

## Motivation towards peacebuilding: the Story of the Young Women Peace Builders in Iraq from Gender Perspective

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### **Abstract:**

This study examines the peace activism journey of young women in the context of Iraq. More accurately, the study investigates how the Iraqi young women are motivated to become peace activists. For its theoretical analysis, both feminist theories and motivation theories are applied. Methodologically, the research employed qualitative research techniques by conducting (19) semi-structured interviews with young women peacebuilders from Kirkuk and Nineveh governorates as these two governorates are considered as small Iraq. Through an in-depth analysis of the gathered data, three key themes emerge as pivotal factors propelling women's engagement in peacebuilding including victimhood, women's representation as a need, and personal benefits. These interconnected motivations together shape these women's journeys toward advocating for peace. By recognizing the significance of these drivers, decision makers, practitioners, and relevant actors can design and develop more targeted strategies to encourage and support the active involvement of young women in peacebuilding efforts.

**Key words:** Young women peacebuilders, peacebuilding, motivation, Ethno-religious group, Iraq

## 1. Introduction:

Inclusive societies, which provide equal opportunities for all, are more expected to be peaceful and stable. Inclusion is considered as a key component of conflict prevention. The trend of inclusion is progressively being embraced as a standard practice to enhance the longevity of peace agreements and prevention of increasing violence (Carl A, 2019).

Regardless of its improvements over the past few years, Iraq is still considered as one of the worst countries for Peace. According to the Global Peace Index (2022), Iraq is ranked as number seven in the list of the worst peace countries in the world. This means that more peacebuilding initiatives are needed to guarantee a peaceful society in Iraq. However, such initiatives are meaningful and effective if they are inclusive (O'Reilly et al., 2015).

The inclusion of women (old and young) and youth (males and females) in peace and transition processes is essential not only to confront deeply-rooted power structures but also to guarantee peace and security (McEvoy-Levy, 2006a; O'Reilly et al., 2015; Simpson, 2018). Additionally, women involvement and gender expertise in peacebuilding activities are significant for reconstituting legal, political, cultural and socio-economic and social structures; they can consequently deliver on gender equality goals. Gender equality brings to peace-building new degrees of democratic inclusiveness, faster and more durable economic growth and human and social capital recovery (Klot, J. F, 2007). Moreover, when women are involved in the peace process, the likelihood of reaching peace agreement increases (O'Reilly et al., 2015). Relatedly, women are more likely to not only have a stronger commitment to the ending of violence but also to the maintenance of long term peace than groups of men (Pankhurst, D, 2000). Conversely, failure to take gender perspectives into consideration can undermine attempts and initiatives to facilitate a return to real peace and human security (Anderlini 2007).

The rationale for incorporating young individuals (females and males) into peace processes is unquestionable, simply because of their significant presence among armed groups, their large population in conflict-affected regions (who are not directly involved in violence), and their role in shaping the future (Teresa Whitfield, 2019). Youth have also demonstrated their capacity to establish productive and innovative methods for resolving conflicts, adopt peace-oriented

perspectives for the long run, and direct their attention towards matters of justice that form the fundamental pillars of thriving, harmonious, and inclusive societies (Altiok, A., & Grizelj, I. 2019). Despite the positive impact of women and youth participation in the peace process, the comprehensive global response to women and youth-related matters has a brief timeline. The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) was adopted by the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2000, indicating that it is only two decades that women's roles and participation in the peace process are globally recognized. Since then, the UNSC has adopted another nine resolutions that, together with 1325, form what is known as the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda (Peace Women, 2023). Prior to the approval of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 known as youth, peace, security (YPS) agenda in December 2015, there was no worldwide structure to facilitate the examination or handling of concerns involving youth, peace, and security (Mohammed, M. A, 2023). Even though the adoption of the WPS and YPS agendas are important progress in the global policy framework, and both have reflected on the need for more inclusive and responsive peace, yet, the UN and the majority of member states have predominantly returned to a constrained or limited involvement of youth and women in shaping, carrying out, and assessing advancements related to the agendas, and consequently led many commentators to question their impact and the motivations driving their approach to implementation (Our Generation for Inclusive Peace, 2019; Upadhyay, M, 2023b). Taking a close look at the number of the UN member states, which have adopted WPS and YPS action plans, clearly indicates that there is a long way to go to achieve the desired goals of these agendas. For example, 107 UN Member States (55%) have adopted a WPS National Action Plan. 30% of NAPs are outdated, having expired in 2022 or before (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2023). In terms of the YPS agenda, only 4 countries including Finland, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Philippines have adopted a national action plan to implement the agenda (Upadhyay. M. 2023a). Noteworthy to mention that Iraq launched the first national action plan to implement the WPS agenda in 2014 and the second one in 2019. However, the Iraqi state has not adopted any action plan to implement the YPS agenda yet.

Despite the fact that women and youth in Iraq are hugely under-represented in the peace process (Mohammed, M. 2023; O'Driscoll, D., 2017) and they have faced several challenges to be part of this process (Khodary, 2016; N Kaya, & Makki, 2022), their roles and motivations in/for peace building are really important, which is something that has not been well investigated. Having [sjh@univsul.edu.iq](mailto:sjh@univsul.edu.iq)

several opportunities to amplify women and youth's voices and increase their participation, it is still not clear how young female peace builders from different ethno-religious groups are included in the peace process. I have thoroughly examined existing research to determine whether there has been prior exploration of the factors driving young women, towards becoming peace activists. It appears that only a limited number of studies have directly delved into this topic. Notably, none of these studies have investigated this matter within the context of Iraq.

As a result, this study aims to bridge this gap within academic discourse and contribute to the body of literature regarding the engagement of young women in the peace process. More precisely, this research wants to answer the question how are women peacebuilders in Iraq motivated to become peace activists? The significance of this research lies in its focus on young women peacebuilders, a demographic that has not received substantial attention in previous research endeavors. By concentrating on this specific group, we aspire to enhance our understanding of the motivations driving their involvement. Ultimately, this deeper comprehension can provide valuable insights to those involved in shaping peace processes, facilitating the creation of comprehensive and inclusive peacebuilding strategies.

## **2. Literature review:**

### **2.1. Gendered peacebuilding (Women and Peace)**

History has witnessed different forms of women participation in war and peace. Scholars argue that compared to men, women are naturally more peaceful. However, others have the opposite argument (Goldestein, 2001). A large literature exists on women and peace and most of these works address the importance of women participation and their positive roles in the peace process. Despite the fact that women are mainly considered as a marginalized group in the peace process (Ali, I. et al., 2018; Khodary, 2016; O'Driscoll, D., 2017), they still have their contribution in different forms. Even if women are not actively involved in the formal peace process, they do play a role in the informal peace initiatives at the grassroots level. (Masri, 2017; N Kaya, & Makki, 2022; O'Driscoll, D., 2017; Pepper, 2018; Porter, 2007).

Tickner (1999) argues that associating women with peace can reinforce gender stereotypes that see men as proactive and rational and women as passive, victimized, and emotional. She goes on to say that these preconceptions hurt women's credibility in international politics and undermine efforts to achieve world peace. As a response to male dominance in the peace movement, and as a

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feminist issue in its own right, women peace activists attempted to merge feminism and pacifism, but they were met with strong resistance (Rafferty 2017).

The role of women in post-conflict reconstruction and the peace process is likely to be more notable at the local level rather than the national level (Matheson, 2001). Concerning women's engagement in politics amid and after armed conflicts, scholarly literature indicates that armed conflicts can yield positive outcomes for women. These conflicts disrupt existing gender hierarchies, prompting women to mobilize in reaction. Through joint endeavors, women establish novel leadership roles, culminating in their attainment of altered and frequently enhanced positions within the sphere of politics following the conflict's conclusion (Anderson & Valade, 2022; Paulson-Smith and Tripp 2021; Tripp 2023 )

Some argue that women actively participate in peace initiatives, but their roles and participation are not acknowledged, therefore, it requires much greater recognition (Jordon, 2003). Study indicates that Iraqi women peace activists exert considerable effort, yet their impact remains limited in scope and largely unrecognized. This challenge is particularly prominent among young women engaged in peace activism (N Kaya, & Makki, 2022). Upon reviewing the existing literature, it becomes evident that the majority of studies have concentrated on the notable absence of women in peace processes and their roles in peace-related endeavors. However, a limited number of studies, (Cardenas, 2022; Jordon, 2003; Masri, 2017; Rafferty 2017) have explored the underlying motivations propelling women to engage in peace activism, yet these studies did not specifically target the cohort of young women peacebuilders.

As women (young women included) face more challenges in entering formal politics, civil society can serve as an alternative path for women to become active in the political sphere (Castillejo, 2016). In the context of Nineveh province in Iraq, research found that the notion of increasing women's engagement in political and public arenas, along with the provision of improved protection, garnered strong support. This endorsement is rooted not solely in the fact that women make up half of the population but also in the awareness of the suffering that has arisen due to their historical marginalization (Hayder, R. & Palani, K, 2021).

Relatedly, strong civil society organizations led by women nurture skills and expand avenues, enabling women to participate more effectively in the peace process (Anderlini, 2000). Iraq has witnessed a substantial growth in the quantity of civil society organizations, including those spearheaded by women (Salih, S & Khalid, A, 2020). Apart from the numerous registered and

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unregistered organizations led by women, diverse initiatives have also been undertaken to elevate women's involvement in the peace process through civil society organizations (CSOs) in Iraq. To ensure inclusivity and effectiveness in the efforts of organizations led by women, these entities have established networks. For example, a network of women lead CSOs was established to implement the 1325 action plan. The network consisted of 31 CSOs and focused on the implementation of the plan. Establishing a women peace group consisting of 20 women leaders from different political parties was an initiative to increase women participation in the peace process in KRI, (Vilardo, & Bittar, 2018).

Local Peace Agreements (LPAs) in different communities in Iraq were also other forms of initiatives to bring peace and ensure peaceful coexistence between Iraqi components. However, the role and participation of women in this type of initiative were still limited (Parry, J., & Aymerich, O, 2022). During August 2017, within Mosul, a conference was organized by the Iraqi Women Network, bringing together representatives from various parts of the country's civil society. The event centered on the theme of women as agents of peace in Iraq. The conference served as a platform for women from Mosul to openly exchange their insights, shedding light on their encounters and contributions in countering extremism while Mosul was under the influence of the Islamic State. This gathering underscored the resolute commitment of Iraqi women to actively participate in initiatives related to political transformation, conflict resolution, and the establishment of peace and justice (Iraqi Women Network, 2017).

The Global Study is premised upon an understanding that women are not a homogenous group. Gender is simply one axis of difference, which intersects with many other forms of identity and experience. Nationality, ethnicity, political and religious affiliation, caste, indigeneity, malial status, disability, age, sexual preference; all of these, and others, are important factors in determining women's lived experiences of conflict and recovery. It is well understood that these identities can intersect to amplify vulnerability (Coomaraswamy, R., 2015).

## **2.2. Age-d peacebuilding (youth and peace)**

National and international actors consider new approaches to ensure youth are included in peace work. A youth-inclusive approach emphasizes that peace processes should be shaped by the participation and representation of young people in the design and implementation of peace processes, as critical and necessary partners in conflict transformation and peacebuilding (Irena Grizelj and Ali, 2022). Passing of the landmark United Nations Security Council resolution [sjh@univsul.edu.iq](mailto:sjh@univsul.edu.iq)

(UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in 2000 as well as youth, Peace, Security in 2015 are great achievements towards increasing women and youth participation in the formal peace process. However, the shortcomings pertain to the implementation phase, stemming from the absence of a monitoring mechanism by the Security Council to oversee the resolution's implementation. Consequently, the success of implementation relies on the individual decisions of each member state regarding whether they opt to carry it out or not (Lie, K, 2017).

Youth have found a significant avenue to improve their socio-economic involvement by actively participating in civil society organizations (CSOs). Within the context of post-IS Nineveh, there has been an emergence of youth-led initiatives and organizations, further contributing to the engagement of young individuals in community activities and local decision-making processes. The participation of youth in civil society to rebuild their region has increased, with their emphasis on civicness as a basis for their identity, and the rule of law as a basis for governance. This shift challenges the existing religious sectarian and ethnic orientation of social and political life in the governorate and is a reaction to the governorate's own dynamics and context (Rifaat.K & Palani, 2021)

The Ministry of Youth and Sports in the Federal Government launched the 2030 National Youth Vision, which is an important document as it will facilitate comprehensive youth development in Iraq and ensure that the country benefits from its demographic dividend. The Vision particularly highlights a focus on girls and young women who, if and when supported, can play a significant role in Iraq's sustainable development with proper implementation, can harness the huge potential of youth in Iraq and contribute to the peace and prosperity of the country. While young people recognize the need for social cohesion among different ethnic groups and community peacebuilding, they still ace many deeply embedded cultural and structural challenges in Duhok governorate in Iraq (Mohammed, M. A, 2023).

**2.3. Push factors of peace activism:** Research shows that the ability of women to partake in the nation's reconstruction and contribute to peace was influenced by individual, societal, and cultural factors, alongside networking opportunities and international support. It can be also argued that these factors are directly or indirectly shaped by motivation. Rafferty 2017 mentioned that "motivation can be simply defined as the reasons an individual has for acting or behaving in a certain way. More specifically, they can be viewed as alternatively intrinsic or extrinsic.... Intrinsic motivations are those internal to an individual such as normative beliefs, or a desired goal.

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Extrinsic motivations are those external to the individual and may cause them to act contrary to their internally held preferences, examples being the threat of punishment or the promise of social reward” (P 15). Jordon (2003) identified four factors that drew women towards their chosen peace-building area including prior experience, pragmatism, emotional/spiritual motivation, and compelling need.

In the context of [Lebanon](#) for example, Masri (2017) investigated the role of women in the peace process after the civil war in the country during 1990-1995, as she found personal factors played a pivotal role in motivating women's engagement and contributions during this period. Having endured numerous violations amid the conflict, women grew weary of enduring discrimination and injustice that cut across societal divisions. This accumulation of experiences propelled them to stand up for their rights and drive transformative change within their nation. This aligns with a wider collection of studies on victimhood and political mobilization, contending that encounters such as civil conflict or even personal victimization due to crime can result in heightened civic involvement among those affected (Blattman2009; Bateson 2012).

In the context of Iraq-Nineveh, female victims representing religious groups have participated in the peace process and now play a positive role in peace initiatives to protect minority rights. The nobel prize winner, Nadia Murad is a good example of how victims of wars and conflicts are able to become peace activists. Nadia is a Yazidi girl who was captured and enslaved by ISIS. In her book, “The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State,” she describes her story and how ISIS killed her family and people in her small village in Nineveh-Iraq. Due to her activism and efforts to advocate for the rights of Yazidis, she is a well-known female activist who works to build peace (Murad, N, 2018). Noteworthy to mention that, Nadia established a non-governmental organization in Iraq, entitled “**Nadia Initiative**,” which provides support for other Yazidi girls to work with her to ensure that female minority activists have their say when it comes to the peace process in the country.

In the context of Northern Ireland, Rafferty (2017) also conducted a research intended to provide understanding into how particular individuals have managed to cultivate a strong motivation for participating in intergroup peacebuilding, even in the face of a broader social environment that does not provide support for their endeavors. This research revealed that an individual's choice to participate in intergroup peacebuilding, within a certain social context, can be partially shaped by [sjh@univsul.edu.iq](mailto:sjh@univsul.edu.iq)

their past socialization encounters and the degree to which they have nurtured specific personal attributes. As a result, disparities in socialization and personal traits affect individuals to decide whether or not to be part of intergroup peacebuilding initiatives. This study proposes that peacebuilders should take into account individual-level psychology as a critical consideration. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of actively involving education and socialization practices, recognizing their potential to play a role in the development of more harmonious societies.

As an element of the process of socialization, educational programs have the potential to influence individuals' motivations to become peace activists. Scholars in different contexts found that such programs are effective to increase participant's motivation to promote social cohesion and intergroup relationships. For example, Israeli and Palestinian youth (females and males) who participated in educational programs in the United States developed motivations to become peace activists. More precisely, more than fifty percent of the program graduates were actively involved in peacebuilding initiatives during their high school years. Furthermore, close to twenty percent of the graduates continued their involvement in peacebuilding activities as adults (Lazarus, 2011). Encounter-based peace education programs for young people from Pakistan and the US promoted social cohesion and motivated youth to become peacebuilders. Despite the challenges, the programs emphasizing community action in the US and in Pakistan increased participants' peacebuilding motivation and helped youth to maintain it as their projects reinforced their attitudinal transformations promoting social cohesion (Cromwell, 2022).

A vast collection of literature exists, particularly in the field of religion and peace, which primarily centers on spiritual or theological motivations driving the quest for peace and active participation in peacebuilding endeavors (Omer et al., 2015). Although religion has contributed adversely to conflicts, there is substantial scholarly work showcasing the constructive roles that religion can play to motivate individuals to be part of peacebuilding. In the context of Iraq, religious teachings have been employed to fuel conflict, with specific clerics playing a role in instigating sectarian violence and some conflicts taking on a religious underpinning. Concurrently, religious discourse and leaders have also utilized doctrine to advocate for the principles of peace and justice (Alshamary, 2021). Scholars also suggest that it is crucial to exert additional efforts in identifying and providing assistance to female and young religious figures who are actively contributing to peace within their communities. This recognition stems from the significant impact these

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individuals have in shaping community outlooks and behaviors. Furthermore, this endeavor seeks to prevent religious engagement from perpetuating male dominance. Similarly, it is of utmost importance for religious actor involvement to prioritize the inclusion of minority faith leaders. This acknowledgment reflects their increased vulnerability and unique concerns and aims to ensure that religious engagement does not inadvertently reinforce the dominance of Muslims (Wainscott, 2019). In other contexts, researchers found that religion is a motivation to increase women participation in interreligious peacebuilding and reconciliation process after violence (Al Qurtuby 2014).

### **3.Theoretical Framework:**

Peace activists/peacebuilders can be understood as individuals involved in a diverse array of actions, all driven by the purpose of making contributions to peace at various levels(Rafferty 2017). UN Secretary- General’s Policy Committee offers a comprehensive definition of peacebuilding as a collection of strategies aimed at diminishing the potential for lapsing back into or resuming conflict. This involves reinforcing conflict management abilities at all tiers of a nation, with the objective of establishing the fundamental basis for enduring peace and sustainable development (Khodary, 2016). Numerous theories are available to explain the motivations driving female peace activists to engage in peacebuilding efforts. Nevertheless, I emphasize only those that are most appropriately relevant to this research, namely feminist theories and motivation theories.

#### **3.1 Feminist theories:**

Feminism is an ideology that emphasizes the equal worth of both men and women, asserting that this parity should be universally recognized across societies (Mazurana & Mckay, 2001). Feminist consciousness serves as a motivating factor in women's engagement in activism, along with the aspiration to offer practical solutions to the everyday issues within their communities (Cardenas, 2022) This notion is rooted mainly in the liberal feminism, which focuses on the norm of pure equality ‘women becoming like men’ (Khodary, 2016). This argument is supported by field research conducted in different contexts including Jordon’s research (2003) which reveals that women are evidently not passive victims or marginal observers. Quite the opposite, they assume a variety of roles, often with intersections, that are predominantly influential and remarkably proactive. Operating at the grassroots level, they strive to impact policy formulation and decision-

making procedures. She also categorized women peace worker into four categories and identified their tasks as followings;

- Supportive: enabling, assisting, facilitating, supporting, accompanying, and building up.
- Directive: organizing, training, managing, advising, and providing resources and information.
- Networking: promoting, liaising, disseminating, publishing, and influencing.
- Representing: acquiring the roles of ambassadors and advocates.

In contrast to this viewpoint, there is also the standpoint feminism with a binary lens sees men as dominating and violent, and women as subordinate and peaceful. Scholars address that women by nature are good nurturers and therefore, they bring new perspectives and knowledge to peace processes which facilitate conflict prevention and focus on peacebuilding (Anderlini 2007). It is also argued that it is indisputable that women are victims of injustice and horrific atrocities in conflict affected contexts (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002). Additionally, girls frequently seem to be portrayed mainly as victims requiring assistance or rescue. Their agency appears diminished, and they are perceived as necessitating protection, highlighting potential conflicts within these prevailing narrative frameworks surrounding girls (Brown, 2020).

Scholars believe that both above mentioned paradigms overlook the fact that reality is more complex; identities overlap and experiences are contextually based (Khodary, 2016). Relatedly, Yuval-Davis (1997) argues that women's experiences are heterogeneous as women position themselves in relation to multiple structures of power. Thus, differences among women should be recognized and given a voice beyond the boundaries of who they are but also in terms of what they want to achieve. Research also show that women can broaden the foundational aspects of their ethnic identity. This expansion enables them to adopt a political agenda that goes beyond being solely influenced by the ethno-political context (Cardenas, 2022).

### **3.2 Motivation theories:**

Numerous motivation theories have been proposed mainly by psychologists to explain human behavior and actions. Although not all, the majority of these theories can be employed to understand the motivations that influence individuals' choices and actions as peacebuilders. The motivation theories are mainly categorized into categories: (1) content theories, which focus on

needs that drive individuals to act in a certain way, and (2) process theories, which address how motivation occurs.

As part of the content theories, Maslow's hierarchy need theory (2000), can be helpful to understand how personal needs and satisfaction drive individuals to be part of peace initiatives. Research found that activists derived personal satisfaction they experienced through their connections with others and their involvement in tightly-knit group activities within the peace movement (Down- town & Wehr, 1997). While delving into the explanation of reasons behind involvement in social movements, Klandermans (2007) has identified three primary factors that make movement participation attractive to members of society: among others, identity as involves a display of affiliation with a specific group, was one factor.

The two factors theory proposed by Herzberg, F. (1964) can also help to explain peacebuilding motivation. According to this theory there are hygiene factors (external factors) that, if absent, can lead to dissatisfaction, and motivational factors include factors such as recognition, achievement, responsibility, opportunities for growth and advancement, meaningful work, and a sense of personal accomplishment. These factors directly contribute to satisfaction and can lead to increased motivation. This theory is applicable to explain why female peacebuilders engage in the peace process and why they continue. Research for example found that women peacebuilders have relished the opportunity to empower themselves, which has let them use skills they didn't know they had. The same research shows that recognition is needed to motivate women to have more contribution in the peace process (Jordon, 2003). Relatedly, research shows that social capital fosters drive, and the societal benefits stemming from this social capital subsequently inspire and stimulate individuals to participate in community activities. As a result of this recognition of the positive impacts of their actions on society, individuals are prompted to contribute. Hence, motivation plays a pivotal role in the cultivation of social capital. Consequently, social capital can introduce external influences of motivation by leveraging community norms, networks, and reciprocity. It can similarly nurture intrinsic motivations based on how deeply individuals connect with the aim of enhancing their communities (Alexander Cromwell, 2022).

#### **4. Research design:**

Scholars contend that the selection between qualitative or quantitative methods is typically guided by the nature of research questions and issues under investigation in a study (Vanderstoep and [sjh@univsul.edu.iq](mailto:sjh@univsul.edu.iq))

Johnston 2009). This research applied a qualitative approach to know how the young women to are motivated to become peace activists. This approach is helpful while it provides detailed and descriptive research results (Marvasti, 2004). This study utilized semi-structured interviews to generate first-hand data and gather variety of insights regarding the topic of this research. More precisely, the analysis presented in this thesis is based on 19 individual semi-structured interviews, which is a sufficient number to rely on for drawing a conclusion.

Researchers emphasize that qualitative studies normally rely on different methodologies of purposive sampling or non-random sampling (Vanderstoep & Johnston 2009). I utilized snowball sampling to purposively take the sample of my research. In order to recruit the participants, I considerably relied on the network of Peace and Freedom Organization-PFO as a big and well-known organization for peacebuilding in Iraq and Kurdistan region of Iraq in general as well as Kirkuk and Nineveh in particular. As the starting point, two friends of mine from PFO introduced me to a few young women peace activists, I clarified the objectives of my research to these young women, they agreed to participate as interviewees, then they helped me as identifiers to find other potential participants.

In terms of inclusion criteria, I only targeted women who; (1) are from Kirkuk or Nineveh governorates, (2) have been working on peacebuilding and social cohesion in those governorates, (3) are between 18-35 years. I made it certain that participants are recruited from different ethno-religious backgrounds. Consequently, I was able to recruit and interview 19 young women from Kirkuk and Nineveh governorates.

I employed a semi-structured interview guide to gather the data, focusing on specific aspects of the young women's peace journey. The interview discussions encompassed: (1) the initiation of their path towards becoming peace activists, (2) the influential factors such as individuals, groups, and organizations, (3) their emotional responses and sentiments towards their actions, and (4) the influence of ethno-religious factors on their interests and priorities.

Prior to commencing each interview, I provided an overview of the research goals and outlined the overall questions that would be posed. I also secured verbal consent from all participants, affirming their voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw at any point. To safeguard confidentiality, pseudonyms are employed, and participants granted permission for their voices to be recorded. The interviewees expressed a preference for conducting the interviews in either of the

two primary languages spoken in the country, namely Arabic and Kurdish. The interviews were carried out using both online and offline methods, with the average session lasting about an hour. Thematic analysis serves as an appropriate approach for analyzing interviews within qualitative studies (Neuman 2014). A number of interviews was transcribed, the themes have been taken that are important and clear for the researchers. This study employed the analytical framework proposed by Jordon (2003) to identify motivations and influences, in order to unveil the factors propelling young women towards becoming peace activists. These factors were organized into four comprehensive categories: prior experiences, pragmatism, emotional/spiritual motivation, and compelling need.

## 5. Results:

Drawing from the data analysis, a multitude of motivating factors were identified. This study further revealed that more than a factor simultaneously contributes to inspiring young women to embrace the role of peace activists. Nevertheless, interviews unveiled three prominent themes encompassing the factors that drive these women towards peace activism. These factors are; 1) victimhood as a turning point for peace activism, 2) lack of women representation as a need, 3) what to gain from peace activism, which is categorized into three sub-themes including (A) experiencing internal fulfillment, (B) social connections, and (C) financial benefits. The themes are presented below.

### 5.1. Victimhood as a turning point for peace activism:

Most of the interviewees of this study clearly pointed to their personal situation as well as the situation of their ethno-religious groups before they become peace activists. It is well clear that what they experienced as female and a member of a particular ethno-religious group shaped their decision to become peace activists. Put it more clearly, violations they faced raised their consciousness towards their gender identity as well as ethno-religious identity, and consequently, compelled them to take actions to become peace activists. Their previous experiences ranged from harsh to normal incidents that made them to be more aware about what they should do not only for themselves but also for their communities. This can be obviously noticed when we closely pay attention to the stories narrated by the participants of this research. For example, Sundus, a Yazidi girl, 30 years old from Nineveh plain shared her story and said;

**“My activism started after I was released from captivity. ISIS kidnapped me for three years, once I was free, I realized that I can amplify the voice of women to have justice...that is how I decided to become a peace activist.”**

Her statement clearly shows that women are victims in the Iraqi context. It seems that her experience as a victim raised her consciousness towards the experiences of other women as well. We can read it from her statement that justice is something that should be achieved to make sure women as victims have their rights back and are able to exercise their rights. More importantly, she is aware about her capacity and she is confident that she can be a change agent and make sure women's voices are heard. This was not the only story that shows how women experience as victims developed their self-consciousness towards their gender identity and take actions. Hawda, a Turkman from Kikruk, 25 years old, narrated her story of how she decided to become an activist.

**“I got married when I was too young, my husband was aggressive. He was always mentioning that I, as his wife, have to be under his command, whatever he said, I had to say yes..., I experienced all types of violations in my life, that is why I know what violation against women are..., all the challenges in my life pushed me to become an activist after getting divorce and I wanted to show the world that I am not a normal woman to work only in Kitchen...”**

Hawda's experience is deeply personal, however, it seems that being a victim of domestic violence made her to be more aware about her rights and women rights. Importantly, Hawda is well familiar with gender dynamics in her community. Even though she describes the role of a normal woman as someone who works only in the kitchen (showing that she is affected by her patriarchal society), she does not anymore accept this role for herself as prescribed for females in her community. She also trusts herself that she can do more and take a position that helps her to play a vital role in a wider society.

Relatedly, a specific group of research participants also indicated that their exposure to displacement caused by war and conflicts served as a pivotal moment that prompted them to embrace roles as advocates for peace. The individual obstacles and hardships encountered during their displacement acted as a stimulus, fostering a greater sense of curiosity. This curiosity not only drove them to explore the depths of reality more profoundly but also motivated them to reflect on the active roles they could undertake to enhance and improve that reality. For example, Lia, a

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Christian girl, 27 years old from Nineveh governorate shared her displacement story and how it encouraged her to become a peace activist. As she said:

**“ Before ISIS controlled Hamdania, my family sent me to Erbil because they were afraid that ISIS would arrest me..., My family also moved to Erbil, but a few days after me...we were not able to go back to Hamdania for four years... Once we returned, I couldn’t find any friends, they all left the city or the country and never came back. This was the main reason that I started searching for opportunities to be part of efforts to make sure this will not happen again...”**

This story also shows that because of being a young female, the family was afraid she would be arrested by ISIS, an understanding that ISIS mainly targeted youth and females. This was the moment that she gained self-awareness about her gender identity and realized that she should take actions to be part of positive changes in her community. Most importantly, she feels that her action to some extent would contribute in a positive direction to prevent displacement again and lose loved ones.

One may argue that these stories show victimhood as a precondition for activism. However, I argue that being a victim of conflict and violence could be a turning point for some. My argument is that not all, but some female victims have potential and are able to become advocates for women's rights and peace activism if they have opportunities and they are supported. Another relevant argument that I can make here is that every single peacebuilder in the Iraqi context was not a victim of wars and conflicts before they became peace activists.

## **5.2. Women’s representation as a need:**

An additional factor that propelled the research participants towards assuming roles as peace activists was the sense of women's underrepresentation within peacebuilding efforts. The majority of participants, if not all, highlighted the marginalization of women from their respective ethno-religious communities within peace initiatives. While the primary emphasis was on this concern within their specific ethno-religious groups and the discrimination they faced, a comprehensive review of all the interviews underscores that the landscape of peacebuilding in the Iraqi context remains predominantly male-oriented. To put it differently, all the research participants concurred on the necessity of increasing women's involvement in peace initiatives. However, the motivations that propel them to address this necessity differ.

Several participants, mainly from minority backgrounds such as Shabak, Sabaeen-Mandean, Kakayi, and Christians, highlighted that their respective ethno-religious communities encountered discrimination and faced misconceptions about their identities. Simultaneously, they noticed a lack of representation of women from these groups to address this issue. This circumstance served as a driving force for them to take proactive steps, ensuring that they, as women, could contribute positively to fostering harmonious relationships among the diverse components within the country. Maria is a 26 years old Shabak girl from Nineveh, clearly pointing to the situation of her minority community and what drove her to be part of peace endeavors, she stated that

**“...being a part of the minority community that has experienced oppression and displacement, I felt a responsibility to engage in peacebuilding efforts. It's essential to shed light on the situation of minority women, particularly from the Shabak minority,... I sensed a compelling need to contribute to this issue, considering the circumstances.”**

From Maria's perspective, the minority status of her community as well as the situation of women in that community are important and prioritized in her activism. She holds the belief that, as a member of that community, she bears the responsibility of dedicating her efforts, and she recognizes the effectiveness of these efforts in ensuring a peaceful coexistence for all. It's worth noting that while she gave Shabak women the top position in her list of priorities, she also displays support for women from other minority groups. This suggests that young women from minority backgrounds are seeking shared platforms for collaborative initiatives.

Participants from other minority groups also shared quite similar stories. Asia, a 27 years old, Kurd-Kakayi girl from Kirkuk stated that:

**“...Any incident that occurs is met with accusations that we're not Muslims. I don't intend to speak negatively about Islam, but there were occurrences that didn't align with our beliefs...”**

Analyzing the context of this statement, it becomes evident that her religious identity holds significance to her. She has also witnessed instances of misjudgment against her community, implying that any challenges they face are unfairly attributed to their minority status, as they are not part of the predominant Muslim majority. It's clear that she isn't aiming to convey any negative intent through this observation; rather, she seeks to emphasize the existence of misconceptions about her community that require rectification.

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She delved deeper into this aspect and emphasized that despite the severe discrimination endured by Kakayis, the focus of peace efforts should include women belonging to various ethno-religious groups. She shared a story of one of her activity and said that;

**“I had the duty of arranging an event for 15 women. I could invite only those from the Kakayi community like friends, family members and relatives. Nonetheless, I chose not to proceed with it, as I believed that women representing diverse ethno-religious groups could achieve greater results by collaborating together.”**

This illustrates the feasibility of giving preference to her ethno-religious group. Nonetheless, she recognized her responsibilities and held the belief that collaborative actions are more effective and productive. While conversing with her, I observed her perception that challenges occasionally surpass individual capacities for resolution. However, individual events such as the one she organized can bring even minor changes.

Another Kakayi girl, named Narmeen, 35 years old from Nineveh governorate also talked about her contribution in peace efforts and addressed how she started and supported other women in her community.

**“I was the only Kakayi girl in my village who took the initiative to begin collaborating with civil society organizations. Since then, I've been successful in supporting numerous Kakayi girls..., I was among the forefront of Kakayi girls who engaged in peacebuilding endeavors...we had discussions on how to establish a particular organization for Kakayi women...”**

Her discussion extended beyond her initial engagement with civil society organizations; she also focused on supporting other girls within her community to attain empowerment and active participation in society. Although she did not explicitly mention it as a gap within her religious group, her efforts to establish a specific organization for Kakayi women serve as a clear indication that she recognized that it is a need.

Participants from the Sabaeen-Mandean community also brought attention to comparable concerns, prompting them to take proactive actions. They aimed to ensure that women from their specific group play an active role in the peacebuilding process by voicing their perspectives. Rayan is a 31 year's old, Sabaeen-Mandean girl from Kirkuk, she has been working with civil society organizations for more than five years, as she talked about her experiences, she addressed her connection with her ethno-religious group and said;

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**“There exists a misconception about Sabaean-Mandean beliefs, with some thinking that we worship a separate god (making partner for their god), when in reality, we worship the same God, though our prophets differ. This misunderstanding deeply hurts me, and I as a woman dedicated years to trying to rectify this misperception.”**

In this statement, she discusses a prevalent misconception regarding the beliefs of the Sabaean-Mandean community. She expresses her personal sentiment of distress caused by this widespread misunderstanding. The fact that people inaccurately perceive her religious practices and beliefs seriously affected her. This emotional response is indicative of the importance she places on her faith and the desire for accurate understanding. Additionally, her efforts to address and rectify this misconception over the course of years underscores her commitment to educating others and fostering greater awareness. This implies that she sees value in dispelling the misconceptions to promote understanding and harmonious coexistence among different religious groups.

### **5.3. What to gain from peace activism:**

As previously discussed, multiple factors can motivate young women to engage in the peace process. Those participating in this study emphasized that their worries about their ethno-religious communities, personal victimhood experiences, and the overall societal instability can influence their decision to take action. Yet, various interviewees pointed out that personal advantages also drive them to become peace activists. These advantages fall into categories such as building social connections, experiencing internal fulfillment, and gaining financial benefits.

#### **5.3.1. Experiencing internal fulfillment:**

Several participants highlighted that they feel so comfortable when they see their participation in peacebuilding has positive outcomes. I noted that this factor didn't serve as their initial motivation; rather, it appeared to emerge as a secondary incentive. Drawing upon motivation theories outlined in the literature, I posit that participants must initially make the decision and take action to become part of peace initiatives. Subsequently, their choice to continue or discontinue might depend on the outcomes of those actions.

Carefully analyzing the emotional responses of participants subsequent to their involvement in peace initiatives, I could observe that almost all participants from Kirkuk and Nineveh governorates experienced a sense of satisfaction and pride. These emotions served as a motivating

factor, inspiring them to prolong their engagement. For example, Hawda from Kirkuk clearly stated that

**“... It's remarkable how profound inner peace can be derived from volunteering or assisting others, particularly when engaged in peace-related endeavors within the diverse community of Kirkuk...”**

Saja is a 24 years old, from Shabak Muslim-Shitti living in Nineveh governorate talked about her experience and shared her success that motivated her to continue as peace activist, as she said

**“I feel so proud when I see my work is effective, ...I wrote reports about women and saw that decision makers are reading it, I traveled to other cities, I was able to represent women voices on different occasions..., all these gave me a feeling of pride not to regret for what I have done...”**

Asia from Kirkuk also pointed out that her career as peace activist gave her so much enjoyment and encouraged her to continue.

**“... It is true that I am working for a civil society organization, but I built trust with people and it makes me happy when I see that women contact me and ask me for help...once I entered this field of work, I didn't expect that I would continue like this...”**

It is worth mentioning that this finding is another support for the claim of the two factors theory proposed by Herzberg, F. (1964), which proposed that motivational factors, including recognition, achievement, meaningful work, and a sense of personal accomplishment directly contribute to satisfaction and can lead to increased motivation.

### **5.3.2. Social connections:**

Various interviewees in this study noted that their involvement in peacebuilding initiatives had a positive impact on their social connections. This influence extended beyond their own ethno-religious groups, encompassing individuals from diverse communities. The participants acknowledged the significance of these connections, as they enabled them to develop a more profound understanding of the cultural and religious practices of other ethno-religious groups. Furthermore, the interviewees emphasized that these social networks created opportunities for them to engage with political figures and position themselves as potential candidates for political roles. The majority of the participants addressed these social connections as a motivating factor to continue in their peace work and do not feel bored.

During the interviews, participants mainly mentioned things like

- **“I have friends from all ethno-religious groups now”**
- **“there are some values and principles you don’t know if you don’t connect with other ethno-religious groups.”**
- **“My best friend is an Ezidi girl, from a religious group that I never knew it exists”**
- **“Even though our religion is different, we are friends and we never asked each other why you worship this and that? Why do you pray like that...?”**

The interviewees emphasized these accomplishments as significant milestones in their individual journeys, underscoring how these achievements mutually propelled them forward. The story of Nask, a Kurdish-Muslim girl from Kikruk could be considered as a fascinating story. She shared her experience of being impacted by a girl from a different religious background and governorate. Despite this, their connection continues to grow stronger over time. Nask said

**“I worked with an Ezidi girl, originally from Mosul, our bond has grown exceptionally strong over time. Together, we started on a project centered around enhancing youth awareness of their contributions to political decision-making. I felt that she affected me so much, despite the fact that she follows a different religion than I do.**

Additional participants noted that their activism led to political parties and politicians approaching them, expressing interest in their involvement in political activities and considering them as potential candidates for formal institutional positions. Eham, is 33 years old, she is a Christian girl from Nineveh governorate, who addressed her experience how she was approached by political parties.

**“...Due to my work, I am well known to people. I remember one day a politician, who is a member of a big party in Nineveh called me and said 'Eham, would you consider being our candidate for the upcoming election?' After discussing it, I realized that being their candidate would entail adhering to their agenda. Consequently, I declined the offer...”**

Being involved in peace initiatives appears to yield favorable results in terms of social connections, and conversely, having strong social connections also appears to impact one's path towards becoming a peace activist. Some participants pointed out that they embraced the role of peace

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activists due to the influence of someone within their personal network who informed them about opportunities to engage in peace initiatives. Some participants highlighted that their family members, relatives, and family friends approached them to see whether they would be interested in engaging in or attending activities related to peace. This marked the point from which their journey into activism started. For example,

- Mayasa is a christian girl from Nineveh who was reached out by her sister, who was working with a UN agency.
- Salma is an Arab-Muslim girl from Nineveh and Rayan both were informed by their cousins to see if they want to attend a peace-related activity and that is how they started their activism.
- Shrin is a Kurdsh-Kakayi girl from Nineveh. Her aunt was working for a non-governmental organization and asked her to join the organization, now they work together.
- Saja also mentioned that a friend of her father reached out to her family and asked them if she wants to work with her in his organization, then she started and still continues.

Emphasizing the significance, civil society organizations have played a crucial role by offering opportunities for young women to transition into peace activism and establish interconnections. This can be attributed to the support provided by international communities in response to the aftermath of war and conflict. This assistance, both financial and non-financial, has contributed to the country's reconstruction. As a result, the civil society sector has developed. Thousands of organizations have been registered to be able to officially operate (Salih & Omar, 2020), consequently, attracting individuals towards activism while also serving as a source of living.

### 5.3.2. Financial benefits:

Upon reviewing the interview content, it became evident that a few participants entered peace initiatives with a primary focus on financial gains. This could potentially be linked to their previous qualifications, leading them to view their involvement in civil society organizations as paid employment. This assertion aligns with the context of post-ISIS Iraq and even during ISIS, where financial challenges were a big problem, prompting many to seek opportunities within the civil society sector. Although participants did not explicitly state their financial motives for becoming peace activists, their remarks imply an underlying monetary intention.

Participants mentioned things like,

- **“I was a teacher before, but I was able to get a job in an organization”**

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- **“If I knew English language, I would get higher position in my organization”**
- **“ I know that there are people who work with NGOs only for money...”**
- **“...I have worked in different organizations...”**

All of these align with the perception in Iraqi society that individuals employed by non-governmental organizations enjoy better financial conditions. Additionally, it could be argued that NGO employees sometimes switch organizations, a phenomenon that could be partially attributed to seeking a better salary. However, this does not undermine the efforts allocated by peace activists as they confront societal and cultural barriers to make sure people smoothly and peacefully live together.

## **6. Conclusion:**

The findings drawn from this study provide valuable insights into the motivating factors driving young women in the Iraqi context to become peace activists. The data analysis reveals several factors that shape these women's path towards peace activism. It is clear that these factors are not isolated, but rather interconnected in complex ways to show a dynamic landscape of motivations.

Three major themes emerged from the interviews, indicating the factors that push young women towards peace activism. Firstly, victimhood emerged as a significant turning point for many participants of this study. Personal experiences of domestic violence, displacement, and marginalization within their ethno-religious communities were incidents that raised their awareness of their own identities and compelled them to take action. The stories shared by these women reflect their deep understanding of the challenges not only faced by themselves, but also others, which consequently drives them to work towards justice, empowerment, and change.

Secondly, the lack of women's representation within peacebuilding initiatives acted as a significant motivator. Women from various ethno-religious groups felt the need to rectify the underrepresentation of their communities and bring attention to their concerns. The desire to promote inclusivity and collaboration among diverse groups served as a driving force, pushing these women to step into roles as advocates for peaceful coexistence.

Finally, personal gains and benefits played a role in motivating some young women to engage in peace activism. The noticeable outcomes of peace activism were also explored at the personal level, revealing that participants found personal fulfillment, pride, and satisfaction in their involvement. Social connections emerged as a key benefit, helping them to form relationships across different ethno-religious groups, meaning that they gained insights into different cultures and beliefs. These connections also paved the way for engagement with political actors and potential positions in formal institutions. While financial benefits were not often clearly mentioned, the economic challenges post-ISIS Iraq faced as well as the perceived stability and opportunity within civil society organizations, affected their decisions to become involved. This financial consideration coexisted with their broader aspirations for positive change, showing that financial motivation was very small.

The findings basically highlight the complexity of factors driving young women to become peace activists in Iraq. Victimhood, the need for women's representation, and personal benefits are interlinked motivators that interact and influence these women's paths towards advocating for peace. These insights can contribute to the development of effective strategies for encouraging and supporting the involvement of young women in peacebuilding efforts to make sure there is a more inclusive society where everyone can exercise and enjoy their rights.

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