



POLITICAL DISTRUST AND FRUSTRATION MOUNT AS PANDEMIC IMPACTS IRAQ

**Key Findings of Qualitative Public
Opinion Research Conducted in
Five Provinces in Iraq**

Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salahaddin

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The National Democratic Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that has supported democratic institutions and practices in every region of the world for more than three decades. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to establish and strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. NDI conducts public opinion research to identify issues of public concern, track shifts in public perceptions and opinions, and contribute to evidence-based dialogue on policy and development programs.



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1.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many long-term concerns for Iraqi citizens have been exacerbated by COVID-19 and its related consequences, throwing harsh light on the policies and actions of the Iraqi government. Other concerns brought on by the pandemic are the economic difficulties, infrastructure and service provision problems, and educational challenges that have become even bigger priorities compared to previous years. The combination of factors has had profound social and political repercussions, leading to mental health struggles, an increase in domestic violence, and other family issues, as well as increased skepticism about the government, its policies, and the credibility of the upcoming elections.

NDI conducted focus group discussions and key informant interviews in September and October 2020, looking at the challenges and consequences of the pandemic and the overall state of politics in Iraq, with an emphasis on women's political participation and engagement. This was a follow-up to a public opinion research conducted by NDI in 2019, which also focused on the policy concerns and prioritized issues by Iraqis, particularly related to increasing women's participation in politics. Though it is difficult to draw direct comparisons between 2019 and 2020, owing to the circumstances brought on by the pandemic, the priority issues noted by respondents are consistent and demonstrate the deep-seated policy challenges facing the government as well as the long-term concerns of citizens. The stresses and hardships of COVID have made certain issues - such as health care, government assistance, and job opportunities - even more important than they were previously, while also highlighting some issues that were seen as relatively minor in previous years, such as the impact of traditional values on girls.

Economic concerns are paramount and people are turning to their communities for assistance

The economy, job opportunities, and government assistance measures are major concerns for everyone. The already weak job market and struggling economy have been further hampered by the pandemic. People are demanding for an increase in financial assistance from the government until the economy begins to recover. Supplanting traditional infrastructure concerns about water and electrical supply, people are more concerned about the limited availability and poor quality of health services, including the state of hospitals and medical facilities and the costs of medicine and other supplies. Throughout the pandemic, people have noticed the leading role that community groups and civil society organizations have taken in meeting local needs. While there was limited governmental assistance and the costs of necessary provisions, including food, increased, community groups and CSOs began responding to

requests for assistance, and providing much needed supplies, such as masks and sanitizers. Overall, respondents portrayed a situation in Iraq where the government's shortfalls have stocked an increase in frustration and doubts, while community members have stepped in to bridge the gaps and provide much needed support. As Iraqis turn to their families, neighbors, and community members for help, the perception of governmental accountability and competency has weakened.

Iraqis are critical of the government response and skeptical about the state of politics

The government's ineffective response to the pandemic was one of several factors people noted when examining politics generally and the elections specifically. Adding to people's frustrations about lockdown provisions and other pandemic-related restrictions, on-going political corruption was mentioned by many respondents, both as a factor negatively impacting the success of government policies but also as a reason behind many respondents' belief that the elections will be corrupt and not credible. Though the Provincial Councils were disbanded, people have seen few differences in what they felt was already poor government responsiveness; people feel that the government does not pay attention to its citizens, does not respond to their entreaties, and does not meet their needs. This dissatisfaction is even more evident in how people perceive the electoral process. While most respondents expressed an intention to vote, many also noted that they believe the system and process is not credible, that the results could be suspect, and that the government can't be trusted to oversee the process and be accountable.

Education has suffered, particularly impacting girls

There have been tremendous difficulties with online education, limiting its effectiveness, highlighting infrastructure problems, and compounding inequalities between genders, communities, and classes. While people recognize the need for virtual learning and the growth of online options, they feel the quality of education has suffered because teachers do not have the training or preparation for such a role and students do not have the tools and support needed for success. Respondents pointed to the ease of cheating and the difficulties of properly assessing students' grasp of the curriculum and also discussed the long-term negative impacts this could have on a generation of Iraqi students. Girls are particularly affected, as many of them are subject to traditional values that limit their ability to participate in online classes (e.g. they are not allowed to use the video cameras so as not to be seen on camera or they are more subject to online bullying and hazing). This has led to some girls being taken out of classes altogether and others falling behind in their learning. Respondents want a more robust government response to assist the schools and teachers and to make it more possible for families to afford the necessary supplies - including smartphones, laptops, and Internet access - for their children to attend school.

Women's responsibilities have increased and they are held to higher standards

While many respondents felt that men were more impacted by the pandemic in general, all noted that daily burdens and pressures have increased for most women - including maintaining domestic

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responsibilities, assisting with home schooling for their children, and caring for additional family members. Most respondents noted an increase in mental health strain on women and a rise in domestic violence and family strife due to these heightened expectations. While most respondents felt that women should have leadership opportunities, women's political capabilities are held to a higher standard than similarly qualified men. Many respondents feel that for a woman to succeed politically, she needs the endorsement or backing of a major political party. This, combined with the view that was expressed by several respondents that for a woman to be considered seriously as a candidate she has to prove the excellence of her background and experience to a higher degree than men, demonstrates that people hold women to higher standards, even while acknowledging that male politicians/candidates may be less qualified, may not have performed well in their position, or may be believed to be corrupt.

2.

INTRODUCTION

2.1 RESEARCH CONTEXT

Over the past year, Iraq has undergone drastic changes and encountered serious challenges. Starting in October 2019, thousands of Iraqis took to the streets in protest, fueled by frustrations over economic grievances and the government's inability to combat endemic state corruption. Despite the deaths of several hundred citizens, the anti-government protests continued to rock the country for months, eventually leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi. Spring 2020 not only saw new Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi take office but also the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with all of the attendant challenges and complications. The pandemic and the related restrictions hit the country hard, worsening the economic situation, threatening the livelihoods of millions of Iraqis, and exacerbating existing social, economic, and political grievances. Initial analysis shows that Iraqi women have been affected to a disproportionately high degree: they are facing increased risks of violence, their incomes and livelihoods are more affected by prevention measures than those of men, and those in the workforce are more likely to be exposed to the virus due to the types of positions they occupy in healthcare and caretaking roles.^{1,2}

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is currently in the second year of implementing a three-year Government of Canada-funded program to support gender-sensitive local governance in Iraq by elevating women's and girls' interest in the policy-making process and increasing their participation in the political decision-making process. The overall aim of the program is to build inclusive democratic governance in Iraq, enhance the voice of women in responding to citizen needs, and foster a more inclusive government that improves the well-being of women and girls in the country. This is partially achieved through the creation and support of five Women's Advisory Boards (WABs) in the Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salahaddin governorates, where female activists are trained on the skills and knowledge needed to become trusted advisors to local authorities.

WAB members started their work in September 2019 informed in part by findings from public opinion research that NDI and CMC conducted in summer 2019. Shortly after the start of the program, the provincial councils – which had originally been identified as the WABs' main entry point to local government – were dissolved, and the subsequent onset of COVID-19 and the attendant lockdowns and other restrictions further hindered the engagement of women advisors in implementing their local

1 Democracy Works Blog, April 2020: [Impact of Coronavirus on Women in Iraq](#).

2 Oxfam, June 2020: [Gender Analysis of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Iraq](#).

initiatives. This current round of focus group discussions and key informant interviews was conducted to provide women activists with up-to-date information to understand public sentiments about the state of Iraqi politics and the government's performance during the pandemic and to assist them in readjusting the focus and policy priorities of their work to best respond to current needs. As such, this study's aim was not only to explore the impact of the coronavirus and citizens' views on the government response but to reassess citizen needs and local perspectives towards governance to ensure that WABs can provide the most appropriate assistance. A particular focus on the gender dimension of the current situation was prioritized throughout the research to explore if and how the pandemic has exposed or exacerbated existing grievances and challenges faced by women and girls, to identify those, and to explore possible solutions.

2.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To gauge in-depth local views towards the subject matter at hand, this research employed a qualitative approach that built on a series of 16 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 14 key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted in five Iraqi governorates: Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salahaddin. Fieldwork took place between September 30 and October 19, 2020, starting approximately six months after the onset of the pandemic and various mitigation measures and restrictions. To comply with movement restrictions and in order to avoid the risk of spreading the virus, most of the fieldwork was conducted virtually; however, five KIIs and three focus groups were conducted face-to-face due to respondents' preferences. In these cases, strict virus mitigation precautions were adhered to by moderators and respondents.

The discussion and interview guides followed a similar overall structure. Focus groups were held with 'ordinary citizens' of urban communities who were to report on the repercussions, needs, and challenges they faced since the pandemic hit the country. For the KIIs, a mix of non-government local leaders and government officials were recruited and asked to speak on behalf of their community. In total, the research engaged a sample of 97 respondents – 83 citizens who participated in the focus groups, and 14 community leaders as part of the KIIs. See Annex One for demographic characteristics of research participants.

The research is purely qualitative in nature and not statistically representative, which informs the infographics, which are based on individual keyword coding.

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3.1 IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began to rapidly spread in Iraq. In response, the government imposed a lockdown where individuals, businesses, and government offices all began taking measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. According to research participants, the pandemic, as well as the lockdown itself, have brought severe repercussions in all parts of society, changing the social and economic realities of Iraqis. Research participants agreed that the pandemic had an adverse effect on a wide variety of circumstances, including people's employment and financial situation, mental wellbeing, family and social relationships, domestic violence, education, health, and others.

"There are people who depend on daily income, so they were devastated as they couldn't work. The parents were under a lot of pressure, and they directed the pressure and stress towards their children which caused a lot of family issues. I was keen to stay home, but sometimes I had to go out shopping, and it was frustrating that we did not know what to do and how to stay protected."

– Woman, Anbar

"It has affected everyone, starting from a simple daily worker to the prime minister. The virus doesn't differentiate between humans, so everyone can be infected. We couldn't attend our classes at university, and it has impacted our children psychologically."

– Woman, Ninewa

Impact on Job Security and Finances

By far the most discussed impact was on the financial situation, owing to the economic impact of the pandemic. Accordingly, many respondents mentioned unemployment and financial insecurity as a direct consequence of the pandemic, such as this Kurdish male Youth Center Manager and former Provincial Council member in Diyala: *“The main threat is on the economy. The people are on the edge when it comes to the economy, they get more and more uncertain of the financial situation every day.”*

The financial impact did not unfold equally among the whole population. Respondents agreed that the groups facing economic insecurity and the risk of poverty were those who work in the informal sector or private companies, have low-income jobs, depend on daily income, or are small local business owners. In contrast, public servants were somewhat less affected, as they mostly continued to retain their positions and receive their income, even though sometimes delayed.

“It vastly affected people with limited income, and whoever I talk to through organizations, the first thing they mention is how they lost their source of income. People with salaries were maybe affected by 50%, but people with unstable income took a great hit. And some weren’t even able to afford basic protection, they were the most affected ones. The others were mostly affected based on their routines, as they stayed home most of the time, and couldn’t pursue their daily work.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

“A lot of companies lost their projects and closed their offices, so a lot of people lost their jobs. Government employees didn’t face that issue, because they were paid despite closing the government offices.”

– Woman, Kirkuk

“It only had a bad impact on the poor people who depend on daily income because the majority of them got unemployed, as for the rich people, they weren’t that affected.”

– Shabaki Sheikh, Ninewa

“[I]n our community, the government should have taken care of the daily income people. The measures were correct for the rich or middle class, but it was wrong for the poor class. The government should have punished the people who break the protection procedures instead of announcing a curfew.” -

– Woman, Ninewa

Impact on Mental and Physical Health

With government-imposed movement restrictions, most Iraqis had to stay at home and avoid personal interactions as much as possible; consequently most could no longer work. In addition to the economic impact that resulted, the experience of being isolated at home and refraining from the usual social outlets came with a psychological strain for many, such as for this Yezidi woman in Ninewa: *“It was something new for us to stay at home, so we got bored as it was like a jail.”* According to some, the impact on mental well-being even outweighed the sheer economic consequences, as the new reality of men staying home posed significant challenges to Iraqi families, and women in particular, and caused family issues. The common narrative among many respondents was that, while men previously were away from the home for work or recreational activities most of the day, during the lockdown they were confronted with the reality of the domestic responsibilities predominantly managed by women. This caused domestic disagreements and added pressure on women, culminating in a higher divorce rate, a sharp increase in domestic violence, and even in cases of suicide (attempts), and rarely homicide:

“Once you have spent a long time at home, arguments and troubles come up between men and women. We are not accustomed to spending a lot of time together at home, I think this has caused a lot of issues in the community.”

– Male government official, Salahaddin

“Most women are home doing housework, while men are not used to sitting home that much. [...] Men started getting obsessed with certain stuff like cleaning and whatnot, which made way for even more problems. Or to put it more simply, they were obsessively compulsive about things they never cared about before, due to how long they stayed home.”

– Woman, Diyala

“Men are now spending their time at home with a reduced income, which caused domestic violence and suicides. For example, there are a lot of women who burned themselves or hanged themselves.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

“Everything is seeming more negative now. We see family violence getting more and more every day. Murder is becoming more common now, men killing their wives, women killing their husbands, fathers killing their children, and so on. This is because of the current stress and pressure people are under, and because of how negligent the government is towards these issues.”

– Female government employee, Diyala

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Respondents also noted anecdotal evidence of dramatic increases in suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and successful suicides among women. This seems to be due to a combination of several factors, namely the general effect the lockdown had on mental wellbeing, the psychological impact of gender-based violence, and financial concerns over affording basic needs:

“There were several suicide cases in the area. [...] The bad living situation of the poor people is the reason behind their suicides. [...] The majority were females. [...] The unemployment of men led to the creation of family issues between the husband and the wife as the husband spent most of the time at home and couldn’t afford the required materials for the family to live, so that led the women to lose hope and commit suicide.”

– Shabaki Sheikh, Ninewa

“The Iraqi families are suffering from a lack of economic resources, and there are a lot of families who want to commit suicide because they can’t afford the basic life needs for their children.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

Though there was widespread consensus among both genders of research respondents that men were generally impacted to a greater degree overall, a distinction was made between how men and women were affected. During the pandemic, women are generally regarded as carrying a greater psychological burden, firstly because they had to take on new tasks in addition to their traditionally ascribed responsibilities (such as protecting their families during the pandemic, assisting in children’s education, and managing increased domestic responsibilities such as cooking and cleaning for more people) and secondly because they were disproportionately affected by the consequences of family issues and domestic violence. The impact on men was seen most acutely in the changes to their employment status, prospects, and income.

“We live in an eastern society, so the man is responsible for the money, and the woman is responsible for everything else like cooking, teaching, raising kids and cleaning. When all of the family members were stuck at home, the mothers were under a lot of pressure because there were a lot of people to take care of.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

“Women have more responsibilities than men. Men were only stressed because they couldn’t get out of the house, but women had to prepare meals, clean the house, and even maintain the calmness inside the house. See, my husband helped me with the whole mask sewing thing, but that’s a rare case. Most men are addicted to PUBG (an online game), which is a terrible thing, and all that while they just sitting

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home, not worried because they have stable salaries. The men who were vastly impacted were the ones with a limited income. In short, women have been much more tired than men during this pandemic.”

– Woman, Diyala

“Economically, the men were more affected as most of the workers are men. Psychologically, women were more affected as the husband is stuck at home and they can’t go out for entertainment.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

Some respondents also pointed out that certain population groups, such as elderly people and children, were particularly affected:

“Everyone is affected, especially the children as they are the future generation. The majority of the children are stuck at home and aren’t allowed to leave the house which makes them bored. Thus, the family have to play with the kids because otherwise, the children would use the smart devices to watch online videos which has a bad effect on the children and makes them love the loneliness.”

– Woman in Salahaddin

Only some respondents referred to physical health issues when asked about the repercussions caused by the pandemic, suggesting that those are not a priority concern for the participants of this research; however, some respondents reported health grievances caused directly by the virus or by the consequential de-prioritization of other essential procedures:

“The coronavirus affected us physically and psychologically. I am a coronavirus patient and this is my third week in the quarantine, and it has affected me, my health and my unborn baby, and I do not know what is going to happen.”

– Woman, Anbar

“At the beginning, hospitals weren’t taking in patients. My sister has five kidney stones, and despite her having her medicine, we still needed a doctor’s consultation, but they didn’t allow us in. At the same time, there were several intractable cases which led to two deaths in the area, as they weren’t allowed in hospitals either.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

Impact on Public Services

The research also specifically asked about the pandemic's impact on the provision of public services. In this, education was mentioned most frequently, since access to and quality of education was impacted drastically through the closing of schools and universities, despite the attempts to move some classes to the virtual space (see the separate chapter on education). The second most commonly mentioned were health services, referring to an overload of the already few functioning hospitals, as well as a lack of protection items such as sanitizers. Several respondents remarked however that this had mainly been an issue at the beginning of the pandemic but had gradually somewhat improved:

“At the beginning of the pandemic, all Iraqis were worried and scared as our health system is bad and not trustworthy. However, after the launch of the awareness campaigns from social media and YouTube, people have started to change perceptions and to feel better.”

– Woman, Anbar

Respondents reported that a few shops or pharmacies took advantage of the situation and increased prices for basic necessities such as sanitizers, COVID-tests, or masks, such as this female Sunni Arab government official in Diyala:

“There are people who can't afford to do tests or even buy masks, because of how many pharmacies are taking advantage of the situation and raising their prices instead of lowering them to help the people.”

There was a lack of consensus among respondents about the provision of basic services such as electricity and water; while some noted that electricity supply, and occasionally water, had gotten worse during the pandemic, roughly the same number of respondents stated that those services were not impacted abnormally.³ Some respondents remarked that the stability of Internet services decreased, which could be due to the higher traffic caused by citizens staying home or, as several suspected, it was a reflection of the poor state of technological infrastructure in parts of Iraq.

Some respondents expressed that the pandemic brought certain positive effects, affording them the possibility to develop new skills (such as e-learning), spend more time with family, or help in the community. However, one woman from Salahaddin was quick to put this into perspective: *“The negative effects are far more than the positive effects. There might be people who have developed themselves during the quarantine, but the whole planet has been damaged. The economic situation is getting worse, the social life is getting worse, and it has had many other negative side effects. If we want to talk about all of the negative side effects, then we will need more than one discussion meeting.”*

³ With respect to electricity services, it should however be noted that focus group respondents were predominantly from urban areas which likely are less affected by electricity cut-offs than rural areas.

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Looking ahead, many research participants voiced a sense of uncertainty, as they feared that the persistence of the pandemic would cause further deterioration and long-term consequences in various areas, including the economy, the health sector, and social life:

“The winter is near, so the cases will increase while our health sector is still bad, and the economic situation will be getting worse. The future is unknown in Iraq because the government doesn’t have a plan to take care of the pandemic, so Iraq is suffering.”

– Male Mukhtar, Anbar

“The Coronavirus changed everything, to the point that we might need 10-12 years to have 50% of our normal life back. One of the things is the social connections, which will not go back to normal for a long time. Another thing is travelling, and how you’d be afraid to get infected, and that you won’t enjoy your travel due to the anxiety that the fear causes.”

– Male Government Official at Oil Distribution Directorate, Kirkuk

“They say that another wave of the virus might hit the country during winter. And I bet that if this is the case, we will have a lot of difficulties – particularly women, as it is not only about the domestic work, but it is about taking care of the kids as well, and there is also a possibility that women in private sectors would lose their jobs.”

– Woman, Kirkuk.

A female Turkmen activist from Salahaddin expressed particular pessimism regarding the prospects for young people currently in school: *“This will create a desperate and depressed generation.”* In contrast, a few other respondents showed more optimism towards future developments, even though they retain some skepticism about longer-lasting repercussions:

“Every pandemic is a phase and it passes. There were other pandemics or even plagues in the past that have now passed. Sure, there are quite a lot of casualties, but the truth of the matter is, with time, all things heal. Therefore, this pandemic will hopefully pass soon as well.”

– Male government official, Salahaddin

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“As for the Anbar community, people work harder after each crisis, so I think that after this crisis there will be more job opportunities. However, after each crisis, a new social issue arises, so issues like drugs and sexual harassment have appeared after old crises.”

– Male Program Manager at the Ministry of Youth, Anbar

Impact on Social Cohesion

Generally, respondents showed a high degree of personal awareness and knowledge about the coronavirus, but most acknowledged that their communities often treated the infection as a social stigma, especially in the earliest stages. Infected persons were often subject to public shame, discrimination, rejection, or ostracism in their communities. This affected both genders, as neither women nor men were immune to negative perceptions.

“If I were to be infected with the virus, I would have been considered a lawbreaker and somehow a criminal. And this had its effects in making people feel ashamed about the matter.”

– Male government official, Kirkuk

“A person in our neighborhood got infected, so he called the ambulance and they took him for quarantine for 14 days. The issue was that when he came back after getting well, people were angry because they thought that he would infect them, so they were dealing with him like a terrorist, and they still have issues with him, even though it is not his fault.”

– Female community leader, Ninewa

“The infected people wouldn’t say that they are infected in order to stay away from people’s harsh opinions, and the patients would feel ashamed. Some people would get anxious and angry if you tell them that they might be infected because they think that it is a shame mark.”

– Male Mukhtar, Anbar

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“My cousin passed away due to the virus, and I posted that in my Facebook feed to let people know where I’ve been, and to naturally pay respects to him. What surprised me is that I saw his children comment on my post saying that their father died of natural causes, and not due to the virus. Mind you, they’re little children! But they were told that the virus is a shame. So, I called them and told them that I knew their dad before they did, and I know what he died from, the virus is no shame, and it is totally fine. I think that rather than telling our children that this virus is a shame, we should help them understand the virus more so that they could protect themselves better.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

Respondents described several factors that explained the social stigma associated with the coronavirus. One was a lack of awareness and understanding, as the virus was something new to everybody and, due to the resultant uncertainty, fear, and anxiety, perceptions were often impacted by tribal or traditional beliefs. In addition to this, respondents faulted the media for inaccurate coverage of the pandemic, for sharing disinformation, and for advancing negative stigma about infected people. Some also criticized the government for reinforcing fears about the coronavirus through improper management and reporting of infection cases. Infection-related stigma was an issue in the early stages of the pandemic but has lessened as people’s awareness of the virus has increased.

“This virus, especially in Mosul, had a social stigma around it, even though the symptoms and the disease itself had no reason for shame. However, after gaining awareness on the matter and realizing that the virus is much like a heavier version of the flu, people no longer felt ashamed of the disease, and the social stigma slowly disappeared.”

– Man, Ninewa

“I think that many of the media resources kept scaring the people while few others were claiming it was only a lie, then people were just confused and, in the beginning, whoever died for any reason was claimed to have died for Covid-19.”

– Man, Anbar

“The media scared and threatened the public to an extent that people lost their trust and started to see it as a conspiracy, rather than a reality.”

– Man, Kirkuk

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“The Government should be blamed. I remember that once there was a house with a Covid patient: the security surrounded the place and took the patient to the hospital as if he had done something wrong. This was the moment of stigma in the community.”

– Man, Kirkuk

“There was a stigma at the beginning of the pandemic, so the infected people were seen as shamed people, and which enhanced that idea is the way they government buried the dead patients because they were buried outside the governorate. However, that has changed after the awareness increase.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

“A social coldness came with the virus: when someone greets you, and you can’t put your hand out to shake theirs, it would make them jump into conclusions on why you wouldn’t shake their hand. It was especially difficult for me as a department director, because even when I explained to some people how I feared I would infect them, they still didn’t understand, and got upset.”

– Male government official, Salahaddin

Impact on Women

Both men and women played active roles in responding to the pandemic, but respondents expressed that women carried a particularly heavy burden and took on many additional responsibilities. Many pointed out women’s domestic responsibilities, such as housekeeping and the protection of family members, including sanitization and educating children on the risks of the coronavirus, which put women directly into harm’s way; at the same time, women were often seen as very active in community engagement such as the sewing of masks, working as nurses or doctors, and assisting in efforts such as supplying food to those in need. Furthermore, many ascribe women a very active role in increasing awareness of COVID among the population, for example through organizing virtual workshops.

“I’ve seen many organizations and voluntary groups through my work, and I think women were a big part of that. Both men and women worked very hard to overcome this crisis, but it is always women who have the lion share. As a mother, doctor and survivor, it is really not easy for women to take this responsibility but they have been doing really well.”

– Female government official, Diyala

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“Yes, women had a big role in the matter. In Kirkuk, we had big women-led voluntary organizations that helped providing food boxes and whatnot. They also played a big role in making masks and gloves, for free. There were reports and articles about their work, and they had a massive role in addressing Coronavirus.”

– Male government official, Kirkuk

“Women had a big role in the matter. Some women started sewing masks in order to give them to the people who weren’t able to afford them, as we know their prices went up a lot. And yes. I know some organizations, in fact, we worked with some to raise awareness and to provide masks, each in their respective area.”

– Woman, Diyala

“Women had a super active role. We had zoom sessions like this one where we shared information to help each other spread awareness on the virus, not to mention all the women that worked tirelessly in hospitals and volunteered to help raise awareness on the pandemic. In short, women’s role was no smaller than men in addressing COVID-19 challenges.”

– Woman, Kirkuk

“In Anbar, in the different sectors like organizations, governmental and private sectors, women have a big role. For example, the female tailors in Anbar trained people on tailoring masks, and they were producing masks for free. Further, the women had a big role in online campaigns through sharing awareness and motivating people, and they provided oxygen bottles and food for the people in need.”

– Man, Anbar

Participants of the research were aware of several civil society and grassroots organizations that provided relief in response to the pandemic, including some that are women-led. In Salahaddin, a female Turkmen professor and civil activist even specifically refers to NDI’s women advisory boards:

“Yes, in Salahaddin there are two consultancy groups, one of them is related to the National Democratic Institute, and the other one is connected to the council of ministers, and there is an organization called Women Support Organization. The National Democratic Institute held online workshops to teach the people on how to use online education programs. Also, they provided medicine and medical materials required during the pandemic for free in urban areas, rural areas and even at check points. Also, the women groups are going to organize an event about increasing the number of trees in the governorate.”

3.2 EDUCATION

Access to education has suffered during the pandemic

The education system in Iraq already faced significant obstacles prior to the pandemic, beset by several challenges such as political and social instability, the impact of armed conflicts, limited government funding, and inadequate facilities and resources. According to respondents, the education sector was particularly hit hard by the pandemic, posing an additional threat to an already fragile system. As Iraqi authorities issued the closure of all schools at the beginning of the pandemic, and schools remained closed at the time of fieldwork in October 2020, almost six months of schooling had been disrupted. There were attempts to mitigate this by offering remote schooling solutions through the use of virtual classes, but those attempts did not prove to be fully inclusive: while respondents stated that the switch to online alternatives constituted a drastic change for everybody, it became obvious that women and girls, low-income families, and those in tribal, rural areas were affected disproportionately negatively.

“It affected education as a whole. Education in Iraq was going downhill anyway, and the pandemic made it even worse, as schools closed and students went almost a year without proper education.”

– Man, Ninewa

“In the undeveloped communities, parents always look for the opportunity to take girls out of school, I think a crisis like this has accelerated that.”

– Man, Anbar

One motive that was repeatedly mentioned for why some families do not allow their daughters to participate in online classes is the conservative or traditional belief that girls should not show themselves on video, owing to the idea that it is improper and to fears that they could be harassed. This viewpoint was criticized by many respondents, and partly seen as an excuse for parents in rural and underdeveloped areas to take girls out of school permanently. Financial resources are also a significant barrier for poor families because online classes require Internet access and costly devices, such as tablets, laptops, and/or smartphones. Taken together, the myriad of obstacles to girls’ education were amplified by the pandemic, putting girls at risk not only of falling behind educationally but of falling out of the system entirely.

“The economic situation of some families prevents them from being able to provide their children with the necessary tools to participate in online education. Their cultural background also plays a role in that matter, because not all parents understand how essential education is, therefore they won’t let their daughters participate in groups or online classes. We also don’t have a structure to work on when it comes to online education. Most of our students don’t even know how to

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use computers. Thus, this needs to be a lesson for us to educate our children on such matters in order to be prepared for any similar incidents in the future.”

– Female school principal and Social Center Department Manager, Anbar

“We had many girls miss out on the classes, and sometimes even the exams. Because there are many girls who have phones, but their parents don’t allow them to be in groups, talk to their teachers or even talk to their friends. There are some girls who don’t even have phones. Guys, however, took advantage of the situation. Hence, girls were really impacted by this.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

“The Internet is bad in our country, so for example, during the last exams, many of the females didn’t have phones or Internet access, so many of them failed the classes because of that. We tried our best to provide the proper electronic devices for the female students who needed it.”

– Male Mukhtar and employee in the Anbar Ministry of Education

Traditions are the most significant barrier to education for girls and women

The research also investigated the more general factors that limit Iraqi girls’ and women’s access to education, irrespective of the COVID-induced constraints. In this, traditional beliefs and social customs emerged as the most significant barriers to the education of female Iraqis, circumstances which, according to many respondents, have historically been particularly prevalent in communities that can be characterized as rural and tribal. According to respondents, large parts of the – particularly rural – population still hold the firm belief that a woman’s main aspirations in life should be to marry and take care of domestic tasks, whereas higher ambitions regarding education and leadership deviate from the norm, and are consequently considered shameful. This mindset fosters a lack of awareness of the importance of education, while related customs such as child marriages are often ascribed as preventing females from accessing education.

Families’ limited financial resources are ranked as a second factor preventing girls from accessing education. Even though schooling is free in Iraq, families have to pay for indirect costs such as school materials, transportation, and school uniforms. For poor families, these financial obligations not only constitute a general barrier to the education of their children, but in combination with traditional values, these expenditures may be seen as particularly unnecessary for girls, as they are expected to marry at a young age. In addition, other factors that were mentioned as preventing families from sending their daughters to school concerned fears over their security on the way to school, as well as insufficient infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.

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“The main barrier is the traditions. There are families who would take their daughter out of school after finishing sixth grade and force her to get married. Also, the family might not have enough money to pay for educational bills and transport bills. Another factor is security – people would be afraid of their daughter being sexually harassed, so they don’t let them go to school.”

– Female Christian church official, Ninewa

“They believe that the daughter will marry in the end, so she doesn’t need to get education, but the son needs education in order to live, which is a wrong concept. During the pandemic, families were sending their sons to take exams while forcing their daughters to stay at home.”

– Man, Ninewa

“There are some areas where traditions prevent women from getting an education. And there are other areas where the parents send their children to work instead of receiving education because of the bad economic situation and the low income.”

– Shabaki Sheikh, Ninewa

“The first barrier is the tradition, as some parents believe that women will eventually marry and take care of the children, so they wouldn’t need to attend college. The second reason is that the security situation is bad, so the parents are afraid that the children might get raped or kidnapped. Thirdly, the economic situation is bad, so the parents won’t spend money on girls as they are going to marry and leave home after some years. Also, the infrastructure of the education system and schools is horrible, so the quality of education is low.”

– Female professor, Salahaddin

“Right now, the main barriers in less developed areas are the old customs and traditions, and in the more developed areas, the economic situation is the biggest barrier. For girls to have a chance of getting good grades, they need courses and private lessons which cost a lot of money.”

– Male Kurdish youth center manager and former Provincial Council member, Diyala

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“In tribal areas, the man is the one with absolute power, so they force the female to stay at home. [...] I live in the center of Mosul, where it is rare to see such things, but the cases in rural areas are very high.”

– Woman, Anbar

“I have spent most of my childhood and part of my adulthood in the village so it affected my view about life and women in particular. In my village, you could hardly see girls in the schools but only boys because they were prevented by the family. There is still that perception saying ‘why do you send your daughter to school she will marry anyway.’”

– Man, Kirkuk

“We have girls in my school whose parents show more backwardness than anything in the sense that girls have to marry at some point, and if they get married too early, they’d merely be bringing children back to their parents, nothing more. Which means that the parents have done nothing but ruin the girl’s future.”

– Female government official, Diyala

Online education is often seen as a failure

Virtual classrooms as alternatives to in-person classes were widely implemented for students at all levels, including university. Respondents saw online education as an inadequate solution, for several reasons. The appropriateness of using online classes to effectively impart lessons to students was questioned in general. While this is seen as more adequate for secondary school and university students, in particular, there was agreement that it is nearly impossible for elementary school students to learn basics such as the alphabet without direct, in-person interaction with the teacher.

“Despite all our efforts and what we did with online classes, it isn’t good enough for students. Because if they’re not in their actual classes, they won’t learn properly. Some of our students didn’t even attend the online classes due to the stress and frustration that this pandemic has caused them. We also have Internet and electricity issues in our country. Thus, online education will never be successful here.”

– Female government official, Diyala

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“Especially for the new generation that is just getting into school, it isn’t fair for them to have such a bad structure right from the start. We all know that they need their teachers to teach them directly, as learning to read and write through online lessons is a tough task for children. You see, online classes have been a thing for a long time in other countries, but to us, it’s as fresh as a vegetable that’s just been harvested. And we can’t make full use of something that is so new to us”

– Woman, Salahaddin

Respondents also noted the inadequate technological infrastructure in Iraq, stating that institutions were not prepared for the implementation of online classes. Consequently, frequent interruptions of Internet service negatively affected learning quality. Respondents noted the prevalence of technological deficiencies and inequities, a consequence of people having to rely on Internet access and technical infrastructure to a greater degree than ever before. This was noted both for the negative effect it has on the quality of education, as well as its indictment of Iraq’s quality of infrastructure. Another common complaint concerned a lack of instructional rigor and standards, as there appeared to be a tendency to let students pass rather effortlessly, regardless of their command of the material. Solutions such as open book exams, in combination with the lack of supervision online, were seen as invitations to cheat rather than tools to measure knowledge of the material being tested.

“Students and teachers didn’t have enough knowledge of online education. Therefore, they weren’t able to take full advantage of it, and it was executed very poorly.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

“College students faced several issues with their online exams. Internet weakness and connection loss, alongside easy ways to cheat, were two massive problems. And I think it is safe to say that education was the biggest victim of this pandemic.”

– Woman, Diyala

“The Internet services are generally weak, so it has affected the quality of the online education. Also, the online exams aren’t fair as students can cheat or exchange information, so this type of education is obviously wrong and unfitting here.”

– Man, Ninewa

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“There are people who passed without knowing anything. Thus, the education system has been critically affected, for example, the first-grade students haven’t even learnt the whole alphabet and passed nonetheless. Also, there are families who have 5 children, so it is difficult to provide tablets for 5 children.”

– Woman, Ninewa

“Students have passed without studying hard, so the students passed without knowledge. The first grade is the most essential one, so imagine passing the first grade without learning the basic alphabet.”

– Man, Anbar

In addition to the challenges of learning in crowded homes, some also reported that online classes brought additional unforeseen obstacles for girls and women, such as the cultural barrier against being seen on video (which, in one case, was even reported for some female teachers who are not allowed by their husbands to use video). Another barrier was the emergence of online bullying during classes, which disproportionately affected and victimized girls; this not only harms the day-to-day school experience but was also seen as an impetus for removing girls from school.

“A lot of harassment took place via online education by the instructors. Also, the instructor would ask the female student to open the camera to prove that the student is not cheating, but some females weren’t able to do that, while the males wouldn’t face such issues. Also, in Ninewa, several families might live in the same house due to losing their houses in the war, so there might be background noise or the student might not be able to open the camera as there would be a lot of people around the student.”

– Woman, Anbar

Potential improvements to education

Respondents reported that, except for the use of online education, there were few attempts from the government to facilitate access to education for students at large, girls and women in particular. When asked for their recommendations about appropriate improvements, some did not see online education as the ultimate solution and called for the reopening of schools, while others were concerned about the high risk of infection. To avoid this, it was suggested by several respondents to form smaller groups by dividing classes to take place at different times or weekdays, in combination with offering sanitizers and free transportation (to make in-person schooling safer and more affordable). To facilitate online teaching, some suggested the promotion of innovative and interactive software solutions, such as the Newton Platform, or the provision of devices for students. More generally, some also mentioned an overhaul of school curricula, renovation of schools, and the opening of new schools.

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“In my opinion, forcing the youth to go school with a low number of students per class is better than giving them phones which would make them busy with other entertaining stuff.”

– Woman, Ninewa

“In our country, we don’t plan for the crisis, we wait for the crisis to happen, and then we start dealing with it. Thus, the Ministry of Education should have started with online education a long time ago instead of dealing with it when the pandemic hit the country.”

– Man, Anbar

“Many families fear for their daughters, that’s why they don’t allow them to go back to school. The government calls for social distancing, but there is no possible way we can perform social distancing at schools due to the lack of seats, classes, and space.”

– Woman, Kirkuk

“The government made a huge mistake by deciding on online education. As educators, we know that even if the student is right in front of us, most of the times they wouldn’t understand. The government needs to open new schools and provide better accessories for students to benefit from. We need to learn from countries like China, which was the origin of the virus, but you see them now living pretty much normally, and they go to school without any worries. The least the government could do is to provide sanitizers, which they haven’t done.”

– Woman, Kirkuk

“We’ve also provided them with many tools to make their online education experience a lot easier, especially through new programs. Last week we started a training campaign with parents and caretakers on how to use the Newton platform that was provided by the ministry of education, where unlike YouTube, you can ask and answer, and not just watch.”

– Female activist, Salahaddin

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To tackle the underlying barriers of traditional social customs that prevent girls from accessing education, several respondents called for increasing parental responsibility and raising awareness about the importance of education, particularly in rural areas (e.g. through workshops, posters, and social media campaigns). Some, such as this male Sunni Arab government official from Kirkuk, demanded compulsory education for all children as the most efficient solution:

“by making laws and putting rules, even if it’s by using force so that fathers would allow their daughters to learn, and be reassured of the safety of his girl.”

“The majority of the areas in our city depend on traditions to make decisions, so they only allow their daughters to study until sixth grade. Thus, we should create workshops in those areas in order to increase the awareness of people about the importance of girls’ education, and show them that the importance of girls and boys getting education is the same.”

– Male Mukhtar and employee in the Anbar Ministry of Education

“Another thing is raising awareness on the matter. Then maybe mothers would come to schools and say that her daughter wants to get education, but her father wouldn’t allow it. If we get activists involved, they could maybe resolve those types of issues.”

– Female social center department manager and school principal, Anbar

“Raising awareness on the matter and enlightening parents that education is the only weapon against the dark ages of ignorance.”

– Male Kurdish youth center manager and former Provincial Council member, Diyala

3.3 PRIORITY ISSUES AND CRITICAL NEEDS FOR WOMEN

The pandemic has highlighted the significant needs of citizens, exacerbating some that were apparent prior to the onset of COVID-19, while uncovering others that emerged due to the health crisis. Accordingly, many respondents explained their need for more assistance when it comes to the provision of protection items such as masks, sanitizers, and gloves, while others expressed the need for more hospital services and psychological counselling as a relief measure for the detrimental impact on mental well-being. Several respondents also mentioned the need for the provision of food and healthy food items in particular.

“Despite needing food and basic services, people need medicine now as well. People need to be able to protect themselves from the virus, and even that has been made difficult because of how their prices have gone up. So, you see some people that are aware, can’t afford masks or gloves or the medicine necessary to keep themselves safe.”

– Female government official, Diyala

“The needs of the people have changed, and their needs have increased as they have to buy masks and gloves. We are living in a tribal society, so the families used to gather and have fun together each week, but that disappeared after the crisis.”

– Program Manager at the Ministry of Youth

Connected to this, some also demanded an increase in awareness raising campaigns about the virus and the necessary precautions people must take, as parts of the population, reportedly, continue to neglect its seriousness:

“The community needs awareness in order to be more careful about the virus, so people would wear masks and gloves. Also, some people don’t care if they get infected because they don’t have enough awareness to know that they will infect other people. [...] Some men don’t wear masks because they believe that men should not wear it.”

– Man, Ninewa

Finding a stable job with a steady income appears to be one of the most dominant needs among the local population, related to the pandemic-heightened financial instability and unemployment situation. This resembles the findings from the 2019 research,⁴ where jobs and employment were also one of the

4 NDI, *Citizens Demand More Responsive Governance*, 2019.

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most frequently mentioned needs in these governorates. Jobs are seen as a prerequisite for improving overall well-being, particularly for women, who must also juggle domestic responsibilities, such as this Sunni Arab woman in Salahaddin:

“There should be projects to attract the unemployed youth, especially females. We can create workshops and other projects in which we can make use of the youth’s energy.”

Other needs highlighted by respondents included, but were not limited to, education, basic necessities, protection for victims of domestic violence, improved waste management services, and the paving of streets. Whereas security concerns dominated discussions of priority issues in 2019, those have taken on secondary importance in the face of pandemic-related needs.

“There are families who don’t even have the money to buy a piece of bread. The ration is an essential part of the citizens’ daily life, so providing the ration should be the priority currently for the government. Also, these impacts are going to affect the youth.”

– Female social activist and high school principal, Salahaddin

“One great issue we suffer from is ignorance and illiteracy. You see people dropping out of school, or not getting into school in the first place, but rather getting “educated” on the street. We need many things, but most important of all is education.”

– Male government official, Salahaddin

“One of the most pressing issues we have is waste. The city is being polluted, and no one is doing anything about it.”

– Woman, Kirkuk

“The government should provide a center for domestic violence and harassments, and the employees should be females.”

– Woman, Diyala

Women's Policy Priorities

Respondents were asked to assess the most pressing issues facing women in Iraq today. Gender-based violence, child marriages, as well as access to education, women's employment situation, and access to positions of authority and leadership were the most frequently mentioned issues:

Many respondents agreed that women continue to be held back by traditional customs and beliefs, especially in rural areas. These restraints severely limit their freedom in all aspects of life and often make them subject to social judgement:

"Women in our community are always fighting, whether they are fighting their own family or the community that they live in. Nowadays women cannot do anything without thinking of what the community would think of them, especially if she fails at what she's doing."

– Woman, Kirkuk

"There are a lot of people in our communities who prohibit women from enjoying their freedom, and if in the future you need the help of your women, you will notice that she doesn't have skills because she was isolated. Thus, women should be involved in the community."

– Man, Salahaddin

"One of the main issues we have in our society is that a woman's place is supposed to be home in the kitchen and that they shouldn't finish their education but rather marry at a young age. And women who work with men get so much criticism for what they do. People in our community care more about what the woman wears rather than what she's done for society. Women are always the center of criticism."

– Female government official, Diyala

One of the most-cited indicators of the continuously suppressed role of women is the prevalence of acts of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, which continue to be a common grievance among many women, which was emphasized by many of the female research respondents. Some accused the government of negligence in handling this matter and issuing laws that would prevent and solve the issue, despite it being a longstanding problem in Iraq.

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“The biggest issue that women are facing nowadays is sexual assault. And there are no organizations or parties that are taking care of the matter, and even if the criminals are arrested, they would only be in jail for a short while and then they are released after that. If the criminals are either hanged or sentenced for life, other ones would get afraid and not commit that crime anymore. In some cases, when women are raped or sexually harassed, their fathers, brothers, and husbands would kill them for their honor rather than standing by their side.”

– Woman, Kirkuk

Particularly vulnerable to domestic violence are girls who are married at an early age, which is another significant issue that still exists according to respondents (see findings above). Owing to a mixture of traditional doctrines and financial necessities, child marriages are seen as having a dramatic impact on the lives of girls and women, as it takes away their freedom and limits options, and effectively prevents women from accessing education and employment.

“The biggest issue is child marriage, but that does not apply everywhere, some families don’t even let their daughters marry until they finish university. However, in tribal communities, many families drop their daughters out of school at a young age and force them to marry. Also, a cousin might not allow a girl to marry because he likes her, so she should be his wife, and if she refuses, she is not allowed to marry anyone else.”

– Man, Diyala

“It is still a huge issue; you know that many refer to Islamic doctrines for that. There are still many families who encourage women to marry at a very early age, and this is a huge issue as it closes all opportunities for the women to access. She cannot finish her education, she cannot achieve her dreams, and she cannot enjoy her childhood.”

– Woman, Kirkuk

“Child marriage is a big issue. The families force their daughters to marry at the age of 13 to 16 years. The husband might divorce the young wife because she was just a child and couldn’t reach the expectations of the husband. The community has a bad view on divorced women which makes their lives difficult. [...] The first reason is the tradition, and the other reason is that when a rich man proposes for marriage, the young girl’s family would accept in order to get money because they see the young girl as a commodity.”

– Woman, Ninewa

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“The lack of awareness of the families, for example, the families don’t care about their daughters and don’t observe them. [...] Imagine that there is a child forced to marry a man while she is still playing with her toys. I guess most of you heard about the recent story of the mother dropping her kids into the river in Iraq in revenge to the husband who married another woman, these are outcomes of early marriage.”

– Woman, Anbar

In addition to girls’ and women’s often still-limited access to education (see separate chapter), many respondents reported that there are significant challenges for women to participate in the labor market. This is mainly driven by the fact that many women are denied the right to work by their husbands, but in addition, respondents noted that many companies do not have suitable positions for women or discriminate against women. Other than accessing regular jobs, women further continue to face barriers in accessing positions of authority and leadership.

“Many women aren’t respected nor appreciated within their household, and sometimes their husbands would not allow them to work. [...] They think that women are only supposed to stay inside the house, to clean, cook, and act like slaves, and that only men are allowed to work.”

– Woman, Kirkuk

“I would say, it has to do with the lack of job opportunities. [...] There is a lot of discrimination in that aspect, and there are still many women who are prevented by their family to work. If you survey this, you can see that 80 percent of employees in the private sectors are men and at the same time, women are not allowed to do any jobs.”

– Man, Anbar

“Women can’t reach high positions like government managers, university directors or any other high positions, and this is a great issue. If women would be able to reach high governmental positions though, they would be able to help solve women’s issues.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

3.4 VIEWS ON GOVERNMENT

Iraqis are critical of what they see as an inadequate COVID-19 response

When Iraq recorded its first case of COVID-19 in February 2020, the country was already facing a combination of challenges and crises, including the anti-government demonstrations that started in late 2019 protesting the lack of basic public services and economic opportunities, the collapse of oil prices that affected Iraq's oil revenues and economy, and the escalating tensions between Iran and the US on Iraqi soil. All these issues have had an impact on the political, economic, and social sectors. With the rapid spread of COVID-19, the situation in Iraq worsened, despite government measures to limit the spread of the virus, such as closing borders, imposing travel restrictions, closing schools and universities, and mandating a nationwide lockdown and curfew, introduced on March 22, 2020.

For the purpose of this research study, respondents were asked about their opinion on the measures taken by the government to limit the spread of the pandemic. Almost all respondents throughout the different governorates reported that they were not satisfied with government efforts in containing the virus and that the measures taken were not adequate to meet the threat. Respondents confirmed that these measures had an additional negative impact on them, as the government couldn't provide support to alleviate the negative effects of the lockdown, especially as the majority of Iraqis have had no stable income to provide basic needs for their families.

“The majority of Iraqis depend on daily income, and the government measures have been very poor, so they didn't even give the nutrition ration. Also, the government was not paying its public employees, but at the same time it was asking the citizens to pay high water and electricity bills, and the people who didn't wear the protective products were being fined 100,000 or 200,000 IQD. Thus, the measures were bad, and people started to be affected negatively by those measures.”

– Man, Diyala

“The curfew decreased the number of cases in the city, but the issue is that the citizens weren't following the rules. In my opinion, if the people kept on obeying the rules, the cases would have been even less. The current situation is getting worse as people are not using the protection methods which are wearing masks and gloves.”

– Woman, Diyala

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In addition, focus group respondents argued that while some measures, such as the lockdown, helped to decrease the number of cases of infected people in the country, the government did not do enough to support people who lost their jobs. They were also seen as having failed in raising awareness of the danger of the virus, and how to protect themselves and their families. The respondents further pointed out that they were already suffering from a lack of or poor quality health services. Given the fact that the government was aware of this weakness, they argued that taking serious measures quickly, as well as investing in increasing people's awareness about the virus could have helped them to avoid the spread of the virus to the extent currently impacting residents.

“The government should have been responsible for containing the virus, but they haven't done anything. The citizens don't have enough awareness about the virus, and they think that it is the same as influenza, so they don't follow the protection rules. Thus, the government should have increased the awareness of the citizens. Also, the government doesn't provide proper health support for the community. For example, an infected old man lost consciousness several days ago, so they called the ambulance, but they refused to send an ambulance which is a disaster.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

“The government has low capabilities in Iraq generally, and it is even weaker in Mosul as the health services are bad, and the corona tests aren't even available. Also, there aren't any health stations for infected people, and the people who get infected, they stay at home until they get better.”

– Woman, Ninewa

“The government didn't provide proper support. The support they provided was not enough. They should have provided medicine for the patients. Also, when the virus started to spread, they should have prevented non-citizens from entering the country. Also, they should have provided oxygen devices before the crisis started. The health centers did not provide enough tests, so patients would leave the hospital without taking a test. Also, instead of building hospitals, the government used hotels as quarantine rooms for infected people which is not acceptable. And, there were infected patients sleeping in the gardens because they didn't have anywhere to go to. The government is responsible for half of the issue, and the people are responsible for the other half.”

– Female representative of the Christian community, Ninewa

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People turn to community assistance when government response fails

Respondents were also asked about their views on the role of civil society organizations and community members during the pandemic. All respondents, regardless of governorate, reported that community members and civil society organizations played a crucial role during the pandemic. The solidarity between people and the engagement of CSOs helped to support many Iraqis by raising awareness, providing food, masks, oxygen bottles, and other supplies, and providing necessary financial assistance in some cases. The comments suggest that respondents were more satisfied with civil society actions than with the government's response to the pandemic.

“The role of civil communities was very important. Also, I know a lot of women’s groups who were providing free masks. There were many civil activists, volunteers and organizations who gathered donations to provide food for the people in need.”

– Man, Anbar

“Civil society organizations worked a lot during the pandemic and are still doing so. Whether it was raising awareness, providing supplies, or just helping people mentally. I saw civil society organizations far more than I saw the local government...”

– Woman, Diyala

“Civil organizations are more engaged with the people than government agencies, as they’re a part of them, and people listen to them more. People don’t trust the government, and their response to the pandemic was somewhat weak. Thus, people would automatically lean towards their own civil organizations.”

– Male Manager at Pensions Directorate, Kirkuk

“In Anbar, the youth have created events and activities for the sake of facing the pandemic. One of the campaigns was about making masks and distributing it for free. Also, the civil activists have worked hard to provide oxygen bottles for the people in need for free. Also, there were campaigns to help the people who have lost their jobs and daily incomes by providing them food, and the youth have even started campaigns to increase awareness about the virus.”

– Man, Anbar

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“The rich citizens, religious figures and organizations were responsible for providing help during the pandemic while the government was watching. The government has not provided suitable support for the students which has a bad impact on the quality of the education.”

– Woman, Ninewa

“The youth of the neighborhood worked together to clean and sanitize the neighborhood. Also, as for the economic situation, they gathered money and provided food for the people in need. Also, they helped with cleaning and sanitizing schools and governmental buildings.”

– Woman, Ninewa

Trust in Government is Low

In order to understand the extent to which Iraqis interact with and trust the government (at a national and local level), and its capacity to provide basic services and meet their needs, the respondents were asked about their interactions with their local government representatives as well as their responsiveness to requests.

Overall, the majority of respondents reported that when they need assistance, the first people they turn to are friends, family, and influential connections within the government (*wasta*). However, responses to this question differ between governorates, and from one person to another, depending on their background and roles in society. The majority of respondents who do not work in government institutions, or are not active with civil society organizations, generally don't interact with government representatives as they don't need them or don't know how to reach them. In select cases, such as when legal documents are needed, they normally try to reach out to a family member or friend working with the government (*wasta*) to help them solve their problems; however, if a person does not have those connections, their options for assistance are limited. Young respondents⁵ from Anbar and Kirkuk highlighted the role of social media platforms in reaching out to government representatives during the pandemic. As it is difficult to receive any answer from the government representatives in their governorates, social media and the reach of influencers played an important role in raising their voices and requesting assistance regarding their needs.

“During the last period, as an Anbar citizen, I don't have the power or ability to reach the people who are in a high position to tell them our needs. Thus, we seek the help of organizations and social media influencers in order to reach high ranking officials. For example, when we knew that the recovered patients can donate their plasma, we volunteered to find donors to the patients who are in a critical situation, but the government didn't help us, so we had to depend on ourselves.”

– Man, Anbar

5 Respondents between 20-30 years old

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However, respondents who are serving as volunteers, or are active with CSOs or community groups, reported that their interaction with the government had increased throughout the pandemic, as they needed to coordinate with local government representatives to be able to distribute food, masks, conduct awareness-raising activities, and provide basic needs to their community members.

“There are more interactions from both genders with the local government ever since the outbreak. The majority of people hold themselves responsible for the protection of their communities, and the government has taken advantage of this and there is more cooperation between the youth and the authorities.”

– Male government official, Kirkuk

Respondents confirmed that government representatives for the most part do not act upon requests or meet people’s needs. People noted the role and utility of neighborhood representatives and informal leaders (such as tribal elders, relatives, and religious figures) as helpful in dealing with pandemic-related needs, and they noted that they are more likely to approach this set of representatives, rather than government officials (e.g. mayors, MPs, governors) if they want a solution to a social or economic issue.

“Generally, the government of Ninewa is not responsive and their performance is below medium. For example, we have been having public services issues, and the government isn’t responding and isn’t solving them.”

– Woman, Ninewa

“The provincial councils were supposed to be a link between the people and the government, but they weren’t. The only link between citizens and the government is the governor, and it’s impossible to reach him because there are corrupted employees in every government agency.”

- Man, Kirkuk

“Institutions aren’t for regular people, unfortunately. If the person doesn’t have Wasta, they won’t help them. There are times where the person puts all his effort into asking for their rights, and won’t even feel good about getting his work done after consuming all his energy trying to accomplish his work.”

– Woman, manager in Education Directorate and school principal, Diyala

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“There are no responses whatsoever. I made many requests for people with cancer whose conditions were critical, but they would see the appeals and ignore them. However, the civil society had a much bigger role in responding to us.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

“We get no response from the government. Most responses are from civil organizations and teams that gathered donations and held charities. As for the government, they did nothing at all.”

– Man, Salahaddin

Minorities such as Yezidi women feel that the government does not provide any support for them, especially as they suffered dramatically during and after the ISIS occupation. Years after the liberation, they still think that the Iraqi government is not helping them to find solutions for their social and economic problems.

“As Yezidis, we have lost our houses and villages, and the government hasn’t helped us. Also, there are a lot of our family members who are still missing, so the government should search for them.”

– Woman, Nineveh

“In Sinjar, the houses are destroyed and women are kidnapped, but the government isn’t doing anything. We have been displaced for six years, and the government isn’t doing anything.”

– Yezidi woman, Ninewa

In Anbar, the views on the responsiveness of the government were divided. While the majority of female respondents expressed very positive views on local government responsiveness, confirming that the local government is responding to their demands and is supportive and helpful. The male respondents from Anbar had the opposite opinion and confirmed that their local government is not responsive and does not listen to their demands.

“The local government has a big role as it listens to our suggestions and ideas, and they make our voices reach higher positions. Also, they have data of school students, widows and divorced women in order to support them with the help of the civil community.”

– Woman, Anbar

FINDINGS

“Local government representatives are responsive, when I visit them, then they would give me allowances, and whenever I do workshops at camps, the local government would provide security coverage.”

– Woman, Anbar

“Generally, the government of Anbar is not responsive and their performance is below medium. For example, we have been having public services issues, and the government isn’t responding and isn’t solving them.”

– Man, Anbar

While some local government representatives in select governorates are seen as responsive to people’s needs and complaints (e.g. Anbar), the majority of focus group respondents reported that in their governorates, the local government representatives do not listen to them and ignore their complaints. The inadequate quality of basic services, poor economic and infrastructure conditions, and the bad management of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that the social contract between the Iraqi government and its people yet again failed to meet their expectations, which has fueled growing mistrust, discontent and frustrations with the government.

Asking research participants specifically about their experiences of interacting with different government representatives revealed that the degree and quality of interaction is generally very low; the majority have never interacted with representatives such as the mayor, governor, Council of Representatives (CoR) representative, or members of provincial councils (before their disbanding). While some respondents mentioned that they had interactions about different issues (such as asking for a legal document, provision of support to the community during the pandemic, or asking for basic services such as water, electricity, and infrastructure), the overall notion was that this very rarely resulted in actual results from the government representatives. Only in a few cases did respondents report positive responses as a result of their interaction.

“I once met a member from the provincial council, and talked about issues, for example we told him about what the students need to walk in a swamp to reach the university, but he just said yes and ignored us.”

– Woman, Ninewa

“The parliament and the provincial councils are corrupt circles. There are social welfare ranks, and the governorate council are responsible for assigning them which means that they will only give it to the people who would vote for them.”

– Woman, Ninewa

FINDINGS

“Before the outbreak, I interacted with the mayor because I needed permission to carry out surveys in some residential areas, which required me to visit some houses and some certain areas to ask questions. Hence, the mayor made this easier for me.”

– Woman, Salahaddin

The majority of the participants reported that the disbanding of the provincial council did not make any difference to them, as they had never had an important role in the first place, with many respondents criticizing the resources and money wasted by the provincial councils (PCs). Furthermore, many of their members were seen as ineffectual and corrupt, with respondents noting that some PC officials tried to wield political power or raise their profile in the community but got involved in the wrong issues, often exacerbating corruption.

“We haven’t noticed that as they didn’t have any impact or effect on the community or governorate. To be honest, we haven’t noticed their absence as they haven’t done anything to help the community.”

– Man, Diyala

“The provincial councils never had a role. They had no power at all, even the head of the council had no power, all he did was sign finished paperwork. So, no matter what the problem was, even if you reached him, he would listen to you, but do nothing, because he could do nothing. The entire council didn’t have the power to decide on anything.”

– Man, Ninewa

“The provincial council is an example of sectarianism... The people in the provincial councils are related to political parties, so they work to benefit those parties not to benefit the city. The politicians who talk about corruption are the ones who don’t get their share from the stolen money.”

– Man, Ninewa

“To be honest, they have done a lot, but they have done a lot for their relatives, not for the citizens.”

– Man, Ninewa

FINDINGS

“The decision of disbanding them was right as they were busier with personal stuff than public issues.”

– Man, Salahaddin

“They [the government] are the ones that should be listening to the concerns of the people, because no matter how hard the people try, their voices will never reach them. Even if you can reach the government and display your concerns to them, they would nod their heads to you but then do nothing.”

– Man, Ninewa

3.5 THE ELECTIONS AND VOTING

Iraqis may participate in elections but are skeptical about credibility

Many respondents stated that they will participate in the election process and vote; however, not many people expressed trust that the elections would be credible or that they were enthusiastic to vote. Some consider elections to be an opportunity for people to raise their voices and give more opportunities for people who deserve to be representing them. People pointed to past problems with election administration and fraud and noted that politicians are untrustworthy, so the systems they oversee consequently cannot be trusted. A considerable portion of the respondents reported that they will only vote under the condition of having more transparency in the process and new candidates nominated in their governorates, as they don't trust the existing politicians. Other respondents asked for a new electoral law that would allow voters to choose individual candidates rather than existing party lists. Several respondents stated that election credibility would be improved if international observers - from the US, EU, or UN - came in to either observe or administer the process; the belief that Iraqi officials and politicians are corrupt was behind many respondents' opinions, leading to the belief that some sort of outside accountability would be necessary. A small number of the focus group participants reported that they will not vote, due to what they perceive to be a corrupt system and their lack of hope that the situation in Iraq will change, indications of potential apathy among the electorate. One sentiment expressed was that with little progress seen to date, what reason would people have to vote for the same people again?

“Yes, we would vote if there are new candidates who are educated with high capabilities who can serve the country, but if the candidates are the same old faces, then we will not vote.”

– Man, Diyala

FINDINGS

"I will definitely vote so that my vote doesn't burn and go to someone else."

– Woman, Diyala

"They're all the same faces as before, no one is new. It's basically the remastered version of the previous elections. If the whole ruling system doesn't change, there would be no improvements on a country level. No matter who you vote for in a party, they all take orders from the party leader. So even if you like someone in a certain party, you're not voting for him, but rather giving your vote to the party leader as they're the ones who make all the decisions."

– Man, Salahaddin

"...the previous elections, there were some people whose names I won't mention, who claimed they would work for the benefits of Mosul, and that they would serve the city. And some people voted for them merely based on those things, and that they were from Mosul. After the elections, those candidates disappeared and were nowhere to be found. I honestly think this whole election thing is a joke, and I am staying as far away as possible from it."

– Man, Ninewa

Several statements during focus group discussions indicated that there may be problems with disinformation surrounding elections, voting, and politics in general. Though more research and analysis of this would be needed, it appeared to be a budding issue that could expand over time if not addressed. For instance, in some groups, respondents made statements casting blame about "what China did" or expressed that the virus only impacted Iraq after it came in from Iran - statements not backed up by facts. Others noted the belief that election results were predetermined, making actual choice moot. This is an increasingly complicated issue globally and could be exacerbated as elections approach and people spend more time online, potentially receiving news from unverified sources.

"It doesn't matter if you vote or not, the process has already been determined, and the results are clear. And this time around, the elections will be regional. Which means that each region will choose the people they want to elect respectively with their city, and you can only vote for them, or so I've heard."

– Woman, Diyala

FINDINGS

"I have voted in all the previous elections. However, I've realized that they're but lies and fabrications, and the people going through have already been determined. Thus, I have decided not to vote this time around...I honestly think this whole election is a joke, and I am staying as far away as possible from it."

– Man, Ninewa

While discussing the elections and political participation of the citizens in Iraq, the respondents were asked their opinion about women in leadership positions, and whether they are willing to vote for women to represent them in the parliament. Almost every respondent, both male and female, confirmed that they would vote for a woman if she had the necessary qualifications, including: a high level of education, honesty, and relevant professional or political experience. The female respondents, in particular, argued that having a woman in decision-making positions would affect their lives, as they would advocate for more rights and equality for women in society and could be a good role model for future generations. However, though most respondents felt positive about the fact that women are capable of being leaders and should be considered viable candidates, they had less confidence that women would actually be able to win office.

"Yes, I would vote for female candidates, because women have more awareness about the issues related to women, and also, we would like to support women in leadership positions."

– Woman, Diyala

"We don't care about the gender of the candidate, so we vote for the suitable experienced candidate who can serve the city. For example, most of my family voted for Khaled Al-Obaidi, but then he disappeared. Half of the community are female, so half of the MPs should be women too."

– Man, Ninewa

"...as far as I know, women understand the needs of the public very well, there shouldn't be any differences between men and women. Both should be provided with the opportunity to represent the community."

– Man, Anbar

"No matter what we do to improve the capabilities of women candidates and change the ideology of the community, they wouldn't have success without the help of a big political party. We have seen female managers who have done more achievements than the female MPs. Thus, in order for women to succeed, they need the help of a political party."

– Man, Diyala

FINDINGS

In addition, respondents agreed that gender is not a criterion for them to choose for whom they should vote. However, it is worth mentioning that the majority of research participants have a high level of education, or are part of civil society organizations, which doesn't represent Iraqi society as a whole. This was confirmed by the respondents when they were asked about their opinion about their community members, and whether they think that people, especially men, in their communities would vote for a woman. Many respondents said that it will be difficult for men in their communities to accept the idea of a woman representing them, and this is linked to their local culture, traditions and mindset.

“To be honest, men in my community people will not vote for a woman, but the educated people would vote for a woman. The issue is that the candidate should get tribal support in order to be able to join the elections. According to what I heard, the majority wouldn't vote for a woman, and even the women themselves wouldn't vote for a woman.”

– Man, Anbar

4.

FINDINGS COMPARISON 2019 TO 2020

Though it is difficult to draw direct comparisons between 2019 and 2020, owing to the dramatically different circumstances brought on by the pandemic, the priority issues noted by respondents were similar in both years, though for different reasons. The stresses and hardships of COVID have exacerbated certain issues and needs for people - such as health care, government assistance, and job opportunities - while also exposing some issues that might have seemed relatively minor or marginal in previous years, such as the impact of traditional values on girls. Below are some key similarities and differences in public opinion trends from 2019 through 2020.

Economy and Job Opportunities

As in 2019, people still noted the economy and job opportunities as primary concerns. However, while people were worried about employment and income in both years, the reasons are different. The weak job market and struggling economy of 2019 was exacerbated by pandemic repercussions. So people are worried about job opportunities in both the short-term (needing immediate relief) and long-term (wanting a sustained economic recovery), and they are worried about overall economic health. Most 2020 respondents noted the need for increased financial assistance from the government to help people get through the pandemic period until some degree of normalcy resumes. Many respondents also noted the need for ration cards to be administered better or reinstated in order to provide necessary assistance.

Infrastructure and Services

Concerns about infrastructure and services in 2020 are focused on the availability and quality of health services, including the status of hospitals and medical facilities, the qualifications of medical personnel, and the costs of medicine and other care. Respondents mentioned the reliability of electricity and water supply, but it was not discussed as a major issue; however, trash collection and basic cleaning and maintenance were mentioned as areas that are lacking and causing problems.

Corruption and Political Skepticism

As in 2019, corruption was mentioned by many respondents, both in terms of how they perceived the value and performance of the provincial councils and also how they perceive the upcoming elections and the electoral process overall. Many respondents registered their belief that the elections process is corrupt and the elections will not be credible. Corruption was also mentioned as impacting the slate of candidates who will stand for election, with some respondents even expressing the belief that the results of the election will be determined ahead of time (this was listed as a reason why some respondents won't vote).

The 2019 research noted that there was “increased resentment toward the political elite [that] could widen the divide between politicians and citizens.” Resentment was not expressed in the same way by the 2020 respondents, but there is nevertheless simmering dissatisfaction and an undercurrent of suspicion about politicians and the political process in general. As noted above, many people expressed a belief that the elections will be corrupted and not credible, or that the results will be suspect. Though there weren't questions about where people get their news and information, or how people assess the accuracy of the information they take in, based on some responses it seems as if mis- or disinformation could play a major factor in upcoming elections. People cited fixed or pre-determined election results without indicating any proof, or they cited theories about vote theft without any evidence, indicating that there is at least some level of inaccurate or inflammatory information being circulated, possibly online. Given the increased amount of time that people are spending online and using social media platforms during the pandemic, there could be an expanded audience of vulnerable people who could be exploited with poor information.

Because the provincial councils were disbanded, the research findings about peoples' perceptions of the PCs and their performance is not directly relatable. However, the frustration and low levels of public trust that were shown toward PCs in the 2019 research were still evident in 2020. Regarding the PCs, respondents stated that they didn't see any difference with the PCs being gone because they didn't do anything to help people. Some respondents went so far as to say that it is good that the PCs were disbanded because the money spent on them would no longer be wasted and could be put to use elsewhere. The negative feelings about the PCs were reiterated when respondents discussed government in general; many respondents noted that they did not feel the government paid attention to, responded to, or met citizen's needs. Several respondents replied with a similar sentiment: that you might be able to meet with a provincial or governmental official who would ostensibly listen to you and perhaps agree with you and promise to do something, but that there was never any action that resulted.

As noted in 2019 “non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have moved to serve as a stopgap in the researched communities, and have built a positive reputation. Participants during in-depth interviews mentioned the positive impact of assistance delivery by some local NGOs.” The 2020 research showed similar responses regarding NGOs and the impact of community-led efforts, particularly in responding to pandemic-related needs. The government was/is seen as slow to respond with assistance, leaving many community members struggling. But NGOs and less formal community-led groups/efforts were noted by most respondents as having provided essential services and support, including making and distributing masks and sanitation supplies, teaching women and young people skills such as mask-making to allow more people to assist in support efforts, collecting food and essential supplies to give to families in need, and teaching online classes or providing online assistance for community members.

Status of Women and Girls

The 2019 research showed that respondents of both genders felt that women were not given opportunities “to adequately represent themselves in the public sphere” and that a major barrier to women being accepted in leadership roles was the traditional views of Iraqi men. In 2020, tradition is still cited as a barrier, but the perception of women’s political and leadership capabilities is colored by other views as well, including that for women to succeed politically, they need the endorsement or imprimatur of a political party or major political figure. This, combined with the view that was expressed by several respondents that for a woman to be considered seriously as a candidate she has to demonstrate the excellence of her background and experience to a higher degree than men, demonstrates that people might ostensibly be open to women in political or leadership roles but they want some sort of guarantee. They hold women to higher standards of proof, so to speak, to ensure that they can do the job, even while acknowledging that male politicians/candidates may be less qualified, may not have performed well in their position, or may be believed to be corrupt.

The restrictions and limitations on women expressed in 2019, as well as the street harassment and bullying that was noted to be directed against women, was also mentioned in 2020 responses, though COVID has acted as an accelerant to some of the issues. For instance, the burden of home duties has increased for most women since the pandemic began - including in maintaining domestic responsibilities, assisting with home schooling for their children, and caring for additional family members - while at the same time the pressure on them has increased due to heightened expectations. Most respondents noted the mental health strain on women, increases in domestic violence and family strife, and noted an (anecdotal) increase in divorces.

Traditional values and culture came up often in 2020, coloring the perceptions of the pandemic’s effects on men and women, the impact on education and other sectors, and the impact on children, especially girls. As seen below, the negative impact of online education on girls was cited repeatedly as something exacerbated by traditional values and cultural norms, such as child marriage, denying education to girls, and prohibiting the use of technology for girls. While issues like child marriage were mentioned in 2019, they weren’t top-of-mind issues, most likely owing to the unique circumstances of the current pandemic. However, people in both years acknowledged that certain traditional values have a disproportionately negative impact on girls, limiting their options for the future, determining their marital and educational fates, and denying education to a population that should have guaranteed access to schooling.

Ethno-Sectarian Relations

There was not much discussion in the 2020 FGDs and KIs about ethno-sectarian relations (partly because it was not an explicit line of questioning), but based on some tangential comments from respondents, it could be worth monitoring the sense of social cohesion and improved ethno-sectarian relations during the coming year. Some responses indicated strain in relations, not necessarily having to do with overt ethnic or sectarian tensions but having to do with resentment or frustration in comparing how some governorates are responding to COVID and people’s needs versus how other governorates are responding. Some regions are perceived to have managed the pandemic better or to be suffering less, whether that has to do with the government response (lockdowns and curfews vs. other restriction

measures), the state of development and infrastructure in different areas (with some areas having not-yet-refurbished health facilities, schools, and other services due to destruction during the conflict), and/or the relative wealth of some areas (with respondents noting that schools in cities like Erbil are better prepared for online education and are working with students who have more resources). Should inequalities continue to be exacerbated by the pandemic, and depending on how long pandemic-related restrictions continue and the pace at which the economy and job market recovers, these frustrations and resentments could grow and become problematic. They might be worth focusing on if future research projects are undertaken in order to assess developments and to highlight policy needs for political parties and legislatures.

5.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Open up government's communication channels with citizens to restore trust

The lack of responsiveness from the government, frustration with false or unfulfilled promises, and the lack of basic services and job opportunities continue to be significant barriers between the Iraqi government and citizens. The impact of the pandemic made the situation more challenging, which requires more effort from the government than ever to communicate with citizens and respond to their demands through the provision of services. Among others, Iraqis urge their government to provide more economic and financial support for those who lost their jobs during the pandemic due to the lockdown. Moreover, citizens demand better health services, as well as more hospitals to guarantee equal access to health services.

Focus on facilitating access to and quality of education

The pandemic led to a severe deterioration in access to and quality of education. Assistance is needed universally but particularly among girls and women, poor families, those in rural areas, and other marginalized groups, for example through the use of innovative technologies and by increasing awareness on the importance of education for girls'. Activating the Compulsory Education Law would also help to address the rampant decrease in dropout rates and support the increase in re-enrollment rates, particularly for young girls. Additional legislative and public outreach efforts to prevent and prohibit early marriage would also serve as a deterrent to stop families from taking young girls out of school.

Prioritize assistance to women

A great number of Iraqi women and girls experience trauma from gender-based violence, domestic violence, or child marriages, or have suffered from a worsening of their psychological well-being during the pandemic. To address this, the Council of Representatives should pass the Anti-Domestic Violence Law, which was originally introduced in 2015 to address the increase in gender-based violence. In addition, safe spaces, such as protection and rehabilitation centers for survivors of gender-based violence, can help to protect those women and offer the psychological support needed.

Support and promote women's leadership

More support for women is needed to enable them to participate in the political process. The majority of the research respondents argued that women need support at different levels, starting with the family and community members to change the dominant mindsets and influence a culture that has traditionally oppressed women and locked them out of leadership positions. Women need more opportunities to build their skills and expertise, access good quality education, and be part of the public political and economic sphere.

Enact reforms and increase transparency for credible elections

Besides the effort that should be made to raise people's awareness about the importance of participation in elections, new candidates (especially women) should be encouraged to engage in local governance and ultimately run for office to diversify options beyond the traditional elite. More reforms are required by the public in order to guarantee a credible process, which will contribute to building trust between the politicians and the citizens. Non-partisan or international election observation efforts should be considered to increase public trust in the reliability and trustworthiness of the process and results.

Promote awareness on the nature and danger of the coronavirus

Despite positive developments in how the coronavirus is perceived among the population, more awareness needs to be created to guarantee that protection measures are understood and supported, to avoid social stigmatization, and to maintain vigilance until a vaccine or other mitigation tools are available. This requires government support to community groups, CSOs, and others working at the community level to provide assistance.

ANNEX

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

FGD #	Location	Residence Type	Gender	Age	Urban/Rural	Ethnicity/Religion	Education
1	Diyala	Not displaced or returnee	Female	20-30	Urban	Sunni Arab	Intermediate and upwards
2	Diyala	Not displaced or returnee	Female	40-60	Urban	Sunni Arab	Primary to secondary
3	Diyala	Not displaced or returnee	Male	30-45	Urban	Sunni Arab	Primary to Secondary
4	Ninewa	Not displaced or returnee	Female	40-60	Urban	Sunni Arab	Intermediate and upwards
5	Ninewa	Not displaced or returnee	Female	25-40	Urban/Rural	Yezidi	Primary to secondary
6	Ninewa	Not displaced or returnee	Male	20-30	Urban	Sunni Arab	Primary to Secondary
7	Ninewa	Not displaced or returnee	Male	30-45	Urban	Sunni Arab	Intermediate and upwards
8	Anbar	Not displaced or returnee	Female	30-45	Urban	Sunni Arab	Intermediate and upwards
9	Anbar	Not displaced or returnee	Male	30-45	Urban	Sunni Arab	Primary to secondary
10	Anbar	Not displaced or returnee	Male	20-30	Urban	Sunni Arab	Intermediate and upwards
11	Salahaddin	Not displaced or returnee	Female	20-30	Urban	Sunni Arab	Primary to secondary
12	Salahaddin	Not displaced or returnee	Male	20-30	Urban	Sunni Arab	Intermediate and upwards

ANNEX: SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

13	Salahaddin	Not displaced or returnee	Female	40-60	Urban	Sunni Arab	Intermediate and upwards
14	Kirkuk	Not displaced or returnee	Female	20-30	Urban	Sunni Arab	Intermediate and upwards
15	Kirkuk	Not displaced or returnee	Female	30-45	Urban	Kurd	Intermediate and upwards
16	Kirkuk	Not displaced or returnee	Male	40-60	Urban	Turkmen	Primary to secondary

KII #	Location	Residence Type	Gender	Age	Ethnicity/ Religion
1	Diyala	Not displaced or returnee	Female	30+	Sunni Arab
2	Diyala	Not displaced or returnee	Male	30+	Kurd
3	Diyala	Not displaced or returnee	Male	30+	Kurd
4	Ninewa	Not displaced or returnee	Female	30+	Christian
5	Ninewa	Not displaced or returnee	Male	30+	Shabak
6	Anbar	Not displaced or returnee	Male	30+	Sunni Arab
7	Anbar	Not displaced or returnee	Male	30+	Sunni Arab
8	Anbar	Not displaced or returnee	Female	30+	Sunni Arab
9	Salahaddin	Not displaced or returnee	Male	30+	Shia
10	Salahaddin	Not displaced or returnee	Female	30+	Sunni Arab
11	Salahaddin	Not displaced or returnee	Female	30+	Turkmen
12	Kirkuk	Not displaced or returnee	Male	30+	Sunni Arab
13	Kirkuk	Not displaced or returnee	Female	30+	Kurd
14	Kirkuk	Not displaced or returnee	Male	30+	Turkmen

