

Iraq & The Covid-19 Pandemic

Iraq is in great need of humanitarian aid as the Covid-19 pandemic in the country has challenged an already fragile health system damaged by years of conflict. It is estimated that there are over 4.10 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, with the pandemic expected to exacerbate current socio-economic vulnerabilities.¹ The regional economy has gone through several shocks, from the pandemic to the drop in oil prices and reduced tourism: *"The coronavirus era has created many big issues that are affecting families and their children, including poverty, child labour, and high levels of unemployment, which now stands at 21 percent in Iraq,"* said the Iraqi sociologist, Latif Hussein² According to the latest statistics, 28% of families lack any access to income, 45% are reliant on casual labor and others rely on loans and cash assistance to meet their essential needs such as food, hygiene items or health care. The inability to meet these basic needs will put families at an amplified risk and increase socio-economic fragility.³

Certain communities have been affected greater than others, including women and children, the most vulnerable and helpless members of the population. Children, who make-up more than half of the population in Iraq, are prone to bear the highest cost of increasing poverty as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.⁴ In the years of political upheaval and conflict, reliable access to a quality education was already difficult for Iraqi children. Currently, as the world faces the COVID-19 pandemic and closures of various institutions and businesses, Iraqi children are faced with a new hurdle to their development. Due to rampant unemployment, many children are forced to work to help their parents make ends meet. Disruption to education, increasing malnutrition and violence are all sad realities that underprivileged children in Iraq are currently facing.

Iraqi orphans in particular are the most destitute of the vulnerable groups in Iraq. According to the Iraqi Children Foundation (a non-profit organization which is based in the United States) there is an estimated 800,000 children who were orphaned by the 2003 Iraq War, and the invasion of ISIS displaced more than 1.3 million children.⁵ UNICEF recently stated that the number of Iraqi children who had been abandoned or orphaned had now risen to almost one million.⁶ Amongst the orphaned and displaced children there are countless who are desperately poor and working or begging on the streets. This humanitarian crisis poses a risk to the future of Iraq, as failure to act and help these poor orphans will leave these exposed kids susceptible to poverty, harm and danger.

While Corona has affected everyone, for women living in the world's most fragile countries like Iraq, the impact has been particularly devastating. One gender analysis showed that women in three sample areas of Iraq had faced an increase in the burden of domestic work and caring duties, an increased risk of domestic violence, and greater loss of economic livelihoods and autonomy than men. Furthermore, Iraqi women also face greater problems in accessing healthcare and support services, due to restrictions on movement and constricting social norms, have restricted decision-making power, and lack the information on coronavirus itself which would help keep them safe.⁷ According to Dina Zorba (UN Women Representative for Iraq and Yemen) measures to decrease the spread of the virus, such as lockdowns and curfews, have worsened pre-existing inequalities for many Iraqi women; the country has seen an increase in cases of domestic and gender-based violence since the arrival of the pandemic.⁸

Iraq is in a precarious condition as it faces major challenges on multiple fronts. Following over a decade of conflict and fragile state-society relations, the war-torn country is particularly vulnerable to the pandemic.

Iraq needs your help in these troubling times. We ask donors to pledge generously.

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¹ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/coronavirus-threatens-iraq-new-humanitarian-crisis>

² <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-iraq-covid-19-generation-forced-labour-education-school>

³ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/coronavirus-threatens-iraq-new-humanitarian-crisis>

⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/children-make-majority-45-million-iraqis-risk-falling-poverty-and-deprivation-due-impact>

⁵ <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/an-academy-for-orphans-filling-the-schooling-void-in-iraq-34134>

⁶ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/4/5/the-iraq-report-millions-of-iraqi-children-abandoned-orphaned>

⁷ <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/gender-analysis-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-iraq-conducted-in-kirkuk-diyala-and-621007>

⁸ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/7/feature-women-in-iraq-play-vital-roles-in-the-countrys-covid-19-response>