



COMPREHENSIVE RESEARCH REPORT

Public Perceptions of Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) in Iraq

Project: Enhancing Public Perceptions of WROs through Research and Strategic Communication in Iraq

Target Governorates: Salahaddin, Ninawa, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah

Implemented By: Women Empowerment Organization (WEO)

Date: June 2026

List of Abbreviations:

➤	CSO: Civil Society Organization
➤	FGD: Focus Group Discussion
➤	WEO: Women Empowerment Organization
➤	KII: Key Informant Interview
➤	KRI: Kurdistan Region of Iraq
➤	NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
➤	WRO: Women's Rights Organization

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women Empowerment Organization (WEO) is implementing the "Enhancing Public Perceptions of Women's Rights Organizations through Research and Strategic Communication in Iraq" project. The project aims to strengthen the resilience, visibility, and public acceptance of Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) in Iraq by generating evidence-based narratives, addressing harmful misconceptions, and promoting greater public support for women's leadership and participation.

As part of the project, this baseline research was conducted to assess public perceptions of Women's Rights Organizations, identify prevailing narratives and misconceptions, and generate evidence to inform strategic communication and advocacy efforts. Under the technical oversight of WEO's Research Specialist, the study adopted a rigorous mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data collected through Kobo Toolbox surveys with qualitative findings from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The research engaged a diverse range of stakeholders across Salah al-Din, Nineveh, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah, including community members, women activists, therapists, judges, community leaders, media professionals, and civil society representatives.

To ensure balanced representation, the survey included equal numbers of men and women from both urban and rural communities, representing different age groups, education levels, employment backgrounds, and displacement statuses. The findings show that while many community members are familiar with Women's Rights Organizations, their understanding of the full range of services they provide remains limited. Although beneficiaries generally express high levels of trust in WROs, broader public perceptions continue to be shaped by misinformation, misconceptions, and social norms, particularly in more conservative communities. As a result, practical services such as legal assistance, education, healthcare, and protection receive greater public support than broader discussions related to gender equality and women's rights. The research also highlights the challenging environment in which women leaders and Women's Rights Organizations operate. Participants described facing social criticism, online harassment, misinformation campaigns, and funding constraints that affect both the sustainability of organizations and the personal safety of

women activists. Despite these challenges, women leaders continue to play a vital role in providing services, advocating for women's rights, and strengthening community resilience.

Overall, the study reveals an important distinction between **institutional trust** and **social acceptance**. Communities that have direct experience with Women's Rights Organizations generally recognize their value and contribution, while wider public acceptance remains influenced by cultural norms, traditional beliefs, and misinformation. The findings demonstrate the need for stronger community engagement, evidence-based communication, and locally tailored approaches that build trust, address misconceptions, and strengthen the role of Women's Rights Organizations as trusted partners in promoting inclusive development, social cohesion, and gender equality across Iraq.

2. INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND CONTEXT

This baseline research provides an important evidence base for understanding public perceptions of Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) and the factors influencing their visibility, public trust, and acceptance across Iraq. The Women Empowerment Organization (WEO) is implementing the "Enhancing Public Perceptions of WROs through Research and Strategic Communication in Iraq" project. The project recognizes that while WROs play a critical role in promoting gender equality, protecting human rights, and strengthening community resilience, they continue to face challenges including misinformation, negative stereotypes, and social and cultural barriers that affect public perceptions of their work.

To better understand these challenges, this study adopts a mixed-methods research approach to examine community perceptions, institutional trust, and communication patterns across urban and rural communities in Salah al-Din, Nineveh, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. The findings will inform WEO's Strategic Messaging Plan, town hall discussions, and public awareness campaigns designed to strengthen community trust, address misconceptions, and improve public understanding of the role of Women's Rights Organizations. Finally, WEO extends its sincere appreciation to Ms. Elaf Khaled, Research Specialist, for her technical leadership and valuable contribution to the design, implementation, analysis, and development of this comprehensive research report.

3. METHODOLOGY

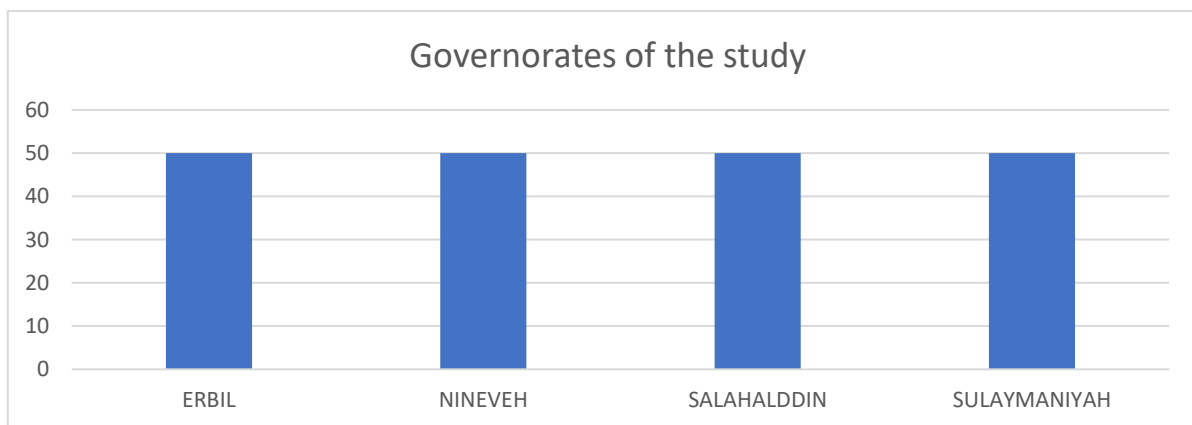
To generate standardized, quantifiable metrics paired with descriptive nuance, a mixed-methods approach was deployed under the rigorous oversight of WEO's research specialists.

3.1 Data Collection Instruments & Scope

The research infrastructure was constructed using a comprehensive, multi-layered methodology, implemented through digital and field-based applications, to capture both broad socio-cultural trends and deep institutional insights.

► Quantitative Data Collection via Kobo Toolbox

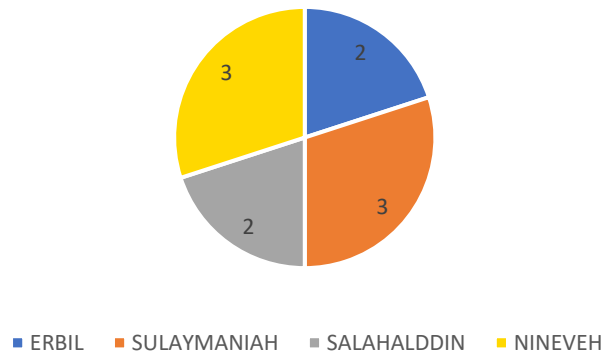
Primary quantitative metrics were collected utilizing a digitized version of the *'Perception Survey Questionnaire'*, custom-programmed and deployed via the Kobo Toolbox platform. This digital application facilitated real-time data validation and minimized enumeration errors for a target of 200 surveys. The survey utilized a dual-layer questioning architecture featuring closed-ended matrices—such as Likert-scale agreements, categorical selections, and binary choices—to isolate statistically sound indicators on trust, visibility, and legal efficacy. Additionally, open-ended text fields were integrated dynamically within the digital form to allow for immediate capturing of raw qualitative nuance, localized contextual feedback, and descriptive institutional community recommendations.



► Qualitative Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

To supplement the broader survey data with specialist expertise, structured qualitative Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with 10 total sector stakeholders. These interviews targeted 2 to 3 key informants in each governorate, explicitly including women leaders and executives of local NGOs/CSOs, influential male community allies, human rights lawyers, psychological therapists, and specialized women caseworkers.

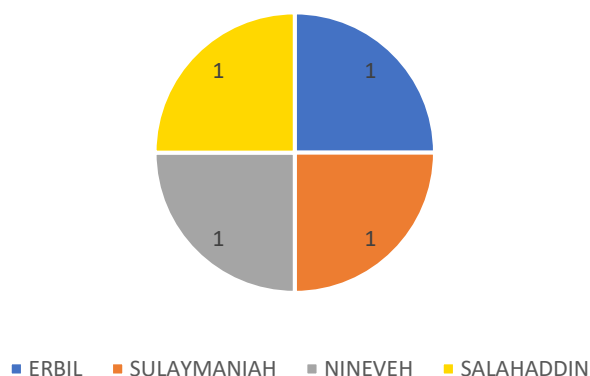
Key informants/Governorate



➤ Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus group sessions were convened to evaluate group dynamics, community discourse patterns, and collective narratives regarding women's rights. A total of 4 focus group discussions were conducted across the study. Each session consisted of 8 to 11 participants per governorate. The composition of these sessions purposefully targeted individuals heavily experienced within the women's rights and protection sectors, including grassroots activists, NGO field workers, legal counsels, programmatic funders, specialized therapists, and a representative cross-section of local women and men. To ensure a comprehensive institutional and protection framework, the groups also explicitly integrated local and community police officers, judges, and government employees working within specialized women's rights and protection departments.

Foucs group discussion/Governorate

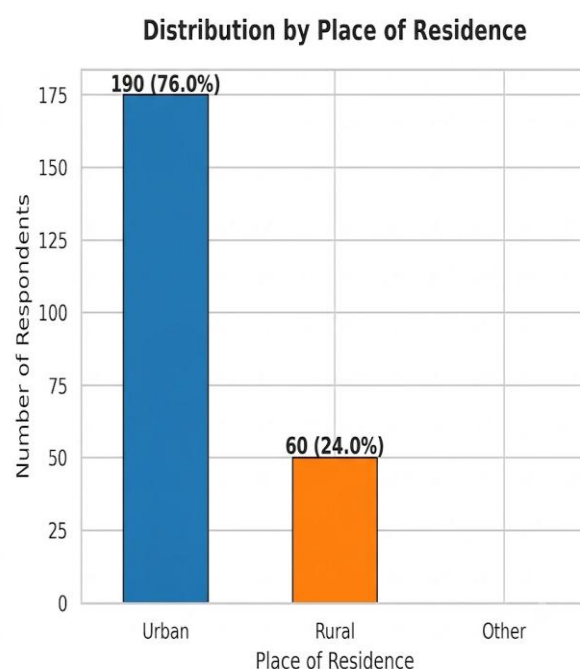
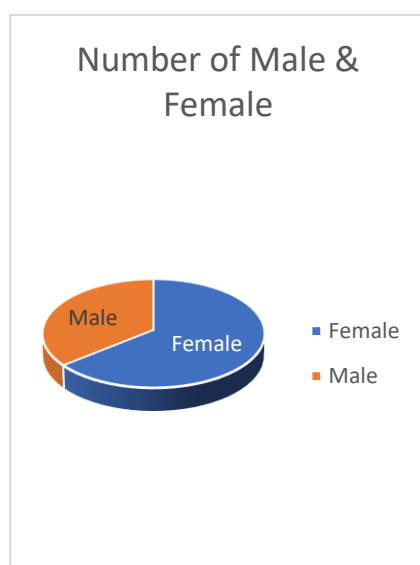


3.2 Sampling Frame and Target Distribution

The geographic scope strictly targeted 4 distinct governorates to ensure full representation of different cultural, demographic, and post-conflict operational landscapes: Salahaddin, Ninawa, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. The total finalized sample frame was strictly structured to collect exactly 50 quantitative survey responses per governorate using Kobo Toolbox, reaching the global target of 200 surveys. This was paired with 2 to 3 qualitative Key Informant Interviews per governorate for a total of 10 interviews, and 1 Focus Group Discussion of 8 to 11 persons per governorate for a total of 4 sessions across the project footprint.

Demographic Diversity Indicators

To eliminate structural biases and maximize analytical validity, the enumeration teams strictly enforced a diversity-focused sampling selection framework across all 4 governorates. Respondents were deliberately selected based on intersectional indicators, ensuring comprehensive saturation across equality between men and women to capture both female and male community perspectives. Furthermore, the sample accounted for varied employment backgrounds—spanning private-sector employees, self-employed freelancers, government civil servants, daily wage laborers, students, and unemployed individuals—as well as multiple educational attainment levels ranging from primary-level literacy to post-graduate degree holders. Finally, diversity was maintained across ethno-religious and geographic lines by interviewing individuals from varied religious communities, ethnic backgrounds, and both dense urban centers and conservative rural localities to track regional perception variations.



4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DATA TRIANGULATION

The aggregated response framework provides key insights into institutional awareness, core metrics of trust, and immediate structural vulnerabilities.

4.1 Knowledge, Awareness, and General Impression

Public awareness regarding the institutional presence of Women’s Rights Organizations (WROs) is broadly established across the surveyed regions, yet the depth of institutional familiarity varies significantly by geography: baseline knowledge remains shallow in Nineveh, where visibility lags due to post-conflict hurdles and requires extended community-integration timeframes, whereas familiarity metrics in Salahaddin, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah demonstrate much higher depth and proactive civic recognition. Despite these regional gaps in operational visibility, the overarching macro-impression remains stable across all target governorates, with communities viewing WROs not as an optional civic luxury but as an essential protective necessity. When evaluated through qualitative coding, female participants contextualized these organizations through a deeply personal framework of advancement and human security, using terms such as Equality, Justice, Women’s Voice, and the Core Hope for their Lives. Conversely, qualitative data from focus groups—particularly within the conservative and rural perimeters of Nineveh—exposed persistent underlying friction, with some respondents voicing concern that certain external agencies encourage women to act against local community norms or behave in a socially disruptive manner, treating specific rights-based outreach as a threat to established tribal and family structures.

4.2 Institutional Trust and Operational Efficacy

The survey recorded strong thematic agreement across core institutional indicators. The majority of respondents aligned with positive trend lines on Likert-scale matrices assessing the following pillars:

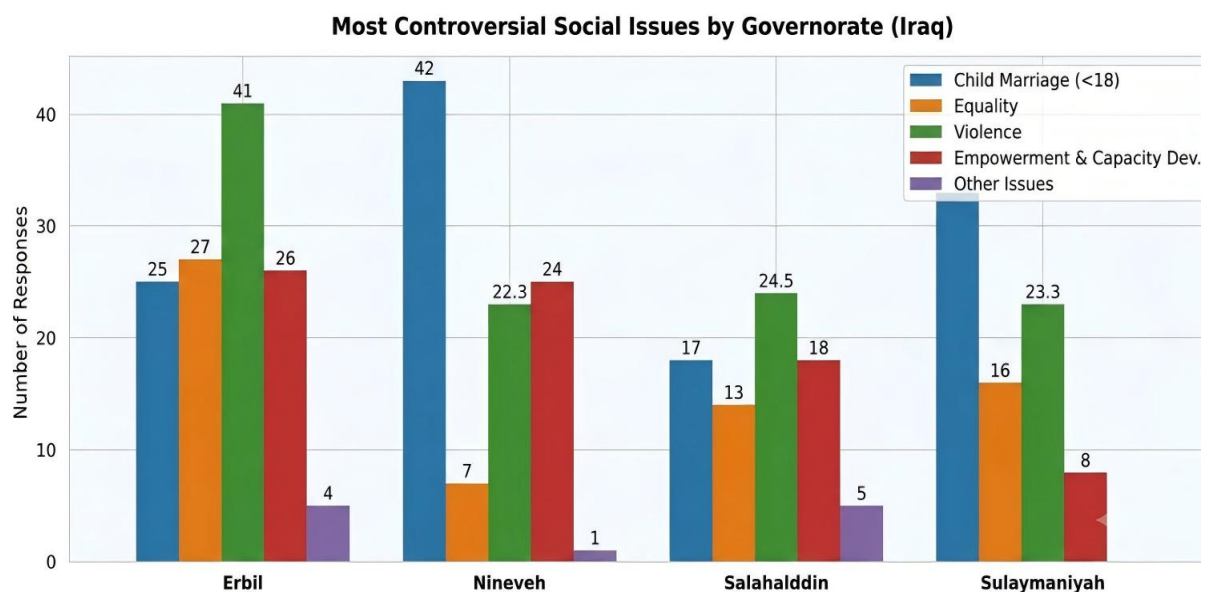
Evaluation Pillar	Public Perception Trend / Majority Response
Community Role	Strongly Agree / Agree that WROs possess a highly positive societal role.
Operational Trust	High institutional trust recorded in the execution of project mandates.

Transparency	The majority of approval tracking organizations are transparent and accountable.
Socio-Religious Values	Confirmation that active local WROs show due respect to religious and social codes.
Targeted Support	Strong agreement that WROs actively meet and champion the needs of local women.

4.3 Societal Acceptance vs. Public Discourse

A critical structural divergence appears when comparing high institutional trust against overall societal acceptance. Locally and nationally, acceptance scores track strictly within 'average' parameters. Publicly discussing sensitive women's issues is categorized as 'acceptable to some extent,' signaling persistent community-wide boundaries.

- High-Acceptance Themes: Educational access, employment integration, healthcare rights, and domestic violence protection receive broad support for open community discussion.
- Highly Controversial Themes: Issues regarding child marriage (under the age of 18) and absolute legal equality remain deeply sensitive and subject to intense community friction.



5. THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

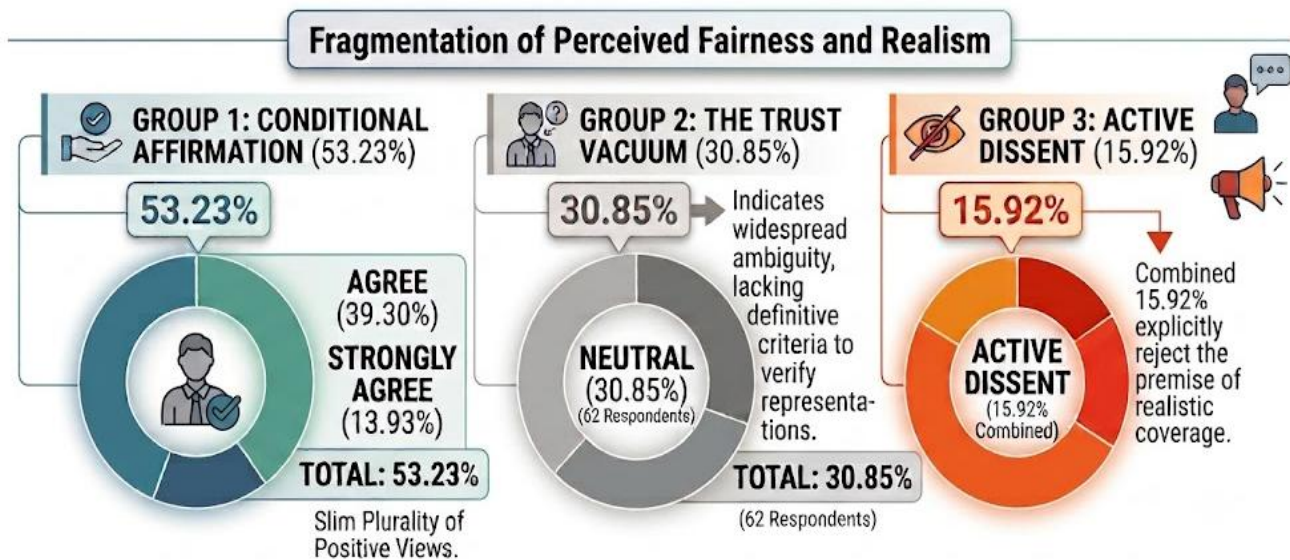
5.1 Primary Channels of Public Information

The internal communication dynamics within the surveyed regions demonstrate a definitive shift away from traditional media channels toward decentralized digital networks. Social media has established complete structural dominance over public attention, serving as the primary source of daily information for **65.17%** of all respondents (250 individuals from qualitative, quantitative, and FGD surveys).

In contrast, traditional television networks account for only **6.47%**, while direct outreach or informational campaigns from non-governmental and civil society organizations yield a minimal footprint at **4.98%**. Notably, localized word-of-mouth networks—consisting of family and immediate community circles—remain a vital secondary verification loop, capturing **23.38%** of the demographic.

5.2 Perceptions of Media Representation and Influence

Social media platforms function as powerful instruments of opinion synthesis rather than simple avenues for passive consumption. A significant cumulative majority of **64.18%** of respondents explicitly acknowledge that social media actively shapes their personal perspectives regarding Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) and their operational representation in Iraq (comprising **43.28% Who Agree** and **20.90% Who Strongly Agree**).



Despite the documented psychological leverage of these platforms, community consensus regarding the fairness and realism of media coverage is highly fragmented:

- *Conditional Affirmation:* A slim plurality of 53.23% feel that WROs are represented fairly and realistically across media formats (39.30% Agree; 13.93% Strongly Agree).
- *The Trust Vacuum:* A substantial 30.85% (62 respondents) maintain a strictly Neutral stance, indicating widespread ambiguity or a lack of definitive criteria to verify the accuracy of the representations they observe.
- *Active Dissent:* A combined 15.92% explicitly reject the premise that media coverage is realistic, signaling an undercurrent of skepticism toward mainstream or digital narratives.

5.3 Saturation of Misinformation and Digital Vulnerabilities

The underlying driver behind public hesitation and fractured institutional trust is the high prevalence of unverified information. The information ecosystem is highly saturated with bad actors or misleading coverage:

- *Confirmed Exposure:* 37.31% of the surveyed population stated definitively that they have encountered misleading or false news published within their regular informational streams.
- *Epistemic Ambiguity:* Furthermore, 30.85% report being not sure whether the information they consume regarding civil society and rights frameworks is factual or fabricated.

- **Aggregated Threat Vector:** Cumulatively, 68.16% of the community is either actively subjected to targeted misinformation or lacks the media literacy tools required to distinguish verified reporting from false narratives.

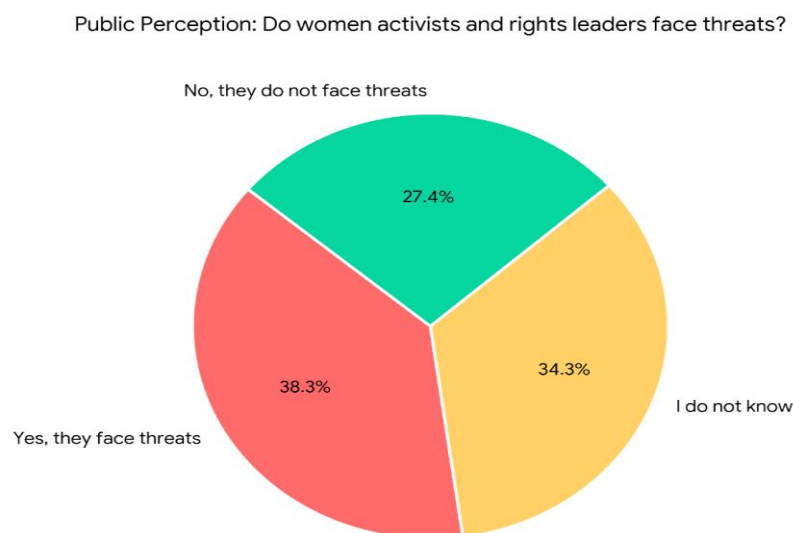
5.4 Challenges, Violence, and Legal Protection Frameworks

The research validates that women leaders and frontline human rights activists operate under persistent threat.

1. Threat Assessment Overview

An evaluation of public perception regarding whether women activists and leaders in the field of women's rights face threats yields a highly concerning trend. Out of the 250 total respondents surveyed:

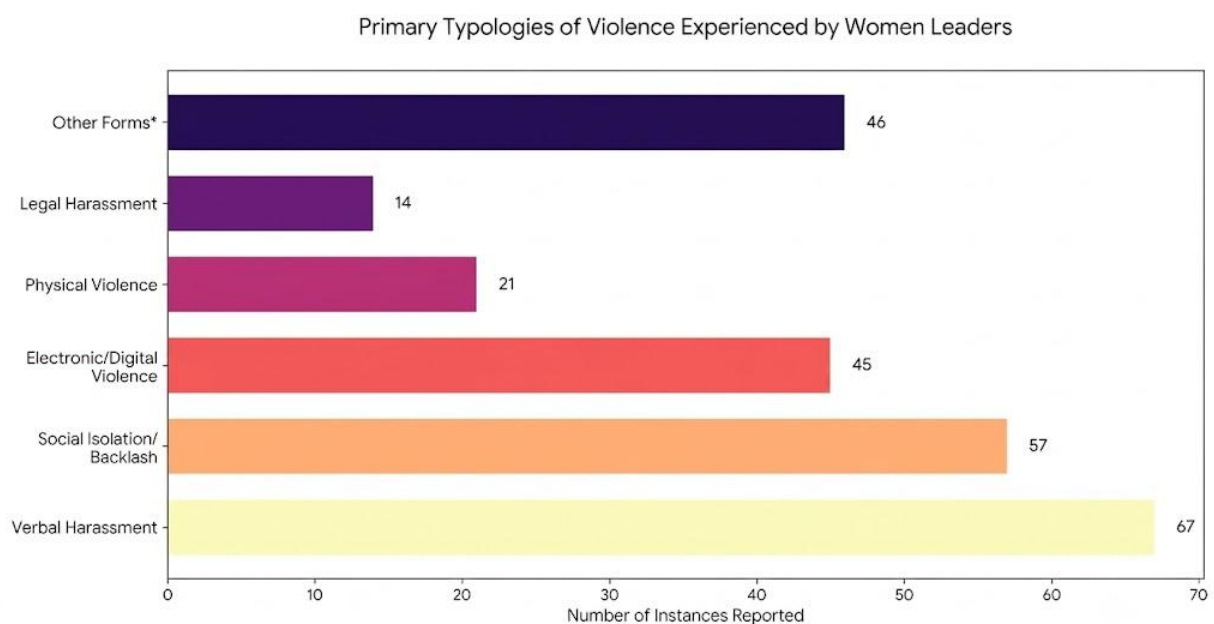
- 38.3% explicitly state "Yes", women activists and leaders face threats in their communities.
- 34.3% answered "I do not know", indicating a possible lack of public visibility or underlying sensitivity around tracking these issues openly.
- 27.4% answered "No".



2. Primary Typologies of Violence Experienced

For respondents who identified active threats or occurrences of violence against women leaders, the risks manifest across several distinct dimensions. The reported breakdown of the primary types of violence includes:

- **Verbal Harassment (67 instances):** The most widespread tool used to intimidate women leaders publicly, often manifesting as insults, public defamation, or direct verbal hostility.
- **Social Isolation/Backlash (57 instances):** Community or tribal alienation, character defamation, and systemic social exclusion targeted at undermining their social standing.
- **Electronic/Digital Violence (45 instances):** Cyberbullying, coordinated online defamation campaigns, digital blackmail, and tracking via social media platforms.
- **Physical Violence (21 instances):** Direct physical altercations, bodily threats, or targeted physical assaults.
- **Legal Harassment (14 instances):** Arbitrary legal pressures or institutional hurdles used to restrict community mobilization and advocacy.
- **Other Forms (46 instances):** Qualitative follow-ups highlight overlapping psychological tolls, institutional marginalization, and high-profile security threats against visible public figures.



In scenarios where a woman encounters severe threat or domestic violence, the immediate path of recourse remains centered on the traditional family or tribal dispute framework. This pattern persists because traditional structures are perceived to provide faster, more immediate physical intervention compared to formal civil protection channels, community police, or civil society alerts.

3. Comparative Analysis of Public Opinion Dynamics in Iraq

This section provides a data-driven evaluation of the primary forces driving public opinion, comparing localized community perceptions with the broader national public sphere. The analysis is based on qualitative, quantitative and FGD surveys (N = 250 respondents). The findings reveal a distinct transition: while localized opinion is formed primarily through direct information access and immediate social networks, the national narrative in Iraq is perceived to be fundamentally steered by traditional, structural institutions.

A. Local Community Influence

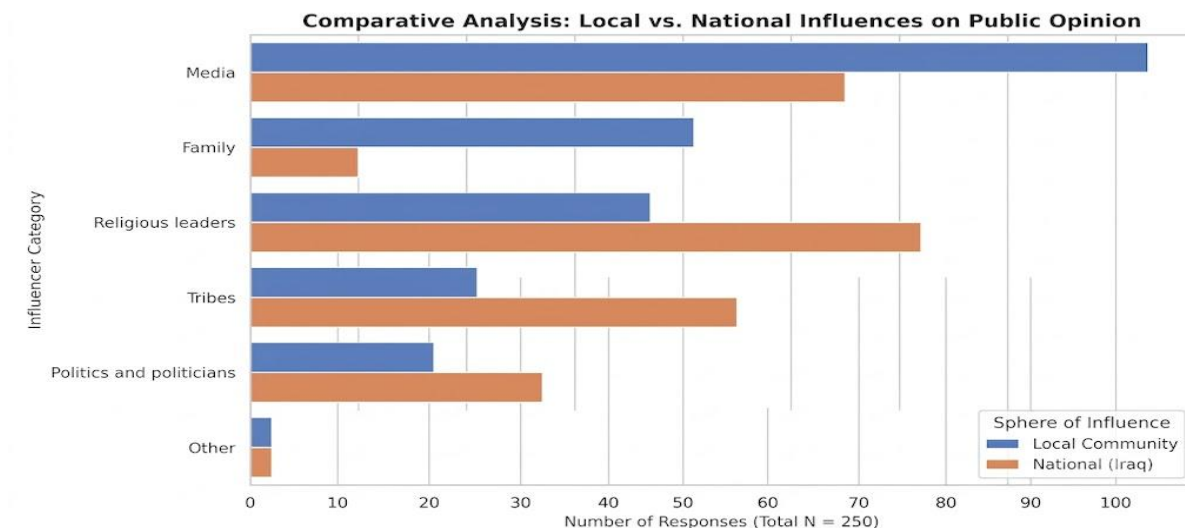
At the grassroots level, respondents identified the immediate information environment and personal networks as the dominant drivers of public opinion:

- **Media:** The primary force shaping opinion at the community level, cited by respondents (41.3%).
- **Family:** A vital social pillar for localized influence, cited by respondents (20.4%).
- **Religious Leaders:** A secondary traditional anchor at the local level, cited by respondents (18.4%).
- **Tribes:** Perceived as a localized driver by respondents (10.4%).
- **Politics and Politicians:** Mainstream political actors held the lowest baseline local influence, cited by respondents (8.5%).
- **Other:** Only (1.0%) selected this option.

B. National Influence (Iraq Broadly)

When shifting the frame of reference to the macro public sphere across Iraq, the structure of influence dramatically alters, shifting toward formal, traditional power centers:

- **Religious Leaders:** Rise to the primary position of influence nationwide, cited by (30.8%).
- **Media:** Shuffled to the second-highest position, remaining a strong pillar but losing its absolute dominance at (27.4%).
- **Tribes:** Experience a massive surge in perceived macro-level power, cited by (22.4%).
- **Politics and Politicians:** Gain more traction on the national stage compared to the local level, cited by (13.4%).
- **Family:** Contracts sharply, dropping to a minor national factor with respondents (5.0%).
- **Other:** Cited by respondents (1.0%).



6. STRATEGIC MESSAGING FRAMEWORK

Institutional Capacity and the Need for Sustainable Investment

Across all focus Group Discussions (FGDs), participants consistently emphasized that Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) play an important role in supporting women and communities, but their impact is often limited by insufficient funding. Many participants explained that organizations have the commitment, experience, and community trust needed to expand their work, yet they lack the financial resources to sustain and scale up their activities. They recommended increasing long-term investment in local WROs so they can reach more women, strengthen protection services, expand community awareness programmes, and provide greater support in underserved areas.

The Role of Women's Rights Organizations in Community Recovery and Social Cohesion

Participants, particularly in post-conflict governorates such as Nineveh, highlighted the important role WROs played during and after the recovery period. They recalled how these organizations provided humanitarian assistance, protection services, psychosocial support, and helped connect vulnerable families with government institutions. These experiences have strengthened community trust in many areas, with participants describing WROs as important partners in rebuilding communities, promoting social cohesion, and supporting long-term development. The findings suggest that strengthening these organizations will also strengthen community resilience and local stability.

Building Effective Messages that Reflect Community Values

The Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) highlighted that communication is more effective when it uses simple, locally relevant language and reflects shared community values such as dignity, justice, family wellbeing, and mutual respect. Participants noted that awareness messages should focus on the practical contributions of Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) to communities rather than relying on technical or abstract rights-based language. They also emphasized that engaging both women and men, particularly youth, is essential for building greater understanding and public trust. Based on these findings, WEO is planning to develop a **Strategic Messaging Plan** in collaboration with Women's Rights Organizations and media professionals from all four target governorates. The strategy will translate the research findings into evidence-based communication messages that address misconceptions, strengthen community trust, and improve public understanding of the role of WROs. The messaging plan will then be implemented through a social media awareness campaign targeting more than 50,000 individuals across the four governorates using clear, culturally appropriate, and locally relevant content.

7. OUTCOMES

The research provides a detailed picture of how Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) are perceived by communities across Nineveh, Salah al-Din, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. It establishes a baseline for understanding public trust in these organizations and examines whether community members see them as contributing positively to society or as conflicting with local social and religious values. One of the key findings is that women leaders continue to face serious risks because of their work. Participants described different forms of violence and intimidation, including online harassment and blackmail, verbal abuse, social exclusion, threats, and, in some cases, physical violence. These risks remain one of the greatest barriers to women's leadership and civic participation.

The interviews with women leaders illustrate these challenges in a very personal way. A woman leading a local organization in Salah al-Din (Tikrit) described surviving an attempted kidnapping and receiving repeated death threats because of her work supporting women. She explained that in some conservative communities, Women's Rights Organizations are viewed with suspicion. Some community members believe these organizations challenge traditional values or encourage women to reject social norms. As a result, women leaders often become targets of criticism, intimidation, and hostility. Despite these risks, the research also highlights the determination and resilience of women leaders. Many explained that their commitment is rooted in personal experiences of conflict,

loss, and injustice. One participant from Tikrit reflected on how losing her husband and son in 2008 motivated her to dedicate her life to defending the rights of others:

"When my husband and son got killed in 2008, I saw myself on a path working for humans and supporting them to get their rights back. Because still, I feel I didn't get my husband and son's rights back when they got killed for nothing, just because we were Sunni. And for what? This was a push factor for me, and a victory when I see every woman and human get their rights back. I can see right through me as an activist."

Her testimony reflects a broader pattern found throughout the research: many women leaders transform personal hardship into a strong commitment to promoting justice, protecting vulnerable people, and strengthening their communities.

The research also reveals the importance of Women's Rights Organizations from the perspective of women living in these communities. In Salah al-Din, many women described WROs as one of the few places where they could seek support, legal advice, or protection from violence. For many participants, these organizations represent a trusted source of assistance when other support systems are unavailable.

In Erbil, the findings highlight a different but equally important challenge. Women leaders emphasized that sustaining their work depends on reliable and flexible funding. Beyond supporting programmes, long-term funding allows organizations to maintain a visible presence within communities, build trust, and continue serving both urban neighbourhoods and remote rural areas. Participants explained that when organizations reduce their activities because of funding shortages, communities may assume they are no longer active, making it more difficult to maintain relationships and reach women who need support. Women leaders in Erbil also described facing social pressure and threats because of their advocacy. One lawyer shared how taking responsibility for her family after the loss of her father strengthened her determination to defend other women, despite receiving threats from individuals who opposed her work:

"When I started working as a lawyer, I didn't have any ability to talk or defend. When I lost my father and took the responsibility for my life, I started protecting other women and defending them. I got messages and was threatened by many people and men because I'm protecting their women. Still, I feel proud of myself because I resist, and there is no fear when your goal is clear."

Overall, the research demonstrates that Women's Rights Organizations play a vital role in supporting women and strengthening communities across Iraq. However, it also shows that women leaders continue to operate in challenging environments where security risks, social resistance, and limited funding affect both their personal safety and the long-term sustainability of their organizations.

8. ADDED VALUE

This report is more than a traditional public perception survey. It provides practical evidence that can help Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) strengthen their strategies, improve community engagement, and better respond to the realities faced by women and girls across Iraq. One of the report's main contributions is that it captures the views of a diverse range of community members from Nineveh, Salah al-Din, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah, including people of different ages and backgrounds, as well as internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees, and host communities. By listening directly to these voices, the research helps organizations better understand how they are perceived, what communities expect from them, and where trust can be strengthened. Rather than relying on assumptions, WROs can use this evidence to make informed decisions based on the experiences and priorities of the people they serve.

The findings are also particularly valuable for improving communication and public outreach. The research highlights how misinformation, negative stereotypes, and misconceptions continue to influence public perceptions of Women's Rights Organizations in some communities. It identifies the concerns and narratives that shape public opinion, allowing organizations to develop communication strategies that respond to community questions, address misinformation with facts, and build stronger relationships based on transparency and dialogue. This enables WROs to communicate their work more effectively and increase public understanding of the services they provide. Another important contribution of the report is its focus on inclusion and accountability. The survey examines whether communities believe Women's Rights Organizations are reaching different groups of women, including those who are often overlooked, such as women and girls with disabilities and other marginalized populations. The findings help organizations identify gaps in their programmes and ensure that future interventions are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of all women, particularly those facing multiple forms of discrimination.

The report also provides valuable evidence for strategic planning and resource mobilization. By identifying differences in community perceptions, levels of trust, and protection needs across

governorates, the findings enable Women's Rights Organizations to tailor their interventions to local contexts rather than applying a single approach across all areas. This evidence can also strengthen funding proposals by demonstrating clear community needs and priorities, allowing organizations to justify investments in activities that improve women's safety, expand access to services, strengthen community trust, and support women leaders working in challenging environments.

Ultimately, the report offers a practical foundation for evidence-based decision-making. It equips Women's Rights Organizations, donors, government institutions, and development partners with reliable data that can be used to design more effective programmes, improve accountability, strengthen partnerships with communities, and increase the long-term impact of efforts to advance women's rights and gender equality in Iraq.

9. EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL VIEWS

The research reveals a noticeable difference between how Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) view their own role and how they are perceived by the communities they serve. While both groups recognize the importance of supporting women, their perspectives differ regarding the role, legitimacy, and public image of these organizations.

From the perspective of Women's Rights Organizations, their work is driven by a commitment to promoting women's rights, supporting survivors of violence, strengthening women's participation in public life, and advocating for legal and policy reforms. WRO leaders see their organizations as trusted community partners that provide essential services, raise awareness, and contribute to social development.

Many also view their work as filling important gaps where public institutions have limited capacity to respond to the needs of women and girls. Community perceptions are more diverse. Many participants acknowledged the positive role of Women's Rights Organizations, particularly in providing legal assistance, psychosocial support, awareness activities, and protection services. Women participants, in particular, frequently described WROs as important sources of support and guidance. However, the research also found that some community members remain uncertain about the objectives of these organizations.

In some locations, particularly in more conservative communities, participants expressed concerns that WROs promote ideas that are inconsistent with local traditions or religious values. These perceptions are often influenced by limited understanding of the organizations' work, misinformation, or broader social attitudes toward gender equality.

The findings also demonstrate important regional differences. In the Kurdistan Region, participants generally described a more supportive environment for civil society organizations and women leaders. WRO representatives reported that they are able to organize public activities, engage openly with communities, and collaborate with local institutions with relatively fewer social barriers. Community members in these governorates also tended to express greater familiarity with the work of Women's Rights Organizations and were more likely to recognize their contribution to community development. In contrast, Women's Rights Organizations operating in Baghdad and several central

and southern governorates described a more challenging environment. Although cooperation with local authorities and communities exists, women leaders reported facing greater security concerns, social pressure, and public scrutiny. Some participants explained that activists often avoid appearing in photographs, media coverage, or public campaigns because of concerns for their personal safety or fear of harassment. These findings suggest that the level of visibility and public engagement available to women leaders varies considerably depending on the local political, social, and security context.

Overall, the comparison between internal and external perspectives shows that Women's Rights Organizations are widely recognized for the services they provide, but public understanding of their broader mission remains uneven across Iraq. The findings suggest that strengthening communication with communities, increasing public awareness of WRO activities, and building trust through locally appropriate engagement can help reduce misconceptions and foster stronger partnerships between organizations and the communities they serve.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations can help strengthen Women's Rights Organizations (WROs), improve public trust, and create a more enabling environment for women leaders across Iraq.

1. Strengthen Community Trust and Public Engagement

- Link women's rights activities to visible community benefits, such as legal aid, vocational training, livelihood support, healthcare referrals, and protection services.
- Use simple, culturally relevant language that emphasizes shared values such as dignity, justice, family wellbeing, and community solidarity.
- Increase regular dialogue with communities through public meetings, awareness sessions, and open discussions to explain the objectives and impact of WROs.

2. Improve Strategic Communication

- Develop communication strategies to address misinformation and negative stereotypes about Women's Rights Organizations.
- Establish dedicated communication teams to monitor misinformation, respond with accurate information, and increase transparency about projects and funding.
- Encourage women beneficiaries to share their experiences and success stories, helping build trust through community-led advocacy.

3. Engage Community Leaders and Men as Partners

- Strengthen partnerships with respected religious leaders, tribal leaders, local authorities, and community influencers to promote dialogue and mutual understanding.
- Design programmes that actively engage men and boys as partners in promoting family wellbeing, gender equality, and peaceful communities.

4. Tailor Interventions to Local Contexts

- Adapt programmes and communication approaches to the social, cultural, and security conditions of each governorate rather than applying a single national model.
- Expand outreach in rural and underserved communities to ensure equitable access to services and support.

5. Strengthen Protection for Women Leaders

- Develop organizational safety and security protocols for women activists and staff.
- Provide training on digital security, risk management, and online harassment prevention.
- Expand access to psychosocial support and legal assistance for women human rights defenders facing threats or intimidation.

6. Strengthen Institutional Capacity

- Establish or strengthen local coordination mechanisms between Women's Rights Organizations, local authorities, and community stakeholders.
- Invest in experienced legal advisors, case managers, and community outreach staff to improve service delivery.
- Increase flexible, long-term funding that enables organizations to maintain continuous engagement with communities rather than relying only on short-term projects.

7. Promote Long-Term Social Change

- Integrate civic education, human rights, gender equality, and respectful dialogue into school curricula and youth programmes.
- Support media initiatives that highlight positive community contributions made by Women's Rights Organizations and women leaders.
- Encourage stronger government ownership and investment in women's rights initiatives alongside continued support from development partners to ensure long-term sustainability.

Overall, strengthening trust between Women's Rights Organizations and communities requires a combination of transparent communication, meaningful community engagement, locally tailored programming, stronger protection for women leaders, and sustained investment in institutional capacity. Implementing these recommendations will contribute to a more supportive environment in which women can participate safely and meaningfully in social, economic, and public life.

11. CONCLUSION

This research provides an evidence-based understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) across Nineveh, Salah al-Din, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. The findings show that while many communities recognize the valuable services provided by WROs, public understanding of their broader mission remains mixed due to social norms, misinformation, and limited awareness.

The study also highlights the difficult environment in which many women leaders operate. Despite facing harassment, threats, and social pressure, they continue to provide essential services, advocate for women's rights, and support their communities. The findings demonstrate that strengthening public trust requires transparent communication, meaningful community engagement, culturally appropriate approaches, and greater investment in the protection and sustainability of Women's Rights Organizations. Ultimately, this report offers practical evidence to support government institutions, Women's Rights Organizations, donors, and development partners in designing more effective and locally responsive programmes that strengthen women's leadership, improve community trust, and advance gender equality across Iraq.

As one woman activist from Nineveh shared during the assessment:

"Every woman we support, every family we help, and every barrier we overcome shows why our work matters. We will continue to stand against misinformation and keep working for our communities because real change comes from courage, hope, and believing that a better future is possible."



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