



# UNPACKING GENDERED REALITIES IN DISPLACEMENT:

## The status of Syrian refugee women in Iraq



### **About this study**

This study was commissioned by the UN Women Regional Office for Arab States, with research undertaken in late 2017 and early 2018.

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RESEARCH PAPER

# UNPACKING GENDERED REALITIES IN DISPLACEMENT: THE STATUS OF SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN IN IRAQ



**REGIONAL OFFICE FOR ARAB STATES  
UN WOMEN**

Cairo, November 2018



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Syrians seeking refuge in Iraq are almost exclusively ethnically Kurdish (97%)<sup>1</sup> and reside in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In addition to the Syrian refugees, a caseload of 249,641<sup>2</sup>, 61% of Iraq's 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) reside in the Kurdish region,<sup>3</sup> together placing a significant amount of stress on local infrastructure and governance. While the Kurdistan Regional Government has taken steps towards the inclusion of Syrian refugees, for instance allowing them to work, access education, and move freely within the Region, they still experience social and economic hardships as a result of displacement.

According to the latest figures, nearly half (47%) of Syrian refugees registered in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are female.<sup>4</sup> Gender discrimination and inequality place them at heightened risk of violence and exploitation, which is exacerbated by shifting gender roles and conditions in displacement. Within this context, UN Women sought to assess the gendered impact of the Syria crisis, and look at the status of refugee women and girls in the Kurdistan Region, with a focus on understanding the changing nature of gender dynamics, women's roles and responsibility, their experiences of and access to humanitarian aid, and experiences of violence. Using information gathered from 500 survey responses and five in-depth interviews, all conducted with female Syrian refugees, this report highlights the situation of women and girls living in displacement in Iraq.

Seventy-eight percent (78%) of women interviewed for this study had a Kurdish residency permit, which allows legal employment, free movement, and access to important civil documentation (such as marriage

and birth certificates)<sup>5</sup> in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Economic insecurity was cited as the primary concern for almost all women in this study (82%). More than half (57%) reported not having enough money to live, with 34% reporting temporary or contractual employment of any household member as the primary source of household income, and 30% reporting non-agricultural casual labor. Only 4% of women reported that they had access to full-, part-time, or temporary work even though nearly a quarter reported wanting to work in order to be able to contribute to household income. There seems to be a correlation between income and possession of the Kurdish residency permit, with the poorest interviewed (having a household income of less than 350,000 IQD per month) less likely to have a residency permit (65%) than those whose household income was higher (90%).

Fifteen percent (15%) of the women interviewed stated that they served as their heads of household. These women were more likely to report temporary or contractual employment by a household member as the main source of income within their households, but were also more likely than women in male-headed households to have full-time employment. Moreover, working women were more likely to report lower household incomes than women that were not working – suggesting that the nature of the work available to refugees is characterized by underemployment.

1 Syria Regional Refugee Response, Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/settlement.php?id=176>. Note this number represents the number of refugees registered with UNHCR.

2 Syria Regional Refugee Response, Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/settlement.php?id=176>. Note this number represents the number of refugees registered with UNHCR.

3 UN Population Fund (UNFPA), "Women and Girls in the Syria Crisis: UNFPA Response, Facts and Figures," March 2015, 11. <http://www.unfpa.org/resources/women-and-girls-syria-crisis-unfpa-response-facts-and-figures>

4 UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal: Regional Overview.

5 REACH, "Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in Camps, March 2015," [http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach\\_irq\\_mnsa\\_of\\_syrian\\_refugees\\_in\\_camps\\_march2015\\_3.pdf](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_irq_mnsa_of_syrian_refugees_in_camps_march2015_3.pdf), 40.

Despite these factors, very few women reported receiving financial assistance, with the exception of women in Domiz 1 camp who reported receiving high levels of assistance. Women also said that whatever assistance they did receive was inconsistent and not substantial, with a few mentioning that they had only received assistance when they arrived in Iraq and nothing thereafter. Nearly three-quarters of women (74%) reported being unaware of employment assistance services, and in cases where they were aware that these existed, they reported substantial barriers to accessing it, primary that they didn't know where to access services or did not have sufficient information on them.

For many women, the humanitarian aid services they received only partially met their needs, in particular in terms of financial and employment assistance. Many women requested direct outreach from aid organizations to help them learn about the services available and where they could find them, stating that this would be more reliable than receiving information through word of mouth from neighbors and extended family members within the community, as is the current practice.

Women reported a number of coping strategies to deal with the financial insecurity they experience. For many, they borrowed money informally from family and neighbors, or through store credits from local shops. Some women indicated compromising the quality of food they bought for themselves and their households to save money, while others depended on their children to supplement household income.

When asked to compare their role in household decisions now to before the Syria conflict, the majority of women (57%) reported that they now had a larger decision-making role, though some said they did not feel they had the capacity to take on this responsibility. Further, women did not view increased responsibility as the result of a decision they made themselves, but instead viewed it as critical for the survival of their families. A few women reported that increased responsibilities, in particular women working outside of the home, gave Syrian refugee women a bad reputation in Iraq.

Most women (70%) believed that female Syrian refugees could serve as leaders in their community, and even more (79%) believed that men would accept female community leaders. However, only 0.4% of women said that they had taken on a new community leadership role since the conflict in Syria, illustrating perhaps the gap between aspirations and reality.

Safety was reported as a concern; one fifth of women (19%) said that violence against women (VAW) has increased since the onset of the Syria crisis, with half of women (47%) stating that VAW is an issue, and an additional 12% stating that it is a major issue. This was particularly true in camp settings, where 78% of women said VAW is an issue in the Syrian refugee community in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and 41% said it happens very often. Almost all (89%) of women who said VAW was an issue, reported that it occurs most often in the home and was therefore a private matter to be handled without outsider involvement or reporting. This opinion was driven largely by cultural norms and a sense that in-country security services would not respond positively or adequately to Syrian refugees. Some women (21%) were aware of VAW prevention and response services, but only 3% had accessed them, mainly because they didn't know where to access them or that they were available. Additionally, there was a clear call from women for more and better mental health services.

This study highlights many of the key concerns for female Syrian refugees living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and the underlying gender inequalities that contribute to and perpetuate their lives in displacement. In response to these findings, the report makes the following recommendations:

1. Ensure that the **approach to gender mainstreaming in humanitarian and resilience programming is one that prioritizes both women's access to services and women's empowerment**, by ensuring that programs address issues of women's access (equal access of services), while also tackling gender discrimination and inequalities, combining service delivery with support to women's leadership, and including efforts to broker meaningful dialogue

around gender inequalities, violence prevention and advocacy to promote gender equal legal reform.

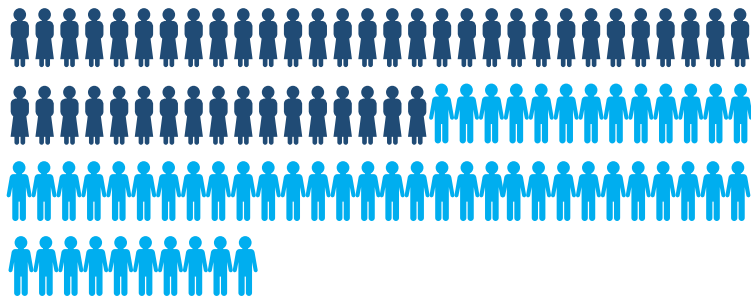
2. Increase **access to employment services and financial resources for female Syrian refugees, actively targeting female refugees for livelihoods programming**. Ensuring that at least 30% of livelihoods opportunities go to women and girls is the minimal threshold to demonstrate commitment and support women's empowerment and recovery;
3. Continue to **support interactive, safe spaces for female Syrian refugees to meet, network and socialize**, not only as a strategy for empowerment, but also to enhance reporting of gender based violence, and use of GBV services. Within these spaces, increase the availability and quality of psycho-social support services;

4. Continue to ensure **information sharing and awareness raising on available services**, pairing approaches that utilize technology with those that are based on word of mouth;

5. Promote **accountability for violence against women**, supporting the judicial system to investigate and prosecute cases of violence against women within the refugee community; and,

6. Recognize the positive correlation between the strength of women's movements and organizations and gender equal societies, and **invest in women led organizations (Syrian and Iraqi)** as a key driver of short-term and long-term social equality.

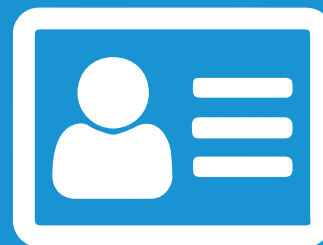
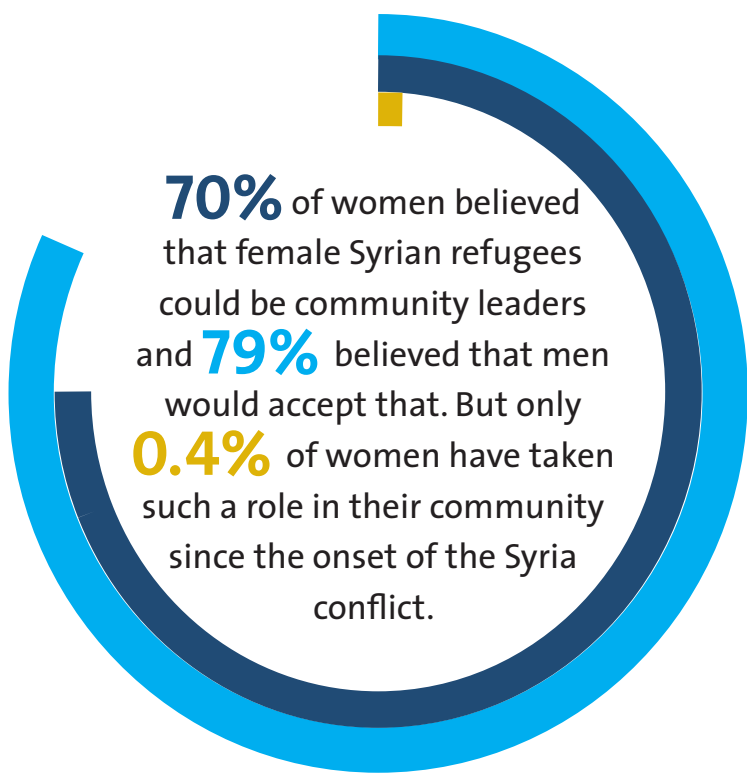
**97%** of Syrian refugees in Iraq are Kurdish, and reside in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. **47%** are female.



**57%** of women had now a larger decision-making role than before displacement.

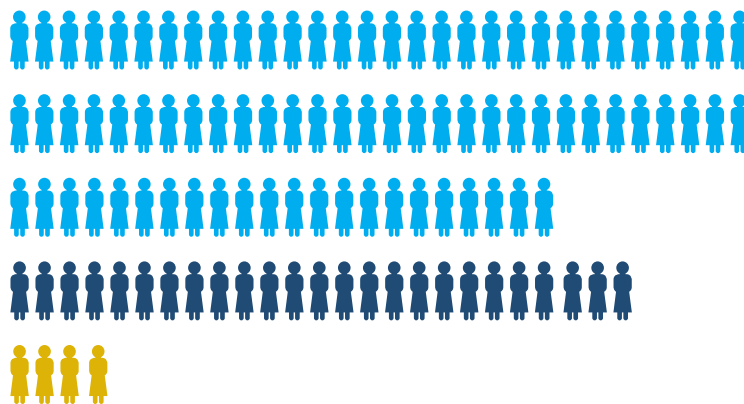


**70%** of women believed that female Syrian refugees could be community leaders and **79%** believed that men would accept that. But only **0.4%** of women have taken such a role in their community since the onset of the Syria conflict.



**78%** of women have a Kurdish residency permit, necessary for legal employment, free movement and access to important civil documentation.

**82%** of women reported economic insecurity as a primary concern. While **25%** expressed their desire to work, only **4%** of women had access to any form of employment.



**19%** of women said that violence against women (VAW) has increased since the onset of the Syria crisis.



# OVERVIEW OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS IN IRAQ

The vast majority (97%) of the 249,641<sup>6</sup> Syrian refugees in Iraq are of Kurdish origin and are residing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, distributed between camps (37%) and non-camp urban and rural residences (63%), with concentrated numbers in Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah.<sup>7</sup> The largest camp is Domiz 1, with over 33,000 registered residents, representing 36% of camp-residing refugees in Iraq.<sup>8</sup> Nearly half (47%) of registered Syrian refugees in Iraq are female.<sup>9</sup> In this region, fewer than one in ten refugee households are headed by women, with slightly higher proportions in camps (9%)<sup>9</sup> than outside (6%).<sup>10</sup>

In addition to Syrian refugees, Iraq has over 2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs),<sup>10</sup> of which, 40% now reside in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.<sup>11</sup> Since the beginning of the Syria crisis, the population of the autonomous region has increased by 28%. This has put further strain on aid groups addressing refugee concerns, and has led to large numbers of out-of-camp Syrian refugees requesting to be relocated into camps.<sup>12</sup> Beyond this, Iraq's unsettled history and ongoing experience with internal and external violence has left 8.7 million people across Iraq in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>13</sup>

The Kurdistan Regional government's rights-based policy of providing access to health, welfare, economic security, and employment opportunity to all living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has resulted in an over-stretched national and local service infrastructure, which lacked capacity even before the Syria crisis.

Camps are stretched to their limits, and overpopulation has led to concerns about management of services, particularly those related to nutrition, and about spread of disease. The regional Kurdish government asserts that providing services and rights to refugees has created cohesion, stability, and sustainability.<sup>16</sup>

The refugee crisis has also worsened the macroeconomic situation in the Region, with the poverty rate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq more than doubling between 2013 and 2016 (6% to 14%).<sup>17</sup> This is exacerbated by an increase in commodity prices to meet increasing demand.<sup>18</sup> On a microeconomic level, competition for jobs and shelter has sharply risen, unemployment jumped from 3% in 2013 to 14% in 2016,<sup>19</sup> and according to the Kurdistan Regional Government, this has sometimes led to exploitation and even petty crime.<sup>20</sup>

6 Syria Regional Refugee Response, Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/settlement.php?id=176>. Note this number represents the number of refugees registered with UNHCR.

7 UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal: Regional Overview

8 UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal: Regional Overview.

9 UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal: Regional Overview.

10 UN OCHA: Iraq. <https://www.unocha.org/iraq>.

11 KRG Ministry of Interior's Joint Crisis Coordination Centre, "JCC statement on the alarming situation of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan region," April 26, 2018, <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=56760>.

12 UNHCR, "3RP: Iraq Monthly Update July 2017, Protection," July 2017, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=14192>.

13 UN OCHA: Iraq. <https://www.unocha.org/iraq>.

14 REACH, "Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in Camps, March 2015." [http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach\\_irq\\_msna\\_of\\_syrian\\_refugees\\_in\\_camps\\_march2015\\_3.pdf](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_irq_msna_of_syrian_refugees_in_camps_march2015_3.pdf), 14.

15 REACH. "Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in Host Communities, April 2015." [http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach\\_irq\\_msna\\_of\\_syrian\\_refugees\\_in\\_host\\_communities\\_april2015\\_1.pdf](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_irq_msna_of_syrian_refugees_in_host_communities_april2015_1.pdf), 13.

16 KRG Ministry of Interior's Joint Crisis Coordination Centre, "JCC statement on the alarming situation of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan region," April 26, 2018, <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=56760>.

17 KRG MOI JCC, "JCC Statement."

18 World Bank. "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Assessing the Economic and Social Impact of the Syrian Conflict and ISIS." 2015. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-0548-6. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/21637/9781464805486.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>.

19 KRG MOI JCC, "JCC Statement."

20 Kurdistan Regional Government, "Impact of the Refugee Population on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," <http://cabinet.gov.krd/p/page.aspx?l=12&p=484&h=1&t=407>

# OVERVIEW OF WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN OUR STUDY

## Quantitative Study

As 97% of Syrian refugees that have been displaced in Iraq reside in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, this was the geographical focus of the study – covering both refugees in camp and non-camp settings. In addition, because of interviewer safety concerns at the time of the study, all interviews of those in non-camp settings were conducted in urban or semi-urban areas. The study included 500 female Syrian refugees living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, selected to be broadly representative of what is known of the Syrian refugee population in terms of geographic distribution and age at the time of the study. Further details on sampling are included in the Methodological Appendix.

- The average woman in this study was 33 years old. All women were between 18 and 70 years of age.
- Almost half (48%) of women were located in Erbil; one quarter (24%) were in Dohuk (non-camp); 20% were in Domiz 1 Camp; and 8% were located in Sulaymaniyah.
- Six percent arrived in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq within the year prior to the date of the study (February 2018); 19% arrived between one and three years ago; 50% arrived between three and five years ago; and 24% arrived in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq more than five years ago.
- The largest proportion of women surveyed came from Al Hasakah, Syria (67%). Others came from Aleppo (19%), Damascus (10%), and Al Raqqah (3%).
- A plurality of women had completed primary school (48%); while 28% had completed less than primary school; and 22% were illiterate. Eighteen percent (18%) had completed secondary school or higher, and 6% had received a university degree.
- The majority were married and living with their partner (89%), though some had a partner living elsewhere (3%), were divorced (1%), or widowed (2%). Four percent were single, increasing to 12% among 18-24-year-olds.
- Most women reported that their husband was the head of their household (70%), with another 8% reporting that they and their husband jointly headed the household. Fifteen percent (15%) reported that they were the head of the household. Where their parents were head of their household (3%), women were mostly young and unmarried.
- On average, women reported that their total household size was five members, including themselves. For the purposes of the study, “household” was defined as family members or close relatives who live under the same roof and share meals. This varied substantially from single person to 14-person households.
- The average number of school-aged dependents per household was two, with a range from none to

nine. The number of dependents per household was lower in Dohuk (1) and in Domiz 1 Camp (1) than in Sulaymaniyah (2) and Erbil (2).

- More than three quarters (78%) of women had regular access to a mobile phone for their own personal use, 21% said that they had regular access to a shared phone, and 1% said that they had no access to a phone at all.
- Ninety percent (90%) of women said that they had UNHCR registration. Those in Sulaymaniyah had the lowest proportion of UNHCR registrants (38%), compared to those in Dohuk (94%), Domiz 1 (99%), and Erbil (94%). In addition, 84% of women had an ID from another country, 78% had an Iraqi Kurdish residency permit, and 15% had a passport in their possession.

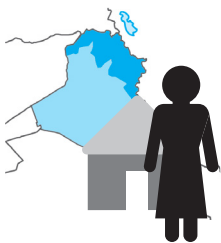
### Qualitative Study

The qualitative portion of this study included in-depth interviews with five women living in Erbil, selected to represent a range of circumstances based on age, education, marital status, and number and age of dependents. Participants included:<sup>21</sup>

- Amira: A 47-year-old unmarried woman, living with her brother, sister-in-law, and their four children. Amira’s family arrived in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 2013 and their monthly household income

is 700,000 IQD (\$589.23 USD). She has a primary school education.

- Isra: A 19-year-old salon worker with an 8th grade education who lives with her mother, her four siblings, and her sister-in-law. Her household arrived in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 2014. Their monthly household income is 240,000 IQD (\$202.02 USD).
- Shilan: a 24-year-old married mother living with her husband and their infant daughter as well as with her brother-in-law and his family. Their monthly household income is 355,000 IQD (\$298.82 USD). Shilan has a high school education, and she arrived in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq from Syria in 2013.
- Jihan: a 27-year-old married mother of three children with a university education who lives with her husband and children. She was a primary school teacher in Syria but is unemployed in Erbil. Her household arrived from Syria in 2012. Her household income is 240,000 IQD (\$202.02 USD) each month.
- Hana: a 38-year-old married woman with four children, living with them and her husband in Erbil. Hana has a university education and now teaches at an elementary school for refugee children. Her family arrived in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 2015 and their monthly household income is 355,000 IQD (\$298.82 USD).

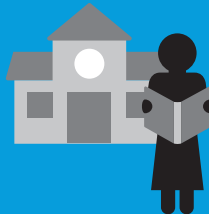


The average age of the **500 female refugees**, living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, was **33** and **15%** of them headed their households.



**48%** of women reside in Erbil; **24%** in Dohuk; **20%** were in Domiz 1 Camp; and **8%** in Sulaymaniyah.

**6%** of women had received a university degree, **18%** secondary or higher education, **48%** primary education and **11%** were illiterate.



**67%** of women came from Al Hasakah, **19%** from Aleppo, **10%** from Damascus and **3%** from Al Raqqah.



# RIGHTS AND LEGAL STATUS

While Iraq is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Government has issued two primary domestic legislative instruments regarding the protection and needs of refugees, which outline issues such as the right to work and to access the same health and education services as Iraqis: Act No 51 of 1971 (the Political Refugee Act<sup>22</sup>), and Law 21-2010.<sup>23</sup> In 1971, the Government of Iraq provided refugees the same access to “medical, cultural, and social services”<sup>24</sup> as Iraqi citizens. In 2010, Law 21-2010 established the Ministry of Migration and Displacement, which provides assistance and services to both internally displaced persons and refugees inside Iraq.

Under the 1971 law, only refugees defined as ‘political refugees’ are granted these rights in Iraq,<sup>25</sup> though there is no publicly-available information on how many have received that designation. The Government of Iraq is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and does not recognize all those who have fled from persecution in their home country as refugees.

Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are required to register with UNHCR and the Department of Displacement and Migration, which entails the receipt of an asylum seeker certificate valid for one year and a temporary, free of charge, residency permit, renewable after one year. This documentation gives Syrian refugees many of the same rights as an Iraqi Kurdistan citizen, including the right to work<sup>26</sup> and to education,<sup>27</sup> and freedom of access within the Kurdish region.<sup>28</sup>

Outside of the Kurdish region, while the Iraqi government grants Syrian refugees free access to education,

they are not allowed to work,<sup>29</sup> register businesses, own land, or open bank accounts, all of which require Iraqi national documentation.<sup>30</sup> Seventy-eight percent (78%) of women interviewed for this study had a Kurdish residency permit, which allows legal employment, free movement, and access to important civil documentation (such as marriage and birth certificates)<sup>31</sup> in the Kurdish region of Iraq.

There seems to be a correlation between income and possession of this permit, with the poorest interviewed (a household income of less than 350,000 IQD per month) less likely to have a residency permit (65%) than those whose household income was higher (90%).

While there are stark geographical differences, 90% percent of women interviewed had a UNHCR ID, similar to a 2015 research that found that 96% of non-camp households had UNCHR registration.<sup>32</sup> Whether or not women were registered seems to be related mostly to location and, to a lesser extent, to time since arriving in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

22 *Iraq: Act No. 51 of 1971, The Political Refugee Act*, 10 April 1971, available at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/560a498c4.html>.

23 Law 21-2010, *Al Waqa'a al Iraqyah*, vol. 4141, 1 Nov. 2010. Full text no longer available in English online.

24 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Iraq: Act No. 51 of 1971, The Political Refugee Act,” Refworld, accessed September 21, 2017, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/560a498c4.html>.

25 G Sadek, “Legal Status of Refugees: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq,” Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugees/legal-status-refugees.php>.

26 Sadek.

27 Syria Needs Analysis Project, “Legal Status of Individuals Fleeing Syria,” June 2013, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/legal\\_status\\_of\\_individuals\\_fleeing\\_syria.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/legal_status_of_individuals_fleeing_syria.pdf).

28 [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/legal\\_status\\_of\\_individuals\\_fleeing\\_syria.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/legal_status_of_individuals_fleeing_syria.pdf)

29 Syria Needs Analysis Project.

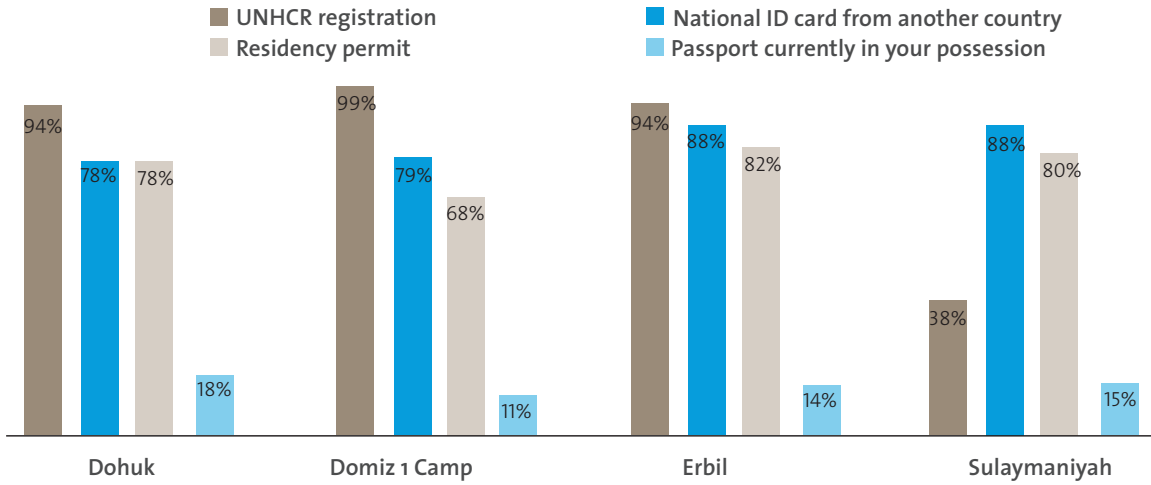
30 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “World Refugee Survey 2009 - Iraq,” Refworld, accessed September 21, 2017, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4a40d2a92.html>.

31 REACH, “Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in Camps, March 2015,” [http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach\\_irq\\_msna\\_of\\_syrian\\_refugees\\_in\\_camps\\_march2015\\_3.pdf](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_irq_msna_of_syrian_refugees_in_camps_march2015_3.pdf), 40.

32 REACH, “Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in Host Communities, April 2015,” 44.

FIGURE 1:

Documentation by Location



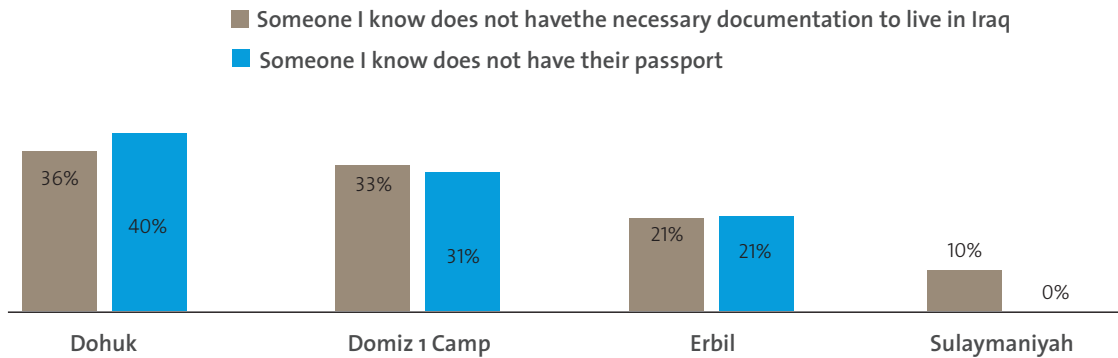
Only 38% of women in Sulaymaniyah were registered with UNHCR, compared to 94% in Dohuk and Erbil and 99% in Domiz 1. Those who arrived less than 3 years ago were less likely to be registered with UNHCR (83%); 95% of those who arrived in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq more than 3 years ago were registered. In the qualitative interviews, women mentioned that without registration, they were turned away from receiving aid.

**“We never got anything. They told us you didn’t register your names, so we cannot help you.” – Amira**

Despite relatively high rates of women possessing a Kurdish residency permit and UNHCR registration, one quarter (26%) of women knew someone who did not have the necessary documentation to live in Iraq, which may include a Kurdish residency permit. However, there was substantial regional variation in this number, with documentation issues reported most commonly in Dohuk and Domiz 1 Camp, as shown in Figure 2 below.

FIGURE 2:

Women Who Know Someone with Documentation Issues



# EMPLOYMENT, ECONOMIC SECURITY AND ENSURING LIVELIHOODS

Four-fifths (82%) of women in this study reported that they were unable to meet their and their households' basic needs. These sentiments were reflected in the in-depth interviews, where women said that they often had to make sacrifices or borrow money to get by.

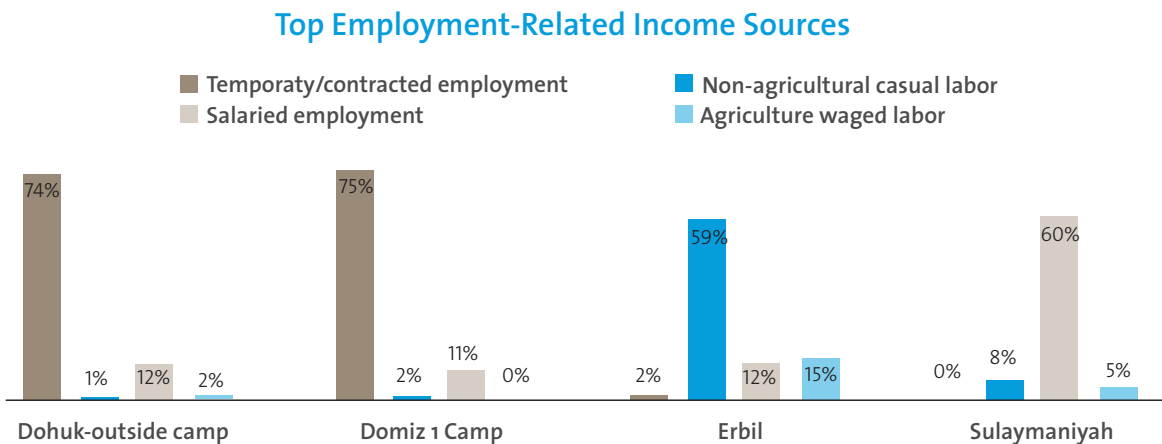
**I am obliged to borrow money to be able to buy what I need for the house and for my children. I am willing to do any work, even if it's below me, to improve my standard of living and fulfill my household needs.**  
– Jihan

When asked about the single greatest challenge they face, the majority of women responded that they did not have enough money to live (57%), demonstrating that income and livelihoods are a critical concern to most Syrian refugees.

## Income and Employment

Sources of income varied widely by geographic area, as shown in Figure 3 below. Across the population interviewed, the source of household income most commonly reported was temporary or contractual employment of any household member (34%), and non-agricultural casual labor was also common (30%). Full-time salaried employment as a main source of income among household members was less common (16%).

**FIGURE 3:**  
**Top Employment-Related Income Sources**

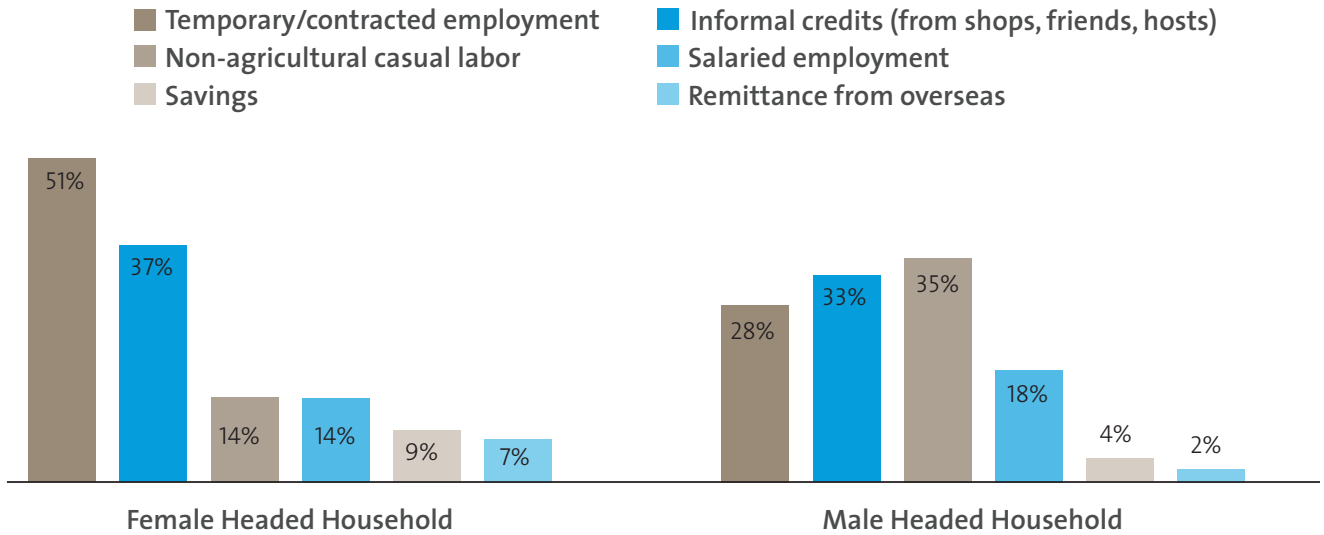


Sources of household income also varied substantially by the reported head of household. Fifteen percent (15%) of the women interviewed stated that they served as their heads of household. Women in female-headed households were more likely to report temporary or contractual employment as a main

income source, along with informal credits, use of savings, remittances, and sale of crops, than male-headed households, as shown in Figure 4 below. Women from female-headed households were also more likely to report that they themselves were employed full time.

FIGURE 4:

Top Income Sources



Four percent (4%) of women in this study said that they had full-time, part-time, or temporary work, while 34% of women reported temporary employment as a main source of household income, suggesting that in many families, other family members, and not the women themselves, are the main income earners. Of the 4% working, most of these women were located in Erbil, married, and had a primary education or less. Though most were married, the majority said that they were the sole head of their household and not their husband. Working women were also more likely to report lower household incomes than women that were not working – suggesting work as a coping mechanism for insufficient income. Working women also tended to say that they were happy with their current level of employment.

Nearly a quarter of women (24%) said that they wanted to work more than they currently do. This was also reflected in qualitative interviews, where women discussed the difficulties they and their family members had faced in finding adequate employment since arriving in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Many were unemployed or frustrated because they or their family members were unable to find work at all, or in the same field as they were employed in in Syria.

**“My husband had his own engineering office in Syria. He is a civil engineer. Here, he works as an employee in a company not related to his field. At the beginning, he was very upset but now he’s gotten used to his work.” – Hana**

This is unsurprising given that only 26% of women in this study said they were aware of employment assistance services, and just 5% had accessed them. Though more women in Erbil were aware of services (34%), there were no other notable differences across demographics.

Twenty percent (20%) of women said that they would like to access employment assistance services but are unable to do so, aligning with the quarter (25%) of women who would like to work more than they currently do. Over a third (35%) of women that said they wanted to access employment assistance but were unable to said this was because they did not know where to access such services, and 22% said it was because they didn’t know it was available. Other barriers to accessing this type of assistance were lack of childcare (11%) and not having connections to the organizations offering it (17%).

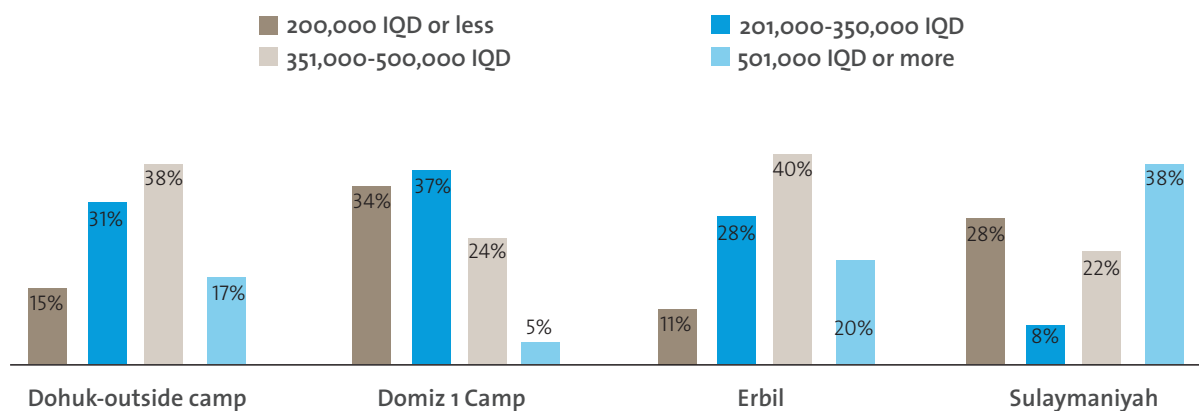
In the qualitative interviews, women reported that they were looking for jobs but not able to find them,

or were employed in less-than-ideal positions, indicating that employment assistance may be helpful.

**“There are no work permits. Our situation in Syria was much better, we had everything we needed, my children and I, because both my husband and I were working, but here there is no work, and no living.”**  
– Jihan

The legal minimum wage is 350,000 IQD per month in Iraq, recently raised from 250,000 IQD.<sup>33</sup> Nearly one half (47%) of women reported that, in total, their monthly household income was less than 350,000 IQD. Female-headed households were more likely to report household incomes of less than 350,000 IQD per month (53%) than male-headed households (47%).

Household incomes were substantially lower than average in camp settings (Domiz 1 Camp) than in non-camp settings, with 71% of women saying their household lived on less than 350,000 IQD per month. Women living outside of refugee camps reported higher household income levels, as shown in Figure 5 below. This aligns with previous findings that types of employment are more limited within camps,<sup>34</sup> as well as findings from other country contexts about the inability of refugees to earn income when living inside of formal camps. Though with the free provision of some basic necessities (primarily shelter and power) refugees are able to subsist on less.<sup>35</sup>



**FIGURE 5:**  
**Income**

Given that only half of households interviewed met the minimum wage threshold, it is unsurprising that the vast majority (82%) reported an inability to

meet basic needs, including providing adequate food for their family, paying housing costs, and educating children.

33 Economic Iraq, “Cabinet approves recommendation to set the minimum wage to 350 thousand dinars,” December 17, 2017, <http://en.economiciraq.com/2017/12/18/cabinet-approves-recommendation-to-set-the-minimum-wage-to-350-thousand-dinars/>.

34 REACH, “Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in Camps, March 2015,” 2, 17-18 and REACH, “Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in Host Communities, April 2015,” 1, 14-15.

35 World Humanitarian Summit. “Community Consultations On Humanitarian Aid: Findings From Consultations Within Syria And Among Syrian Refugees In Jordan.” Presented in Istanbul, Turkey: May 23-24, 2016. <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Communication%20with%20affected%20communities-Syria%20Country%20Report.pdf>.

**“We pay 200,000 IQD to rent this house and we cannot save any money, so we had to borrow some this month, because there are no jobs available, even for my brother.”** – Isra

Women spoke of a significant decrease in household income in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq compared to their household income in Syria, and noted that they had been more financially comfortable in Syria. They described changes in income-generating



responsibilities within their households as a result; this included women seeking works for the first time (4%), a family member seeking work outside of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) (8%), and relying on children, typically male, to contribute to household income (7%).

Fifteen percent (15%) reported having a family member accept unusual, high-risk, or socially degrading work to cope with financial difficulties. These family members were far more likely to be male (95%) than female. Women in qualitative interviews, however, did report that they or other family members had taken whatever jobs were available to help to support their families, no matter the personal or social consequences.

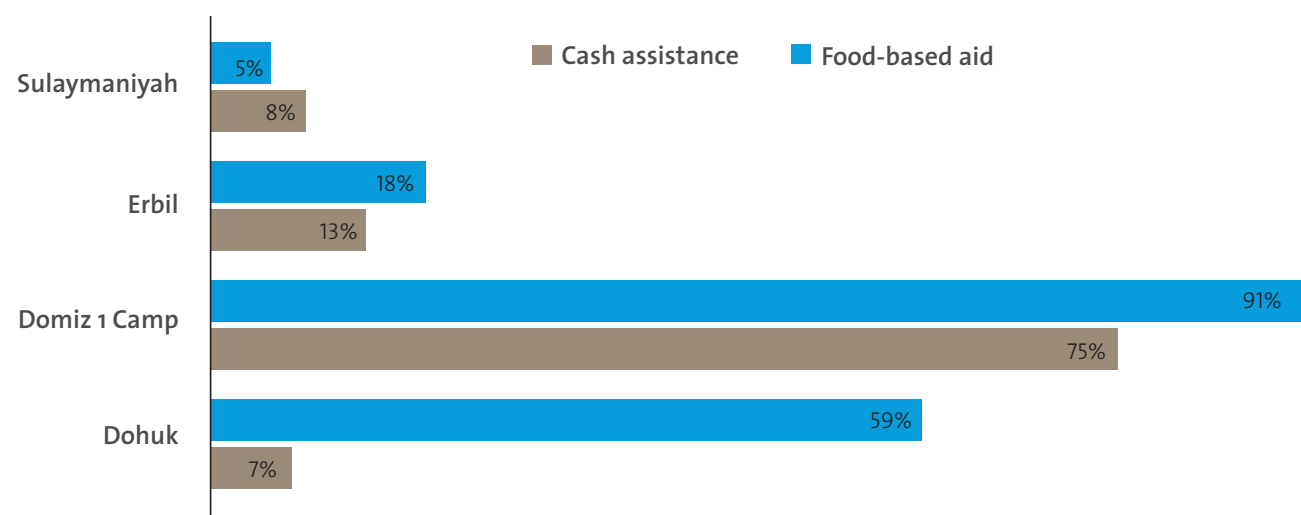
**“Our women work, and they come back at night tired. We need to work, because our financial situation is bad. But women working is not acceptable in this community, and I hear that people say that Syrian refugee women have a bad reputation.” - Amira**

## Cash-Based Assistance

While very few women (1%) reported aid as a major component of their household income, 24% of women said that they had accessed food-based aid (including cash transfers or vouchers for nutrition) and 41% said they had accessed cash-based assistance. This aligns with World Food Programme (WFP) reports that they provide cash-based transfers of \$19 USD per person per month to 56,000 Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, representing about a quarter of all registered Syrian refugees in the country.<sup>36</sup>

However, access to these services varied substantially by geographic location in this study. Those located in Domiz 1 Camp reporting much higher levels of access than those living in host communities, corroborating data from 2014 which found that 100% of households in Domiz 1 Camp receiving WFP vouchers had met or exceeded the threshold for acceptable food consumption.<sup>37</sup> This also aligns with earlier findings that in camps, refugees have lower income levels but higher levels of assistance.

**FIGURE 6:**  
**Access to Food and Cash Assistance**



In the qualitative interviews, some women reported receiving a few hundred dollars and some supplies

upon arriving in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but no financial assistance since then. Even women who

36 World Food Programme. “WFP Iraq Country Brief.” July 2017. [http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ep/wfp273367.pdf?\\_ga=2.204485968.1554388099.1505081542-1750603342.1502915762](http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ep/wfp273367.pdf?_ga=2.204485968.1554388099.1505081542-1750603342.1502915762).

37 REACH, “Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Camps: Kurdistan Region of Iraq,” Assessment Report, September 2014, [http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach\\_irq\\_kri\\_report\\_msnasyrianrefugeesincamps\\_september2014.pdf](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_irq_kri_report_msnasyrianrefugeesincamps_september2014.pdf), 2.

were aware of aid programs reported difficulty in accessing them, saying distribution was inconsistent and unpredictable.

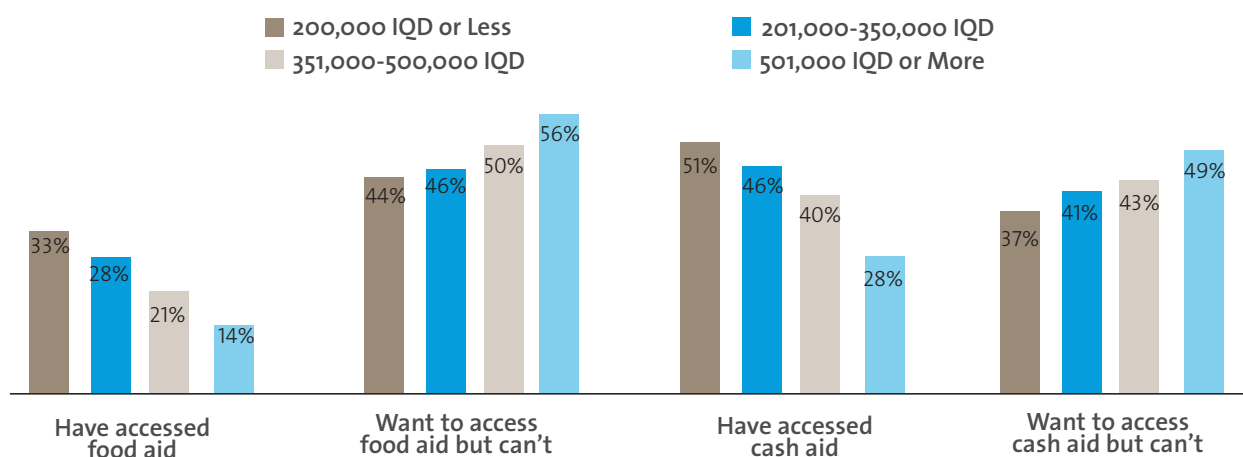
**“There are some families that receive 1,200 dollars four times, and some twice, and some not at all.”**  
- Hana

The majority of women (95% of women who accessed food-based aid and 93% of women who accessed cash assistance) said that their needs were at least partially met by these services. However, in Erbil numbers were

much lower (84% and 76%, respectively), perhaps speaking to the higher cost of living there.

Similarly, when asked what services they wanted to access but couldn't, a significant portion of women said food-based aid (49%), with cash-based assistance as the second most common answer (43%). As shown in Figure 7 below, for both food and cash-based assistance, those with higher incomes were less likely to report that they have accessed aid and more likely to report that they needed it. This suggests that targeting is based on income level and that even those with higher incomes have substantial unmet needs.

**FIGURE 7:**  
**Access to and Need for Food and Cash Assistance**



Female-headed households were significantly more likely to report having accessed cash assistance (62%) than male-headed household (37%). When analyzed against previously collected food security data – which finds that female-headed households continue to be more food insecure than male-headed households despite receiving disproportionately more food aid – this demonstrates the deep vulnerability that female-headed refugee households face in Iraq, and the importance of continuing to target them as a priority group.

Quantitative findings on financial coping mechanisms demonstrate the lengths women go to in order to try to make ends meet financially for their families, indicating that further assistance could have

a substantial impact on reducing reliance on negative coping mechanisms and on the quality of life for female-headed households.

### Meeting Household Needs on a Low Income

As noted above, 82% of women said they or their household had been unable to meet their basic needs since coming to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This number was higher in Duhok and Sulamaniyah (95%) and Domiz 1 Camp (92%) than it was in Erbil (70%). Female-headed households were significantly more likely to report an inability to meet basic needs (96%) than women living with a male head of household (79%).

Many women described borrowing regularly as necessary to cope with inadequate income. Of the women who said they were unable to meet basic needs, more than three-quarters (77%) reported that their household had to borrow money. This was less common for women who were unmarried (68%).

**“Our financial situation is very bad, we do not even have money for rent, my brother lent us money to pay the rent. When we work, we must pay him back. He has been living here for seven years but he too does not have a job, and we have to pay him back within a month or two.” – Jihan**

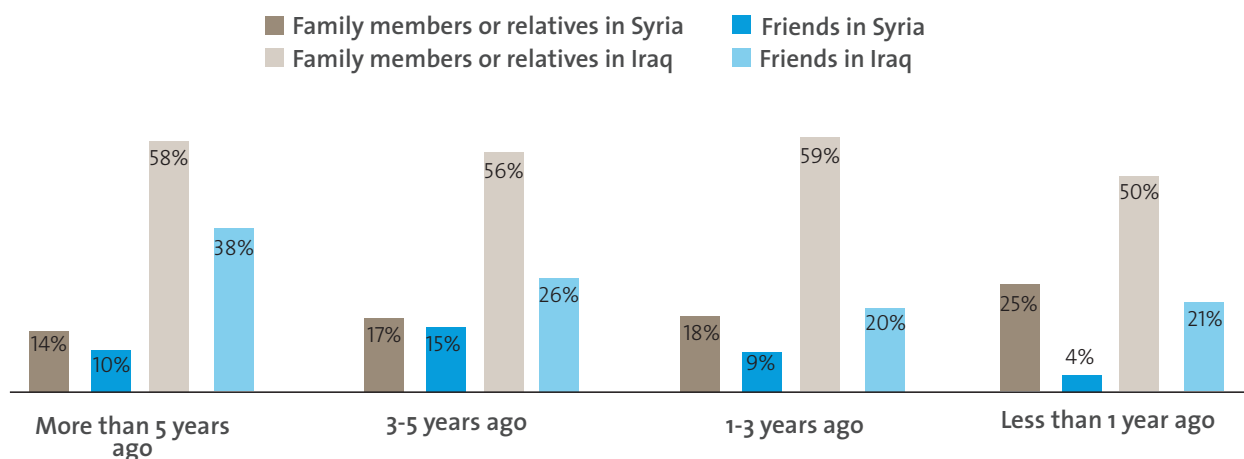
When they borrowed money, half (48%) borrowed from family members or friends in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Borrowing from family was most

common among those living in Erbil (75%). Another 28% borrowed money from friends living in Iraq, 17% borrowed from relatives living in Syria, and 6% borrowed from friends in Syria.

**“My husband and I borrowed a lot of money from his brothers because they have the Iraqi passports and their wives are Iraqi, so they are more settled physically and financially.” – Hana**

Length of stay in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq appears related to the borrowing sources available, as shown in Figure 8 below. As those that had been in Iraq longer were more likely to borrow from sources inside the country than sources in Syria, this likely speaks to the foundation of support networks, which take time to establish in a new country.

**FIGURE 8:**  
**Borrowing Source by Time Since Arriving in Iraq**

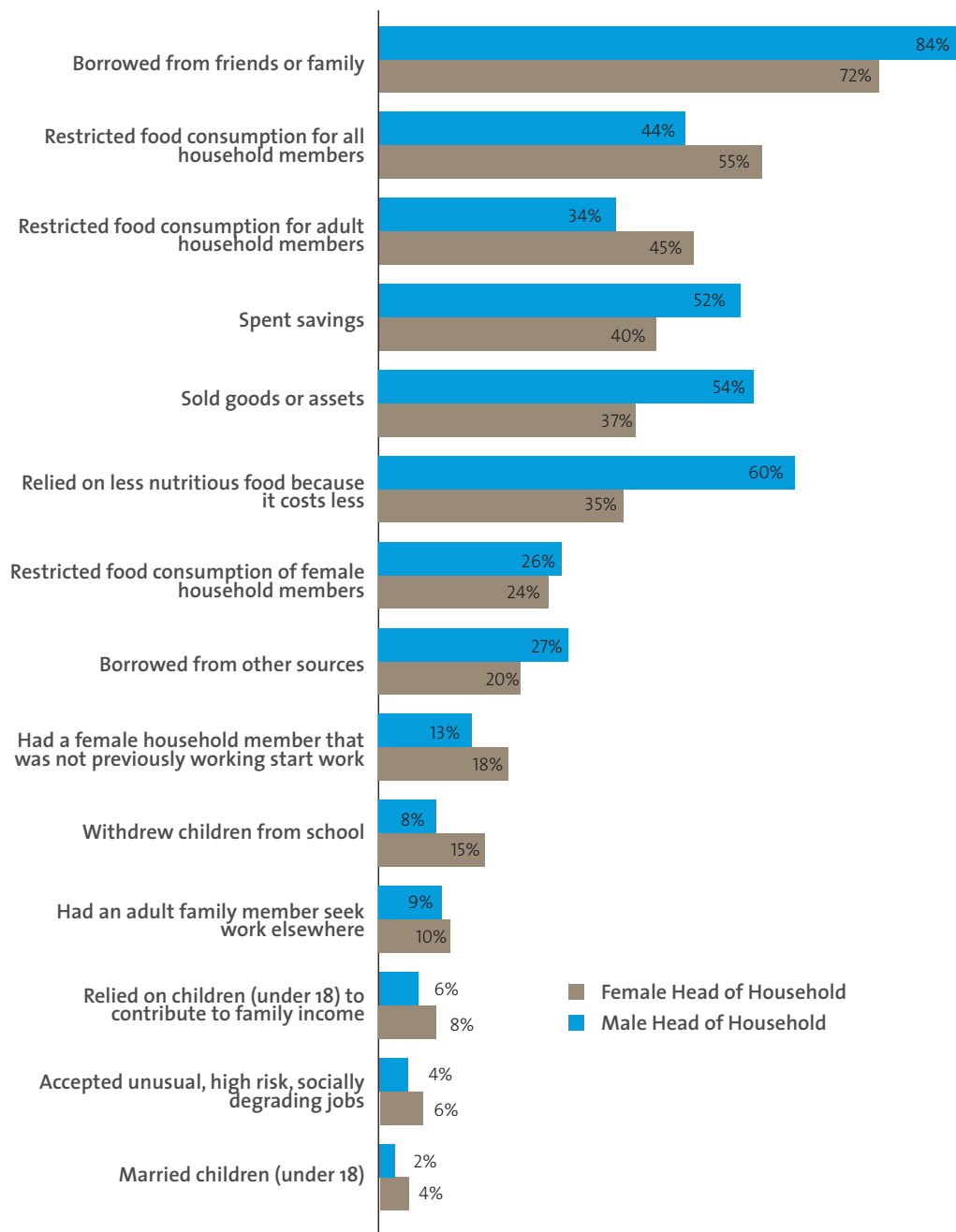


Nearly a third (32%) of women reported their household had relied on informal credits from shops, friends, and hosts as a main source of income in the past 60 days. This was more common among women in Erbil (46%) than in Dohuk (16%), Domiz 1 Camp (22%) and Sulaymaniyah (22%). In the qualitative interviews, women also reported that buying on credit was a common way to make ends meet.

In addition to monetary coping mechanisms, women also used other means such as food or employment to cope with not being able to meet their basic needs. Often, these choices differed based on the sex of the head of household, as shown in Figure 9 below.

**FIGURE 9:**

**Coping Mechanisms of Those Who Report Being Unable to Meet Basic Needs**



As above, food-based coping mechanisms were also a common theme in qualitative interviews, where several women reported being unable to fully meet the nutrition needs of their family, resorting to buying food on credit and restricting adult food intake. These sacrifices were often made for children, whether to

help save money for children’s education, or so that children would have more to eat.

**“I prevent myself from eating so I can save the money for my brother’s children to go to school, because their future depends on it. I don’t mind doing any work to**

**ensure that the children get an education. For me, I don't consider my own future.” – Amira**

However, this was not the only way in which children were impacted by their household's inability to meet basic needs. Seven percent (7%) of women who could not meet their basic needs said they relied on children to supplement household income; most often these were male children. Relatedly, women also said that they had withdrawn children from school (10%), often because they couldn't afford the fees or so that children could earn an income. This is supported by previous research which showed that over three-quarters of Syrian refugee children in Iraq work to support their families.<sup>38</sup> In addition to relying on children to contribute to household income, 3% of women reported arranging marriages for their underage children as a mechanism for coping with the inability to meet the basic needs of the household. Of these, women tended to report that female children were the ones to be married, rather than a small number who reported male children.

**“My young brother, who is 10 years old, is a student, but we made him leave school as he was offered a**

**job paying 2,000 IQD daily. However, he left his job because he was required to lift heavy weights and it was difficult for him to do so.” – Isra**

Where children were withdrawn from school, it was more likely to be the male children (48%) than female (25%) or both male and female (17%). This is perhaps because male children are more likely to contribute to household income, while female children are more likely to contribute to the unpaid household economy. These findings align with previous studies which state that while the overall student population of Syrian refugee in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is 48% female, girls are more likely than boys to attend secondary school.<sup>39</sup>

Despite this, women in qualitative interviews spoke about the importance of children's education, though some had been unable to complete their own schooling, either due to family restrictions or the need to contribute to the household income.

**“I left school to be able to live and work but there is no work.” - Isra**



**57%** did not have enough money to live. **34%** had temporary or contractual employment of any household member as the primary source of household income, and **30%** reported non-agricultural casual labor.

**82%**

said economic insecurity is the primary concern for them.



There seems to be a correlation between income and possession of the Kurdish residency permit, with the poorest interviewed less likely to have a residency permit (**65%**) than those with higher household income (**90%**).



Only **4%** of women reported that they had access to full-, part-time, or temporary work even though nearly a quarter reported wanting to work in order to be able to contribute to household income.

38 UNICEF, "Assessment of the Situation of Child Labour among Syrian Refugee Children in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," 2014, cited in Save the Children, "Small Hands, Heavy Burden: How the Syrian Conflict is Driving More Children into the Workforce" 2015, <http://childrenofsyria.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/CHILD-LABOUR.pdf>.

39 UNHCR, "Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP): Iraq 2017-2018," <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/IRAQ-3RP-Regional-Refugee-Resilience-Plan-2017-2018.pdf>, 39.

# WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE HOUSEHOLD AND THE COMMUNITY

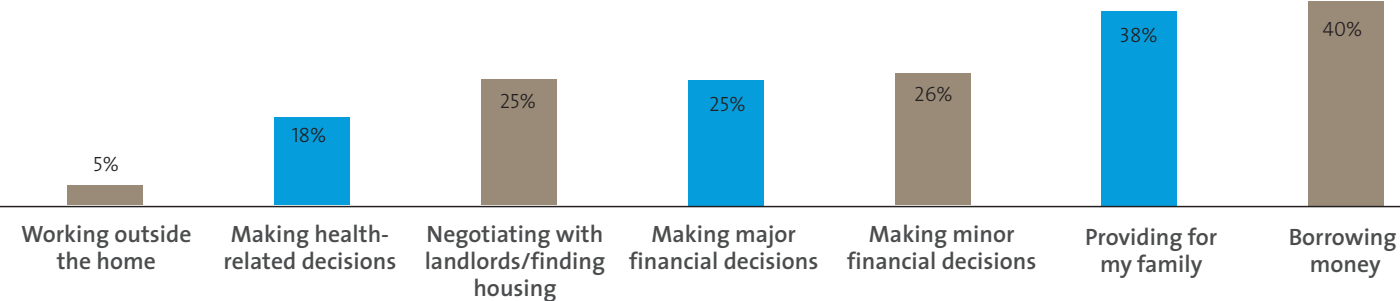
## Role in the Household

Women reported being more likely to have a role in general family decisions than in financial decisions in the household. When asked about their role in household decision-making, two thirds (65%) of women reported that they made family-related decisions together with their spouse, and another 8% reported that they themselves were exclusively responsible for these kinds of decisions.

Financial decisions were more likely to be made solely by the male head of household (43%), though 41% of women reported that they and their spouse made financial decisions jointly, and 10% said that these decisions were theirs alone. Of these women who were the primary financial decision-maker, the majority - two-thirds (67%) - were also the sole head of their household.

When asked to compare their role in household decisions now to before the Syria conflict, the majority of women (57%) reported that they now had a larger role, with 32% reporting that nothing had changed and 11% reporting that their role had decreased. This may be related to new responsibilities around providing for their families, including interacting with aid and service providers, as can be seen in Figure 10 below.

**FIGURE 10:**  
**New Responsibilities Women Report Taking on Compared to Before the Syria Crisis**



This aligns with qualitative findings, where women expressed that they had more responsibility now than they did before the Syria crisis. In general, women found this increase in responsibility to be out of need alone, and was not something that they necessarily wanted.

**“I did not use to work in Syria, but here we need to work, because our responsibilities are more, and our income is less.” - Amira**

Despite not always claiming responsibility for decision-making, the majority of women (62%) felt that

they could influence decisions that were made in their households, and an additional 25% said they probably could. Women who reported heading their household, or serving as joint heads of household with their husband, tended to feel more strongly that women could influence household decisions (73% and 78%, respectively) than women whose husband was the head of their household (60%).

In the qualitative interviews, some women echoed this, saying that they took part in making household decisions. However, others felt that their family's choices were not truly decisions that they made, but rather were dictated to them by their financial constraints.

**“These decisions are beyond our control, because we are governed by our financial situation.” – Jihan**

### Role in the Community

A large proportion of women interviewed said that women are generally able to influence decisions made in the community (76%), although more women (89%) said that men are able to do so. In the qualitative study, women reported that they did not know of women participating in the community, both due to social convention and because of domestic responsibilities.

**“Women handle household affairs like nurturing, helping with homework, and organizing the home. I do not think woman refugees have any social status in the community in Erbil.” - Hana**

Most women (70%) believed that female Syrian refugees could serve as leaders in their community, and even more (79%) believed that men would accept female community leaders. However, only 0.4% of women said that they had taken on a new community leadership role since the conflict in Syria.

In contrast, in the qualitative interviews, women typically felt that men would not be accepting of women in leadership roles, and that even if Syrian men were to allow women to be leaders in the community, there would be financial, societal, cultural, and logistical barriers for women. Many felt that they lack the

education, funds, and connections to succeed in leadership positions in the community.

**“I have not heard of a woman in a leadership position in the Syrian refugee community. This is because it is not their position, due to cultural differences. I would like to be a leader but it's difficult for me, because I don't know these organizations, I don't know anybody here, I don't even work, I don't know if women leaders can influence society.” – Jihan**

### Freedom of Movement

In qualitative interviews, many women reported that they had less freedom to move around in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq than they had in Syria. For some, this was related to not having the money to get to places, and they reported that this impacted men as much as women. However, some issues mentioned related specifically to issues of gender dynamics and gender equalities, as women stated that they could not travel unaccompanied or leave the house at night because they had faced judgments based on their style of clothing, and felt vulnerable as refugees.

**“In Syria we were better off, and we used to feel safe walking in the street. Nobody used to look at us, but here they give us strange looks, and I feel betrayed.” – Jihan**

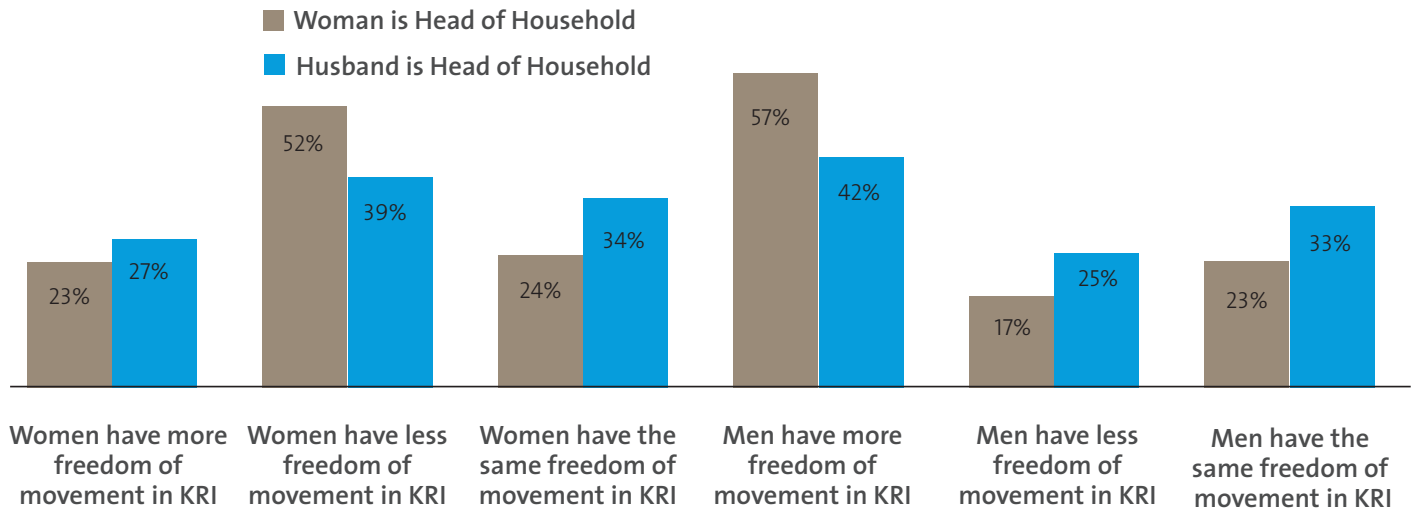
These insights aligned with findings in the quantitative study; when compared to before the Syria conflict, 40% of women felt that women had less freedom of movement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but 45% felt that men had more.

**“Men have more freedom than women here and in Syria. As for women's freedom, it was better in Syria.” – Shilan**

Women that said they were head of their household were more likely to say that, when compared to before the Syria crisis, men had more freedom of movement than they used to, while women had less, as shown in Figure 11.

**FIGURE 11:**

**Women’s Perceived Comparative Freedom of Movement of Men and Women (compared to in Syria before Crisis)**



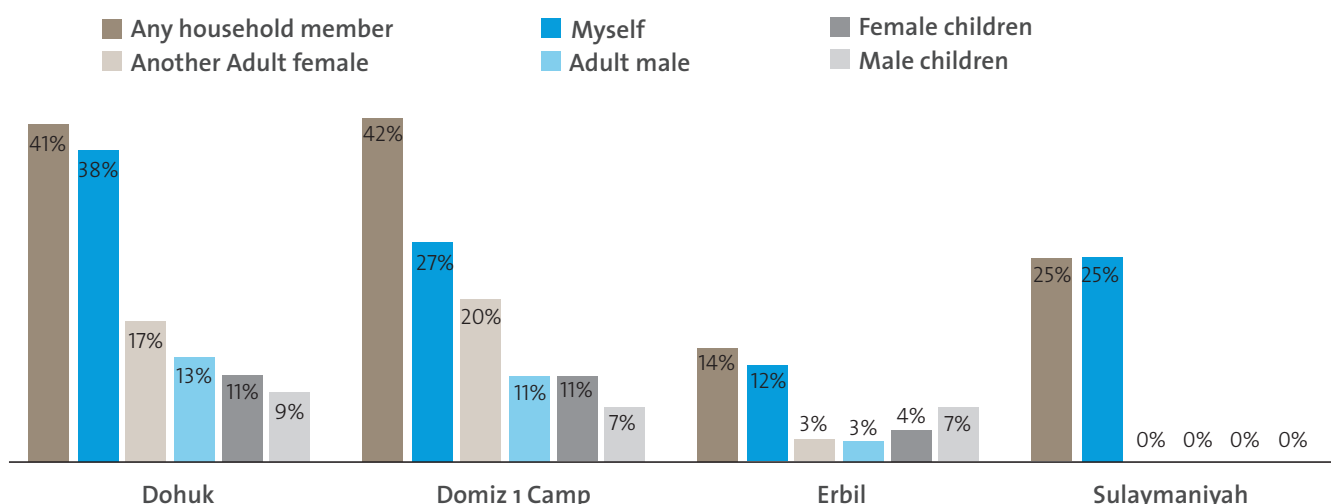
These insights also align with findings around access to transportation services, where 91% of women said that they had accessed transportation related services while in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The notable exception to this was in Sulamanyah, where only 50% of women said they have accessed transportation services, perhaps pointing a gap in service availability. Eight percent (8%) of women reported that being unable to afford transportation kept them from accessing services that they needed, with some women reporting that their access to services would be enabled by more convenient locations (15%) or mobile service delivery (8%).

In addition to structural barriers, one-quarter (26%) of women reported that a perceived lack of safety reduced the movement of at least one household member, though a relatively small number of women reported experiencing safety issues (covered further in the Safety and Security section below). Restriction of movement due to safety issues was highest in Dohuk (42%) and Domiz 1 Camp (42%), and lowest in Erbil (15%), and more likely to affect female household members, as shown in Figure 12 below.



FIGURE 12:

### Reduction in Household Members' Freedom of Movement



Restriction of free movement was also more of an issue for unmarried women, with 34% of single, divorced, or widowed women reporting that they had restricted movement.

## Safety and Security

One fifth of women (19%) reported that violence against women (VAW) has increased in displacement since the onset of the Syria crisis, with over half of women stating that VAW is an issue, and an additional 12% stating that it is a major issue. Responses also suggest a prevalence of sexual violence in camp settings. Women reported that VAW most commonly happens within the home, and findings suggest that VAW continues to be seen as a private issue. One-quarter (26%) of women reported that safety and security concerns reduced the movement of, primarily, women.

When women were asked if they had experienced any type of security issues, less than 1% (just four women) reported that they or someone in their household had

experienced something in the preceding six months.<sup>40</sup> The safety issues experienced included verbal harassment, theft or robbery, and community violence or disputes.

Women reported that when cases of violence or harassment occurred, whether verbal or physical, they were not often reported to authorities, both because Syrian refugees were afraid that they would face negative repercussions and that there would be no punishment for perpetrators, largely driven by the perception that Syrian refugees do not enjoy the same rights as Iraqi citizens in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

One woman who had experienced verbal harassment said she did not report it because she feared backlash, or that she would be stigmatized as having done something to warrant the unwelcomed attention. Another told a story of her brother being killed by an Iraqi family in a car accident. She said that her family did not report the accident or his death, because no resolution would come from such a report.

<sup>40</sup> Underreporting on violence against women is well documented. Given the methodology of this study (relatively short, one-time interviews) it is not a surprising finding that over half stated that violence against women is an issue, but 1% stated it was an issue for them or someone they knew.

**“I did not do anything because I was afraid, but if I were in Syria I would have complained about him.”**  
– Isra

**“God forbid, if someone attacks me or abuses me, I would report it to the security officials, because this is my right and I would not allow anyone to exploit me just because I am a refugee, and the law is the law and I know my rights. Sometimes, they might be punished.”** - Amira

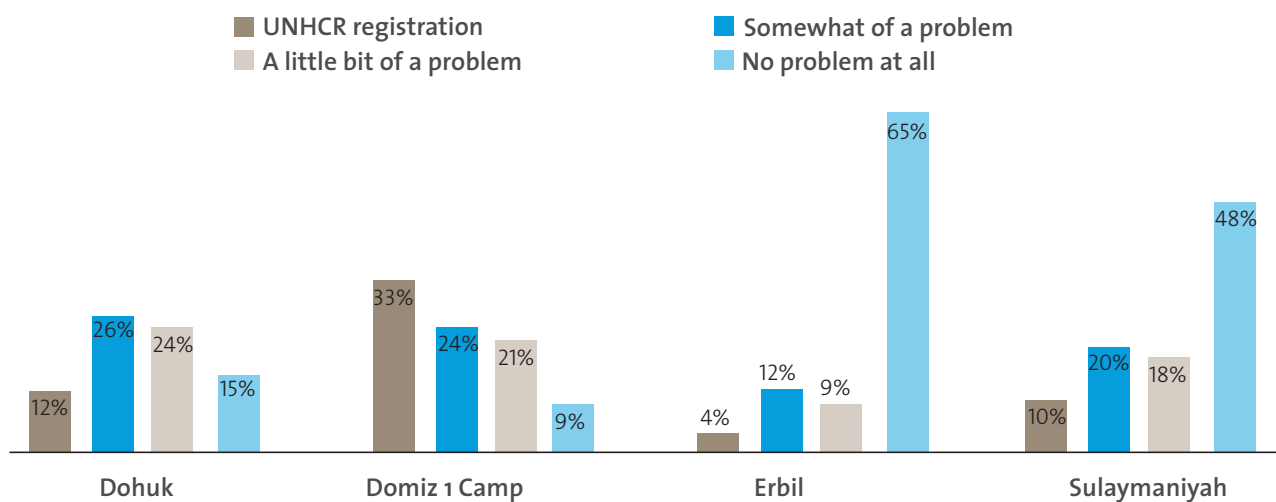
In the qualitative study, a few believed that VAW was a part of life in any country, revealing that these experiences may have been normalized for many women.

**“Violence is everywhere, in all its forms -- verbal, physical, and sexual -- and among all ages. It’s hard to tell, it could happen to Syrian refugee women because they are in a sensitive situation.”** - Amira

Perspectives on VAW as a problem varied substantially by geographic location. Women in Domiz 1 Camp were substantially more likely to report that VAW was a major problem (33%). This is unsurprising when viewed in light of similar findings in this report regarding restricted female movement due to safety concerns in camp settings.

**FIGURE 13:**  
**Perceptions of Violence Against Women as a Problem in the Syrian Refugee Community**

Of the women who believed that VAW was a problem,

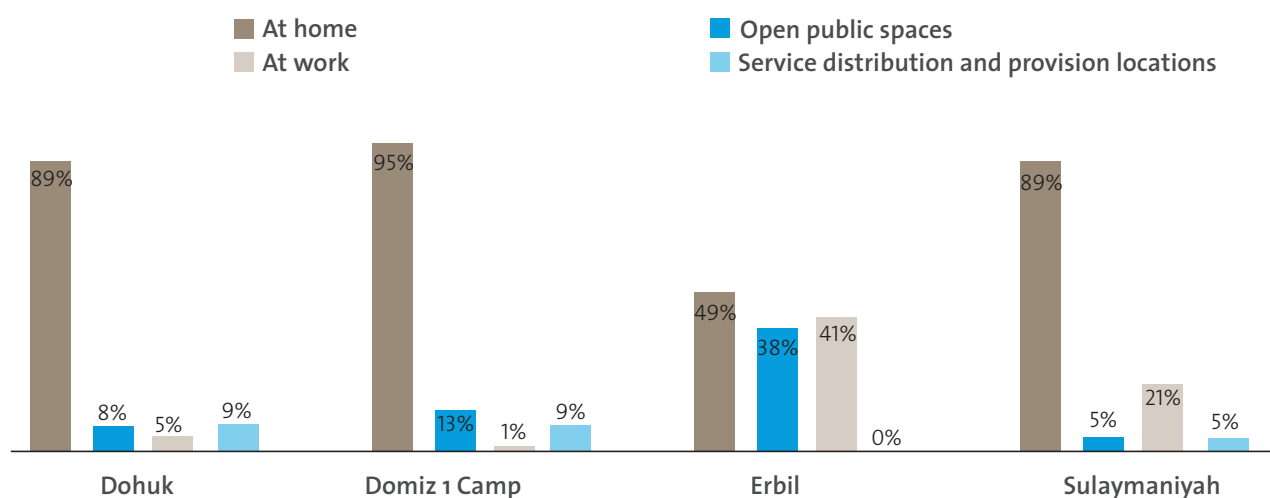


The vast majority (81%) felt that VAW most often occurs at home, and nearly all women in Domiz 1 Camp (95%) reported that when VAW happens, it happens at home. This aligns with previous studies where qualitative participants believed that VAW in the context of marriage had increased since leaving their life in Syria.<sup>41</sup> Others reported that VAW happened mostly in public spaces (17%), at work (15%), and at service distribution and provision locations (6%).

41 UN Women, “We Just Keep Silent,” 14.

FIGURE 14:

Location of Greatest Perceived Risk of Violence



Though differences in survey methodology do not allow for direct comparability, these findings are in contrast to those of a 2013 study, which reported that women believe taxis (35%) and the street (33%) were the riskiest places for Syrian women and girls in Iraq, followed by the workplace (17%), and the home (7%).<sup>42</sup>

More than one-third of women (36%) said that the VAW they experienced was the same in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as it had been in Syria. One-fifth (19%) of women reported that VAW had increased since the Syria crisis. This was higher for women in Domiz 1 Camp (31%) and was echoed by women in Erbil in qualitative interviews, who said that they felt safer in Syria. Just under one-third (28%) of women reported that VAW had decreased since the Syria crisis.

**“In Syria, I was better off. I had my father and my brother [for protection and support], I never worried about anything.” – Shilan**

Of the 47% of women that said that VAW was an issue in the Syrian refugee community, more than half (55%) said that it is never sexual in nature, while 19% said that it could be, and 25% did not know. In the qualitative interviews, women didn’t comment on the

sexual nature of violence, with some saying they did not know because they don’t often leave their homes and interact with the community.

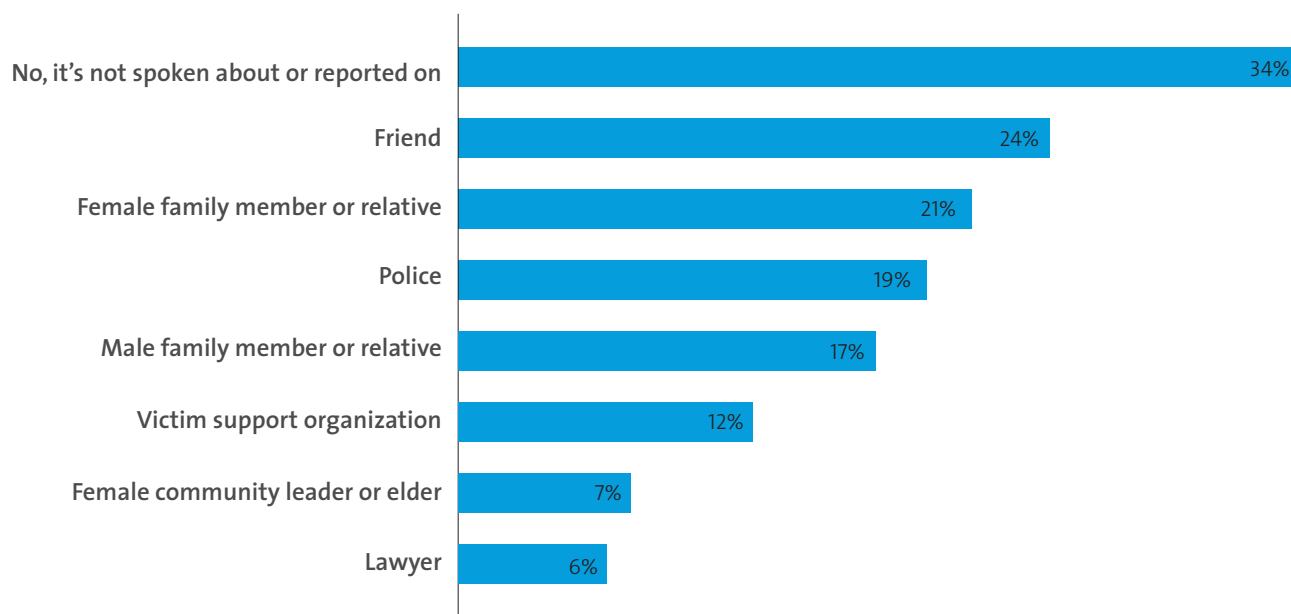
Mirroring geographic differences in other safety issues, a higher proportion of women in Domiz 1 Camp said that violence against women could be sexual in nature (31%), further indicating that violence is particularly prevalent in this setting.

Most women (63%) said that VAW was reported on in some capacity, although only one-fifth (19%) thought that it would be reported to police. Others said that it would be reported to friends and relatives, and possibly support organizations or lawyers. However, one-third (34%) said that when VAW occurs, it was not spoken about or reported on at all.

42 UN Women, “We Just Keep Silent: Gender-based violence amongst Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq,” April 2014, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/We\\_Just\\_Keep\\_Silent\\_final\\_English.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/We_Just_Keep_Silent_final_English.pdf), 51.

FIGURE 15:

### Reporting of Violence Against Women



More than one in five women (21%) were aware that VAW prevention and response assistance was offered to Syrian refugee in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, though only 3% of women had accessed such services themselves, though this figure was much higher in Sulamanyah (15%) than elsewhere. Of the four women in the quantitative study who reported experience with violence, only one reported that she had accessed VAW services, and 1% of women overall said they wanted to access these services but could not.

This may be driven by the difficulty in accessing services. Other studies reported that services for survivors were notoriously difficult to access, requiring that reports be made to police in order to get into shelters or safe houses run by the government.<sup>43</sup> This is particularly concerning when viewed in light of the qualitative findings in our study, which showed overall distrust in authorities.

**“I don’t think violence is reported because the authorities do not punish anyone, because we are refugees. I don’t think it is reported even if it did happen, because it would not lead anywhere.” – Hana**



**19% of women said that VAW has increased** since the onset of the Syria crisis, with half stating that it was an issue, and **12%** stating that it was a major issue.

This was particularly true in camp settings where **78%** of women said VAW was an issue and **41%** said it happened very often. **89%** of women who said VAW was an issue, said it occurred most often at home.

**21% of women were aware of VAW prevention and response services**, but only **3%** had accessed them.

43 UN Women, “We Just Keep Silent,” 16.

# HOST COMMUNITY RELATIONS

In addition to hosting Syrian refugees, Iraq has approximately 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), of which, 61% reside in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, mostly in Dohuk.<sup>45</sup> Since the beginning of the Syria crisis, the population of the Kurdish autonomous region has increased by 28%. This has put a huge strain on the government and aid groups addressing refugee concerns, and has led to some out-of-camp Syrian refugees requesting to be relocated into camps.<sup>46</sup>

The Kurdistan Regional Government’s policy of providing access to health, welfare, economic security, and opportunity to all living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has resulted in an overburdened national and local service infrastructure, which lacked capacity even before the Syrian crisis.

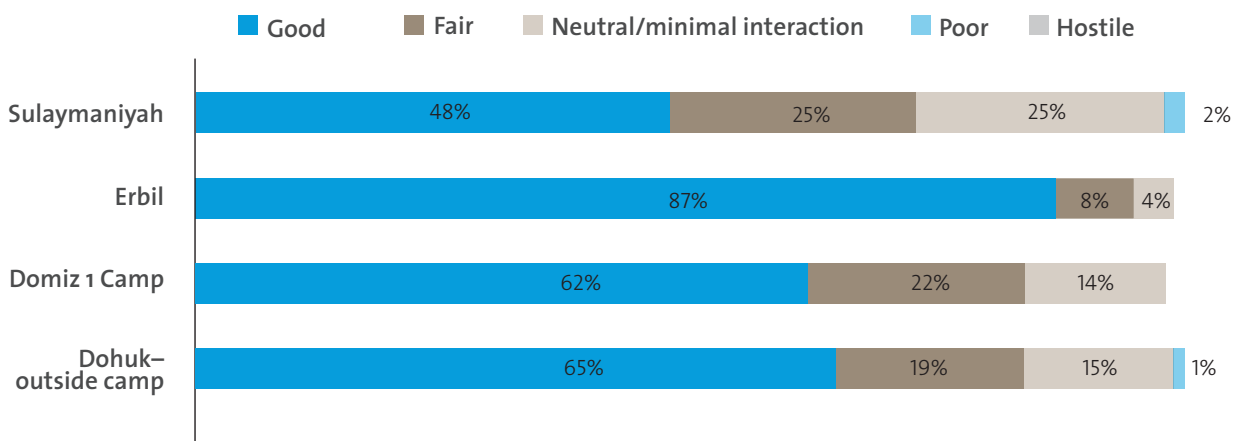
In local schools, teachers and administrators face the additional challenges of accommodating both Syrian refugee children and IDPs, as well as the local population of children. While enrollments have risen, the number of teachers in the country has remained stagnant.<sup>47</sup> In qualitative interviews for this study, one Syrian woman suggested that one opportunity could

be to hire qualified teachers from the refugee population to teach within refugee schools.

**“I work in a school that is for Syrian refugees and sometimes the ministry brings teachers that are not of a high level. I don’t know why; Syrian refugees need this money.” - Hana**

Despite the increasing strains placed on the Kurdish government and an expanding population, most women in this study considered the relationship between Syrians and Iraqis living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to be good (74%) or fair (15%). As with other responses, these varied by geographic area, and were highest in Erbil, as shown in Figure 16 below.

**FIGURE 16:**  
**Perceptions of Host Community Relations**



44 UN Population Fund (UNFPA), “Women and Girls in the Syria Crisis: UNFPA Response, Facts and Figures,” March 2015, 11. <http://www.unfpa.org/resources/women-and-girls-syria-crisis-unfpa-response-facts-and-figures>

45 UNHCR, “3RP: Iraq Monthly Update July 2017, Protection,” July 2017, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=14192>.

46 UNHCR, “3RP: Iraq.”

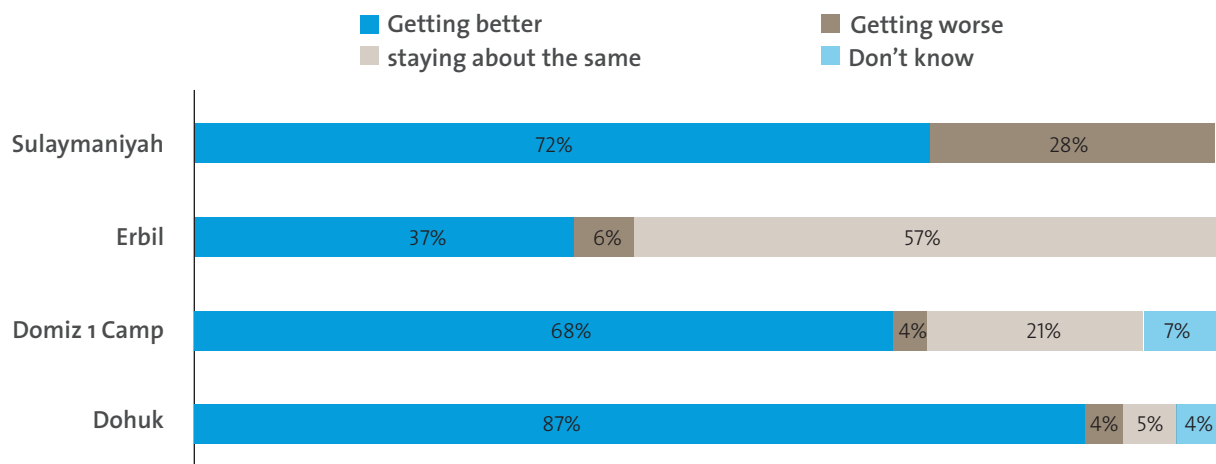
However, in the qualitative interviews, women expressed varied perceptions of host community relations. Some noted that they have minimal interaction with Iraqis living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and others pointed to them as perpetrators of violence against Syrians. Even while taking an overall positive outlook, one woman discussed being the subject of hurtful stereotypes about Syrian refugees.

**“There are different circumstances, some people respect us, while others see us as refugees. For example, I have friends who are not refugees, they are from Erbil, one of them who is a teacher said that the children of refugees are not the same as our children,**

**they are unruly in school. I was very upset, but I did not say anything.” - Hana**

Women in the quantitative study were divided over how the relationship between refugees and the host community has changed over time, though most said it was improving (58%). However, this varied substantially by geographic area, as shown in Figure 17 below. In the qualitative interviews, some women noted that the relationship had improved since arriving in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq thanks to shared Kurdish culture or both sides being willing to adapt to each other.

**FIGURE 17:**  
**Perceived Change in Host Community Relations**



These views align with the 39% of women that said there is no source of tension between the two communities. However, in contrast, 21% of women said that cultural differences were the greatest source of tension between the refugee and host communities, and another 21% said that competition for jobs was the greatest source of tension. In one interview, one woman took a particularly disheartening view of tensions between Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish communities.

**“I don't think anybody competes with us because we have nothing.” - Isra**

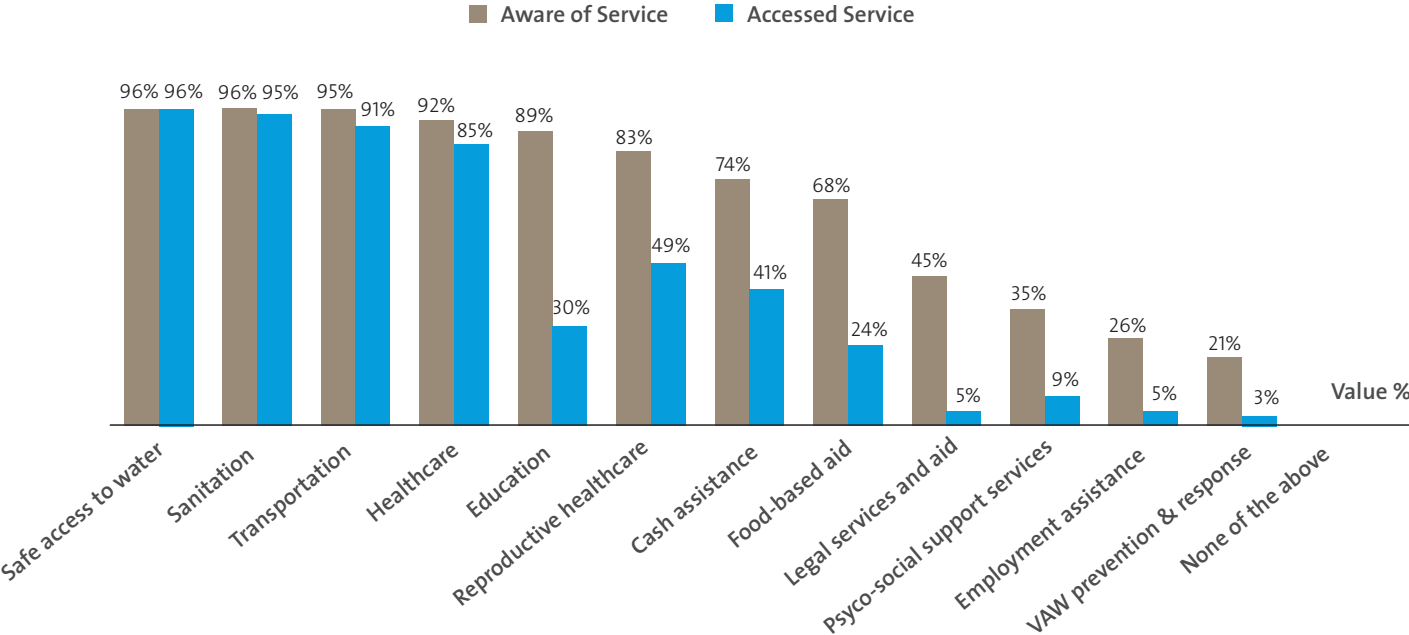
# ACCESS TO SERVICES FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ

In this study, awareness of and access to humanitarian services were most often determined by women’s physical location, and varied widely depending on the type of service. While awareness of a service is a prerequisite for ability to access that service, it did not exclusively predict whether a woman had accessed it.

As seen in Figure 18, all women were aware of at least one type of service. In general, awareness of services available for Syrian refugees was higher in Domiz 1

Camp compared to the other locations, aligning with earlier findings about the type of assistance available and the closed nature of camps.

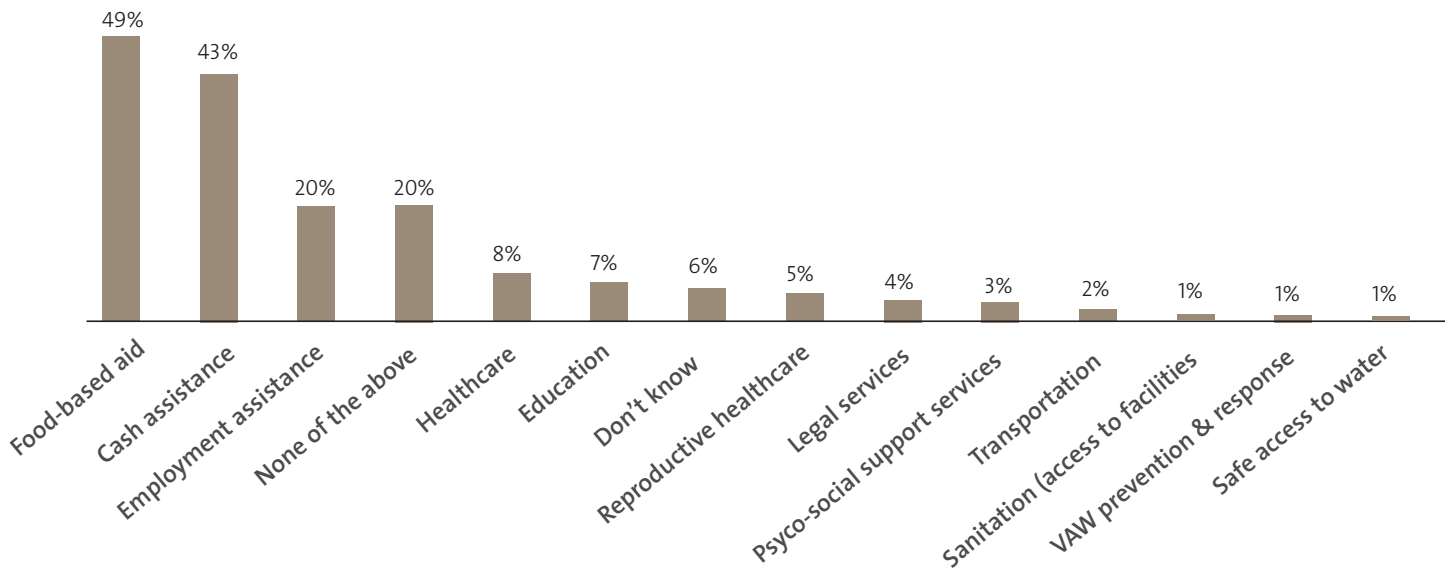
**FIGURE 18:**  
**Awareness of and Access to Services**



In this study, all but two women reported that they accessed one or more of the services of interest. Despite this, 80% of women reported that there was

at least one type of service that they wanted to but were unable to access.

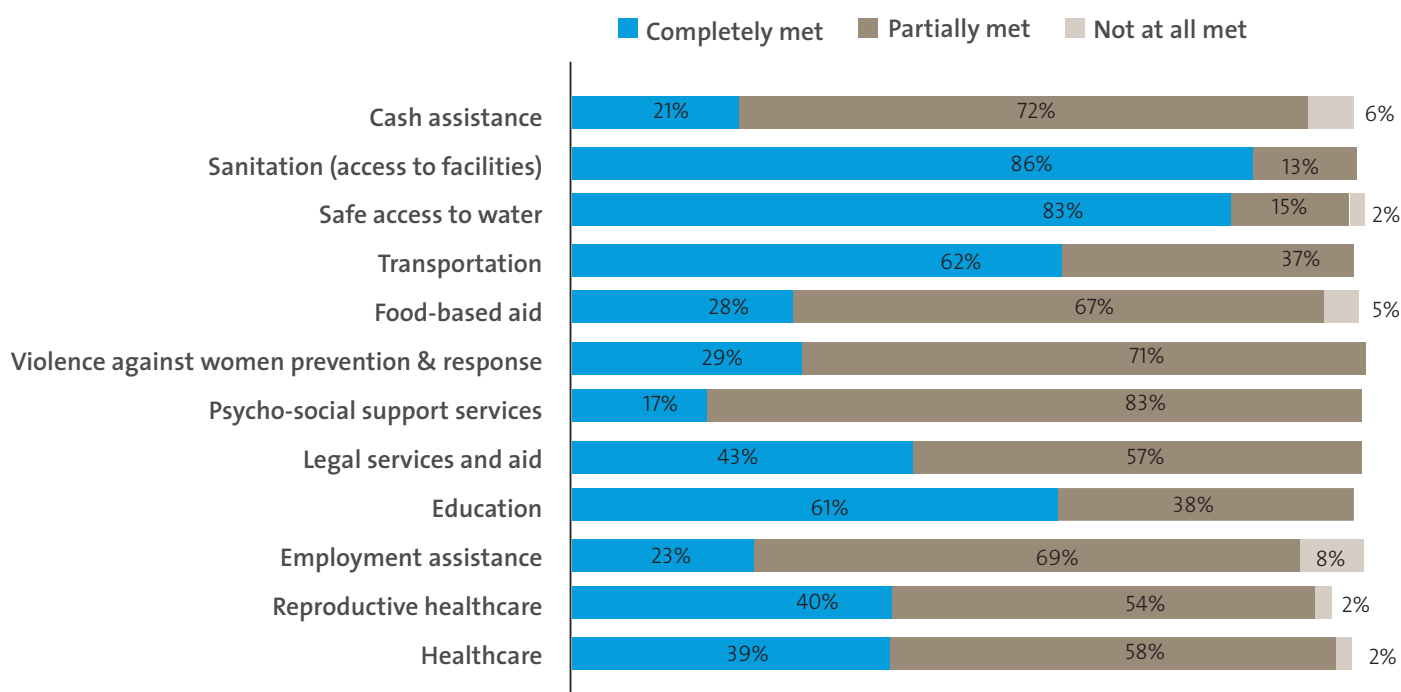
**FIGURE 19:**  
**Want to Access Services but Unable**



When women had accessed services, they mostly said that their needs were at least partially met by them, as seen in Figure 20 below. This was particularly true of those that accessed sanitation, safe water services, and transportation. Cash assistance programs and employment assistance services were least likely to meet the needs of women who accessed them.



**FIGURE 20:**  
Needs Met by Service Type Accessed



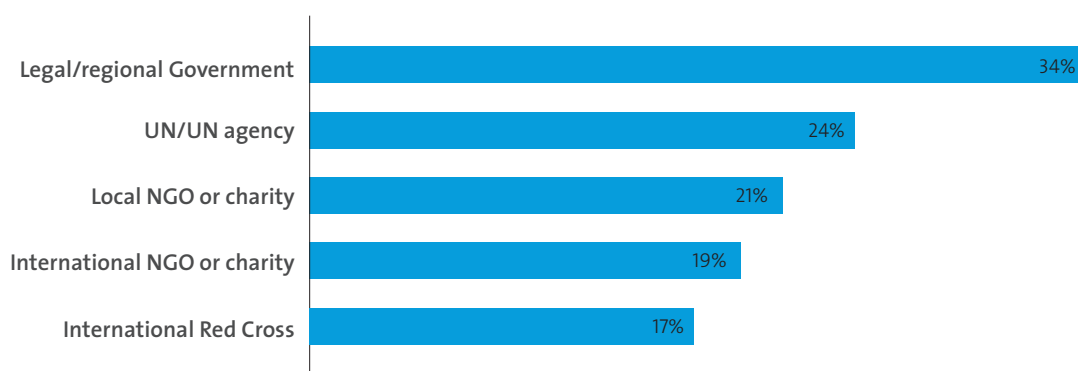
Women participating in the qualitative study in Erbil had heard very little about services provided or the organizations that offered them, explaining that assistance was infrequent, unpredictable, and insufficient.

**“I have not heard or seen any posters and nobody has told me anything. Only at the beginning when we first came we received 4 blankets and a gas heater**

**and 400 dollars. When we received the 400 dollars, it was very tiring, and we spent 25,000 IQD on taxis. We have gotten nothing else since.” – Isra**

The largest identified providers of resources and services to Syrian refugees were the local or regional government (94%) and the United Nations (82%).

**FIGURE 21:**  
Organizations Offering Resources and Services

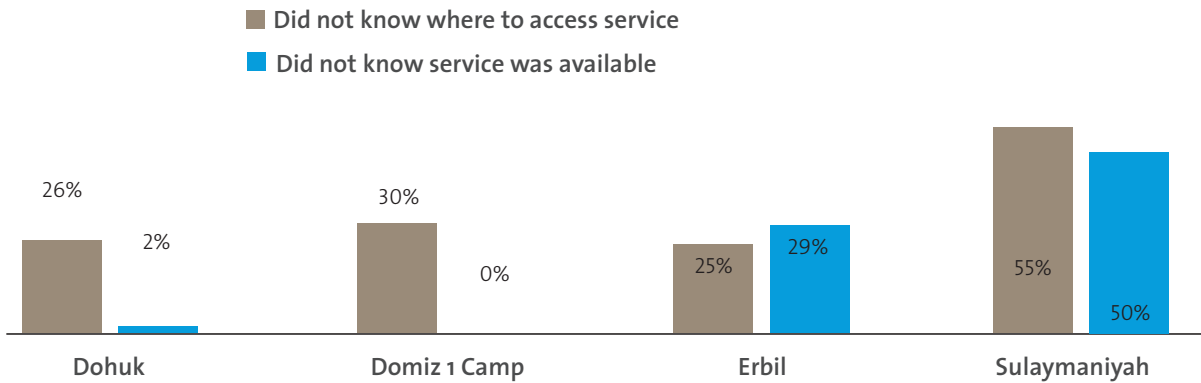


# BARRIERS TO SERVICE ACCESS AND POTENTIAL ENABLING FACTORS

Despite the efforts of providers to reach affected populations, women and girls encounter many barriers to accessing services. Lack of awareness and prohibitive cost were common themes in the literature<sup>48,49</sup> and this study confirmed these findings.

For the 80% of this sample who wanted to access services but could not do so, knowledge was the main barrier, both in terms of not knowing where to access services (29%) and not knowing that services were available (20%). Knowledge barriers were highest in Sulaymaniyah, as shown in Figure 22 below.

**FIGURE 22:**  
**Knowledge-Related Barriers to Service Access**



When asked what would enable them to access services, one of the most common responses was direct contact from the service organization (15%). The qualitative study echoed these findings, with women being generally unaware of many services, and where they did know about them, they didn't know how to access them, or were unclear about what may qualify them to receive resources or services.

One woman mentioned that if she had known that resources were available, she would not have let anything get in her way of accessing them, indicating that lack of knowledge was more prohibitive than any other kind of barrier.

**“If I knew they were distributing children’s items or any other items I would have gone with my friends or neighbors. My husband would not have prevented me, and we would not worry about the cost of the**

47 IASC, “Syria Crisis Common Context Analysis Update, August 2015,” August 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-crisis-common-context-analysis-update-august-2015>.

48 For further discussion, see Literature Review sections “Overview of Issues Affecting Women and Girls as a Result of the Syria Crisis” and “Enabling Factors and Barriers to Access of Humanitarian Services Across All Countries”

**taxi, and I wouldn't care where it was or from whom. If I was sure I would have gotten services, I would have gone." - Shilan**

Perceptions of barriers also varied based on geographic location. Over a quarter of women in Dohuk (28%) reported that the reason they were unable to access services and resources was that they were not in a refugee camp. Thirty-four percent (34%) of women in Domiz 1 Camp said that they were unable to access the services they needed because they had “no connections in the organization,” reflecting the perspective that there is corruption in aid distribution. These reports indicate that though those outside the camp perceive that living in a refugee camp enables service access, it is not a universal reality for those in the camp.

Affordability was the other major barrier: 10% of women reported that they could not afford the costs of the services. This was particularly the case for unmarried women (20%, compared to 9% of married women), and among those whose monthly household income was 200,000 IQD or lower (18%, compared to 8% of those with monthly income of 201,000 IQD or more). Relatedly, of those that reported wanting to but being unable to access services, 14% said that free services, and 12% said that low cost services, would facilitate access to their desired services. This was especially the case for those with lower incomes.

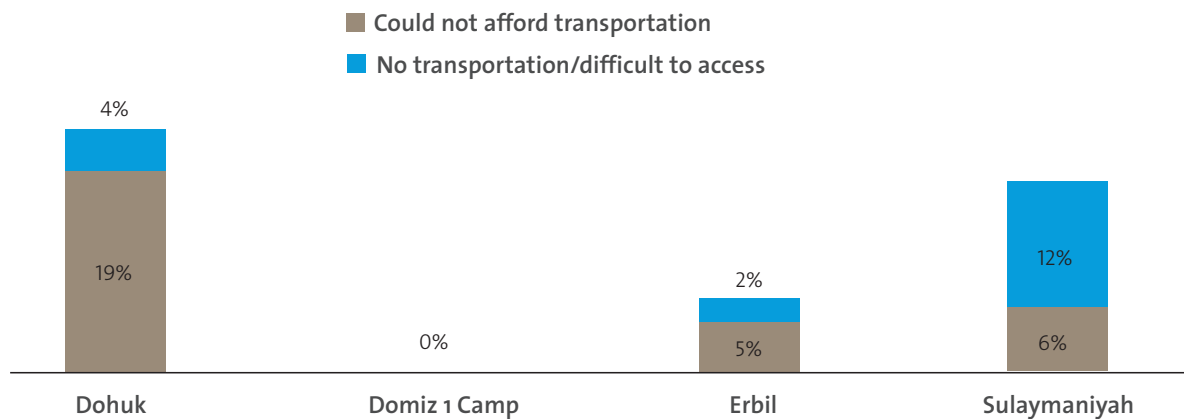
Similarly, in the qualitative study women reported that even when they knew food aid was available, accessing these services was complicated by a number of factors, including cost of transportation, individual opportunity cost, and insufficient availability of aid for the number of people in need.

**“There are places where they distribute food and other in-kind assistance, but I cannot go there because I need means of transportation and expenses and the items they give are not worth these expenses. Sometimes, the items are not enough for everyone, so we come back empty handed.” - Hana**

In some areas, services were more difficult to physically access than in others, as shown in Figure 23 below. One in 10 women (10%) could not afford transportation costs to reach service locations. Across the study, women believed that conveniently-located services (15%) and mobile services (8%) would further improve access.

Transportation was not a barrier in Domiz 1 Camp, where women also reported universal access to transportation services. In contrast, in Sulaymaniyah, where only 50% of women had accessed transportation services, 12% reported that lack of transportation was a barrier to accessing services, and 15% reported that more convenient locations would enable access.

**FIGURE 23:**  
**Transportation-Related Barriers to Service Access**



These findings echo previous research on geographic accessibility of services for women in crisis contexts: due to women's lack of ability to safely and affordably travel in public spaces, comprehensive care services that come to refugees' homes have proven to be very effective for women.<sup>49,50</sup>

In qualitative interviews, a commonly suggested solution to problems with service access was for aid organizations to increase the consistency and predictability of distribution, suggesting that these are additional barriers.

**“Sometimes, they come to us and distribute things. Sometimes they give one person four boxes and another gets nothing, I mean the distribution is very chaotic, they should distribute in a better organized manner or go house to house.” – Jihan**

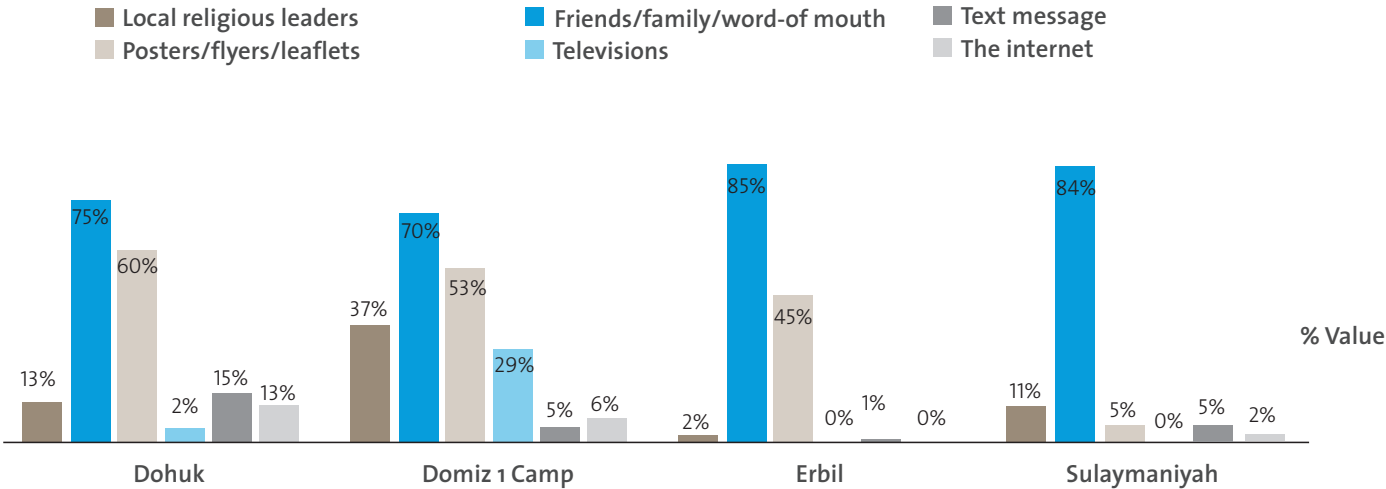
49 Z Zaatari, “Unpacking Gender: The Humanitarian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan,” New York: Women’s Refugee Commission, March 2014, <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UnpackingGender-WRC.pdf>.

50 P Lilleston et al, “In Brief: Reaching Refugee Survivors of Gender-Based Violence,” *International Center for Research on Women*, 2016. <https://www.icrw.org/publications/in-brief-reaching-refugee-survivors-of-gender-based-violence/>.

# SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT HUMANITARIAN RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Women primarily found out about available services through their friends and family (80%), text messages (47%), and local religious leaders (12%). These behaviors varied by region, as shown in Figure 24 below.

**FIGURE 24:**  
**Top Sources of Information About Humanitarian Services**



More women found text messages trustworthy (90%), than friends and family (79%); however, both were perceived to be more trustworthy than television (59%).

# HEALTHCARE SECTION

## TO BE PUT AS FULL PAGE CALL OUT INTO LIVELIHOODS

Previously-published literature reports that physical health of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was very low,<sup>52</sup> but that 58% of refugees accessed care when needed.<sup>53</sup> Our study shows improvement in this area.

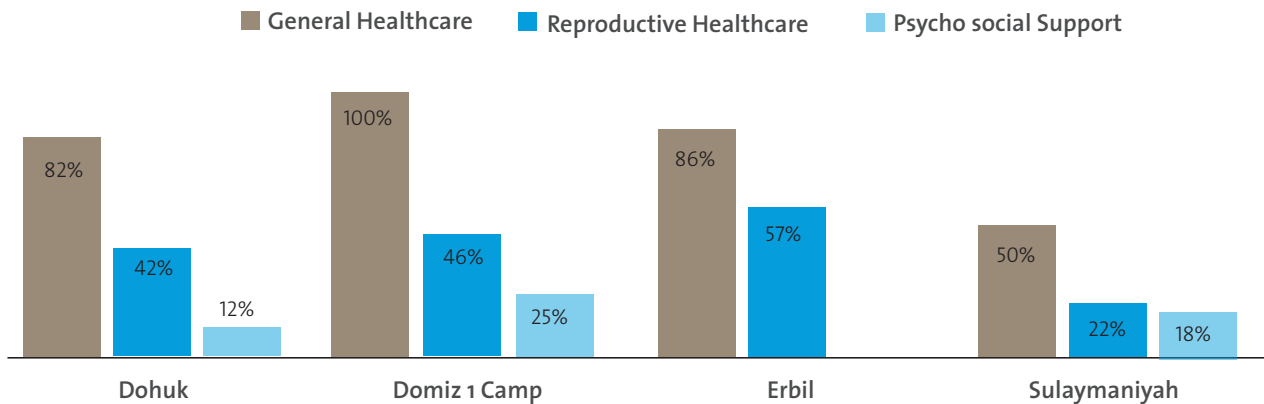
Women in this study were generally aware of health care services available to Syrian refugees, though more so for general healthcare<sup>54</sup> services (92%) and reproductive healthcare services (83%) than for psycho-social health services (35%). This pattern was reflected in those who reported using these services, with 85% saying they had used general healthcare services, 49% had used reproductive, and 9% had used mental health care (though this number rose to 31% among women who headed their household).

However, there were notable geographic disparities in awareness and use of healthcare services. As seen in Figure 25, access to general and reproductive healthcare was lowest in Sulaymaniyah, which corresponded with higher numbers of women wanting but being unable to access healthcare services, suggesting that those in Sulaymaniyah are underserved. This is in stark contrast to a 2014 study that reported 92% of those in Sulaymaniyah who wanted to access healthcare could do so.<sup>54</sup>

FIGURE 25:

### Access to Healthcare

Beyond geographic difficulties in access, financial need also acts as a barrier to care for the 8% of women



51 IA Aziz, CV Hutchinson, J Maltby. "Quality of life of Syrian refugees living in camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq." *PeerJ* 2:e670: 7.

52 UNHCR, "3RP: Iraq," 49.

53 This refers to physical healthcare; mental health and psycho-social support are addressed separately.

54 REACH, "Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Syrian Refugees Outside Camps: Kurdistan Region of Iraq," Assessment Report, September 2014, [http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach\\_irq\\_kri\\_multisectorneedsassessmentsyrianrefugee-soutsidcamps\\_september2014\\_o.pdf](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_irq_kri_multisectorneedsassessmentsyrianrefugee-soutsidcamps_september2014_o.pdf), 27.

that needed to but were unable to access healthcare services. In the qualitative interviews, women spoke about the cost of healthcare, often saying that it was prohibitively high for their household to access.

**“Of course, there are many needs, like health care. For example, when one of my kids is sick, I must go to the evening clinics where I pay reasonable fees. I cannot manage with our monthly income to go to private clinics.” – Hana**

Differential utilization rates based on type of health service are concerning based on previous research surrounding population need for these types of care. Despite relatively high rates of awareness and access to general healthcare, specialty care for women remains crucial in refugee or crisis settings.

Previous research has shown that approximately 20% of women<sup>55,56</sup> are in need of pre- or post-natal care at any given time.<sup>57</sup> Though nearly half of women reported having accessed reproductive care, these services were not as well utilized among unmarried women (26%, compared to 50% of married women), and by women who were the sole head of household (31%).

Available information shows that obstetric care and family planning services are accessible to those residing in camps, as part of the comprehensive primary health care services provided by the Department of Health with support from WHO and UNFPA.<sup>58</sup> This aligns with findings in our study that showed only 1% of women in Domiz 1 Camp wanted to but were unable to access reproductive healthcare.

In previous studies, refugees in Iraq have reported low psychological quality of life,<sup>59</sup> and that 54% of those with a mental illness were unable to access care.<sup>60</sup> In the qualitative interviews, discussion of mental health symptoms was common, with several women stating that their circumstances had led them to feel a need for psychosocial support particularly due to the difficult circumstances they have dealt with, including lack of social support, financial hardship, humiliation, and loss of a family members.

**“We all need mental health treatment, especially now, but I have not seen any kind of support.” – Isra**

Despite expressing a nearly universal need, no participants in the qualitative interviews had attended or even heard of mental and psychosocial support programs. This may indicate a prevailing stigma on care-seeking behaviors related to mental health.

55 REACH, “Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in Host Communities: Iraq,” April 2015, 40

56 REACH, “Multi-Sector Needs Assessment of Syrian Refugees Residing in Camps: Kurdistan Region of Iraq,” March 2015, 38.

57 Defined as pregnant or lactating.

58 UNHCR, “Iraq Monthly Update July 2017, Health,” July 2017, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=14195>.

59 This quality of life measure is relative to that of refugees in the Gaza strip. Aziz, 7 of 9

60 UNHCR, “Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP): Iraq,” <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/IRAQ-3RP-Regional-Refugee-Resilience-Plan2017-2018.pdf>.

# CONCLUSION

This report seeks to provide further analysis and understanding of the lives of Syrian refugee women living in displacement in the Kurdish region of Iraq. In doing this, it highlights the ways in which women are affected by the Syria crisis, including the intersection of systemic gender discrimination, poverty, and instability, and the ways in which these increase women's risk to violence and isolation. In many cases, as shown in this report, these multiple dimensions compound each other, leading to further restrictions on women's movement and to threats to their safety.

While the interviewers sought to identify where displacement had led to enhanced empowerment and agency, and despite women reporting that they could serve as leaders within their community, there were very few positive examples or results from displacement ascertained in this study. Though women demonstrated their own agency, and did not see themselves as victims, they were vocal as to the negative impact that displacement has had on their lives and families.

Women stressed the importance of receiving assistance in a clear and consistent manner. They also reported that financial assistance was not sufficient to reduce their reliance on negative coping mechanisms. For this reason, despite the physical limitations and threats of violence, many women in this study reported a strong desire to contribute to household income. However, they continued to have problems finding work opportunities despite a willingness and legal ability to work. In some cases, this led women to turn to informal and inconsistent work.

Compounding these factors, many women felt that displacement has increased violence against women, primarily in the private sphere, and has negatively impacted their mobility given the actual and perceived risks of violence for Syrian refugees.

The increased stress of displacement, and especially the inability of many women to meet their basic living needs, has led to increased mental and psychological issues. Women commonly pointed to their desire for psychosocial support that could help them deal with their lives in displacement and with the increasing tensions both in the household and in their communities.

For the female Syrian refugees interviewed in this study, improved livelihoods, access to formal work, and comprehensive support for both themselves and their families were articulated as the foundations for empowerment and equality for their lives in displacement in Iraq. In the absence of this, women and girls will continue to be forced to make decisions that put themselves at risk and compromise the range of choices and opportunities available to them.



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