's political participation and economic empowerment.

The evaluation learned that national government partners would value more technical support in the following areas: women, peace, and security; economic development; social norms change; women's political participation; and connecting women's empowerment to the local context. Some stakeholders indicated that many of the ministries'

women empowerment focal point positions had been eliminated over the past two years and asserted that UN Women should be helping the system retain these gender focal point positions. As a result, there are also opportunities for the Country Office to work more closely with government partners to build a stronger collective vision for women's empowerment in Iraq.

In the Kurdistan region, UN Women collaborates through a good partnership and projects with the High Council of Women's Affairs, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and to an extent with the Directorate General to Combat Violence Against Women. During the evaluation period, UN Women developed strategic collaborations with security and justice sector actors and service providers to enhance protection and accountability for addressing gender-based violence and resilience of local communities. Overall, stakeholders recognized UN Women as a valued expert in the women's empowerment space. However, the evaluation noted there is no senior coordinator in Erbil, despite the Country Office having several programmes in Kurdistan or neighbouring governorates. UN Women needs to boost its representation and visibility in the Kurdistan region and expand its ability to support the government and UNCT partners in a strategic manner.

In addition to government coordination, the Country Office actively engages with donors and other development partners. UN Women is a member of the International Gender Group, a coordination mechanism of the international community established by UN Women (and co-led periodically) for advancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda, in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. However, the evaluation noted that the group has had limited engagement since the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022). Many donor representatives indicated that there was no dedicated donor coordination group on gender, which is usually led by UN Women in other countries and could be a mechanism to facilitate dialogue on sensitive issues related to women's rights and equality, and the development of a united voice.

The Country Office has a collaborative relationship with CSOs, and leads a gender network of over 150 CSOs and

activists. This group met quarterly; however, the frequency of meetings dropped towards the end of the CPE period.

As of May 2024, the Country Office had 33 active Programme Partner agreements between 2020 and 2024, including 24 with CSOs.<sup>85</sup> The Country Office is also one of the key recipients of the Women, Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) and manages over 25 grantee partners in Iraq through this fund.<sup>86</sup>

The civil society consultations indicated an overall appreciation of UN Women's technical and financial support, i.e. UN Women has supported and built a strong CSO network working across UN Women's thematic areas. In the evaluation survey, 11 of 17 implementing partners (64 per cent) found training and capacity-building useful or extremely useful (full survey results can be found in Annex

8). Programme partners particularly noted the value of UN Women's support in strengthening organizational practices and proposal writing. Further, 13 of 17 respondents (76.5 per cent) found UN Women's role in convening networks and stakeholders extremely valuable or valuable. Civil society partners indicated there is space to promote a common and collective advocacy voice on women's rights and that partners look to UN Women to demonstrate leadership to strengthen and amplify collective voices. The civil society partners interviewed reported issues of gender backlash, with a number of CSOs having to terminate their activities and/or facing issues with their registration. According to these CSOs, UN Women needs to strengthen its convening role of facilitating dialogue between the government and CSOs to establish common understanding and shared goals for women's empowerment.

### 3.3 Effectiveness and sustainability

To what extent have UN Women's contributions across its integrated mandate advanced gender equality and the empowerment of women in Iraq, including through the UN system and Government of Iraq? To what extent were capacity and systems developed to ensure the sustainability of efforts?

**FINDING 4.** The Country Office's work on the Women, Peace and Security thematic area through the Iraqi National Action Plan was found to have strengthened coordination and accountability mechanisms across a wide range of stakeholders. National Action Plan II demonstrated some key achievements under the protection pillar, laying the foundations for a gender-responsive security sector. The Country Office worked closely with government institutions to implement the plan at a strategic level, including training of government officials. The Country Office also worked in partnership with CSOs to build the skills of women and girls to advocate on Women, Peace and Security and women's rights however, the trained women's access to national and local infrastructure to utilize their new capacities was limited. There was some engagement of male role models in programming but a clear strategy for engaging men is needed to achieve sustainable gender-role transformation.

Iraq adopted its first National Action Plan in 2014, making it the first country in the MENA region to adopt such a plan. The second Iraq National Action Plan was launched in 2020 to implement UN Security Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. It was structured across three strategic pillars: participation, protection and prevention. During the evaluation period, UN Women supported development of the National Action Plan II through facilitating consultative meetings with women-led organizations, the Council of Ministers Secretariat, women's machinery and representatives from the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government to gain feedback and endorsement of the plan and to enhance communication, monitoring and evaluation components.<sup>87</sup>

UN Women contributed to the establishment of a formal coordination mechanism between the Federal Government of Iraq, Council of Ministers National Department of Iraqi Women and the Kurdistan Regional Government High Council for Women and Development. Stakeholders appreciated the aim of strengthening coordination across the two regions to unify efforts, knowledge exchange and overall implementation and monitoring of National Action Plan II.

<sup>85</sup> 12 with government entities and one with a UN agency.

<sup>86</sup> The Women, Peace and Humanitarian Fund is a pooled UN Women grant giving programme.

<sup>87</sup> In development of National Action Plan II for Iraq, the drafting process was led by a Cross Sector Task Force and multiple consultative meetings were undertaken with representatives of CSOs, the National Security Agency, Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation Committee. This included nine consultative meetings facilitated by UN women (four in person and five online) to support development of the National Action Plan II.

**BOX 3: National Action Plan II  
KEY RESULTS REPORTED BY MANAGEMENT (2020–23):**

- Formal coordination mechanism established between the Federal Government of Iraq National Department of Iraqi Women and the Kurdistan Regional Government High Council for Women and Development.
- Advanced implementation through endorsement of sectoral plans for six ministries and two governorates.
- Establishment of a regional sectoral plan for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and mobilization of Kurdistan Regional Government resources (US\$ 500,000) towards protection implementation.
- Development of a National Action Plan II communication plan and awareness-raising campaign.
- Engagement of 30 women champions and 36 CSOs engaged in National Action Plan II planning.

*Source: SIDA donor reporting*

In Kurdistan, UN Women's technical support contributed to development and endorsement of a regional Kurdistan action plan and establishment of a UN Security Council Resolution 1325 Board Committee headed by the Ministry of Interior, with membership of the High Council for Women and Development, donors and civil society. UN Women's technical support focused on building capacities of the High Council for Women and Development to apply a gender-responsive and intersectional approach to strategic planning, and monitoring and evaluation of strategies and policies. The evaluation observed that the council had committed US\$ 500,000 towards its National Action Plan protection pillar. This reflected the regional government's commitment to the Women, Peace and Security agenda and accountability.

The evaluation noted the work being carried out by UN Women with the Council of Ministers National Department of Iraqi Women and other relevant ministries to develop and endorse sectoral plans across Federal Iraq. UN Women worked with over 15 ministries and across 18 governorates providing technical support to develop National Action Plan II, developing capacities for strategic planning, gender-sensitive budgeting and monitoring and evaluation. According to the programme donor report, UN Women trained over 150 officials across the National Department of Iraqi Women, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Migration and Displacement.<sup>88</sup> According to project monitoring, 70 per cent of those trained showed their commitment through the active development of implementation plans.<sup>89</sup> This had reportedly resulted in six ministries having fully developed and endorsed sectoral

plans<sup>90</sup> and two localized sectoral plans endorsed at the governorate level in Ninewa and Thi-Qar.

A key focus of UN Women's capacity-building on Women, Peace and Security was the National Action Plan II comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework at both federal and Kurdistan Region of Iraq levels. The framework was developed in partnership with gender machineries (Council of Ministers National Department of Iraqi Women and High Council for Women and Development) and with engagement from CSOs (including the 1325 Alliance and Network).

The evaluation learned that the Country Office invested effort and resources in development of two bespoke web portals in partnership with the government and civil society to enable relevant stakeholders (including ministries, non-government entities and CSOs) to (a) record National Action Plan II achievements; (b) use it as a transparent performance monitoring instrument; and (c) support wider training outreach activities. However, neither portal was maintained beyond the departure of the consultant who developed them and as of September 2023 both were no longer functional - see Section 3.4 on Efficiency for more details.

The stakeholders consulted acknowledged UN Women's efforts to facilitate dialogue between CSO alliances and government representatives in both federal Iraq and Kurdistan to validate National Action Plan II and to ensure greater civil society engagement and community level local action. UN Women engaged over 60 CSOs, including the 1325 networks and alliances, to ensure civil society engagement fed into the National Action Plan II plans.<sup>91</sup> It also focused on building capacity and knowledge of grassroots organizations to strengthen ownership of the National Action Plan II and effectively support its implementation. The evaluation observed that civil society-facilitated contributions had led to an increased emphasis on planning for protection of women survivors of conflict.

Under the three pillars, the protection pillar to foster comprehensive gender-responsive security and justice sectors facilitated provision of multisectoral protection services, and provided training to police, judges and prosecutors on how to better respond to violence against women. According to a UN Women donor report, this included capacity-building for 58 national police officers and 42 judges and prosecutors from across Iraq and 128 frontline staff to strengthen their capacities to provide comprehensive protection<sup>92</sup> and prevention services to survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. Monitoring reports indicated that across trainees, 91 per cent reported an increase in skills and knowledge. The evaluative evidence validated this as the judges and frontline staff indicated that capacity-building had placed them in a better position to provide support for vulnerable women; strengthened

<sup>88</sup> SIDA Narrative Donor Report, June 2023

<sup>89</sup> SIDA Narrative Donor Report, June 2023

<sup>90</sup> The following six ministries have fully endorsed sectoral plans: Ministry of Planning, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Culture, Ministry Of Displacement and Migration, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education.

<sup>91</sup> As reported by UN Women, UN Women's programmatic and normative work in the Women, Peace and Security sector, last accessed November 2024

<sup>92</sup> This included training of 38 employees from the General Directorate of Social Welfare on sexual and gender-based violence and Gender-Based Violence Information Management, as well as training to 90 frontline social workers from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq Gender Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women who were trained on case management and adequate protection, Finland Narrative Donor Report, November 2021

their understanding of gender-sensitive approaches; and encouraged the sharing of experiences across professionals. One of the key results acknowledged by stakeholders was heightened response to cases of gender-based violence, wherein the Gender Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women has recorded an upwards trend in violence against women reporting and registered cases following UN Women's interventions.<sup>93</sup> The evaluation learned that UN Women's support had reportedly helped to fill gaps in existing service provision and increased access to quality protection services for over 2,000 survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.<sup>94</sup>

Under the prevention pillar, UN Women focused on Prevention of Violence Extremism, facilitating women's involvement in post-conflict recovery and building social cohesion. UN Women programme reports indicated that as part of Ministry of Education sectoral plans, 48 staff were trained on preventing violent extremism and the role of education institutions in mitigating its impact. The post-training feedback data showed 87 per cent of trained personnel reporting a significant increase in their knowledge.<sup>95</sup> The stakeholders consulted validated the positive feedback on the training. The evaluation team was also informed that UN Women had initiated research on gender-responsive prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration approaches to individuals associated with ISIS, as well as a gender analysis of the intersectional needs and gender issues of Iraqi detainees at Al Hol. The civil society actors supported by UN Women also contributed to regional dialogues on prevention of violence extremism responses in Iraq. Overall, outcome-level results of work under the prevention pillar needed to be captured and communicated in a more systematic way.

Under participation pillar, various training programmes were implemented to empower women and girls. At the community level, UN Women worked in partnership with CSOs to build the skills of women and girls to advocate on Women, Peace and Security and women's rights. According to the programme reports, UN Women led in-person training for 120 staff across 36 CSOs on Women, Peace and Security, 1325 and women rights leveraging the Country Office's civil society networks for awareness-raising and community sensitization. The evaluation team observed positive feedback from the stakeholders trained; however, their access to national and local infrastructure to utilize their new capacities was very limited. This was apparently exacerbated by the backlash against civil society working on gender issues. UN Women needs to develop sustainable linkages for trained women to local governance/peacebuilding structures; and while the evaluation noted some engagement of male role models to facilitate support for trained women to take up non-conventional gender roles, interventions would benefit from a clear strategy for engaging men, to achieve the intended gender role transformation.

UN Women targeted 30 gender champions in government and within CSOs. According to programme monitoring data, more than 80 per cent reported increased engagement in planning and implementation on National Action Plan II to a large extent.<sup>96</sup> However, the stakeholders consulted indicated that the civil society space was increasingly limited in terms of its ability to influence national governance, policy design and implementation. UN Women also laid the groundwork to establish an Iraqi women mediators' network, but its effectiveness has yet to be established.

Alongside CSO actors, UN Women facilitated the creation of a communications strategy for the National Action Plan II to increase public awareness of the Women, Peace and Security agenda and to create an enabling environment for women's participation in decision-making at all levels. This included supporting the roll out a series of sensitization campaigns, including three advocacy campaigns and four events<sup>97</sup> to raise awareness of Women, Peace and Security during the annual 16 days of activism.<sup>98</sup> More systematic monitoring of campaign performance and results data to determine the impact of advocacy is needed.

The ministries consulted indicated that UN Women's technical support is key to support good governance, ownership and build political buy-in to translate action into financial commitments. Implementation could also be strengthened by ensuring the continued collaboration of diverse partners from civil society, government and donors in implementation of Women, Peace and Security initiatives. This should ensure there is an intentional approach to link outcomes at the national level with interventions at the community level.

#### BOX 1: Testing theory of change – Women, Peace and Security

The Country Office's assumption was that partnerships with government, CSOs and targeted populations would facilitate locally contextualized accountability frameworks for Women, Peace and Security, which meet the needs of affected women. The underpinning intervention logic of the Women, Peace and Security portfolio was valid and appeared to lead to adoption and ownership of the Women, Peace and Security agenda across government and CSOs. Formalized coordination of outcomes at national and community levels could have been strengthened. Evidence suggest that women engaged in community mechanisms with service providers and local government to implement gender-responsive strategies but there was limited evidence that women and youth enjoy increased participation in leadership, decision-making and peacebuilding mechanisms.

<sup>93</sup> Agulhas (2021) Strengthening the Resilience of Syrian Women and Girls and Host Communities programme: Final evaluation -15 January 2021

<sup>94</sup> Finland Narrative Donor Report, November 2023

<sup>95</sup> Finland Narrative Donor Report, November 2023

<sup>96</sup> Sida Narrative Donor Report, June 2023

<sup>97</sup> This included the 16 days of activism conference, Let's Talk conference, sectoral plans launch event and International Women's Day 2023 events.

<sup>98</sup> This included a billboard campaign in Baghdad and Erbil to advocate for ending violence against women and raising awareness of Women, Peace and Security and a high-profile commemorative event held in Erbil's citadel with the presence of senior ministers, consulates and high-level government officials. As part of the communication plan, a national women's anthem was developed 'Ana Al Iraqiya' produced with UN Women to support advocating for women's role in all fields of Iraqi society, together with a women's bazaar organized to celebrate innovation in Iraqi culture from a gender perspective. In addition, the Kurdistan Regional Government Gender Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women in partnership with UN Women has conducted a series of radio programmes across northern governorates (Ranya, Raparin, Soran, Al Sulaimanya, Erbil and Duhok) to raise awareness of gender-based violence, family, gender issues and early marriage issues. The radio programmes targeted 30,000 individuals, including internally displaced persons, refugees and members of host communities.



**FINDING 5.** The Country Office’s Women’s Economic Empowerment portfolio was mainly delivered in a humanitarian context through the Leadership, Empowerment, Access and Protection (LEAP) model and through green skills and climate-smart initiatives in partnership with WFP. It aimed to target some of the most marginalized Iraqi women, including internally displaced persons, Syrian refugees and vulnerable host communities, providing them with confidence, aspiration, strengthened coping strategies and led to some successes in increased access to income generation. However, the programme model, particularly cash-for-work interventions needed a stronger sustainability perspective. The Country Office would benefit from a clear strategy for the Women’s Economic Empowerment portfolio in Iraq, to guide the transition from a humanitarian to longer-term development focus. (WEE)

The Country Office used the LEAP model (2017–2023) (see Figure 5), designed to build short and medium-term resilience in internally displaced and Syrian refugee communities, as well as vulnerable Iraqi women from the host communities, while also promoting enabling environments to increase women’s participation in the labour workforce.

The Country Office’s Women’s Economic Empowerment portfolio was mainly funded through the regional LEAP programme, by the Government of Japan. This was complemented by the European Union’s Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis – the “Madad Fund” and the Government of Finland’s Women, Peace and Security-related activities.

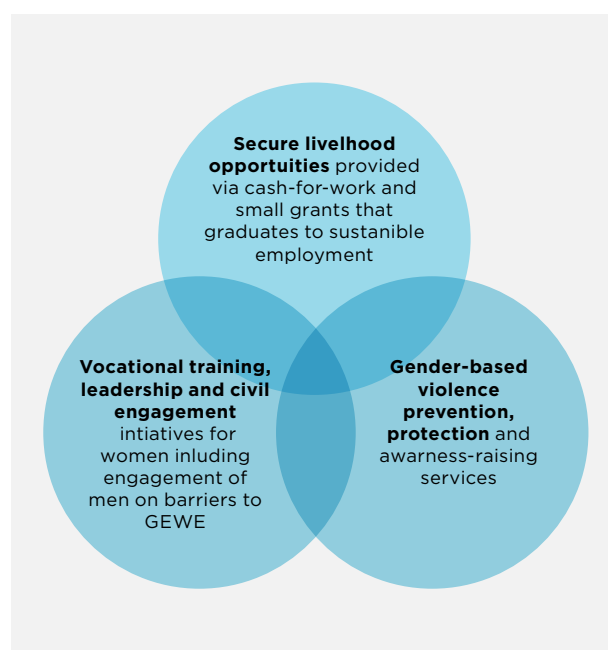
Interventions under this portfolio delivered cash-for-work and small grants, vocational and life-skills training, and gender-based violence awareness-raising in locations across Anbar, Kirkuk, Dohuk, Erbil, Fallujah, Nineveh, Mosul, Salah al-Din and Baghdad. The women consulted indicated that one of the strengths of the programme was its inclusive nature, particularly referencing older women who may be excluded from other economic programming. According to UN Women donor reporting, between 2020 and 2023, 790 women received cash-for-work or small grants through LEAP, Madad and Women, Peace and Security interventions with cash-for-work volunteers receiving on average US\$ 400 per month. A further 2,382 women had reportedly participated in employability, vocational and entrepreneurial skills training. Vocational training and skills development focused on tailoring, weaving and food production delivered in partnership with six CSO programme partners.

The programme targeted the most vulnerable women, including internally displaced persons and refugee women, ISIL survivors, widows, women with disabilities and women with a high number of dependants. The evaluation learned that one partner had specially adapted spaces to aid disabled women’s access to mitigate challenges in accessing services.

The programme also provided childcare arrangements through a small creche, which increased accessibility to project activities for women with children who did not have support structures around them.

According to LEAP project monitoring data from January 2021, there was a 27 per cent increase in resilience for project cash-for-work participants and that negative livelihood-based coping strategies had reduced by 93 per cent and stress-type coping strategies had reduced by 100 per cent.

Figure 5: LEAP model – building blocks



Source: UN Women Iraq Country Office, March 2024

According to LEAP project monitoring data, 45 per cent of participants reported improved self-worth. Regarding income generation, 88 per cent reported improvements in their skills and capacities to generate income; 53 per cent reported improved ability to deal with shocks and stress; and 73 per cent reported an increase in decision-making abilities within their household.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Madad (ended in January 2020) monitoring found that resilience has been strengthened by 40 per cent across cash-for-work participants and 92 per cent agreed that the programme had presented them with increased access to income-generating opportunities.<sup>100</sup>



Photo: UN Women, LEAP project

It was evident from the focus group discussions, interviews and field visit observations that economic insecurity was one of the primary concerns for the participants and there remains a high need for cash-for-work activities in camps where income-generation opportunities are limited. The target group reported that the Country Office's interventions have had a positive effect on their lives, helped to build their confidence and provided some level of financial independence. The target group felt more self-reliant and confident to make own decisions and that they had gained practical skills and understanding on how to develop their own small businesses. Additionally, women articulated that the LEAP training centres had provided a safe space to come together to gain friendship, peer support and build community outside their household for the first time – a feature that was useful in the context of a traditional and conservative community.

Consultation with targeted women<sup>101</sup> indicated that some elements of the training had been limited in depth and sometimes only constituted a few days. For instance, under a pilot capacity-building programme on climate smart agriculture in Erbil, the targeted women shared that they had received training for one day on agriculture and three days on business management, followed by a job fair. They felt that one day was too short to understand and apply the knowledge and skills presented. The training covered use of green fertilizers, and most had only used their skills at home for personal use in own gardens not for wider income generation. The evaluation team observed an instance where women were expected to share one set of equipment between 12 women. Following the training, no equipment was made available to the trained women. Consultations held with 29 incentive-based women indicated that only six women (20 per cent) had continued to generate income. The evaluation also learned that longer-term income security was greater for those who were provided with small grants and that the provision of start-up grants to purchase equipment was key to success. For small grant recipients, all eight of the women consulted (100 per cent) indicated they had initiated small businesses, with five (63 per cent) having maintained them. This compared to only 1 in 21 (47 per cent) of those interviewed who had received cash-for-work.

The evaluation learned that the targeted professions were not always relevant due to barriers to the labour market or limited market opportunities. Market assessments need further strengthening and as a result, areas chosen for skills development did not always provide routes to employment. The monitoring data suggested that assistance needed to be tailored to the needs and vulnerabilities of different groups to have more impact.<sup>102</sup>

The evaluation noted that additional grants support or mentoring was required to establish or access business opportunities. Some projects provided a jobs fair linking women to employers, which had built women's networks. However, a more comprehensive approach is required to yield sustained employment results. Many targeted vulnerable women were also illiterate, which is a fundamental barrier to accessing the labour market and requires different training modalities.

In relation to project monitoring, the Country Office were one of the first offices in the Arab States region to capture data on the gender-sensitive resilience index (a quantitative approach to measuring the resilience of women) and that two implementing partners were using the new Track It Portal<sup>103</sup> to generate data on Iraqi women's resilience. This was providing good evidence of the shifting impact of personal resilience in relation to UN Women's interventions. However, project monitoring needs further strengthening to capture longer-term results on targeted women's livelihood trajectories and longer-term economic

<sup>99</sup> UN Women (2021) LEAP 2020-21 regional donor report.

<sup>100</sup> Agulhas (2021) Strengthening the Resilience of Syrian Women and Girls and Host Communities programme: Final evaluation -15 January 2021

<sup>101</sup> The evaluation observed two structured approaches to cash-for-work. Some women received training-structured interventions in weaving, tailoring, food production and were provided with job placements, including placements in a carpet factory in Kirkuk, while others were provided with small grants and training in entrepreneurship to set up new small businesses.

<sup>102</sup> UN Women (2021) LEAP 2020-21 regional donor report

<sup>103</sup> Track IT!

outcomes. The lack of robust longitudinal outcome data makes it difficult to evaluate the extent to which interventions translated into access to long-term, sustainable economic employment. The evaluation acknowledges the Regional Office's recent investment and efforts to capture long-term outcomes beyond the project cycles.

The LEAP I programme (2021–22) incorporated wider advocacy and civic engagement to support an enabling environment through the creation of volunteer community-based support groups established in Kirkuk and Anbar. These support groups were established to bring together CSOs and women leaders to raise issues of concern with decision makers. Members of these groups were provided with training and were able to draw attention to the challenges that displaced and vulnerable women and girls face in their communities. However, their access to decision makers and structured forums was limited.

Alongside cash-for-work, protection services were also delivered. According to programme data, between 2020 and 2023, over 5,436 vulnerable women who had been subject to violence accessed services including referrals, psychosocial counselling and legal aid through the Country Office's Women's Economic Empowerment interventions. This included support to internally displaced persons and women returnees who had been held by ISIS. The women consulted highlighted the essential nature of women-only spaces, providing them with safe spaces for support and to access specialist services.<sup>104</sup>

The evaluation noted some awareness-raising activities with men, including through engagement of over 200 male agents of positive change, supporting awareness-raising and community mobilization. Such activities would benefit from a more strategic approach to have a greater impact on men's gender perceptions and, especially, gender behaviour. Past evaluations suggested that engagement of men could be more systematically underpinned in the theory of change to address the structural causes of gender-based violence and economic empowerment.<sup>105</sup>

As the country transitions from a humanitarian to a development focus, UN Women needs to develop a clear strategy for its Women's Economic Empowerment portfolio in Iraq. The evaluation acknowledges initiatives such as LEAP III (2023–24) which focuses on building green, climate-smart businesses skills and access to green livelihoods; investment in research and knowledge products to better understand the situation of women in relation livelihoods, including a series of joint studies with ESCWA on the impact of COVID-19 on social protection and women's economic empowerment;<sup>106</sup> a scoping study with WFP on development of the green economy; and a labour market diagnostic analysis of women's economic empowerment in Iraq.<sup>107</sup> The Country Office has also engaged in discussions with WFP and UNICEF

regarding joint programming opportunities to extend the reach of its Women's Economic Empowerment portfolio.

Overall, providing protection and economic empowerment services together in women-only centres was considered to be an effective practice in offering comprehensive services to highly vulnerable women with complex needs, but the theory of change should be revisited to ensure a more contextualized approach and to ensure the sustainability of longer-term economic outcomes. While the Country Office is making efforts to move away from humanitarian work to long-term economic development work, this needs to be accompanied by private-sector engagement to ensure market preparedness. The evaluation noted the need for greater connection with central and local government departments to align projects to national strategies and establish more institutional arrangements for longer term social protection mechanisms and routes to employment.

#### **BOX 2: Testing the theory of change – Women's Economic Empowerment**

The Country Office's Women's Economic Empowerment programme provided humanitarian cash-for-work and safe spaces for women; and improved their confidence, networks, coping strategies and, at some level, their financial independence. Evidence shows that the programme's intervention logic to provide gender-sensitive humanitarian assistance through a combination of protection services together with training to develop financial skills and entrepreneurship was valid and yielded some success. However, longer-term sustainable gains were not fully realized for all target women and required a more comprehensive sustainability perspective.

<sup>104</sup> A small sample of protection related participants were consulted during field visits as it was not deemed suitable to conduct online KIIs with the protection related women participants to avoid doing further harm.

<sup>105</sup> Aguilhas (2021) Strengthening the Resilience of Syrian Women and Girls and Host Communities programme: Final evaluation -15 January 2021

<sup>106</sup> UN ESCWA (2012) Impact on Social Protection responding to Covid-19 pandemic - accessed 24 April 2024.

<sup>107</sup> UN Women (2023) Enabling the resilience of vulnerable women affected by climate change, displacement, crisis and increasing food insecurity by taking urgent measures to handle risks and empower them to participate in and benefit from mitigation of crisis including green growth.

**FINDING 6.** The Country Office's Women's Political Participation portfolio has influenced some key normative work to facilitate women's equitable and equal participation in Iraq's parliamentary elections. The Country Office also carried out operational-level interventions to address the challenges facing women's political participation in Iraq. However, there were also challenges in terms of the level of expectation placed on UN Women, particularly in supporting women parliamentarians to advocate for women's empowerment perspectives. Some sensitivities were observed regarding UN Women's partnership approaches. Outcome-level monitoring to capture and communicate the Country Office's results on Women's Political Participation needed improvement. (WPP)

The Country Office's Strategic Note outlined women's political participation and representation in decision-making in the political sphere and in peacebuilding mechanisms as a priority area. However, due to limited resource mobilization, work has largely been supported through the Women, Peace and Security component.

The Country Office has made a number of positive contributions to women's political participation in the country, particularly in facilitating women's equitable and equal participation in elections. In the context of the Iraq parliamentary elections in October 2021, UN Women was invited as the UN representative to be part of the governmental Supreme Committee, constituted to support the participation of women in parliamentary elections. According to some of the stakeholders consulted, UN Women contributed to development of the Supreme Committee action plan aimed at promoting Iraqi women's participation in elections. The Country Office provided technical support to the National Department for Iraqi Women to review the Women's Quota Law, which saw electoral quotas increase and move from being regarded as a ceiling for women's participation to a minimum standard.<sup>108</sup> Stakeholders indicated that, in collaboration with other UN entities, UN Women had also led advocacy efforts for gender sensitization of electoral procedures to address violence against women in elections, which was reported as a major concern following the 2018 elections. The Country Office provided technical support to the Independent High Electoral Committee to ensure the Electoral Code of Conduct was gender sensitive. According to management progress reports, UN Women also contributed to a new regulation regarding the reporting of violence against women in elections.<sup>109</sup> UN Women advocated for the Ministry of Interior to establish two hotlines for complaints from women exposed to harassment.

In the 2021 election, women gained 95 seats (29 per cent) achieving more than 25 per cent of seats for the first time.<sup>110</sup> Some UN stakeholders commented that as the UN representative at the Supreme Committee, UN Women had played a fruitful role in communicating with other UN

entities regarding election developments, particularly noting the collaboration with UNAMI.

The evaluation found that UN Women contributed to the development of three key manuals for parliamentarians on parliamentary good practices, integrating gender into electoral procedures and guidelines on electoral systems (See Annex 9 for details). The guidelines provided recommendations to expand women's representation in the legislature and equip women parliamentarians with tools to advocate for wider women's representation.<sup>111</sup> In 2021, the Country Office also conducted a study with ESCWA on the impact of conflict and COVID-19 on Iraqi women's political participation and engagement in peace.<sup>112</sup> This study identified key challenges in relation to women's political participation in Iraq: unconstitutional discrimination in some laws; lack of political will granting women a role in peacebuilding; lack of electoral support for women's candidacy; and gender social norms.<sup>113</sup>

At an operational level, the Country Office conducted various training sessions to support governmental partners, women leaders and CSOs in their efforts to implement the Women's Political Participation and Women, Peace and Security agenda in Iraq. In 2020, this included workshops with women parliamentarians on women's political participation, and the new electoral laws and standards, adopted under the revised Electoral System in Elections Law No. 9 of 2020.<sup>114</sup> In 2021, UN Women supported the Iraqi National Security Adviser to deliver capacity-building training for prospective women candidates in the lead up to the 2021 national parliamentary elections.<sup>115</sup>

According to programme reporting data, UN Women's initiatives also included training of 65 female candidates and campaign leaders in the lead up to the 2023 provincial elections on understanding electoral procedures and regulations; designing and leading successful election campaigns; and mitigating the risks of violence against women. Programme monitoring data indicated a shift in participants' level of awareness of these issues from 38 per cent to 61 per cent in pre and post-tests.<sup>116</sup> However, programme personnel noted the work was initiated at a

<sup>108</sup> GIZ Peace Project Narrative Donor Report 2021

<sup>109</sup> On 1 August 2021, the Supreme Judicial Council of Iraq issued a regulation regarding reporting procedures for violence against women in elections.

<sup>110</sup> UNAMI (2022) Gender analysis of Iraq's October 2021 national elections.

<sup>111</sup> GIZ Peace Project Narrative Donor Report 2021.

<sup>112</sup> UN ESCWA (2021) The impact of the Conflict and Covid on Iraqi Women, Political, Participation and Engagement in Peace, last accessed June 2024

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> GIZ Peace Project Narrative Donor Report 2021.

<sup>115</sup> Training programmes for women candidates for parliamentary elections

<sup>116</sup> UNDP Joint Project Donor Narrative Report 2022-23.



late stage in election preparations, which impacted the depth of results.

The stakeholders consulted indicated that UN Women's work through its CSO partners at the community level and with journalists on social norms change was building an enabling environment for greater support to women's political participation. The evaluation also found that the Country Office had an ambition to include youth more systematically as a key demographic. The Country Office reported it had delivered a series of training workshops during 2020 with 15 Iraqi youth to establish a youth alliance and increase youth and women's participation, which included a social media campaign to increase youth awareness of the political situation in Iraq.<sup>117</sup> However, no data was available to assess the impact of these training events.

The evaluation noted some critical feedback on UN Women's contribution to facilitating women's political participation in Iraq. Some key stakeholders indicated that UN Women needed to play a greater role, i.e. in supporting women parliamentarians on various issues such as laws, legislation and south-south exchange with other countries to better equip them to advocate for women's empowerment. UN Women's role to help the system retain women's empowerment focal point positions was also highlighted.

The evaluation also noted some concerns and contradictory viewpoints regarding UN Women's approach in this area of work. Some key stakeholders felt that UN Women's interventions should steer away from working with specific women political leaders or personalities who come with distinct political affiliations. However, UN Women personnel were of the opinion that they had an inclusive approach and worked equally with everyone. Overall, the evaluation team recognizes that women political leaders can act as key enablers, paving the way for meaningful, contextually relevant work on Women's Political Participation. However, as the political participation space is highly sensitive, such partnerships also risk being misunderstood or misrepresented, potentially compromising UN's neutral image in any given country. UN Women should therefore weigh the opportunities versus risks of such affiliations, in consultation with the UNCT and UN Women's regional leadership.

The evaluation heard that the UN Women joint programme with UNDP to collaborate with the Council of Ministers National Department of Iraqi Women and Iraqi Parliament on Women's Political Participation<sup>118</sup> was apparently discontinued due to performance concerns and funding challenges.

Some stakeholders indicated that Country Office personnel had limited technical capacity in this thematic area of work. While the Country Office has invested in long and

short-term consultancies and has received some surge support from the Regional Office, feedback from stakeholders indicated that use of the surge support was suboptimal. The evaluation noted that as the role of UNAMI changes, creating a vacuum, UN Women will be expected to play a more prominent role in the Women's Political Participation space. The Country Office indicated it is preparing to play a more integral role in this space within the UNCT.

Overall, Women's Political Participation is a critical area of work in the context of Iraq and UN Women has made some contributions particularly in the context of the 2021 parliamentary election. However, given the limited resources available for this work, the Country Office should make the most of joint collaborations with its UNCT partners to achieve meaningful impact. Women's Political Participation is a highly sensitive space and therefore, the work would benefit from a clear, collaboratively developed strategy, vision and committed resources. The portfolio would also benefit from more outcome-level monitoring to understand and capture the Country Office's contribution to Women's Political Participation.

#### **BOX 4: Testing the theory of change – Women's Political Participation**

The Country Office is working strategically to enhance the capacities and awareness of women and youth on importance of women's roles in promoting political participation and peacebuilding. The evidence suggests the Country Office has successfully engaged women at many levels, but stronger resourcing of networks to help build alliances across women's organizing would help foster a stronger women's movement and transformative change.

<sup>117</sup> German Peace Project Annual Narrative Report 2020.

<sup>118</sup> According to the UNDP Joint Project Donor Narrative Report 2022-23, through this collaboration two joint round tables were held with the Council of Ministers National Department of Iraqi Women and political parties to explore the obstacles to participation faced by Iraqi women in the political arena. The round table resulted in a series of recommendations to the Iraqi parliament on combating violence against women in politics, noting the key role of the media to address gender bias and negative social norms around women in politics, and outlined the conditions necessary for advancing the inclusion of women with disabilities.

**FINDING 7. UN Women's work on Ending Violence Against Women involved normative, coordination and operational pillars. While the Country Office's operational work was effective, its normative and coordination work needs stronger focus. Joint programming with UNFPA in the Kurdistan region presents a good model of cooperation across UN entities, with the potential for expansion to the remote areas beyond Erbil. Provision of data on Ending Violence Against Women and work on social norms changes with the involvement of men, boys and other key stakeholders needs further strengthening. (EVAW)**

Ending Violence Against Women was identified as a key priority for the Country Office across its normative, coordination and operational pillars. The Ending Violence Against Women portfolio received just over US\$ 1 million from the Italian Government to support a joint programme with UNFPA focusing on the Kurdistan region, and through Women, Peace and Security arrangements funded by Finland and the European Union.

The joint programme with UNFPA aimed at increasing access to quality gender-based violence protection services, such as mental health and psychosocial support; and strengthening case management and referrals to other services upon survivors' requests. It also aimed to provide the survivors of gender-based violence with easier access to justice through endorsed practical standard operating procedures for legal and police actors.

UN Women targeted support across key national institutions operating in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, including the High Council of Women Development, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Gender Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women and women shelter personnel to strengthen their capacities to improve gender-based violence protection services. This also included development of seven technical resource guides on addressing and mitigating the impacts of gender-based violence (see detailed outline of knowledge products in Annex 9).

Since 2021, UN Women has provided training to 83 judges and prosecutors on how to better respond to cases involving violence against women and effective remedial measures in women's access to justice. Monitoring data and stakeholder consultations indicated there was an increase in knowledge and capacity and a tangible shift in attitudes across the legal professionals who took part in the workshops. During interviews, judges commented that the training had strengthened their knowledge of legal provisions and international standards. Among the success factors cited was greater understanding of the survivor's situation, and national and international laws and how to implement them. Most judges consulted noted there was added value in learning from other

judges in other governorates in terms of legal insights and quality discussions. This had a positive impact on their ability to provide non-discriminatory justice for survivors and on justice sector capacity. However, stakeholders also noted the legal limitations to progress in this area and that the training could have had a more targeted selection criteria to reach professionals directly working on gender-based violence cases.

Training was also provided at the service delivery level, reportedly reaching 275 professionals, covering 27 gender-based violence service providers across 7 directorates, including shelter managers and technical staff to enhance the capacities for those working on hotline case management and shelter operation procedures.<sup>119</sup> Programme monitoring data reflected that the training boosted confidence and communication skills across personnel, with 90 per cent reporting increased knowledge on gender-based violence support, case management and counselling.<sup>120</sup> Monitoring data also reflected a 50 per cent uptake across Gender Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women offices of new gender-based violence case management systems, and integration of harmonized gender-based violence case management systems.<sup>121</sup> These benefits were confirmed by stakeholders who highlighted the positive impact of the training on strengthening their knowledge and providing new approaches to case management and protection and psychosocial support for survivors of gender-based violence/conflict-related sexual violence.<sup>122</sup> They also valued the support for institutionalizing gender-based violence systems as this was resulting in a more coordinated approach across government agencies.

One of the intervention's key success factors was that UN Women's capacity strengthening inputs at institutional level were complemented by UNFPA's technical work, such as development of standard operating procedures to operationalize gender-based violence case management procedures across government agencies. The programme was a good example of how UN agencies' comparative technical capacities can come together to build on each agency's comparative strengths. The stakeholders consulted indicated the need to scale up similar joint programming in other parts of the country.

<sup>119</sup> The evaluation learned that a reported 275 professionals from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the General Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women had received training to improve their knowledge and capacities on gender-based violence and survivor-centred approaches. A further 206 trainees were reportedly trained on case management using new hotline standard operating procedures and 25 trainees also reportedly received Training of Trainers to support further dissemination of technical capacity-building across service delivery personnel.

<sup>120</sup> Government of Italy, Donor Report, March 2023

<sup>121</sup> *ibid*

<sup>122</sup> To complement this, UNFPA developed Shelter Standard Operating Procedures for the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and provided additional training on how to operationalize new procedures for centre management and in working with survivors, and provided technical and financial support to hotline staff and support to Gender Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women offices to provide gender-based violence services.

Despite this positive feedback, stakeholders indicated some key areas for improvement. The programme needed to focus more on the remote areas beyond Erbil as most survivors of violence come to Erbil from remote areas. There was also scope to reduce duplication of activities between both agencies. The vocational training was a good start, but UN Women needed to develop a longer-term approach, supporting women to take next steps when moving outside the shelter. Broader partnerships beyond the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs could also be strengthened, including with the Ministry of Interior, Justice and Health.

UN Women's input across the project was not very visible and the Country Office should therefore strengthen its communication and dissemination of programme results, lessons and good practices.

The evaluation noted that the work on Ending Violence Against Women carried out under the Women, Peace and Security and Women's Economic Empowerment portfolios also contributed towards capacity strengthening on gender-responsive protection and justice processes. Programme monitoring data shows that since 2019, over 500 judges, gender unit personnel, police and frontline shelter staff at the federal level had been provided capacity strengthening. Monitoring data suggested that the training has built capacities in gender-responsive humanitarian principles, do no harm, and in guiding principles for gender-based violence programming. Consultations undertaken through the evaluation validated the positive feedback of UN Women's technical inputs. In particular, capacity-building support for justice sector professionals<sup>123</sup> had influenced realization of a new declaration issued in 2021 establishing special courts for domestic violence across all governorates. This was noted as a substantial achievement by the judiciary and a positive indicator of the willingness of justice professionals to embrace the concepts of human rights for women in Iraq. However, the evaluation observed that portfolio monitoring of these capacity-building efforts relied heavily on trainers and the evaluation would recommend independent validation of data to better understand the impact of Country Office initiatives.

In addition to its capacity-strengthening programmes, UN Women supported seven safe spaces and four women's shelters with financial and technical support in seven governorates (Erbil, Dohuk, Ninewa, Salah al-din, Anbar, Baghdad and Kirkuk). Past evaluations noted that the model of providing protection and economic empowerment services together in women-only centres was innovative and offered comprehensive services to highly vulnerable women with complex needs. As a result of these initiatives, women can discuss sensitive subjects in safe environments, which helps them better consider important issues such as gender-based violence.<sup>124</sup>

Stakeholders consulted by the evaluation noted a critical shortage of safe houses and that UN Women's support had added value and was filling the gap in provision of key services. Since 2019, over 10,000 women were reported as having received counselling advice and referrals to other services. The past evaluative evidence suggests there has been an increase in the number of gender-based violence cases processed through the court each year as a result of UN Women programmes.<sup>125</sup>

The evaluation noted that across multiple interventions, UN Women had created space for marginalized women from internally displaced and refugee communities and survivors of gender-based violence/conflict-related sexual violence to advocate for their needs through the creation of women's committees and provision of training in advocacy, facilitation and mobilization skills. The evaluation observed that women's committees were bringing women together to raise issues of concern with decision makers and to guide service sensitization. However, these committees were project linked and not all women continued to play an advocacy role beyond project time frame.

At the UN coordination level, UN women was a part of the sub-cluster group on social cohesion and sexual and gender-based violence; however, stakeholders noted that UN women's contribution was limited and could be further strengthened. UN Women, in partnership with UNFPA, UNDP and ESCWA, conducted a study on Gender Justice and the Law in the Arab States region launched in 2019 to provide a comprehensive assessment of laws and policies affecting gender equality and protection from gender-based violence in the Arab states region.<sup>126</sup> This study was an important step in building knowledge on the needs gaps in relation to violence against women and girls. However, there remains a lack of up-to-date data on the status of violence against women and girls in Iraq, and government stakeholders require support in developing the gender profile. UN Women initiated a study with ESCWA on the cost of ending violence against women in 2023 and the scoping study was completed. This is an area in which UN Women's technical capacity could add greater value.

At the normative level, UN Women has worked in coordination with the government to promote legislative reforms to the Iraqi Constitution, Penal Code, Family Law and Personal Status Law, among others, with the aim to eliminate violence against women and girls in compliance with CEDAW recommendations. Since 2019, UN Women has been advocating for an amendment to strengthen the Anti-Domestic Violence Law to protect female survivors of gender-based violence, but progress stalled during the COVID-19 pandemic. The gender backlash further limited advancement on domestic violence legal reforms. The evaluation noted there is also need for greater focus on

<sup>123</sup> UN Women (2021) Enhancing protection and response mechanisms to address gender-based violence and conflict related sexual violence in Iraq, Evaluation Report

<sup>124</sup> Agulhas (2021) Strengthening the Resilience of Syrian Women and Girls and Host Communities programme: Final evaluation -15 January 2021

<sup>125</sup> *ibid*

<sup>126</sup> See: UNFPA (2018) Gender Justice and the law in Iraq

domestic violence against male children and to protect the rights of disabled and vulnerable groups. Stakeholders interviewed suggested UN Women could do more to facilitate such legal reforms.

UN Women had established an effective partnership with the High Council for Women and Development and Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs but that closer engagement with Gender Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women in Kurdistan and in federal Iraq should be initiated. UN Women has engaged in a number of initiatives to address violence against women in politics covered under Finding 6 related to its Women's Political Participation thematic area. Stakeholders indicated that there were several opportunities for UN Women to expand on its thematic areas of work. First, violence against women in elections, in particular cyberbullying is a key area of violence against women that needs greater attention. Second, in the area of social norms change, the involvement of men, boys, religious leaders, education institutions etc. are of paramount importance and UN Women needs to lead on this work. There is great scope for the expansion of the Arab States' regional programme Dare to Care in Iraq.

The Country Office had a focus on ending violence against women advocacy and sensitization efforts, most notably through its advocacy messaging around International Women's Day events and 16 Days of Activism which engaged with a wide network of government and CSO partners. However, programme partners noted that coordination and support to connect into collective advocacy campaigns should be further expanded in light of the backlash against gender issues and the shrinking civil society space. Challenges within the media were also highlighted, e.g. harassment and disrespect of women, and attacks on women activists and politicians. The evaluation noted there is continued need for quality, contextualized media training for those women who suffer from social media harassment.

The evaluation noted that the Country Office had mobilized technical support from the Regional Ending Violence Against Women thematic expert for a short period of time. Ensuring the Country Office's future technical expertise under this portfolio will be an important consideration for UN Women.

UN Women's focus should look beyond service delivery, with continuous stronger focus on normative work; and a broader role in the provision of data and policy guidance on Ending Violence Against Women, and in the area of gender social norms change.

#### **BOX 5: Testing the theory of change – Ending Violence Against Women**

The Country Office had the underpinning intervention logic that UN Women will be able to create a holistic ecosystem to end violence against women through its normative, operational and coordination work. Its operational work was underpinned by the logic that building the capacity of personnel and institutions will deliver gender-responsive services to the survivors of gender-based violence, which was accurate and largely effective. However, the Country Office's normative and coordination work needed more attention and connection to lessons from the office's operational work. It also needed to focus on the thematic areas where it could add value, such as gender social norms change, data evidence and policy guidance on Ending Violence Against Women.



**FINDING 8.** The Country Office invested in the Women, Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) to develop effective CSO partnerships and bolster an active CSO community. WPHF-funded projects supported safe spaces for women run by CSOs and conflict prevention at local levels. However, management of WPHF funding, grants and grantees stretched UN Women personnel due to limited support funds. The absence of a clear policy or guidelines in the WPHF operational guidelines regarding a mandatory “cool-off period” before members of the National Steering Committee could apply for WPHF grants created confusion and misunderstanding regarding the impartial grantee selection process in Iraq. (WPHF)

The Country Office was one of the main recipients of the Women, Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) and was the recipient of seven allocations totalling almost US\$ 10 million during the evaluation period. The WPHF funded several cycles of grant-related applications submitted by local CSOs through the fund's established selection mechanism. This funding has been dispersed to 30 Iraqi CSO partners, covering a large number of Iraqi and Kurdistan governorates (with 22 current partners), which on average received grants of US\$ 150,000 – US\$ 200,000. In addition to the grants, the Country Office received US\$ 300,000 for capacity-building initiatives as well as 7 per cent of the grant amount over six years for the grant administrative and management function.

The stakeholders consulted acknowledged that the WPHF was critical in maintaining good partnerships and alliances with a wide group of CSOs throughout Iraq and supported its involvement in key gender areas such as Women, Peace and Security and addressing gender-based violence issues. The evaluation team's consultation with grantees indicated that WPHF-funded projects<sup>127</sup> played an important role in financially supporting safe spaces for women run by CSOs and in conflict prevention at local levels.

In general, WPHF funding reportedly provided more flexibility and space to the grantees to design more relevant delivery models with greater contextual and need analyses built into the intervention compared to UN Women-supported standard programmes. For example, the Women's Economic Empowerment projects observed during field visits offered more structured and longer-term vocational support by providing small tools packages such as sewing machines, compared to other livelihood interventions that were short-term humanitarian projects with limited scope for the implementing partners to participate in the programme design.

The capacity-building component of the WPHF for the CSO partners mostly covered areas such as project design, effective grant management and resource mobilization to enable them to access funds for the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The evaluation noted that capacity-building

was delivered through an online platform developed in response to COVID-19 restrictions and had supported 60 individuals across 15 WPHF CSO partners between October 2020 and January 2022. According to project monitoring data, 80 per cent of the participants were satisfied with the website and learning materials.<sup>128</sup> However, a review of capacity-building efforts conducted by the WPHF Secretariat in 2022 noted that training courses had not adequately integrated the Women, Peace and Security component and there was no clear evidence of the training's impact on the partners' resource mobilization, technical capacities and skills.<sup>129</sup> The review noted it was unclear whether follow-up coaching and mentoring had been provided to support participants in applying the learning and information gained.

The evaluation team received mixed feedback from CSOs on the content of the training. While some valued the content on organizational strengthening, others suggested it was not well aligned with their priorities. The amount of funding allocated to capacity-building (US\$ 300,000) was thought to be high compared to the number of CSOs trained and the courses developed. The evaluation observed that, as of 2023, the portal was no longer functional (see Section 3.4 on Efficiency for more details).

At the time of the evaluation, stakeholders indicated there were no clear policies or guidelines restricting CSOs who were part of the National Steering Committee<sup>130</sup> from applying for WPHF grants. The evaluation notes the existing WPHF operational Manual<sup>131</sup> states:

*"to avoid conflicts of interest, all members of the national level steering committee must declare any conflict of interest with any points on the agenda. If a project proposal is submitted to the national level steering committee by a participating organization with a seat on the national level steering committee, or if the participating organization is an implementation partner or will indirectly receive funds through the project, the organization shall not be allowed to vote on the corresponding item."*

However, according to stakeholders, this was not adequate and there was a need for a clear policy regarding a

<sup>127</sup> According to the WPHF operational guidelines: To avoid conflicts of interest, all members of the national level steering committee must declare any conflict of interest with any points on the agenda. If a project proposal is submitted to the national level steering committee by a participating organization with a seat on the national level steering committee, or if the participating organization is an implementation partner or will indirectly receive funds through the project, the organization shall not be allowed to vote on the corresponding item.

<sup>128</sup> Country Office Annual Report, 20 Dec 2021.

<sup>129</sup> WHPF (May 2019–Dec 2020) Review of WPHF Capacity Building Results in Iraq, May 2022.

<sup>130</sup> Country-level steering committees or national-level steering mechanisms have delegated responsibility from the WPHF Funding Board to manage WPHF allocations at the country level.

<sup>131</sup> The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund (WPHF) Operations Manual

mandatory “cool-off period” before National Steering Committee members might apply for WPHF grants. According to UN Women personnel, in the absence of such clear WPHF guidelines, they followed a strict protocol on this issue, not allowing CSOs which are members of the National Steering Committee to apply for the grants. However, the absence of a clear policy on this matter created confusion and misunderstanding among various stakeholders and, therefore, this should be addressed by the WPHF secretariat. The issue has been flagged with the WPHF team, which is committed to resolving the matter in the next Terms of Reference for National Steering Committees.

Evaluation consultations with UN Women personnel indicated that the current arrangement of relying on existing personnel to manage WPHF grants and grantees without additional support might have diverted Country Office personnel time and attention from their usual normative, coordination and resource mobilization efforts. According to them, this matter has been raised with WPHF management. They also highlighted the risk to the financial sustainability of Country Office operations when WPHF funding ends.

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**FINDING 9. The Country Office successfully mobilized funds through regional and global joint programmes. Operating in a humanitarian context where funding is usually short term, the Country Office applied a phased approach to facilitate longer-term focus. There was limited local donor coordination to facilitate a dialogue on the need for longer-term investment in women’s empowerment, including seeking non-earmarked resources for the Strategic Note.**

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The Country Office managed a project portfolio that included both humanitarian and development initiatives. The evaluation recognizes the inherent challenges of operating in a humanitarian context, where funding is usually short term and the Country Office’s efforts through phased projects over the years. The evaluation observed limited local donor coordination by UN Women to facilitate a dialogue on the need for longer-term investment in women’s empowerment, including seeking non-earmarked resources for the Strategic Note. Since 2018, the WPHF has prioritized Iraq, allowing the Country Office to build partnerships with civil society through the fund and similar grants. However, these funds are not stable long-term, as they are variable and may be discontinued.

The programme partners consulted noted sustainability remains a critical concern, with high dependency on UN Women for continued support, which risks the sustainability of gender equality efforts once direct support ends. According to these partners, interventions also need to be better aligned with the Iraq Government’s national strategies, such as Iraq Vision 2030 and the National Development Plan to ensure they are embedded within local

frameworks and can be sustained beyond the life of projects. Some partners also advocated for UN Women to create a coordination platform for CSOs to facilitate their collective and potentially sustainable engagement with the government and donors.

Donor feedback emphasized the importance of UN Women demonstrating the tangible impact and value for money of their funded interventions to strengthen the Entity’s credibility and their longer-term support. Feedback underscored that while UN Women’s work in Iraq is valued, it faces challenges in strategic coordination, communication and demonstrating programme impact.

There is a need to rethink UN Women’s value proposition as Iraq shifts to development programming. The Country Office’s approach should be more strategic given its limited resources and highlight its more normative and institutional-level engagement to reframe its role as a more advisory, technical Country Office. UN Women will need to be creative in resource mobilization and consider the financial implications for operating costs as UNAMI scales back its operations.

### 3.4 Efficiency

Does the Country Office have appropriate governance, capacity and capability to ensure good use of resources (personnel, funding and assets) to deliver results? To what extent are effective evidence, learning and knowledge management systems and culture in place?

**FINDING 10.** The Country Office staffing structure needed to be “fit for purpose,” with dedicated technical expertise and a well developed second line of leadership. Monitoring, evaluation and learning functions were under-developed and under-resourced. Leadership transition issues, strained relationships with government counterparts and the gender backlash created a stressful work environment affecting the morale of personnel. Some of the Country Office’s modalities, such as third-party contracting for some key core functions like communications, had affected its value-for-money. More systematic communication was required between the Country Office, Regional Office and headquarters and the UN Resident Coordinator. Regular regional management oversight could have facilitated the early identification and mitigation of risks related to gender backlash and leadership transition.

The Country Office has successfully mobilized funds through regional and global joint programmes, highlighting its reliance on non-core funding sources, which made up 80 per cent of its budget, compared to only 20 per cent from core funds. Since 2018, the WPHF has prioritized Iraq, however, these funds may not be stable or long term and may be discontinued. Considering the planned closure of UNAMI, the Country Office may face additional costs in preparing for this change and to its operations as a result.

The resource mobilization trend analysis compiled by IAS showed that the Country Office had set progressively higher Development Results Framework (DRF) budget targets each

year from 2020 to 2023, with actual achievements falling short, indicating a persistent gap between goals and actual funding. This funding gap was evident in 2023, when the Country Office achieved only 57 per cent of its planned budget for the Development Results Framework. This was partly due to the reprioritization of funds by donors, for example to the Gaza crisis. Overall, the trend of setting optimistic targets needs to be accompanied by robust plans and flexibility, with risk mitigation measures in crisis countries to avoid budget shortfalls, which impact the Country Office’s ability to sustain its programmes (see Table 2 below).

**TABLE 2.** Iraq Country Office development results framework (DRF) resource mobilization

Description	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
<b>DRF budget target (US\$)</b>	8,780,656	6,379,720	6,286,072	7,252,917	10,862,854
<b>DRF actual budget (US\$)</b>	6,371,471	4,350,877	3,744,411	3,740,000	6,212,000
<b>Resource mobilization targets (%)</b>	73%	68 %	60 %	52 %	57 %

Source: UN Women Internal Audit Report, 2024

At the time of the evaluation, the evidence collected indicated the current office structure was not fully “fit for purpose”. Personnel skills were predominantly project management oriented and technical thematic expertise was limited. While this was supplemented by long and short-term consultancy contracts and technical expertise drawn from the Regional Office (for the Ending Violence Against Women and Women’s Political Participation thematic areas of work) the lack of capacity still limited the Country Office’s ability to provide technical and subject-matter support and oversight.

The Iraq–Yemen Cluster Office arrangement meant that the Country Representative was out of the country for relatively long periods of time. Under such circumstances, a stable functioning deputy was needed. The evaluation noted that the Operations Manager and Programme Management Specialist played the roles of second in command when the former Country Representative was away. However, stakeholders indicated there were limitations in their decision-making authority. The need for more senior representation in Erbil was also brought to the attention of the evaluation team.

The monitoring, evaluation and learning functions were under-developed and under-resourced and capacity was not adequate to support the Country Office’s diverse programme portfolio. Most of the donor reports reviewed captured limited evidence on outcomes or impact. The Country Office confirmed that monitoring was mostly carried out by programme managers; was highly dependent on reporting by programme partners; and acknowledged the need for more investment in robust monitoring and evaluation processes. Programme managers were not able to validate the data reported on the numbers of target population reached, which presents a risk that data is incomplete or inaccurate. Ideally, key elements of monitoring should be performed by independent specialists qualified in results-oriented monitoring.

The Country Office had limited number of evaluations during the review period concerned and did not meet the IEAIS evaluation coverage norms<sup>132</sup>. The introduction of the gender-sensitive Resilience Capacity Index for LEAP, piloted in partnership with the Regional Office offered the potential to generate a more holistic and stronger evidence base. The evaluation team was informed that the Country Office had asked for additional resources from “unallocated corporate funds” which was approved. A Monitoring and Evaluation specialist post for the cluster was established accordingly. However, the recruitment process had yet to be initiated in light of the Iraq–Yemen cluster delinking.

When referring to the Country Office’s advocacy and communication efforts, stakeholders highlighted the importance of having the right personnel in place with the

skillset and seniority to be able to identify opportunities in a timely manner and provide effective and strategic messaging. The Communications function was currently left to programme managers to support. Despite previous active communications, there had been a tendency for communications to focus on key events and could be stronger on advocacy for gender equality and women’s empowerment beyond projects or international events.

Internally, there appeared to be a lack of collective vision for the Country Office and there was limited communication and coordination across some teams. There was an atmosphere of uncertainty and personnel were concerned about the stability of their positions. The personnel survey carried out by the evaluation and internal audit team revealed that 28 per cent of personnel (N=4) felt overloaded with their work, 35 per cent (N=5) sometimes felt overloaded, and the remaining personnel (35 per cent) reported that their work was manageable.<sup>133</sup>

Additional areas highlighted for improvement included enhancing technical assistance and coordination; better alignment with governmental priorities; need for clear communication; improved staff retention; and staff well-being and development. Other aspects of how the team functioned were reported positively in the staff survey (see Figure 6).

The Country Office was officially delinked from the Iraq–Yemen Cluster Office in December 2023, and the leadership transition during the same time (September–November 2023) increased stress, uncertainty and workload issues among personnel. Personnel also shared concerns during and after the transition about limited internal communication and information-sharing from senior management, e.g. Country Office leadership changes and future plans, leading to some trust issues. Personnel also highlighted that strained relationships with government counterparts and the gender backlash had created a stressful work environment, which has affected morale.

Most of the internal and external stakeholders consulted during the evaluation indicated that country leadership should be rotated regularly. New leadership can help to nurture fresh thinking and maintain versatile partnerships. Stakeholders reported that the appointment of interim management after three months of a vacant position, has been perceived positively.

The evaluation team noted that, overall, the Country Office team maintained good relationships and funding modalities with its programme partners. However, in early 2023, transition to Quantum and new policies from the Central Bank of Iraq and the Iraqi government (which resulted in a halt in the use USD in Iraqi banks and markets) resulted in some bottlenecks (for more details refer to the

<sup>132</sup> IEAIS evaluation coverage norms

<sup>133</sup> UN Women, Iraq Personnel Survey, Question 16 detailed in Annex 7.



Iraq Country Office Internal Audit report, 2024).<sup>134</sup> The programme funded by the Italian Government also faced delays for both UN Women and UNFPA partners, due to slow adoption by local government authorities and was extended for 13 months beyond its intended completion.

Value for money was noted as an issue by both the evaluation and internal audit team. The Operational Risk Assessment conducted by IAS in 2022 also highlighted this as a risk. For instance, the Country Office relied on sister UN agencies and a long-term agreement with a third-party contractor to fulfil its personnel needs in Iraq. Some core functions, such as communications, should have been undertaken by UN Women personnel instead of external consultants. The costs of such consultancies was considered high compared to what was delivered. It was good to note that, at the time of the evaluation, most of the vendor-contracted consultants had been converted to other staff categories and efforts were being made to fully resolve the situation.

Another example noted by the evaluation and internal audit team was the development of two IT portals. In 2023, the Country Office independently developed two local-level portals for programmatic activities without prior involvement of headquarters IST support, contravening corporate requirements on consulting IST prior to the development of any portal. Upon the consultant's departure in September 2023, both portals ceased to function, demonstrating a lack of sustainable maintenance planning. The internal audit estimated the financial implications of this situation to be around US\$ 0.7 million, paid over the course of three years, with the investment not fully meeting its intended outcomes and not demonstrating sustainability or value for money. The 2022 IAS risk assessment recommended consulting with IST to ensure system sustainability. Following this recommendation, the Country Office liaised with headquarters and consultation with IST was in process in 2023. As underlined in the effectiveness section, some

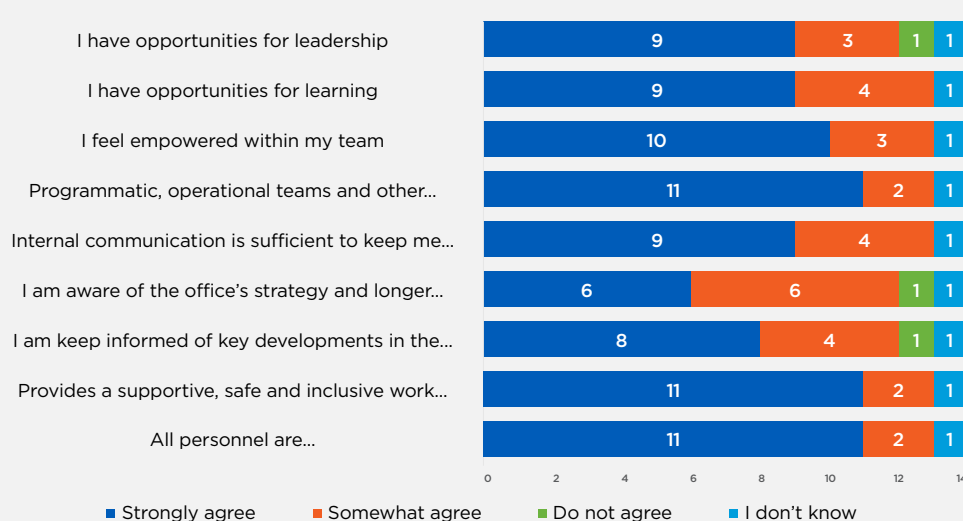
interventions such as the vocational training, were expensive investments given the limited numbers of people reached and the results achieved.<sup>135</sup>

For countries going through significant transitions and in politically sensitive contexts, the evaluation noted some areas where Regional Office support and the management oversight function could be improved. For instance, the scope of quality assurance missions,<sup>136</sup> such as that conducted in May 2023, could be expanded to include independent consultation with key external partners, e.g. government and UNCT partners, for early identification of risks and concerns. Communication between Regional Office leadership and the UN Resident Coordinator should also be more regular and systematic.

There also is a need to establish more systematic and regular exchange between the Country Office, Regional Office and headquarters for countries like Iraq, which are facing various forms of political pushback and backlash to facilitate timely guidance and support to country leadership. The evaluation noted that several programme and CSO partners had faced challenges in working on issues related to women's empowerment and rights. In this regard, there should be stronger application of the "do no harm" principle.<sup>137</sup>

As the funding arena becomes increasingly competitive; humanitarian financing reduces; the development sphere focus grows; and as UNAMI prepares to transition out (having provided considerable operational support to UNCT members), the Country Office needs to rethink its value proposition, adjust the office's strategic vision and communicate it with the UN system and donors. The Country Office also needs to refine and diversify its resource mobilization strategy and seek financing from the private sector as well as domestic resources.

Figure.6: Evaluation and internal audit personnel survey results Q 15



<sup>134</sup> Internal Audit Report, UN Women Country Office in Iraq, 2024

<sup>135</sup> For more details, refer to the internal audit report, 2024.

<sup>136</sup> Part of the role of the Regional Office is to provide quality assurance over Country Offices, which includes ensuring offices integrate/mainstream audit compliance into their daily processes. Part of this process involves a quality review exercise, with an onsite assessment to establish if the Country Office has the structure, resources and controls to identify priorities; develop and implement its field programme and planned activities; and monitor performance. The team reviewed sampled documents and had discussions with Country Office colleagues. Given that the office had an IAS risk assessment in 2022, this was an opportunity to work with the office to address the recommendations.

<sup>137</sup> See UN Women's Push Forward For Rights, Equality and Justice-An Evolving UN Women Strategy, released in August 2024 for more guidance.

### 3.5 Gender equality and human rights

Has the Country Office's portfolio been designed and implemented according to leave no one behind principles, including a disability perspective?

**FINDING 11.** The Country Office has made some progress in the formal sphere to advance gender equality and women's empowerment through supporting normative work around women's political representation, leadership and peacebuilding. In the informal sphere, it has contributed towards creating space for women to take up leadership roles, but its work on gender social norms change requires a more intentional approach. There were challenges regarding the Country Offices' preparedness and capacity to address the gender backlash that emerged in 2023. Country Office programmes intentionally targeted marginalized women; however, there was limited evidence of a systematic approach towards engagement of women with disabilities<sup>138</sup> and there were requests for the office to expand its geographical reach to more traditional and conservative rural governorates.

The Country Office programme was viewed across the four quadrants of The Gender at Work Framework<sup>139</sup> and it was evident that it targeted each of the four quadrants, and both formal and informal structures through a variety of interventions to a greater and lesser extent.

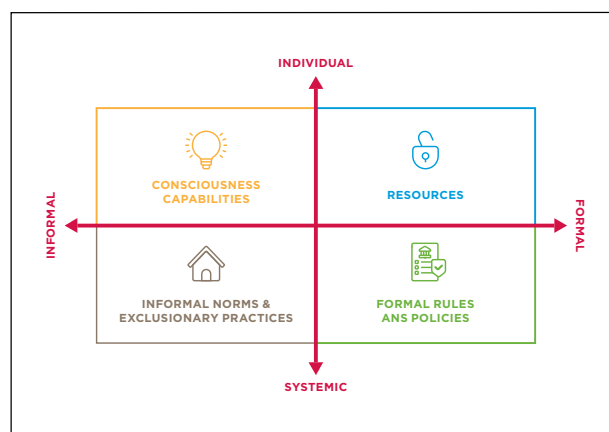
Regarding the formal quadrants, the Country Office's work and advocacy has influenced legislative and policy development/amendments in the country. Some examples include the normative frameworks and guidelines for its Women Peace and Security work through the Iraq National Action Plan to increase women's participation in the political space and work related to preventing and addressing gender-based violence.

Areas for improvement and further development include:

- Potential to extend efforts in peacebuilding platforms through the planned mediators network, and to further engage at a normative level to address the barriers to women's involvement in decision-making platforms within political parties and political structures.
- The Country Office contributed to strengthening institutional capacity and generated empirical evidence through gender data and reports, which could be further built upon.
- More coherent and collaborative work is required to navigate some of the key challenges in the country, such as dealing with the use of the term "gender"; removal of women's empowerment focal points across government departments; and addressing violence against women political candidates and representatives.
- Normative work on Women's Economic Empowerment needs a clear strategy and attention.

- Work to convene and facilitate CSO advocacy efforts, finding ways to formalize women's alliances and networks to ensure their collective inputs and voices are systematically fed into normative processes could also be further strengthened.

Figure 7: Gender at Work Framework



In the informal quadrants, the Country Office has made progress in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment by raising awareness and increasing the acceptance and space for women to take on leadership roles in informal spaces.

The programme partner survey showed that 100 per cent (N=17) felt the lives of women and girls around them had been improved by the work of UN Women; and 71 per cent (N=12)

<sup>138</sup> See: UN Disability Inclusion Strategy, 2019

<sup>139</sup> The Gender at work framework identifies four, interlinked domains of change needed to make sustainable progress on gender equality and women's empowerment: individual change, formal change, systemic change and informal change. This is one of the most widely applied frameworks to better understand the types of changes UN entities contribute to.

felt that UN Women's impact on women's empowerment had been significant. Interviews with target populations also indicated similar positive feedback, particularly emphasizing a sense of empowerment to make household decisions and take up community leadership roles.

The Country Office programme has increased the scope of civil society actors engaged and, according to civil society partners, there was strong engagement from marginalized women from rural and conservative host communities, and hard to reach communities such as internally displaced persons, refugees and ISIS returnees. However, the situation for internally displaced persons, refugees and returnees in Iraq is increasingly uncertain, with key persistent issues relating to the Personal Status Law and Family Status Law which has reduced women's autonomy and access to civil documentation. Planned government closures of internally displaced persons camps present a key risk to women without provision of adequate social protection safety nets. Similarly, as Iraq moves into the development phase, a longer-term reintegration programme for internally displaced persons needs particular consideration. Similarly, economic empowerment interventions, such as cash-for-work, need translation into longer-term economic independence, transforming gender and labour norms.

All stakeholders interviewed as part of the evaluation process indicated the continuing need for work to change prevailing social attitudes and perceptions concerning women's role within society. Stakeholders also noted the need for UN Women to strengthen its preparedness and capacity to identify and address gender backlash, particularly in the context of the 2023 ban on the use of the term "gender". The Country Office has made some efforts to influence the gender social norms that restrict the participation of women, with an increasing acceptance of women in public sphere both in regard to livelihoods and leadership roles and in advocating for the importance of women's role in building Iraq's future. This work could be further strengthened through a coherent strategy on social norms change. A stronger social relations approach is needed to support work with men and communities to achieve sustainable social norms change. The programme's results framework could be strengthened with social and gender norms measurement tools to better capture resistance to change and potential backlash.

The evaluation noted that disaggregated data on the targeted population across programmes was rather limited, with no central database held. While there is not a corporate requirement to hold a centralized database, this could assist the Country Office in capturing longer-term impact against target groups. Monitoring and evaluation systems still need further work to effectively track the transformative changes of civil society interventions, such as attitudes towards women's participation and tangible changes in women's participation in decision-making processes.

Leave no one behind is a fundamental principle driving the work of UN agencies and a critical element of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The Iraq programme intentionally targeted marginalized women from traditionally marginalized rural host communities as well as internally displaced persons, refugees and women-headed households. Implementing partners demonstrated a commitment to inclusion and reach into marginalized communities, which was seen as a strength of the programme portfolio. However, with regards to women with disability, while the evaluation noted that some programme partners had made efforts to increase accessibility for women with disabilities, there was little evidence they had been systematically targeted. Similarly, monitoring data on disability was not systematically captured. Across projects, the Country Office could have a more intentional approach to engagement of women with disabilities to ensure adherence to the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy.<sup>140</sup> Geographical reach could also be strengthened. The evaluation noted that the focus of interventions was concentrated in the same locations – in liberated areas and the Kurdistan North, Baghdad and cities. The Country Office would benefit from extending its reach to more traditional and conservative rural governorates that are less well reached by interventions, and where other agencies are not present, particularly across the Southern Governorates of Iraq.

<sup>140</sup> See: UN Disability Inclusion Strategy, 2019



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## 4. LESSONS LEARNED



This section provides generalized lessons from the experience of the Iraq Country Office that have potential application in other offices.

#### • Lesson 1

Opposition to “gender ideology” has gained momentum across the world, including among conservative religious, civil society and state actors. In recent years, backlash against women’s rights and the concept of gender and gender equality has put hard-fought gains in jeopardy. Under such circumstances, it is important that UN Women develop a set of principles or guidance at the corporate level to address gender backlash. UN Women needs to strengthen its convening role in building alliances with donors, UNCT members and CSOs to build a united front on effective responses to gender backlash. UN Women should also consider issues around “duty of care” towards its programme partners and other CSO partner agencies who may face existential crises for working on gender equality and women’s empowerment. In the case of Iraq, with the national authorities’ prohibition of use of the term “gender” in mid-2023, the donor community, UNCT members and CSOs look to UN Women to play a leading role to facilitate a common and collective stance to manage this issue. There is a need to support and strengthen the capacities of UN Women leadership and personnel to deal with such gender backlash so that there is cadre of trained leaders in the organization who are well prepared to deal with such issues at the country level. At the time of the evaluation, the new interim Country Office leadership and Regional Office leadership had taken account of this lesson and started taking concerted action to support the UN system in addressing this critical issue in the country.

#### • Lesson 2

UN Women’s strength lies in its convening power as a gender equality champion and neutral convener in political arenas and in working with diverse state and non-state actors, including women-led and civil society organizations. UN Women should be prepared to identify and deal with risks relating to challenging relationships with its partners, particularly governments, in a time-sensitive manner to avoid reputational damage and further deterioration of the partnership. Root cause analysis of the strained relationship between some government stakeholders and the Country Office provides lessons for future consideration, the first being that rotation of Country Representatives in hardship duty stations should be more strictly implemented. This can help to infuse fresh leadership thinking and reinvigorate relationships with partners in the country. Second, indications of potentially strained relationships with key government partners should be brought to the attention of regional leadership in a timely manner, to be further escalated to headquarters if needed. This would ensure timely action to manage the situation, including the provision of guidance and support to country and regional leadership. In sensitive situations, Regional Offices should maintain stronger feedback ties with the UN Resident Coordinator; and quality assurance and management oversight reviews should be more systematic and involve independent consultation with key external stakeholders. This would help regional leadership to understand if support or potential leadership shifts are needed. Good practices and case studies on similar situations could be documented and shared for future reference.

#### • Lesson 3

A social norms change approach should be central to UN Women’s efforts and interventions. Country Offices may miss opportunities to address and transform negative social norms if the focus of their interventions is too small scale. UN Women could strengthen its relationships with key allies by providing robust data, demonstrating tangible changes in social norms change and learning from setbacks. The Entity should seize opportunities to work with other UN partners in the UNCT to support collective action for broadening social norms change efforts on gender. In the case of the Iraq Country Office, some activities involved men, boys and some key institutions; however, these interventions were rather small scale and piecemeal. There was a clear need and demand for work on gender social norms change across various thematic areas in a strategic and systematic manner.

#### • Lesson 4

Countries going through a post-conflict transition, shifting their focus from a humanitarian to development paradigm presents challenges (as well as some key opportunities) for all UN entities, including UN Women. In these circumstances, there is a critical need to periodically review the environment for early identification of risks and opportunities, including the possibility of mobilizing domestic resources for productive, long-term development. Such transitions require a change of approach and building new alliances and relationships with stakeholders. It also requires a “fit for purpose” office to deliver on the shifting mandate to remain relevant. In this regard, standard corporate management reviews (e.g. mid-term reviews) and independent oversight (e.g. strategic evaluations and internal audits) should be conducted on a periodic basis. More regular exchanges between these Country Offices, Regional Offices and headquarters may also be useful to ensure the UN Women leadership receives regular political guidance and support.



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## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides overall conclusions and corresponding recommendations. The recommendations have been drafted following a consultative approach. Presentation of the preliminary findings and the way forward took place with the programme management team, and the country and regional leadership team to inform the recommendations below. The recommendations have been streamlined with those of the internal audit to minimize management's reporting burden. Each recommendation is tied to corresponding conclusions and includes actions for consideration by the Country Office. The level of priority and responsibility for actions are indicated with each recommendation.

### 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. The Country Office needs to play a stronger leadership and technical role to remain a relevant player in the field of women's empowerment. 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) will have to be prepared to support the government with relevant technical and advisory services for sustainable development. In this context, there is increasing demand for gender data and statistics and social norms change expertise. (Finding: 1, 4,6,7,11)

### 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 (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.

**Responsible Office:** Country Office, Regional Office

**Priority:** High

#### Actions:

1. For the new Strategic Note, revise the Country Office's existing theory of change to reflect the transition from a humanitarian to a development and resilience focus, ensuring that critical work in Women's Economic Empowerment, Women's Political Participation and Ending Violence Against Women form part of its intervention logic, building on key successes and lessons learned; and ensure that gender data, statistics and gender social norms change form an integral part of the theory of change and programme interventions.
2. Ensure that these pillars have a clear strategy, receive dedicated focus, funding and staffing in the next Strategic Note.

### 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 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 should be supported by a dedicated coordination strategy and resources. (Finding 2, 3, 5,6)

### 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.

**Responsible Office:** Country Office, Regional Office

**Priority:** High

#### Actions:

1. Work with UNCT partners to strengthen technical support for gender mainstreaming in their work and joint programming; and complete pending coordination exercises, such as the UN-SWAP.
2. Lead a collective approach to identifying and addressing gender backlash.
3. Work with donors as allies to leverage collective advocacy on transforming gender equality.
4. Ensure corporate investment in the coordination function is supported with adequate financial and human resourcing.
5. Restore and strengthen positive engagement with national and federal government women's machinery by ensuring systemic communication on interventions, progress and setbacks.
6. Strengthen engagement with CSOs, including through the creation of coordination forums for collective advocacy efforts to amplify the voices of women-led organizations and civil society.



**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 Country Office modalities, such as third-party contracting for some key core functions like communications, had affected its value for money. Monitoring, evaluation, knowledge management and communication functions needed 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. (Finding 10)

**Recommendation 3**

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

Responsible Office: Country Office	Priority: Medium
<p><b>Actions:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Ensure the programme monitoring framework and system includes and systematically measures outcome and impact-level results.</li><li>2. Separate the monitoring function from programme management to ensure data independence by hiring dedicated personnel for the monitoring and evaluation function.</li><li>3. Allocate adequate financial resources for monitoring, evaluation and learning.</li><li>4. The Country Office should meet the UN Women evaluation coverage norms and conduct a systematic evaluation of its programmes and portfolio.</li><li>5. The Country Office should reinvigorate its approach to evidence and knowledge management in sharing programme learning and impact, including a dedicated learning, knowledge management and communications strategy to harness and communicate evidence and learning internally, across its portfolio. The Country Office should also systematically share lessons with external stakeholders, such as the UNCT, government and CSOs partners.</li></ol>	

**Advisory Note:**

- The Country Office to implement internal audit recommendation 7 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.<sup>141</sup>
- 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.

<sup>141</sup> Internal Audit Report UN Women Country Office in Iraq, 2025



**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.<sup>142</sup> 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. (Findings 9, 11)

**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.

Responsible Office: Country Office	Priority: Medium
<b>Actions:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Invest in research to support understanding of the intersectional needs of Iraqi women, particularly internally displaced women, in terms of gaps in existing provision and the potential impact of camp closures.</li> <li>2. Build on work with internally displaced persons to focus on the required legal changes and develop enabling environments for greater social cohesion and the reintegration of internally displaced persons and refugees.</li> <li>3. Ensure disability inclusion is embedded in project management processes and personnel are clear about commitments to the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy and leave no one behind principles.</li> <li>4. Ensure monitoring across the portfolio systematically collects disaggregated data and analysis to improve programme inclusion mechanisms for monitoring.</li> <li>5. Ensure the Country Office's gender social norms approach and strategy is well developed and integrated across its portfolio.</li> </ol>	

**Recommendation 5**

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

Responsible Office: Country Office	Priority: Medium
<b>Action:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ensure a sustainability perspective is built into project strategy and design, including effective exit strategies for sustained results.</li> </ol>	

**Advisory Note:**

- 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.

<sup>142</sup> See: UN Disability Inclusion Strategy, 2019