



# WOMEN, CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN THE IRAQ CRISIS: A FACT SHEET

January 2008

More than 4.5 million Iraqis are living as refugees inside their own country or in neighboring countries.<sup>1</sup> This represents the largest displacement of people in the Middle East since 1948. On average, 75 to 80 percent of the displaced in any crisis are women and children.<sup>2</sup> They are also the most vulnerable. The Iraqi Red Crescent Society estimates that more than 83 percent of those displaced inside Iraq are women and children, and the majority of the children are under 12.<sup>3</sup>

Tens of thousands of Iraqis have lost their lives in the violence since 2003.<sup>4</sup> Women and girls inside Iraq have been targeted for murder and kidnapping, and have been subjected to violence, including rape, by armed groups as well as civilians. Widespread violence and new, restrictive laws have significantly constrained women's and girls' lives and limited their access to and participation in the public sphere. Women are afraid to leave the relative safety of their homes or shelters and parents are reluctant to send their children to school for fear of violence.<sup>5</sup> Children, particularly girls, are often isolated and have little interaction with their friends. The isolation exacerbates the trauma that stems from violence and displacement. Women in Iraq are struggling to meet their families' basic needs in a country where 4 million people do not have enough to eat.<sup>6</sup> Seventy percent of the population lack access to proper water supplies,<sup>7</sup> and 43 percent live on less than one dollar per day.<sup>8</sup> The challenges are especially great for those displaced from their homes and neighborhoods.

Iraqi refugees in neighboring countries may be safe from the violence they experienced in Iraq, but many live in desperate circumstances. Most refugees have no legal status and live in constant fear of detention and deportation. They cannot legally work and many cannot access basic services. Parents are afraid to send their children to school because the family does not have legal status. The situation is ripe for the exploitation of vulnerable women and children. There have been numerous reports of women and girls forced into prostitution and children sent out to the work to help support their impoverished families.<sup>9 10 11</sup>

The United States, the government of Iraq and international actors must act now to significantly increase humanitarian assistance for displaced Iraqis, provide generous support to countries hosting Iraqi refugees and ensure that all possible measures are taken to safeguard vulnerable women, children and youth from violence and exploitation.

## Abuse and Exploitation of Women and Girls

- In Basra, a city in southern Iraq, local police reported 40 cases in the last five months of 2007 alone of women killed by religious vigilantes because of how they dressed. Their mutilated bodies were found with notes warning against "violating Islamic teachings."<sup>12</sup> The actual number of murdered women is believed to be much higher since many cases go unreported for fear of reprisals.<sup>13</sup>
- According to a local Iraqi organization, most women in Iraq now only go outside with a male escort and rape is commonly committed by all armed groups; they also report that the killing of women is increasing.<sup>14</sup>
- "Honor killings," or the murder of a woman or girl usually by a male relative to restore "family honor," have increased dramatically in Iraq since the US invasion.<sup>15</sup>
- The number of women who committed suicide by self-immolation in the Kurdistan region of Iraq increased from 36 in 2005 to 133 in 2006, and murders of women rose from four in 2005 to 17 in 2006.<sup>16</sup> Incidents involving violence against women in the Kurdistan region increased by 18 percent between March and May of 2006.<sup>17</sup>
- An Iraqi women's organization reported that an estimated 4,000 Iraqi women, one-fifth of whom are under 18, have disappeared since the 2003 invasion; many are believed to have been trafficked.<sup>18</sup> The US State Department reports that Iraqi women and girls are believed to have been internally and internationally trafficked for sexual exploitation.<sup>19</sup>
- In 2007, prostitution increased among internally displaced women and girls desperate to survive in northern Iraq.<sup>20</sup>
- 15 percent of surveyed Iraqi women widowed by the war are seeking "temporary marriages" or sex work for protection and/or financial support.<sup>21</sup>
- Approximately 50,000 Iraqi women and girls in Syria have been forced into prostitution.<sup>22</sup>
- A September 2007 report showed that sexual exploitation of Iraqi women and girls in Jordan is a growing problem.<sup>23</sup>

## Women and Children's Health

- Iraq remains on the list of the 60 countries in the world with the highest infant, under-five and maternal mortality rates, according to available data.<sup>24</sup>
  - Infant mortality rate: Estimated at 35 per 1000 live births.<sup>25</sup>
  - Under-five mortality rate: Estimated at 41 per 1000 live births.<sup>26</sup> Diarrhea and acute respiratory infections account for about two out of three under-five deaths, with malnutrition a major contributing factor.
  - Maternal mortality rate: 192 per 100,000 live births (2004).<sup>27</sup>
- Only one in three children under the age of five in Iraq has access to safe drinking water, according to UNICEF.<sup>28</sup>
- 23 percent of children in southern Iraq are chronically malnourished.<sup>29</sup> 25.9 percent of children under five in Iraq suffer from stunted growth.<sup>30</sup>

- An April 2007 report found that 43 percent of the Iraqi refugee children it surveyed in Amman had witnessed violence in Iraq; 39 percent said they lost someone close through violence<sup>31</sup> and over 30 percent of the refugee children surveyed said they had no hope for the future.<sup>32</sup>
- Male gynecologists are being targeted for violence and intimidation by Islamic extremists as they are accused of invading the privacy of women.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, according to the Iraqi Medical Association, at least 75 percent of doctors, pharmacists and nurses in Iraq have left their jobs at universities, clinics and hospitals. Of these, at least 55 percent have fled abroad.<sup>34</sup>
- As of August 2007, 19 percent of refugees registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Syria reported having significant medical conditions and 14 percent of those registered in Jordan were identified as having special needs.<sup>35</sup> Ten percent of Iraqis in Lebanon suffer from chronic disease.<sup>36</sup>
- The two main clinics that service Iraqi refugees in Amman do not have medicine to prevent pregnancy or HIV transmission for rape survivors.<sup>37</sup> Mental health care is also generally not available for Iraqis in Jordan who survived or witnessed violence.<sup>38</sup>

### Education

- Figures from the Iraqi Ministry of Education show that even before the escalation of sectarian violence in February 2006, one in six children did not attend primary school. Since the upsurge, that number is one in three.<sup>39</sup>
- Only one in five students at primary and secondary schools countrywide are girls.<sup>40</sup> In the southern provinces, the ratio of girls attending school has dropped from two girls to three boys to one to four.<sup>41</sup>
- 92 percent of Iraqi children experience problems learning, primarily attributed to the overall climate of fear.<sup>42</sup>
- Many Iraqi refugee children have missed up to three years of school as a result of displacement and violence.<sup>43</sup>
- In some classes in Jordan, up to 30 percent of Iraqi refugee children are nearly or completely illiterate.<sup>44</sup>
- As of November 2007, 340,000 Iraqi school-age refugees in Syria are not in school.<sup>45</sup>
- Already overcrowded schools in Damascus now have up to 60 students per class.<sup>46</sup>
- In Lebanon, enrolment in schools for Iraqi children aged from six to 17 years old is only 58 percent.<sup>47</sup>

### Livelihoods

- 20 percent of the population inside Iraq has fallen below the international poverty line of \$1 per day per person.<sup>48</sup>
- Access to work, income generation and employment is considered a priority need by over 62 percent of the surveyed internally displaced population.<sup>49</sup>
- According to a November 2007 study, 33 percent of Iraqis in Jordan surveyed report that their financial resources will last for three months or less, while 24 percent are relying on funds from family abroad to survive.<sup>50</sup>
- Fifteen percent of Iraqi women in Jordan participate in the labor market. Twenty-five percent of economically active Iraqi women are self employed.<sup>51</sup>
- The economic exploitation of adolescent girls and boys is on the rise as family savings dwindle and poorer Iraqi families arrive in Syria and Jordan. Girls work as domestic workers or in factories, or sell small goods on the streets. Children and adolescents often accept lower-paying jobs than adults and are exposed to more hazardous and exploitative working environments.<sup>52</sup>
- In Lebanon, 25 percent of Iraqi refugee males under 18 years of age are economically active. Five percent work intermittently and less than five percent are looking for work.<sup>53</sup>

### Other Risk Indicators

- Over 30 percent of the total population in Iraq has special needs.<sup>54</sup>
- An average 25,000 children per month were displaced by violence or intimidation during 2007, their families seeking shelter in other parts of Iraq.<sup>55</sup>
- Approximately 1,350 children in Iraq were detained by military and police authorities in 2007, many for alleged security violations.<sup>56</sup>
- At least 15 percent of cases referred by UNHCR for resettlement are women at risk.<sup>57</sup>
- Twenty percent of the Iraqi families surveyed in Jordan are headed by a female and often found among the poorer population.<sup>58</sup>
- A UNHCR survey of over 750 Iraqi refugees in Syria showed that every single person interviewed reported experiencing at least one traumatic event in Iraq.<sup>59</sup> One in five of those registered with UNHCR since January 2007 – more than 19,000 individuals – were identified as victims of torture and/or violence in Iraq.<sup>60</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> IOM. [Iraq Displacement Assessment and Statistics Update](#). December 1, 2007.
- <sup>2</sup> UNFPA. [State of the World's Population 2002](#). 2002.
- <sup>3</sup> Iraqi Red Crescent Society. [The internally displaced people in Iraq – update 27](#). October 24, 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> The British-based research group [Iraq Body Count](#) reports over 87,000 civilian deaths due to violence. According to a study published in *The Lancet*, 655,000 excess deaths occurred in Iraq through the end of June 2006 because of the war. A recent WHO study reported that approximately 151,000 Iraqi civilians died violently between March 2003 and June 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Brenjo, Nina. [Iraq: The calm before the storm?](#) Reuters AlertNet. December 18, 2007.
- <sup>6</sup> UNOCHA Situation Report. [Humanitarian Crisis in Iraq: Facts and Figures](#). November 13, 2007.
- <sup>7</sup> Oxfam and NGO Coordinating Committee in Iraq. [Rising to the humanitarian challenge in Iraq](#). Briefing paper. July 30, 2007.
- <sup>8</sup> Oxfam and NGO Coordinating Committee in Iraq. [Rising to the humanitarian challenge in Iraq](#). Briefing paper. July 30, 2007.
- <sup>9</sup> Hassan, Nihal. ['50,000 Iraqi refugees' forced into prostitution](#). The Independent. June 24, 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> IOM. [Tension in the North Poses Additional Burden on Internally Displaced](#). November 2, 2007.
- <sup>11</sup> Lyon, Alistair. [Iraqi refugees turn to sex trade in Syria](#). Reuters. December 31, 2007.
- <sup>12</sup> Inter Press Service New Agency. ['Iraq: 'Bad' Women Raped and Killed](#). December 18, 2007.
- <sup>13</sup> Sinan Salaheddin. [Vigilantes Kill 40 Women in Iraq's South](#). Associated Press. December 9, 2007.
- <sup>14</sup> Brenjo, Nina. [Iraq: The calm before the storm?](#) Reuters AlertNet. December 18, 2007.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Kurdistan's Human Rights Ministry, quoted in IRIN. [IRAQ: "Honour killings" persist in Kurdish north](#). December 7, 2007.
- <sup>17</sup> UN Assistance Mission for Iraq. [Human Rights Report 1 April – 30 June](#). June 2007.
- <sup>18</sup> Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq in Sarhan, Afif. [In Baghdad, Sex is Traded for Survival](#). Al Jazeera. August 13, 2007.
- <sup>19</sup> United States State Department. [Trafficking in persons report 2006](#). Washington, DC: June 2006.
- <sup>20</sup> IOM. [Tension in the North Poses Additional Burden on Internally Displaced](#). November 2, 2007.
- <sup>21</sup> MADRE. [Promising Democracy, Imposing Theocracy: Gender-Based Violence and the US War on Iraq](#). March 2007.
- <sup>22</sup> Hassan, Nihal. ['50,000 Iraqi refugees' forced into prostitution](#). The Independent. June 24, 2007.
- <sup>23</sup> Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. [Iraqi Refugee Women and Youth in Jordan: Reproductive Health Findings](#). September 2007.
- <sup>24</sup> WHO. [Iraq Annual Report](#). 2006.
- <sup>25</sup> Cluster D. [Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey – MICS3](#). 2006.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> UNDP. [Iraq Living Conditions Survey – ILCS](#). 2004.
- <sup>28</sup> [Report of the Secretary General to the UN Security Council](#). October 15, 2007.
- <sup>29</sup> Harper, Andrew. [Iraq: growing needs amid continuing displacement](#). Forced Migration Review. November 2007.
- <sup>30</sup> WFP and Government of Iraq: Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq. May 2006.
- <sup>31</sup> World Vision. [Trapped! The Disappearing Hopes of Iraqi Refugee Children](#). April 2007.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> IRIN. [Iraq: Male gynaecologists attacked by extremists](#). November 13, 2007.
- <sup>35</sup> UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. [Health sector appeal – Meeting the health needs of Iraqis displaced in neighboring countries](#). September 18, 2007.
- <sup>36</sup> UNHCR. [Surveys give valuable data on plight of Iraqi refugees](#). December 14, 2007.
- <sup>37</sup> Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. [Iraqi Refugee Women and Youth in Jordan: Reproductive Health Findings](#). September 2007.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> IRIN. [Number of girls attending school dropping, say analysts](#). November 25, 2007.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Oxfam and NGO Coordinating Committee in Iraq. [Rising to the humanitarian challenge in Iraq](#). Briefing paper. July 30, 2007.
- <sup>43</sup> UNHCR. [UNHCR and UNICEF issue joint appeal to get Iraqi children back in school](#). Press release. July 27, 2007.
- <sup>44</sup> Erb, Jason. [Save the Children](#). December 12, 2007.
- <sup>45</sup> Harper, Andrew. [Iraq: growing needs amid continuing displacement](#). Forced Migration Review. November 2007.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> UNHCR. [Surveys give valuable data on plight of Iraqi refugees](#). December 14, 2007.
- <sup>48</sup> Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology (Iraq) and Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies (Norway), pp. 58-63
- <sup>49</sup> IOM. [Emergency Needs Assessment. Bi-weekly report](#). November 1, 2007.
- <sup>50</sup> UNHCR. [Surveys give valuable data on plight of Iraqi refugees](#). December 14, 2007.
- <sup>51</sup> Fafo. [Iraqis in Jordan 2007: Their Numbers and Characteristics](#). 2007.
- <sup>52</sup> UNICEF. [Iraqi Adolescent Girls: Voices to be heard](#). August 2007.
- <sup>53</sup> Danish Refugee Council. [Iraqi Population Survey in Lebanon](#). November 2007.
- <sup>54</sup> UNHCR News Stories. [UNHCR doubles budget for Iraq operations to US \\$123 million](#). July 12, 2007.
- <sup>55</sup> UNICEF. [Little respite for Iraq's children in 2007](#). December 21, 2007.
- <sup>56</sup> UNICEF. [Little respite for Iraq's children in 2007](#). December 21, 2007.
- <sup>57</sup> Harper, Andrew. [Iraq: growing needs amid continuing displacement](#). Forced Migration Review. November 2007.
- <sup>58</sup> UNHCR. [Surveys give valuable data on plight of Iraqi refugees](#). December 14, 2007.
- <sup>59</sup> UNHCR. [Trauma survey in Syria](#). January 22, 2008.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.