

This situation of deteriorating socio-economic conditions for the Iraqi population, and the challenging perspectives for Iraq's Youth and women, in turn has the potential of fuelling violence thereby perpetuating the conflict cycle. Moreover, the conditions and lack of perspectives in Iraq motivates thousands of Iraqis, including many women, to leave their country in pursuit of better living conditions. The burden of this protracted crisis is particularly affecting the most vulnerable: female-headed household, women, and girls who are socio-economically exposed compared to male populations¹². Children too are exposed to threats¹³. While statistics are uncertain, it is likely that persons with disabilities represent at least 15% of the Iraqi population¹⁴.

The succession of wars, sanctions and conflict took particularly affected Iraqi women and girls. Between the 1960s to the 1980s Iraq's women and girls had witnessed good access to education, healthcare and employment, but their conditions began to significantly deteriorate as of the Iran–Iraq war.

Today, the situation of women and girls in Iraq is critical as confirmed by international indices. Iraq ranks 146th on the UN Gender Inequality Index (GII) of 2019, far behind its regional MENA peers¹⁵, and last among its peer upper middle-income countries. This is further confirmed by the Global Gender Gap Index of 2020 where Iraq ranks last as 152nd. Together these testify to the long road for achieving gender parity. The position of women and girls in Iraq is challenged by engrained attitudes, strong cultural beliefs and societal structures that perpetuate patterns of discrimination, gender-based violence and gender-based human rights violations (civic, political and socio-economic rights). At the same time, a new generation of strong and vocal Iraqi women and girls claim empowerment. They are seizing their rightful place across the political, social and economic sphere and put in question traditional gender roles and claim their own identities, both literally and figurative. In this context, working with girls constitutes an investment in future generations.

There is a growing understanding that the perpetuation of gender stereotypes traps both women and men causing long-term costs on societal, community, but also individual level. This ongoing renegotiation of gender norms in Iraq is partly due to economic necessity. More women find themselves in the position as heads of households as a result of their determination, and, equally as a result of the armed conflict and migration of the formerly male head of household. While this does not necessarily indicate a shift in social norms, as an increase of the incidence of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls showed, it offers an entry-point that is being seized by Iraq's strong and determined women. The gender gaps in education and the consequences of non-completed general education - only one in two girls complete primary education and only 40% of girls attend lower secondary education – structurally impede girls from pursuing upper secondary education, from pursuing higher education, from engaging in formal decent employment and from seizing their full democratic rights as citizens, including their political rights. This applies in particular to girls in rural areas, displaced girls, girls pertaining to minorities and girls with disabilities.

This Action for girls' education in Iraq is aligned with the policy priorities of the Commission for 2021-2027, notably the EU GAP III and the GAP CLIP that sets out to ensure that *“women, men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, fully enjoy and exercise their equal civic, political economic, social, labour and cultural rights across Iraq”*.¹⁶ In line with the NDICI regulation, this Action constitutes the mandatory MIP Action with the principal objective of gender equality (OECD gender marker G2).

But the Action also provides an entry point to discuss gender equality with Iraq's Government notably but not exclusively in the field of girls' education. It responds to a gender gap in Iraq in the field of girls' education. Despite

¹² According to the GBVIMS 3rd Quarter Analysis Report (2022), this results in higher food insecurity, and more frequent use of harmful coping strategies, which also compromises women and girls' mental, sexual, and reproductive health with life-threatening consequences, including child marriage. Women have also reported limited /restricted access to protection, cash, livelihood, shelter, specialized mental health, and legal assistance while for example 2022 recorded a significant increase of gender-based violence reported incidents (63% more compared to the same period in 2021).

¹³ According to UNICEF (press release June 2023), since 2008 to the end of 2022 in Iraq, over 9 000 children were killed or maimed. Despite the considerable reduction on the number of reported cases in the last years, the overall number represents, on an average, more than one child killed every other day and one child maimed daily over the reported period

¹⁴ Given that the rate of disability is likely higher in humanitarian settings, it is probable that Iraq's estimate exceeds the global average of 15%. Similarly, in 2019, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stated that Iraq has one of the largest populations of persons with disabilities in the world (IOM, 2021 Persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in Iraq: barriers, challenges, and priorities)

¹⁵ Saudi Arabia (56), Lebanon (96) and Iran (113)

¹⁶ https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/join-2020-17-final_en.pdf