

EVALUATION OF THE LIVING IN DIGNITY PROJECT – PHASE I



Women attending a sewing class at the Baharka camp in Erbil.

A SAFE ENVIRONMENT AND AN EMPOWERING CONNECTION FOR WOMEN AFFECTED BY (S)GBV AND THEIR CHILDREN IN THE KURDISH AUTONOMOUS REGION OF IRAQ (KRI)

The first phase of the Living in Dignity Project took place between 2020 and 2024. Its overall aim was to stabilise and empower women and girls affected by sexualised and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The project was led by *medica mondiale* in partnership with local partner EMMA.

The project took a stress- and trauma-informed, holistic approach, combining essential support services with long-term institutional support and seeking to improve the well-being and future prospects of survivors. Centred in Erbil and Dohuk, it built on local expertise by supporting women’s counselling centres and outreach in camps for Internally Displaced Persons, while also training government and professional staff to strengthen institution-

al responses to sexualised and gender-based violence (SGBV). The project design was based on *medica mondiale*’s experience of similar previous projects as well as EMMA’s ongoing efforts in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The Living in Dignity Project delivered essential services, raised community awareness and bolstered advocacy efforts, while investing in the long-term sustainability of EMMA and other local partners. By working across individual, community and institutional levels, it fostered a supportive and responsive environment, empowering survivors to reclaim their dignity and rebuild their lives.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- **Project Title:** Living in Dignity Project
- **Project Duration:** 2020 - 2024
- **Location:** Erbil, Dohuk and Shekhan in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq
- **Funded by:** German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
- **Project Budget:** EUR 2.73 mn
- **Evaluation type:** Final independent project evaluation
- **Evaluation team:** Global Aid Insights (GAI): Yaseen Ayobi, Shahad Al-Dawoodi, Lana Kamal Ramadhan, Rahell Abdul Hawez, Hayam Nawaf Ghareeb, Elaf Yousif Ramathan
- **Evaluation period:** May – November 2024



PROJECT GOALS

Holistic Support Services: Provide survivors of sexualised- and gender-based violence with psychosocial, legal, educational and vocational support. This included counselling services, legal advice and job-skills training.

Community Awareness and Engagement: Raise community members' awareness about the rights and needs of sexualised- and gender-based violence survivors, encouraging supportive social environments.

Institutional and Political Advocacy: Train government and civil society actors to better handle cases of sexualised- and gender-based violence. Strengthen networks between organisations and government bodies to improve the support available to survivors.

Organisational Development: Strengthen the operational health and capacity of EMMA, *medica mondiale's* local partner, ensuring sustainability in advocating for, and supporting, women's rights.

PROJECT CONTEXT

In 2014, around 2.6 million Iraqis were displaced due to ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). Many found refuge in camps for Internally Displaced Persons and towns in the Kurdish Region of Iraq. Women and girls in these situations

often experience increased gender-based violence, including psychological and physical abuse alongside high rates of children forced into marriage. Official figures often under-represent these cases due to high stigma. This can lead to consequences like honour killings and suicides.

The ongoing security crisis, socially conservative values and poor cooperation between government and civil society have hindered efforts to address these issues, despite the presence and progress of women's rights organisations since 1991. Many women's rights activists face personal risks and difficulties in their work and are themselves affected by family violence or threatened due to their activism. To address these challenges, *medica mondiale* established a project aimed to strengthen the capacity of their partner organisation EMMA through organisational development and staff self-care. Strengthening EMMA was considered an effective way to enable the dignity and well-being of women and girls in the camps for Internally Displaced Persons and host communities.

The evaluation of the Living in Dignity Project covered the following domains as defined by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD DAC criteria):

- Relevance, coherence, impact, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability
- Cross-cutting issues such as the implementation of the Stress- and Trauma-sensitive Approach (STA), conflict sensitivity, contribution to peacebuilding, feminist approach and staff and self-care

The evaluation used a trauma-informed, feminist and intersectional approach, tailored to the complex humanitarian context.



Impressions from the Shekhan camp for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) near Dohuk.

EVALUATION SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The evaluation used a mixed-method, participatory approach, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. Activities involved a desk review of key documents, conversational interviews, focus group discussions, a perception survey, observational field visits, and the collection of in-depth case studies.

The evaluation team applied a five-point rating scale to assess project achievements across key criteria

- 5: the project is strong and has long-term potential (durable and thriveable)
- 4: it is supportive (conducive)
- 3: it is decent (good)
- 2: there are some challenging issues (problematic)
- 1: the project is in serious trouble (dire)

In total, 135 people were involved in the evaluation: 105 in person and 30 via a perception survey. Of the 105 in person, 72 were female and 22 male. The interviews and focus group discussions were held in camps for Internally Displaced Persons and host communities, and concentrated on the projects of *medica mondiale* and EMMA.

Throughout, evaluators prioritised creating a safe and supportive environment for participants given the stress- and trauma-sensitive nature of the project. The findings incorporate survivors' testimonies, providing rich insights into changes at both individual and community level.

FINDINGS

Relevance and project design Rating: 3 (Good)

This first phase of the Living in Dignity Project is seen to have demonstrated strong alignment with its core objectives and the needs of its target population. It did this through the Stress- and Trauma-sensitive Approach (STA), economic empowerment and culturally responsive interventions. Key interventions such as vocational training (like sewing, literacy, jewellery making) and trauma care addressed both psychological recovery and self-reliance, while community engagement strategies helped overcome initial resistance rooted in socially conservative cultural norms.

Trade-offs emerged, however, particularly between the provision of psychological support and beneficiaries' requests for financial aid and tangible tools like sewing machines. Budget constraints limited the expansion of services and materials, which left some economic empowerment needs unmet. Logistical challenges, such as inadequate training venues and inconsistent electricity, also constrained implementation. These limitations underscore the need for more

robust infrastructure and resource planning for the project's second phase (2024-2027).

A key strength was the project's adaptability, driven by a robust feedback mechanism that allowed for real-time adjustments based on beneficiary input. This led to practical shifts like the introduction of relevant vocational skills (e.g., cooking) and relocation of training sessions closer to camps for accessibility. During the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual sessions and expanded mental health services helped to maintain project continuity. The feedback loop also improved complaint resolution and service delivery, though there were frequent response delays due to high demand. Overall, the project reflected a learning-oriented, survivor-centered design that evolved with shifting needs.

"The training I received on trauma-sensitive care has completely changed how I approach my work. I now understand the importance of being patient, listening, and offering survivors the care they truly need. This training has made a big difference in how we support survivors."

Government Social Worker, Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women (DCVAW), September 2024

Partnerships and alignment with local government policies were considered central to the project's success. The consortium model of *medica mondiale* and EMMA facilitated cross-organisational collaboration and capacity-building, including training for local government agencies like the Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women (DCVAW) and the Ministry of Health (MOH). Regular coordination meetings and knowledge-sharing workshops between these different stakeholders strengthened the collective response. Furthermore, the project built on past evaluation learnings of other projects in the region to enhance women's leadership roles and foster social inclusion. The localisation of services and integration of survivors' voices in governance sustained community ownership, accountability and long-term relevance, positioning the project as a replicable model of rights-based, trauma-informed humanitarian action.



Coherence
Rating: 3 (Good)

The project was found to align closely with other gender-based violence (GBV) and trauma-sensitive efforts in the Kurdish-inhabited region, showing strong compatibility with local culture and existing interventions.

In particular, the project's focus on women's empowerment, psychological support and vocational training matched national and international priorities for assisting women affected by conflict and displacement. It was found to work in harmony with regional policies on gender-based violence prevention and women's rights and collaborated with local institutions to support reintegration and economic empowerment.

The project complemented other humanitarian efforts in the region that were targeted at Internally Displaced Persons, focusing specifically on psychological recovery and livelihoods for women (while other organisations provided shelter, food and basic services). With many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) having recently left the region, the project filled important service gaps – especially in mental health and vocational training. As a result, its work became increasingly vital to maintaining support for vulnerable populations in the region.

While the project collaborated with local government bodies and women's centres, including the Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women (DCVAW), the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Ministry of Labour (MOL), it did not become fully integrated into national service systems. In future, this could limit long-term access to mental health services for women and girls. Moreover, coordination challenges and perceptions of differences between local and international actors affected coherence and efficiency across the sector. Strengthening these links could improve the sustainability and effectiveness of the second phase of the project.

“All the women were grateful for the vocational trainings and psychological sessions we provided, as no one else was offering the same type of specialised support. This filled a critical gap in the services available to women in the camps.”

Staff member, September 2024

Impact & Effectiveness
Average Rating: 4 (Conducive)

The Living in Dignity Project directly supported over 540 women and girls, trained 71 local staff, and engaged 150 government stakeholders, with an estimated 20,000 people reached indirectly. Of the 540 women and girls, a third felt that the project helped them make important and sustainable improvements, while a **quarter** reported either good or significant improvements in their situation. In terms of promoting dignity, resilience and self-reliance, the project was particularly successful, with **60%** of participants feeling more dignified and self-reliant. Another **third** reported some stabilisation in their lives.

“I don't know where I would be without the support I received. The counselling helped me heal, the legal aid gave me my freedom, and the training provided a way for me to earn a living. The project didn't just address one issue; it helped me rebuild every part of my life.”

Beneficiary of Multiple Services, Camp for Internally Displaced Persons, September 2024

Through vocational training in areas like sewing, literacy and jewellery-making, many women gained confidence and practical skills to earn a living. Trauma-sensitive support helped women recover emotionally from the effects of violence and displacement. However, the lack of financial support and tools, such as sewing machines, limited women's ability to use their new skills to sustain long-term income. Impact was also uneven, with women in camps facing more barriers to self-reliance than those in host communities due to limited access to land, jobs and resources.

The project's training for government staff helped build capacity in handling sensitive cases with empathy and care. Staff reported stronger teamwork and improved communication after attending sessions on case management and stress management. Still, they requested more frequent, longer trainings held in quieter locations to allow for better focus. While these sessions were valuable, balancing immediate service delivery with long-term learning goals was a challenge. This reflects the wider issue of needing dedicated time and space to build skills in busy humanitarian settings and for busy government workers.

A key strength of the project was its culturally sensitive and flexible approach. It adapted interventions based on community feedback and maintained strong engagement

with local people. The partnership between *medica mondiale* and EMMA was central to its success, blending international technical expertise with deep local knowledge. Together, they provided a range of services, from trauma care to legal aid, and introduced innovative healing methods such as art and music therapy.

However, EMMA's limited visibility in donor-level strategy discussions was a constraint. While decisions were made jointly, the funding structure limited EMMA's leadership role and direct access to strategic forums and resources, pointing to the need for greater inclusion and capacity building.

Efficiency Rating: 4 (Conductive)

The project used resources efficiently to achieve its objectives. A combination of financial inputs, staff expertise and strong partnerships enabled the delivery of impactful services at relatively low cost. Group therapy and community-based psychological support offered scalable, cost-effective mental health care, while vocational training in low-cost, marketable skills like sewing provided a pathway to economic independence – despite material shortages, such as limited sewing machines.

Implementation was timely and responsive, with most activities delivered as planned and within agreed timeframes. As a result, vocational participants began income-generating activities relatively quickly. However, broader economic outcomes were limited by external factors such as restricted market access and ongoing resource shortages, especially in the camps.



The project's locally focused model proved cost-effective. Working with EMMA reduced overheads and allowed for tailored, context-sensitive interventions. Group-based, trauma-sensitive approaches expanded psychological support without compromising quality. The integrated approach – combining legal, psychological and economic assistance – was both holistic and efficient.

Partnerships were a key strength. EMMA's cultural knowledge complemented *medica mondiale's* technical expertise, reducing reliance on costly external staff and enhancing the relevance of services. The management system balanced adaptability and accountability, with responsibilities shared between field offices and headquarters. However, limited budgets continued to constrain access to tools that could have further improved vocational outcomes.

Monitoring and adaptation also supported efficiency. A well-structured system tracked participation and outputs, though it focused more on short-term results than long-term impact. Joint planning and real-time adjustments, such as rescheduling overcrowded sessions, maximised resource use. Ongoing community feedback enabled swift course correction. While cost-effectiveness was strong overall, securing more in-kind resources – particularly vocational tools – remains an area for improvement.

Sustainability Rating: Host communities: 3 (GOOD); Internally Displaced Person camps: 2 (PROBLEMATIC)

Sustainability challenges spanned institutional, societal, economic, and financial dimensions across both camps for Internally Displaced Persons and host communities. A notable difference was that sustainability in host communities was stronger than in the camps due to better access to land, employment and resources.

Institutional sustainability progressed through capacity building with EMMA, integration of gender-sensitive and trauma-informed practices, and collaboration with structures such as the Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women (DCVAW). These efforts enhanced resilience, but high staff turnover, resource scarcity and reliance on short-term donor funding remain significant barriers. Continued investment and stronger management systems are needed to maintain gains.

Societal sustainability was supported by community activities like tailoring, literacy and psychosocial support, which reduced stigma and improved perceptions of women's empowerment and sexualised and gender-based violence (SGBV). While attitudes are shifting, cultural resistance and ingrained gender biases continue to pose challenges, requiring sustained advocacy and engagement.

Economic sustainability improved through vocational training in skills such as tailoring, baking and jewellery-making. However, limited post-training support, such as access to equipment and startup capital, hindered income generation. Linking trainees to microfinance, cooperative spaces or local business partnerships could improve long-term outcomes. Financially, dependence on donor funding enabled broad participation but was seen to the project's continuity.

While the project achieved meaningful changes – such as strengthened local systems and improved attitudes toward gender-based violence – long-term sustainability remains uncertain. Unequal conditions between host communities and those in the camps, limited resources, and insufficient follow-up support could continue to undermine outcomes. To ensure lasting impact, the project needs a clear exit strategy, local fundraising efforts and long-term planning to embed progress within community and institutional structures.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation contains 25 recommendations ranging across 12 themes. They can be grouped into four broad areas.

Improve Awareness of SGBV and Expanding Survivor Support

To effectively address sexualised and gender-based violence (SGBV), a community-based, inclusive approach, with sustained awareness-raising, is essential. This includes engaging local institutions, religious leaders, and both women and men to challenge harmful norms in order to reduce stigma and strengthen support for survivors. Key actions include:

- **Sustain awareness and dialogue:** Continue inclusive campaigns and peacebuilding dialogues to promote gender equality, involving women, men and youth.
- **Engage leaders:** Partner with religious and local leaders to advocate for women's rights, reduce stigma and build broader community support for survivors.
- **Involve all groups:** Include both women's and men's groups in community initiatives to foster cultural change and support survivors.

Enhance Vocational Training Projects

To enhance vocational training, projects must be diversified, inclusive and well-resourced. Recommendations include:

- **Expand the range of courses:** Offer courses in practical and culturally relevant skills at different levels to engage learners.

- **Link training to livelihoods:** Partner with local businesses to provide market access and sustainable income opportunities.
- **Improve access and resources:** Expand training locations, invest in better equipment and prioritise vulnerable groups, such as women with disabilities and adolescent girls.



EMMA empowers displaced women through training courses. In EMMA's courses, they can learn a trade, such as baking in a bakery course

Ensure Long-Term Sustainability

Sustaining project impact requires action at several levels:

- **Institutional:** Strengthen legal support through partnerships (e.g. Directorate of Combating Violence Against Women [DCVAW]) and ongoing legal training. Combine legal aid with trauma-sensitive psychosocial care.
- **Community:** Build local capacity (e.g. EMMA and others) in vocational, legal and psychosocial support, and promote women's leadership for lasting community ownership.
- **Project:** Support displaced participants post-camp with emotional, financial and livelihood resources. Develop clear exit and handover plans to ensure long-term impact through local institutions and community buy-in.

Improve Internal Project Efficiency

To boost implementation and staff support, the following steps are needed:

- **Clarify and embed the Stress- and Trauma-sensitive Approach (STA):** Create clear guidelines, deliver training, and gather feedback to ensure consistent understanding and application across all project areas.
- **Strengthen EMMA's capacity for oversight:** Increase field visits and manager check-ins for better support and resource use.
- **Provide ongoing staff training:** Offer regular sessions on emotional resilience and handling sexualised- and trauma-sensitive cases to improve support and reduce burnout.
- **Establish feedback systems:** Embed structured participant feedback into monitoring and evaluation processes to improve services and responsiveness.

CONCLUSION

The first phase of the Living in Dignity Project significantly supported women and girls affected by sexualised and gender-based violence (SGBV), enhancing their resilience, economic independence and community integration. Despite progress, challenges like limited market access, funding risks and resource constraints remain. A second phase (October 2024 to 2027) is now underway, aiming to build on the achievements of the first phase while emphasising stronger integration into national systems and the reinforcement of local institutions for longer term sustainability.



Impressions from the Shekhan camp.

Text: Rachel Houghton

Edited: Inga Kohl

Layout: Dreimalig, Cologne

Contact: Evaluation & Quality Department,
evaluation@medicamondiale.org

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