



# **WOMEN NAVIGATING DURABLE SOLUTIONS TO DISPLACEMENT**

EXPERIENCES FROM NINEWA  
GOVERNORATE

March 2024

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# 1. PROJECT OVERVIEW

The objective of this study is to investigate the experience of displaced women and their reintegration in areas of origin. It examines female-related vulnerabilities and obstacles that affect their reintegration. The report explores what factors influence decision-making during the durable solution process, as well as women's agency to overcome reintegration barriers. The goal is to present a comprehensive analysis to inform programming and advocacy efforts supporting internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees. This study builds on IOM's research including *Progress Toward Durable Solutions in Iraq: a Pilot Project in Ninewa Governorate (2023)*, *Reimagining Reintegration: An Analysis of Sustainable Returns After Conflict (2023)*, and *Poverty and Precarity: A Comparison of Female- and Male-headed Households in Districts of Return (2023)*. These studies developed a quantitative assessment of vulnerabilities related to sustainable integration of women returnees and IDPs. To complement and deepen those findings, this study takes a qualitative approach to focus on women's agency and decision-making across four barriers to reintegration: (i) access to documentation, (ii) housing tenure, (iii) livelihoods, and (iv) social networks.

# 2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology aims to answer the following research questions:

- What specific factors impact decision-making along the durable solutions continuum for women?
- How do these factors impact the ability of women to overcome key reintegration barriers?

The research utilized a qualitative approach and narrative and thematic analysis, employing focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIs) as the methods of primary data collection. In addition, a desk review of existing resources and relevant datasets was conducted to design the study and supplement findings.

The study carried out 20 FGDs with women returnees and IDPs, including female-headed households (FHH) and non-FHH, in urban and rural areas. Of these, four FGDs were conducted with younger married and non-married women 18–25 years old. Data collection took place between 11 and 20 June 2023, and was carried out by female members of the IOM research team in 14 locations spanning 10 subdistricts in Ninewa. These locations were chosen by IOM DTM based on a combination of severity,<sup>1</sup> geographical distribution and operational constraints.

A total of 19 KIs were conducted, including with mukhtars from six of the districts,<sup>2</sup> local civil society organizations (CSOs), local/international experts and government officials to gather sector- and location-specific insights, gather recommendations from a variety of perspectives and triangulate data emerging from the FGDs.

<sup>1</sup> Levels of severity were determined using IOM Iraq's Return Index (Round 17) and Displacement Index (Round 5).

<sup>2</sup> Al-Ba'ja, Hatra, Al-Qosh, Mosul, Sinjar, Al-Qayara.

## LIMITATIONS

Recruiting young women aged 18–25 years for FGDs proved difficult, resulting in the limited inclusion of some older women up to 33 years old, including some who were married. Thus, resulting data from this group may have been influenced by the participation of older women. Similarly, in one FGD Sinjar, the inclusion of married women may have introduced additional dynamics and perspectives that were not directly relevant to the experiences of FHH.

The majority of women interviewed had low education levels (illiterate, some reading/writing or primary education), which may have influenced the diversity of responses, particularly in the section focused on livelihood and job opportunities.

Finally, this qualitative study's findings should be interpreted as indicative to the 14 Ninewa locations covered (see sampling frame). However, many of these findings have been replicated through studies in other areas, which are cited throughout this report.

## 3. KEY FINDINGS

From the moment they are forcibly displaced from their areas of origin, women face specific barriers to achieving durable solutions. In Ninewa, households that are female-headed, those with a high ratio of non-working-age members,<sup>3</sup> and those of the Yazidi community make up a large proportion of those progressing the least along the durable solutions continuum – and frequently these characteristics overlap.<sup>4</sup> The sex of the head of household significantly influences reintegration outcomes, impacting both women's conditions and perceptions.<sup>5</sup>

This report relays women's experiences of searching for durable solutions to their displacement, highlighting the specific challenges which impact their progress. It follows women's journey throughout the process, including their decision to return, resolving issues related to civil documentation, housing, land and property, livelihood opportunities and the role of their social networks. The findings demonstrate these factors affect women's perceptions of both reintegration barriers and their ability to overcome practical challenges.

## DECISION TO RETURN

**Key finding:** When deciding whether to return, women consult with family members; however, the final decision often rests with adult men if they are present in the family. The role of childcare plays a significant role in the decision, as women seek to ensure their education, opportunities and security.<sup>6</sup> Family considerations, including basic needs and family ties, strongly influence the decision to return.

3 Dependency ratio – The number of children (aged 0–17 years) and older persons (aged 60 years or older) in relation to the working-age population (aged 18–59 years).

4 IOM, *Progress Toward Durable Solutions in Iraq – A pilot project in Ninewa Governorate* (Baghdad, IOM, 2023).

5 IOM, *Poverty & Precarity - A Comparison of Female- and Male-Headed Households in Districts of Return* (Baghdad, IOM, 2022).

6 This finding is consistent with other studies including Oxfam 'I Am Determined To Realize My Dream' Understanding decision making during displacement and return in Iraq (London, Oxfam, 2018) and Kerrie Holloway, and Filippo Grandi "*Dignity in Displacement a review of the Literature*" (London, Overseas Development Institute, 2018).

Women make the decision to return after consultations with their family. In the case of FHH, women consult their families and relatives, including siblings, parents and children. Widows consult their late husband's family, while divorced or separated women consult their own. In non-FHH, the husbands mainly make the decision. Nevertheless, women can exert influence and have a say in the decision-making process, depending on the level of openness their husbands have to considering their input. **“The woman may be aware of the challenges that she may face in the event of return. Therefore, she can talk to her husband and make the decision based on her view on this issue”** (Returnee, non-FHH, Urban, Al-Srjkhana, Mosul).

However, while family members might be involved in the decision-making process, the final decision ultimately rests with the head of the household. For young women, the decision is primarily made by their families or a male member, such as their fathers or husbands. As a young participant expressed: **“My family did not ask my opinion on the decision to return, because we always follow the words of my father. He is the one who decides about our life matters, and we accept that”** (Returnee, non-FHH, Young, Urban, Hay Alshuhada, Sinjar).

Childcare plays a significant role in decision-making, as women seek to ensure better education and opportunities for the children, as well as security. Women prioritize their children's education, which may have been interrupted or disrupted during displacement, for example due to overcrowding in schools or shelters, or poor infrastructure in the location of displacement. Livelihood opportunities also influence decisions, as women consider the future pathways for children to contribute to the family's income. Women often rely on their adult children to find jobs and support the family before deciding whether to return home or remain displaced.<sup>7</sup> Security is another significant consideration, with women expressing the desire for privacy and a sense of ease for themselves and their children upon returning to their village; however, there were notable exceptions in areas like Sinjar, where unstable security and discrimination against Yazidis were major concerns.



<sup>7</sup> IOM, *Access to Durable Solutions among IDPs in Iraq: Experiences of Female-Headed Households* (Baghdad, IOM, 2020).

Category of concern	Quote	Source
Education	"I made the decision to return for fear of my children being deprived of education and losing their future, as they stopped education during our displacement and the conditions we lived in affected them psychologically, so returning to the house in which they were brought up will make them feel safe and stable."	Returnee, FHH, (Qasabat Zummar, Zummar)
Livelihood	"Most women returned because of the availability of job opportunities that their children can exercise like construction workers, work in agriculture, or as daily wage workers in markets."	IDP, FHH, Rural (Al-Mahattah Al-Ghaziya Village, Al-Qayara)
Security	"Because of the security context, the parents fear for their children, especially for girls, so they are forced to stay here [in displacement] in order to protect them."	IDP, non-FHH, Rural (Beban, Al-Qosh)
Armed groups	"After the liberation of their region, I returned immediately because I feared that my teenagers would drift away and join the terrorist groups that were present in Mosul."	Returnee, non-FHH, Urban (Wanna Centre, Wanna)
Social cohesion	"[In the area where I was displaced to] there was racism in the interaction between the children - 'you are Arab and I am Kurdish' - and my children felt the cultural and linguistic difference. I returned [to my area of origin] so my children could feel more comfortable in the community."	Returnee, non-FHH, Urban (Wanna Centre, Wanna)
Yazidi	"Because of the fear that we experienced during ISIL's annihilation of the Yazidis, many of us did not want to return, and until now many women live with the same trauma that they experienced on the day of the extermination."	Returnee, FHH, Urban (Hay Alshuhada, Sinjar)

## ACCESS TO DOCUMENTATION

**Key finding:** Women's access to documentation is heavily shaped by social customs discouraging them from travelling alone, especially in areas like Sinjar, where Yazidi women fear societal judgment and the unstable security situation. Women with perceived affiliation to ISIL face further challenges in accessing services due to fear, discrimination and lengthier procedures.

Women encounter specific and well-documented barriers to accessing documentation, including transportation, freedom of movement, additional costs and lack of knowledge on related procedures. These issues are typically worse for FHH<sup>8</sup>, who must wait for two years after their husbands' disappearance before claiming government assistance. Women also tend to rely more on social welfare schemes that require core identity documents.<sup>9</sup>

Access to government offices is mainly influenced by social customs. While some women feel they can access government offices on their own<sup>10</sup>, almost all women preferred bringing an accompanying family member (such as a husband for non-FHH, sister, mother, son) or neighbour. This is commonly because of social customs around

8 IOM, *Strategy to Support Reintegration and Durable Solutions of Displaced Populations* (Baghdad, IOM, 2017).

9 Danish Refugee Council (DRC), *Women, Displacement and Durable Solutions in Iraq* (Copenhagen, DRC, 2023); Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), *Paperless People of Post-conflict Iraq* (NRC, 2019).

10 FGD Returnees, FHH, Rural; FGD Returnees, non-FHH, Rural, Young; FGD IDPs, FHH, Urban; FGD IDPs, non-FHH, Rural;



women travelling alone and fear of harassment, as well as lack of transportation (especially in rural areas.)<sup>11</sup> Young women are discouraged from going alone, which can also apply to widowed or divorced women, because of societal customs and acceptance.

**“There is no shame in a man going to government departments, but a woman should be very conservative in going to these departments and not go alone.... I don’t feel comfortable going to government departments because of the community’s talk”** (Returnee, non-FHH, Urban, Young, Hay Alshuhada, Sinjar).

**“When I need to go to government departments, I go with my brother or my mother, because I do not feel comfortable going alone because I am young”** (IDP, non-FHH, Rural, Young Al-Mahattah Al-Ghaziyah Village, Al-Qayara).



Opinions vary when it comes to widowed and divorced women. Overall, there tends to be a bit more leniency towards widowed women, who are typically older, and they may have greater community acceptance to travel independently.

Women report generally being treated well once they are at government offices. With the notable exception of Yazidi women, overall, women perceive that they receive respectful treatment at government offices and often have shorter waiting times compared to men.

In Sinjar, Yazidi women often feel uncomfortable accessing government offices due to concerns about societal judgment and the unstable security situation in the area.<sup>12</sup> Another complication is the absence of governmental offices in Sinjar and Sinuni that issue documentation.<sup>13</sup> Women must therefore repeatedly travel to other locations

11 This was particularly cited by women in rural areas, such as those in Al-Qosh, who did not have the financial ability to go to their area of origin (Sinjar) to obtain documentation, or from Al-Hamdaniya.

12 FGDs Returnees, FHH, Urban.

13 These offices are the Iraqi Citizenship Registration Department, the Social Security Department, and the Civil Affairs Department.



such as Mosul, Duhok or Telafar, where they face overcrowding issues and incur transportation and facilitation costs (for a lawyer or intermediary). Furthermore, the presence of a different ethnoreligious culture and language in places like Duhok or Mosul may add to women's perception of discrimination when visiting government departments there.

Women with perceived ISIL-affiliated family members face significant challenges in accessing legal services. Fear and distrust of government authorities often dissuade these women from seeking the assistance they need.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the process of obtaining “**tabria**” and officially acknowledging their connection with ISIL can expose them to harassment by authorities.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the timeline for receiving necessary documents is significantly extended, resulting in increased costs. These findings are line with the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) research<sup>16</sup>, which showed that ISIL-affiliated women experience similar challenges faced by other IDP women, but perhaps to a greater extent.

As a result of these considerations, women may delay obtaining their documentation or not be able to access it all, which, in turn, hinders their freedom of movement and access to basic services. This can affect registering children in schools, receiving government support (especially for FHH)<sup>17</sup>, and accessing public health facilities, amongst other issues.<sup>18</sup>

## HOUSING TENURE

**Key finding:** Women's ability to live independently is heavily influenced by their financial status and how society views this decision. In rural areas especially, social customs play a big role in restricting women's rights to own property and inherit, despite their legal entitlements. Women living in a shared household may have less control over their personal decisions and the upbringing of their children, including limiting their exposure to violence.

Women, and especially IDPs, face greater housing precarity compared to men and are more likely to either be hosted or pay rent.<sup>19</sup> They are also more likely to fear eviction and face greater challenges in asserting their HLP rights<sup>20</sup>, which is impacted by social norms. This situation hinders women's ability to secure stable housing and establish a sense of stability and security for themselves and their families.

Women's ability to live alone depends on their financial situation and how their community perceives such independence. Most women expressed not having enough money to live alone, either to rebuild their house, rent a place or afford basic needs, which meant that many lived with their families or in shared housing. Furthermore, KIs highlighted that women living alone face heightened risks of exploitation and harassment, facing challenges such as landlords taking advantage of their vulnerable situation.<sup>21</sup> Having children appears to confer a certain level of

14 KII International Expert; UNDP, *Affiliated with ISIS: Challenges For The Return And Reintegration Of Women And Children* (Baghdad, UNDP, 2022).

15 KII CSO.

16 MEAC, *The Road Home from Al Hol camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience* (Geneva, MEAC, 2022); Top-Line Report Managing Exit from Armed Conflict Survey in Al Qaim and Mosul Districts (Geneva, MEAC, 2023); Top-Line Report Managing Exit from Armed Conflict Survey - Phone Surveys (Geneva, MEAC, 2023).

17 IOM, *Strategy to Support Reintegration and Durable Solutions*.

18 KII CSO; IOM, *Strategy to Support Reintegration*; DRC, *Women, Displacement and Durable Solutions in Iraq* (Copenhagen, DRC, 2023).

19 IOM, *Poverty & Precarity*; NRC, *Broken Home - Women's Housing, Land and Property Rights in Post-conflict Iraq* (NRC, 2020).

20 NRC, *Broken Home*.

21 KII CSO, KII CSO.

independence for women to live alone, as their earnings can help support the household and/or sons of a certain age may assume responsibilities as head of household.<sup>22</sup> In rural areas, social customs exert a stronger influence, with women reporting that they cannot live outside their area of origin without bargaining with their families.



**“When I arrived to Al-Ba’aj I wanted to stay alone with my kids; however, because did not have any source of income, I was obliged to live with my brother-in-law’s family and defer to them”**

(IDP, FHH, Urban, Al-Thawra, Al-Ba’aj).

Social customs, especially in rural areas, often take precedence and overrule women’s legal rights regarding HLP. From a legal standpoint, when a husband passes away, his wife is entitled to a share of his estate. If there are no children, the wife’s share is one fourth, and if there are then the wife’s share is one eighth of the estate.<sup>23</sup> KIIs reported a lack of awareness and acceptance of women’s HLP rights, varying depending on the community’s culture and level of education.<sup>24</sup>

Social acceptance around ownership and inheritance varies widely. Women’s ownership is accepted if she contributes to the family, in other instances it is accepted under certain conditions (for example husband has died, or with the understanding that it is ultimately for her children), while by some it is not accepted. In rural locations, people typically lack documentation for their land, particularly in cases where the land is classified as agricultural and does not have a title deed.<sup>25</sup>

22 FGDs IDPs, FHH, Urban and Rural

23 Personal Status Law № (188) of 1959 and amendments; IOM HLP Iraq.

24 KII International Expert.

25 Across many FGDs including all profiles

“Everything belongs to men according to customs and traditions, as it is not permissible for a woman to own anything. [...] It is not acceptable in our society for a woman to be the owner of property while the husband is alive. The rest of the participants agreed with her opinion, because customs and traditions contradict that women have the right to own property.”

Returnee, non-FHH, Rural, Karaba Alkurna Village, Al-Ba’aj

Living in a shared household, especially with another family that is not their own, can limit women’s decision-making power. Due to the financial and social impact of displacement, many women end up living in shared housing, accepting challenging and restrictive living conditions to support themselves and their children.<sup>26</sup> This situation affects various aspects of their lifestyle and choices, including clothing, eating, leaving the house, hosting guests and raising children. Furthermore, it can limit women’s comfortable access to communal areas within the residence. These effects are particularly pronounced among younger women.

Women perceive living in a shared household as increasing the risk of domestic violence,<sup>27</sup> although non-FHH believe women are exposed to violence regardless of their living arrangement. Women report that domestic violence is often caused by financial stress, interference from the husband’s family and conflicts involving children crying or engaging in fights with other children. KII with CSOs showed that women may feel pressured to accept shared living conditions due to financial constraints and lack of alternatives, especially if they have children.

Living in a shared household has a significant impact on children, influencing their behaviour, exposure to violence and education. Women report that children’s behaviour can be negatively influenced by others in the shared household, due to the exposure to children or other members with different values, beliefs or disciplinary practices. Children themselves being exposed to violence is a common finding among studies in Iraq,<sup>28</sup> with home and school being primary locations for such experiences.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, overcrowding in the home and the presence of other children can hinder a child’s ability to focus on their studies,<sup>30</sup> affecting their educational progress.

26 KII CSO.

27 While domestic violence was not explicitly reported in rural FGDs, underreporting might be influenced by the tribal nature of society and close-knit community dynamics. See IOM, “Towards the Systematic Integration of Gender in Iraq - Gender Analysis of Women’s Access to Durable Solutions (Baghdad, IOM, 2022).

28 According to UNICEF’s Multiple Indicator Survey (MICS6) 2018, 4 out of 5 children in Iraq experience violence at home or in school.

29 Exposure to violence not only threatens their physical safety and emotional well-being, but also increases the normalization of violence, as indicated in the KII International Expert. See also, IOM, Towards the Systematic Integration of Gender in Iraq.

30 FGD Returnee, FHH, Urban.

"I live in a house with my husband's aunt, and she is very controlling and influences my husband's decisions. She does not want me going to the market [because it is far, and socially it is not acceptable for women to go to far places alone], and she often interferes in raising my children and beats them sometimes. We do not have any stable source of income, and we cannot leave the house and rent a house. We are forced to put up with what she tells us. She does not accept that I receive my family in our home, but she always receives her relatives and I take care of them and serve them."

Returnee, non-FHH, Rural

"The woman who lives with several families is more restricted than the woman who is alone, and living with others negatively affects the upbringing of children as well. Because of the crowding inside the house, their children do not want to study, there is no privacy in raising their children, and there is an impact on the behaviour of the child, which cannot be controlled due to living with other families. But due to the alarming security situation in Sinjar and the aftermath of ISIL events, and due to the social and economic situation, most women live with other families because they are forced to do so."

IDP, FHH, Urban

## LIVELIHOODS

**Key Finding:** Women are restricted to a limited range of "acceptable" jobs based on customs and traditions, typically subject to family consent. Age, marital status and childcaring responsibilities further impact their choices. However, in some locations, the challenging living conditions brought on by the conflict, and the organizations raising awareness have helped change cultural attitudes around what is perceived as acceptable.

Access to livelihood significantly influences progress toward durable solutions<sup>31</sup>, impacting both the decision to return and the sustainability of reintegration. Women, and particularly FHH, face increased income disadvantages, and heavily rely on public and informal safety nets, government support and family assistance.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, women must navigate shared decision-making when it comes to working, highlighting the common involvement of husbands and other family members, which influences the type of job they can pursue.<sup>33</sup>

Women are restricted to a limited range of "acceptable" jobs based on customs and traditions, typically subject to family consent. Generally, women are expected to seek approval from their families. In the case of FHH, they might also face the interference of their late husband's family. Non-FHH women are pressured to consult their husbands or male relatives. As highlighted by previous findings, if conflicts arise around women's desire to work, the final decision typically rests with the father, husband or older brother.<sup>34</sup>

31 IOM, *Progress Toward Durable Solutions in Iraq*.

32 IOM, *Poverty & Precarity*.

33 REACH, *Assessment on Employment and Working Conditions of Conflict-Affected Women across Key Sectors* (Baghdad, REACH, 2019).

34 Ibid.



“My family does not allow me to work, because I am a widow, and all my movements are monitored. I have many job opportunities, such as a seamstress or a cook in a hospital, but my family refused.”

“My father does not allow me to work because I am young and my family is very committed to customs and traditions.”

“My father allows me to work if the type of work is suitable for women.”

“I work inside the house in nursing, and I do not like to work outside the house for fear of harassment.”

FGD, Returnees, FHH, Urban



Acceptable jobs include sewing, tailoring, hairdressing, beauty salons, food preparation (such as sweets making), and in rural areas, agriculture or livestock breeding, almost exclusively within the confines of their village or within the home space. These employment patterns align with previous findings that assign women to the private sphere and men to the public sphere, particularly in rural areas of Iraq.<sup>35</sup>

Even for the “acceptable” jobs, family and community often confront women’s choice to work. Age and marital status are subjects of debate and influence societal acceptance of women in the workforce. It is generally perceived as not acceptable for young women to work, due to societal restrictions around being unaccompanied and potential exposure to harassment. However, there is more acceptance for older women to work. Divorced women are commonly subjected to increased societal scrutiny and cultural norms, which can often hinder them from seeking employment opportunities: **“If she is a separated or divorced woman and wants to work in the same field or place, she will have more restrictions and controls because she is one of the vulnerable groups in society and that all the steps and actions she takes are more focused on by the community”** (Returnee, non-FHH, Urban).

The debate around marital status varies among young women, with those in urban locations in Sinjar stating that unmarried women have more freedom but must consult husbands after marriage. In contrast, those in rural locations

35 IOM, *Perceptions on Women’s Economic Opportunities in Urban Areas of Iraq - Motivations and Mechanisms to Overcome Barriers* (Baghdad, IOM, 2019); REACH, *Assessment on Employment and Working Conditions*; IOM, *Livelihood Policy Brief No.4 Women Doing Business in Iraq: Insights from IOM’s Field Experience* (Baghdad, IOM, 2022).



in Al-Hamdaniya believe unmarried women face more restrictions to protect their reputation. These perspectives may be influenced by ethnoreligious composition, with Yazidi communities being more open-minded, in both urban and rural settings, but with rural areas appearing somewhat more conservative.<sup>36</sup>

In many cases, women are expected to prioritize their family responsibilities instead of working.<sup>37</sup> Society may view women negatively if they work, assuming they will not adequately take care of their children and household. These factors influence women's decision-making about whether to pursue work opportunities. As a result, many women opt for home-based businesses as a means to navigate these norms and address the double burden of caregiving responsibilities they face,<sup>38</sup> with less favourable business outcomes.

The conflict has contributed to shifting societal norms around women's work. During the initial stages of displacement, breaking traditional norms became necessary for safeguarding and supporting families. As the situation evolved, these changes in social norms have become evident in certain areas. As discussed by participants: **"The difficult conditions they live in now forced women to work to be able to help their family and meet the daily needs of the family. In helping the family, society has become less restrictive of women's freedom and understands the importance of women's work"** (IDP, non-FHH, Rural, Young); **"Before the displacement, women's work was unacceptable in society, but the period of displacement, the lack of work opportunities, and the change of ideas made the society accept women's work, but from the home, and she is unable to work outside the home"** (Returnee, non-FHH, Rural).

Organizations' work has also helped raise awareness about women's employment. In certain locations, participants recognized the impact of organizations in raising awareness about women's right to work and make independent decisions (acknowledging the continuing influence of societal norms and cultural beliefs). One woman explained: **"An organization came to the area and set up a workshop to teach sewing. I asked my husband's permission to attend the workshop, but he and his family rejected the idea because of the community. Yet because of my ambition I was able to convince my husband and attend the workshop. I succeeded in my work in the field of sewing and helped my husband in supporting the family in this way, and I was able to change the thinking of my brothers as well, and they also began to allow their wives to work"** (Returnee, non-FHH, Urban).



36 FGDs Returnee, non-FHH, Urban and Rural, Young.

37 Kills Community Leaders.

38 REACH, *Assessment on Employment and Working Conditions*; IOM, *Towards the Systematic Integration of Gender In Iraq*.

## SOCIAL NETWORKS

**Key finding:** Social customs play a significant role in women's perceptions of self and relationship with the community. FHH feel a sense of belonging but also isolation due to their dual roles as providers and caregivers. Widowed and divorced women face an additional level of scrutiny due to their marital status and may feel pressured to remarry. Stigma is strongest for women with perceived affiliation or those who have signed tabria, although there is increasing recognition that many were compelled to do so. Forced/early marriage further hinders women's agency and progress.

Family and community acceptance, stigma and discrimination are key variables that have been shown to affect the reintegration experience.<sup>39</sup> Feelings of isolation and marginalization can have a significant impact on women's long-term reintegration and the sustainability of returns.

Many FHH expressed a strong sense of belonging to their community, especially due to their dual roles as both "fathers and mothers," providing for their children's needs in terms of food, education, clothes and teaching them good behaviour. However, this responsibility could also bring a sense of isolation, as these women faced the financial and psychological pressures of fulfilling both parental roles simultaneously. As found in previous studies,<sup>40</sup> FHH are more likely to feel marginalized and neglected as citizens. One participant explained: **"I feel that I am part of the community, I am in charge of managing the house, raising children, educating them and meeting their needs. I play the role of father and mother. But I feel isolated because of the pressures of life that I face every day. It is not easy to play the role of father and mother at the same time"** (Returnee, FHH, Urban). The demands of fulfilling these roles leave little time for social interaction, which is key to their social and psychological re/integration.<sup>41</sup>



39 IOM, *Comparative Reintegration Outcomes Between Forced and Voluntary Return Through a Gender Perspective* (Baghdad, IOM, 2021).

40 IOM, *Poverty & Precarity*.

41 IOM, *Towards the Systematic Integration of Gender in Iraq*.

Non-FHH women generally feel a sense of belonging to their community, with the ability to express their opinions and participate in decision-making.<sup>42</sup> However, they recognize that their decisions are still influenced by societal customs and traditions, imposing some limitations on their agency. This finding aligns with previous IOM studies,<sup>43</sup> which highlight the higher costs for women who do not conform to social customs and norms.

Reasons why women did not feel part of their community included: limited decision-making power over their education and desired careers, lack of understanding of the hardship experienced, financial stress or living in remote areas with limited access to essential services.<sup>44</sup> Reasons could also be attributed to geographical differences, as most of the responses were from women in Al-Ba'aj.

Widows and divorced women face an added layer of scrutiny due to the marital status. These women may feel additional pressure to conform due to the lack of financial and moral support around being a widow/divorcee. In some cases, women may feel more empowered, especially if they can pursue their studies and provide for their children independently, without interference from other families. On the other hand, divorce can negatively impact some women's support and standing within the community as divorced women may face judgment and be perceived as undesirable. Widowed women may receive some additional leniency and respect from the community due to the challenges they face after losing a husband, but this sentiment is not universal.<sup>45</sup>

Some women may face the pressure to remarry but this depends on the family and source of income. Some divorced women actively resist remarrying, especially if they have had negative experiences in their previous marriages.<sup>46</sup> As one woman said: **"I am relieved after my divorce. [Previously, marriage] prevented me from going out, and [the husband's] family interfered in my life, but after the divorce, I was freed from it and became I came back to life and flourished in society"** (Returnee, FHH, Urban). On the other hand, some women may feel pressure to remarry due to societal perceptions around divorced women and pressure from their families, particularly if they are seen as a financial "burden."<sup>47</sup> **"There is pressure from family members towards women because they consider marriage to be the base for family stability, and they believe that marriage can provide material support and protection for them and their children"** (KII Community Leader).

Underlying concerns exist regarding underage or forced marriages. Child marriage is a widespread issue in Iraq,<sup>48</sup> particularly amongst IDPs and returnees as a coping mechanism to alleviate economic hardship resulting from displacement and changes in their family's financial situation.<sup>49</sup> Women and girls face contradictory expectations, perceived as financial burdens or being married off as a way to secure opportunities for them,<sup>50</sup> while also being denied the opportunity to work. This has immediate impacts and long-term implications for their reintegration as it exacerbates power imbalances and restricts their agency to make decisions in their lives. Child marriage affects various issues that can hinder progress along the durable solutions continuum, including increased risk of domestic

42 FGD Returnee, non-FHH, Urban.

43 IOM, Towards the Systematic Integration of Gender in Iraq.

44 FGD IDPs, non-FHH, Rural, Young; FGDs IDPs, non-FHH and FHH, Urban; FGD Returnee, non-FHH, Rural.

45 FGDs Returnee, FHH, Urban; FGD IDP, FHH, Urban; FGD Returnee, non-FHH, Urban, Young.

46 FGD Returnee, FHH, Urban.

47 KIIs with Community Leaders.

48 UNICEF, Child Marriage Country Profile Iraq (CITY, UNICEF, 2022); *Girls not Brides*, Iraq Country Profile. The legal age of marriage in Iraq is 18 years, but with court permission, it can be as young as 15 years old, subject to the approval of the court and the guardian. However, the judge has the authority to supersede the guardian's consent if necessary (Personal Status Law № (188) of 1959 and amendments, article 8.) Religious marriages younger than 18 years and practices such as nikah mut'ah ("temporary marriage") further contribute to the occurrence of underage and forced marriages. European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), *Forced and child marriage* (Brussels, EUAA, 2021).

49 KIIs International experts; UNICEF, Child marriage in humanitarian settings: Spotlight on the situation in the Arab region, (New York, UNICEF, 2018); Goers, Matthew., Hunersen, Kara., Karim, Luqman Saleh. et al. "Child marriage among displaced populations – a 2019 study in Kurdistan Region of Iraq" BMC Public Health 22:796 (2022).

50 KIIs International Experts and CSO.

violence, higher dropout rates in schools,<sup>51</sup> diminishing work opportunities, health complications associated with early/unplanned pregnancies and increased isolation from peers.<sup>52</sup> The Iraqi law requirement<sup>53</sup> that women must be older than 18 years to have custody of their children can leave them in abusive situations and discourage them from seeking divorce,<sup>54</sup> in addition to the social stigma around being divorced.

Women who have had to sign *tabria* still face significant discrimination from society. However, participants expressed a recognition that many women were forced to do so, particularly to obtain essential documents for their children or to rent a house. Some women sympathize with these women's choices and believe they have the right to choose their own life despite the stigma attached to their past. They acknowledge that signing *tabria* is often necessary for women to lead normal lives and for their children to attend school or to rent a house.<sup>55</sup> One woman explained: **“Our relationship with the family and relatives was not affected because of the “*tabria*”. They understand that we cannot practice our normal lives if there is no “*tabria*”, as children cannot go to school, and we also cannot live [in a rented house]”** (IDP, non-FHH, Rural, Young). However, discrimination against families associated with ISIL still persists, with instances of women not being able to return, communities preventing their local leaders (*mukhtars*) from assisting them or women being denied housing permits due to fear for their safety without male protection due to ISIL-affiliated hostilities.<sup>56</sup> This aligns with other research,<sup>57</sup> showing that some families have more difficulty in obtaining community acceptance due to perceived associations with ISIL, weaker family support and limited social networks. Importantly, that study showed that at the community level, successful reintegration is measured by the absence of revenge attacks or other community issues.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

Women with access to basic services, security and improved job opportunities often reported that they would remain in their current area and not return to their areas of origin. Conversely, those expressing a desire or inability to leave are typically due to housing concerns (eviction, destroyed homes) particularly amongst IDPs, and financial stress, consistent with the findings of the Ninewa survey.<sup>58</sup> Young women, in particular, express a desire to leave in search of better job opportunities. Social factors also play a role, with some women wanting to leave due to concerns about being judged by others (FHH), experiencing psychological trauma from displacement (IDPs), or fearing witnessing another genocide against Yazidis (Sinjar). The implications for sustainable reintegration are significant, as negative material conditions and social perceptions can affect the decision to return, hinder long-term reintegration and potentially lead to remigration.

51 UNICEF, *Statistical profile on child marriage: Iraq* (UNICEF, 2022).

52 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Child Marriage in Kurdistan region* (Baghdad, UNFPA, 2016).

53 Personal Status Law № (188) of 1959 and amendments, article 5.

54 KII International Expert.

55 FGDs Returnee, FHH, Urban and Rural; FGD Returnee, non-FHH, Rural; FGD IDP, non-FHH, Rural, Young; FGDs IDP, FHH, Rural and Urban.

56 FGDs IDP, FHH, Urban and Rural; FGD IDP, non-FHH, Rural, Young; FGD Returnee, non-FHH, Urban; KII International Expert and CSO.

57 MEAC, *The Road Home from Al Hol camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience* (Geneva, MEAC, 2022).

58 IOM, *Progress Toward Durable Solutions In Iraq*.



## 4. CONCLUSION

This report delves into the unique reintegration journey and experience of women, emphasizing the significant impact of social and cultural norms, as well as financial capacity, on their decision-making and overall agency. Women decide to return in consultation with family members, and strongly considering children's educational and livelihood opportunities, as well as security. For FHH, children also shape how women perceive themselves, as they take on the responsibility of providing for their children both financially and emotionally. Societal customs and traditions exert a significant impact on women's decision-making, affecting their access to government services, housing ownership and employment opportunities. Age, marital status and perceived affiliation add another layer to women's freedom to make choices. These challenges can curtail their agency, making it more challenging for them to assert control over their lives and progress towards durable solutions.

The implications for programming and reintegration efforts highlight the importance of addressing women-specific challenges. Programmes should consider women's decision-making roles within the landscape, challenge harmful societal norms and create an enabling environment for them to assert their rights and make decisions that benefit their families. Taking an approach which is sensitive to issues outlined in this report will better support women's journey towards successful reintegration and empowerment after displacement.

## 5. THE WAY FORWARD

Comprehensive awareness-raising campaigns:

- Can help address lack of information on specific topics (for example documentation, or HLP procedures), help educate women on their rights and contribute to promote a mindset shift among both men and women regarding roles and equality in society. These campaigns should aim to empower women to make informed decisions and challenge traditional norms, fostering a more supportive and inclusive environment for women's empowerment.
- Examples of awareness-raising interventions can vary, covering specific topics like housing ownership and changing societal perceptions regarding women's work (particularly through behavioural change approaches)<sup>59</sup> as well as broader initiatives aimed at reducing community violence and promoting acceptance of divorced women. Feedback from FGD participants highlighted the positive impact of such efforts, with organizations' campaigns being particularly effective in reducing violence and shifting attitudes around women working, not only among women but also among men and husbands.

Improve women's livelihood opportunities:

- Offering bundled livelihood support, including a set of services such as mentorship, technical, material, financial support and networks/job referrals to help women start their own businesses or obtain employment. Careful consideration should be given to market saturation, ensuring a sustainable business environment. Home-based opportunities can be explored to accommodate women's childcaring responsibilities and align with social norms. Implementing cash-for-work programmes or initiatives specifically dedicated to women can help provide additional opportunities for income generation, while respecting social norms. As mentioned above, these initiatives should be completed with sensitization and awareness-raising campaigns to challenge traditional mindsets and societal perceptions around women working. These efforts can play a significant role in promoting a supportive environment for women's empowerment and participation in economic activities.
- Support to continue education – vocational training programmes that focus on specific skills and industries to

59 IOM, 'Nudging' Women's Economic Empowerment in Iraq (Baghdad, IOM, 2023).



enhance women's employability and income-generating potential, courses on various subjects (such as IT, languages) or opportunities for women to continue their education (for example accelerated education programmes for those who have had interrupted schooling, or promote and subsidize female schooling to ensure access to education for women and girls).

Provide psychological and social support:

- Offer Mental Health and Psychosocial Support services focusing on women, especially divorced and widowed individuals, and children, to help them address the impact of stigma and social traditions linked to their marital status, while also providing emotional support and building resilience to cope with trauma.
- Establish social support systems, such as creating social centres or networks, to connect women together, fostering a sense of community, social acceptance and empowerment.
- Strengthen gender-based violence (GBV) response services, including establishing safe spaces and training social service workers, such as health workers, to effectively address GBV issues.

Advocacy and policy measures:

- Provide stronger social and financial support or programmes for divorced and widowed women, including stipends or financial assistance to help them overcome economic difficulties and improve their livelihoods. Additionally provide assistance to help women obtain government support.
- Engage in advocacy efforts to simplify government laws, procedures or specific requirements that may hinder women's access to services (such as documentation), resources or opportunities, making it easier for women to navigate and benefit from government programmes.
- Strengthen the legal framework on topics such as domestic violence and underage marriage. These include: ensuring that the legal age of marriage is enforced and that marriages involving minors are prohibited, removing the exception in the personal status law that allows for judges' permission to marry underage girls, adding penalties for those who conduct child marriages and passing the Anti-Domestic Violence Law.



## ANNEX

## SAMPLING BREAKDOWN

## FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

		FHH	non-FHH	Young (18-25 years old)	Total
Returnee	Urban	3	1	1	5
	Rural	3	1	1	5
IDP	Urban	3	1	1	5
	Rural	3	1	1	5
Total		12	4	4	20

## KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Number	Profile/Category
6	Community Leaders
6	CSOs
5	Local expert (university)
	Int experts
2	Govt representatives
19	

## LOCATIONS

Urban	Rural
Al-Srjkhana, Mosul	Karaba Alkurna Village, Al-Ba'aj
Hay Alshuhada, Sinjar	Muhalabya Centre, Al-Muhalabiya
Zummar, Zummar	Qabr bin Naif Village, Al-Qayara
Wanna Centre, Wanna	Karamless, Al-Hamdaniya
Hawi Alkanisa, Mosul	Markaz AL-Hatra, Hatra
Al-Intisar, Al-Ba'aj	Al-Mahattah Al-ghaziyah Village, Al-Qayara
Al-Thawra, Al-Ba'aj	Beban, Al-Qosh



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