

Conference Focus Group Report

Livelihood and Psychosocial Needs for Women from Nineveh Plains & Sinjar

Erbil, Kurdistan Region, Iraq, December 2021

Acknowledgments

This report was written by Shauna Sexsmith, Co-Founder and Managing Director of Smithson Institute of Professional Development.



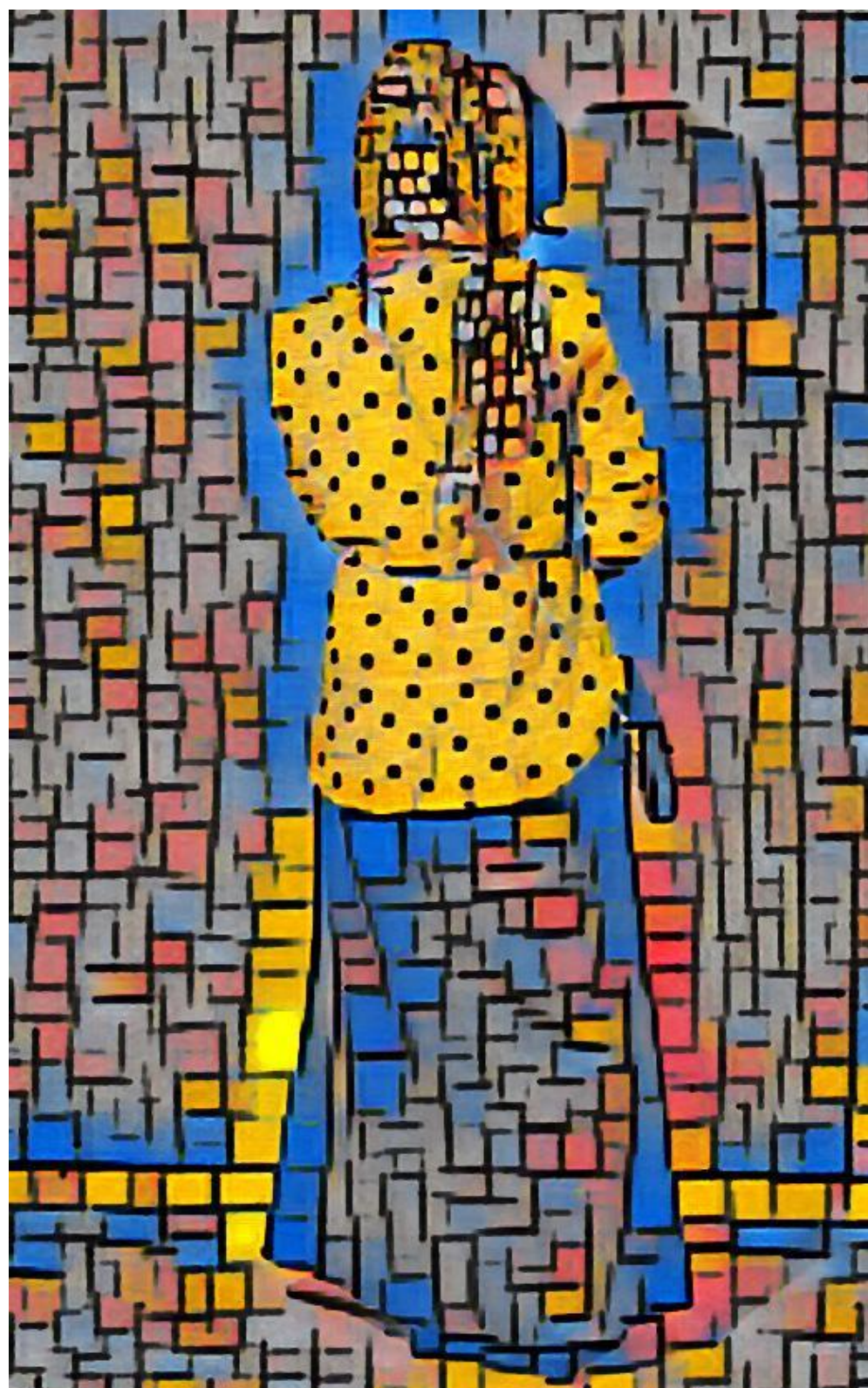


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	3
Foreword	4
Introduction	5
Executive Summary	6
Methodology	7
Participant Demographics	9
Section One: Background on the Assessment	10
Section Two: Ethical Considerations	14
Section Three: Background on the Humanitarian Crisis for Women Post ISIS	16
Section Four: Key Findings by Thematic Area	21
Section Five: Recommendation Analysis	28
Section Six: Recommendations by Thematic Area	32

Foreword

Khanzad Ahmed

Secretary General of High Council of Women and Development

Addressing the psychosocial and livelihood needs of women and girls in the conflict-affected areas such as Nineveh Plain and Sinjar will provide us with a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the situation and enable more informed and effective upcoming actions.

I want to thank all parties that greatly contributed to this initiative. Special thanks to UN Women and Mosaic Middle East, which both greatly supported the conference.

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) policy and practice is the same when it comes to minority groups. We strongly believe that all efforts should be directed to building an enabling environment to help people with diverse backgrounds to return back to their place of origin in a safe and dignified way. Armed with the above vision, we strongly welcome the results of this initiative and we see it from the evidence-based policy making perspective. Thus, we invite all the relevant parties to hear the voices of the participants and attach their responses to their needs accordingly in their future interventions.



Khanzad Ahmed, Secretary General of High Council of Women and Development and Conference attendees





Khanzad Ahmed and Shauna Sexsmith, Co-Founder and Managing Director of Smithson Institute of Professional Development with Conference attendees

Introduction

Gillian Dare OBE, Mosaic Middle East

Iraq has traditionally been a diverse society – one of its strengths. The Yazidis, Christians, Jews, Shabaks, Sabaeans Mandaean, Turkmen lived side by side for decades if not centuries. However, growing sectarianism over the last 30 years, culminating in the ISIS occupation, has led to massacres, exile and the devastation of communities. This has had key impacts on Iraq itself, no longer able to feed itself and with a weakened economy. As a result, there is great discrimination and marginalisation of minorities. And as in all conflicts, it was the women who suffered worst.

Mosaic Middle East, under a mission of bringing hope, help and healing to marginalised and persecuted communities, is working alongside these communities through our Nineveh Seed programme, to support the re-introduction of livelihoods. Our programmes are based on listening to the communities and facilitating what they want to do in partnership with local organisations, regional and local government.

We have seen that many women experience double discrimination in the workplace, both by belonging to a minority and by reason of their gender, finding it difficult to get jobs, start businesses and access finance. All evidence shows that the meaningful participation of women in public and political life and the ability to exert real influence, strengthens the stabilisation process and is essential to build lasting peace. But meaningful participation depends on the economic empowerment of women to play a leadership role.

For the women who attended the conference, we wanted this to be an opportunity for you to explore the challenges facing you; the chance to make your voices heard by those in authority and potential partners to enable you women to flourish and become the agents of change in a new dynamic and more equal society instead of remaining passive victims. The sponsors of this conference focus group and report want to help you generate your own solutions to overcoming those challenges.

Executive Summary

In conflict-affected countries, women experience severe challenges and violence which adversely affects their mental, and physical capacity to fully seize opportunities for economic empowerment.

Though economic upheaval brings hardships to everyone, it is particularly important for the women of Iraq, especially in the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar, to be able to move forward post ISIS and in the light of the pandemic. The women were the most affected, especially as it led to an increase in female headed households.

As relief and recovery efforts proceed, improving women's economic position and psychosocial well-being depends on an understanding of how existing livelihood and psychosocial programming is being implemented and the barriers presented by pervasive gender norms, roles and associated responsibilities of women within their communities.

Across Nineveh Plains and Sinjar, alongside the Sunni Kurds and Sunni Arabs, minority communities such as the Yazidis, Turkmen, Christians, Kakai, and the Shabak comprise a large percentage of the population but are particularly targeted by armed groups.

As a result of the conflict, the basic physical and social infrastructure in the communities have been destroyed to the point that they have become largely non-existent, and social services, such as health care, and economic development are only available in their most basic forms, if at all.



This document reports on the *Gendered Focus Group Discussion: Livelihood and Psychosocial Needs for Women from Nineveh Plains and Sinjar*.

This assessment aims at evaluating the multi-sectoral needs of women, including the nature and capacity of livelihood and psychosocial services available and the barriers reported in accessing those services. To gain a much deeper understanding of women's needs and the services provided, key experts were selected.

Four focus group studies were conducted over two days. The first and second study involved two focus groups with women (n=10). The women were divided by ethnicity and place of origin, ensuring equal representation in both groups.

Interviews conducted as part of this study provided strategic direction for this report's recommendations and findings.

Some of the key takeaways of this assessment are:

- Access to safe spaces is limited.
- Sexual and reproductive health services are lacking, in an already weak healthcare system.
- Medical counseling and provision of qualified case workers were categorised as the two most fundamental needs, respectively.
- The most pressing psychosocial needs were, mental and emotional support, in addition to livelihoods.
- Government institutions currently provided little to no assistance in livelihood and psychosocial services.
- Social norms which drive gender-related challenges derive from a lack of community awareness and a patriarchal culture and create barriers for women seeking to access opportunities for economic empowerment.
- Basic life skills, and sustainable income generation opportunities are required.

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

This report is based on 4 focus groups conducted for Mosaic Middle East, UN Women, and the High Council for Women Development. By design, the focus groups took place in Erbil, Iraq from December 5-6 of 2021 with 20 participants from Ninewa Plains and Sinjar.

The participants were selected initially by Mosaic Middle East's field teams within Ninewa Plains and Sinjar. A secondary review of selected participants was reviewed by key informants and community leaders within the region. Within the last phase of the selection process, the High Council for Women Development was consulted to ensure equal and inclusive representation from all minority groups.

Each group was homogenous in that it equally represented: (1) ethnicity/religion, and (2) place of origin to ensure open conversation among all women. Each group comprised women between the ages of 20-42; the set of focus groups was also equally divided between those who are more (in respect to religion/ethnicity) and less.

To build theory and ensure equal opportunity for participants' responses, to heighten group interaction to produce data and insights and to avoid saturation (data is being repeated) the 20 participants were divided into smaller groups (n=10). The woman participated in two group sessions that lasted one and a half hours and filled out a survey on basic demographic information. The women's participation in the focus group was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

All findings are qualitative and inherently not statistically representative. They are based on the opinions of 20 participants selected by pre-determined specifications. The focus group analysis aims to capture themes, major conclusions, and points of tension derived from the structured

question-by-question guidelines. Given some of the cultural complexities and language barriers two translators were provided, gendered for the psychosocial assessment, and the 4 focus groups were held in English and Arabic.

Informed-consent procedures were explained at the beginning of each focus group. Some focus group discussions were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. The anonymity of participants in the focus groups is protected in this report.

Facilitators

FGDs as a popular qualitative method of collecting data was employed in the following order to obtain in-depth information

Using open-ended interview protocol, the external consultant facilitated the focus groups with the assistance of translators with the capacity to facilitate in a specific language. Interview questions were developed with the direction and input from Mosaic Middle East and were designed to cover a range of livelihood and psychosocial needs. Moreover, the interviews also included questions about the capacity and performance of organisations and government institutions regarding responding to the needs of and providing services to women.

Methodology

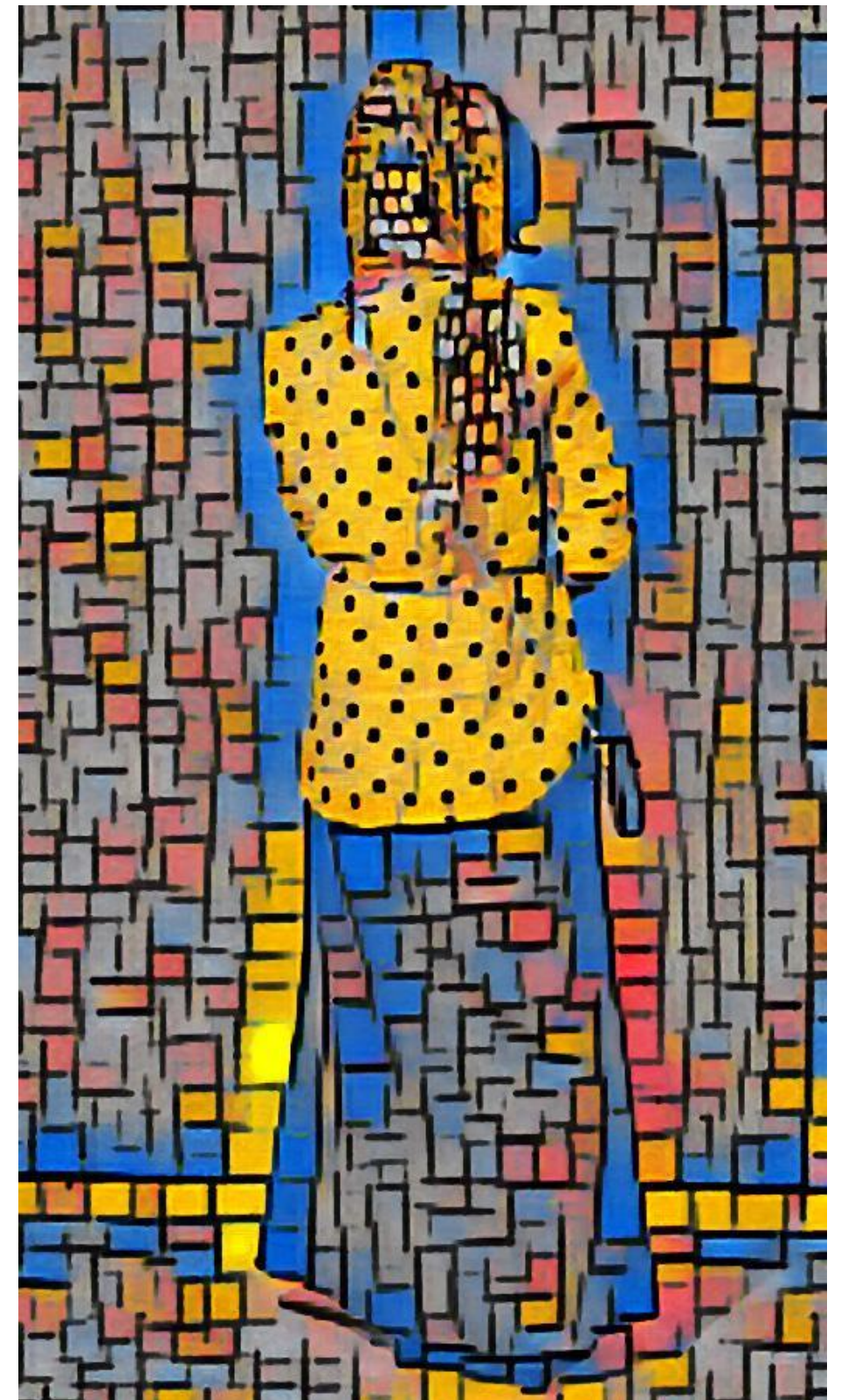
Data Analysis

To begin the data analysis process, the facilitator debriefed with representatives from Mosaic Middle East and UN Women after each focus group to discuss session content, what was learned, what was surprising, and to process any emotions evoked throughout.

Next, the facilitator conducted a preliminary analysis to get a general understanding of the data and reflect on its meaning. An individual summary report was drafted for each focus group that analyzed the two major themes. Once individual reports for each group were completed, the data was further analyzed across all focus groups and organized into themes. An initial analysis matrix was produced which included a series of key thematic codes based on the objectives of the focus group. These themes or key findings helped determine the interconnectedness of issues and

conditions stemming from mental and physical well-being and economic empowerment. The themes were then turned into recommendations to improve service delivery.

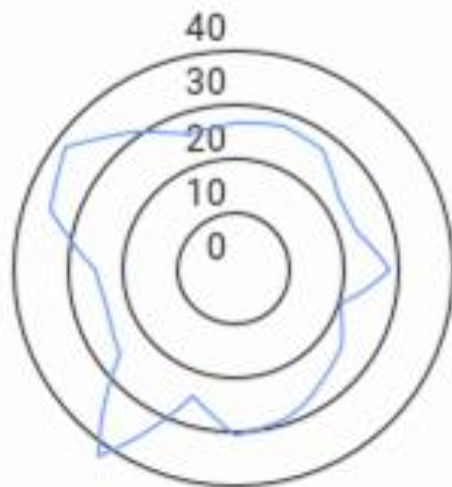
Qualitative thematic analysis was used to inductively (from the data) and deductively (based on the focus group objectives) analyse the focus groups, with new emerging thematic codes logged and added to the analysis matrix. The full analysis was carried out using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.



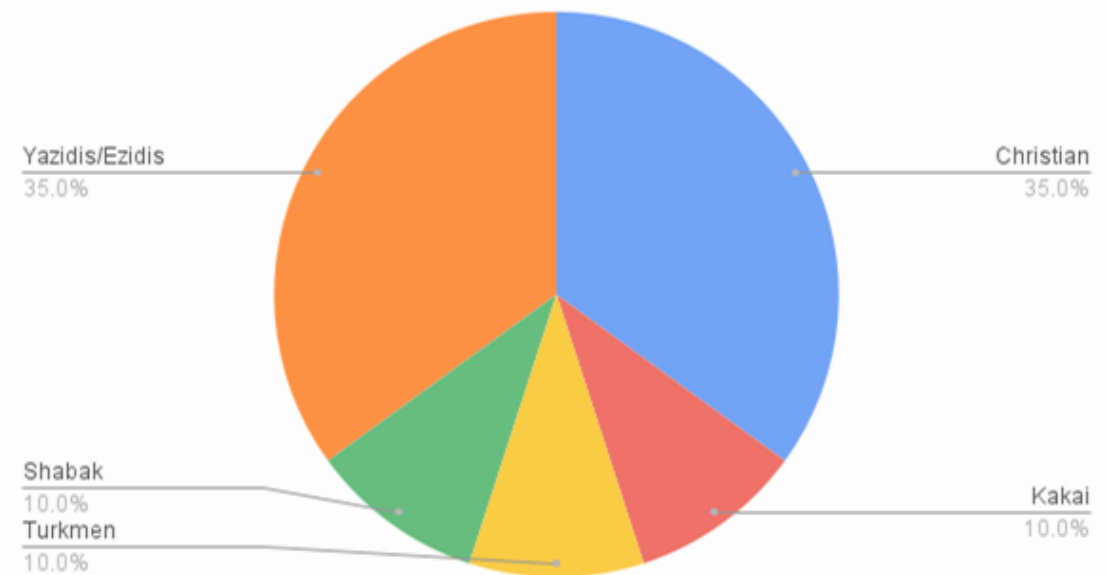
Demographics Ethnicity

The following demographics reflect the self-reported information by the 20 participants in the 4 focus groups

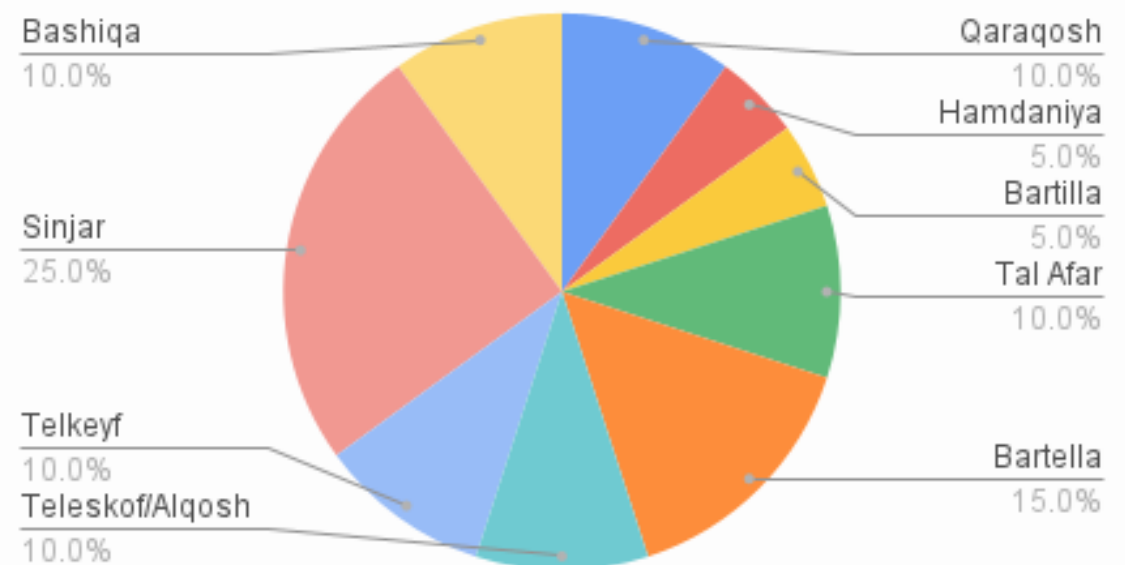
Age



Religious/Ethnicity

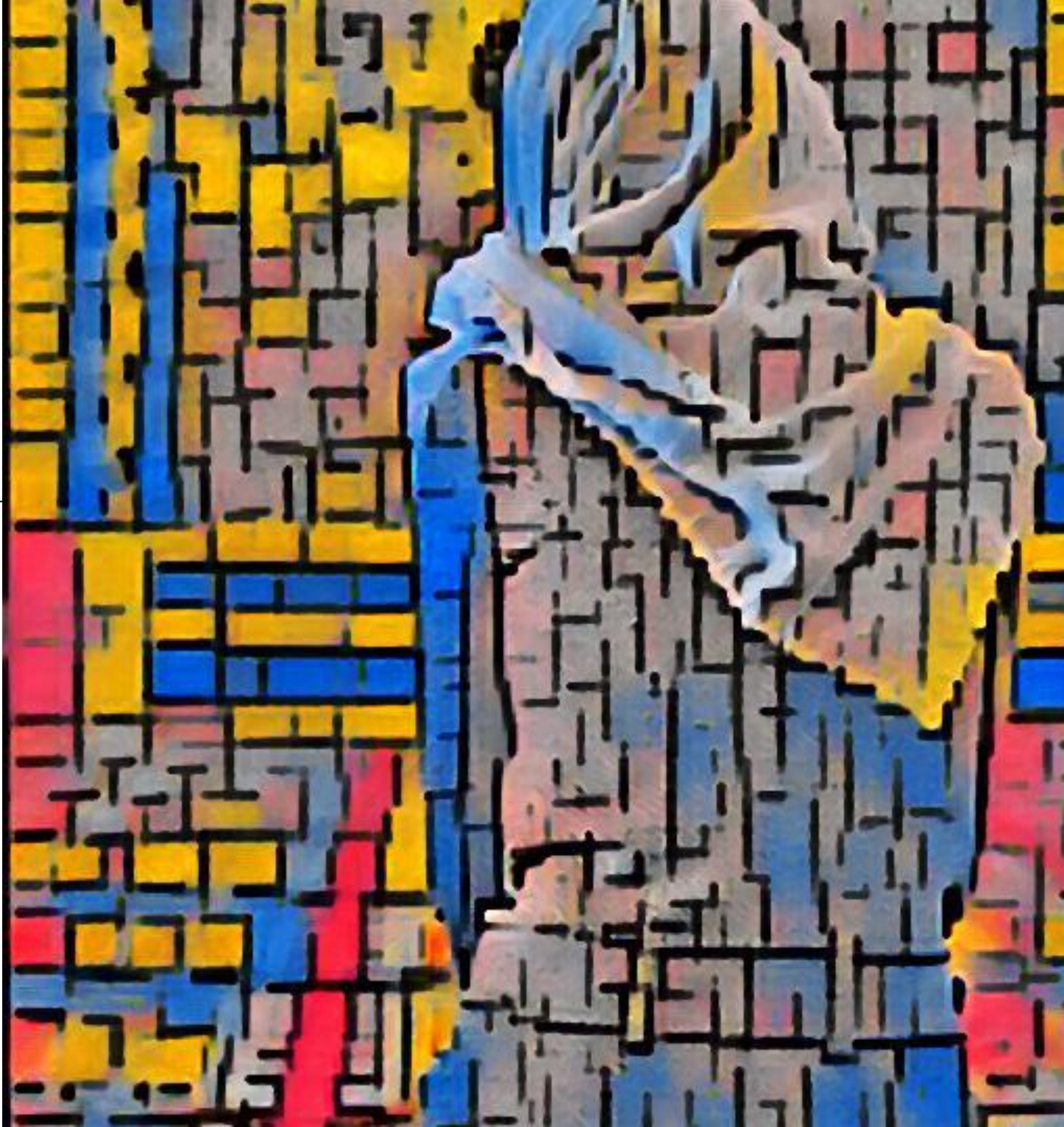


Place of Origin



Section One

Background of the Assessment



Background of the Assessment

This focus group was conducted amidst the ever-changing political and security environment in Iraq resulting from the ISIS crisis, as well as the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis which Iraq hosts to date, requiring humanitarian intervention. While the war against ISIS is mostly over, and most of the IDPs have returned home, there are still a large number of people who remain in the camps and in host communities, some in very hostile and insecure conditions, posing a threat to infrastructure, mobility, economics, and other risks associated with unsafe spaces.

Since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar region have faced a protracted IDP crisis. Its historically high levels of violence and territorial ownership disputes have made this governorate one of the most frequent sites of displacement and return in Iraq.

ISIS and subsequent military operations and displacement affect men, women, and children alike, but the impact on women and girls is disproportionate in both



Conference Focus Group attendees

settings. Due to a lack of medical staff and damage to medical facilities, many hospitals and clinics under the control of ISIS had been reported to be partially or completely inoperable.

As a result of ongoing violence and forced displacement, women were disproportionately affected, losing not only their livelihoods, but also a sense of

security, which had severe psychological consequences. Many displaced people were unable to return to their hometowns because in addition to the destruction of buildings and infrastructure, their livelihoods were destroyed. Many displaced people also lost their lives.

Background of the Assessment

Though limited in scope, gender-based humanitarian responses pay attention to the effects of sexual and gender-based violence on women, while neglecting socioeconomic factors that affect women's daily lives during displacement. The point is not that gender-based and sexual violence should not be considered as central aspects impacting women's sense of safety and security. But gender analysis of displacement must be approached in a more holistic manner. Different factors influence women's experiences of displacement, including their place of settlement and origin, their level of education, literacy, ethnicity and religious background, and even their age.

Women and the community as a whole are facing a great many challenges due to the widespread presence of mental health issues stemming from human rights violations. As a result of conflict, losing family members, experiencing sexual or gender-based violence, fleeing in horrible circumstances, hunger, and



displacement, women and girls suffer significant health and social consequences, including chronic and acute effects on their mental health.

Women in Nineveh Plains and Sinjar experienced difficult access to healthcare and psychosocial support. While women faced violence at the hands of armed actors, psychosocial support, including female-led therapy, is rarely provided, and many hospitals, clinics, and health services are completely or partially nonfunctional due to a lack of qualified medical staff and high-quality equipment.

Due to a dearth of medical assistance provided to affected areas by the government, mobile clinics were deployed sparingly. The limited capacity of medical facilities and the operational difficulties for mobile clinics particularly during periods of heavy rain and impassable roads, together with mobility restrictions due to COVID-19 makes some areas impossible to reach, resulting in a limited access to healthcare.

Background of the Assessment

The significance of this assessment lies in its firsthand accounts from women currently living across Nineveh Plains and Sinjar. The Gendered Focus Group Assessment was conducted with the following objectives:

1. Identify and understand the most prominent and important needs of women.
2. Explore the current livelihood and psychosocial services provided to women by humanitarian organisations and government institutions.
3. Propose recommendations to improve the provision of services and develop sustainable solutions for women.



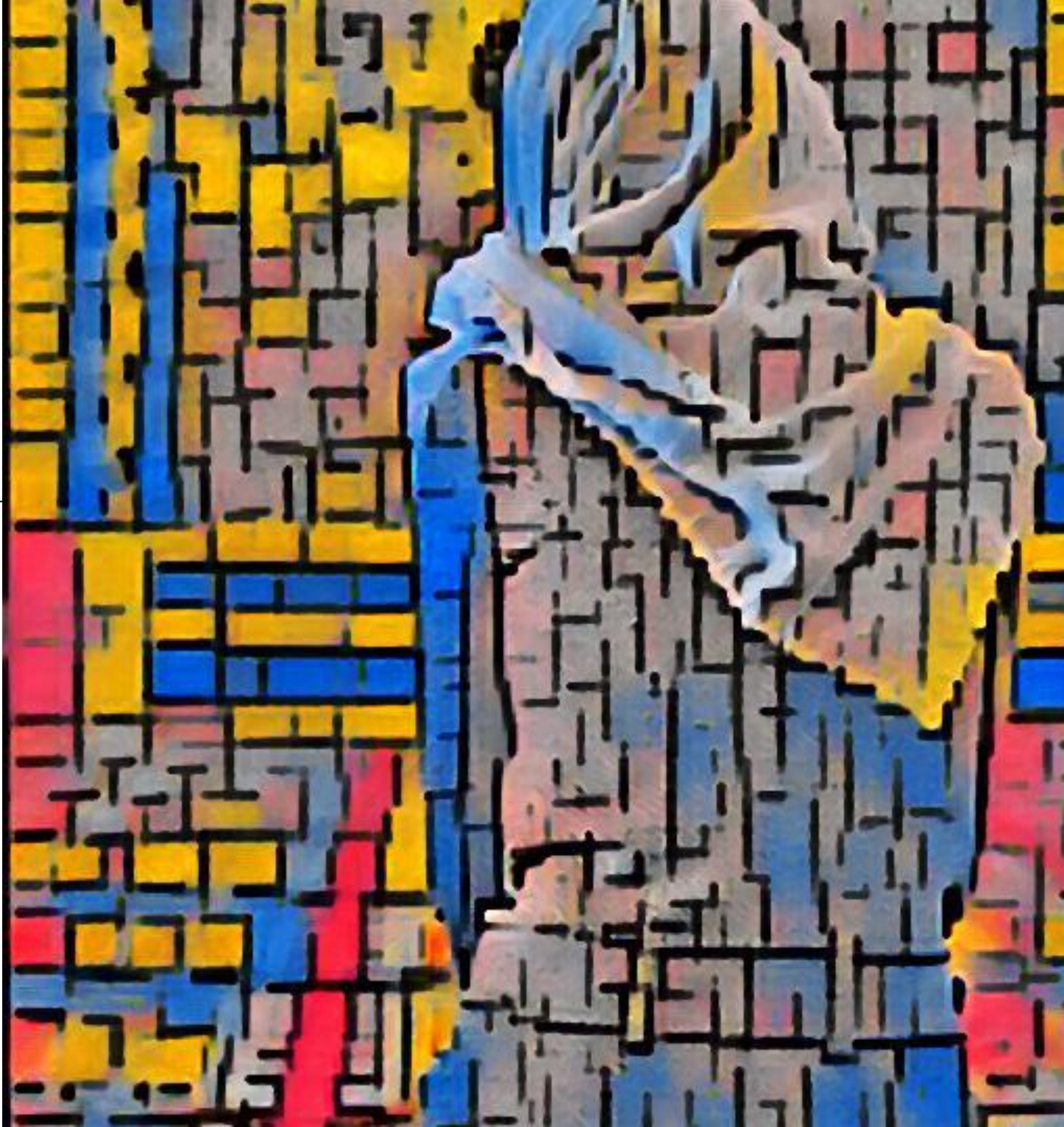
Conference Focus Group attendees

Mosaic Middle East, UN Women, High Council for Women Development along with local partners of the humanitarian community are actively playing their part in responding to the urgent, immediate, time critical needs of the affected population, specifically women and girls.

Importantly, this assessment has placed the needs of women and their access to services at the forefront of its focus.

Section Two

Ethical Considerations



Ethical Considerations

This focus group discussion adhered to the principle of '**Do No Harm**'. The question design and data collection both emphasized the importance of informed consent as well as the right of possible respondents to withdraw any time during the two days.

In addition to providing sufficient technical skills including the use of the tools for minimizing errors related to the data collection, the facilitators were well versed in the ethics related to the collection of data and information from women.

A variety of methods were used in this assessment to apply these ethical considerations to the interaction with and interview of women, including:

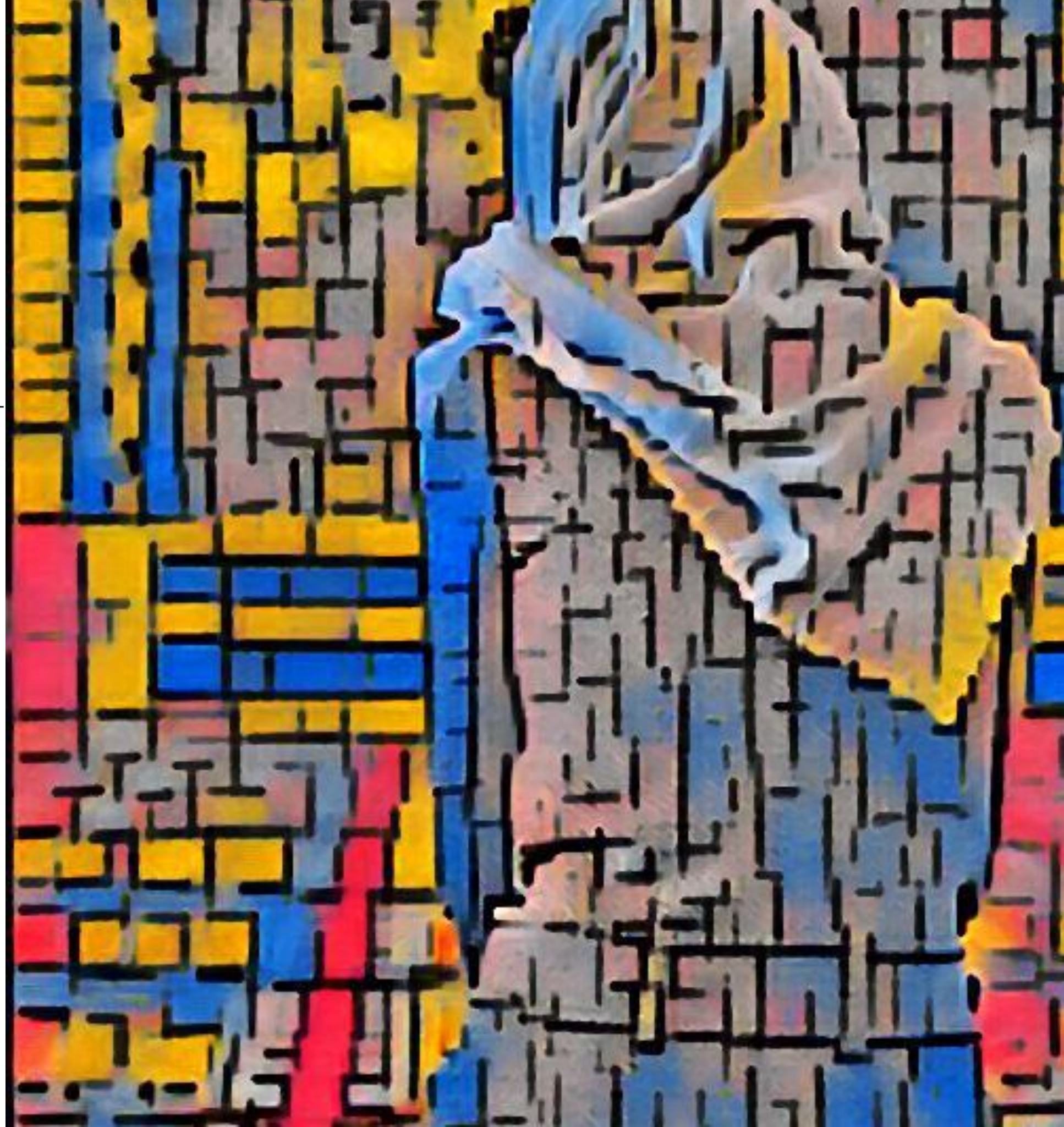
1. Before taking part in the focus groups, all participants were informed of the purpose and nature of the focus groups, and informed consent was obtained. At the end of each focus group, women were asked how they were feeling.
2. Following the principle of showing and maintaining respect to the participants, the following measures were implemented:

- A. Ensure that all discussions take place in a safe environment, where the women would feel both physically and emotionally protected.
- B. Assuring the conversations are conducted and translated by someone of the same gender.
- C. Avoiding judgmental presumptions, showing respect for the women's opinions, and feelings.
- D. Making sure to always maintain active listening skills.
- E. The participants were made to feel as safe as possible during all contact and interview sessions.
- F. Their identities were kept anonymous and never revealed under any circumstances.
- G. Assuring participants that answering any focus group questions was optional, they were not obligated to do so, and they could withdraw from the interviews at any time.

In accordance with the principle "**Do No Harm**," no further contact or discussion was conducted that would likely harm the wellbeing of the women.

Section Three

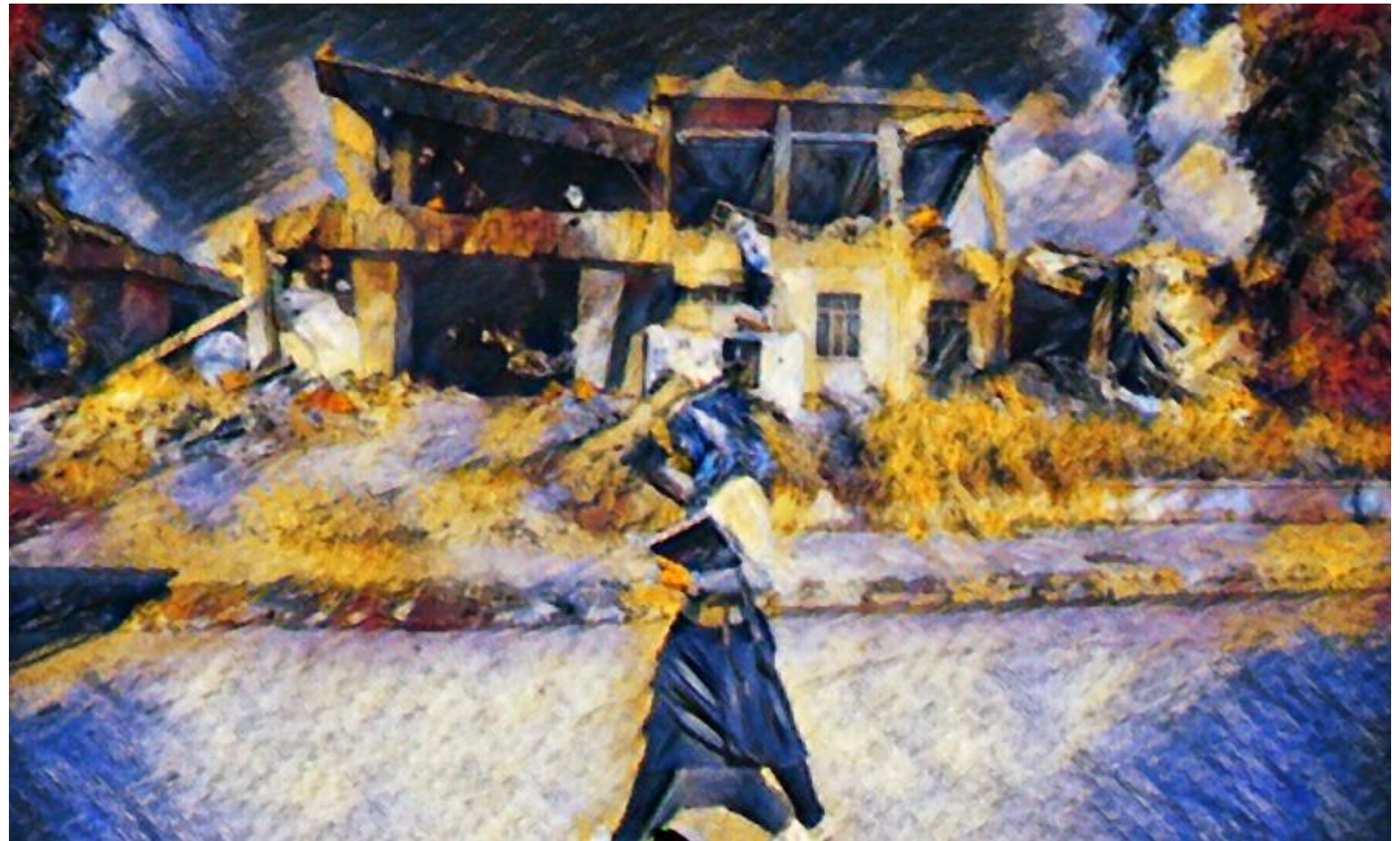
Background on the Humanitarian Crisis for Women Post ISIS



Background of the Humanitarian Crisis for Women Post ISIS

Decades long regional political instability and continued internal conflicts have led to a large-scale displacement and forced movement for women, resulting in unprecedented socio-economic problems, psychological and mental health issues. In 2014, a terrorist organisation called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged and seized control over Nineveh Plains and Sinjar.

Although the area has been “liberated”, women in Nineveh Plains and Sinjar, both inside and outside the camps, still feel their lives have not been normalized. The challenges for women wishing to live or return to these areas are multiple. In some cases, women cannot afford to leave the camps, in others they are slowly trying to rebuild. The culture of fear is still entrenched in these disputed and protracted areas and there are still many weapons, unexploded ordinances, and unsafe conditions.



Additionally, the rule of the community or tribal law is more powerful than the rule of law.

The challenges most faced are their economic suffering, the lack of employment opportunities, the lack of qualified health facilities, the lack of safe spaces or for future opportunities to build sustainable economic opportunities. Returnees though having reclaimed their rights since the liberation, find themselves

starting to lose them once they return to their place of origin.

Many societies are characterized by cultural norms that cause or support violence against women. In these societies, these practices have become normalized over time.

Background of the Humanitarian Crisis for Women Post ISIS

The Iraqi society has historically discouraged women from voicing their questions and concerns regarding traditional practices because of the perceived shame of talking openly in public and because it minimizes gender equality and expects women to behave modestly, shyly, tolerantly, and with respect towards family and prevailing social norms.

In Iraqi social cultural fabric, just like everywhere else in the world, gender roles are assigned to children at birth. Roles and responsibilities, expectations, limitations, and choices are all set out at the beginning of the process. As part of socialization, children are taught their gender roles via gendering or gender indoctrination. This process further internalizes behaviors, attitudes, and roles that further support patriarchy and are perceived to be anti-women.



Internally displaced grandmother and child in northern Iraq refugee camp, due to ISIS war

Due to the ISIS war and insecurity in conflict-affected areas, infrastructure and assets have been destroyed.

In 2014, the poverty rate increased from 19.8% to 22.5%. There are about twice as many unemployed people in the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar that were most affected by ISIS.

In emergency contexts, studies show that equal access to economic resources and

control over those resources can be effective in enhancing resilience, reducing vulnerability, and mitigating the risks of further violence.

Background of the Humanitarian Crisis for Women Post ISIS

Most situations where women are economically dependent on men manifest many cross-cutting issues, including harmful traditional practices. As a result, two effects may be noted:

1. As a result of lack of economic opportunities, women are more likely to be dependent on men, have fewer opportunities for economic advancement, and have fewer rights regarding accessing resources and exercising control over resources.
2. In addition, women face enormous challenges in their recovery efforts since they are returning to houses that have been damaged or destroyed, without access to income generation or livelihood opportunities across Nineveh Plains and Sinjar.



These internally displaced minority women from northern Iraq have remained in a camp south of Baghdad, with few opportunities for livelihoods

Resulting from the experience brought on by conflict, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), social exclusion and rejection, self-blaming, and low self-esteem are extremely prevalent amongst women across Nineveh Plains and Sinjar.

Many of the female victims of conflict do not report their mental problems because of the reasons, mainly social rejection and stigma. This is often associated with feelings of shame on the family.

Infrastructure in the recently reclaimed areas of return has been damaged. This has prevented women from accessing public services including health, and livelihood opportunities.

Background of the Humanitarian Crisis for Women Post ISIS

In view of limited protection and women's spaces/centers, women are also threatened with immediate security and protection from additional acts of violence.

Additionally, to the challenges that the women are facing, a significant number of women who are currently living in the IDPs camps or host communities across Nineveh Plains and Sinjar have reported cases of various forms of gender-based violence, such as an increase in the prevalence of child marriage, school dropouts due to a variety of factors, including gender-based roles and expectations. As a result, livelihood opportunities, psychosocial support services and security are also limited.

As noted earlier, the mental health and well-being of a woman affects her ability to pursue or perform work. A lack of stable services has been one of the main barriers to women, as well as the distance involved

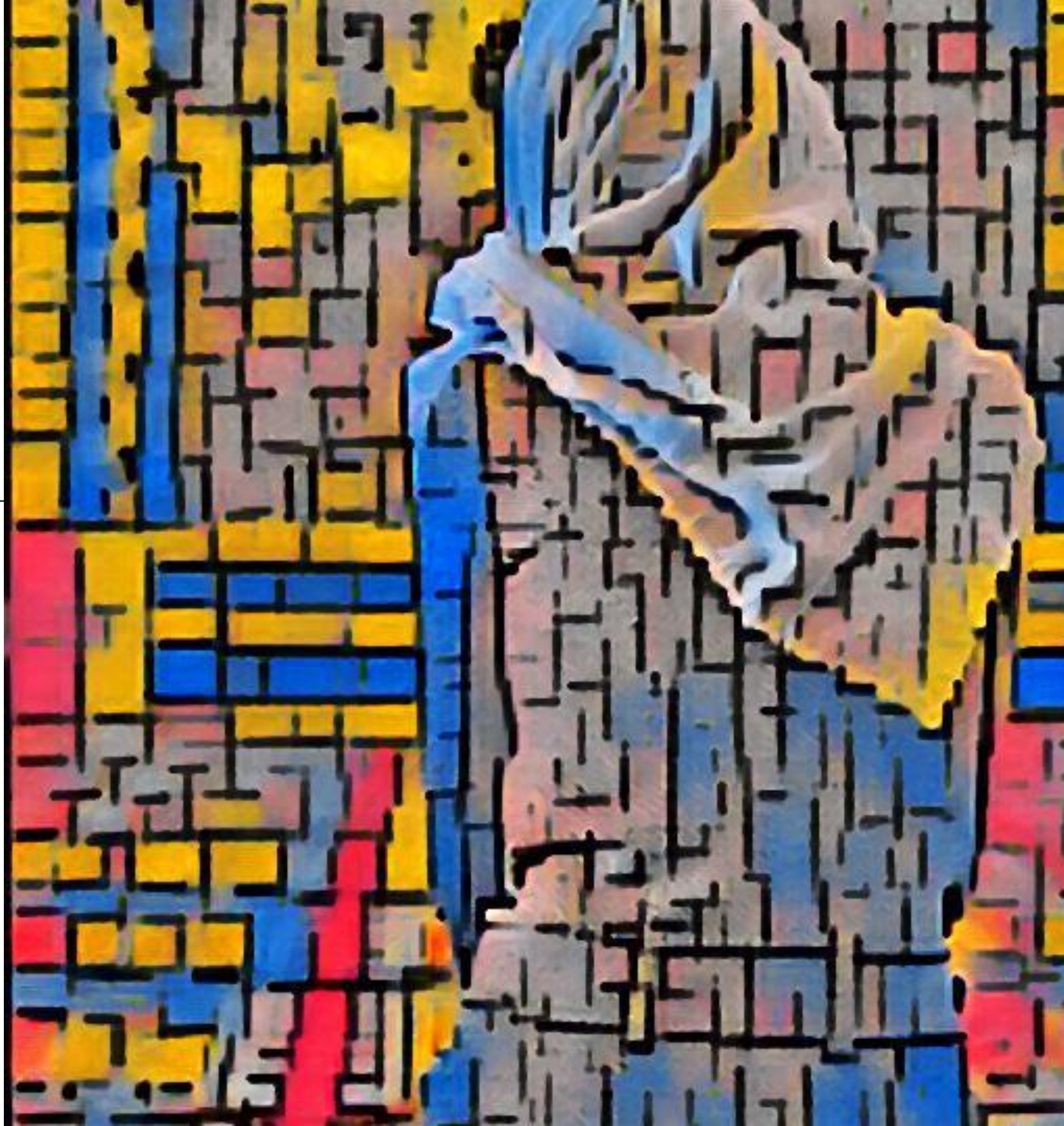


Linda's farm was restored through Mosaic Middle East's Nineveh SEED, providing for her and five children, plus employment for five young local people

in accessing services. While noting, a lack of adequate psychosocial services forms the foundation for women not being able to move forward and develop sustainable economic opportunities. Coupled with a lack of financial support, lack of tools to start or sustain a business, lack of training and skills, inability to find employment, and not being able to concentrate enough to work create almost impossible barriers to participation in or pursuing livelihood opportunities.

Section Four

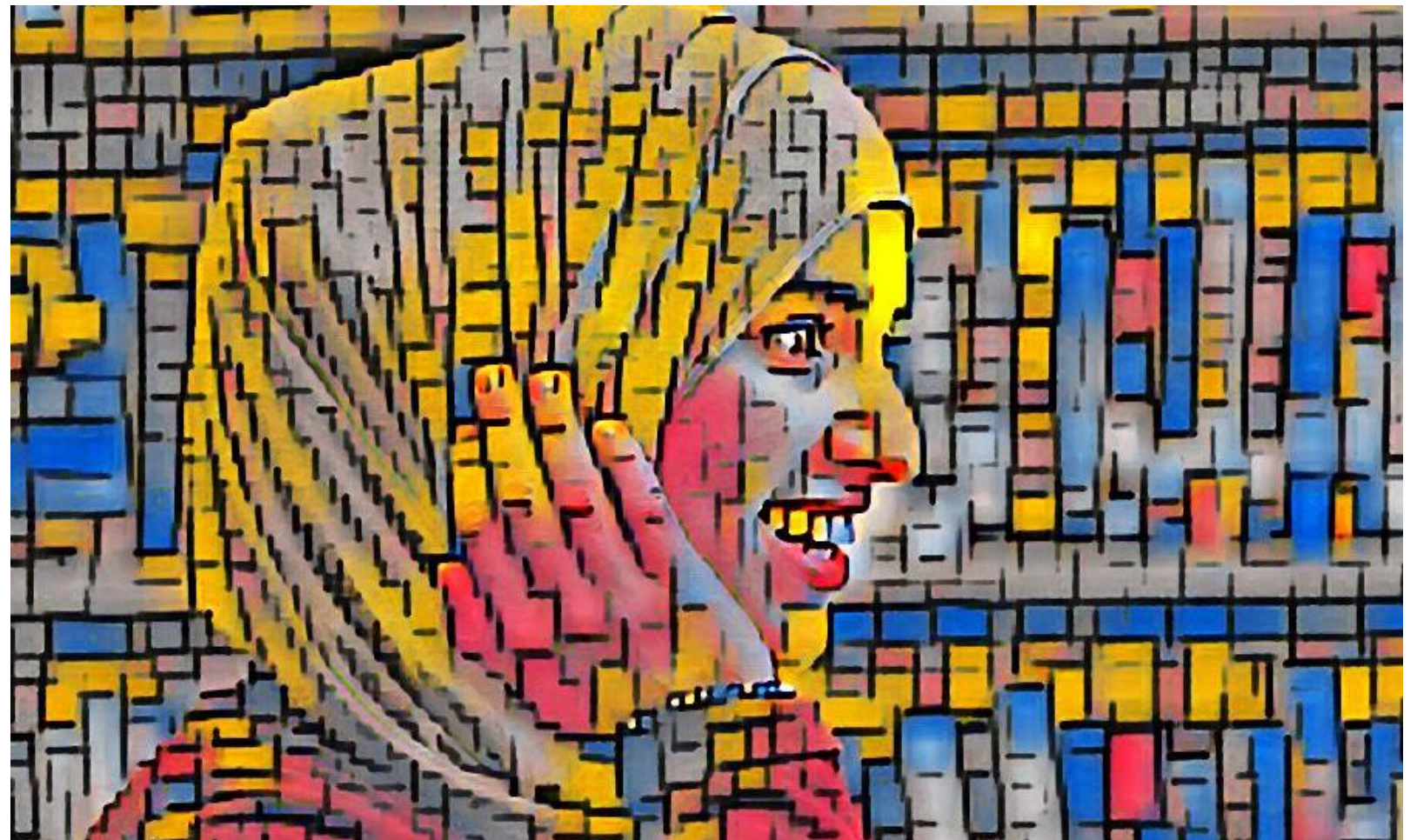
Key Findings by Thematic Area



Introduction to Findings

In Section Three, we report on findings from the qualitative data generated via the focus groups around two thematic areas and four key questions for each:

1. How do the livelihood and psychosocial activities implemented by the government or any other service provider including NGOs adequately address the specific needs and concerns of girls, and women in Nineveh Plains and Sinjar.
2. What are the barriers and enablers for women and girls to access livelihood and psychosocial services and facilities?
3. What are the specific gender related protection risks (harassment, insecurity, exploitation, etc.) for girls and women in relation to access to livelihood and psychosocial services and facilities?
4. What suggestions for solutions do girls, and women propose to improve sustainable equal and safe access to livelihood and psychosocial services?



Livelihood Findings

Section one of the Key Findings discusses employment opportunities, interests, and challenges in Nineveh Plains and Sinjar. Focus group questions were designed to better understand the local community's employment opportunities and livelihood interests. Also included are barriers to employment and livelihood challenges.

Livelihood interests in Nineveh Plains and Sinjar

Women participants report that the most significant needs resulting from livelihoods are (1) increased income, (2) access to markets, and (3) collaborative relations (especially between women) on a community level with the development of safe spaces, individual and collaborative work opportunities.

It was reported by participants that longer-term interventions, such as vocational training and business grants, were preferred. Special focus should be given in five key areas: Project Management, Financial Accounting, Human Resource Management and Agriculture. For the women who participated in the FGDs, work in baking, sewing is



Conference Focus Group attendees

oversaturated and of little interest. Running a small business such as a food store, a salon, a clothing store, or vocational development was most relevant.

Barriers to Accessing Livelihoods

All women mentioned that through livelihood programs, advancement, and presence of the role of women in society is expected to bring about concerns regarding community approval and potentially increased incidents of gender-based violence.

To ensure women can engage freely and without fear in economic generating activities, all the women suggested awareness raising amongst the community, inclusive of both men and women required.

Livelihood Findings

It is important to note that one hundred percent of women cited that the livelihood activities being run by NGOs did not adequately address the sustainability in the long run. They also noted that the government currently offers no support in terms of economic development.

Women's perceptions of the cost of not conforming to gender norms vary, but include stigmatization, harassment, and exclusion.

Seventy five percent of respondents, pointed towards the cost of transgressing social norms including violence, one respondent from Sinjar stating:

“The beliefs of these viewpoints regarding the 'causes' of violence are the consequence of deeply ingrained social norms where men are not held accountable for perpetrating violence against women as well as women being unaware of their rights.”



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Group or Individual Livelihoods

Women need to build and strengthen relationships with each other to organize as a collective for change, which offers valuable individual psychosocial benefits and opportunities for collective action; as well as developing their ability to create a livelihood for themselves.

As a means of establishing and strengthening bonds between women at the

level of the community, group, and individual, long-term livelihood activities present an entry point for women to get together.

Livelihood Findings

As a result of the focus groups, employment opportunities and community interests are generally aligned in Nineveh Plains and Sinjar. For livelihood interventions to succeed, they must address both market demands and participant interests. Most of the jobs are in industry, grocery stores, trade-related businesses, and agriculture. Participants in the focus group said these jobs are desirable and of interest to the local community.



Khanzad Ahmed, Secretary General of High Council of Women and Development and Conference attendees

Psychosocial Findings

A focus group structure was created to understand the availability and accessibility of psychosocial services in Nineveh Plains and Sinjar. These questions centered on services, knowledge about the services, general psychosocial needs, and common barriers to accessing these services.

Available Psychosocial Services

The FGD results showed that women lacked access to psychosocial services in two out of two FGDs conducted. There was a predominance of medication prescription over emotional and mental support in the available services.

The results reflect what is being experienced by the women. There are currently no qualified psychosocial service providers operating in Nineveh Plains or Sinjar, and there are a few case management services available, but they lack quality and qualified staff. On the whole, psychosocial services for women are limited in Nineveh Plains and in Sinjar.



Khanzad Ahmed, Secretary General of High Council of Women and Development and Conference attendees

Psychosocial Needs

According to women, the most necessary psychosocial activities for the local community are individual psychosocial counseling, group peer support, psychosocial awareness sessions, fully equipped health centers, and life skills training.

Nineveh Plains and Sinjar suffer from social stigma, a lack of knowledge about

available services and a long commute to get services, as evidenced by findings of the FGD. In addition, one hundred percent of women indicated stigma and recent COVID-19 restrictions as significant impediments.

Psychosocial Findings

Basic health care and the development of infrastructure to support it includes all the basic services that are required to meet every-day healthcare needs of the community. One hundred percent of participants classified basic healthcare as a top priority after psychosocial support.

FGD findings showed it may be beneficial to provide initial psychosocial education sessions and other services closer to the affected population to address these barriers. It was suggested by sixty percent of the women that an online service is not desirable but would be advantageous if there are no connectivity issues. With online psychosocial support, stigma-related barriers may also be relieved.



Khanzad Ahmed and Shauna Sexsmith, Smithson Institute of Professional Development with Conference attendee

Section Five

Recommendation Analysis



Recommendation Analysis

The questions in this section aimed at identifying women's needs to extent and quality of services provided relating to psychosocial and livelihood needs

In response to question **‘What are the specific gender related protection risks (harassment, insecurity, exploitation, etc.) for girls and women in relation to access to Livelihood and Psychosocial services and facilities?’** the majority of women noted unmet protection needs were associated with certain factors independent of ethnicity or displacement status. In an inherently patriarchal environment and by virtue of community discrimination, women minority groups face several challenges. These challenges include (a) limited movement, (b) disproportionate targeting towards women, and (c) harassment. It is important to mention that this need and opinion was shared by one hundred percent of the women participants.

Among all participants, they identified the need for women's shelters and safe spaces as a central and immediate need. Women with assumed ISIS affiliation face challenges obtaining ID documentation, community stigma, and are thereby prevented from accessing services. The perceived lack of basic services was cited as a central barrier by many of the women, which adversely affects their prospects for social and physical well-being. Safe spaces, updated educational resources, and health services are among the essential services required. In all three sectors, the rehabilitation of existing infrastructure in Nineveh and Sinjar, as well as the provision of recovery or emergency services in areas of displacement continue to be critical needs.

Enhancing access to services and improving the quality and quantity of available services are among the cross-cutting concerns. Specifically, within the health sector, there is a need for a clearer focus on mental health issues, as well as an improved understanding of these issues. The lack of reported mental health is one of the most underreported issues by women noted by all participants. Sixty percent of women explained how it is critical to understand this as it relates specifically to women. In addition to separation from family members (through deaths or disappearances), being a single female head of household, and feeling of collective blame such as community judgment or labels from others, are also important and influential factors.

In response to the question: **‘How do the livelihood and psychosocial activities implemented by the government or any other service provider including NGOs adequately address the specific needs and concerns of girls, and women in Nineveh Plains and Sinjar’.** According to the women participants, several service gaps persist in Nineveh's and Sinjar's healthcare and education sector. Due to the extensive damage caused during liberation, many existing health facilities within Nineveh and Sinjar must be rehabilitated while others must be deconstructed and rebuilt. Seventy percent of women noted a lack of expertise within the Iraqi health organisations, MOH (Ministry of Health) specifically, in technical and material capacity to provide health services. As such, humanitarian organisations would be best suited to build capacity to improve the management of existing hospitals, identify mental health needs, and refer patients to appropriate providers, and ensure equal access to care for persons with perceived affiliations, special needs, and those without civil documentation. Eighty percent of women mentioned without these basic needs being met it would be impossible for women to secure livelihoods.

Although access to education has greatly improved within the sector, existing education initiatives have a lack of qualified teachers, and social workers so many formal and informal learning spaces rely on inexperienced volunteers. It is important to note that one hundred percent of all women feel few pedagogical innovations exist, and that these limitations have a negative impact on their ability to develop the required skills to find employment or develop their capacities to become business owners.

As evident from these findings, it is crucial to ensure the delivery of basic services through a cohesive and comprehensive coordinated and complementary system. A lack of such a system continues to negatively impact intervention effectiveness. It would be worthwhile to look as a means of collaboration between government and NGO actors to supplement the need for pedagogical innovation, and the promotion of local ownership as the key to a successful and sustainability process.

The results from the FGD show that women regardless of minority grouping are in a dire need of services, and this necessitates a well-coordinated, integrative, partnership-based, and impact-oriented multi-sectoral response service that is easily accessible, affordable, and promotes dignity, safety, and welfare of women.

The questions in this section aimed at identifying the women's needs to extent and quality of services provided relating livelihood needs and recommendations

In response to the question: **‘What are the barriers and enablers for women and girls to access livelihood’** the result of war, lack of infrastructure in basic services and displacement continue to severely impede women's ability to access Nineveh and Sinjar markets. Forty three percent of women believed that access to production (particularly around Sinjar) and the development of commercial relations are affected by the breakdown of essential infrastructure. Disputed status of large areas within Nineveh and the weakness of government implementation, regulation of the value chain, has affected the growth of sustainable markets and programs which adequately address the gaps in the current market.

Seventy six percent of women believe that in Nineveh and Sinjar, women are largely dependent on men, and are underrepresented in the labour market. The situation is particularly challenging for women, who face challenges related to a lack of livelihood opportunities, childcare responsibilities, restrictions placed on their access to the labour market, and their general lack of qualifications. Forty percent of women mentioned Nineveh's agriculture industry as an important economic sector, and its revitalization could help to meet the increasing need for food security and reduce dependency on imported goods. Women could also benefit from its revitalization through job opportunities in markets where already saturated (sewing, handmade goods) vocational trainings have not produced sustainable livelihood needs. Ninety percent of women mentioned there is, however, a need for government support, and protection to boost this industry

In response to the question: **‘What suggestions for solutions do girls, and women propose to improve sustainable equal and safe access to livelihood and psychosocial services’** The FGD participants stated in humanitarian contexts, there is a need for a shift from emergency response to development but accompanied by a reconfiguration of livelihood programming and the introduction of new frameworks promoting market sustainability and entrepreneurship. Interventions related to inclusive capacity building, recapitalization of SMEs, and the replacement of lost assets are central in this regard.

To adequately respond to existing needs, the women suggested that humanitarian actors need to coordinate their efforts. In addition, initiatives designed to promote women's economic empowerment and independence need more support and attention because women still lack an equal chance of becoming business owners.

In response to the question: **‘How do the livelihood activities implemented by the government or any other service provider including NGOs adequately address the specific needs and concerns of girls, and women in Nineveh Plains and Sinjar’**. The majority of the FGD participants said inclusion of women in various livelihood sectors is a key since many women who became heads of households during the invasion are also the primary caregivers for their children. This makes their need for income even greater while limiting their ability to access livelihood opportunities. Moreover, a stronger channel of mutual referrals between psychosocial programs and market-related activities would be helpful. Sixty percent of the women said there is a need to develop a certified and progressively built empowerment model based on market demands for women - so that they are fully integrated back into their own communities and markets. To achieve sustainable livelihoods, livelihood actors will need to turn more to the private sector while at the same time promoting a culture of entrepreneurship within their operations.

As a result, agriculture cooperatives, as well as banking systems, must be strengthened to encourage the flourishing of women owned and run business. It will be necessary to combine these strategies with a robust advocacy for the implementation of social safety nets for women. Cross-sharing of lessons learned by the humanitarian actors and the Government will be central to enhancing livelihood projects in Nineveh and Sinjar and ensuring that existing interventions are achieving stability and sustainability. Creating healthy regulatory frameworks and securing investment for the upscaling of small businesses requires that the government supports Public-Private Partnerships. Market integration and stabilization should be improved through Public-Private Partnerships

To realize sustainable livelihood solutions that promote stability, a longer-term project cycle was suggested for each project. As of now, sixty eight percent of women noted that most opportunities are short term projects and these timeframes may not be appropriate for some types of interventions, such as entrepreneurship and capacity building.

The questions in this section aimed at identifying the women's needs and the extent and quality of psychosocial services provided to them

In response to the question: **‘What are the barriers and enablers for women and girls to access psychosocial services and facilities?’** Participants in the focus groups considered fear, shame, and social stigma to be some of the major obstacles. Because of this, they see safety shelters and protection sanctuaries as providing them with a degree of security, as well as opportunities to become more aware. Participants from Sinjar highlighted the importance of psychosocial support services as well. Women also see health care services and raising awareness among men, boys, and girls as critical to fully understanding their rights and being able to access much-needed services. The participants’ recognition of the essentiality of these services is associated with what they saw as the most crucial needs mentioned above.

All participants viewed the lack of awareness as the second major obstacle. It is significant that both factors are interrelated, as lack of awareness may trigger feelings of shame and guilt amongst women. Access to services was also hampered by the lack of trust and confidence in service providers, especially the government

In reply to the question **‘What should be changed to make the services more effective and efficient for women?’** According to participants in the FGDs, improving the relationship between government institutions and private service providers will lead to increased efficiency and reduced bureaucracy.

In addition, participants stressed the importance of mental health and psychosocial services provided by trained psychologists, with a clear Terms of Reference and updated training modules to improve the response to psychosocial needs, which would be assisted by the provision of counseling support. As a result, this would assist women in creating livelihood opportunities, and restoring self-confidence and self-esteem.

Over eighty percent of the women also emphasised the need for changing the mechanisms currently in place for humanitarian-government partnerships that may help service delivery. These partnerships and cross-sector collaborations would assist with unmet public health needs that cannot be addressed by humanitarian or government actors alone.



Conference Focus Group attendees

Section Six: Recommendations

According to the focus group findings, a strategic, multifaceted, multi-partnership approach is essential, including, but not limited to, mechanisms for collaboration between women focal points throughout the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar, advocacy and education, awareness raising and sensitization, prevention, and beyond that, activities that promote sustainable development that are gender equal and empower women. To have equal opportunities for employment and education, women must have the same rights economically.

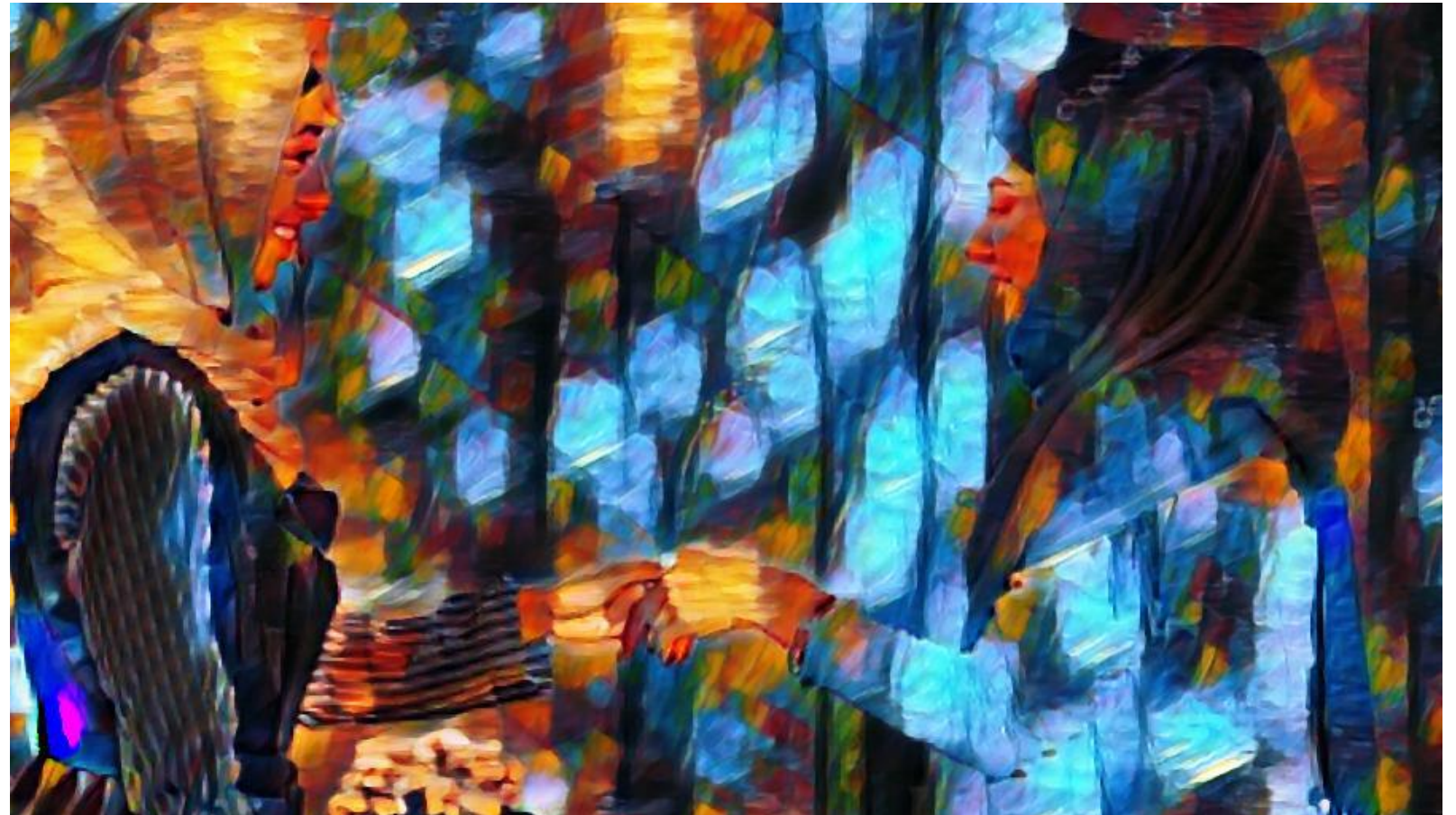
Women must be made aware of their rights legally. To achieve dignity and freedom, they need to be free of all psychological and social barriers.

In addition, men and women need to be empowered to confront dominant cultural norms that view women as inferior to men, ultimately leading to gender conflict and subordination.

Following are some of the key recommendations derived from this focus group assessment at the infrastructure, livelihood, and psychosocial levels:

Infrastructure Recommendations

- Assisting with the reconstruction and recovery process from a gender-inclusive perspective. Particularly, making basic social services available to women across Nineveh Plains and Sinjar.



- The creation of an all-women focal point unit to work in collaboration with international actors for the collection of project ideas, complaints, and needs.
- The promotion of gender awareness and sensitization in schools, for women's rights. The appointment of more social workers and psychosocial counsellors in schools.
- Establishing centers for women who have been victims of sexual assaults or other forms of violence due to trauma or post-traumatic disorder.
- Creating safe spaces, focusing on women-led livelihood collaborations, and improving existing ones.

Livelihood Recommendations

- Assistance with starting a new business based on skills and experience, vocational training, job placements, training programs, and programs for expanding an existing business as well as financial support for Small Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMME).
- Labour market assessment on the current gaps within agriculture skills, food processing services, and production, with a focus on women.

Recommendations

Psychosocial Recommendations

- Involving women, boys, men, religious figures, public figures in training courses on women's rights, and making them more involved in awareness-raising and programs as equal partners as well as beneficiaries.
- Assuring that the psychologists providing services have clear TORs.
- Make sure that providers of health services are aware of women's needs and the referral pathways in their respective areas.
- Providing more qualified medical counselors and developing curriculum to strengthen psychosocial services, particularly for women.
- As well as economic outcomes, psychosocial wellbeing outcomes resulting from livelihood activities should be recognized, measured, and incorporated into program design.
- As part of further efforts to empower participants, the setting of livelihood activities should be offered as a choice. This should be alongside addressing these and other norms that hinder women's participation in livelihood activities through gender integrated behavior change activities on the capabilities that both men and women have, and cultural structures that perpetuate gender inequality.



Khanzad Ahmed, Secretary General of High Council of Women and Development, trainers and Conference attendees

- Identify the gaps in the basic health care system, the service provision, and the capacity of health providers to provide gender targeted services.

