On 8 March 2016, International Women’s Day (IWD), women from the southern governorates of Iraq shared their wishes and stories of resilience with WFP. Three themes emerged as WFP staff listened to the needs of different Iraqi women.

1. **Empowerment and Stability**
   One of the wishes for the group of talented women was to find income-generating opportunities to get their lives back on track. Many of these young women are college graduates, and are skilled as hairdressers, tailors, cooks, and farmers. These women said they rely on these skills to support their families, and their children’s education. Many of them lost their husbands or sons during the crisis while fleeing. Some of these IDP women have taken up small jobs such as sewing, knitting or making pickles and cookies in return for small money.

   "Iraqi women proved to be extremely strong, not only because of the recent crisis, but because of what they have been through during decades of instability”

   **Rasha**, a 20 year old college graduate from Mosul

   WFP’s Shatha Kando talked to some displaced Sunni women from Tikrit and Ramadi, who now reside as IDPs in Shi’a communities in Muthanna. **Azhar**, a 37-year-old mother of three young physically disabled girls said she wished for a sewing machine to support her family. **Ayaam**, a 35-year-old in Najaf said that she was selling her knitted sweaters and jackets in a local market to support her family. Finally, **Najat**, 25, who participated in a focus group organized in Al-Saniya, Qadisiya told WFP’s Heyad Musa that she sold her gold ring to buy a sewing machine, and now sews children’s clothes for the host and IDP communities as a way of generating an income.

   As some wished for empowerment, others were empowering their communities. **Afrah**, 31, is a teacher from Tal Afar told WFP’s Khuld Karam in Najaf that she gathers her neighbours’ kids to teach them in the evening for free.

   "We can talk to you freely about all our concerns”

   Women of different age involved in a focus group discussion

2. **Integration and Equality**
   Continuing her education was **Nardine**’s number one wish before she had to leave Mosul was to study: “I wanted to become a doctor and help people, but now I need help,” she said. Another girl named **Intisar**, 22, is a law student who aspires to become a judge.

   “We miss the times at school, the care-free time we spent back home”

   **Nardine**, a 16-year-old school girl told in al-Qadisiya.

   Not giving up on her dream, Intisar is working for a civil society organization in Najaf to support her studies.

   Image at top of page: Meeting in Muthanna. WFP/Shatha Kando
2. Integration and Equality

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One of the biggest concerns for Nardine, Shahad and other young girls is their limited integration into their host communities. Zainab, a 20-year-old in Al Qadissiya, said that although she feels safe, she and others nonetheless are isolated as IDPs as they cannot mix with the locals.

“We are foreigners here. Imagine, we are foreigners in our own country”

Zainab, a 20 year-old school in al-Qaddisiya.

3. Accessibility to Social Services and Privacy

The accessibility to basic social services such as water, hygiene, clean shelters and separate toilets is the third pressing need for women, especially young females. A group of young girls in Karbala said they suffer from various skin ailments due to the non-hygienic living conditions. Many of them sleep in humid beds because of the rain. For these women, social and economic barriers prevent them from accessing health services in host communities. The women who shared their views about their food needs were thankful for WFP’s food assistance.

Conclusion:
The discussions held on the occasion of International Women’s Day, helped WFP to gain a deeper understanding of the needs of displaced and conflict-affected women in Iraq. It also helped to establish a dialogue with IDP women to listen to their concerns. All of the participants agreed that it was their first time that any humanitarian workers had come to them in this manner, where they were free to express their views, and feelings. WFP in Iraq is the lead agency with regards to implementing the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) and Communicating with Communities (CwC) concepts in its response to assistance to IDPs in Iraq.

“We know, that WFP doesn’t have a magic solution for our problems, but we are thankful to you for the food we get every month, and especially for listening to us”

A young woman in Karbala

“We never had this kind of discussion before, where we could talk freely about our lives, fears and our situation while living in camps and shelters”

Sabah, 28 years old

“We are foreigners here. Imagine, we are foreigners in our own country”

Zainab, a 20 year-old school in al-Qaddisiya.

“There are no women-designated toilets in this mosque where we are living. The boys use the toilets all day long and we feel embarrassed using them at the same time. So we wait until night time to go to the washroom when others are sleeping”

25-year-old Najat from Anbar, now living in Al Qadissiya

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