Policy Brief

Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in Iraq:

Comprehensive Evidence, Policy Context and Recommendations



OCTOBER 2025

The Regional Observatory on Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is an independent mechanism to follow up on laws and policies related to combating VAWG and to support the implementation of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) Ministerial Declarations on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society. The Observatory is hosted by EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI) in Amman.

EuroMed Feminist Initiative (EFI) is a policy platform that provides expertise in the field of equality between women and men and advocates for women's rights as inseparable from democracy building and citizenship, for political solutions to all conflicts and for the right of peoples to self-determination.

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Acronyms

BPfA Beijing Platform for Action

CEDAW Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CSOs Civil Society Organisations

DCVAW General Directorate for Combating Violence Against Women and the Family

EFI EuroMed Feminist Initiative

FGM Female Genital Mutilation

GIZ Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit

HCWD High Council of Women and Development

KII Key Informant Interview

KRG Kurdistan Regional Government

KR-I Kurdistan Region of Iraq

SDGs Sustainable Development Goals

SPACE Strengthening Participation, Peaceful Coexistence and Equality in Iraq Programme

UNSCR United Nations Security Council Resolution

VAWG Violence Against Women and Girls

WED Women Empowerment Department

Executive Summary

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a global phenomenon that affects all societies regardless of income, culture or geography. In line with international human rights standards, it is recognised as a grave violation of women's human rights. Despite important efforts made in recent years to adapt national legislation, strategies and policies to address and prevent VAWG more effectively, it continues to persist across all regions, cultures and socio-economic groups.

In Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I), VAWG is deeply entrenched at the intersection of a history of protracted conflict, instability and economic inequality, as well as persistent patriarchal norms and structural barriers within political, legal and economic frameworks that affect women's lives in every sphere—from the household to the political arena. It manifests in physical, sexual, psychological, economic and, increasingly, digital forms of violence.

In addition to Iraq's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), its commitments under international frameworks also include the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably Goal 5 and Goal 16. However, national legislation and policies are not yet fully aligned with these commitments. Iraq lacks a specific law on combating VAWG. While the KR-I has taken positive steps through adopting Law No. 2011) 8) on Combating Domestic Violence, the lack of sufficient budgetary allocations for the institutions implementing the law limits its effectiveness. In addition, structural and cultural barriers have impeded full implementation of national laws.

This policy brief presents the findings and recommendations of the study "Violence Against Women and Girls in Iraq and the KR-I: Patterns, Causes and Policy Responses," conducted by a national research team in partnership with the Regional Observatory on VAWG in 2025 and supported by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) as part of the programme "Strengthening Participation, Peaceful Coexistence and Equality in Iraq" (SPACE), funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

It highlights the pervasive and enduring nature of VAWG across regions and contexts in Iraq, as well as the patterns, types and prevalence of VAWG, and the availability of services, policies and legislation put in place to prevent, protect and combat VAWG.

The evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, civil society and international development partners aim to enhance the efforts of both governmental and civil society actors in fortifying protections for women and girls in Iraq, including the KR-I.

The policy brief highlights the urgent need for legislative reform, the expansion of services for survivors, the institutionalisation of capacity-building for service providers and the adoption of long-term prevention strategies.

1. Background

Iraq and the KR-I have endured decades of conflict, political instability and economic hardship, all of which have contributed to an environment where VAWG persists at alarming levels. Deeply rooted patriarchal norms, the legacies of armed conflict and the fragmentation of legal and governance systems have created systemic vulnerabilities. Displacement, widespread poverty and limited access to basic services exacerbate women's exposure to violence, particularly for those in rural areas and refugee communities.

Iraq has made formal commitments to international frameworks, including CEDAW, the BPfA, UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and the SDGs. Yet, the translation of these commitments into effective legal protection, institutional mechanisms and adequately resourced services remains incomplete.

At the federal level, Iraq lacks a dedicated law to combat all forms of VAWG, retains provisions in the Penal Code that mitigate sentences for "honour crimes" and allows marriages below 18 with judicial approval. The Personal Status Law enshrines discriminatory practices in marriage, divorce and inheritance, while federal strategies on women and on combating VAWG remain without allocated budgets or effective monitoring. The KR-I has enacted the Law on Combating Domestic Violence (Law No. 8 of 2011), cancelled the legal provisions related to so-called "honour-based" violence since 2015, and criminalised female genital mutilation (FGM). Nonetheless, enhanced institutional and financial resources are still needed for effective enforcement.

Within this context, there was an urgent need to conduct a national assessment study on VAWG in Iraq and the KR-I. The study aimed to examine the prevalence and patterns of VAWG in Iraq and the KR-I. This included an analysis of different forms of violence and how they interact with and are compounded by structural violence. Moreover, it delved into both overt instances of VAWG and the underlying systemic barriers that sustain it. This included an analysis of prevailing societal norms, gaps within the legal framework and institutional responses. The study also aimed to assess the availability of services, policies and legislation put in place to prevent, protect and combat VAWG.

A mixed-methods approach was applied, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection to ensure both breadth and depth of analysis. Quantitative data were gathered through a structured survey administered to 1,216 women across four governorates in Federal Iraq (Baghdad, Najaf, Basra and Anbar) and two in the KR-I (Erbil and Sulaymaniyah), representing urban and rural contexts. Qualitative insights were obtained from 36 key informant interviews (KIIs) with government officials, civil society representatives, legal experts and service providers.

The analyses were further complemented by legal and policy assessments, as well as a thorough literature review of national and international reports. The data were triangulated to validate findings and ensure contextual accuracy.

2. Key Findings

2.1 Prevalence and forms of VAWG

The study's findings reveal that VAWG in Iraq and the KR-I is characterised by high prevalence, significant underreporting and persistent societal acceptance of certain forms of violence.

Over half (55.7%) of surveyed women reported experiencing some form of VAWG in the past six months. Physical violence (34.2%) was the most commonly reported, followed closely by psychological abuse (28.4%). Economic violence, such as the denial of access to income or property, ranked third at 15.8%. Forced marriage remains a concern, with 10.7% of women reporting it, followed by conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) (9.7%), which reflects the intersection of insecurity and violence. Only 14.9% of survivors filed formal complaints, highlighting systemic barriers to reporting.

Baghdad reported the highest rate of violence at 67.8%, attributable to its high population density, social and cultural diversity and the prevalence of various forms of violence amidst inadequate community oversight and security measures. This context may also indicate a heightened awareness of manifestations of violence and an increased capacity for reporting in urban locales. Following Baghdad, Najaf recorded a rate of 68.1%, which—despite the city's religious character—suggests that traditional systems contribute to the persistence of both domestic and societal violence against women, compounded by insufficient legal and protective mechanisms.

Diagram 1: Type of violence women experience

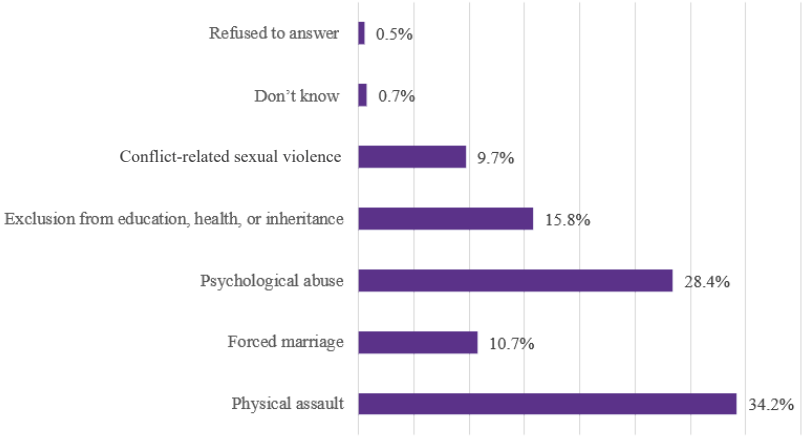
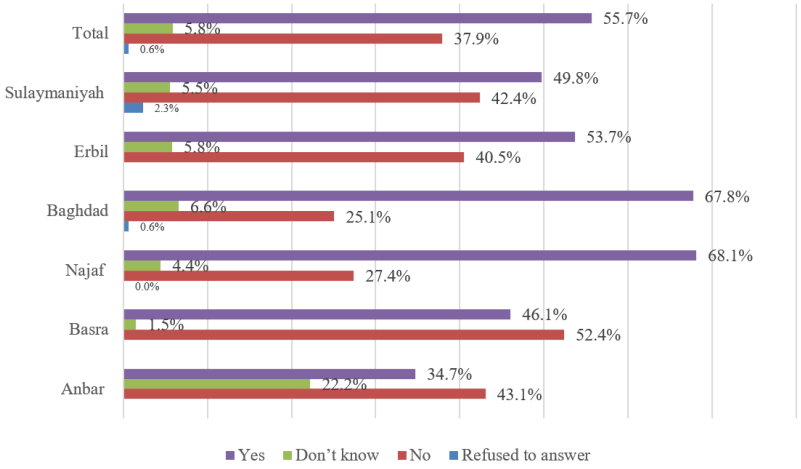


Diagram 2: Witnessing violence against women and girls



2.2 Policies and services for combating VAWG

Legal context in Iraq

Iraq has taken several positive steps toward advancing women's rights. The National Strategy for Women (2018–2030) represents important policy commitments to equality and protection from violence. In recent years, the government has also expanded collaboration with civil society organisations (CSOs) and international organisations to improve coordination on women's protection, including through the establishment of specialised police units in some governorates and the development of draft legislation on domestic violence, which, if adopted, would mark a critical step forward.

Moreover, Iraq's Women Empowerment Department (WED), operating under the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, serves as the national women's machinery. The department is mandated to coordinate and monitor the implementation of the National Strategy for Women (2023–2030), in collaboration with line ministries and development partners.

Despite these steps, the national legal framework still falls short of ensuring comprehensive protection for women and girls and effectively preventing this violence. The Personal Status Law continues to contain provisions that discriminate in matters of marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance, perpetuating inequalities. Moreover, Article 41 of the Iraqi Constitution allows each religious sect to regulate personal status issues according to its own

interpretation, creating a fragmented legal environment in which women are subject to unequal rights depending on their religious affiliation or geographic location.

Iraq still lacks a comprehensive law to combat all forms of VAWG. The draft Anti-Domestic Violence Law remains still pending before Parliament. At the same time, certain Penal Code articles continue to legitimise or excuse some forms of violence. Article 41 allows husbands to "discipline" their wives, and Article 409 provides reduced sentences for so-called "honour crimes," perpetuating impunity and undermining Iraq's commitments under international legal frameworks. Institutional coordination across federal agencies responsible for prevention and response remains inconsistent, resulting in fragmented implementation of national strategies. Judicial and police training on survivor-centred procedures also remains limited, affecting enforcement of laws and further discouraging survivors from seeking justice.

Moreover, there are no state-run shelters, and most support services, including safe houses, hotlines and psychosocial assistance, are donor-dependent and concentrated in urban areas. Awareness of legal rights and available services is especially limited in rural areas, where entrenched patriarchal norms and a limited institutional presence further exacerbate women's vulnerability leaving rural women with minimal access to legal aid and protection mechanisms.

These barriers are compounded by pervasive stigma and fear of retaliation, which discourage many women from reporting abuse and perpetuate the silence surrounding VAWG. These numerous obstacles survivors encounter prevent them in seeking justice and protection.

Legal context in the KR-I

The KR-I has taken steps to combat VAWG, most notably through the enactment of the Law on Combating Domestic Violence (Law No. 8 of 2011). This legislation established mechanisms for coordination among government ministries, the judiciary and civil society, and signalled a stronger political commitment to addressing VAWG. The National Strategy to Combat VAWG (2017–2027) outlines a multi-pillar framework focused on legal reform, protection, prevention and care.

At the service provision level, five shelters currently operate, offering psychosocial support to women survivors of violence, along with nurseries for their children up to 15 years old. While the General Directorate for Combating Violence Against Women and the Family (DCVAW) at the Ministry of Interior plays a central role in coordinating interventions and reporting VAWG, the High Council of Women and Development (HCWD) is responsible for coordinating inter-ministerial actions and enhancing accountability and monitoring mechanisms. Additionally, specialised courts have been set up to handle cases of domestic violence.

Nonetheless, gaps in implementation persist. Inadequate financial and human resources, and insufficient institutionalised training for police, judicial actors and social service providers have constrained the law's effectiveness. The lack of responsive budgeting to the needs of women further undermines the sustainability and quality of support services, including shelters, psychosocial assistance and legal aid for survivors. Although some amendments have been made to the Personal Status Law, structural legal inequalities remain, restricting women's rights in areas such

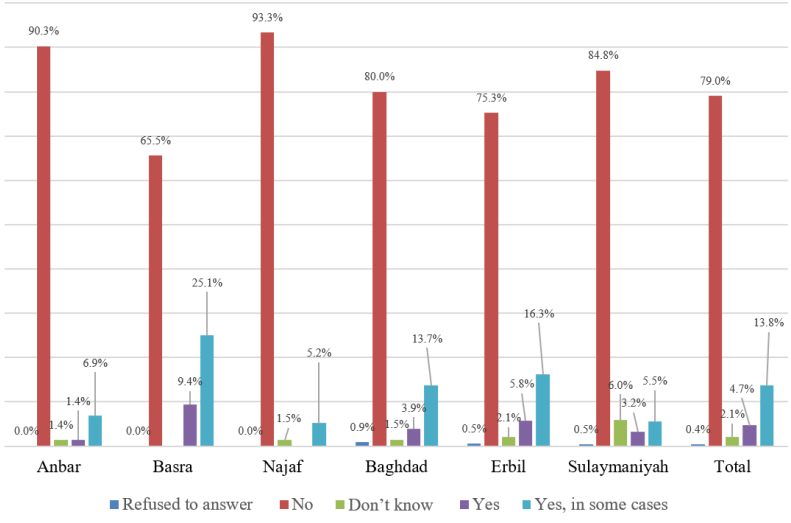
as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Marginalised women and girls, such as refugees, internally displaced women and women with disabilities, face additional barriers, including social stigma and fear of retaliation, which limit access to existing protection systems.

2.3 Cultural and social norms

Cultural and social norms play a decisive role in shaping attitudes toward VAWG. Deeply rooted traditions and patriarchal structures continue to influence perceptions of women's roles within the family and society, often reinforcing unequal power dynamics. Moreover, the persistence of patriarchal values contributes to the normalisation of violence.

Survey data show that 18.5% of women believe physical violence against wives can be justified at all times or under certain circumstances, while 28.1% either agree with or are neutral about harassment being justified based on a woman's clothing or behaviour. Interviews also reveal that male guardianship is often seen as a protective measure, even though it restricts women's autonomy. These beliefs are reinforced by religious and community leaders in certain areas, limiting the effectiveness of legal reforms.

Diagram 3: Do you think it is acceptable for a husband to hit his wife in the following cases? (If she neglects children)



2.4 Services for women survivors

Knowledge and awareness of protection and support services are central to combating VAWG. In Iraq and the KR-I, a network of legal, health and psychosocial services exists but remains fragmented and unevenly distributed.

About one-third (33.7%) of respondents knew about a hotline for reporting violence, and fewer (19.4%) were aware of shelters. Services are concentrated in urban centres, leaving rural women with significantly less awareness and access; knowledge in some rural districts is up to four times lower than that in urban areas.

Diagram 4: Does the government provide shelters for women survivors of violence?

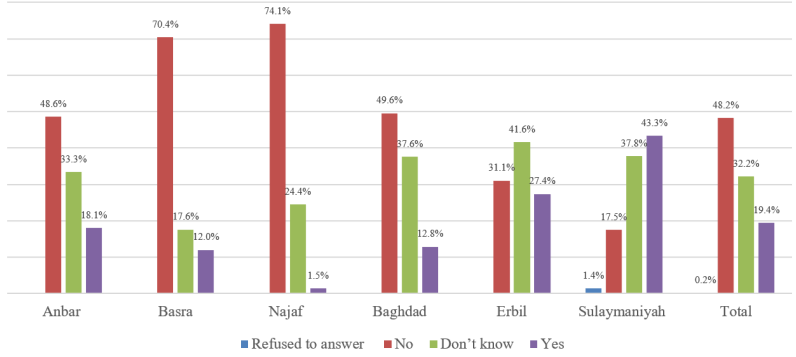
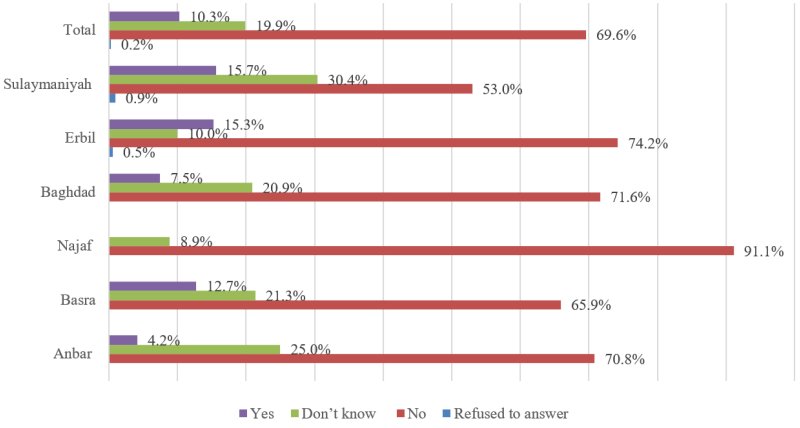


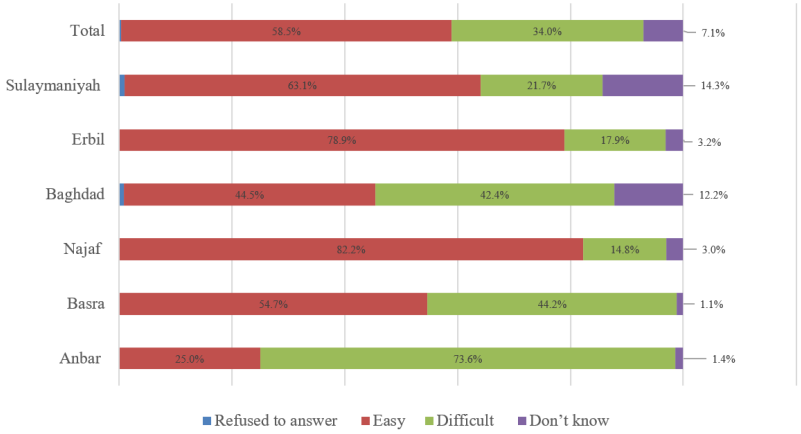
Diagram 5: Are the laws and procedures to protect women from violence sufficient in Iraq?



While government institutions and CSOs have made efforts to expand shelters, hotlines and legal aid, limited resources, inconsistent coordination and insufficient public awareness continue to restrict women's access to comprehensive protection and recovery mechanisms.

Only 19.7% of respondents in urban areas found access to healthcare to be "easy," while nearly one-third (34%) reported that access is "difficult," raising concerns about the quality and availability of health services in cities, particularly given their high population density.

Diagram 6: Is it difficult or easy for women to utilise the following services in the community? (Healthcare)

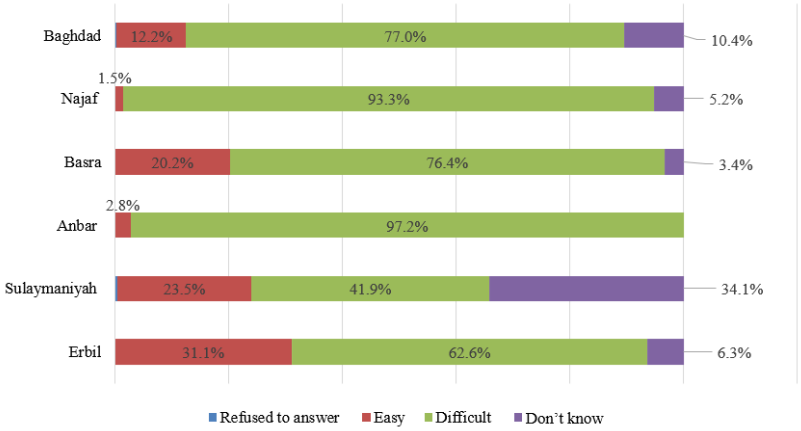


Access to police services is also a challenge. A total of 71.4% of respondents stated that it is difficult for women to access police services.

The barriers women face are multifaceted and linked to a shortage of law enforcement personnel trained in survivor-centred approach, the physical environment of police stations which often lacks private spaces for confidential discussions with survivors and a scarcity of female officers to receive survivors of violence, as survivors frequently express discomfort when engaging with male police officers.

In urban contexts, 68.2% of respondents reported that access to police services is difficult, while 83.7% of rural respondents stated that women's access to police services is difficult; only 6.9% reported it as easy. These statistics reveal a troubling disparity in justice provision and service access between urban and rural populations.

Diagram 7: Is it difficult or easy for women to utilise the following services in the community? (Police)

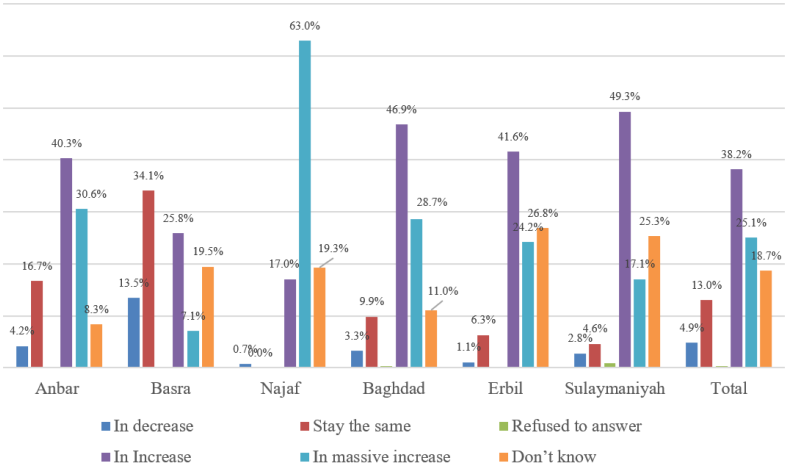


2.5 Impact of armed conflict

Armed conflict and prolonged insecurity have had a profound and lasting impact on women and girls in Iraq and the KR-I. Beyond direct physical harm, conflict has disrupted social structures, eroded community protection systems and deepened inequalities between women and men.

A total of 63.2% of respondents believed that armed conflict has worsened VAWG. Displacement, the breakdown of social structures and economic instability have increased early marriage, trafficking and sexual exploitation. The conflict has also disrupted women's access to essential services.

Diagram 8: Has armed conflict in Iraq increased violence against women and girls?



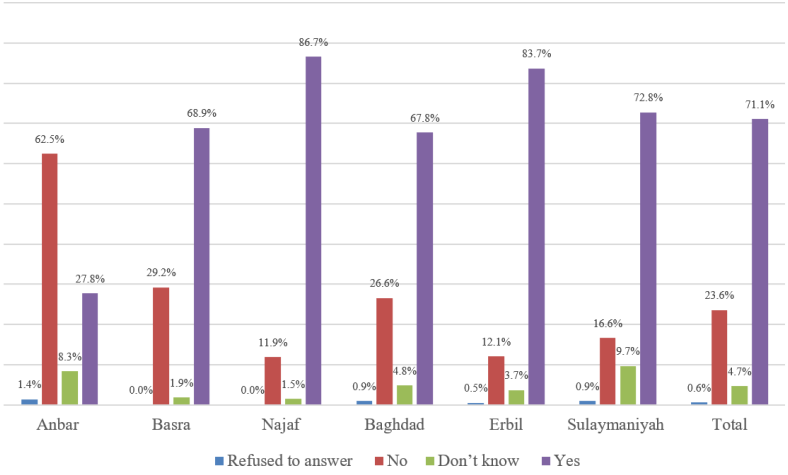
2.6 Economic dependence

Economic vulnerability is both a driver and a consequence of VAWG. It remains one of the most persistent structural drivers of VAWG in Iraq and the KR-I. Limited access to education, employment and financial resources reduces women's autonomy and ability to leave abusive relationships. Socio-economic instability, compounded by the legacies of conflict and displacement, has further marginalised women in the labour market.

Socioeconomic instability, community resistance to women's economic independence, compounded by the legacies of conflict and displacement, has further marginalised women in the labour market. Moreover, existing social protection programmes in Iraq seldom incorporate components that are sensitive to women's specific needs, reducing their effectiveness in addressing economic and protection gaps.

A total of 71.1% of respondents agreed that a lack of financial means traps women in abusive relationships. The female labour force participation rate is only 10.6%, with a wage gap of 18.4%.

Diagram 9: Do you believe women subjected to violence by their husbands or families stay with them due to a lack of financial resources?

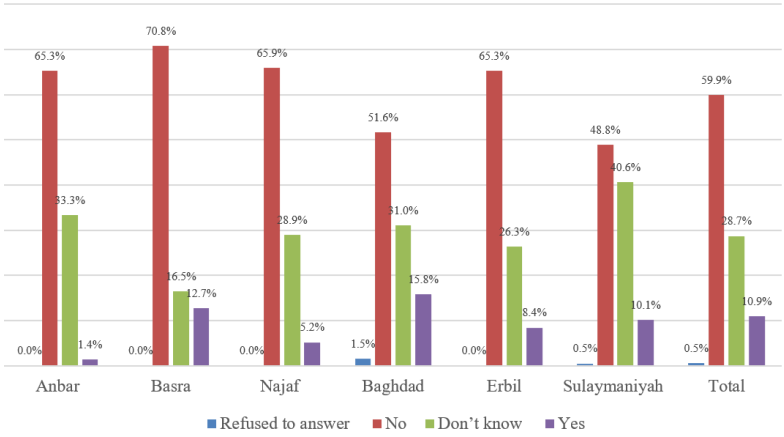


2.7 Awareness among women

Public awareness and knowledge of rights are central to preventing and responding to VAWG. In Iraq and the KR-I, awareness levels among women remain uneven and largely dependent on location, education and access to information. Limited dissemination of information in rural and marginalised communities continues to hinder women's ability to seek protection and exercise their rights.

A total of 59.9% of women were unaware of any campaigns aimed at combating VAWG. Rural women, in particular, are less informed about their rights and the services available to them. Awareness campaigns are sporadic, donor-dependent and rarely evaluated for their impact.

Diagram 10: In the past year, have you heard of any campaigns by the government or civil institutions in Iraq supporting women facing violence?



2. Policy Gaps

The findings point to critical policy gaps across legislative, institutional and service delivery domains. The table below provides a summary of the policy gaps in Iraq and the KR-I.

Legal Area	Federal Iraq	KR-I
CEDAW	Ratified with reservations on Articles 2, 16, and 29; the Optional Protocol has not been ratified.	Bound by federal ratification; no addi-tional reservations.
Specific Law on Combating VAWG	No law enacted; a draft Anti-Domestic Violence Law has been pending for years.	Law No. 8 (2011) exists; however, im-plementation remains limited due to insufficient resources and capacity.
Definition of VAWG	No comprehensive definition in law.	Domestic violence is defined in Law No. 8 (2011); no full legal definition of VAWG.
Penal Code on 'Honour Crimes'	Article 409 allows reduced sentences for "honour" killings.	Mitigating excuses for "honour crimes" were abolished under Law No. 14/2002 and Law No. 3/2015.
Minimum Marriage Age	18, but courts can authorise marriage from 15 (and in exceptional cases, below 15).	18, but exceptions are possible at 16 with court approval (or at 15 in cases of "extreme necessity").
Protection in Family Law	Discriminatory polygamy allowed, une-qual divorce rights, fathers as sole guard-ians, unequal inheritance.	Some reforms (e.g., limits on polyga-my and conditional guardianship for mothers) have been made, but core inequalities remain.
Sexual Harassment	The Penal Code criminalises sexual har-assment as "crimes against modesty"; the Labour Law prohibits workplace harass-ment.	Similar Penal Code provisions; the Labour Law (1987) does not explicitly protect women from workplace har-assment.
FGM	Not explicitly prohibited by law.	Explicitly prohibited under Law No. 8 (2011).
Rape Laws	Article 398 of the Penal Code allows a rapist to escape punishment if he marries the victim.	The same Article 398 of the Penal Code still applies.
Marital Rape	Not explicitly criminalised.	Criminalised under Article 2 of Law No. 8 (2011).
National Strategy on VAWG	The National Strategy to Combat VAWG (2018–2030) and National Strategy for Iraqi Women (2023–2030) exist but are underfunded and lack effective monitor-ing and evaluation.	The National Strategy to Combat VAWG (2017–2027) exists, with legal, protection, prevention and care pillars, but resources remain insufficient.
Shelters & Services	No State-run shelters exist; some UN-supported centres exist but lack a legal framework.	Four official shelters plus one tempo-rary (72-hour) shelter exist, managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Af-fairs.
Budgeting for VAWG	No dedicated budget lines for combating VAWG.	No dedicated budget lines for combat-ing VAWG.

4. Conclusion

The global phenomenon of VAWG remains a deep-rooted structural challenge intertwined with social, cultural, legal and economic factors. This complexity poses the need for comprehensive approach to combating it on multiple levels: both addressing the root causes of violence and strengthening mechanisms for prevention, protection and empowerment, while enhancing collaboration among all relevant stakeholders, service providers and civil society, institutionalizing survivor-centred approach in all training programs and intensifying the awareness raising campaigns on all forms of VAWG and how to prevent them

VAWG is also a profound barrier to peacebuilding, social cohesion and sustainable development in Iraq and KR-I. The evidence highlights legal discrimination, limited institutional responses, underfunded strategies and persistent socio-cultural norms that perpetuate impunity and silence survivors.

While the KR-I has made progress with the adoption of Law No. 8 (2011), Federal Iraq still lacks a specific law on combating VAWG.

To face gaps in implementation, service provision and accountability and achieve the desired change, comprehensive legal reform, sustainable financing and institutional accountability mechanisms are essential.

On policymaking level, close partnership with civil society, women's rights organisations and international partners is essential to ensure that no woman and no girl are left behind.

Immediate, coordinated and adequately resourced action is vital to guarantee protection, promote equality and uphold the rights of all women and girls.

5. Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to support policymakers in their responses to combat violence against women and girls and ensure their right to live free from violence and discrimination across Iraq and KR-I.

Federal Government of Iraq

- Remove CEDAW reservations and ratify the Optional Protocol to strengthen compliance and accountability.
- Adopt a specific and comprehensive law to combat all forms of VAWG, with a clear definition of VAWG, the criminalisation of all its forms, provisions for survivors' protection and penalties for perpetrators.
- Repeal Penal Code provisions that reduce penalties for "honour crimes" and criminalise marital rape and FGM.
- Reform personal status and inheritance laws to guarantee equal rights in marriage, divorce, guardianship and inheritance.
- Align all VAWG interventions with SDG N: 5 and N: 16 and the Regional Index on VAWG and Iraq's National Development Plan (2024–2029) to ensure strategic coherence.
- Strengthen justice and police systems by institutionalising specialised training, allocating resources and following up on VAWG cases.
- Allocate dedicated budgets and implement monitoring of the National Strategies (2018–2030; 2023–2030).
- Establish government-run shelters nationwide, notably reaching out to rural areas, with legal authorisation, trained staff and sustainable funding.
- Conduct regular national surveys on VAWG prevalence to capture both reported and unreported cases of VAWG.
- Develop a centralised national database on VAWG linked to the Central Statistical Organization and the national complaint system.
- Integrate equality and VAWG prevention into teacher training and education institutes.
- Transform awareness campaigns into sustained nationwide education and communication programmes.
- Institutionalise mandatory training on VAWG for police academies, judicial institutes and medical schools.
- Strengthen institutional coordination through binding protocols, accountability frameworks and annual reviews. This could be best accomplished by establishing a national, unified digital data and referral platform on VAWG, linking databases of relevant ministries (the Ministries of Interior, Labour, Health, Planning, and Justice) and overseen by an inter-ministerial committee.
- Include survivor-centred approach and principles in any government policies, frameworks and training curricula on VAWG, which will enhance women access to services.
- Adopt responsive budgeting to address the needs of women, with dedicated lines for combating VAWG.

Kurdistan Region of Iraq

- Reform personal status laws to eliminate discrimination in divorce, guardianship, polygamy and inheritance.
- Adopt a comprehensive law on the elimination of all forms of VAWG that extends beyond the 2011 Domestic Violence Law, including a clear definition of VAWG, the criminalisation of all its forms and provisions for coordination among all relevant stakeholders.
- Allocate dedicated financial and human resources for the implementation and monitoring of the National Strategy to Combat VAWG (2017–2027).
- Strengthen justice and police systems by institutionalising specialised training, allocating resources and following up on VAWG cases.
- Expand integrated centres providing medical, psychosocial, legal and shelter services.
- Increase the number and regional distribution of government-run shelters, ensuring accessibility for rural women and marginalised women, including women with disabilities.
- Standardise the quality of shelter and counselling services with survivor centred protocols and regular monitoring.
- Secure sustainable funding for shelters, hotlines and services through dedicated budget lines and long-term partnerships.
- Conduct regular surveys on VAWG prevalence to capture both reported and unreported cases of VAWG.
- Integrate equality and VAWG prevention across all education levels and curricula.
- Institutionalise mandatory training on VAWG for police academies, judicial institutes and medical schools.
- Strengthen inter-ministerial and CSO cooperation through formal agreements with clear roles and monitoring mechanisms.
- Include survivor-centred approach and principles in any government policies, frameworks and training curricula on VAWG which will enhance women access to services.
- Adopt responsive budgeting to address the needs of women, with dedicated lines for combating VAWG.

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