



Empowering Women Leaders in Iraq: IRC's Impact on the Women Peace Network

A success Story Compilation of impactful Iraqi Women

In June 2024, the International Rescue Committee's (IRC) Women Protection and Empowerment (WPE) team, in partnership with the Women Empowerment Organization (WEO), held a transformative five-day training program in Iraq for 20 members of the Women Peace Network. The training focused on Women in Local Leadership (WILL), with a strong emphasis on enhancing decision-making, leadership, communication, and advocacy skills. Through this initiative, the IRC and WEO aimed to strengthen the capacities of women leaders across Iraq, enabling them to lead effectively in their communities and organizations.

The Women Peace Network (WPN) has grown into one of the most powerful advocates for women's empowerment in Iraq, thanks to the tireless work of its members and leaders, like Ms. Suzan Aref, head of Women Empowerment Organization (WEO) and the Women Peace Network. Ms. Suzan reflects on the Network's remarkable journey, which began as a small initiative in 2011 and has since blossomed into Iraq's largest women's empowerment network. "It started very small, and through hard work on establishing the vision, strategies, policies, and plans, it began to grow. Today, the Women Peace Network is an alliance of multiple organizations with a unified vision to empower women throughout the country," she said.

Ms. Suzan highlighted how integral the recent training on Women in Local Leadership (WILL) has been for building leadership skills and supporting the long-term sustainability of the Women Peace Network. The training focused on key areas of leadership, both administrative and political, and aimed to align the Network's efforts with Iraq's National Strategy for Women Empowerment.



**Ms. Suzan Aref - Head
of WEO and WPN**



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"The training was unique. It brought together women from different organizations, governorates, cultures, and ages, creating an environment where everyone could share diverse and inclusive feedback," Ms. Suzan said. She praised the practical elements of the training, which allowed participants to not only learn but also to strategize for their own organizations and the Network as a whole.

One of the core challenges facing the Women Peace Network is its growing size and the need for foundational structural work. As the Network expands, more members must be involved in decision-making, and the network must better utilize its diverse capacities. "We need to work on how all these members can contribute to the Network and its work. There is a lot of potential, but much of it is not being utilized to the benefit of the Network," Ms. Suzan noted. She emphasized the need for enhanced collaboration, not just within individual organizations but across the Network, including sharing resources like funding, media access, and technical skills.

Ms. Suzan believes that with the right structural reforms, the Women Peace Network can continue to play a leading role in empowering women in Iraq. "We have good hope for the IRC's support in helping us reduce the gaps in the Network," she added, recommending that the Network's efforts include a stronger focus on proposal writing, communication and media work, and strategic engagement. She also suggested adapting the curriculum of future trainings to fit the Iraqi context and introducing a TOT (Training of Trainers) model to ensure the knowledge is passed down to organizations across governorates.





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The success of the training is best captured through the experiences of several participants, whose reflections demonstrate the profound impact the sessions had on their personal and professional lives:

Sawsan Suood Salih: From Learner to Leader

Sawsan Suood Salih, a 56-year-old activist from Salah Aldin, head of the Saya Organization for Human Rights and Democracy, found the training to be a transformative experience. "I felt like a student," she remarked, emphasizing how the training provided her with new skills and insights. One of the most significant takeaways for her was the importance of communication and negotiation skills. Previously unaware of their role in leadership, she now uses these skills to enhance her interactions with clients and her team. The training has also led to a shift in her organization's decision-making processes. Instead of decisions being solely made by management, she now encourages collective brainstorming sessions, promoting a culture of transparency and collaboration.

Sawsan's newfound confidence has also led her to consider partnerships beyond her own organization. She now sees potential in working with other women-led organizations, recognizing the shared challenges they face. "We as women have a responsibility in our community, and I am already thinking of how we can collaborate across cities and governorates," she said.

One of her key suggestions was to organize information camps, allowing women leaders from different governorates to learn from each other's cultural and social contexts. Her proposal demonstrates a clear vision for uniting women leaders across Iraq, fostering national understanding and collaboration.

**Sawsan Salih, head of
Saya Organization**





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Ban Walid Fareed: Strengthening Advocacy and Partnerships

For Ban Walid Fareed, a civil society activist from Baghdad working at the Association for Women and Children, the training was an opportunity to revisit essential skills and apply them in new ways. A highlight for her was learning how to better analyze information and make decisions under pressure. The training also enhanced her teamwork skills, teaching her how to work collaboratively with other organizations. Ban shared an example of a partnership her organization developed with cultural forums, where they extended support to orphans and widows. This partnership, which emerged after the training, is a testament to the practical impact of the lessons learned.

One of Ban's most memorable moments during the training was hearing the story of Ms. Asmaa Khader, a Jordanian lawyer who advocated for her community and became a role model for activism. This story inspired Ban, reinforcing the importance of practical advocacy examples in training sessions. "We appreciate when practical exercises are given to us in training, especially as sustainable projects," Ban explained. Her feedback highlights the value of hands-on learning in empowering women leaders to take action in their communities.



**Ban Fareed, from the
Association for
Women and Children**



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Shaz Noor Al-Din: Building a Collaborative Network

Shaz Noor Al-Din, a 34-year-old lawyer from Sulaymaniyah, was amazed by how the training fostered collaboration among the Women Peace Network members. For her, the training was not just about acquiring new skills but also about building relationships with fellow network members. "We do not always get the chance to meet most of the network in one place," she explained. This sense of connection inspired her to propose a joint initiative for the 16 Days of Activism campaign, a powerful example of how the training encouraged collaborative efforts within the network.

Like Ban, Shaz was also inspired by the story of the late Ms. Asmaa Khader. As a lawyer herself, Shaz felt a personal connection to Asmaa's journey and drew motivation from it to continue advocating for women's rights in Iraq. "The training was very elaborate," Shaz noted, praising the interactive nature of the sessions, which allowed participants to express themselves and learn from each other.

**Shaz Noor, Lawyer at
Women's Legal
Assistance Association**





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Fryal Al-Kaabi: Bottom-up approach to Leadership

Fryal Al-Kaabi, an engineer and head of the Awan Organization for Awareness and Capability Development, found the training's focus on leadership styles particularly valuable. She appreciated learning about collaborative leadership, a style that she has since implemented in her organization. "We realigned our decision-making processes to include more people, not just the management," Fryal explained. This shift toward a bottom-up approach has strengthened her organization's ability to make informed and inclusive decisions.

As a member of the Women Peace Network's management team, Fryal also gained insights into how to better support the network's governance. The training helped her and her colleagues draft key policies, including human resources and financial policies, which are now being implemented to ensure the network operates more efficiently. This process of policy development is a clear example of how the training contributed to the practical strengthening of the network's internal operations.



**Fryal Al-Kaabi,
head of Awan
Organization**



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Parwin Mohammed: Advocating for Women's Rights

Parwin Mohammed, a founding member of ASUDA for Combating Violence Against Women, brought a wealth of experience to the training. For her, the sessions provided an opportunity to refine her advocacy skills and better communicate her organization's message. One of the key projects she is currently working on is a program called "Pewerem" (translates to 'I Am Brave' in Kurdish), which highlights women's roles in peace and security. The training helped her structure this initiative, from setting goals and identifying stakeholders to selecting topics and even selecting the name of the initiative.

Parwin stressed the importance of advocacy in Iraq's current context, particularly in response to challenges such as the personal status law. She emphasized that local organizations, supported by networks like the Women Peace Network, must raise their voices to demand women's rights. The training has equipped her with the tools to do just that, and she hopes more women will have the chance to participate in similar programs in the future.



**Parwin Mohammed,
founding member of
ASUDA**



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Conclusion: A Shared Vision for Change

In closing, Ms. Suzan's call to action emphasizes the potential of the Women Peace Network, provided its members continue to work collaboratively and share their resources. "We need to not only wait for the network to give us, but we need to ask what we can give the network," Aref remarked, affirming the importance of collaboration and contribution at every level.

The Women in Local Leadership training conducted by the IRC and WEO has proven to be a pivotal experience for these women leaders in Iraq. Whether it's enhancing decision-making processes, fostering collaboration, or strengthening advocacy efforts, the participants have emerged with new skills, strategies, and a shared vision for empowering women across the country. The training has not only built individual capacities but has also strengthened the Women Peace Network as a collective force for change.

All participants expressed a strong desire for more practical sessions in future trainings, particularly in the areas of advocacy and leadership. Their stories underscore the critical role that capacity-building programs like this play in equipping women to lead, advocate, and create lasting impact in their communities.

As Iraq continues to rebuild and heal from years of conflict, the leadership of women like Ms. Suzan, Sawsan, Ban, Shaz, Fryal, and Parwin is more important than ever. With the continued support of organizations like the IRC and WEO, these women will undoubtedly continue to make a difference in their communities and beyond.



**Noor Esam, WPE Senior
Manager at the IRC**



**Dina Arafah, WPE
Coordinator at the IRC**



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