



The Economic and Social Impacts on Women Who Search for the Disappeared

The Case of Ninewa, Iraq

RIMA SALIMA¹

1. Introduction

Enforced disappearances have long shaped Iraq's violent past and fragile present, leaving behind a legacy of unresolved loss and generational trauma. While much of the discourse around disappearances has focused on legal mechanisms, truth commissions, or political responsibility, far less attention has been paid to those left behind, especially the women who bear the weight of searching for the disappeared.

This research centres the lived experience of Yazidi and Sunni Arab women searchers from Sinjar and South Mosul in the Ninewa governorate, who, despite navigating patriarchal and insecure environments, have become frontline actors in the search for truth, justice, and accountability. Rather than framing them solely as victims, it recognises these women as agents of change and resilience. Their search journeys reflect the enduring trauma of enforced disappearance while also exposing broader patterns of structural violence, including economic marginalisation, gendered stigma, and exclusion from justice.

By listening to them as survivors as well as social and political actors, the study highlights how searching becomes a site of both burden and resistance, where women mobilise limited resources,

¹ This article is published under a pseudonym at the request of the author, whose professional circumstances prevent publication under their legal name.

confront hostile systems, and demand answers in the absence of effective state action. In doing so, it contributes to survivor-led and feminist scholarship that makes visible the unacknowledged labour of those sustaining post-conflict recovery.

This research paper is structured as follows. **Section 2** situates enforced disappearance within Iraq's political and historical landscape. **Section 3** outlines the methodological approach. Iraq's legal commitments regarding enforced disappearance are reviewed in **Section 4**, before **Section 5** examines the gendered impacts on women searchers in Sinjar and South Mosul. **Finally, Section 6** advances survivor-centred recommendations to guide policy and practice, strengthen accountability, and promote more inclusive approaches to peace and justice in Iraq.

2. Background: The history of disappearances in Iraq and Ninewa

The legacy of enforced disappearance in Iraq spans decades and involves both state and non-state actors. For the purpose of this research, enforced disappearance refers to the arrest, detention, abduction, or any form of deprivation of liberty by state or non-state armed actors, including groups such as the Islamic State (IS), followed by a refusal to acknowledge the fate or whereabouts of the persons concerned, thereby placing them outside the protection of the law (ICPPED, 2006).²

The persistence of this crime has been reinforced by the absence of accountability and the lack of comprehensive transitional justice mechanisms in Iraq. Institutional fragmentation and limited coordination among agencies responsible for addressing missing persons continue to delay truth and reparation processes, deepening the suffering of families of the disappeared and hindering societal reconciliation (ICMP, 2021).

The roots of enforced disappearances in Iraq trace back to the 1960s during the Baathist regime, particularly during Saddam Hussein's campaigns against the Kurdish civilians in the north of the country, where mass disappearances became a tool of political repression and ethnic persecution (Human Rights Watch, 1993). During the Anfal campaign between 1986 and 1989, an estimated **50,000 to 100,000** Kurds were forcibly disappeared or killed, and more than 1,200 Kurdish villages destroyed (Holocaust Museum Houston, n. d.). Subsequent conflicts, including the Iran-Iraq War, the 1991 Gulf War, and the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, further entrenched the practice, with various armed groups, including occupying forces, implicated in these crimes (Amnesty International, 2017). Iraq is now considered one of the countries with the highest numbers of enforced disappearance cases globally, with some estimates suggesting that between **250,000 and one million** people have disappeared since the 1960s (OHCHR, 2023).

The post-2003 period marked a dramatic transformation in Iraq's political and sectarian landscape. The Baath regime had long favoured Sunni Arabs in political appointments, military leadership, and

² This research focuses on women searching for disappeared family members, most of whom are civilians. In some cases, however, the missing person's relatives have been accused either formally or informally of affiliation with the IS. Regardless of their status, these individuals remain disappeared without due process or acknowledgement, and the women searching for them continue to face systemic barriers and social stigma.

economic development, particularly in governorates such as Ninewa (Mohammed, 2018). Following Saddam's removal, power was rapidly consolidated by Shia-majority political groups, many of whom had been historically repressed. This abrupt reversal left many Sunni communities feeling politically excluded and economically marginalised, particularly as de-Baathification policies and security purges disproportionately targeted them (Zinn, 2016; Mako, 2019). Combined with weakened legal institutions and fragmented security forces, these dynamics created conditions for the continuation of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance, especially in Sunni-majority areas (Mako, 2019).

In Ninewa, diverse ethno-religious communities experienced renewed cycles of marginalisation and insecurity after 2003. Al-Qaeda in Iraq exploited Sunni grievances by presenting itself as a defender of Sunni identity (CTC, 2007). The rise of the Islamic State marked a particularly brutal chapter: building on Al-Qaeda's strategy, IS mobilised narratives of Sunni victimhood to gain support before imposing a regime of violence, repression, and mass human rights violations, including widespread disappearances (International Crisis Group, 2013; Revkin, 2018).

Between 2014 and 2017, the Ninewa governorate came under IS control. During this time, IS perpetrated systematic crimes against civilians, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and sexual and gender-based violence. These violations disproportionately targeted ethno-religious minorities such as Yazidis, Christians, Shabak, and Turkmen (Yazda, 2016; UNAMI & OHCHR, 2016). The genocide against the Yazidi population in Sinjar, in particular, is among the most internationally recognised atrocities carried out by IS, although documentation and investigative processes remain incomplete. Of the approximately **6,417** Yazidis abducted by IS in August 2014, around **2,600** – predominantly women and girls – are still missing today (Reuters, 2024).

At the same time, Sunni Arab communities in Ninewa have faced a different set of harms during and after liberation operations, beginning in 2017, including mass detentions and enforced disappearances – often based on perceived IS affiliations. What distinguishes Ninewa from other regions in Iraq is not only the intensity of IS occupation and violence, but also the intersection of its ethno-religious diversity and contested governance. The province witnessed both genocidal targeting, as in the case of Yazidis, and collective punishment of Sunni Arab populations after the defeat of IS. These dynamics have created a highly fragmented landscape where efforts to search for the disappeared are shaped by distrust, limited access, and ongoing community-level tensions. Unlike more centralised regions in Iraq, Ninewa's multiple power holders and deep-rooted grievances present both barriers and openings for survivor-led justice initiatives. Given this history, it is crucial to understand how legacies of enforced disappearance and institutional neglect continue to shape the lives of those left behind.

3. Methodology

While Iraq's legacy of enforced disappearance spans a wide range of communities, regions, and time periods, this research specifically focuses on two groups of women in the Ninewa governorate whose experiences reflect both profound risk and unique forms of agency:

- **Yazidi women** from Sinjar who survived IS captivity and are now searching for missing relatives, including male family members and children who remain unaccounted for.

- **Sunni Arab women** from Mosul and South Mosul whose husbands or male relatives were detained or disappeared during or after post-IS military operations. These women often face compounded discrimination due to perceived affiliation with IS.

Their experiences unfold in a post-IS context, where the absence of meaningful transitional justice mechanisms continues to hinder reconciliation and healing at the community level, a concern frequently voiced by affected communities.³ The selection of cases was not intended to suggest exclusivity, but is reflective of their disproportionate exposure to enforced disappearance, the limited documentation of their experiences, and their central roles in ongoing search efforts.

This research adopts a qualitative approach, combining five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a review of relevant reports, legal frameworks, and secondary sources. Grounded in feminist and survivor-centred research ethics, participants were identified through local protection and peace networks.

All interviews were anonymised to protect confidentiality and were conducted in culturally appropriate and trauma-sensitive ways. Women were treated not as passive subjects but as co-narrators shaping the themes and insights of this research. The researcher, an Iraqi national with professional experience in protection and peacebuilding, leveraged contextual familiarity to build trust and enable deeper engagement with participants, while maintaining ethical rigour and reflexivity throughout the research process.

Emphasis was placed on deeply understanding the experiences of the interlocutors, rather than breadth or generalisability of larger case numbers. Interviews were complemented by a desk review of international legal instruments, Iraqi national laws, NGO reports, and UN documentation. This secondary material helped situate the individual narratives within broader legal and institutional contexts.

4. Iraq's international commitments and national gaps regarding enforced disappearance

Iraq ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), adopted by the United Nations in 2006 and ratified by Iraq in 2010, committing to criminalise and investigate enforced disappearances, prosecute perpetrators, and provide reparation to victims and their families (ICPPED, 2006). It is also a party to other international treaties such as:

- **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** – Protects against arbitrary arrest and detention and guarantees the right to legal recourse.
- **Convention Against Torture (CAT)** – Obliges Iraq to prevent torture and ill-treatment, often associated with enforced disappearances.

³ The analysis presented below draws on long-term field engagement and ongoing interaction with communities in Ninewa, beginning in 2017.

- **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** – Reinforces the obligation to eliminate gender-based barriers to justice.

Despite these commitments, Iraq has not incorporated enforced disappearance as a standalone crime in its domestic penal code (MENA Rights Group, 2021). This omission undermines accountability, as cases are typically pursued under unrelated charges such as kidnapping. Iraq also lacks a legal status of “absence” for the disappeared – an alternative to presumptive death declarations that would allow families to access pensions or legal processes without abandoning the search (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, 2021; ICRC, 2019).

In 2017, Iraq introduced a draft Law on the Protection of Persons from Enforced Disappearance, but it remains stalled and has not been enacted. International observers highlighted several deficiencies in the draft: the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances noted that it fails to classify widespread or systematic enforced disappearances as crimes against humanity and does not include provisions on command responsibility (UN CED, 2023). The Ceasefire Centre further criticised the draft for excluding relatives of the disappeared from recognition as victims (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, 2021). The MENA Rights Group highlighted that Article 40 of the Iraqi Penal Code allows public officials to invoke superior orders as a defence, a provision that contradicts Article 6(2) of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (MENA Rights Group, 2020).

The UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances has repeatedly urged Iraq to prohibit unofficial detention sites and establish a consolidated national registry of the disappeared. While the Iraqi government announced a unified national mechanism for missing persons under the Ministry of Justice in early 2024, including a National Committee and plans for a National Central Record, independent confirmation of the mechanism’s public functionality and accessibility remains limited. Families continue to navigate fragmented and opaque reporting mechanisms, as humanitarian organizations have noted, while the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances and UNAMI have reported persistent allegations of secret and unofficial detention (ICMP, 2024; ICRC, 2024; UN CED, 2023; UNAMI & OHCHR, 2021).

Simultaneously, authorities in Ninewa have begun preliminary exhumations at the al-Khasfa site near Mosul, collecting surface remains and initiating DNA sampling. However, full-scale forensic work remains constrained by hazardous conditions and lack of specialised support. For women searchers, such uneven progress translates into continued waiting, as the prospect of identification through mass graves remains one of the few avenues for closure (Al Jazeera, 2025; Associated Press, 2025).

Table 1

Summary of Iraq’s legal commitments and gaps regarding enforced disappearance⁴

Instrument / Framework	Status	Relevance to Enforced Disappearance	Gaps or Challenges
ICPPED	Ratified (2010)	Criminalisation, victim rights, state obligation to search	No national law with implementing provisions
ICCPR	Ratified (1971)	Right to liberty, legal recourse	Arbitrary detention persists
CAT	Ratified (2011)	Prevents torture linked to disappearance	Lack of accountability for abuse
CEDAW	Ratified (1986)	Gender-based legal equity	Women excluded from search systems
Draft Disappearance Law	Drafted (2017)	Would criminalise disappearance	Still not passed, lacks victim-centred provisions
Iraqi Penal Code	Active	Handles related crimes (kidnapping, false imprisonment, etc.)	Fails to define or criminalise enforced disappearance as a specific offence
National Registry	Not effectively operational	Would track missing/ disappeared persons	Fragmented, inaccessible, and not consistently updated or integrated

Table 1 provides a synthesised snapshot of Iraq’s commitments under international law regarding enforced disappearance and highlights the persistent gap between treaty ratification and domestic implementation. Without a clear domestic legal framework aligned with international law, Iraq’s obligations remain largely rhetorical (MENA Rights Group, 2021; UN CED, 2023). Women searching for the disappeared, particularly in Ninewa, thus face institutional neglect compounded by a lack of enforceable rights.

5. Impacts on the economic and social rights of women searchers

The following analysis examines the economic and social impacts on women who search for disappeared people in Sinjar and South Mosul. Drawing on international human rights frameworks, economic rights are understood as the rights to work, gain a livelihood through freely chosen employment, and access social security and other forms of material support (CESCR, 1990; OHCHR, 2008). Social rights refer to the rights to health, education, family life, and protection from discrimination, as outlined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR, 2000).

⁴ The information is compiled from publicly available legal instruments, the OHCHR Human Rights Treaty Body Database, the MENA Rights Group’s legal analysis (2021), and reports from UN bodies such as the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (2023). While not exhaustive, the table reflects widely reported legal and institutional gaps relevant to the search for missing persons in Iraq.

5.1 Economic strain and financial precarity

Women in both Yazidi and Sunni Arab communities described how the financial cost of searching for a disappeared relative was a significant strain on their households. This included transport, legal paperwork, and informal payments to bureaucrats. The opportunity cost was equally damaging, as time spent seeking updates came at the expense of employment, childcare, or educational opportunities.

These financial pressures intersect with gendered economic exclusion. In Ninewa, where women's employment opportunities are already limited due to conservative norms and insecurity, the loss of a male breadwinner further entrenches women in cycles of dependence and poverty. Despite Iraq's obligations under international human rights law, such as Article 6 of the ICCPR and Articles 2 and 15 of CEDAW, no targeted assistance exists for women engaged in the search process.

"I stopped working because the search takes all my time and money. I travel to offices, wait for hours, and leave with nothing." – Widow in Mosul

"I borrowed from neighbours just to pay for another ride to Mosul. Every time they tell me, 'Come next week.' I'm drowning in debt for no answers." – Woman searcher, South Mosul

A widow living in Mosul provided free domestic labour in exchange for shelter. Her grandchildren were denied school transport, and her daughter was subjected to harassment by officials. One interviewee stated: *"Every document costs something. Even to ask a question, they expect payment."*

Another woman from Qayyarah, South Mosul, was forced to abandon her craftwork entirely, stating: "I would leave in the morning and return by late afternoon, too tired to do anything, even earn a few dinars from my crafts." While economic hardship poses immediate survival challenges, women also face deeply entrenched emotional and social consequences linked to prolonged ambiguity and community exclusion.

Case Box: A Widow from South Mosul

A woman in her 50s from South Mosul has searched alone for her disappeared husband since 2017. He was a retired military officer, taken during a security raid in Mosul. She believes his detention was a form of collective punishment after three of their sons were killed during the liberation due to IS affiliations. She insists her husband had no connection to the group.

Since 2019, she has undertaken a relentless and exhausting search, travelling between intelligence offices, courts, detention centres, and humanitarian agencies across Mosul and Baghdad. At each location, she is asked for documents she cannot afford to obtain, or is turned away and told to return weeks later. She lines up before dawn to enter government buildings, waits for hours without being seen, and often leaves with no information or follow-up. Despite her persistence, the process remains opaque and demoralising.

“I can’t commit to work because I never know when I’ll be called. So they don’t accept me.”

The search has driven her into poverty. She now lives in a wealthy man’s home as an unpaid housekeeper and night guard in exchange for shelter, an arrangement she calls exploitative. He restricts her movements and pressures her daughter into a secret marriage: ***“He comes into the house whenever he wants. He keeps asking my daughter to marry him in secret.”***

She also supports her daughter and three grandchildren, as her daughter’s husband is also missing. They survive on irregular, low-paying jobs. The children often skip meals and walk long distances to school. Even basic administrative steps, like publishing a disappearance notice, cost her over **USD 60**, an overwhelming expense given her lack of income.

“Some women are forced to sell their dignity just to get their file processed. And they do it, dead inside, because they believe it’s the only way.”

For her, justice is not abstract but survival: ***“Justice is to know the truth, to live with dignity, to not fear for your daughter at night.”***

5.2 Psychological and social impacts

The emotional toll of ongoing uncertainty, referred to in psychological literature as an “ambiguous loss” (Boss, 1999), was a central theme among all interviewees. This trauma, compounded by social judgement and institutional neglect, manifests in depression, memory loss, anxiety, and psychosomatic complaints. Several women described feeling invisible within their families and communities for continuing the search or ridiculed for stepping outside socially sanctioned roles.

Legal frameworks in Iraq provide no recognition for this psychological toll and do not mandate access to state-supported mental health services.

“They told me to forget my family – that healing meant giving up. But how can I live when I still don’t know if they’re alive or dead?” – Woman from Sinjar

Societal norms in Ninewa reinforce exclusion. Women who search are often judged, silenced, or told that seeking answers is not their role, while others are warned that their persistence brings shame. This creates a double bind: they are shamed for remaining silent, yet punished for speaking out.

For Yazidi women, the burden of the search is layered by the trauma of abduction, captivity, and sexual violence under IS. Their search for missing family members is intertwined with unresolved grief, survivor’s guilt, and ongoing challenges of reintegration into communities where stigma prevails. As the only surviving members in some families, they carry the dual task of rebuilding their own lives while relentlessly seeking truth for those still missing. The absence of trauma-informed, survivor-centred mechanisms further isolates them and exposes them to re-traumatisation in official procedures.

“I feel guilty for surviving. I was a child when they took us, but now I’m alone and still waiting for them.” – Woman survivor from Sinjar, abducted as a child

Another Yazidi survivor, abducted at the age of eight, described how her memory and language deteriorated following her release and during her reintegration as the only family member to return: *“Some days I forget how to speak properly. I think my memory got stuck the day they disappeared.”*

From a transitional justice perspective, which emphasises rights to truth, justice, and reparations, the Iraqi government’s failure to actively search for the disappeared reflects a broader neglect of survivors’ rights. Despite the Yazidi Survivors Law, institutional action remains minimal and fragmented. For many women, the absence of information sustains the hope of reunion, prolonging the pain of unresolved loss.

The following quote is from an elderly Yazidi woman who is herself a survivor of IS captivity. She is searching for her missing husband, two sons, and two daughters. Her words reflect the emotional weight of abandonment by the authorities, the persistence of hope, and the gendered neglect surrounding repatriation efforts:

“I no longer tell people I’m searching for my husband, two sons, and two daughters because they tell me to forget about them. But I don’t want to believe them. I always believe they are still alive and we will meet one day. The government doesn’t make the least effort to bring my daughters back. Some of our missing girls are even still in Iraq – some are in Syria’s Hol camp, and they [the authorities] have access but don’t have the will or care.”

The absence of state-led search mechanisms not only perpetuates suffering but also reinforces the message that Yazidi survivors, especially women, are not worth the effort, deepening their exclusion from post-conflict recovery and social reintegration.

5.3 From harassment to harm: Exploitation of women searchers

Many women engaged in the search for disappeared relatives reported experiencing harassment, coercion, and gender-based exploitation during their interactions with state institutions, officials, and even humanitarian actors. These experiences reflect a broader pattern of institutional impunity and patriarchal control that not only obstructs their right to truth but also compromises their safety and dignity.

Women often encounter inappropriate comments, unwanted attention or conditional offers of assistance tied to their physical appearance or willingness to comply with unspoken expectations. A young woman searching for her husband in South Mosul shared that: *“They wouldn’t speak to me unless my cousin came. Even then, the officer kept asking if I was married and why I came alone.”* This statement illustrates how male gatekeeping practices create barriers that infantilise and disempower women, reinforcing the idea that they require male chaperoning to be taken seriously.

Others described how officials leveraged their desperation: *“Some officials give you their number, and if you refuse to call, they don’t move your file. It’s like our dignity is the price of getting information.”* These coercive dynamics transform the search process into a moral and emotional struggle, forcing women to weigh integrity against the possibility of finding answers about their loved ones.

Harassment is not limited to the women alone. It often extends to their daughters. A woman from Mosul recounted: *“My daughter was with me at the checkpoint. The officer stared at her in a way that made me ashamed, as if we were criminals.”* The gaze, in this context, operates as a form of social and moral surveillance, transforming an already vulnerable journey into one that is laced with shame and fear. Women reported altering their appearance, avoiding eye contact, or withholding questions to minimise risk, ultimately sacrificing transparency and justice to maintain personal safety.

Exploitation also extends beyond state institutions. Many Yazidi female survivors, including those searching for missing relatives, recounted feeling used by local and international NGOs and journalists who extracted testimonies without informed consent or meaningful follow-up.

One survivor said: *“They took my words, my picture, my pain and disappeared. I never heard from them again.”* For her and many others, the experience echoed a broader cycle of abandonment, promises of assistance that end in silence, and exposure that offers no real support. Such practices not only violate international ethical standards but also reproduce cycles of abandonment under the guise of visibility.

These experiences highlight a broader institutional failure to provide safe and equitable access to information and justice. Iraq’s obligations under CEDAW, particularly Articles 2 and 15, mandate the elimination of discrimination against women in public institutions and the guarantee of equal legal capacity. Yet the everyday reality of women searchers shows that these standards are still far from being realised.

Case Box: A Survivor from Sinjar

A Yazidi survivor of IS captivity and a mother of eight has led the search for her missing family members entirely on her own since 2014, even during her time in captivity. She began by asking IS fighters about her husband, two daughters, and two sons. After her liberation in 2015, she continued the search, driven by determination despite profound personal, emotional, and financial costs.

She was repeatedly exploited. Once she paid **USD 400** to someone claiming her daughter was in Ankara; the lead disappeared. NGOs also filmed her without consent, later using her story for reports and fundraising: ***“They used my pain to get attention, but they never asked what I needed.”***

Despite living abroad for several years, she never stopped searching. Back in Iraq, worsening health limits her mobility, forcing reliance on social media and community networks. A small stipend under the Yazidi Survivors Law barely covers rent, while a **USD 2,400** loan for a false lead in Mosul keeps her in debt, leaving her unable to afford medical care.

She described two years of exhausting bureaucracy to complete survivor documentation: ***“You ask for help, and they tell you to wait. You wait, and they forget you even exist.”***

Stigma adds to the pain. She hides her search to avoid gossip, and is told to “move on”. She resists: ***“If I were a man, I would go to Syria myself and search. But because I’m a woman, I have to sit and wait. Wait for nothing.”***

For her, justice is the right to search, to survive with dignity, and to be heard. ***“There are no rights. Not even the right to search.”***

Gender-based harassment during the search process is not a marginal issue. It is a systemic barrier that deters women from seeking truth, erodes their trust in institutions, and exposes them to new forms of violence. As long as safety and dignity remain conditional or negotiable, the search for the disappeared will continue to re-traumatise rather than empower.

5.4 Disillusionment with legal and state structures

While the previous section explored how gendered norms and power imbalances expose women to harassment and exploitation during the search process, this section examines the broader institutional and legal failures that block their access to justice. These failures compound women’s vulnerability, deepening their marginalisation and making the search process both emotionally exhausting and structurally inaccessible.

Trust in the legal system was almost absent among all interviewees. Women described years of navigating disconnected institutions, contradictory requirements, and repeated referrals across different offices. In Iraq, there is no centralised database for the disappeared, no legal pathway for temporary legal status, and no standard process for proving kinship in the absence of male documentation. Corruption and arbitrary treatment further exacerbate this distrust. Even those who received some institutional engagement characterised the system as dehumanising and ineffective.

Despite Iraq's ratification of international human rights instruments, including the ICCPR, these obligations remain unfulfilled in practice, especially for marginalised women.

“They say ‘Go to Baghdad’, then Baghdad tells me ‘Go back to Ninewa’. I’ve done this for three years – no paper, no proof, no progress.” – Woman from Mosul

“They act like we’re lying. Like our sons disappeared by magic and we’re here just to make a noise.” – Woman from Mosul, whose husband was detained in 2017

One woman noted that her attempt to get a death certificate or marriage record was denied because the local Mukhtar⁵ refused to sign off her documents. Another recounted: *“They told me the intelligence director had changed, and I have to wait for Baghdad.”*

Many women described their search as an endless loop, structured to wear them down. While the inefficiency and fragmentation of Iraqi state institutions affect all searchers, women face additional layers of exclusion rooted in gender norms and legal discrimination. This dual burden of systemic dysfunction and gendered marginalisation not only violates their right to truth and justice but perpetuates a culture of institutional apathy and exclusion.

“The system is inhumane. They don’t even try. We waste our time, our emotions, our dignity.” – Woman from Mosul

These findings reinforce the urgent need for structural reform and rights-based support systems for women searchers in Iraq.

6. Recommendations

The absence of survivor-centred search procedures and the refusal to acknowledge women's voices in the official documentation of disappearance cases, investigative processes, and civil registries contradict Iraq's international commitments. These failures must be read against Iraq's broader treaty obligations, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention against Torture (CAT), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention

⁵ A Mukhtar is a locally appointed community leader or neighbourhood chief in Iraq who has administrative authority to verify and certify basic civil documents, such as residency papers, marriage records, or death certificates. While not an elected position, Mukhtars play a gatekeeping role in everyday bureaucratic processes, and their approval is often required for accessing formal services.

on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Iraq has ratified these instruments but has not fully implemented them in practice. It has also not ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), the most directly relevant treaty. In this context, CEDAW is one of the few binding frameworks that can be invoked, particularly Article 15, which guarantees women equal legal capacity and access to justice.

Iraq lacks a comprehensive legal framework on enforced disappearance. Existing procedures are fragmented, opaque, and often dependent on death certificates, leaving families without clear protections or remedies. As the preceding analysis demonstrates, these national gaps play out in Ninewa through daily practices that exclude women from official files, force them into debt when following false leads, and expose them to stigma, harassment, and deepening poverty.

These realities highlight the urgent need for gender-transformative approaches to the search for the disappeared. Such approaches should recognise women not only as victims but also as agents of change. Women searchers consistently demonstrate agency by resisting harassment, making repeated visits to authorities, and building informal knowledge networks. Nevertheless, they remain excluded from shaping the very systems intended to protect them.

“At least listen to us. We’re the ones living this. We know what’s missing and what we need. If they listened to the women who search, maybe things would change. But they don’t.” – Woman searching for multiple disappeared persons within her family, Sinjar

“They decide everything without asking us. We are the ones carrying the pain, but no one asks what we think or need.” – Woman searching for her missing husband, Mosul

The following recommendations are grounded in women’s lived experiences and reflect the structural reforms they view as essential for justice, accountability, and long-term protection:

1. Legal and Policy Reform

- Recognise women as independent rights holders in disappearance cases regardless of marital or kinship documentation status.
- Codify enforced disappearance as an autonomous crime under Iraqi law.
- Establish a national centralised registry and database for the missing and disappeared.
- Ensure gender-sensitive procedures and representation in national search mechanisms.
- Support legal recognition processes, such as kinship proof, guardianship rights, and access to compensation without death certificates being required.
- Advance and adopt the Draft Law on Enforced Disappearances, ensuring alignment with international standards and gender-sensitive provisions. The law should not remain symbolic; genuine political will and resources are required to translate it into practice.

2. Institutional Accountability and Coordination

- Clarify institutional mandates and ensure that roles and responsibilities among relevant bodies, such as the Mass Graves Directorate, Medico-Legal Institute, Red Crescent, and Intelligence Services, are both well-defined and publicly communicated. Improve inter-agency coordination to reduce duplication and confusion, especially for families seeking clarity on procedures and responsibilities.
- Train caseworkers, judicial staff, and security personnel in gender-sensitive and trauma-informed approaches.
- Introduce independent complaint mechanisms for harassment or abuse during the search process.

3. Mobilise Gender-Sensitive Financial and Psychosocial Support for Women Searchers

- Provide targeted cash assistance or stipends to women conducting search efforts.
- Expand access to free legal aid and documentation services.
- Increase investment in psychosocial support tailored to survivors of enforced disappearance.
- Ensure that trauma-informed psychosocial services are sustainably provided for women searchers, particularly survivors of captivity.
- Facilitate community-based protection structures that include and support women searchers.

4. Protection from Exploitation and Gender-Based Violence

- Strengthen codes of conduct for humanitarian actors and ensure enforcement.
- Establish safe reporting channels for women experiencing abuse, coercion, or exploitation.
- Increase monitoring of informal housing and labour arrangements for at-risk women.
- Enable protective accompaniment and safe access to institutions for vulnerable women.
- Promote solidarity initiatives that reduce stigma and enhance the visibility of women's protective roles.

5. Participation, Representation, and Survivor-Led Advocacy

- Institutionalise the meaningful participation of women searchers in policy design, transitional justice bodies, and search mechanisms at both national and local levels.
- Establish consultation platforms and advisory roles to ensure that the perspectives of women are reflected in institutional responses.
- Support the development of mutual aid networks and grass-roots organisations led by women searchers.
- Provide long-term support for survivor-led advocacy and documentation efforts at both the national and international level.

6. International Engagement and Monitoring

- Urge UN mechanisms and donor states to prioritise enforced disappearance in Iraq's human rights agenda.
- Ensure ongoing international review and follow-up of Iraq's implementation of ICPPED obligations.
- Advocate for the inclusion of gender-specific concerns within international accountability mechanisms.

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ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

The Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation is a network of organisations from Germany and across the world, initiated by the Berghof Foundation and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in early 2022. We want to facilitate an inspiring space for dialogue and learning that is driven by solidarity, inclusivity and innovation. By building bridges, generating knowledge and amplifying voices, the Hub seeks to advance the policy and practice of dealing with the past to strengthen peace and justice.

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Berghof Foundation Operations gGmbH
Lindenstraße 34
10969 Berlin, Germany
info@berghof-foundation.org
www.berghof-foundation.org

Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation
transitionaljusticehub@berghof-foundation.org
www.transitionaljusticehub.org

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