

**PROTECTION
LANDSCAPES IN
DIYALA AND
KIRKUK, IRAQ**

Two years after Iraq declared military victory over ISIS in December 2017, 1.4 million people are still internally displaced. Efforts to rebuild are under way against a backdrop of continuing insecurity, the high presence of armed groups, ethnoreligious tensions and a looming ISIS insurgency. This report sets out to explore the perceptions of communities in Kirkuk and Diyala of the main protection risks they face. It aims to enhance understanding of the strategies women and men put in place when faced with protection risks, and to identify methods of prevention, mitigation and response to protection concerns, as a contribution towards durable solutions and recovery.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iraq declared military victory over ISIS in December 2017. Almost two years later, 1.4 million people are still internally displaced,¹ and efforts to rebuild following the destruction caused by the conflict and to re-establish the rule of law are under way despite the presence of multiple security forces and militias, as well as a looming ISIS insurgency.

This increasingly protracted crisis compounds pre-existing vulnerabilities and long-standing instability in the Disputed Territories of Iraq, where ethnic, political and sectarian divides, coupled with historical injustices and extreme inequalities, have seemingly tainted relationships within and among communities.

Between March and April 2019, Oxfam conducted a study on communities' perceptions of the main protection risks in Diyala and Kirkuk, two of the governorates located in the Disputed Territories, in Northern Iraq. In October 2019, Oxfam carried out random interviews to assess the changes that had taken place for some of the interviewees since April 2019.

This paper aims to improve understanding of the perceptions of communities in Diyala and Kirkuk on protection risks and how these shape access to services and assistance. The objective is to enhance understanding of the strategies women and men put in place when faced with protection risks, to derive concrete recommendations for community-level action and advocacy, and identify methods of prevention, mitigation and response to protection concerns.

The research found that communities in Diyala and Kirkuk share a sense of insecurity in their daily lives. The main protection concerns at the community level are mostly related to the presence of ISIS, which is carrying out targeted attacks and killings, and to the presence of state and non-state actors who are jockeying for control. Findings confirm that individuals and groups with perceived affiliation to extremist groups are targets of arbitrary arrests (including

for ransom), denied equitable access to essential public services, prevented from returning, and face harassment and abuse at checkpoints. The dual challenge of finding sustainable solutions while meeting households' immediate basic needs is all the more evident and acute for internally displaced persons (IDPs) who are perceived as affiliated to extremist groups.

In a context marked by protracted displacement, research findings highlight the evident connection between access to livelihoods, which has been disrupted by the past conflicts and displacements, and protection risks. As perceived by the women and men interviewed, the lack of reliable sources of income is the primary protection concern they face, both as individuals and as families. Limited livelihood opportunities compound other existing vulnerabilities in Iraq's highly patriarchal and unequal context. Female-headed households, especially IDPs, are perceived to be at heightened risk of sexual harassment and exploitation. Participants explained that this is due to the absence of men who can fulfil the traditional roles of breadwinners and protectors of the family honour, coupled with the pressure women heads of household can be under to meet the basic needs of their children.

Access to services is limited by a combination of multiple barriers: lack of cash to pay for transport costs, lack of information on the services available, and – not least – restricted mobility caused by security conditions, particularly at night. Strict social norms and fear of harassment place severe restrictions on women's mobility.

Across the board, households are increasingly adopting negative coping mechanisms in response to challenges in accessing sustainable and dignified livelihoods: child labour is reported to be prevalent, especially in Kirkuk, linked to evident limitations in the provision of accessible and safe secondary education. Child marriage is perceived by respondents to be widespread and on the rise among low-income and vulnerable households.

Adolescents, and girls in particular, were identified in this research as a group in need of greater attention and support because they are excluded from meaningful decision making in their communities and can be at risk of child labour and child marriage.

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

CONTEXT

The Disputed Territories, contested between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and federal Iraq, still represent one of the most intractable issues in the country. The fault lines of the conflict include the high ethnoreligious diversity of the area and the fact that this is a major gas and oil producing region, providing public revenue to both the national government in Baghdad as well as the KRG in Erbil. Since 2003, the federal Government of Iraq (GoI) and the KRG have competed to establish control of the Disputed Territories, failing to find a mutually acceptable formula for the region's long-term administration. From 2003 to 2017, despite de jure federal authority, Kurdish authorities seized the opportunity of the power vacuum created by Sunni-Shia sectarian strife to establish a de facto authority in most of the Disputed Territories.

By 2017, ISIS was on the verge of defeat in Iraq at the hands of an opposing force comprising a complex array of state and non-state armed actors that were mobilized to regain control of the territory. The engagement of these groups – with extensive support from an international coalition of over 81 countries – led to a declaration of victory against ISIS in December 2017.

The armed conflict with ISIS between 2014 and 2017 and its aftermath further destabilized the Disputed Territories and created fresh opportunities for a number of different actors to pursue their interests. The results are an overt jockeying for control between various parties and proxies, from within national boundaries and from outside, accelerating demographic change by influencing patterns of displacement and increasing hostility between some communities.

Indeed, deliberate destruction of civilian property and farmlands have been used at different stages of the conflict by the various parties involved to force displacement of populations and alter the demographic balance in the region's different areas. While ISIS deliberately targeted and contaminated the farmlands of minorities in Kirkuk, when Iraqi and Kurdistan military forces retook control over the areas within the Disputed Territories they did so through a series of retaliatory acts against Sunni Arabs, including extensive and unlawful destruction of civilian homes and properties. Trends indicate that the Kurdish authorities have attempted to reverse the demographic changes produced by the 'Arabization' campaign that was undertaken by Saddam Hussein starting in the 1970s. The deliberate and militarily unjustified destruction of homes and properties, including households' sources of income (farms and businesses), appears to be a way to make the residents' forced displacement irreversible.

Following the Kurdish referendum on independence and the ensuing clashes of 16–17 October 2017, for the first time in more than a decade the GoI re-established exclusive control over the Disputed Territories, including parts of Ninewa, Diyala and the multi-ethnic city of Kirkuk with its rich oilfields. While legally and constitutionally these territories remain disputed, the KRG's political and military influence has substantially declined for the time being.

Recent assessments demonstrate that the federal government's authority has been extremely fragmented since the 2014 collapse of its security apparatus. Thus, the degree and nature of the control that the GoI maintains varies considerably across the Disputed Territories. While state-

armed groups have been incorporated into the federal government since 2016, in reality these groups significantly differ in their command structures, priorities and degrees of loyalty to the federal government, with some of them characterized by continuously shifting internal and external allegiances. This fragmentation of power and authority among the different security and political actors hinders the process of strengthening governmental accountability and the rule of law. This negatively affects the region’s overall security, and in turn affects civilians’ safe and equitable to access to essential services and protection.

The territorial struggle across parts of Kirkuk and Diyala has significantly affected the humanitarian situation in Iraq over the past two years. Competing claims over these ethnically diverse, strategic, oil-rich areas have influenced displacement trends and settlement decisions of IDPs and are a trigger for further violence and conflict. Indeed, following the Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017, reports indicated heightened community tensions and instances of internal displacement, specifically in areas that were previously home to both Kurdish and Arab populations.

In this already volatile context, ISIS continues to hold on in the far western areas, becoming increasingly influential in large swathes of the countryside in northern and central Iraq, including in Diyala and Kirkuk governorates. As highlighted at a UN Security Council meeting in early 2019, ISIS has ‘substantially evolved into a covert network’ and is reported to still have between 14,000 and 18,000 militants in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic, including up to 3,000 foreign fighters.² Even if ISIS is now more of an insurgent force rather than an entity capable of occupying territories, it still poses a substantial threat to civilians living in these regions of Iraq.

ISIS cells in Iraq have been conducting attacks against civilians as well as military groups. In the first 10 months of 2018, Kirkuk saw an average of 33 attacks per month, while Diyala was affected by an average of 26 attacks per month. Targeted killings of local leaders, such as mukhtars (town/village heads), tribal leaders and district council members, is a common ISIS tactic for undermining government authority and further jeopardizing societal reconciliation. This is evident both in Kirkuk and in Diyala, where 35 and 31 targeted assassinations were registered, respectively, in the first 10 months of 2018.

RATIONALE

Against this backdrop of continuing insecurity, changes in territorial control and a high presence of armed groups and ethnoreligious tensions, both Diyala and Kirkuk remain home to large numbers of IDPs and returnees. The table below shows the most recent statistics, according to the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) of the International Organization for Migration (IOM).³

Governorate	IDPs	Returnees	Living conditions of returnees
Kirkuk	101,082	336,222	High severity: 5,796
Diyala	53,892	227,160	High severity: 22,302

Table 1: Numbers and living conditions of IDPs and returnees in Kirkuk and Diyala (IOM figures)

Diyala governorate is characterized by **a low rate of return of IDPs**. According to an assessment conducted by IOM, returns to the governorate increased by only 10% between May 2017 and May 2018.⁴ In Kirkuk the displacement also appears to be protracted, if less so than in Diyala: 43% of IDPs in Kirkuk have lived in displacement for an average of three years. In addition, a significant number of IDPs in both governorates live in areas with 'high' or 'medium' severity in terms of living conditions.⁵ The UN OCHA 2020 Humanitarian Overview lists Diyala and Kirkuk as governorates with the most severe living conditions and protection concerns.⁶

Oxfam commissioned this research to inform its advocacy and community engagement strategies, as well as to raise awareness among local leaders and the humanitarian community on key protection issues in Diyala and Kirkuk. The research is designed to illustrate communities' perceptions of their protection risks, mitigation and response mechanisms. It intends to identify gaps in prevention and response to protection situations, including the level of access to protection services in Diyala and Kirkuk, with a specific focus on gender-based violence (GBV).

Specifically, the research aimed to:

- Map and analyse key actors and violators impacting power dynamics around protection issues at community and governorate levels.
- Identify perceptions of socio-cultural/ethnic/sectarian and socio-economic barriers and enablers in relation to perceived protection risks and accessibility of services.

METHODOLOGY

The research data was collected using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, between March and April 2019. A review of existing secondary data preceded data collection to compile information on the current protection needs of the affected population in Diyala and Kirkuk. Gender-focused documentation on both locations influenced the analysis of the research.⁷

Data collection included a set of focus group discussions (FGDs), household surveys and key informant interviews (KIIs). Data collection tools were developed to fit the contexts, translated into the local languages (Arabic and Kurdish) and reviewed by Oxfam in Iraq staff.

Oxfam assessment teams were trained ahead of data collection on participatory methodologies to strengthen the teams' capacity to conduct FGDs. The teams received training on the 'Do no harm' approach in research, including informed consent and confidentiality, to avoid causing respondents psychological distress and discomfort by having to relive painful experiences through interviews.

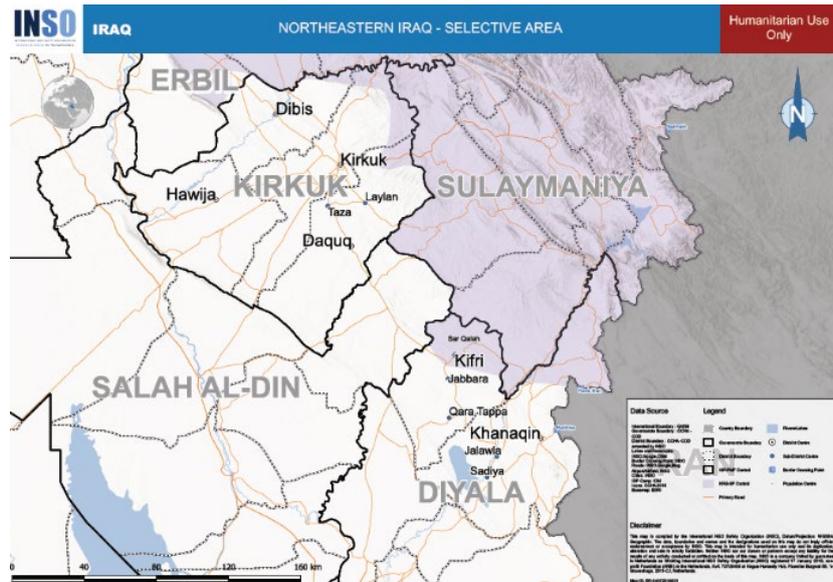


Figure 1: Map showing Kirkuk and Diyala produced for Oxfam by INSO Iraq

TARGETED GROUPS AND LOCATIONS

The study targeted IDPs, returnees and host communities living in Diyala and Kirkuk. Study locations were selected based on areas that are under-served, under-reached and accessible by Oxfam teams. The decision was also guided by areas where Oxfam has an existing relationship with communities through ongoing programming. The research abided by ethical principles which recommend that research should intend to benefit the people who consent to take part in it.

The research was conducted in 23 locations: 10 in Diyala and 13 in Kirkuk. Due to security and access constraints, surveying in Diyala was only possible in the northern districts of Khanaqin and Kifri. Diversity was maintained by selecting urban areas as well as villages with diverse profiles in terms of size, ethnoreligious composition of host communities, and the size of the IDP population. Data was collected from a total of 258 households (111 in Diyala and 147 in Kirkuk), 48 FGDs (21 in Diyala and 27 in Kirkuk) and 48 KIIs (21 in Diyala and 27 in Kirkuk).

In order to allow broader exploration of perceived protection threats, the research strove to take a gender-sensitive approach, ensuring gender balance in the data collection. FGDs were held separately with men (9 in Diyala, 14 in Kirkuk) and women (12 in Diyala, 13 in Kirkuk); 48% of the key informants interviewed were women; and 44% of the household-level surveys were conducted with female respondents (50% female respondents in Diyala and 39% in Kirkuk), with 10% of women respondents from female-headed households. In addition, three FGDs were conducted with adolescents: one with girls in Diyala and two with boys in Kirkuk.

Finally, specific attention was paid to the selection of key informants, being mindful of the impact that the research may have on community dynamics, as well as of the ways in which power dynamics can shape responses to research questions. For this reason, Oxfam assessment teams identified key informants from a wide range of community actors, including women and youth from civil society.

GOVERNORATE	POPULATION GROUP	F	M	GRAND TOTAL
Diyala	Host community	87	36	123
	IDPs (including secondary displacement)	38	37	75
	Returnees	8	40	48
Diyala total		134	122	256
Kirkuk	Host community	39	35	74
	IDPs (including secondary displacement)	108	97	205
	Returnees	33	33	66
Kirkuk total		180	165	345
GRAND TOTAL		314	287	601

Table 2: Study participants by governorate, population group and sex

DATA LIMITATIONS

It is important to acknowledge that the data on which this study is based has some limitations. The first relates to access and security constraints to research locations. In some cases, field conditions prevented the assessment teams from covering under-served areas that are characterized by the presence of vulnerable groups. Access to conflict-affected locations in Hawija district in Kirkuk, and south of Jalawla in Diyala, was mostly limited to urban areas due to active conflict in some of the locations. Access limitations were also due to the external research consultant's ability to travel to research locations.

An additional limitation relates to the difficulty of discussing very sensitive topics in interview settings, such as the protection threats of GBV and other forms of discrimination and violence. Therefore, while secondary data highlighted the existence of certain protection threats, the number of respondents who shared information on those issues in the primary data, particularly with reference to household-related vulnerabilities and to perpetrators of violence, is comparatively low. This may be related to the fact that respondents live in contexts that are still quite fluid in terms of security and potential for conflict.

FINDINGS: COMMUNITIES' PERCEPTIONS OF PROTECTION

OVERVIEW OF PROTECTION CONCERNS

The challenges in the recovery process that began at the end of 2017, with the declaration of victory against ISIS by the Government of Iraq, are evident within the Disputed Territories. In Diyala and in Kirkuk, pockets of instability and fear remain, and attacks by armed groups (notably ISIS), targeted killings and disappearance of civilians, arbitrary arrests and detention of people with perceived affiliation to extremist groups are reported by multiple sources.

Perceptions of safety and protection risks are multifaceted among respondents in Kirkuk and Diyala. In general, the risks that were most concerning to the survey respondents were attacks by armed groups (30% of respondents), followed by abduction and kidnapping (12%), criminal activities (9%), generalized insecurity in the community (7%), and tribal or sectarian incidents and conflicts (6%). These are described in more detail in the sections below.

It is worth noting that while there is substantial coincidence between male and female respondents' perceptions of protection risks, concerns about lack of safety in the community emerged predominantly from female respondents (89%). When asked specifically about protection with the question, 'What are the protection concerns in your area?', the response 'I don't know' was more prevalent in Kirkuk (50% of total respondents) than in Diyala (16% of respondents); in Kirkuk, 57% of women interviewees who gave 'don't know' responses were IDP women.

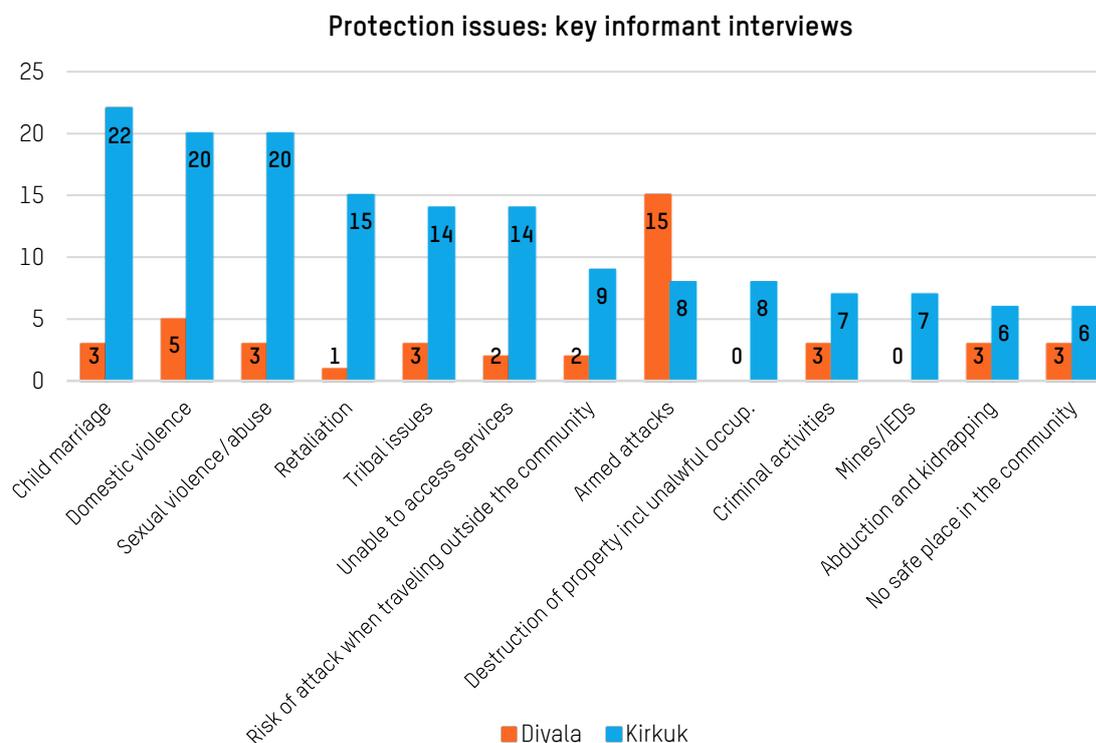


Figure 2: Key informant interview findings on main protection concerns

ATTACKS BY ARMED GROUPS

Attacks carried out by armed groups were confirmed to be a ubiquitous safety concern among key informants interviewed, who mentioned this issue as prevalent in 78% of the research locations (18 out of 23), with ISIS indicated as responsible for these attacks in eight of the research sites.

In **Diyala**, armed attacks are carried out predominantly by ISIS and usually take place at night, targeting security forces or civilians. Direct attacks on civilians – such as assassinations of mukhtars, civil authorities or tribal members – seem to be conducted to exert psychological pressure on the population and erode the social fabric of communities.

Research findings confirm the social and psychological impact of the ISIS resurgence in Diyala, with 42% of survey respondents indicating that attacks by armed groups are their main safety concern. In the words of interviewees, ISIS is ‘never too far from our houses’, as they have direct experience or knowledge of attacks carried out on nearby checkpoints or villages, or retaliatory attacks taking place at night – incidents which may involve kidnapping and killing. Respondents belonging to one of Iraq’s largest Sunni tribes consistently indicated being targeted by ISIS, allegedly in retaliation for the tribe’s mobilization against the group during the conflict. It must be pointed out that in some cases, respondents admitted that they are not sure which group is behind each armed attack, especially for those that occur at night.

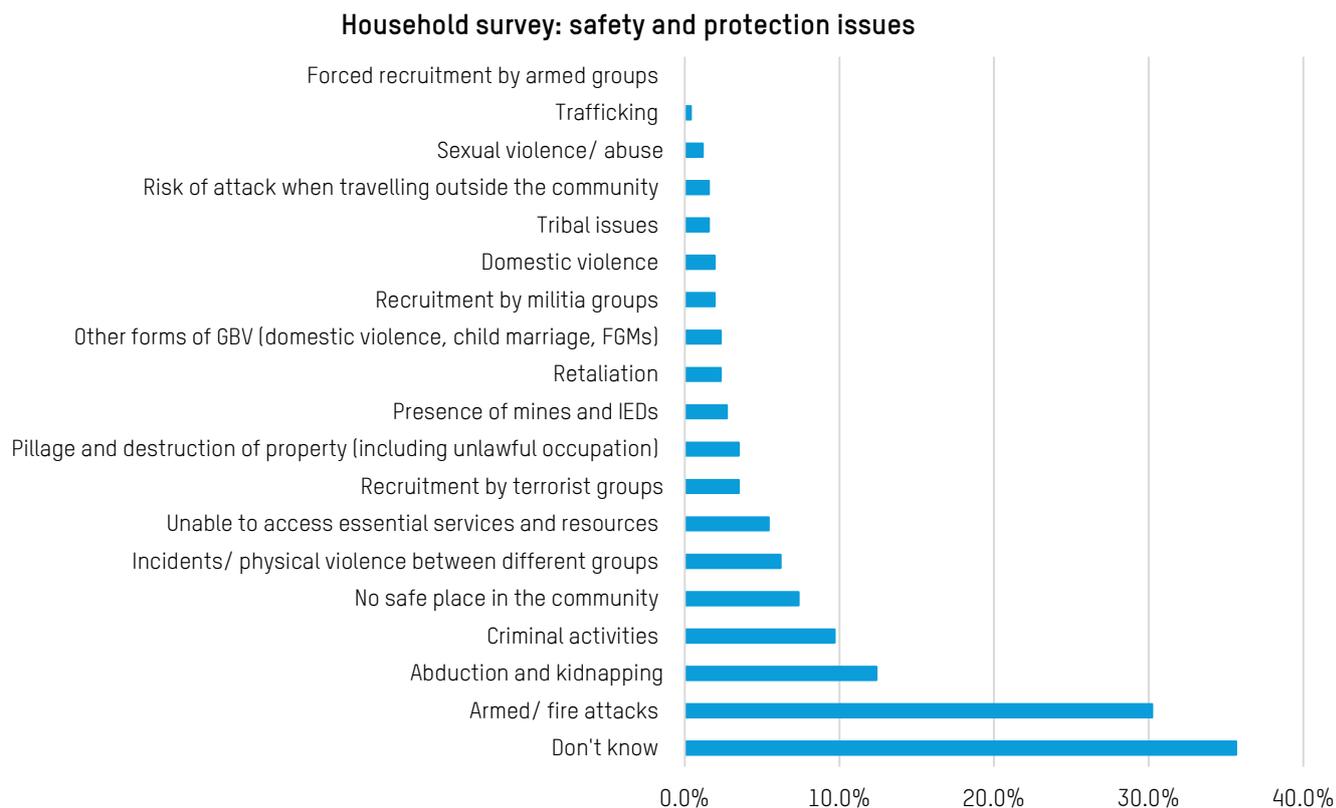


Figure 3: Household survey findings on main protection concerns

During the FGDs, respondents mentioned the presence of multiple armed actors and occasional clashes between state and non-state armed groups, as well as a rise in criminal activities – all fuelling their perception of high levels of instability and insecurity in their area. The fear of sudden

attacks was described by many respondents from Khanaqin district as having reshaped the lives of their communities. Any activity outside of the house virtually stops at night-time: 'After 8.00pm, we just lock ourselves in our houses. What else can we do?'

Some of the respondents in Khanaqin district described how the men in their communities have started to arrange daily night watches, while restrictions on movement appear to be the main if not the only coping mechanism available to affected communities. Most of the interviewees, in fact, perceived that security forces currently in control of the areas are not able to protect civilians, leaving them with the only option to 'take the issue into their own hands'.

In **Kirkuk**, attacks by armed groups are the main protection concern for 21% of household survey respondents and as such represents the biggest protection threat as perceived by respondents in this governorate. Kirkuk is also characterized by the presence of many state and non-state security forces and militias, including ISIS. While one government-backed armed group controls Kirkuk city, another controls roads and checkpoints, and different armed groups tend to differ in their ethnic and sectarian composition. This complexity is reflected in the responses given by key informants, which point to the simultaneous presence of different armed actors and potential threats associated with this.

Two locations in Kirkuk were reported as being particularly affected by ISIS operations and attacks: respondents from a minority in formerly ISIS-held areas in Daquq district reported still being targeted by the terrorist group, including through improvised explosive device (IED) contamination and mining of their farmland. ISIS attacks in Kirkuk governorate doubled from 2017 to 2018; meanwhile, ISIS continues to target and kill mukhtars and members of state-supported armed groups.

In the urban areas of Hawija and Kirkuk, the presence of security forces may be perceived as a potential threat by the local communities because of sectarian tensions and issues related to perceived affiliation to ISIS, as described in more detail below.

KIDNAPPING OF CIVILIANS

Kidnapping of civilians emerged as a protection concern in both Diyala and in Kirkuk, as indicated by 12% of survey respondents in each governorate.

In **Diyala**, key informants and survey respondents mentioned kidnapping as a protection concern in their communities. In Khanaqin, specifically, respondents indicated that armed groups are responsible for abductions in the area, which are motivated by demands for ransom.

In **Kirkuk**, kidnapping and killing of civilians were reported in five different locations in the governorate as forms of retaliation connected to sectarian and tribal conflicts, although no additional information was shared. In Kirkuk city, respondents perceived an increase in abductions in their areas, although they did not share further details. As noted by one key informant, individuals belonging to armed groups are increasingly engaging in kidnapping, which is aimed mostly at collecting ransom but in some cases at retaliation.

Respondents in Taza mentioned that fear of retaliation due to the ongoing conflict with neighbouring Sunni Arab tribes over sectarian differences and perceived affiliation to ISIS affects their freedom of movement and ability to access services outside of their village.

PERCEIVED AFFILIATION TO EXTREMIST GROUPS

Previous research has clearly established how individuals and groups that are perceived to be affiliated with extremist groups – whether as ex-combatants, civilian employees, relatives or just residents of ISIS-controlled territory who did not escape after the arrival of ISIS – are stigmatized and ostracized by communities, local authorities, and state and non-state forces.⁸ As such, perceived affiliation constitutes a driver for multiple protection concerns such as collective punishment, retaliation, equitable access to essential services and livelihoods, and restrictions on mobility – including prevention of return to area of origin. IDPs with perceived affiliation to extremist groups have been identified as one of the most vulnerable groups in need of assistance in Iraq. The Humanitarian Response Plan for 2019 calls for particular humanitarian attention to vulnerable women and children who, due to having fathers, sons, husbands or more distant family members accused of being affiliated with ISIS, are at risk of multiple human rights violations by state or non-state actors.⁹

Although secondary data estimates that over 100,000 persons across Iraq are perceived to be affiliated to ISIS,¹⁰ figures regarding family members with perceived ISIS affiliation are not available. Restrictions on freedom of movement and fear of unjust security clearance processes are two threats around perceived affiliation that consistently emerged in discussions involving some of the communities in Diyala and Kirkuk.

Information shows that restrictions on freedom of movement are mostly due to lack of security clearance and inability to provide identity documents. Movement can also be self-restricted as a coping strategy against risks of violence, abuse and arbitrary arrest or kidnapping by security forces and militia groups.

Determination of affiliation to extremist groups is primarily conducted at screening sites such as checkpoints, by checking if the names of people crossing are on the ‘wanted lists’. These lists have been compiled by various security forces since 2014; the different security forces and militias each prepare and maintain their own lists, mostly based on information provided by informants and local communities. Cross-coordination and sharing of intelligence is limited.¹¹ As a result, wanted lists can include people who have been involved with ISIS in a non-combatant capacity or who have a relative working with ISIS; people can also be regarded as affiliated just because their name is similar to that of someone on the list.

Access to civil documentation remains an unsolved issue for most people with perceived affiliation to extremist groups – they are systematically denied access to services, including to registration offices and courts, by local authorities. To issue or renew an identity card, Iraqi citizens must first submit an application to the Civil Status Directorate in their area of origin, upon which they are subjected to a background check by intelligence and security forces. The application can be denied for different reasons, including if one of the applicant’s relatives appears on one of the various wanted lists.

For most IDPs, travelling to their areas of origin represents either an impossible task – for example because they are denied security clearance to move out of the camp – or a very **difficult and risky** choice, as security screenings at checkpoints may result in harassment, arrest or enforced disappearance, particularly for men and boys.¹²

In **Diyala**, several indicators showing a potential risk for persons with perceived affiliations to extremist groups, namely lack of identity documents and restrictions on freedom of movement, emerged in 50% of the research locations. In-camp and out-of-camp IDP respondents reported that state armed groups carry out arrests based on their wanted lists, resulting in unlawful identification and detention of boys and men who are not affiliated with ISIS. In other cases, respondents mentioned that members of non-state armed groups ask families with detained members for ransom payments. As described in a focus group by an IDP originally from Saadiya, Diyala, 'When armed actors arrest someone under pretence that he is on the wanted list, then they can ask his family to pay five million Iraqi dinars [IQD] to let him [go] free. If you pay five million then they will tell you, "Ah sorry, there was a mistake, you are not wanted." They do it only because we are from a particular tribe.'

During FGDs, interviewees belonging to the one of the largest Sunni tribes in the area shared with Oxfam the challenges they are facing because of perceived affiliation to ISIS. In one location, it was reported that local authorities deliberately discriminate against people with perceived affiliation and deprive them of access to public services, further aggravating the poor material conditions of the community, where most of the men are jobless. Respondents reported that members of this tribe are also targeted by ISIS, allegedly in retaliation for their refusal to support the group. Additionally, men and boys from the tribe are perceived as at risk of being detained and physically abused by armed actors at checkpoints in order to extort confessions.

For IDPs in Khanaqin district, return to their area of origin continues to be prevented. In addition to movement restrictions and denial of security clearance, destruction and seizure of property are used as a means to prevent return. This was reported in particular by respondents displaced from Saadiya and Muqtadiya areas. IDPs from Diyala's southern districts confirmed having no intention of returning for the time being; abuse, arbitrary arrests and forced transfer of ownership of land were reported to be committed by armed actors, with the aim of forcing further displacement of Sunni Arabs and preventing those displaced from returning. Additionally, respondents perceived that the return procedures established by the government are unclear, flawed and take a long time. As one respondent put it: 'Even when your name has been cleared and you have been given permission to return, at the last minute they can get back to you and tell you that return is denied because your name... or maybe your mother or brother's name now appears on their watch list... Return lists prepared by the government are screened by armed actors and by the Mayor's office.'

In **Kirkuk**, the difficulty of accessing new or replacement identity cards and other civil documentation was reported as a serious issue in 10 out of the 13 research locations. Many people lost their civil documentation during displacement or the ISIS occupation. In all 10 locations, respondents reported not being able to renew their documents. Reasons given include the fact that courts and legal offices are far from their place of residence, and they cannot afford the costs of transport and the application procedure. Most importantly, though, most displaced families mentioned that they do not have the security clearance needed to travel to their area of origin to apply to the Civil Status Directorate to have their identity document issued, or else they find that their application has been rejected for the same reason. Families who had been displaced from Salah Ad-Din and are now living in Laylan camp reported that security forces do not allow them to travel back to their area of origin to apply for legal documentation.

In four of the 13 locations in Kirkuk, there are no legal services provided by NGOs or associations; however, it must be noted that even in locations where these services are offered, respondents either lacked the necessary information to access them or the cash for transport costs to reach them, or both. In five locations, FGD participants perceived the problem as 'just unsolvable' because 'the government is unresponsive'.

Lack of identity documents causes severe restrictions on movement, as families cannot or are afraid to pass through checkpoints, and it compounds other pre-existing problems and vulnerabilities. Children cannot enrol in school because they don't have a birth certificate; widows cannot apply for social allowance; and in general, displaced families cannot register with the Ministry of Migration and Displacement to receive an assistance package and be eligible for food and non-food items (NFIs) distribution carried out by NGOs. Additionally, IDP respondents pointed out that they are unable to have new Public Distribution System (PDS) ration cards issued. This was discussed as being a problem particularly for widows, as the PDS card is in the name of the male head of the household.

Lack of documentation also compounds the risk of arbitrary detention. Male IDPs are more at risk of being detained by police or prevented from moving from one location to another. In FGDs in Kirkuk, participants also raised the concern for men of being arbitrarily arrested at checkpoints under Article 4 of Iraq's Anti-Terrorism Law. Respondents reported that men from their community had been arrested by armed actors and kept in detention without formal charges, while attempting to travel to their area of origin.

Return is prevented for IDPs from Taza, Basheer and Dibis areas. Families from villages close to Taza who have been displaced since 2014 reported being prevented by an ethnically affiliated armed actor from reaching public offices in Taza to renew their civil documentation. Access to courts and public services by IDPs is further inhibited by 'bad treatment' by office employees and the refusal to handle their requests.

Respondents also said that they are at risk of harassment and abuse from the security forces at checkpoints between Taza and Bolaq, and therefore are afraid of travelling out of their current location to access civil services. Female respondents and key informants consistently indicated that women with perceived affiliation to extremist groups – including recent returnees in Hawija, and IDPs (both those living in and out of camps) – are at heightened risk of beatings, sexual harassment and abuse at checkpoints and outposts held by non-state armed actors.

CHILD LABOUR

Child labour¹³ was reported in 56% of FGDs held in Diyala and Kirkuk (27 out of 48), and it was confirmed by 41% of the key informants interviewed (19 out of 46).

In Diyala, respondents in 70% of research locations reported that child labour is on the increase, particularly in low-income and vulnerable families such as female-headed households, IDP families and households with members with disabilities. Children most commonly work in urban areas such as Jalawla and Khanaqin, as street pedlars, beggars or rubbish collectors. They can also work part-time after school. Child labour emerged as very common in Alwand 1 camp, where the people interviewed described it as a way to cope with the need for cash to buy food and pay for services, especially since cuts were introduced in the food distributions in the camp.

In Kirkuk, the information collected through KIs and FGDs shows that child labour is a common protection risk, as it was found in all of the research locations (100%). This finding is in line with the data indicating that child labour is a widespread negative coping strategy in Kirkuk governorate, particularly (but not solely) among out-of-camp IDPs.¹⁴ Children are mostly employed as street pedlars, as handymen at markets or at construction sites, with a high risk of exploitation into forced labour and other forms of violence and abuse.

Children who took part in FGDs indicated that they usually work for an average of 10 hours a day, and that they were asked to work by their parents – ‘you are a boy, you are a man, you should work to support your family’ – because they need to supplement the family income. In both Diyala and Kirkuk, IDP children in camps mentioned that their earnings are used by their parents first to buy food, and then medicines.

Across the two governorates in this study, FGD participants on average indicated that ‘a good age’ for a child to start working is 14 years, but other responses and direct observations in some of the surveyed locations suggest that children may start working when they are as young as seven.

Adult respondents appeared to perceive child labour as a coping strategy that they resort to in order to mitigate families’ lack of livelihoods and financial problems, which are further compounded by security constraints and the fear of being targeted, either by security forces, militias or ISIS. As one respondent in Taza explained: **‘When we returned to our village, we discovered that ISIS had demolished and looted our houses. Farming is difficult, and we are still afraid of travelling out of the village because ISIS is still around... It is difficult to support the family under these circumstances, and our children are doing their part.’**

Some 70% of respondents perceived that children of female-headed households are particularly at risk, as child labour is seen as the ‘only available solution’ to the dilemma faced by single women, who have to balance the need to provide for their family with the need to protect themselves from the risk of harassment they perceive they would be exposed to if they worked or sought employment.

Some respondents appeared to be aware of the risk of their children being exploited, and indicated that there are many cases where the child does not receive payment for their work (some said that ‘this also happens to our husbands’). One FGD with male IDP children in a camp in Kirkuk showed that all were working, with all participants describing exploitation and abuse by the police or security forces at the checkpoints where they work. One child reported that he had been locked in the checkpoint caravan and beaten by ‘a policeman’ with an electric-shock baton. At the same time, the children said that they still prefer to work near the checkpoints rather than in the city, because they are also abused and beaten by the local community, and – as one child put it – ‘the police at least give us a little help, they give us water’. Sadly, mistreatment by the local community appeared to be a constant feature for these respondents, enough for the children to prefer to work near security forces, whom they find safer in comparison.

CHILD RECRUITMENT BY ARMED GROUPS AND MILITIAS

Information about child recruitment by armed groups emerged only sporadically. In **Diyala**, key informants reported that children and youth are at risk of being recruited by armed groups (specifically ISIS) in three locations, and by government-supported armed actors in one location (i.e. 40% of locations at risk in Diyala). FGD respondents mentioned that adolescents, in some

cases also underage children, join the state armed actors, mainly attracted by the prospect of a regular salary. As viewed by respondents, recruitment by armed groups is largely driven by widespread unemployment and the lack of job opportunities for young people, compounded by what is perceived as a complete lack of vocational and social activities. As one participant explained: 'Many young men from this neighbourhood tried to offer themselves for volunteer jobs with local institutions and hospitals, but they received only negative responses. Some boys decide to join an armed group because they want to marry, and they have to earn the money to pay for the dowry and the wedding.'

In **Kirkuk**, risk of child recruitment was reported in five locations (38% of the total), with specific reference made to recruitment by armed militias in Taza and Hawija. Confirming previous reports,¹⁵ FGD participants mentioned that in their community 'many children have joined branches of government-supported armed groups and they are also helping to identify IEDs in the contaminated areas surrounding the village'. Based on additional observations within the community, it has been found that boys who join these armed groups receive a monthly salary, are provided with security and undertake military-style physical fitness conditioning.

PROTECTION CONCERNS SPECIFIC TO DIYALA: GENERALIZED INSECURITY IN THE COMMUNITY

Approximately 15% of survey respondents in Diyala perceived their communities to be unsafe. Elements seen by respondents as contributing to this generalized sense of insecurity include petty criminality and drug abuse.

Respondents – notably women from the urban areas (Khanaqin and Jalawla) – described alarming levels of theft (particularly house theft) in the areas where they live, which further compounds the perception of insecurity in the community. Some women described having their life-savings stolen by unknown thieves who had entered their houses. In all cases, the respondents described the issue as originating within their own neighbourhood and connected to extreme inequalities, including the widespread unequal distribution of jobs and income.

Substance abuse and trafficking also emerged from the interviews as a specific protection concern in Diyala. Interviewees linked drug abuse to the unemployment rate, the fact that youth 'have nothing to do', high levels of distress among youth and insufficient law enforcement.

Iraq is a growing transit and consumer country for illicit drugs, particularly synthetic drugs such as methamphetamine; the upsurge in trafficking registered in recent years has contributed to growing rates of substance abuse. Under national laws, drug users can be sentenced to jail for up to three years or be ordered to undergo rehabilitation; however, the latter is not usually an option because of the lack of rehabilitation centres. Drug abuse is perceived by respondents as rampant among young people – mostly boys, but also girls – in urban areas of Diyala. They noted that substance abuse among youth increases risks of GBV, harassment of women in the streets and theft, as well as being a means to recruit young people into criminal networks as drug dealers.

The presence of armed actors is also seen as a cause of the increase in drug abuse. Respondents considered some of the Iran-backed militias to be involved first-hand in the trafficking of drugs. Interviewees expressed a sense of powerlessness in the face of this problem, all the more so

because the local institutions they appealed to appeared unresponsive. One said: 'We even went to talk with the Mayor [of Khanaqin], but he said that he can do nothing.'

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence (GBV), including, *inter alia*, physical, sexual, emotional and economic violence, represents a significant threat to women, girls and boys in Iraq. While the available statistics on the subject are scarce and rapidly become outdated,¹⁶ the evidence gathered suggests that violence against women and girls, most notably domestic violence, has been consistently prevalent in Iraq in the past decade.¹⁷

Women in Iraq are either excluded from or on the margins of most decision-making processes. In many cases they are neither consulted about problems within the household nor on other important matters involving the family, including decisions about whether to go into displacement or to return.¹⁸

Female survey respondents were asked to identify which protection threats women in their communities are most exposed to. Consistently, the women interviewed for this study across Diyala and Kirkuk agreed that the lack of livelihoods, and hence of a job and an income, is their main 'protection risk' (39% of key informants, 8% of FGD participants). This perception was confirmed by 33% of female survey respondents, who framed it as the inability to meet their basic needs. In a conflict-affected community and in a context of displacement, lack of livelihoods increases women and girls' risk of experiencing forms of violence, abuse and exploitation, both within and outside of their households.¹⁹ While many women may feel unsafe when outside of the home, the domestic space is not free from risks either. The majority of key informants (52%) agreed on the fact that the family context is the place where women can be most at risk of GBV.

Domestic violence appeared to be a critical topic for women respondents in both Diyala and Kirkuk, both from IDP and host communities. It was reported as prevalent particularly by IDP respondents, who are experiencing increasing financial difficulties and pressures due to protracted displacement. Generally, IDPs associated domestic violence with unemployment or underemployment of their husbands and male relatives, and the pressure and frustration that it triggers. As recounted by one woman from Diyala: 'Before displacement, I had my own work as a tailor, in our house, and I could make up to 15 or 20 thousand IQD a day. And my husband had a lot of work. Now he sits in the house smoking all day, and every day he makes problems and beats me and the children.' Interestingly, in female FGDs where the issue of domestic violence was brought up, participants suggested increasing men's access to livelihoods opportunities as a way of reducing the risk of violence within the household.

In terms of the ways women cope with domestic violence, in some of the discussions female participants mentioned that they go back to their parents for a few days when beatings and violence become too much to bear, and most of the women agreed that families may play a part in promoting reconciliation between husband and wife. In general, across interviews and FGDs, it was observed that domestic violence tends to be normalized by the community, and in particular by the women who have said they are experiencing it, as they come to see it as part of their condition as women – something they have to expect. One female FGD participant said that she would not even go to her own relatives to seek help and would keep it all to herself, because 'this is a family issue and it must stay in the family'.

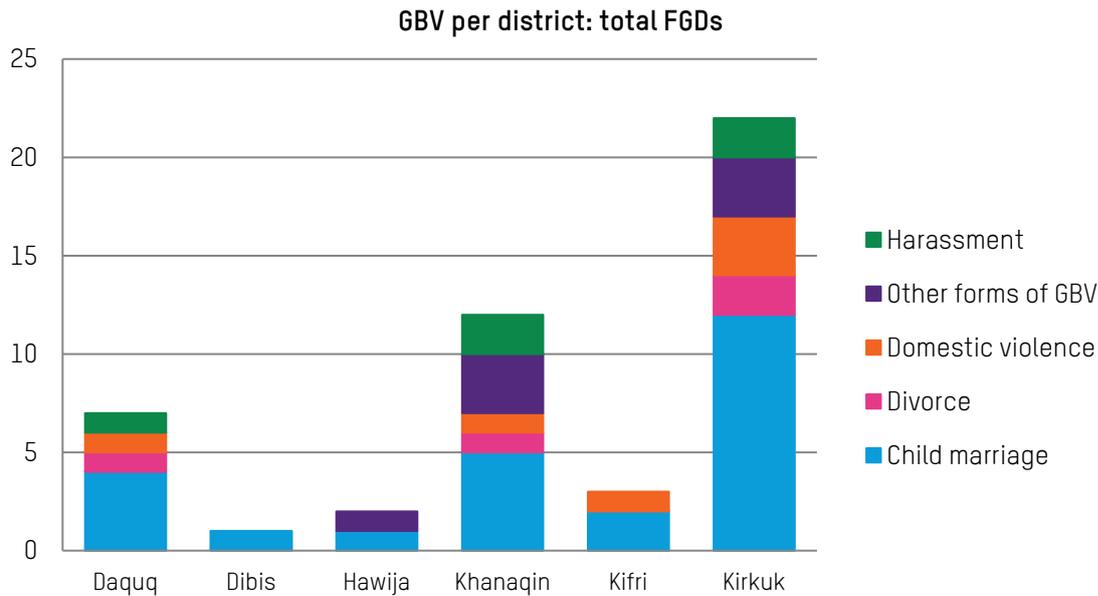


Figure 3: Types of GBV mentioned in FGDs by district

In both governorates, female heads of households (FHHs), widows and divorced women are perceived to be the most vulnerable group among women and girls. As further detailed in the following sections of this report, FHHs are considered to be at heightened risk of sexual harassment and exploitation, especially if they are IDPs. This is because of the absence of men who can fulfil the traditional role of breadwinner and protector of the family honour, and the pressure FHHs can be under to meet the basic needs of their children.

The perceptions of female FGD respondents across the two governorates were very similar in identifying the problem that FHHs have to ‘deal with men’ by themselves, and that men might ‘ask for something more from women, just because they can’ (FGD in Jalawla. FHHs could be forced into sexual exploitation or survival sex, especially when they have no income and have to provide for their children on their own. Respondents also associate the vulnerability of FHHs with a higher prevalence of child labour and school dropout for girls, as two ways to cope with the lack of livelihoods and risk of harassment.

Divorce was also considered a protection concern by female FGD participants in Diyala and Kirkuk; if a divorced woman returns to her family home, the community may stigmatize both the individual and the family and put them under psychological and even material pressure. FGD respondents in Diyala and Kirkuk alike indicated that there many cases of unilateral ‘repudiations’ (*talaq*) in the area where they live. This specific form of divorce is perceived as being on the increase, especially when connected to child marriage; girls are divorced soon after marriage and often when still underage, and are deprived of their legal and financial rights because their marriage contract had not been legally registered.

PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN DIYALA

In Diyala, women respondents feel that they are prevented from working by the negative social norms of the community. Women working outside the home are seen as exposing themselves to a potentially undignified situation; one respondent said, ‘It is a shame for a woman to go to work.’

Respondents voiced their fear of how these perceptions would affect the honour of a woman and her family: 'I am afraid of what people would say if I go to work.' As indicated by respondents, the main people who can prevent a woman from starting a job are her husband or male relatives. For most respondents, a socially acceptable form of work for women is an income-generating activity that can be done from within their house. In some cases, governmental jobs were mentioned as another relatively safe option for female employment. Women's exclusion from livelihoods opportunities, according to the women themselves, is caused not by deficiencies in the law but by the restricted freedom of movement that is imposed on them either by social norms or perceived lack of safety and security, or both.

Most respondents appeared to view the public space as essentially unsafe, especially for women and girls. In five out of ten locations, FGD respondents indicated **sexual harassment** as one of their main concerns. Some 70% of respondents reported that they fear their daughters could be harassed on their way to school, or also at school for locations where only mixed schools are present, and that this is a reason for girls dropping out after – or even before – finishing primary school.

All IDP female respondents perceived themselves as more vulnerable than other women because they live in a community that is not their own. As highlighted in previous studies in the context of conflict and displacement,²⁰ a family's 'honour' is under threat and scrutiny due to the disruption of its social network and the male head of household's perceived inability to keep his family safe. Women IDPs are often exposed to even tighter social control, as they have to uphold the family 'honour' and are perceived as being at greater risk in their new communities due to the family's lack of social capital (bonds and significant social relations with and within the community). As one female participant explained: **'We know that we are IDPs: we are strangers here in this community. Our tradition doesn't accept that our daughters can go outside alone; besides, if they did that, the community would think that our daughters are not behaving well, that they aren't good women.'**

FHHs and divorced women – especially if they are IDPs – are perceived as being at severe risk of **exploitation, abuse or survival sex**. As expressed by one of the women interviewed in Diyala, 'All the community looks at these women as someone who can be taken advantage of.' Whether this perception is based on actual abuses taking place is difficult to assess and monitor, but the perception alone is enough to put women at higher risk of harassment and stigmatization in the community. The absence of a man to fulfil the traditional role of breadwinner and protector leaves FHHs alone and 'exposed' in the public space, under pressure to meet their basic needs and those of their children. It is important to point out that the intersection between gender and class on the one hand, and perceived affiliation to extremist groups on the other, increases women's vulnerability.

In seven research locations out of the ten in Diyala, participants reported that **child marriage** is common in their communities. Girls can be married off at 14 years of age, or sometimes even as young as 12. Among the FGD respondents, 60% see child marriage as a traditional practice, rooted in religious principles, that should be maintained. In some locations, including IDP camps, child marriage is described as the only measure available for protecting girls from the risk of harassment or of being abducted and raped by armed groups or militias. In all cases, respondents from rural or displacement areas associated child marriage with meeting practical needs, especially for families burdened by lack of income or debt and with a large number of children. In

these cases, child marriage can be seen as a measure for 'relieving' the family's financial pressure. In all the locations, child marriage was also associated with girls' lack of access to education, either because there is no high school close to the community or because of the reportedly traditional stances on girls' education, according to which girls do not need an education, especially at secondary level.

PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN KIRKUK

Perceptions of protection shared by the women household survey respondents in Kirkuk are mainly related to risks they identified as being widespread in the community but not specific to women, such as attacks conducted by armed groups (36%), labour exploitation (31%) and sectarian or tribal conflicts (13%); these risks are also partially related to the presence of a complex combination of security forces, militias and terrorist armed groups. While some indications have been found of a correlation between kidnapping, including of girls, and tribal or sectarian retaliation, survey respondents preferred not to share details about these issues. Female respondents in FGDs were relatively more willing to share their views and experiences on the risks to which women and adolescent girls are most exposed; these are described below.

Sexual harassment was one of the main protection concerns in seven locations out of 13 in Kirkuk. Respondents described it as a common pattern of behaviour, perpetrated by men and boys, and most evident in urban areas or inside and around IDP camps. Women and girls can be subjected to sexual harassment when they are in the public space, whether at the market or on their way to school. The distance to school from home was a concern among 48% of FGD respondents in Kirkuk, who are afraid that their daughters could be harassed by men in the community or by passing drivers while walking to and from school.

Harassment is reported to be a serious protection concern in camps; it is considered highly unsafe for women and girls to move around, especially when NGO staff leave the camp. Sexual harassment in the camp is perpetrated by IDP and host community boys and men, taxi drivers, and even by the men and forces in charge of security in the camp. One of the key issues reported in this respect is that toilets are extremely unsafe as they lack adequate lighting and locks on the doors, exposing women and girls to the risk of sexual harassment and assault.

IDP women and girls, and particularly FHHs, are perceived as being especially at risk of being sexually harassed, particularly by the host community, security actors in camps and armed groups at checkpoints. Displaced women belonging to groups with perceived affiliation to extremist groups appear to be the most vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence, which can be perpetrated by the host community, security forces or militias, and is often 'justified' in terms of retaliation. In Hawija, women and girl returnees belonging to groups with perceived affiliation to extremist groups are reportedly being targeted for sexual harassment, abduction and rape by militia.

Even when sexual harassment is limited to verbal abuse, women and girls may pay a high price for it – in all the locations in Kirkuk, the coping strategies cited in response to harassment are withdrawing girls from school and restricting women's movements. The most-reported coping mechanism in all locations is having a male relative accompany women in all their movements outside the house. IDP women respondents also tend to avoid contact with the host community,

while in Hawija, women reported minimizing their movements in the city in order to avoid the risk of coming into contact with armed groups.

In a context where violence committed by family members to protect the 'honour' of the family or tribe reportedly remains widespread,²¹ women and girls bear the blame for sexual harassment. While male respondents also mentioned harassment of women as a protection concern, some tended to justify it as a 'natural' response of men to women's behaviour: one male FGD respondent said, 'Girls nowadays are wearing short and tight clothes that seduce boys.' Another male FGD respondent explained that a girl's mobility must also be restricted in order to avoid her doing something that might 'put her family to shame', again hinting at traditional social norms centred on the family's honour.

Child marriage was consistently reported by FGD participants and key informants as a common practice in all the research locations in Kirkuk. On average, respondents indicated that a suitable age for girls to marry is 13 years, but many female respondents shared personal experiences of being married at an even younger age. Most female interviewees from the community did not express a negative perception of child marriage, describing the practice as customary and aimed at protecting girls against harassment.

Evidence also suggests that child marriage can be a consequence of girls' limited access to education. While some respondents related child marriage to the fact that girls do not have a chance to pursue their education after finishing primary school because secondary schools are too far away, others were candid in expressing that there is no need for girls to have an education. In communities where social and gender roles appear to be strictly defined and regulated, female respondents said that girls should leave school when they turn 12, i.e. right after finishing primary school.

There is evidence that the practice of child marriage is reinforced by displacement, insecurity and poverty, especially when they intersect. As in Diyala, child marriage in Kirkuk appears to be prevalent in contexts marked by lack of income, debt and loss of livelihoods, as a coping strategy to relieve families' financial burden and/or enable them to repay debts. Child marriage also appears to be prevalent in contexts of return that are characterized by high levels of insecurity; in Hawija, where levels of sexual harassment, abduction and rape of women and girls are reported to be high, families may force their underage daughters to marry. According to a male participant of an FGD in Hawija: 'They prefer to marry their daughters to protect them and to preserve the honour of the family.'

Child marriage further compounds the vulnerability of adolescent girls: in Iraq, the legal age for marrying is 18, but in the surveyed location child marriages are registered exclusively by imams, meaning no legal marriage certificate is issued. As mentioned above, the absence of legal documentation effectively results in a loss of rights for adolescents, particularly in the cases of girls or women who are divorced or abandoned by their husbands. Illegal divorces are also perceived by interviewees to be on the increase.

Sexual exploitation of IDP women and girls is reported to be rampant in IDP camps in Kirkuk, as described both by the community and by key informants. Respondents shared that IDP women from female-headed households are forced or coerced into sex with camp workers in exchange for food, assistance or other services. It was also reported that women and girls in the camp, and particularly FHHs, are forced into prostitution by the camp security forces (i.e. the local police).

Respondents indicated that sexual exploitation in the camp takes place systematically, at night, with IDP women and girls forced to have sex with men who come from outside the camp. Oxfam does not work in this camp. The problem of sexual exploitation and abuse was reported to Iraq's Preventing Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Taskforce while preserving the anonymity of those that had shared the allegations. The taskforce followed up the allegations and supported the camp management to carry out an awareness-raising campaign.

Oxfam staff provided participants in the FGDs with the Iraq information centre hotline so that people could report allegations if they chose to do so.²²

Human trafficking was indicated by key informants as an additional risk for women and girls, who are lured or abducted by criminal networks for sexual exploitation. Temporary marriage contracts can be used to hide the exploitation, but most often victims of trafficking are kept in 'prostitution houses' or sent elsewhere. FHHs and separated or divorced women are reportedly the most at risk of this type of GBV.

LIVELIHOODS AND SOURCES OF INCOME

Findings of the household surveys indicate that lack of livelihood opportunities remains a particularly acute problem. The figure below shows the main sources of income across both governorates. It is notable that high percentages of people are reliant on daily wage-based labour, while a relatively low percentage are engaging in agriculture, a traditional source of income in both Kirkuk and Diyala.

The household survey findings related to income and livelihoods are consistent with responses from both KIs and FGDs. In the case of KIs in both governorates, 77% reported livelihood opportunities as a major need, particularly for IDPs (63% of interviewees) and for women (65% of interviewees).

In both governorates, and in both urban and rural communities, the overwhelming majority of respondents reported that their monthly income is insufficient to meet their basic needs. Overall, just 27% reported that their income was sufficient (24% and 29% in Diyala and Kirkuk, respectively). In urban areas, only 28% reported sufficient income, with 26% reporting the same in rural areas.

It is important to highlight that 8% of FGD respondents perceived the lack of livelihoods as the main protection concern. This holds particularly true for female respondents, including female heads of households: 22.5% of women respondents in Diyala and 9.3% in Kirkuk indicated that the fact that they are unable to meet their basic needs represents their main concern and risk, because it exposes them to the risk of domestic violence or sexual harassment.

Female participants who raised this concern also suggested access to 'safe and dignified' livelihood opportunities for women as a possible solution. Income-generating activities that could be carried out within one's house or in a non-public space with other women were unanimously perceived as the safest option; however, this could in turn reinforce negative gendered social norms. Interestingly, one group of female respondents in Jalawla pointed out that government jobs are also considered relatively safe, as 'they are public jobs and you don't have any private owner to deal with'.

Lack of livelihood opportunities also has a significant impact both on protection coping mechanisms and access to other services. As described below, limited financial means lead to challenges in purchasing clean water, paying children’s school fees, and accessing healthcare and other essential services. Lack of livelihoods was also noted by participants of FGDs in IDP camps as a principal reason why people are unable to return.

INEQUALITY IN ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

Considering the ongoing (and in some cases worsening) security challenges in Diyala and Kirkuk, as well as the displacement trends marked by problems in areas of returns and protracted displacement for IDPs, it is no surprise that both humanitarian and recovery needs remain high. In general, respondents reported low levels of access to basic services and high levels of inequality, especially in areas that were most directly affected by the conflict with ISIS, the conflict between government-supported actors and Kurdish counterparts, or both. As noted above, inability to meet basic needs was reported by respondents in both Diyala and Kirkuk as a major source of protection risks. The figure below summarizes the key needs reported in the household survey in both governorates.

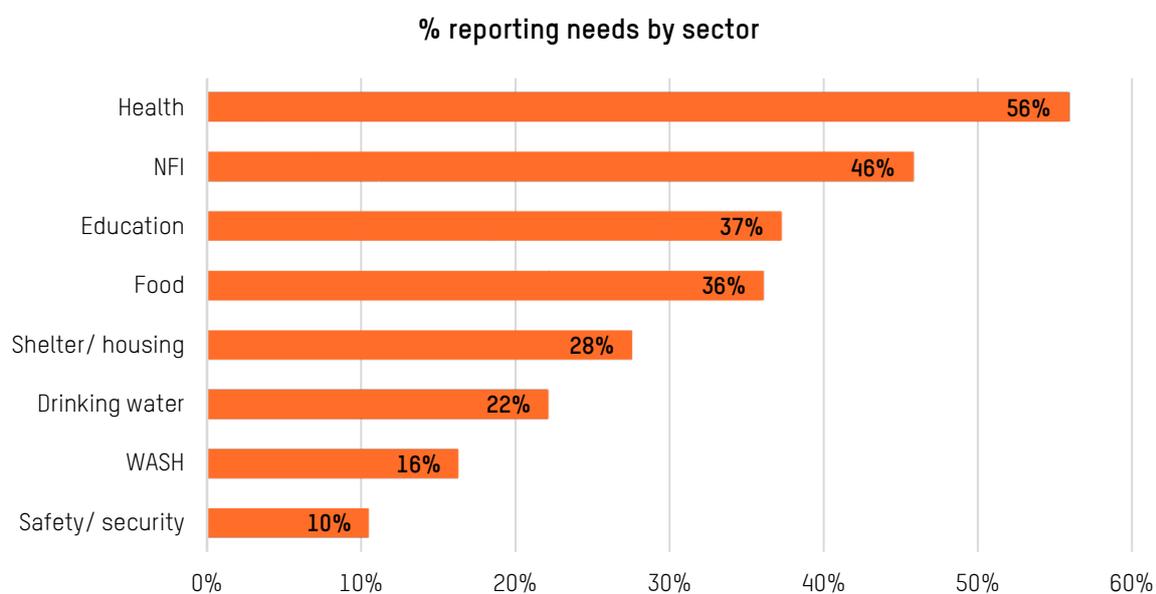


Figure 7: Needs by sector (household survey findings)

HEALTHCARE

Respondents in both Kirkuk and Diyala consistently reported access to health services as an area of high need. Respondents to the household survey in Diyala and Kirkuk reported having better access to basic health services, such as emergency care and in-patient treatment, than to vaccinations, medication and reproductive healthcare. While Diyala reported slightly higher levels of access to health services in general, both governorates suffer greatly in this area.

While the vast majority of communities reported access to healthcare as a major gap in services, eight communities in both governorates (five in Diyala, three in Kirkuk) considered it the most pressing need. All but one of those communities reported the lack of medical personnel,

specialized treatment and health facilities in nearby areas as the major causes of health challenges.

FGD respondents in Diyala (40% of locations) and Kirkuk (25% of locations) indicated that difficulty in accessing healthcare is one of the main issues in their communities: public hospitals are far away and often do not provide quality specialized treatment, requiring families to find the financial resources to cover transport costs on top of the costs of specialized medical treatment. In all locations, respondents associated barriers in accessing healthcare with lack of income; as one respondent from a village in Diyala explained, 'Even if we go to Khanaqin or Jalawla Hospital, we will not find medicines there: they will send us instead to a private pharmacy to buy treatment.' Interestingly, FGD respondents in Kirkuk mentioned that they borrow money to cover the cost of travelling to distant health services and buying medicines, while many interviewees in Diyala reported that they tend to ignore their health needs and only seek care in case of emergency.

Respondents in six communities stated that the lack of access to health services is having a particular impact on women, especially pregnant women. This is also related to the acute lack of female doctors reported in both governorates. Also, as we have seen, limitations on freedom of movement that are caused by the lack of cash on one hand, and from checkpoints and curfews on the other, combined with the fear of being attacked or harassed, may deter women from visiting medical facilities except as a last resort.

Both in Diyala and in Kirkuk, there is a common negative perception about the government's efforts in the healthcare sector; it is considered to neglect the local community and to not address their concerns. As one FGD participant in Diyala explained, 'We tried to raise our voice with local authorities, but they ignored us.'

EDUCATION

According to UNICEF, nearly 3.5 million Iraqi schoolchildren do not attend school or attend irregularly, and more than 600,000 displaced children have missed an entire year of schooling.²³

It is therefore not surprising that education was another issue identified by respondents as a major concern. Overall, 37% of respondents to the household survey identified education as a priority need. This is confirmed by both KII and FGD findings, where the majority of interviewees reported lack of access to education for children as a major challenge (86% of FGDs and 93% of KIIs).

However, overall rates of access to education were relatively high. This is especially the case in Kirkuk, where 69% of respondents reported that schooling was available to both boys and girls. Diyala had slightly lower access rates, with 54% reporting accessibility for both boys and girls. Findings from the KIs and FGDs, however, point to the fact that even though schools might be physically available, a wide range of factors can pose serious barriers to children accessing and continuing education.

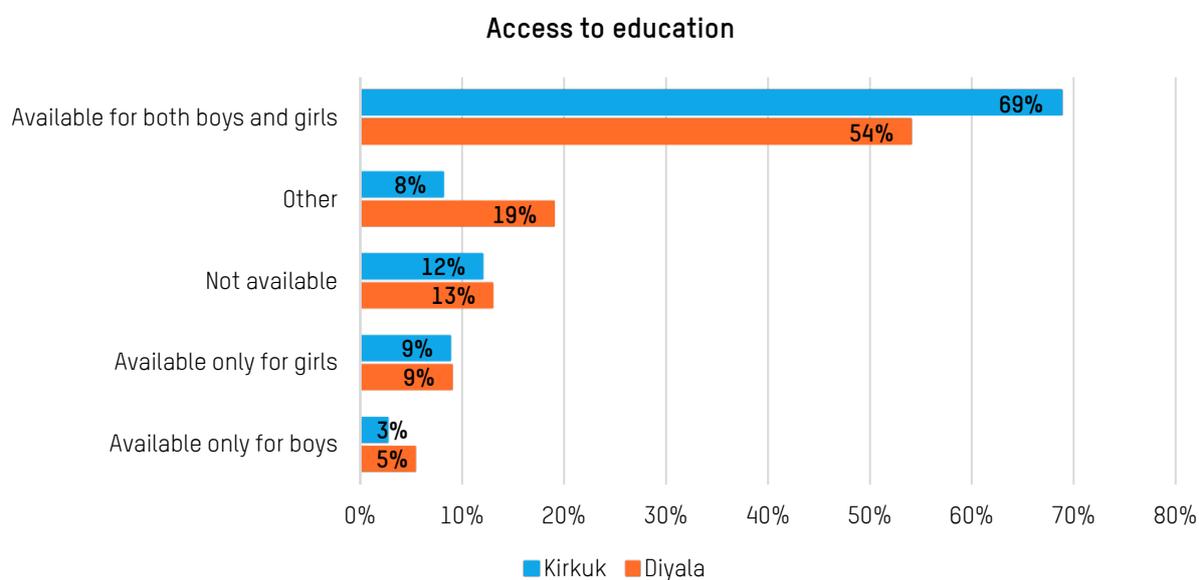


Figure 8: Access to education in Kirkuk and Diyala (household survey findings)

In both governorates, the main barriers to accessing education relate to the lack of physical infrastructure, or schools which are considered unsafe or inadequate for the number of children, particularly in locations hosting high numbers of IDPs. Other issues that were mentioned in both governorates are insufficient teacher numbers and unaffordability of school fees and school-related costs. The lack of secondary schools close to the communities and the difficulty of covering transport costs account for the high drop-out rate after primary school. More specifically, KIs indicated that while access to primary school is generally considered safe for all boys and for most girls (89% of respondents in Diyala and 86% in Kirkuk), access to secondary school is considered far more problematic, especially for girls, with only 35% of respondents in Diyala and 17% in Kirkuk indicating that girls have safe access to secondary education.

Concern regarding access to education is widespread in most of the locations, particularly for girls, who are prevented from accessing education by a range of factors including lack of a secondary school in the vicinity (15 locations), but also the presence of mixed classes, and fear of harassment on the way to school.

Of particular note were the concerns of IDP respondents, who reported comparatively high access challenges. Safe access to primary schooling still represents an issue for many IDP children, with 39% of respondents in Diyala and 35% in Kirkuk reporting that IDP children cannot access primary education. Overall, 35% of IDPs in Diyala reported that education was inaccessible for children, including because of the lack of Arabic-speaking teachers, with 39% reporting the same in Kirkuk. In Diyala, 16% of IDP respondents reported that school was unaffordable for their children, while 20% reported this in Kirkuk. FGD respondents in Kirkuk also pointed to the fact that IDP children

are often denied access to school because they have no legal documentation and/or because they have spent too many years out of school due to displacement.

Strategies used by families and communities to cope with the difficulty in accessing education are limited. Positive coping mechanisms mentioned by FGD participants include collecting money for repairing their primary schools (two rural locations, one each in Diyala and Kirkuk) and employing volunteer teachers (one location in Diyala and three in Kirkuk). When it comes to secondary school, however, the coping mechanisms mentioned are mostly negative. Most FGD respondents indicated that girls have to drop out of school and stay at home 'waiting to be married' (five locations in Diyala and eight in Kirkuk).

The use of corporal punishment and beatings in primary schools is another concern mentioned by FGD participants in Kirkuk (three locations) and in Diyala (one location) as contributing to the increase in drop-out rates. In one camp location in Kirkuk, all the children interviewed agreed on the fact that the teachers are 'not good at all' and reported that some teachers used to beat them with sticks and subject them to other types of corporal punishment on a daily basis. Because of this, none of the children interviewed considered school as a good place where they wanted to be, and none expressed the wish to continue their education.

It is also worth mentioning that both KIs and FGD participants highlighted a lack of safe spaces for children and for youth; for the respondents, there is an acute need for such spaces to promote meaningful social interaction and activities, and to reduce the risk for boys of being recruited into armed groups or militias or falling into drug abuse.

HOUSING, LAND AND PROPERTY

Overall, 28% of respondents to the household survey in both governorates reported shelter or housing to be a major need (32% in Diyala and 24% in Kirkuk). In both locations, IDPs were significantly more likely to report shelter or housing as a concern: 36% and 56% of IDP respondents in Diyala and Kirkuk, respectively.

However, non-IDP populations in certain areas of Diyala, especially in Jalawla, reported higher rates of shelter and housing needs than in other areas. This trend, reported by KIIs, in FGDs and in the household survey, is consistent with secondary data that indicates significantly higher levels of house destruction in Jalawla during the withdrawal of the Kurdish Peshmerga during the post-referendum conflict with the Iraqi security forces in 2017.

In terms of coping mechanisms related to shelter, respondents in both governorates indicated that some support is available to those lacking shelter, but with significant gaps. In Diyala, 57% of household survey respondents reported the availability of hosting or other support from family or friends, with 61% reporting availability of the same in Kirkuk.

WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE

Consistent with both secondary data and direct study findings on education, healthcare and shelter/housing, WASH is also an area of high need in both Diyala and Kirkuk, largely due to the severe infrastructural damage in both areas. Although progress has been made in rehabilitating key infrastructure – notably through UNDP’s Funding Facility for Stabilization as well as other stabilization projects – major gaps remain, especially in Diyala and in camps.

In Diyala, especially in areas of Khanaqin district, FGD respondents reported widespread lack of availability of potable water. Issues generally centred on damage to basic infrastructure (distribution networks, wells, treatment plants), leaving people to use unpotable water even for drinking, in some cases leading to health problems. Notably, only two areas in each governorate reported the use of chlorine for water treatment, and several reported mistrust in government, non-government and international institutions as a result of perceived inaction on the issue of potable water. Additionally, several areas reported that lack of livelihood opportunities meant people lacked financial resources to purchase clean water. Overall in Diyala, 25% of household survey respondents reported access to drinking water as an area of concern.

In Kirkuk, reported access to drinking water and basic WASH services were higher than in Diyala, with only one location (Kirkuk city) reporting lack of drinking water as a major issue, again as a result of unpotable water delivered through the distribution network.

Additional WASH issues with implications for protection were recorded among IDP respondents – namely lack of adequate lighting and locks on doors in camp latrines, leading to protection incidents and fear among female IDPs.

COMMUNITY COPING MECHANISMS AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Findings indicate that communities in both Diyala and Kirkuk seek various types of support in response to protection challenges and have varying levels of success in accessing them. In both governorates, a high proportion of household survey respondents indicated that they mostly seek

support from their families (42% in Diyala and 44% in Kirkuk), followed by community leaders (39% in both Diyala and Kirkuk).

Notably, seeking help from religious or tribal leaders is reported less in Diyala (4% and 22% respectively) and more frequently in Kirkuk (16% and 36% respectively).²⁴ Key informants indicated that families and communities resort to traditional mechanisms for decision making; in Kirkuk, the prevalent mechanism is meeting the tribal leader (38% of responses), while in Diyala the strategy most referred to is meeting with the mukhtar (40% of responses). In both cases, respondents indicated that only men, and specifically the heads of households, take part in those meetings; women can participate in some cases, but only when certain family matters, such as marriage or divorce, are discussed.

Interestingly, when women were asked about sources of support without any men present, responses changed, with the majority of respondents indicating that they would feel safer seeking the help of female relatives (54% of female household survey respondents). Asking for help from a male relative (39%) or a tribal leader (30%) were also frequently reported. Significantly, female household survey respondents also mentioned seeking support from NGOs and women’s help centres, although to a much lesser extent (9% and 4% respectively).

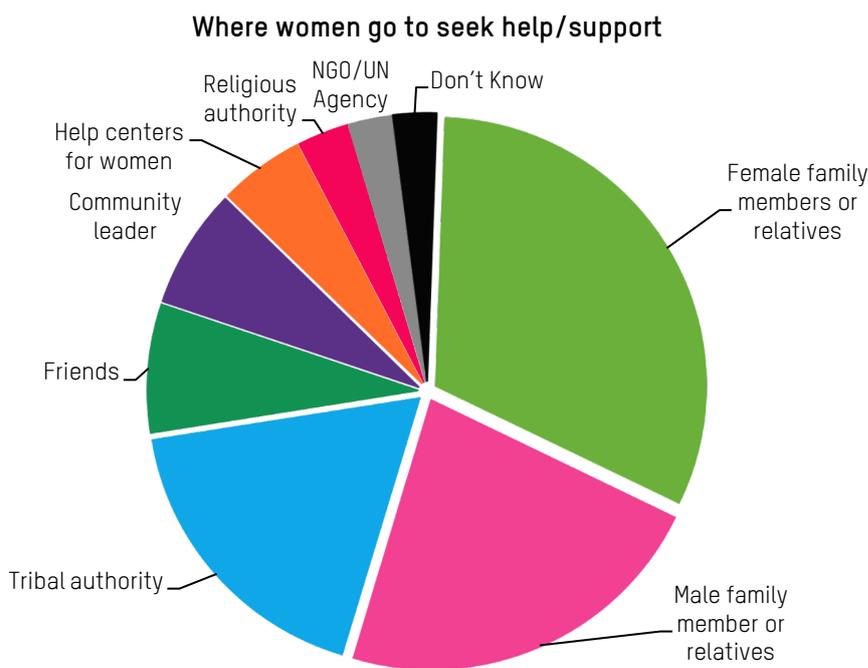


Figure 9: Where women go to seek help/support (household survey findings)

When discussing the risk of harassment, most female FGD respondents indicated seeking support from a male relative as the main coping mechanism, as they consider being accompanied by a male relative to be a mitigating factor. Interestingly, two female key informants from rural communities in Diyala mentioned that an alternative protection strategy for women is to be accompanied by elderly women when they need to go outside their house, in order to avoid harassment and gain relatively more freedom of movement.

The research also examined the challenges that women survivors of violence face in finding support. Findings reported varying levels of discrimination against and stigmatization of women

survivors of violence. Notably, nearly 30% of female respondents in Diyala reported this as a major obstacle. Across the board, specialized services such as psychosocial support, centres for women and safe spaces for children were reported as being only very rarely available.

Lack of information on the available services can also be inferred from the responses of the women who raised GBV-related issues in FGDs: according to the majority of the participants, no service whatsoever is provided by NGOs or at the institutional level for GBV survivors (70% of locations in Diyala and 61% in Kirkuk). In Diyala, 50% of women respondents sought medical care in response to GBV incidents, whereas this figure was far lower (only 21%) in Kirkuk. This finding is consistent with more general questions related to access to health services (discussed above), where respondents in Kirkuk reported lower availability of in-patient and other healthcare services.

A significant proportion of household respondents (38% in both Diyala and Kirkuk) reported an inability to pay for transport as a major obstacle preventing women survivors of GBV from seeking support. This finding aligns with the limited livelihood opportunities and relatively low numbers of respondents reporting a sufficient monthly income.

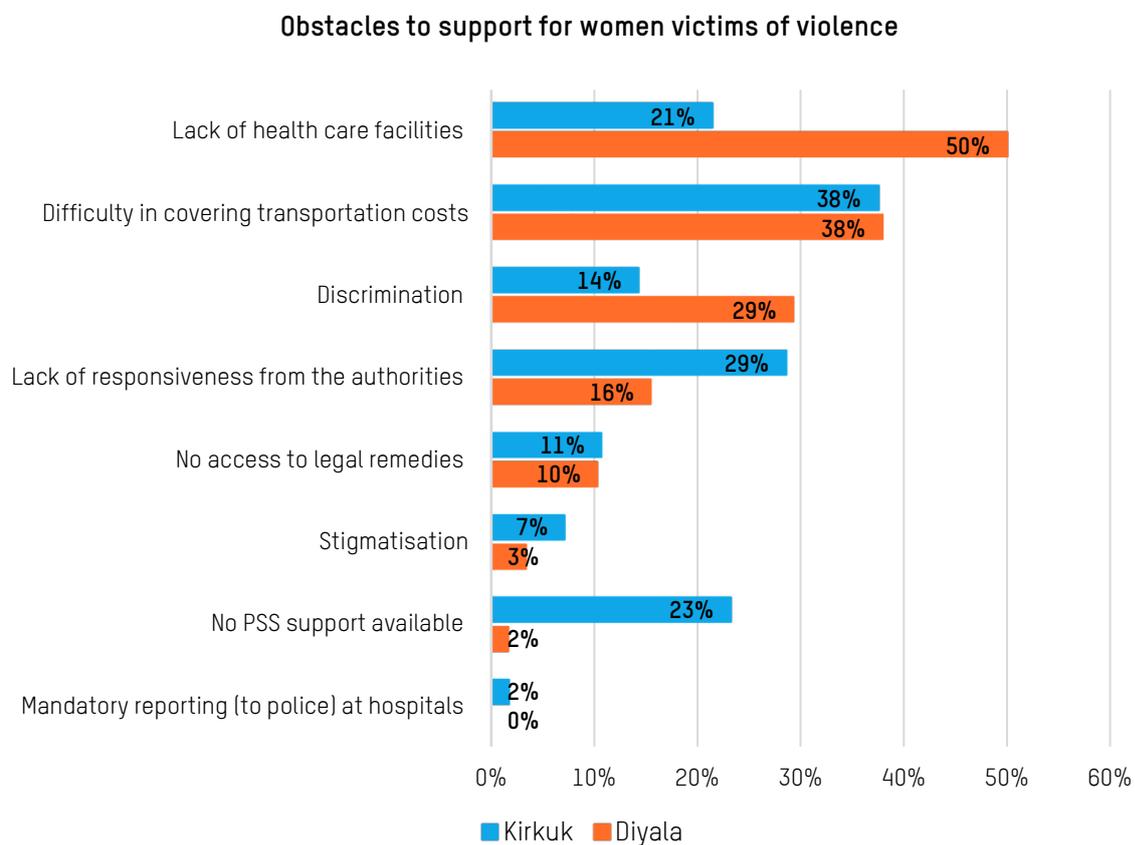


Figure 10: Obstacles to support for women survivors of gender-based violence (household survey findings).
 Note: PSS = psychosocial support.

NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISMS

Respondents described **restrictions on women and girls’ mobility** both as a component of traditional norms aimed at protecting the family’s honour, and as a response to and a strategy for

coping with the insecurity of contexts marked by sectarian or ethnic tensions, the presence of armed groups, lack of information and economic uncertainty.²⁵

As described above, in the context of conflict and displacement a family's 'honour' is under further scrutiny and threat, due to the male head of household's perceived inability to keep the family safe or to provide for it. This has an impact on women's mobility. Both in Diyala and in Kirkuk, the research shows that both host communities and IDPs actively mitigate the risk of sexual harassment and assault by further restricting the mobility of women and adolescent girls. In eight locations (four in Diyala and four in Kirkuk), women are allowed or prefer to move outside only if accompanied by a male relative. In four locations (three in Diyala and one in Kirkuk), women avoid any movement at night. Both coping strategies affect women's capacity to access the services they need; as described by the participants of one FGD in Diyala: 'Even if we have an emergency, we still have to wait for a male relative to accompany us.'

As we have seen, FHHs and divorced or separated women may resort to restricting their movements even further as they are perceived as being more exposed to harassment and blame within the community. Additionally, FHHs are unable to resort to the protection strategy adopted by women who have male relatives.

As mentioned above, the **increase in child marriage**²⁶ appears to be a negative coping mechanism/response to insecurity and economic deprivation. Although child and early marriage was religiously and culturally accepted in Iraq before the recent conflict and displacement crisis, the prevalence of child marriage has increased due to conflict, toxic masculinity, gross inequalities and injustices, and the subsequently deteriorating economic situation. This has impacted heavily on families' livelihoods and – given the rigid patriarchal norms – on the opportunity for young girls to continue their education.

Although not specifically covered by the research, findings suggest that families and individuals try to cope with the difficulties in accessing essential services by **borrowing money**, as indicated by FGD respondents in 40% of locations in Diyala and 30% in Kirkuk. More specifically, respondents in Kirkuk borrow money in order to cover medical expenses and the lack of livelihoods due to displacement or the destruction and contamination of farmland by ISIS. In Diyala, borrowing money is mostly associated with lack of livelihoods, and also with displacement.

CONCLUSION

This report set out to explore the perceptions of communities in Kirkuk and Diyala on the main protection risks to which they are exposed, and to analyse the decision-making processes at the household and community level when communities are confronted with those risks or looking for redress and solutions.

Across the research locations, access to income and livelihood opportunities was identified as a key driver of protection and recovery needs, as well as a prerequisite to enable women and men to access services and activate positive coping mechanisms. For female-headed households in particular, it was found that lack of income is a catalyst for additional vulnerability and protection risks, such as harassment and sexual exploitation.

Affected communities are acutely aware of the interconnectedness of these factors, as they are pushed towards the adoption of negative coping mechanisms while they struggle to meet their basic needs. The research shows how negative strategies to cope with the lack of income is on the increase, especially among IDPs. School dropout, child labour and child marriage are coping mechanisms frequently adopted by the communities that further compound the vulnerability of women and adolescents, who are already systematically excluded from information, decision making and meaningful opportunities for socialization and positive engagement in the community (doubly so in the case of female adolescents). While too many girls are deprived of the opportunity to continue their education, boys and young men with no access to job opportunities are at increased risk of drug addiction and recruitment by armed groups.

Livelihood strategies are also hindered by restricted mobility and the lack of information on services, as well as by the limited presence of humanitarian agencies in some of the most affected areas of Diyala and Kirkuk. As noted previously in Oxfam's 2016 Iraq Gender Analysis report,²⁷ male mukhtars remain to this day the main gatekeepers of the communities, especially in terms of their access to aid. While understandably focused on responding to the immediate needs of the affected communities, humanitarian agencies should be mindful of how their primary interlocutors and entry points into communities, and the information channels they use, contribute to reinforcing traditional power dynamics, connected with male power-holders in a conflict-shaped society.

Perceptions of the local and national government, in all the areas assessed, are that they are largely ineffective and unresponsive. As a consequence, individuals and communities feel that they are left on their own to find solutions to their most pressing problems. Decision making in the community is hence concentrated/confined within traditional structures and mechanisms, such as councils of men, tribal leaders and mukhtars, further reinforcing the disempowerment of women and adolescents.

The exclusion of women from public spaces is further compounded by an increase in sectarian tension, insecurity and criminality, and by the imposition of social mechanisms of control such as harassment and blaming/shaming/dishonouring of women who move around without a male relative, particularly unmarried or divorced women and widows.

Against this backdrop, research shows that GBV is ubiquitous inside and outside of the family and is often made worse by displacement and sectarian divisions. Once again, lack of livelihoods

further exacerbates women and girls' exposure to the risk of GBV, increasing domestic violence, harassment in the community and sexual exploitation. With little means to get hold of information, and little access to income and justice mechanisms, women, girls and boys who are victims of GBV have very limited options other than to seek support within their families.

Stigmatization linked to perceived affiliation to extremist groups such as ISIS is still a widely unaddressed problem, both at the national and local levels. This stigmatization increases women and men's vulnerability and exposure to the protection risks identified in this study. People with perceived affiliation have little or no access to public services and legal remedies, and hence no access to durable solutions. While the legal assistance provided by local and international NGOs is essential, the persistence and entrenchment of structural issues – such as blocked returns and barred access to legal documentation – requires strategies and solutions at the national level.

Protection risks, as indicated by the women, men and adolescents who participated in this study, are strictly interconnected with factors related to income, gender, cultural perceptions and social cohesion. Recovery and durable solutions for those affected by the conflict require a holistic approach to the needs of IDPs, host communities and returnees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research recommendations are from a roundtable discussion with community members from Diyala and Kirkuk. The participants had diverse roles, including government representatives, students, professors, Oxfam youth volunteers and local staff. Following a presentation of key findings, the participants proceeded to develop recommendations on changes they wish to see in their communities.

The recommendations are as per the research findings:

COMMUNITY SAFETY AND SECURITY

Revise legislation governing trafficking laws across Iraq borders, and to establish a regulatory committee to prevent, monitor and combat trafficking.

Increase youth work in community centres that focus on developing skills and opportunities. Equip the centres with resources and guidance to support youth so they can contribute to rebuilding peace in their communities.

CHILD LABOUR AND RECRUITMENT

Establish a committee made up of government, community members and NGO staff to monitor the conditions of children in and out of schools. The committee should record the realities and advocate to improve the safety and wellbeing of children. It is recommended for the committee to run community awareness campaigns on school dropouts, targeting partners and wider society.

Launch media campaigns combating child labour.

Support the Ministry of Education in equipping schools to improve the welfare, health and safety of students, and reduce the overcrowding of schools.

Create a hotline for child labour, exploitation and abuse reporting.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Revise the personal status code governing women's rights in divorce, inheritance and child custody, and activate the National Action Plan based on UN Resolution 1325.²⁸

Increase programmes that have women in decision-making positions, and consult women when designing community centres, roads, shelters, etc.

Review labour laws on women's access to the labour market in Iraq, and promote policy changes to increase economic equality for women.

Increase the number of centres for women in Diyala and Kirkuk that support women's access to services assisting them in situations of gender-based violence.

Promote women in local leadership. As respondents explained, 'all the mayors and sheikhs are men in our community'. It is recommended for the government and agencies to increase women's leadership roles in their communities.

LIVELIHOODS

Increase the number of business start-up programmes in Diyala and Kirkuk run by the government, humanitarian actors and the private sector.

Encourage integrated livelihood programmes with gender, education, and social protection dimensions.

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