



Policy Brief One

Enhancing Strengthening Women's Role in Peacebuilding in Halabja: Advancing Participation, Protection and Prevention

"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**

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Introduction

This policy aims to deepen the understanding of the implementation process of NAP 1325, which is structured around three fundamental pillars: Protection, Prevention, and Participation. In particular, it seeks to enhance the engagement of youth in these pillars by assessing their awareness, identifying the challenges they face, and determining the specific needs of Halabja province. By addressing these factors, this policy aims to strengthen the capacities and roles of women and youth, ensuring their effective participation and support in peace and security efforts. Additionally, we extend our sincere appreciation to Shokhan Ahmed, who supported the development of this policy brief as a consultant.

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.

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.

Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative and quantitative research methods, including interviews, focus group discussions, and questionnaires conducted with youth, women, and key stakeholders in Halabja. These methods were employed to gather insights on the current challenges, needs, and opportunities related to the implementation of the three pillars. Additionally, the policy outlines its significance in shaping future strategies for Halabja province, ensuring a more inclusive and effective approach to peacebuilding and equality between men and women.

First Pillar: Participation

Objective

This policy seeks to increase and enhance women's participation in leadership, decision-making, and peacebuilding efforts by fostering their involvement in security sectors, reconciliation initiatives, and governance. Strengthening women's leadership will contribute to the effective implementation of peace and reconciliation processes within Halabja province.

Key Indicators

- Increased representation of women in security sectors and committees, particularly those involved in security and reconciliation efforts.
- Higher female participation in rebuilding programs, humanitarian aid efforts, and leadership roles in planning and implementation.
- Expansion of women's involvement in decision-making and implementation committees at various levels of governance.

Historical and Current Context

Women in Halabja have historically played significant roles in administrative and leadership positions, as demonstrated by figures such as (Hapsa Khani Naqib and Adila Khan) Their leadership has set a precedent for effective governance and management. Similarly, in contemporary Halabja, women have held senior positions, including:

- Governor of Halabja
- Former Executive President of Halabja University
- Director of committees affiliated with the governorate
- Director of Halabja's Human Rights Office
- Former Director of Halabja's Municipality
- Director of General Municipalities of Halabja
- Representative of the Public Health Directorate

Despite these contributions, women's participation remains insufficient relative to the province's population size and the number of available positions in public offices and directorates. This disparity persists even without considering the obligations of NAP 1325, highlighting the urgent need for stronger policy enforcement to further promote women's inclusion in governance.

Challenges to Youth Participation

Findings from questionnaires conducted with youth indicate that while young people support women's active participation, they themselves remain largely excluded from decision-making processes. Their perspectives and recommendations are not adequately considered, particularly in addressing critical socio-economic issues, such as:

- Unemployment and the lack of job opportunities, where youth engagement has been minimal.
- Limited access to platforms for youth participation, including youth centers, libraries, and cultural or educational initiatives that foster civic engagement.

Additionally, despite the challenges Halabja has endured, the National Action Plan (NAP) 1325 has neither been fully introduced nor effectively communicated to the local population. This lack of awareness significantly hinders the meaningful participation of both women and youth in governance and reconciliation processes. Relevant institutions—including the Ministry of Interior (through its DCVAWs), the Governorate Directorate of Halabja, political parties, and the Department of Labor and Social Affairs (DOLSA)—have a crucial role to play in addressing this gap.

Second Pillar: Protection

Objective

In alignment with the National Action Plan, the Protection pillar aims to safeguard women and girls who have experienced all forms of violence, particularly violence against women and girls (VAWG). This policy seeks to eliminate systemic neglect of such cases and ensure that effective mechanisms are in place to support survivors and uphold their rights.

Key Indicators

- Increased resolution of VAWG cases, ensuring that survivors have access to comprehensive services for protection, legal support, and rehabilitation.
- Higher utilization of reporting mechanisms and response channels through the monitoring and evaluation plan by the high council of women, enabling women and girls to seek justice and support without fear of retaliation.

Current Gaps and Challenges

Despite the urgent need for protection services, Halabja lacks essential infrastructure and resources for supporting survivors of Violence against women and girls. The following critical gaps have been identified:

1. Lack of Specialized Protection Agencies

- Halabja does not have a dedicated Directorate for Combating Violence Against Women and Families, leaving survivors with limited access to protection services.
- Although a directorate has been established, it lacks staffing, logistical resources, and financial support, severely hindering its ability to handle VAWG cases effectively.
- Lack of media support towards women leaders and those holding high posts and positions.

2. failure to localization the specific strategy to protect women

- No official shelters exist for women and girls facing domestic violence, threats, or other forms of abuse.
- In the absence of formal shelters, cases are often resolved informally through tribal or social reconciliation mechanisms, which may not prioritize survivors' safety.
- Women in urgent need of shelter are either sent to stay with well-known families or relocated to Sulaymaniyah, which disrupts their lives and can leave them vulnerable to further harm.

3. Insufficient Support from Local Organizations

- The number of local organizations working is very little but on top of that they are a strong pillar and backbone of the government filling in the gaps where the government might not be able to, and creating a collaboration with the related stakeholders and ministries to further enact on the national plan, such the relationship between a local NGO with the ministry of Culture and youth to contribute to raising people's awareness during elections.

4. Lack of Legal Support

- Stronger Implementation of Existing Laws: Demanding decision makers to review and strengthen enforcement mechanisms to ensure policies supporting women and youth are properly implemented.
- The absence of legal protections or insurance for women leaders, advocates, and activists.
- The lack of workplace policies specifically designed to prevent harassment in sectors such as media, public and Private sectors.
- The lack of a consistent system for applying the laws in the form of a guide or Manuel such as The province lacks specialized courts to address family violence cases, further delaying justice for survivors.

- There is no reconciliation committee dedicated to handling domestic violence disputes with a survivor-centered approach.
- The political parties to this day don't possess specific policies and mechanisms for the protection of women participants and only have a quota for the parliament.

5. Limited Awareness and Community Engagement about women's participation

- There is a lack of public awareness of self-protection measures, available support services, and legal rights for women and girls.
- Educative programs and training on Women's protection in leadership remain minimal or nonexistent, and lack of legal support for women leaders.

Third Pillar: Prevention

Objective

The Prevention pillar aims to strengthen preventive measures before, during, and after conflicts and crises, ensuring the establishment of a safe environment free from violence against women and girls (VAWG). This involves enhancing legal, social, and psychological support systems and addressing the structural gaps that hinder effective violence prevention in Halabja province.

Key Indicators

- Increased number of women and girls benefiting from prevention programs such as capacity building training, and leadership, whether provided by the government or non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
- A number of legislative, executive and procedural amendments that the government has taken regarding the protection of women in conflict situations.

Challenges and Structural Gaps

1. Inactivity of Protection Agencies and Services

- Institutions responsible for protection and prevention remain inactive due to a lack of prioritization, insufficient resources, patriarchal systems, limited political will, and the lack of internal policies within institutions to address and prevent all forms of discrimination and abuse against women.
- Essential services such as legal aid, social support, and mental health assistance are not adequately provided, weakening the overall fight against violence against women and girls.

2. Underreporting and Lack of Recorded Cases

- Official data indicates a low rate of registered cases in Halabja belonging to women leaders and those holding high positions due to the existing culture in Halabja.
- Historically, Halabja has maintained a non-violent cultural reputation, yet this does not mean that violence does not occur. Instead, cases remain unreported due to the absence of formal reporting structures, awareness campaigns, and dedicated institutions to handle such cases. This underreporting hinders the development of targeted interventions and policies needed to address violence affecting equality between men and women effectively.

3. Legal and Administrative Barriers

- Existing laws and policies in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region lack a dedicated budget, limiting their implementation and enforcement.
- Halabja remains administratively dependent on Sulaymaniyah, preventing the establishment of an independent legal and institutional framework to address women's protection.

- Due to this administrative dependency, Halabja does not have an operational Directorate for Women's Protection, which has stalled efforts to provide legal, social, and psychological support.
- There is no dedicated hotline for reporting VAWG cases in Halabja. Instead, cases are reported through Sulaymaniyah's 119 hotline, which then informs Halabja authorities. This delayed and indirect response mechanism weakens the efficiency of protection efforts.

Obstacles to Effective Implementation

The successful implementation of the Protection, Prevention, and Participation pillars in Halabja faces several key challenges that hinder progress and limit the impact of existing policies and initiatives. These obstacles include:

1. Limited Awareness Among Individuals and Youth
2. Low Number of Local Organizations Working in the Field
3. Marginalization of Halabja in Formal and Important Events
4. Absence of Job Opportunities and Equality Between Men and Women in Employment
5. Exclusion of Halabja's Representatives from the National Action Plan on NAP 1325
6. Lack of Solidarity Among Women in Advocacy and Protection Efforts
7. Negative Role of Social Media in Portraying Women in Leadership
8. Absence of a Unified Advocacy Platform for Women's Issues in Halabja

Policy Recommendations for Implementing NAP 1325 in Halabja

To strengthen the Participation, Protection, and Prevention pillars of NAP 1325, the following key actions are recommended:

1. **Enhancing Women's and Youth Participation in Governance and Decision-Making**
 - **Raise Awareness:** Conduct campaigns on rights, responsibilities, and governance to increase civic engagement.

- **Encourage Political Involvement:** Ensure youth and women play active roles in decision-making, governance, and peacebuilding.
- **Increase Equality Between Men and Women in Representation:** Urge political parties to integrate women and youth into leadership roles.
- **Train Women Leaders:** Provide leadership, advocacy, and governance training to enhance women's skills and abilities.
- **Strengthen Institutional Support:** Improve the capacities of law enforcement, judiciary, and security sectors to support women's participation and protection.
- **Engage Religious and Community Leaders:** Involve them in promoting equality and social inclusion.
- **Promote NAP 1325 Training:** Increase the participation of women and youth in 1325 training programs and advocate for their inclusion in political decision-making.

2. Strengthening Protection and Legal Support for Women and Girls

- **Ensure Equal Opportunities:** Improve access to education, employment, and political participation for women and youth.
- **Expand Equality Campaigns:** Raise awareness on women's rights, conflict prevention, and protection mechanisms.
- **Establish Safe Spaces:** Open shelters, specialized courts, and psychological support services for survivors of VAWG.
- **Enhance Social and Mental Health Support:** Provide counseling, financial aid, and legal assistance for vulnerable groups.
- **Train Stakeholders on Equality Between Men and Women Sensitivity:** Educate security forces, policymakers, and judicial authorities on policies and protection strategies that promote equality between men and women.

3. Promoting Economic Empowerment and Capacity Building

- **Empower Women and Girls:** Offer leadership and skill-building programs to increase economic independence.
- **Increase Women's Leadership in Peacebuilding:** Ensure women's roles in decision-making, conflict resolution, and peace processes.
- **Develop Training Programs:** Provide courses on dispute resolution, governance, and negotiations to strengthen capacities.
- **Expand Job Opportunities:** Implement vocational training and employment programs for women and youth.
- **Support Local NGOs and Civil Society:** Fund equality and youth empowerment initiatives to foster sustainable development.
- **Monitor and Evaluate Progress:** Collaborate with authorities to track NAP 1325 implementation and ensure continuous improvement.



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