



Responding to the Syria and Iraq Crises: Enabling Recovery and Resilience among Women Survivors of War in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) Impact report, February 2019

Introduction

In November 2017, Women for Women International (WfWI) began delivering our tried and tested 12-month social and economic empowerment programme in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) for the first time, working with 300 Syrian refugee and host community women. Our programme teaches a holistic range of skills and knowledge including sustainable income generation; health and wellness; decision-making and fostering connections in a safe environment with other women for solidarity and support.

We are pleased to share this impact report, which details the activities that have taken place over the last year, leading up to the participants' graduation from our training programme. Thank you so much for the support that players of the People's Postcode Lottery (PPL) have offered women in KRI. Your generous grant of £200,000 had a tremendous impact on our ability to establish and progress this first year of direct programme delivery in the region.

Direct Impact

Funding from the Postcode Equality Trust over the last year has been essential to the development of WfWI as an organisation. PPL funding has been channelled to directly support the establishment of our social and economic empowerment programme in KRI. This process included the setting up of a new Country Office and recruiting a team to organise, oversee and deliver training, as well as support staff for finance and logistics. The new team were trained and supported by WfWI staff from our headquarters and other more established country offices. Once in place, the team conducted community outreach sessions, to introduce the programme to local authorities, community leaders and other organisations working in our target community of Daratu, Erbil. With the support of our local contacts, we were able to identify 300 marginalised women to participate, and WfWI monitoring and evaluation staff administered intake and baseline surveys to them prior to the start of training. Thanks to your support, we have been able to stay true to our mission and relevant in current crises by responding to the needs of a disadvantaged and marginalised demographic of women – refugees and displaced women – in the fallout of one of the worst conflicts of the decade. WfWI was also able to begin delivering our Men's Engagement Programme (MEP) to an initial cohort of 200 men in the same community. The establishment of our new office in Erbil – our first new office in almost 10 years – and the successful first year of programme delivery has allowed WfWI to expand our presence and increase our visibility and credibility in a new context. This successful foundation will allow us to build a strong programme in the KRI and reach many more women, and men, in the future.

Enabled Impact

The KRI is a region that has experienced a great deal of instability and change over recent years. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimates that one in every four people in the KRI is either a refugee or Internally Displaced Person (IDP), each carrying the trauma of their flight while struggling to find basic accommodation and food on dwindling resources. In addition to placing immense strains on the KRI's local economy and infrastructure as well as doubling the poverty rate¹, this represents a dramatic social shift, creating challenges of cohesion. WfWI's women's market and livelihoods assessment in KRI found a 68% unemployment rate and an unmet need for livelihood support projects for refugees, IDPs and host communities. Women's livelihoods have been disrupted by conflict and displacement and cultural restrictions on women's mobility have increased, impacting opportunities to generate income. In addition to economic hardship, many bear psychological scars of violence and rights abuses, including rape and torture. Studies show that over 80% of refugees live in daily fear of abuse. Women and girls report a significant

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<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/21597/940320KRG0Econ0Box0385416B00PUBLIC0.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

increase in domestic violence, early and forced marriage, and temporary marriages, particularly amongst households where unemployed male relatives suffer from displacement-related stress². Finally, women face cultural barriers that restrict freedoms and opportunities, leaving them vulnerable to gender-based violence. However, despite being faced with multiple barriers and the trauma of displacement and conflict, the marginalised refugee and host community women that WfWI works with have continued to show incredible resilience and determination to learn new skills in order to support themselves and their families.

Following the community assessment and identification activities outlined above, WfWI grouped the 300 enrolled women into classes of 25, which would go on to be a vital resource and support network for them through the year.

Social empowerment training

A key part of the programme consists of social empowerment training, which was delivered in four three-month long modules on health, income, rights and support systems. In these sessions, trainers' foster debate and the exchange of ideas, listen to and respect the opinions of learners, and encourage the women to be resources for each other. Specifically:

- ***Module 1: Sustaining an Income:*** Women learnt about the gendered division of labour, how to challenge stereotypes, and how to achieve a work-life balance. They have also learnt skills for household financial management and savings.
- ***Module 2: Health and Wellness:*** Women learnt about health as a human right and reproductive health, pregnancy, birth and infant care. They also learnt about communicable diseases and disease prevention, as well as nutrition, hygiene and how to manage stress.
- ***Module 3: Family and Community Decision-Making:*** This module included lessons on group decision-making, negotiation, and conflict management, providing vital tools for women to work together and advance their goals. The women also learn about gender equality and their fundamental rights, increasing their confidence to participate in decision-making at the household and community levels.
- ***Module 4: Social Networks and Safety Nets:*** Women learnt how to advocate for and make transformative changes in their homes and communities. As a woman develops with her class, she shares ideas and resources with her fellow participants, building strong support networks. In communities affected by conflict, these networks are important as they give a woman a place to go for help and survival.

In February 2018, WfWI recruited a volunteer English teacher and two volunteer literacy teachers to deliver classes once a week to those women who expressed an interest in English language skills. Additionally, alongside the training, WfWI employed a social worker, who worked directly with programme participants offering psychosocial support, including to women who have suffered trauma or experienced gender-based violence.

Economic empowerment, business skills and vocational skills training

Early in the year, numeracy training was offered to innumerate women, and then in March, vocational skills training in tailoring began. Over eight months, women learnt how to make a wide range of clothes as well as receiving training on business management skills, so are equipped with the tools to earn an income from tailoring. These skills are greatly valued by the women, who see it as an opportunity to provide for themselves and their families in the future. Many are now planning on setting up their own small businesses, or to create cooperatives with the other women they have worked with during the programme. As one participant, Raja,



Some of the members of Hanya group business

² <http://uniraq.org/images/documents/We%20Just%20Keep%20Silent%20final%20English.pdf>

explained: *“In the future I would like to start my own business with other women from my class, and open a small sewing shop, where we support each other and make our lives better and provide a healthy life for ourselves and our families.”*

This demonstrates how combining income-generation training with social empowerment classes, which encourage participants to work together, creates new ideas and opportunities for the future. One group of five women have formed a group business, called Hanya, and use a side room in one of their homes to take turns to look after their children and to sew.

Finally, women learnt about savings and the benefits of financial planning. Seven savings groups were formed over the year amongst the Iraqi women participants, with eight members in each group.

At the start of November, we were delighted to host a graduation ceremony for the 265 women who completed the programme³. After speeches by WfWI staff and a participant, each woman was presented with a certificate. One of the graduates told us how much it meant to her: *“As I heard my name being called out and as I walked on the stage to receive my certificate, I felt like one of the women on TV; I felt like I exist.”* At the end, music and dancing broke out as everyone celebrated together. The event was an incredible celebration of sisterhood and of the women’s achievements over the last year.



Presentation of certificates

Men’s Engagement Programme



MEP participants at a training session

200 key male community members participated in WfWI’s Men’s Engagement Programme (MEP) between September and December 2018, consisting of 48 Syrian refugees and 152 host community members. Amongst these, 41 were family members of the women participants. MEP participants came from varied backgrounds and roles in their communities, including teachers, doctors, religious experts, policemen, health employees and Mukhtars (government or town leaders). The MEP centres around the theme that women’s equality is everyone’s business and that men can be gatekeepers, allies and co-beneficiaries of women’s empowerment. During the training men learnt

about gender-based violence, positive masculinities, power and gender roles, and men’s role in women’s social and economic empowerment. They learnt about WfWI’s core programme and its benefits to the community, with the aim to create a more supportive and enabling environment for the women participants. One MEP participant told us; *“I have learned how to cooperate with women and respect them as they are human just like men. Now, I have the ability to recognise my wife’s rights and how to make a balance and have a mutual interest in making our lives better...”*

Results

Before and after training, a sample of our participants (157 women) completed pre- and post-test questionnaires containing questions relevant to the concepts and lessons presented in the trainings. After analysing the data received, we found notable changes in all major areas covered through the trainings provided, such as:

- 27% of participants increased their net earnings through the year.

³ Some women dropped out of the programme during the year, primarily due to moving away from Erbil. For example, some Syrian women were able to return to their home areas in Syria during the year.

- Participants' average current savings increased by 62% from the beginning to the end of the programme (from \$167.14 at baseline to \$270.26 by graduation).
- After the completion of the tailoring vocational training, participants reported earning an average of \$5.83 per week from that vocational skill alone.
- 17.5% more participants reported being involved in making household decisions by the end of the programme, including decisions around family planning and participation in income generation activities.
- Participants' knowledge of women's rights improved by 17% at graduation and 40% more participants reported having used their voice to speak out publicly against women's abuse than at programme enrolment.

Similarly, a baseline and endline set of data was collected from 150 MEP participants, which showed:

- Before training, 69% of men reported that they do not speak with women about community issues such as violence against women, however by the end of training this had decreased to 49%.
- At baseline, 44% of interviewees reported their belief that family planning encourages promiscuity, and by endline this number was reduced to just 9%.

Conclusion

Thank you so much to the players of the People's Postcode Lottery for the support you have shown to marginalised survivors of conflict in the KRI. In just one year, WfWI-Iraq has been able to achieve so much – established a new team, a new programme and helped almost 300 women to create transformative changes in their lives, alongside the enrolment of 200 men onto our MEP. We hope the enclosed story of Jalila helps bring this impact to life.

In December 2018, we built on the successes of the first year by enrolling 700 new women onto our programme in the same community. We already have a long waiting list of women who have now heard about the programme and are keen to take part, and we are committed to reaching as many more marginalised women as we can. None of this would be possible without your invaluable support.

On behalf of all the women we serve, thank you so much!

Jalila's story



Dresses measured and sewed by Jalila during the training classes in sewing and tailoring

Jalila is 41 years old and a housewife. She left Syria with her family as a refugee at the beginning of the war. Jalila and her family first stayed in a refugee camp, before travelling to the KRI, where they had relatives. *"Due to the conflict, my children missed out on school", Jalila says. "Our life was ruined and collapsed because of the emergence of war and conflict (...) Being a refugee is not easy. It is very hard in terms of language and integration."*

The economic crisis in Iraq has made the family's lives even more difficult. Some of their relatives have returned to Syria now, as the conflict has become less acute in some areas of the country: *"we are not doing well financially, and we miss our family, relatives and home in Syria. But there is nothing left for us [in Syria], we lost everything"*.

Jalila first heard about WfWI when she was invited to attend a meeting where the programme was introduced to interested women. She registered that day and started attending training classes in November 2017. *"I liked it", she explains, "I learnt many things about women and about women's strength. For this reason, I continued [attending the classes]"*.

Jalila left school in the 5th grade, yet during the last year, she has learnt about entrepreneurship, sewing and tailoring skills, and about the law, human rights and leadership. *"I have made a lot of new friends, if I see them outside or in any other place I say hi to them and talk to them. My favourite lessons were those about women's rights and the sewing classes... I see that change is happening in my life and I never miss a class, because I love it here and I feel like home."* Looking ahead, Jalila says, *"In the future, I would like to have a small sewing shop in order to start my business."*