



Policy Brief Two

Enhancing Women's Participation in Peace & Security in the KRI (Halabja) Challenges and Policy Recommendations

"From Marginalization to Empowerment: Advancing the Role of Women and Youth in Halabja's Peace and Security" project implemented by **Women Empowerment Organization** with the lead of **Women for Women International**, funded by the **UK Government**

2025

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About the Project

Women Empowerment Organization (WEO) with the lead of Women for Women International (WfWI), is implementing the “From Marginalization to Empowerment: Advancing the Role of Women and Youth in Halabja's Peace and Security” project in Halabja funded by the UK Government. The project goal is successfully empowering female community leaders and youth activists in Halabja to lead inclusive peacebuilding initiatives, fostering equality between men and women, social cohesion, and conflict resolution at the community level. Additionally, we extend our sincere appreciation to Shokhan Ahmed, who supported the development of this policy brief as a consultant.

About WEO

Established in 2004, Women Empowerment Organization (WEO) is a women-led, national non-governmental organization registered in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq devoted to empowering women socially, economically, and politically. At WEO, we work diligently to enhance women's influence, combat all forms of violence against them, and advocate for policy development and reform that supports equality between women and men. WEO is dedicated to delivering its services in the sectors of Protection, Livelihoods, Advocacy, and Humanitarian by offering a comprehensive range of services, including socio-economic and psychological support, access to finance, individual and institutional capacity development, legal assistance, and advocacy for inclusive approach and meaningful fulfillment of sustainable peace and security.

About WfWI

WfWI is a women-led organization with a fully locally staffed Country Office in Iraq since 2003 (initially in Baghdad and Karbala and in KRI since 2017) working with Iraqi, Kurdish, Syrian, and Yazidi women. Our local staff use their knowledge of the impact of conflict on Iraq to address the needs of the women affected by them.

WfWI is currently implementing a project in both Federal Iraq and the KRI¹ that is elevating the presence, involvement, and influence in decision-making activities of women-led civil society, as essential to the WPS agenda. Recent participatory research explored barriers to women's participation and leadership making key recommendations for achieving full, equal, and meaningful participation based on evidence and firsthand insight of women and women's rights organizations (WROs) in Iraq. These findings enabled us to ground this project's design in input and insight from women and WROs themselves.

GAPS has worked with governments and civil society in Iraq and the MENA region since 2006, contributing to the development and implementation of their NAPs and the UK's; they have led projects on WPS civil society landscape mapping and gendered impacts of COVID-19. GAPS also offers strategic and capacity-building support through the WPS.

Executive Summary

Overview of Resolution 1325

In Iraq, the Kurdistan Region, efforts to implement NAP 1325 are ongoing, with two national action plans developed to guide its execution, in addition, the third plan is currently which is going under approval.

However, despite the commitment of all relevant ministries to adhere to the resolution, the lack of a dedicated budget has hindered the full implementation of planned activities. For instance, the High Council of Women's Affairs has been involved in the initiative for almost eleven years, yet the absence of financial resources has prevented the execution of its programs. Similarly, while seven ministries in Kurdistan are formally part of the plan and tasked with carrying out various activities, the lack of funding has stalled progress.

In Iraq, key stakeholders include the Council of Ministers, relevant ministries such as The National Department of Iraqi Women offices, and local and international organizations. Notably, Iraq is the first country in the MENA region that develop the 1st NAP to operationalize The UNSCR 1325. Additionally, collaborative networks exist at the national level to support ministries and government bodies in the development, implementation, and monitoring process of the NAP 1325,

Women's representation in the 9th governmental cabinet has increased from 54 to 72 positions compared to the 8th cabinet. However, there is no guarantee that this upward trend will continue in the next cabinet. Additionally, several key governmental ministries still have little to no female representation, such as the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Ministry of Finance, the General Board of Kurdish Regions Outside the Kurdistan Region, and the Explosives Enforcement Directorate (3).

At the provincial level, Halabja stands out due to its cultural context, where women have historically played a visible role in political participation and leadership, which indicates the high level of social cohesion, and education in their society even though the region is a small region. However, women have been appointed to high-ranking positions, which is mostly the natural influence of the area and their culture rather than the national plan itself. In many cases, women in these roles have been restricted from exercising independent decision-making authority, as their actions remain tightly controlled by their political parties. This highlights a gap between the formal inclusion of women in political processes and the genuine empowerment needed to achieve the goals of NAP1325.

Context of Kurdistan

In the Kurdistan Region, a National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 has been developed, accompanied by a specialized board tasked with overseeing its execution. The Ministry of Interior presides over this board, while The Secretary General of the High Council of Women Affairs and Development serves as its secretary. The board's membership includes representatives from various government ministries, civil society organizations, and international stakeholders. However, despite its establishment, the plan lacks a dedicated budget, despite these challenges, local and international organizations have actively worked on implementing this plan by conducting multiple projects that have contributed significantly to both governmental and societal support. Additionally, the United Nations has allocated a budget to further facilitate these efforts, ensuring sustained progress and impact.

Efforts have been made to enhance women's political participation, particularly within the parliament, where women now constitute 30% of its members. However, the

representation remains unequal across different administrative and leadership positions. Women's participation in high-ranking governmental roles remains significantly lower than required. For example, while women are well-represented as employees and university faculty members, they remain underrepresented in decision-making positions. The lowest percentages of female representation are observed at the levels of chief executives and department heads within universities.

A similar disparity is evident in institutions combating domestic violence. Among the 28 offices dedicated to addressing domestic violence against women, only three are led by women. Furthermore, as positions become more senior and decision-oriented, the presence of women declines, highlighting a persistent barrier to female leadership in governance structures.

The marginalization of women extends beyond administrative roles and into crisis response and conflict resolution. During periods of conflict and displacement such as the ISIS war in 2014, female refugees often receive inadequate attention and assistance in meeting their basic needs. Additionally, in post-conflict reconciliation efforts, women are systematically excluded from negotiation and peacebuilding delegations, which remain dominated by male representatives.

This persistent imbalance in governance, crisis response, and peacebuilding underscores the need for targeted policy interventions to ensure that the principles of UNSCR 1325 are not only recognized but also effectively implemented and translated into the Kurdistan Region's NAP, even with having issues in enacting the plan, but it has been efficiently influential, specifically the political parties especially during the election process where women's participation was activated, In addition to ensuring the protection of female candidates during the electoral process, efforts have been made to establish networks among relevant ministries and organizations to facilitate collaborative projects. These initiatives also focus on increasing the number of female judges, providing them with support, and conducting training programs to enhance their expertise in international law. Furthermore, specialized training sessions by the high council of women affairs and

development with the assistance of local, international NGOs have been organized for police forces and officers to strengthen their capacity.

Another key priority has been the integration of laws concerning women into parliamentary discussions in coordination with the Council of Ministers. Notably, Halabja has emerged as a leading example, with a rising number of women holding key positions, including a significant presence of female directors.

Problem Statement

Challenges for Women in Kurdistan

One of the major challenges facing women and youth in the Kurdistan Region is the lack of awareness regarding their rights and existing legal frameworks, including NAP 1325. While the UNCSR 1325 remains an international framework according to the Kurdistan NAP 1325 which is used as a guideline tool to work by the ministries, The society, government institutions, and even political parties have limited knowledge about the resolution and its implications. This lack of political will has contributed to low female participation in decision-making processes, governance, and security-related roles, further marginalizing women from positions of power and influence.

According to discussions held in Halabja during a meeting on women's political participation, political parties have yet to amend their internal regulations in line with decisions aimed at enhancing women's involvement. Specifically, there has been no effort to systematically integrate women's participation at every level within political parties.

A historical analysis of the Kurdish Parliament over the past 30 years reveals some progress in women's political engagement. However, their overall participation remains weak. Research indicates that none of the leaders or deputy leaders of any major political party in Kurdistan are women. Moreover, among 16 leadership positions across these parties, only two are occupied by women, highlighting the imbalance in political leadership.

This limited female representation extends across all political parties and governmental structures. Despite official commitments to inclusion, no political party has actively revised its internal policies to align with the principles of NAP 1325. While parliamentary initiatives have been undertaken as a symbolic gesture to support women, these efforts have largely failed to translate into meaningful policy implementation.

The underrepresentation of women is evident at both national and international levels. In Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, only 3 out of 22 ministerial positions are held by women. Similarly, within the Kurdistan Region's diplomatic corps, women hold only 2 out of 14 key international representative positions. Furthermore, data from 2022 (1) reveals that out of 231 judges, only 48 are women, reflecting a significant gap in the judiciary.

This persistent disparity underscores the urgent need for comprehensive legal awareness campaigns, policy reforms, and institutional commitment to fully integrate the principles of NAP 1325 into Kurdistan's political and legal systems. Without such measures, women's participation in governance will continue to be symbolic rather than substantive, limiting their ability to influence decision-making and contribute to sustainable peace and security.

An assessment conducted in Halabja Province through a questionnaire-based study conducted by Women Empowerment Organization (WEO) Researchers and a team with cooperation with a few female leaders revealed that awareness of NAP 1325 remains extremely low among the general population, workplace environments, and even within civil society organizations. This lack of knowledge extends to youth, community members, and professionals working in relevant sectors. Even among individuals employed in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), understanding of the resolution is minimal, indicating a serious gap in legal and policy awareness.

Efforts to promote women's participation such as groups of local organizations and female activists in peacebuilding and governance remain inconsistent and insufficient in Halabja. While some women-led organizations actively work to raise awareness about NAP 1325, their initiatives require greater continuity, institutional support, and long-term strategic planning to achieve substantial impact.

The role of the Halabja local government in implementing NAP 1325 is not financially driven but instead relies on political and administrative initiatives. These efforts primarily focus on enhancing women's leadership and involvement in peacebuilding by leveraging their experiences and contributions to local governance. However, these initiatives lack structured frameworks to ensure sustainability and effectiveness.

One of the primary reasons for the ineffective implementation of NAP 1325 in Halabja is the absence of a localized action plan. The localized action plan has not been properly translated into the national plan, and no independent provincial plan has been developed to promote women's participation in decision-making, negotiations, and conflict resolution. This policy gap has resulted in limited progress in advancing sensitive governance in the province such as combating violence against women, economic women empowerment, and early warning.

To address these challenges, it is essential to develop a dedicated provincial action plan, strengthen institutional coordination, and allocate sufficient resources to enhance women's engagement in leadership and peacebuilding processes. Without these structural improvements, the implementation of NAP 1325 in Halabja will remain fragmented and largely ineffective. In order to address these issues, there is an urgent need for institutional reforms that not only prioritize women's involvement in governance and decision-making but also challenge societal perceptions that limit women's leadership potential.

Lack of Implementation

Iraq stands as the first country to have developed a national plan for implementing NAP 1325 in the MENA region, while the Kurdistan Region has already produced two national plans and is in the process of preparing a third. However, these efforts are hampered by the lack of a dedicated budget, limiting the scope and effectiveness of the plans. Although the plans include monitoring mechanisms and some activities have been carried out with the support of national and international organizations, the overall execution and sustainability of these activities remain insufficient. The plans are supervised by the High Council of Women and Development, yet many of the activities outlined in the plans have not been fully implemented or followed through.

At the provincial level, the rate of implementation of these plans remains low, with Halabja being a particularly stark example. Interviews with women leaders in Halabja revealed that several factors have impeded the full enactment of the plan, including environmental and livelihood challenges that require more tailored solutions. These findings underscore the need for a revised and localized action plan that takes into account the specific cultural, economic, and social realities of Halabja, in order to enhance the effectiveness of the implementation process.

Overall, while the Kurdistan Region and Iraq have made initial strides in adopting NAP 1325, the lack of financial resources, institutional commitment, and context-specific strategies are significant obstacles that hinder the successful implementation of these resolutions. Addressing these gaps is essential for realizing the full potential of women's participation in governance and peacebuilding efforts in the region.

One of the interviewees with women activists acknowledged that the full implementation of the resolution's three pillars—participation, protection, prevention, has not been effectively achieved in Halabja. One interviewee attributed this primarily to the exclusion of local organizations from funding opportunities, stating that Halabja's geographical distance from major decision-making centers has led to its marginalization. As a result, many local initiatives struggle to gain financial and institutional support, limiting their ability to contribute effectively to the resolution's objectives.

Another Women leader, who holds a position in the government and is also an activist mentioned that in Halabja, the resolution's implementation is minimal due to the lack of specific plans, particularly concerning women's involvement in decision-making, leadership, negotiations, and conflict resolution.

- Women in Halabja generally lack awareness, experience, and expertise regarding their roles and responsibilities within the peace and security framework, due to the low awareness of the government, the political parties, and the stakeholders about

the 1325 NAP which mentions the importance of women's participation, but due to not enacting by it not much positive influence have been done.

- In Halabja, the resolution's implementation is minimal due to the lack of specific plans, particularly concerning women's involvement in decision-making, leadership, negotiations, and conflict resolution.
- Women in Halabja generally lack awareness, experience, and expertise regarding their roles and responsibilities within the peace and security framework.

Strengths of Halabja in Advancing Women's Empowerment and Participation

Halabja exhibits several strengths in promoting women's empowerment, political participation, and equality between men and women. These strengths provide a solid foundation for further advancing the implementation of NAP 1325 and ensuring women's full involvement in peacebuilding and governance processes.

The following are key strengths identified in Halabja

1. High Organizational Participation

The level of organizational participation in Halabja is notably strong, with various organizations actively contributing to initiatives that support women's rights and involvement in societal processes. These organizations play a critical role in advocating for equality between men and women and empowering women across different sectors.

2. Active Women's Leadership in Management

Women in Halabja actively participate in management roles, which indicates a significant shift in Men and women equality dynamics within the workplace. Their involvement in leadership positions helps to break barriers and challenge traditional men and women roles, paving the way for future women leaders in the region

3. Economic Independence for Women

Women in Halabja have the ability to work and achieve economic independence, which is a critical aspect of empowering women to make autonomous decisions. This economic empowerment allows women to contribute significantly to their families and communities while fostering self-reliance and economic sustainability.

4. Strong Foundation for Women and Girls' Participation

Halabja provides a supportive foundation for women and girls to actively participate in societal processes through a board specific for combating violence with the governor's leadership, with the Ministry of Interior making this decision. This is facilitated through emotional and liberal movements, which encourage young women to engage in educational and leadership opportunities. This foundation promotes self-confidence, advocacy, and participation in decision-making.

5. Positive Attitude Towards Women's Political Participation

The cultural mindset in Halabja is increasingly supportive of women's political participation. The community holds a positive viewpoint about women's roles in governance and leadership, providing a favorable environment for women to pursue political careers and contribute to shaping public policy.

6. Religious and Civil Society Dialogue

Halabja is home to a religious knowledge center and a strong civil society, both of which contribute to constructive dialogues that bridge gaps between different community sectors. The ability to negotiate and understand one another through interfaith and civil society discussions ensures that diverse viewpoints are respected, helping to mitigate misunderstandings and fostering collaboration in the process of peacebuilding and social progress.

These strengths in Halabja provide a solid foundation upon which to build further initiatives aimed at empowering women, strengthening peacebuilding processes, and improving equality between men and women. By leveraging these strengths, Halabja can continue to play a leading role in promoting women's rights and political participation in the Kurdistan Region and beyond.

Weaknesses in Advancing Women's Rights and Participation in Halabja

While Halabja demonstrates significant progress in promoting women's rights and participation, several weak points remain that hinder the full implementation of NAP 1325 and the empowerment of women. Addressing these challenges is critical for ensuring sustainable development, equality between men and women, and a more inclusive society. Below are the key weaknesses identified in Halabja:

1. Tokenistic Use of Women in Management Positions

Despite the active involvement of women in leadership and management roles, women in Halabja are sometimes seen as token figures in these positions, often used to fulfill quotas rather than being given the agency to make independent decisions. This undermines the authentic empowerment of women and limits their impact on key decision-making processes.

2. Lack of Strategies such as specialized courts for Women in power

Halabja currently does not have specialized courts dedicated to handling domestic violence cases against women. This absence prevents victims of abuse from receiving timely, sensitive, and adequate legal support, thereby delaying the justice process and potentially increasing the vulnerability of women experiencing violence.

3. Insufficient Protection for Women leaders during the election process

There is a significant gap in providing physical and emotional protection for women who have participated in the process of elections and voting. While laws exist to protect women, counseling services, and legal support prevents many women from escaping abusive environments and seeking healing and justice.

4. Economic Exploitation of Women by Families

In some cases, women in Halabja are economically exploited by their families, with limited access to personal income or the ability to make independent financial decisions. This exploitation prevents women from attaining financial independence, which is crucial for empowering them to make decisions and break free from cycles of abuse and oppression.

5. Lack of a manual to implement the domestic violence law

While laws against domestic violence exist, there is insufficient awareness among the public, including both men and women, about these laws. The lack of public education on the rights and protections available under these laws means that women may not seek help or know their legal entitlements, preventing them from accessing the support they need.

6. Limited Focus in the 1325 NAP on Women and Youth Development

The implementation of the Kurdistan NAP 1325 in Halabja has not fully addressed the development of women and youth, particularly in terms of capacity building and providing leadership training. There is a need for more focused efforts to equip women and young people with the skills and knowledge necessary to actively participate in decision-making, governance, and peacebuilding processes.

7. Lack of International Funds and Clear Standards for Local Organizations

Local women's organizations in Halabja face significant challenges due to the absence of international funding and the lack of clear standards for distributing funds to support their activities. Without sufficient financial resources, local organizations cannot effectively implement programs that promote equality between men and women, domestic violence prevention, or youth and women's leadership in the community.

These weak points underscore the need for continued advocacy and policy reforms to ensure that women's rights are fully recognized and implemented in Halabja. Addressing these challenges requires the coordinated efforts of local, regional, and international actors, including government institutions, civil society, and donor organizations. Only through concerted action can Halabja achieve the empowerment of its women and youth, ensuring that they are not only included but active participants in shaping the future of the region.

Policy Recommendations

1. Increase Representation

- Policy Reforms for Inclusion: Officials stressed the need for policies that mandate greater youth and women's representation in decision-making, including introducing quotas in local councils and government institutions
- Political Awareness and Leadership – Women need greater awareness of their political roles and should be integrated into official negotiations. Political parties in Halabja should be pressured to recognize women as key decision-makers in delegations.
- Women as Local Peace Mediators – Women should actively mediate local disputes as a foundational step toward national peace negotiations.
- Focus on Halabja and Surrounding Areas – Implement initiatives to increase women's awareness of NAP 1325 and empower them to take leadership roles within their communities.

- Promote Youth Awareness and Involvement – Awareness campaigns should be intensified through various activities, such as workshops and interactive platforms, to educate youth about their rights and responsibilities.
- Encourage Youth Participation in Societal and Political Processes – Initiatives should be developed to actively involve young people in governance and political decision-making, ensuring their voices are heard.
- Alerting Political Parties to Equal Representation – Political parties should be encouraged and pressured to ensure greater participation of women, particularly young women, in leadership roles to enhance equality between men and women in representation.

2. Strengthen Legal Frameworks

- Equality and Rights Protection – Ensure women's access to education, employment, and political engagement, particularly for those in rural areas.
- Policy and Legal Reforms – Address cultural and political barriers that exclude women from leadership positions.
- Opening Independent and Specialized Courts for Domestic Violence Cases – Create specialized courts to handle domestic violence cases efficiently and with sensitivity.
- Having a specific policy in Halabja for systemizing and working towards increasing women's participation in decision-making.
- Establishing strategies on how to combat violence and provide protection for women during work, and form appropriate environments.

3. Training and Capacity-Building

- Training and Capacity Building – Women should receive training in dispute resolution, diplomacy, and negotiations to enable their effective participation in peacebuilding.

- Implement Sensitivity Training – Conduct sensitivity training for stakeholders, including military, political figures, and government officials, to create a sensitive approach to peacebuilding and governance.
- Forming Peaceful Home Initiatives – Launch programs promoting healthy family relationships, communication skills, and conflict resolution techniques.
- Strengthen Awareness Programs for Women and Girls – Expand targeted workshops, seminars, and training programs to enhance women’s understanding of their rights and skills.
- Skill Training for Domestic Violence Prevention and Awareness (DCVAW) Employees – Provide training for DCVAW employees to equip them with the skills to handle abuse cases effectively, focusing on psychological support, legal rights, and confidentiality.
- Capacity-Building and Education: They emphasized the importance of leadership training and political education programs to equip women and youth with the necessary skills for governance

4. Collaboration with Civil Society

- Encouraging Civic Participation: Authorities highlighted the role of civil society organizations in mobilizing young people and women to participate in political and social initiatives.
- Collaboration with Organizations – Government institutions, NGOs, and international organizations should work together to ensure women’s participation in peace negotiations and empower women-led local organizations.
- Increasing Funding for Women-Led Organizations – Support local and international NGOs focused on equality between men and women, peacebuilding, and women’s empowerment with adequate financial resources.
- Support for Local NGOs – Local NGOs should be supported through funding, capacity-building, and partnerships with international organizations. These NGOs play a vital role

in raising awareness, providing services, and advocating for women's rights and peacebuilding efforts.

- Increasing Job Opportunities in Halabja – Collaborate with local authorities and the private sector to create job and vocational training opportunities for women and youth in Halabja, fostering economic empowerment.
- Establish a dedicated platform for civil society organizations to facilitate the exchange of ideas and opinions, fostering collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and collective problem-solving.

5. Monitoring and Evaluation

- Monitoring and Evaluation – Develop mechanisms for tracking the implementation of NAP 1325 in Kurdistan, including regular assessments and reporting on progress.
- Establish Mechanisms for Monitoring and Assessment – Develop robust systems to track the implementation and effectiveness of equality between men and women policies, ensuring regular reporting and evaluation.
- Developing a Strategic Ongoing Plan with Local Authorities – Partner with local authorities to create and implement an ongoing plan for monitoring the progress of equality between men and women and youth empowerment initiatives.
- Assessment and Follow-up by Stakeholders – Stakeholders, including government institutions, NGOs, and international organizations, should collaborate to assess and follow up on the progress of the 1325 NAP implementation. Regular monitoring and evaluation will help identify gaps and ensure that the action plan is moving forward as intended.

6. Strategy for Combating Violence Against Women Law

- Opening Protected Shelters for Women and Girls and the absence of prisons for females – Establish safe shelters providing housing, legal support, and psychological care for women and girls at risk of violence or persecution.

- Opening Mental Health Institutions – Establish mental health institutions to provide psychological support for women and youth affected by violence or conflict.
- Social Follow-up by the Department of Care and Social Development (DOLSA) – Offer services such as counseling and financial support for vulnerable women and youth, helping them rebuild their lives after experiencing violence.

Conclusion

Based on the discussions held during the negotiations, it is evident that the participation of women and youth in peacebuilding, political engagement, and decision-making processes requires significant reforms and advancements tailored to the needs of society. While the historical and cultural context of Halabja demonstrates that women have consistently been prepared to take on active roles, there remains a degree of hesitation in fully integrating them into these spheres for future generations. Addressing these challenges requires sustained efforts to foster inclusivity and ensure that women's contributions are recognized and institutionalized in political and peace processes.

References and Citations

Through a series of structured interviews with 3 women leaders, 10 questionnaires were answered by 10 women leaders from diverse backgrounds in Halabja, this assessment was conducted using a comprehensive questionnaire. Additionally, three round table (RTDs) discussions were held, incorporating the perspectives of women, men, and youth from various identities. These methodologies provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities surrounding women's and youth's participation in political and peacebuilding processes in the region.



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