



# SEXUAL & GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE NEEDS & SERVICES FOR INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

An Assessment of Women and Girls in Informal IDP Settlements in Salah Al Din Governorate, Iraq

August 2020

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## BACKGROUND

In Iraq, years of repression, economic sanctions, and armed conflicts have led to a deterioration in the quality of lives of women and an associated loss to the country, since women are marginalized and unable to fully contribute economically, socially, or politically<sup>1</sup>. **The ongoing protracted crisis and violence, in conjunction with the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic consequences, have contributed to an increasing risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).**

This report focuses on service gaps and SGBV needs for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in informal settlements in Salah Al Din Governorate, as this is a uniquely vulnerable and overlooked population. Informal settlements are defined as: *“a group of tented or other types of housing units established by IDPs themselves or by non-experienced actors, often erected on land that the occupants have no legal claim to.”*<sup>2</sup>

In Salah Al Din, IDPs who reside in informal settlements are located in the Samarra and Balad districts. IDPs in these sites are displaced from elsewhere in Salah Al Din and unable to return home due to damaged property, real or perceived terrorist affiliations, and/or real or perceived affiliations with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). The population in Balad in particular is perceived to be associated with ISIS, which results in rejection by the host community. And the IDP population in Samarra is largely associated with ISF, which also results in mistrust by the host community and retaliation against these individuals by ISIS actors, hindering their return.

IDPs who do not or cannot access official camps often fall short of any form of long-term assistance. And women and girls who are displaced in these informal settlements are among the most vulnerable, as access to critical services for SGBV survivors in the forms of healthcare, security, psychosocial support, and safe shelter are far from secured. The informal settlements are managed by local authorities, who provide administrative services, and the sites consist of tents, caravans, school buildings, mosques, and unfinished complexes. Informal settlements receive minimal and sporadic services; in fact, food assistance for all sites except for 2 (Al-Ishaqi and Al-Salam) was stopped by WFP in 2019. Service provision is likely impacted by security concerns, as according to OCHA, 71% of districts in Salah Al Din have medium to high access severity.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past months, a wealth of material produced by national, international and UN agencies active in Iraq has clearly outlined the increased risks of SGBV, especially within the most vulnerable households. Reports have shown a significant increase in the numbers of reported cases following the pandemic, requiring a serious reflection on the modality of assistance provided and the necessary steps to curb the phenomenon.

The available material, however, has not yet focused on the impact and long-term consequences on IDP women and girls residing in informal settlements, where a generalized lack of appropriate assistance has been compounded by the recent pandemic and subsequent deterioration of economic and social conditions.

<sup>1</sup> According to the [Iraq Family Health survey](#), already prior to the Covid outbreak 1 in 5 Iraqi women are subjected to domestic violence. All forms of violence are expressly prohibited in the Iraqi Constitution, but Iraq's criminal code [does not mention](#) domestic violence. Only the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has a [law on domestic violence](#). Recent efforts to draft a similar law in Iraq have stalled in the Iraqi parliament. [source Thomson Reuters foundation News; May 2020]

<sup>2</sup> CCCM guidance on definitions for camps (2017); [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/cccm\\_guidance\\_in\\_english\\_and\\_arabic.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/cccm_guidance_in_english_and_arabic.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Iraq Humanitarian Access Severity Overview (April 2020), OCHA; [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20200428\\_humanitarian\\_access\\_severity.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20200428_humanitarian_access_severity.pdf)

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In Iraq, most IDPs do not live in camps but are dispersed in urban centers, yet few existing studies focus on out-of-camp populations<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, most of what is known about IDPs' needs and experiences reflects only a partial reality, neglecting those who remain in protracted displacement and out-of-camp settlements.

In July 2020, Mercy Hands conducted an assessment in 9 informal settlements in Salah Al Din Governorate to address this gap in research. One of these sites (Al-Ishaqi) is technically a formal settlement, but has been included in this assessment because it also receives limited services and is managed by local authorities.

This report aims to 1) identify needs and concerns related to protection and SGBV among women and girls in informal settlements in Salah Al Din, and 2) review existing service gaps, including but not limited to those related to SGBV, within these particularly vulnerable communities.

**With this report, Mercy Hands intends to shed light on the precarious living conditions in informal settlements in Salah Al Din, including SGBV incidents and risks, with the aim to increase attention from the wider community and foster a change in the policies informing humanitarian actors.**

## KEY FINDINGS

This assessment verified the following findings for IDPs in informal settlements in Samarra and Balad:

- **There is a lack of Protection services or infrastructure to sustain the recovery of SGBV victims and to promote awareness.**
- **Essential needs are neglected, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. And, programs to sustain livelihood and economic independence – pivotal to achieving resilience and social cohesion – are inadequate.**
- **There is a gap between what women and girls express as their primary needs and what is actually being provided and/or recommended by the humanitarian community.**

<sup>4</sup> International Organization for Migration Iraq. (2019). Access to Durable Solutions Among IDPs in Iraq: Three Years into Displacement.

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## METHODOLOGY

In July 2020, Mercy Hands conducted an assessment within 9 informal settlements in Salah Al Din Governorate (Balad and Samarra districts). The assessment consists of two parts: key informant interviews (KIIs) and a household survey.

To choose the key informants, Mercy Hands reached out to all UN Agencies/NGOs/CBOs active in Salah Al Din governorate to confirm which organizations are active in the field of SGBV/Protection as well as in the geographic area of the informal settlements – or are planning to be. In addition, Mercy Hands contacted the local camp authorities for all 9 sites, the police, and government authorities involved in the camps. A total of 22 KIIs were held, with a 100% response rate. 15 respondents are male and 7 are female. The purpose of these interviews was to identify SGBV-related needs for internally displaced women and girls, and the types of service coverage offered by the different humanitarian actors during and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the household survey, a randomized sample of 194 women in the informal settlements were

interviewed, representing a statistically significant sample size at 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. The total estimated population of IDP households in these 9 informal settlements is 322 (see chart below for more details). The women were interviewed directly, depending on who was available and in private at the time. Staff members explained the purpose and type of survey to obtain informed consent, given the sensitive nature of the topic. All of the female staff members conducting the assessment were trained on how to ask questions pertaining to SGBV and follow up on any concerns raised.

Both the samples for KIIs and the household survey have potential bias, given that respondents are self-reporting data, including the services provided or lacking, and may have interest in the outcome of the analysis. In addition, the sensitive nature of this topic and desire for privacy and confidentiality, which is difficult to obtain in these sites, may have influenced the answers of the female survey participants. The relative lack of NGO presence in these sites and opportunity to build trust with such organizations may have also influenced responses.

### Population and Sample Sizes within Informal IDP Settlements

Site Name	District	# of Households	Sample Size
Al-Ishaqi*	Balad	63	46
Al-Firdous	Samarra	20	10
Al-Hadadiya	Samarra	32	22
Al-Orouba	Samarra	18	10
Al-Salam	Samarra	10	8
Atwar Bahjat	Samarra	25	7
Balad Station	Balad	68	35
Hai-Al-Jamiya	Samarra	30	22
Omar-Al-Mokhtar	Samarra	56	34
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>322</b>	<b>194</b>

*\*Note: Al-Ishaqi is technically defined as a formal camp, but was included in this assessment due to its management by local authorities.*

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## FINDINGS: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

### I. Overview

KIs were conducted with representatives from UN Agencies, INGOs, NNGOs and CBOs active in Salah Al Din, the police, and governmental authorities operating in or for the informal sites' residents. Among the humanitarian organizations interviewed, only 25% reported to have worked or currently work in informal settlements, and mainly provide Health, PSS, Legal and Awareness services.

**The remaining 75% of respondents stated that they are not currently active in the informal sites, nor were they active prior to the pandemic.**

### II. Needs

Among those humanitarian agencies interviewed which work in the informal settlements, the percentage of reported cases of gender violence varies from 31% to 47%. However, all confirmed they have witnessed a spike in the numbers of referred cases during COVID-19, especially with reference to physical violence, psychological distress and economic deprivation. The police specifically cited an increase of approximately 20%. **In addition, all the organizations active in the informal settlements confirmed an increase in cases of forced marriage.**

Key informants identified many different groups most at risk of being exposed to SGBV: adolescents, divorced women, underage girls, children, widows, and orphans. The 9 respondents from camp management agreed that adolescents in general are the most vulnerable and often do not receive long-term assistance. The humanitarian actors stated that divorced women, underage girls and children are considered among the most vulnerable to potential abuse. And representatives of governmental authorities noted that widows and orphans represent the most at risk category among those displaced. As one of the respondents stated:

*“Widows are very vulnerable due to the cultural norms preventing women from getting married again or having a job. After the crisis in Iraq, women have lost the stipend (social assistance) they were receiving previously as part of compensation for having lost their husbands.”*

**Multiple respondents stated that the most urgent SGBV-related needs concern Protection (both legal and PSS) and Health.**

When asked to whom women and girls usually report violence and ask for help, 42% of respondents stated that many of them refer to friends, followed by family (33%), police (33%), and NGOs (25%).

### III. Barriers to Services

Respondents from camp authorities reported that the only available services within the informal sites are general administration of the camps, shelter, clean water and latrines. 3 out of the 9 sites have periodic distribution of NFIs, 2 out of 9 have periodic distribution of hygiene kits, and another 2 out of 9 have support for IDPs through cash assistance. All of the sites reported no current provision of food, healthcare, nor education. With the exception of 2 out of the 22 interviewed, all the respondents stated that there is no obstruction from the local community to the provision of services to the IDPs.

When asked about challenges in reporting cases of SGBV, especially as compared to more formal camps or other locations, key informants confirmed that the unstable nature of the informal settlements and the lack of privacy and alternative structures to host victims prevent them from seeking help. All the respondents from camp management and from the organizations working in the sites stated that the main difference between formal and informal settlements rests on the lack of available services and on less privacy and safety for the residents in the

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informal sites, compounded by social stigma. As one NINGO stated:

*“Tribal customs and conservative households compounded with a very restricted capacity to maintain privacy within the settlements often impede victims from reporting cases of violence and abuse due to the fear of reprisal and stigmatization within the community.”*

As the police representative further explained, there is no security or protection in these areas, which increases crime. In addition, most women do not have sufficient knowledge of their legal rights.

When asked whether there is a difference in the type of SGBV assistance provided within formal and informal camps, all the respondents reported a large gap in the assistance for IDPs outside of camps. Some barriers include the increased danger, as referenced above, and the surrounding host community’s distrust of these informal areas.

Another main reason for this difference is reported to be that formal camps are known and easier to access. Formal camps have data available, with 100% of IDPs residing in the camp registered by the camp management. Therefore, it is much easier to target beneficiaries. Conversely, in out of camp sites, the fluctuating nature of the IDPs’ presence for the duration of the project makes it much more difficult to find IDPs and maintain figures throughout project implementation.

#### IV. Recommendations

When asked for recommendations to improve the conditions of women and girls in informal settlements, the answers differed between camp management and humanitarian actors. MODM and camp management suggested that primary and practical needs be addressed, such as:

- Segregated and improved quality of latrines
- Financial assistance
- Livelihood opportunities

- Provision of recreational spaces

National and international humanitarian actors, on the other hand, recommended:

- Awareness campaigns on women’s rights
- Psychological support
- Safe spaces for women and girls

While several actors expressed the need for legal and psychological support, the critical primary needs of this population must be addressed. As a police representative explained, the women and children inside these areas *“have more important needs such as food and clothing, so it is difficult to provide psychological support to those who do not have anything to eat.”*

Among the recommendations, it was also suggested to establish centers (booths) in informal camps to collect requests and suggestions coming from the IDP women and girls. This would make it easier for them to freely express their voices and their rights rather than having to rely on statistics and data collections from NGOs or governmental authorities, with the risk of leaving some of their needs unheard and unaddressed. As a UN agency representative explained:

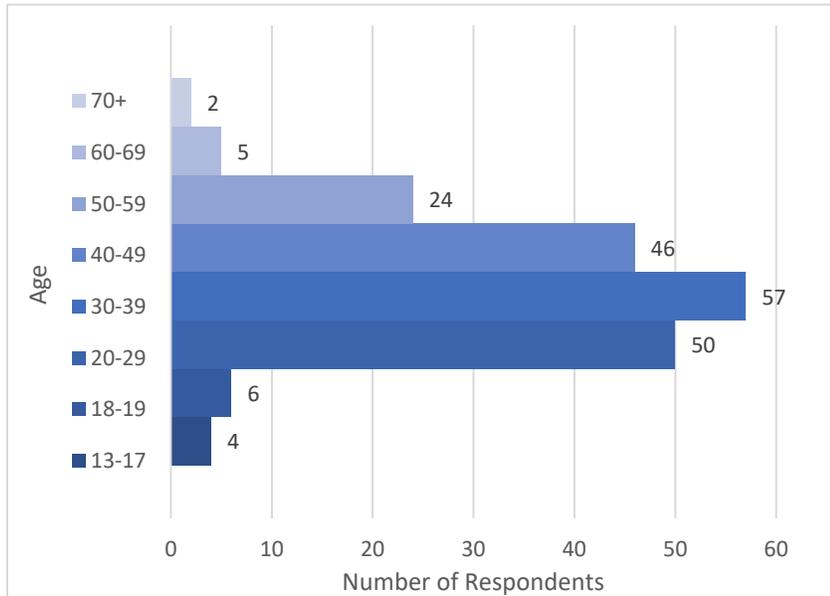
*“There are many UN agencies based inside the [formal] camps, which in some cases are also replicating their activities, but for those IDPs outside camps there is no way to report their needs to the organizations working only inside [formal] camps.”*

When asked how they normally identify the target beneficiaries and whether IDPs are selected on the basis of their current location, one of the representatives of a UN Agency responded that targeted beneficiaries and the locations (in or out of camp) are generally defined by UN Headquarters, reducing the possibility to define at the national or local level the target and type of intervention to prioritize.

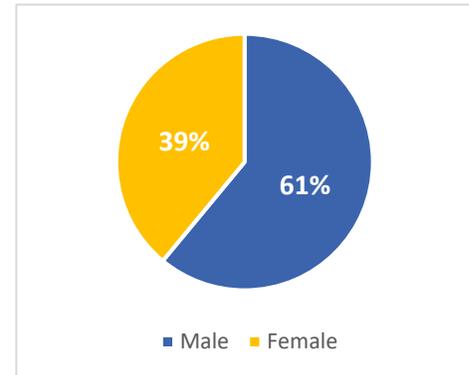
## FINDINGS: HOUSEHOLD SURVEY

### I. DEMOGRAPHICS

Age of Respondent



Head of Household Gender



A total of 194 women and girls were interviewed. Most female respondents are between 20-49 years old. 39% of respondent households are led by women.

### II. SERVICE PROVISION

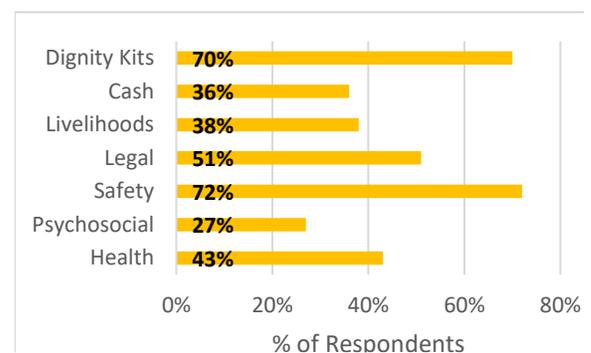
**70% of respondents stated that they do not receive services from NGOs.** Among the 30% who did report service provision, these services primarily include food (33 respondents) and hygiene/cleaning products (22 respondents).

**In addition, 65% of respondents stated that service provision has decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Of these, 16 reported that food aid had stopped and 14 reported that no services at all were available. However, 20 respondents did not observe a decrease in service provision.

When asked what services have been available (from a list), additional services were reported (either currently or in the past). See chart on the right for more details.

Available Services



In addition, several protection-related services were reported as available by the following percentage of respondents:

- 60% - Health workers
- 41% - GBV hotline
- 31% - GBV case management/referrals
- 21% - Women-only spaces

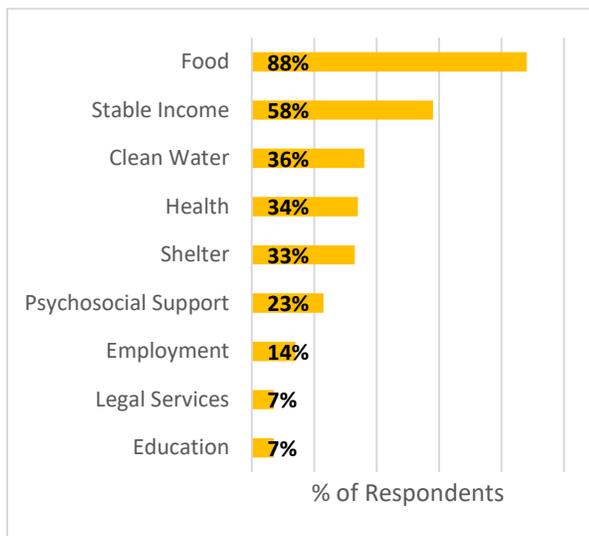
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### III. PRIMARY NEEDS

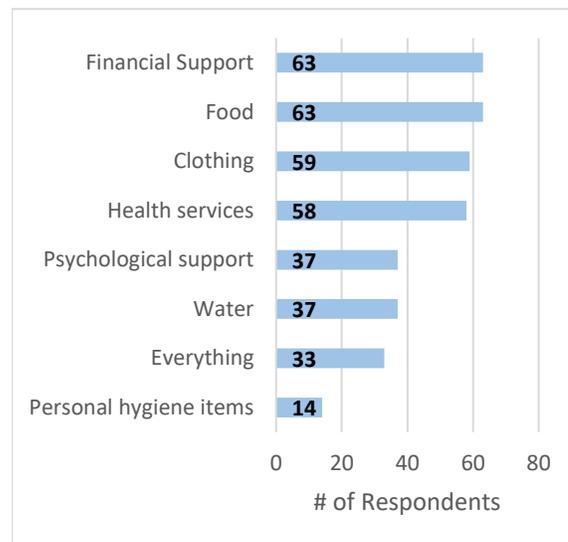
Notably, the women surveyed reported needing very basic services that are essential for living. When asked to rank their top 3 needs, the vast majority of women listed food as a main need.

When asked to list the main needs specifically for women and girls, the most prevalent responses were financial support, food, clothing, and health services.

**Reported Overall Needs**



**Needs for Women & Girls**

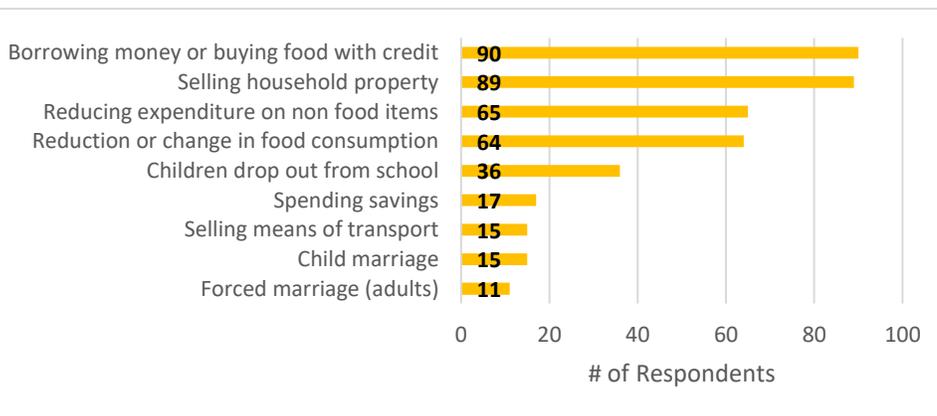


*Less prevalent responses included safe spaces for women, safe shelter, employment, education, comfort and stability, among others.*

### IV. PROTECTION RISKS

**Negative Coping Mechanisms**

Women reported a number of negative coping mechanisms that may cause protection risks. The most common were borrowing money or buying food with credit, and selling household property.



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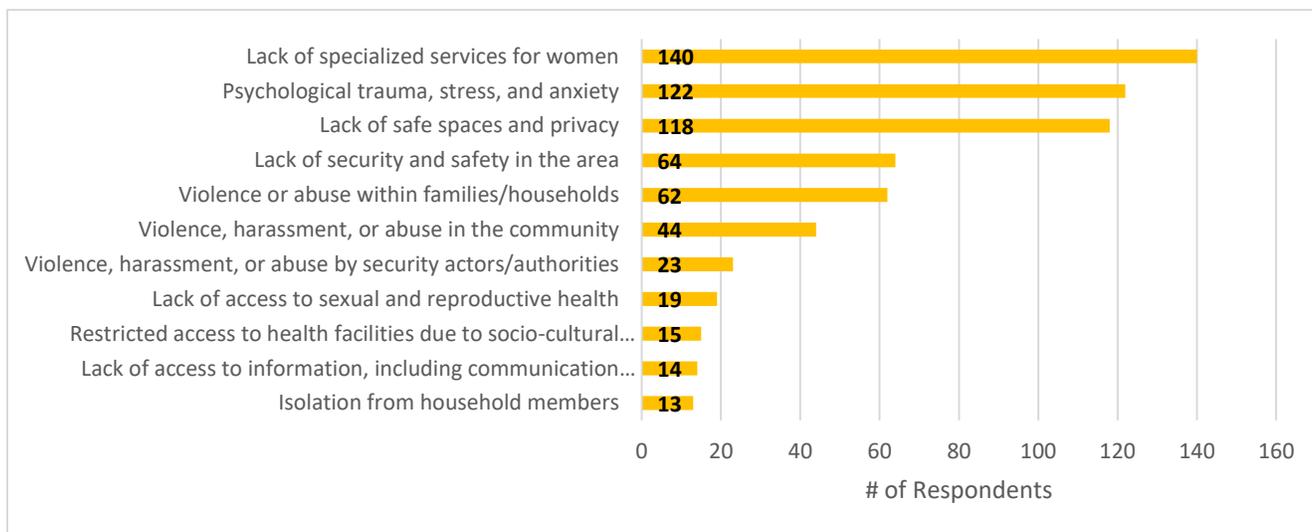
IDPs in informal settlements face a number of protection risks due to a less organized structure and lack of support. Within these settlements, the following structural risks were noted by survey participants:

- 48% reported that non-related families live together
- 56% reported a lack of gender-segregated latrines, and no locks
- 30% reported a lack of public lighting
- 59% reported a lack of camp policing/security

- 86% reported that female-headed households are not grouped separately
- 96% reported that married women are not registered separately from their husbands
- 95% reported that girls or single women without families are not registered

Women were also asked about protection risks affecting women and girls in their location. The most commonly reported risks were lack of specialized services for women, psychological trauma, stress, and anxiety, and lack of safe spaces and privacy. However, a significant number of women reported a variety of other risks.

### Protection Risks



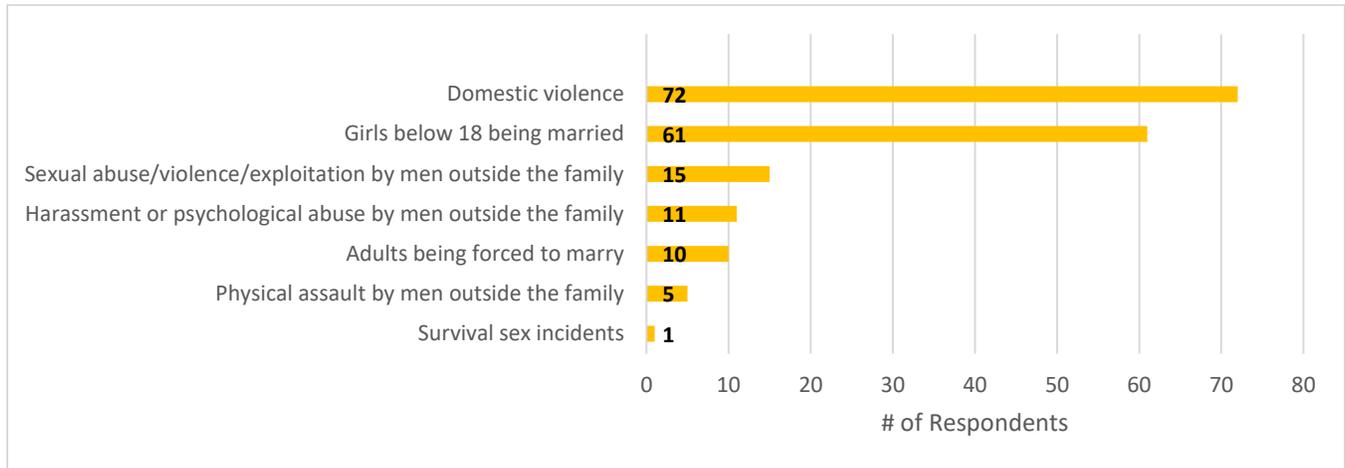
## V. SGBV INCIDENTS

Women were asked if they have experienced or heard of women or girls experiencing any SGBV incidents. The most common type of incident reported was domestic violence. Among the 72 women who reported domestic violence, 64 reported economic violence, 54 reported psychological or emotional violence, 39 reported physical violence, and 2 reported sexual violence.

21% of women (38) said that there had been an increase in such incidents since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, while the rest of the women either did not know (42%), reported no change (34%), or noted a decrease (4%). Among those who noted an increase, most attributed this to a loss in income (35 respondents) and/or stress from confinement (31 respondents).

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### SGBV Incidents

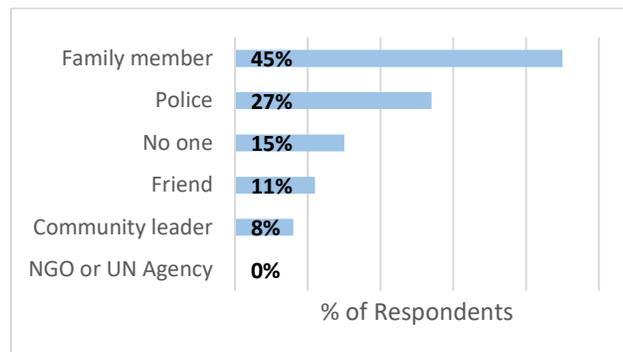


When asked “If a girl or woman in your community experienced violence, who do you think they would tell?” most women answered “family member” or “police.”

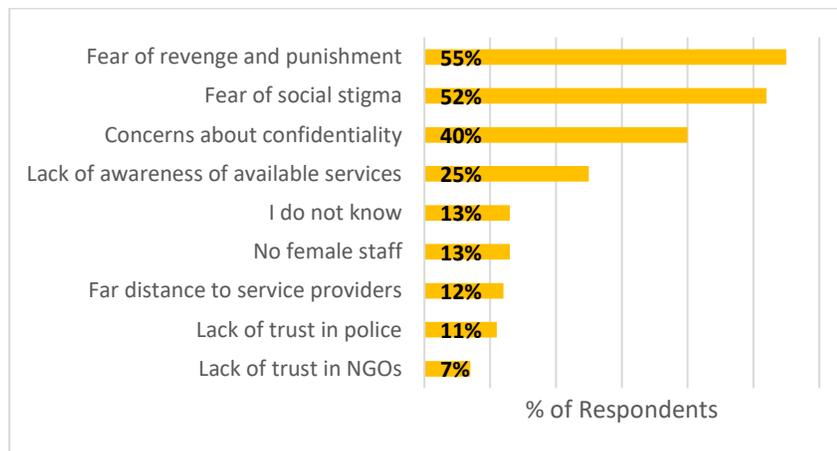
**Notably, no women believed there would be reports of an SGBV incident to an NGO or UN agency.**

15% of women believed that the incident would not be reported at all, due to fear and distrust.

### Reporting SGBV Incidents



### Barriers to Seeking Support



When asked what they believe are the main reasons women who experience SGBV incidents do not seek support, most women responded “fear of revenge and punishment” and “fear of social stigma.”

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## VI. AWARENESS OF AND ACCESS TO SGBV SERVICES



**64% (123)** of women are not aware of how to report violence. Those who were aware said they would report to the police, with a few also noting camp management.



**73% (137)** of women were not aware of how to receive medical attention for sexual-related violence. The majority of those who did know said they would report such cases to the nearest hospital or clinic.



**85% (162)** of women did not know how to receive psychological support. For those who did, most listed family members or friends as the source of support, and only 6 said they would receive services from an NGO.



**96% (183)** of women did not know how to find a safe space to go to if hurt or threatened.



**99% (172)** of women did not know how to obtain more information on SGBV-related services.



**81% (158)** of women reported that there are no services within the settlements to assist those who have experienced violence.



**74% (144)** of women agreed that being internally displaced affects women's and girls' access to services. A myriad of reasons were given for this response, including difficulty due to being far from service providers, financial pressure, psychological discomfort, a lack of security/safety, and a loss of home/stability/employment.

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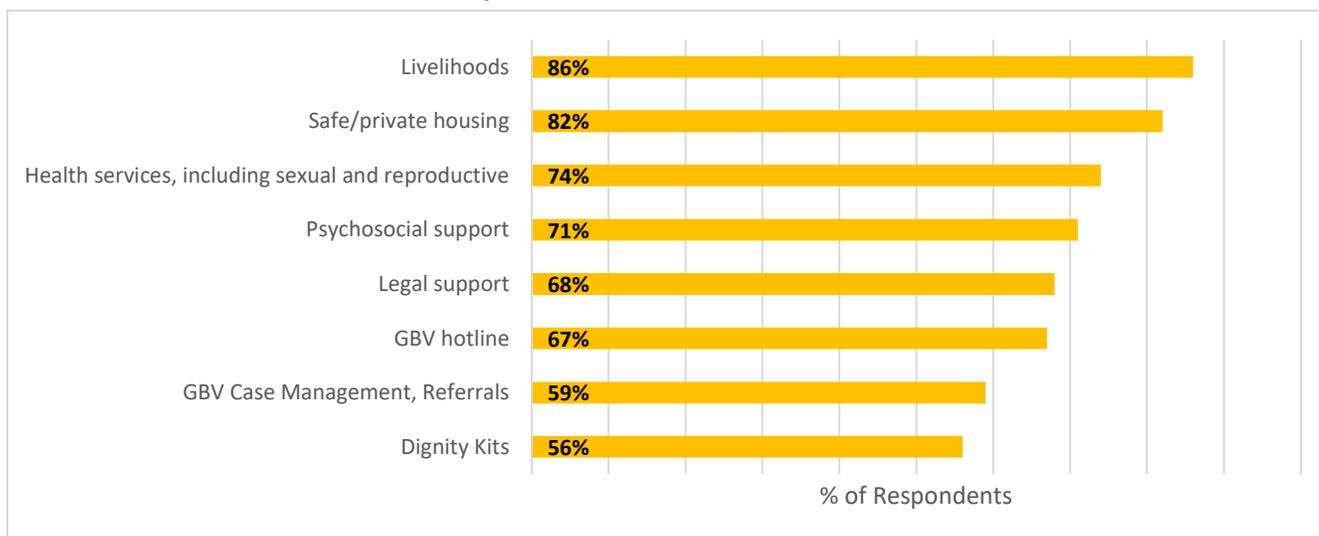
## VII. MOST IMPORTANT SERVICES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

At the end of the survey, respondents were provided with a list of services, particularly for women and girls, and asked to explain which were very important to them, important, neutral, not important, or very unimportant. Below are the percentages of women who ranked each service as either “very important” or “important.”



**86% (166)** of women said that livelihoods services are the most important to them

Most Important Services for Women and Girls



When asked what else would be most helpful for women and girls in their location, the majority of women (55) requested vocational training for women and girls, with 19 women specifically suggesting sewing. These responses support the findings that women believe livelihood support, including training, to be among the most beneficial assistance that can be provided.

In addition, 5 women requested awareness sessions and 4 women asked for a women’s center which may offer support, advice and guidance to them. As noted in the survey, having a safe, female-only space would enable women to learn to support each other, discuss social matters, strengthen social ties, and solve their problems.

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## DISCUSSION

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**This assessment confirms that essential needs of out-of-camp IDPs are neglected, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. And, programs to sustain livelihood and economic independence – pivotal to achieving resilience and social cohesion – are inadequate.**

Interviews with key stakeholders active in these settlements indicate that few humanitarian actors or other bodies are currently working in informal IDP settlements, and that available services are limited to general administration, shelter, clean water and latrines. Although some sites occasionally receive additional services (i.e. NFIs, hygiene kits, cash assistance) camp authorities confirm that all sites do not receive food, healthcare, or educational services. Furthermore, 70% of survey respondents stated that they do not currently receive services from NGOs, and 65% of respondents reported a decrease in service provision since the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically noting the stopping of food aid.

The women surveyed reported a lack of essential services, in particular food, cash/income, clean water, and healthcare. These were reiterated when asked specifically for the needs of women and girls. In addition, around half the women reported resorting to at least one negative coping mechanism, which can lead to much greater concerns if the situation remains as is.

When people remain displaced for long periods and no appropriate measures are developed to improve their conditions, there is a risk of alienating them in enclaves and normalizing their marginalization. IDPs in informal settlements are often perceived as being affiliated with extremists, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) identifies IDPs perceived as extremist-affiliates as “the most vulnerable beneficiaries that humanitarians serve.” Taking steps towards integrative durable solutions may strengthen their resilience and improve reintegration and social cohesion.

**This assessment also highlights the current lack of Protection services or infrastructure to sustain the recovery of SGBV victims and to promote awareness among out-of-camp IDP populations.**

Informal settlements are less organized than formal settlements and receive far less support from governmental authorities or the humanitarian community. This is evident in both the inadequate service provision and the lack of security measures vital to the protection of vulnerable groups, such as lack of gender-segregated latrines with locks, lack of policing/security, and female-headed households not being grouped separately. Women reported multiple protection risks, with the most common being a lack of specialized services for women, psychological trauma, stress and anxiety, and a lack of safe spaces and privacy.

According to KIIs, 31-47% of SGBV cases are reported in informal settlements. Survey respondents stated that the most common type of SGBV is domestic violence, followed by child marriages. Both KIIs and the household survey note a spike in the number of SGBV cases during the pandemic, with key informants especially noting an increase in domestic violence and forced marriage.

Unfortunately, as elsewhere in Iraq, it is difficult to report and seek help for such incidents because of fear and social stigma. However, informal settlements pose additional barriers due to the lack of available services, awareness of existing services, privacy, confidentiality, and safety for residents. When SGBV reports are made, most women surveyed believed help would be sought from a family member or the police; none believed there would be reports to an NGO or UN agency.

While both women and the camp management authorities did not believe SGBV survivors reported such incidents to NGOs, only the NGO respondents stated that they were contacted (at a rate of around 25%). There could be a myriad of reasons for this discrepancy, including a reluctance by women to

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note their involvement with NGOs, a lack of recognition by women and camp authorities of NGOs as active actors to assist SGBV survivors, and/or an overestimation of assistance offered by NGOs themselves. Regardless, this discrepancy may point both to a need for greater awareness of any services offered, and the need to provide greater SGBV-related support.

The majority of women are not aware of how to report violence, receive medical attention for sexual-related violence, receive psychological support, find a safe space to go to if hurt or threatened, or obtain more information on SGBV-related services. This can again be attributed to both a lack of awareness of existing services as well as a gap in available protection assistance. KIIs confirmed this deficiency in SGBV assistance for out-of-camp IDPs. These findings illustrate the need to increase awareness of children's and women's rights and services available, as well as implement protection-related measures.

**Lastly, this assessment reveals a gap between what women and girls express as their primary needs and what is actually being provided and/or recommended by the humanitarian community.**

As the household survey clearly illustrates, respondents are most in need of critical services. When asked specifically for services for women and girls, the majority of women named livelihood services (86%) as the most important, followed by safe/private housing (82%), health services (74%), and legal support (71%). A GBV hotline, GBV case management and dignity kits were also named as important.

Despite this data, and that food assistance has stopped, the main recommendations from humanitarian actors tend to focus on awareness campaigns, psychological support, and safe spaces for women and girls. These are essential for addressing protection concerns and combating SGBV, and women expressed the importance of these services, however the needs expressed as most critical by the women appear to be less known or prioritized. Therefore, protection services must go hand in hand

with addressing the indispensable needs of IDPs in these settlements.

This report has laid out several possible reasons for the discrepancy between women's expressed needs and what is being provided or recommended. These include a lack of support from the surrounding community, the volatile security situation, a disconnect between the local context and humanitarian decision-making, the fluctuating population in the settlements, and the unstructured nature of these sites.

While there has been an increased focus from the humanitarian community on localization, the results of this assessment indicate a gap between the expressed needs of out-of-camp IDPs and the decisions being made regarding their assistance. Measures to address this disconnect, such as establishing a communication mechanism for IDPs in informal settlements, are crucial to improving their quality of life.

**With this report, Mercy Hands intends to shed light on the precarious living conditions in informal settlements, including SGBV incidents and risks, with the aim to increase attention from the wider community and foster a change in the policies informing humanitarian actors. Furthermore, a tailored approach focusing on reintegration and social cohesion with host communities is vital to a long-term durable solution. Only when addressing the legal, social or economic needs of displaced people and host community alike will people be able to see themselves as victims of a common injustice rather than rivals competing for scarce resources.**