



Survey on Widows in Iraq

Relief International Justice and Protection Center Network

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Introduction

Widow is a term assigned to any woman whose husband has died and who has not remarried. Widowhood in Iraq has become a catastrophic social condition due to the violent policies of the previous regime, the continuous wars in Iraq, the violence following April 9, 2003, and sectarian policy-making. Indeed, the great number of widows in Iraq has become a symbol for the collapse of Iraqi society as a whole.

An Iraqi woman does not enjoy the rights she is entitled to in international resolutions, especially in reference to the Convention on Eliminating all Forms of Discrimination against Women, Resolution No. 24/180 of 1979. In the 1980s, however, women represented 70 percent of the employees in the field of teaching and other public offices in Iraq. Women also occupied advanced administrative and scientific posts during that time. When high inflation afflicted the Iraqi economy as a result of the 1990-2003 embargo, women started to leave their jobs as their real salaries steadily decreased. More than 50 percent of those who left jobs in the public sector during this period were women. The reduced participation of women in the work force led to a decrease in the income level of Iraqi families, especially those supported by widows.

The rate of widowhood in Iraq increased in step with the catastrophic wars that killed more than a million Iraqis. Women who lost their husbands traditionally had been supported by extended-family, neighbors and mosques. Yet the continuous war meant that the needs of widows exceeded the available assistance. This disparity has threatened the stability of the country and its frail social structures. Widows, forced to turn to the streets to beg, also became easy prey for insurgents who have recruited them for suicide operations.

Data taken from the Central Organization for Statistics in Iraq and the Department of Planning and the Labor Force within the Ministry of Planning indicates that 11 percent of Iraqi families are supported by women, and that 73 percent of these families are supported by widows. Many of these widows are homeless. In large cities like Baghdad, Kirkuk, Babil, Wasit, Anbar, Erbil or Basra, widows in long cloaks push their way through long queues of cars waiting at check points to beg for money or food. They wait in front of mosques for handouts of money, or in front of humanitarian organizations to receive free blankets. They search through garbage accumulated along the streets, while some live with their children in public parks, deserted governmental buildings, or under the bridges of highways. For many Iraqis, the sight of widows living in desperation is a feature of everyday life.

The Iraqi Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs is concerned with the condition of widows through its Department of Women's Care. The latest statistics indicate that only 120,000 widows receive governmental pensions – just eight percent of the total number of widows in Iraq. Their pensions range between US\$40 to US\$90 a month. This stipend is too small to meet the needs of widows, especially since many are advanced in age. Due to the stress of the economic and social responsibilities she bears for herself and her children, many widows suffer from psychological and emotional problems. Their lives are often plagued by misery and deprivation. Furthermore, due to their vulnerability and poor living situations, they are often victims of crime.



Widows face not only material neglect, but also society's misconceptions of their inferiority. While the state ignores their special needs, widows also suffer from strict social customs and traditions.

In order to reverse social bias, Iraq's public and non-profit institutions must address the neglect of widows. Since the issue of widows' status in society invites considerable interest and debate, discussions and policies must be informed by data and analysis. For this reason, Relief International (RI) proposed to conduct a broad survey of the status of widows in Iraq, in order to gather data, analyze the problem, and develop recommendations for policymakers, humanitarian organizations and civil society groups.

In November 2010, RI's assessment team distributed comprehensive questionnaires on the status of widows in the governorates of Baghdad, Anbar, Babil, Erbil, Kirkuk, Wasit and Maysan. After studying the population and geographical distribution of the survey areas, the sample size was established at 1850. Two hundred questionnaires were given in each governorate except for Baghdad and Erbil, from which 400 samples were taken. Baghdad's population is much denser than the other cities, and Erbil was selected to represent the entire Kurdistan region. This sample size is large enough to allow conclusions that are statistically significant.

The areas of each governorate were divided into rural and urban sections according to the size of each area in the governorate. Urban areas were divided into three parts according to socioeconomic levels. Rural areas were divided into three parts according to population density. The statistical map of the questionnaire was developed from these divisions.



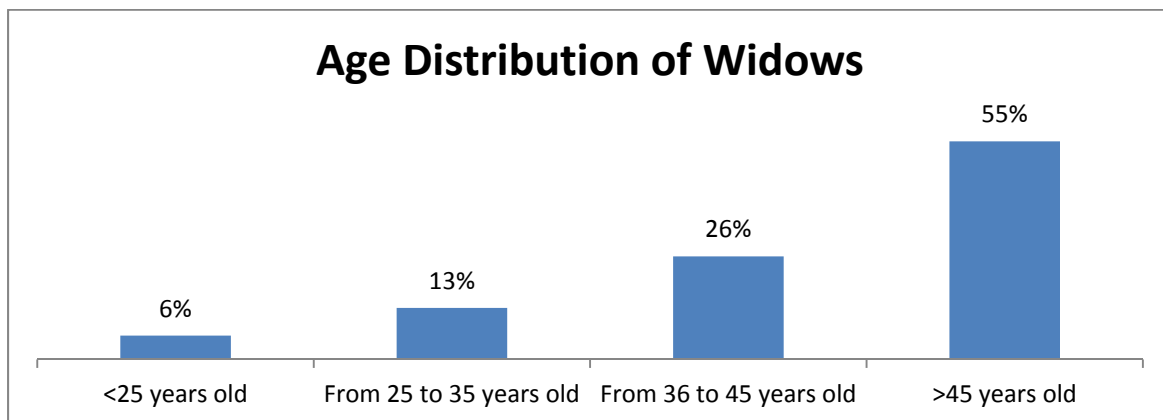
Section One: General Information on Widows

Twelve years have passed since the last census was conducted by the Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology (COSIT) of the Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Developing Cooperation. Since that time, COSIT has not been able to conduct the census according to schedule(i.e., every ten years) due to security conditions. In 2010, however, the population in Iraq was estimated by COSIT at nearly 31 million people. According to the data, women outnumber men: the percent of females in Iraq is 50.74 percent with 16,236,453 women total.¹

The number of houses in Iraq is estimated to be 3,405,691. RI's Justice and Protection Center Assessment teams visited 3,954 households where they were able to interview 1,850 widows. The rate of widows per household was 0.467881. RI thus estimates that the number of widows in Iraq is 1,593,457, or 9.81 percent of Iraqi women.



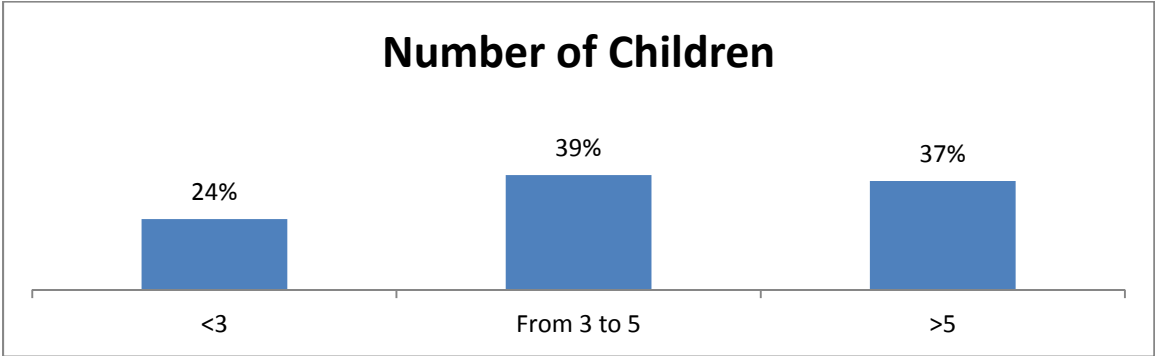
The questionnaire results showed that 55 percent of widows are more than 45 years old. The average expected age of living in Iraq is estimated to be 68.2 years.²



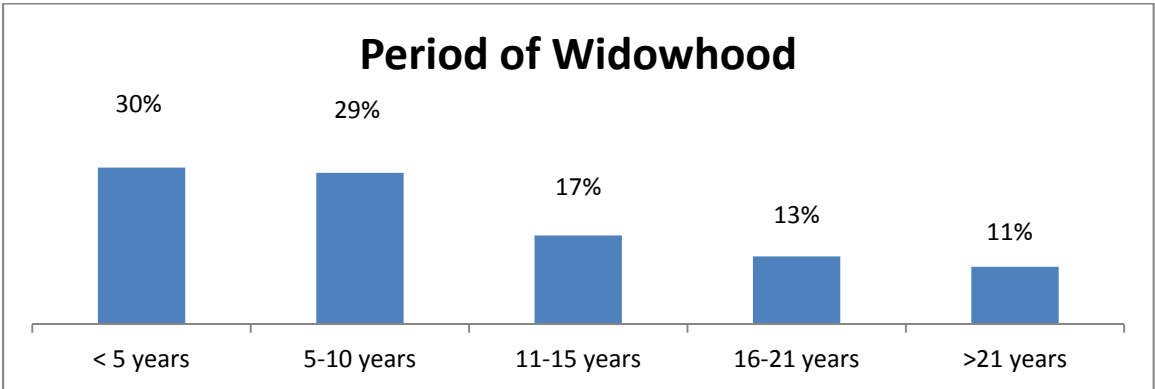
¹ Population estimates provided by Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology (COSIT)

² World Bank World Development Indicators, 2009

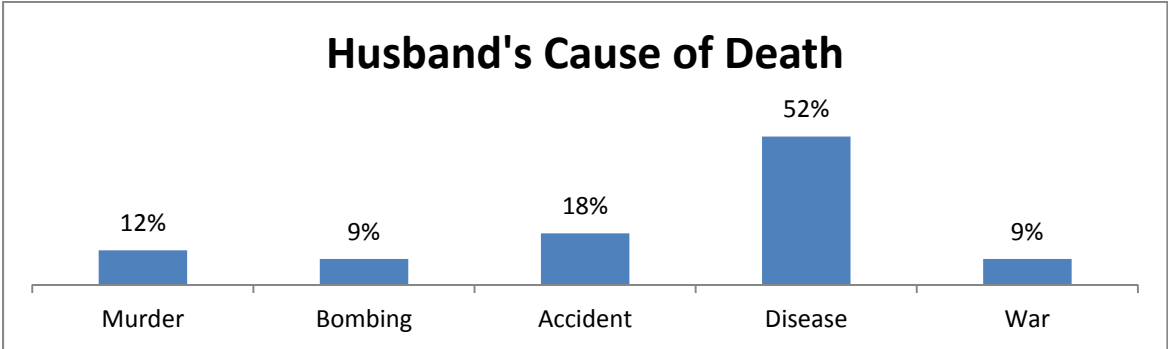
The survey found that 76 percent of widows surveyed had more than three children, and 37 percent had more than five.



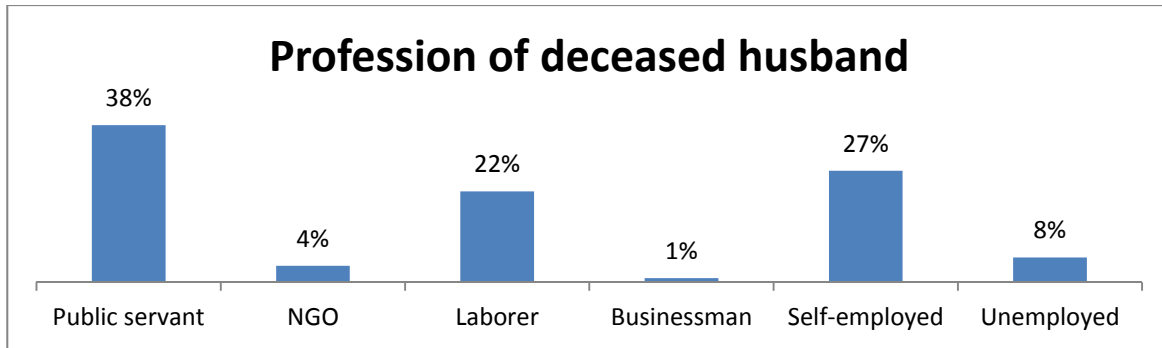
Thirty percent of widows had been widowed for less than five years and 59 percent less than ten years, while 11 percent had experienced widowhood for more than 21 years.



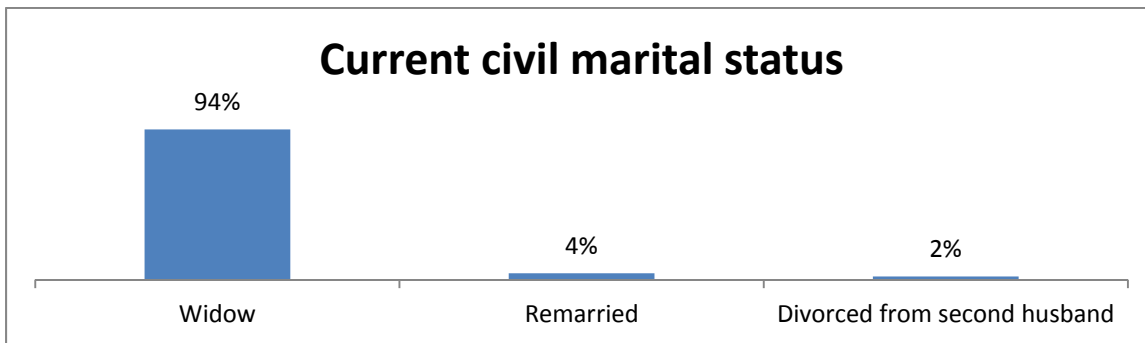
The causes of widows' husbands' deaths varied. While most (70 percent) died of disease or accidents, nine percent had died due to war and nine percent due to bombings.



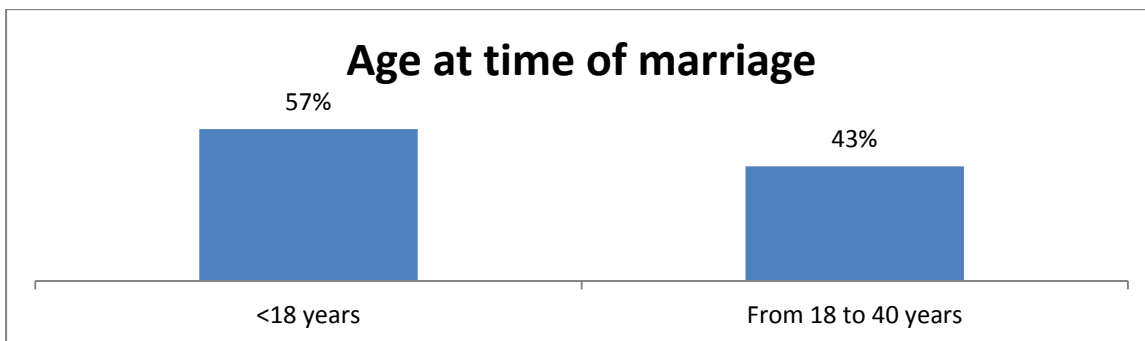
Regarding the profession of the late husbands, 38 percent had been public servants, 27 percent were self-employed, 22 percent were laborers and eight percent had been unemployed.



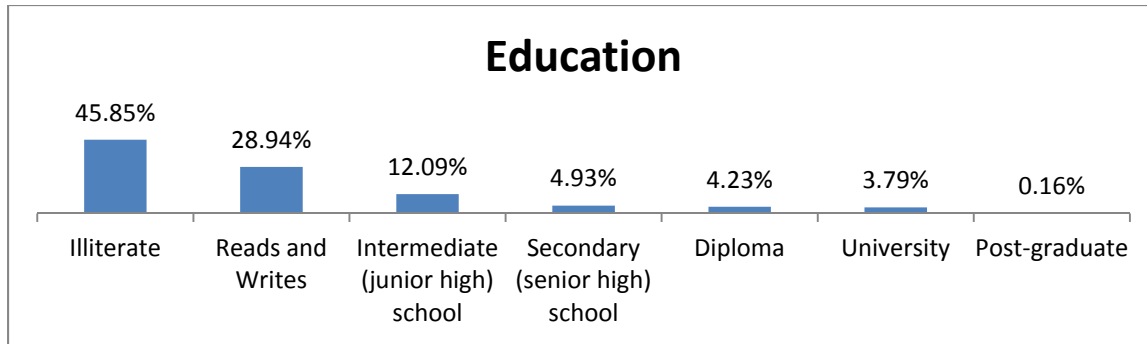
Almost all (94 percent) of the widows did not remarry. Of the six percent who remarried, a third had failed second marriages.



The survey found that 57 percent of the widows had married when they were less than 18 years old.



Almost half (46 percent) of widows were illiterate.



The survey also correlated the widow's educational attainment with her employment status. Of the 3.79 percent of widows who had college degrees, only five percent were unemployed. Of those with diplomas, only 17 percent were unemployed. Meanwhile, among illiterate widows, 93 percent of were unemployed.

Summary:

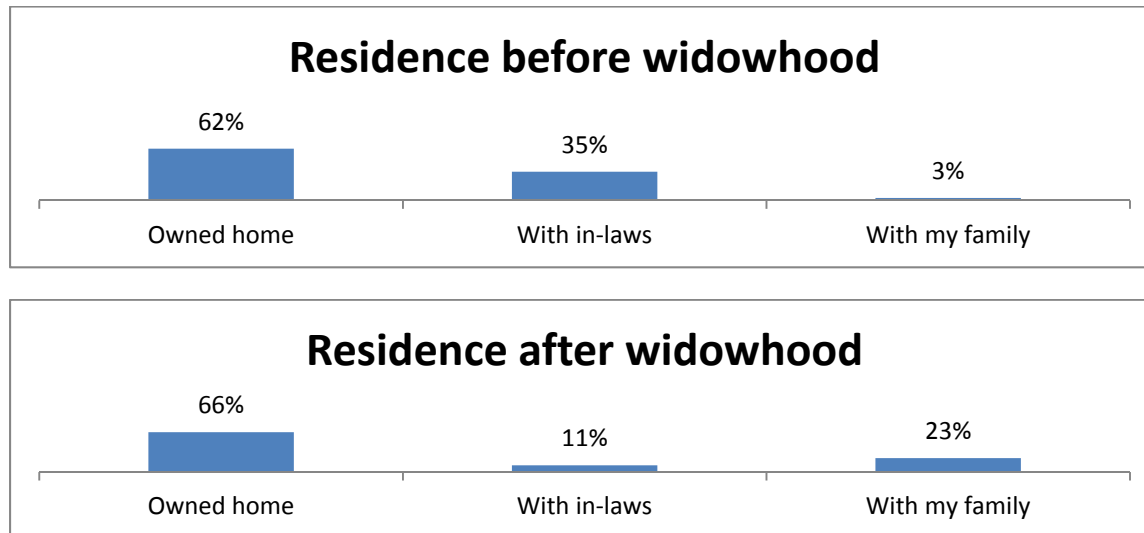
The average profile of an Iraqi widow demonstrates that she tends to be older than 45 years, illiterate, and had married very young. Most had three or more children and had been widowed less than ten years. More than half had lost their husbands to disease, although 18 percent had lost them to war or bombings. Very few had remarried after the loss of their husbands. Finally, the widow's level of educational attainment was closely related to her level of employment.



A beneficiary of an RI beautician training course demonstrates her certificate, which can empower her to develop her own business.

Section Two: Shelter and Housing

There is a general shortage of housing in Iraq, but it represents an unusual burden for widows. RI found that the housing status of women in the survey changed after widowhood.

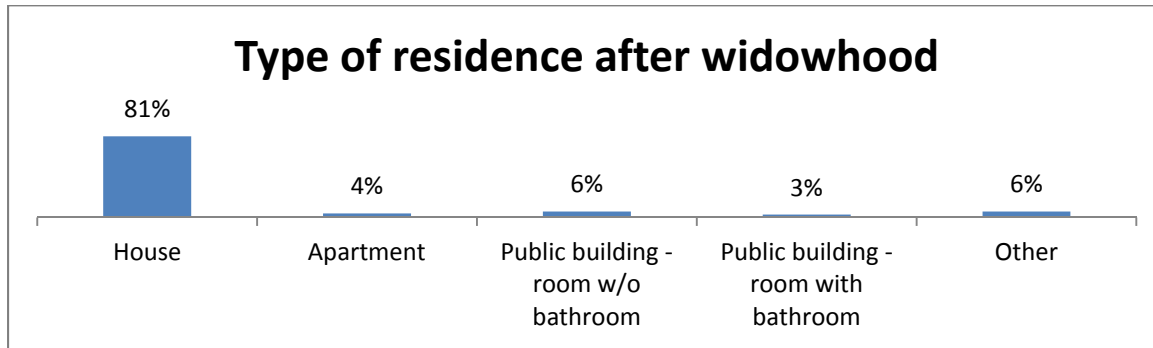
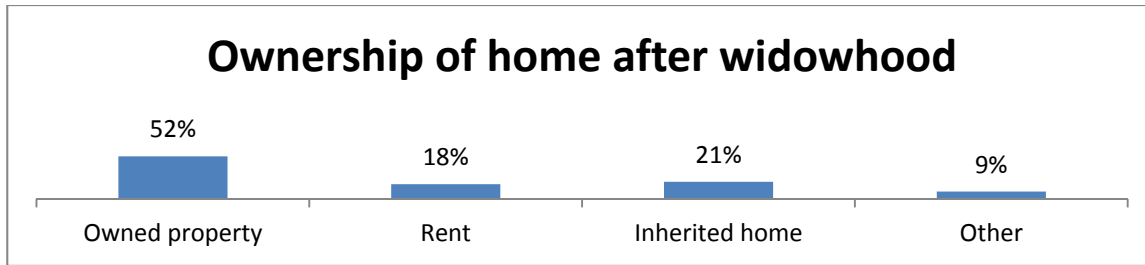


The data showed that before widowhood, 62 percent of widows lived in private homes while afterward an additional three percent moved into private homes. Before, 35 percent lived with in-laws, while after only 11 percent lived with their husband's families. An opposite shift occurred in the trend of residency with the widows' own families before and after widowhood.

Of those who used to live in private homes before widowhood and moved to live with their families after widowhood, two-thirds gave up their private homes because of poor living conditions. However, one third gave up their private homes as a result of family pressure, which they considered a kind of violence against them, and a sign that their families wanted to limit their freedom. For those who lived with their in-laws before widowhood and then moved away, 73 percent considered their in-laws the greatest threat to their safety.

The survey compared home ownership with the monthly income of widows and found a strong correlation between home ownership and financial security. For the 52 percent of widows who live in homes that they own, 89 percent of them have monthly incomes that cover their monthly expenses. For the 18 percent of widows who rent homes, however, 95 percent have monthly incomes that do not cover their monthly expenses. For the 21 percent of widows who live in homes owned by inheritors,³ 23 percent claimed to be worried, stressed and nervous due to lack of a clear view of their futures, lack of safety and lack of stability.

³ A house belonging to an inheritor is one that belongs to the family of the husband. According to Islamic law, the house belongs to a deceased husband's family members after his death. This may include the widow, children, the husband's mother, or his brothers.



The above figure shows that 81 percent of widows live in houses, the most common type of residence in Iraq; while four percent live in apartments. Nine percent of widows were found to live in public buildings⁴ such as governmental offices or water plants, which are unhealthy because their designs are not suitable for habitation. Moreover, many of these buildings have been damaged by war. Some widows live in caravans⁵ that used to belong to governmental sites, which lack the minimum health conditions required in a home. For the three percent of widows who live in single rooms without a bathroom of their own, 12 percent feel depressed and say they wish to die, and 19 percent see themselves as vulnerable and incapable, and believe that the community looks at them as vulnerable.

Summary

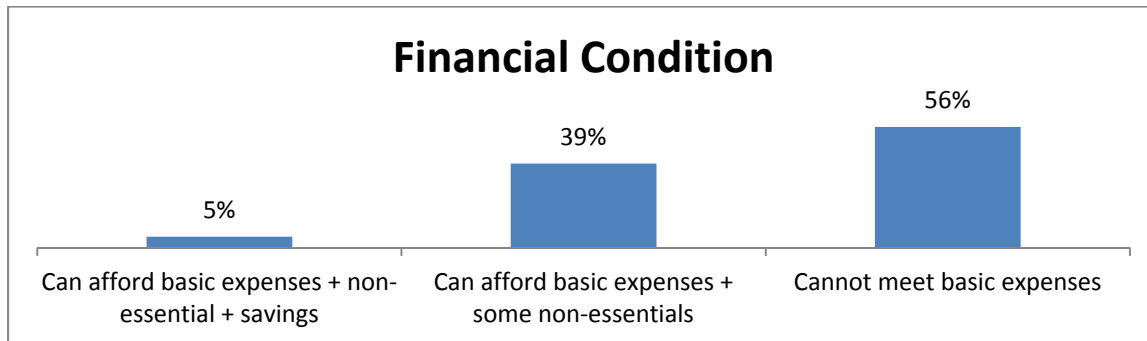
While 85 percent of widows live in a house or an apartment, many widows have insufficient housing, with nine percent living in single rooms in public buildings that were never intended as housing, and another six percent living in other inadequate arrangements such caravans. Widowhood usually results in a move out of a current residency, most often from the house of one's in-laws to the houses of their own families, unless the widow owned her own house. Widows who don't own their own homes often experience hardship, uncertainty, feelings of vulnerability, and risks to their health and security.

⁴ A "public building" means a room in a building that is owned by the government. These are often damaged and abandoned.

⁵ A "caravan" is housing meant as temporary shelter, made of iron or plastic.

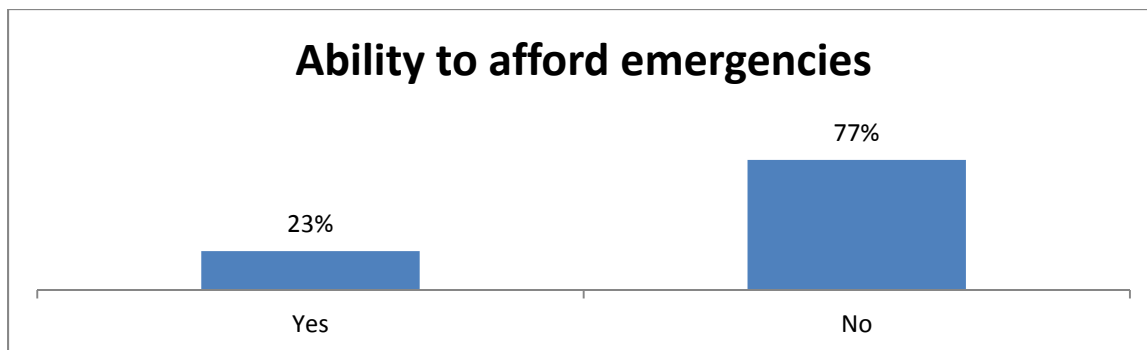
Section Three: Financial Conditions

The figure below illustrates the financial conditions of widows in Iraq in general.

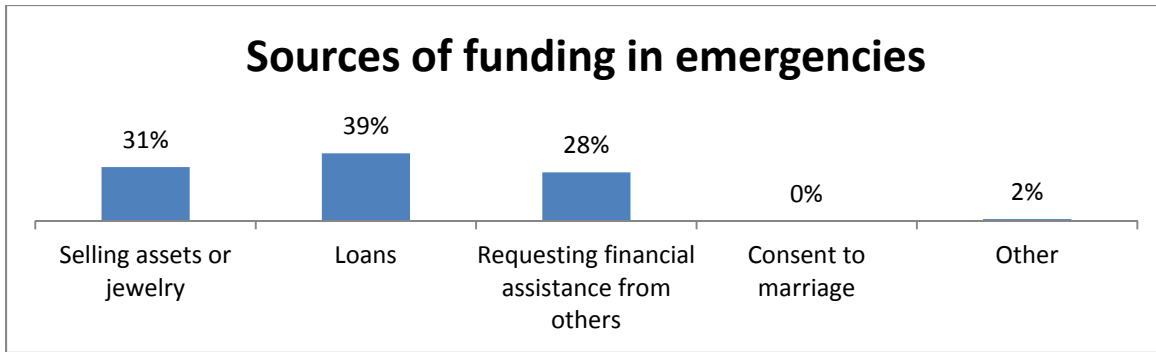


The survey showed that five percent of the widows were well off (i.e. able to afford the monthly basic and non-essential requirements in addition to being able to save some of income for emergencies or future needs). Another 39 percent are maintaining their position, in that they are able to afford monthly basic expenses and some non-essential requirements, but they are unable to put anything aside any amount for future needs. Fifty-six percent of widows, however, are poor and cannot afford basic monthly requirements, let alone save any money.

Seventy-seven percent of respondents said they would not be able to get by should they encounter an emergency such as their own illness, the illness of a son or daughter, the need to undergo surgery, or other costly event.



For those widows who could get by in the case of an emergency, 31 percent said it was because they could sell some assets or jewelry, while 39 percent said “by borrowing and loans,” and 28 percent said “by requesting financial assistance from others.” It should be added that it is common to hear anecdotes about widows who are forced to engage in non-official marriage in order to obtain financial assistance from the government, tribal leaders, or religious leaders, although none of the widows interviewed would speak about consenting to marriage for financial reasons.



Summary

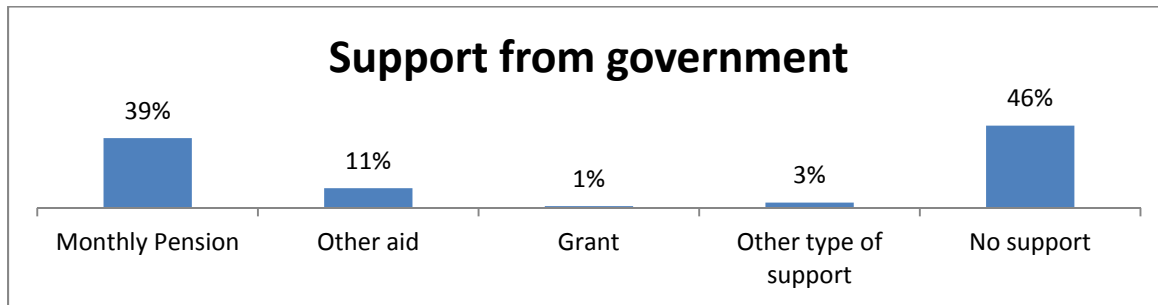
The RI study shows that most widows are poor and on shaky financial ground, with 56 percent unable to afford basic monthly expenses. An emergency would either force them to sell their assets, borrow money, or, in some cases, take extreme measures to ensure financial security.



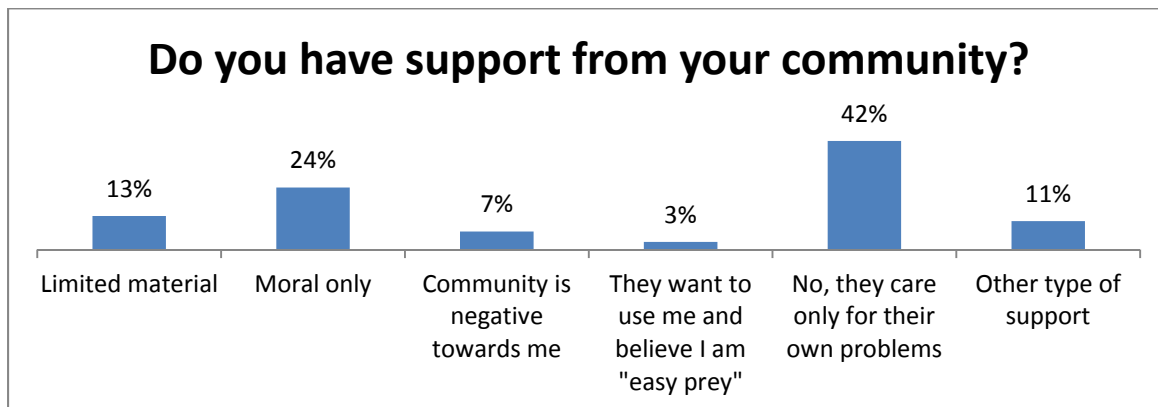
RI's seamstress course provided this widow with an opportunity to establish an income and increased independence.

Section Four: Governmental and Community Support

When asked about governmental or public support, 39 percent of the widows surveyed said they received monthly pensions, either widow's pensions (37 percent), retirement pensions of the deceased husband (55 percent), or monthly salaries because they were public servants (eight percent). Forty-six percent of widows, however, did not receive any form of governmental support.



As for receiving support from the community, only 13 percent of widows received assistance, which usually took the form of financial or material charity (such as second-hand clothes for the widows or their children), and sometimes a small monthly payment. Moral support was important; among those who received moral support, 34 percent said it helped them to feel optimistic about improving their condition. About seven percent felt the community had a negative view of them, and as a result felt isolated, nervous, tense or depressed, or had poor self-confidence. The largest group of survey respondents (42 percent) said they did not receive any community support because people around them (including their own families) cared only for their personal problems.

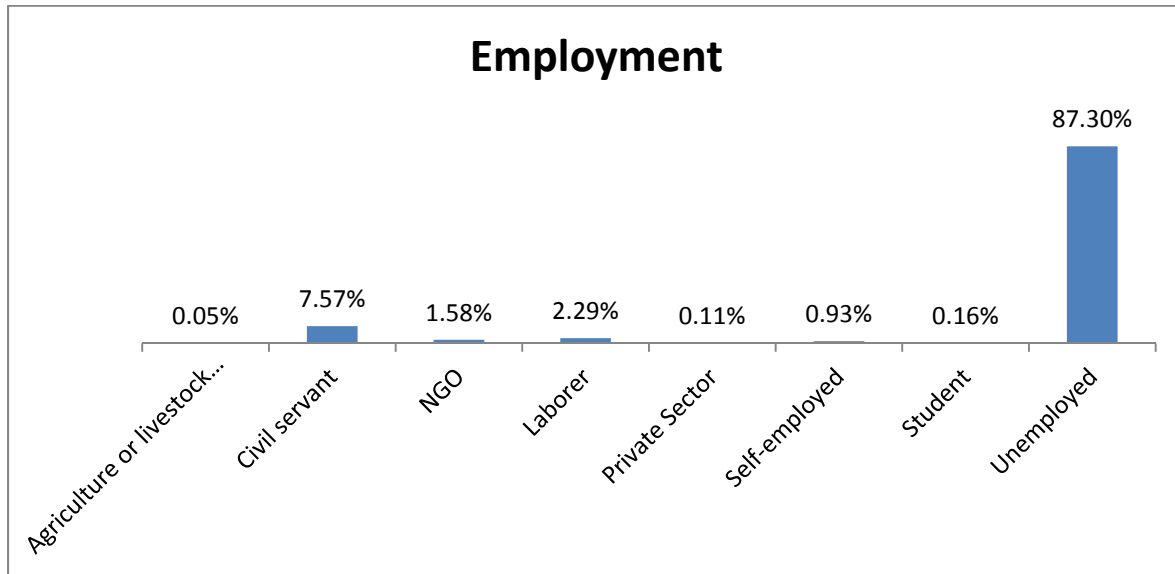


Summary

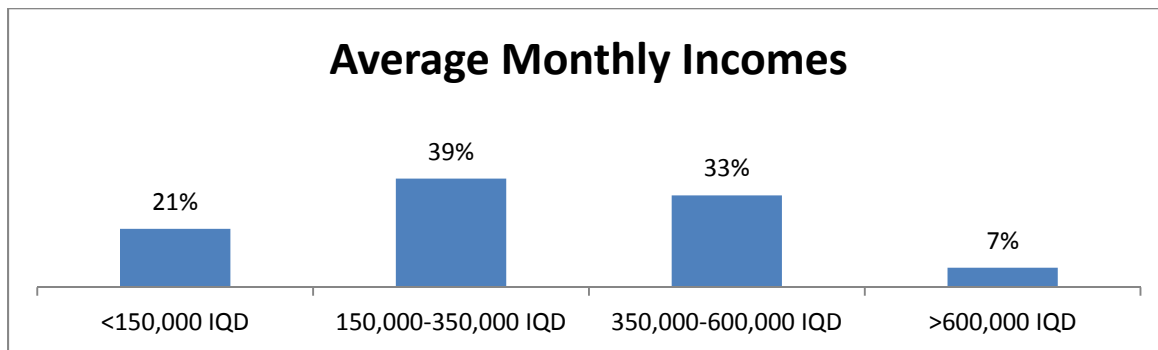
RI found that 46 percent of widows do not receive any government support and only eight percent receive widows' pensions from the government. The community provides some material, financial or moral support, but 42 percent of widows feel that even those who surround them do not care about their situation.

Section Five: Work and Sustenance

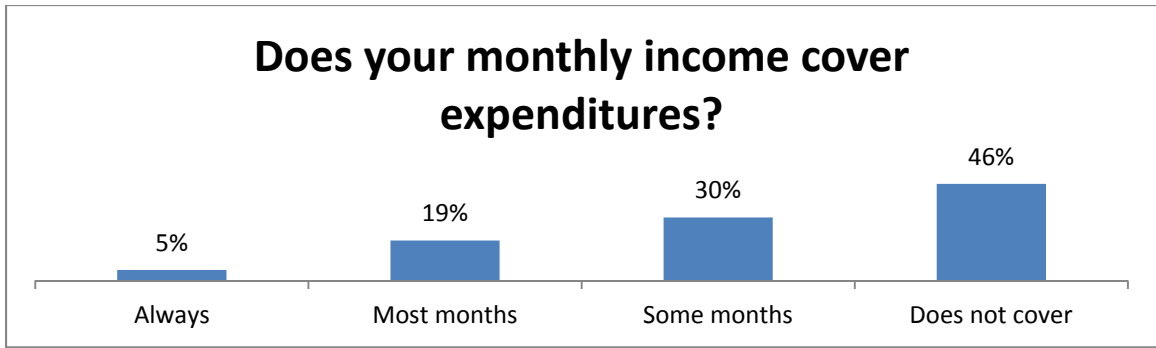
The survey found that more than 87 percent of the widows surveyed are unemployed. For those who do work, about eight percent are employed as civil servants, while less than two percent work in non-governmental institutions or in the private sector.



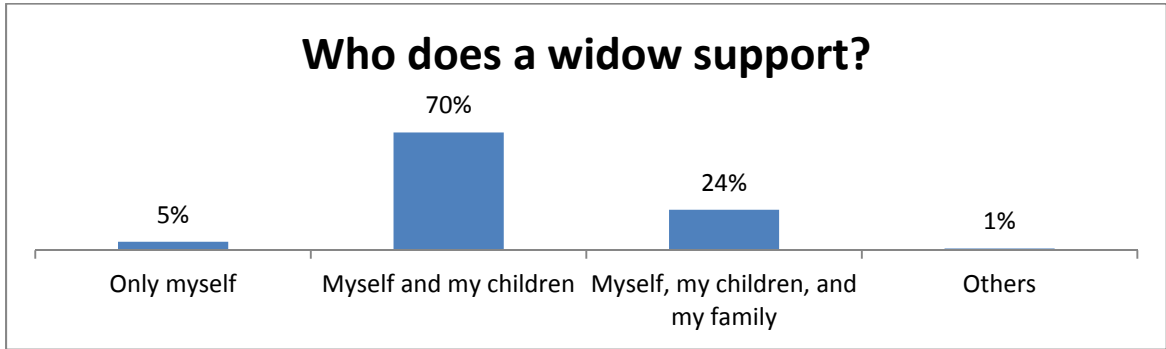
The monthly income of 21 percent of widows is between 50,000 and 150,000 Iraqi dinars while 93 percent of widows make less than 600,000 dinars (about \$500 USD) per month.



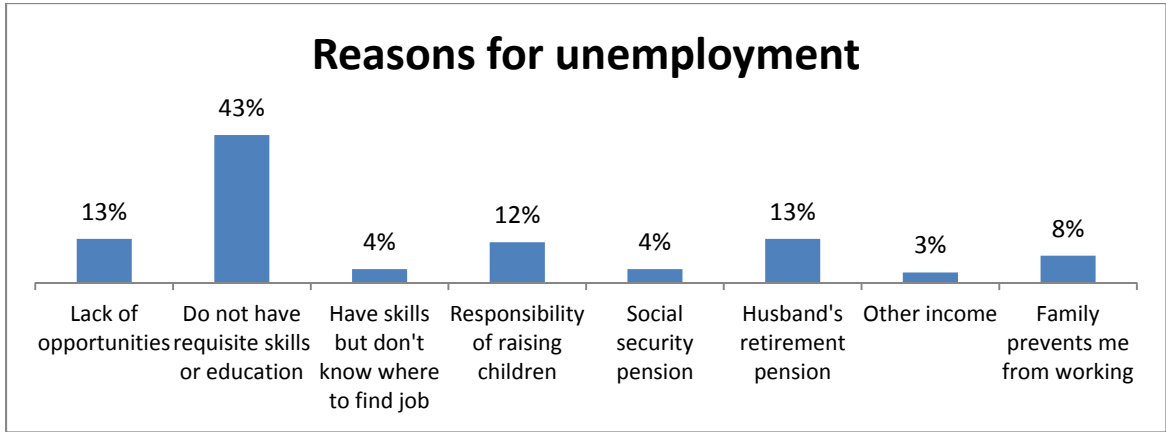
For five percent of working widows, monthly incomes always cover their monthly expenditures. The monthly incomes of 19 percent of widows cover their monthly expenditures for most months, but for 30 percent, they cover them for only some months. For a plurality (46 percent), monthly incomes never cover their monthly expenditures.



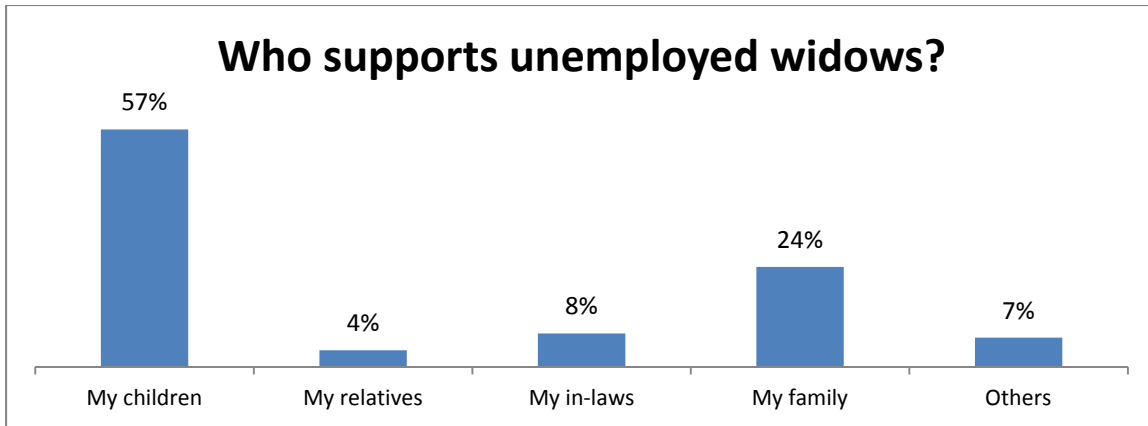
Among employed widows, 70 percent support themselves and their children, and 24 percent support themselves, their children and their families.



The 87 percent of widows who do not work reported different reasons for being unemployed. In spite of their willingness and skills, 13 percent of widows felt they could not find work due to lack of job opportunities. Another 43 percent of widows felt they were unemployed because they do not have the skills or educational background to make them qualified to work.



Of the unemployed widows, most are supported by their children (57 percent) or family (24 percent).

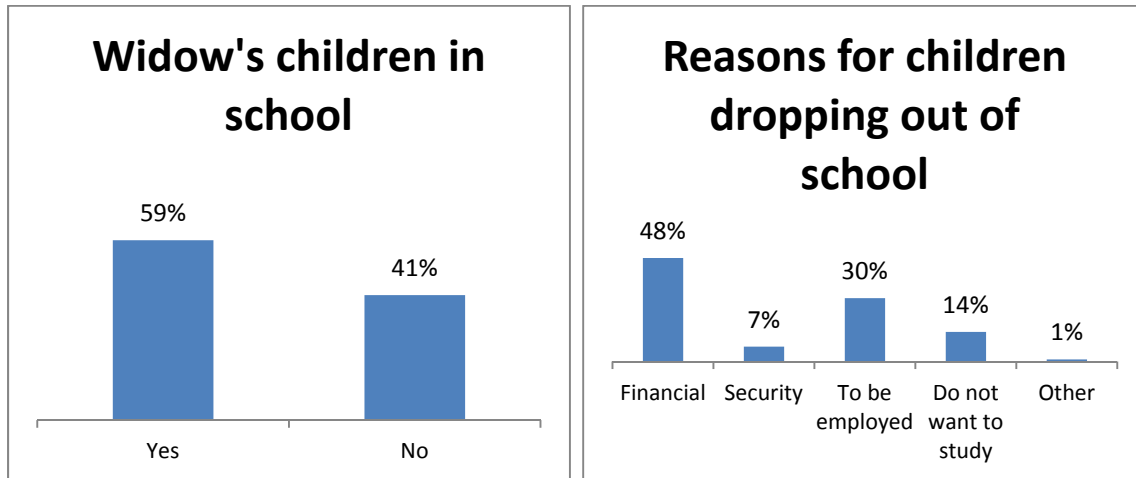


Summary

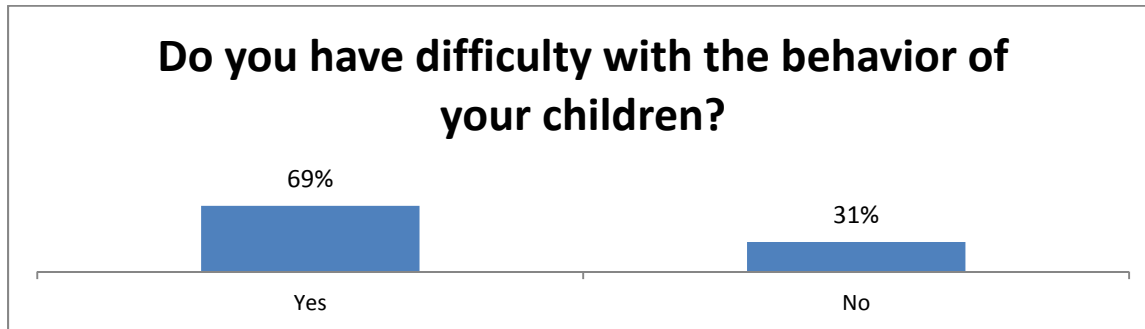
RI's assessment team found that more than 87 percent of widows are unemployed, but for those who work, only a minority is able to make enough money to cover all their expenses and those of their dependents. The support of children and families is important but not always provided, while jobs are difficult to attain even for those with training and qualifications.

Section Six: Children

The questionnaire found that 41 percent of widows' children have dropped out of school. Reasons included poor finances (48 percent were unable to afford school), looking for work (30 percent), or for security reasons (seven percent).



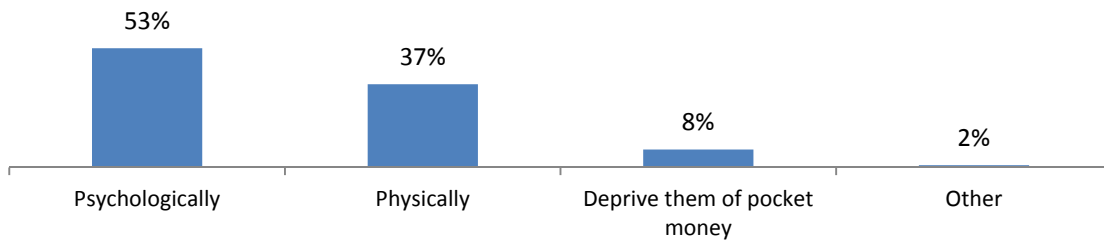
When raising their children, 69 percent of widows encountered difficulty, especially in the area of discipline, because they raise their children alone as single parents.



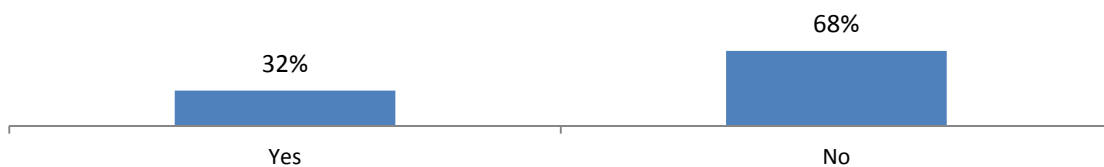
When their children misbehave, 37 percent of the widows punish their children (sons and daughters equally), three percent punish the sons only, one percent punish the daughters only, and 59 percent do not punish their children.

This data suggests that the means by which widows punish their children vary, with 53 percent using psychological means. Another 37 percent use physical means. Sixty-eight percent of widows, however do not believe in the benefit of physical punishment.

When they misbehave, how do you punish your children?



Is physical punishment useful?



Summary

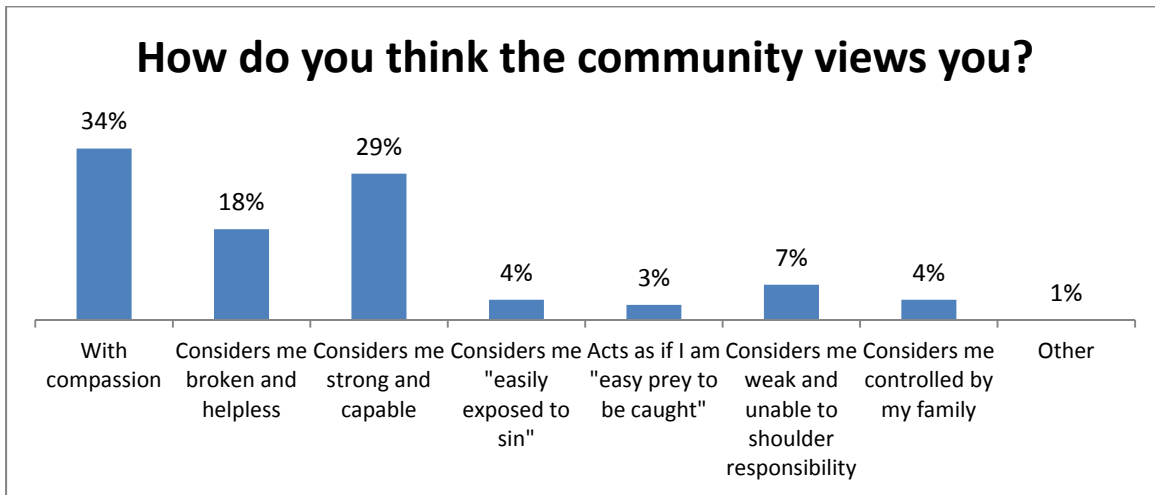
The survey found that the children of widows are also vulnerable. Forty-one percent had dropped out of school for reasons that were mainly financial, endangering their future. Beyond the everyday challenges of raising children in an unstable environment, widows also had discipline problems with their children, leading 37 percent of widows to punish their children physically.



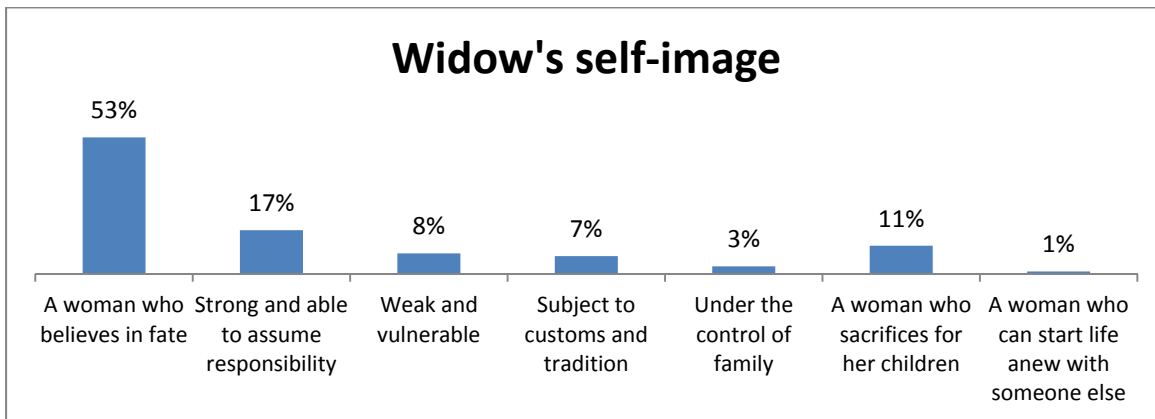
A widow practices her new beautician skills on her daughter

Section Seven: Community Perceptions of Widows and Their Self-Image and Feelings

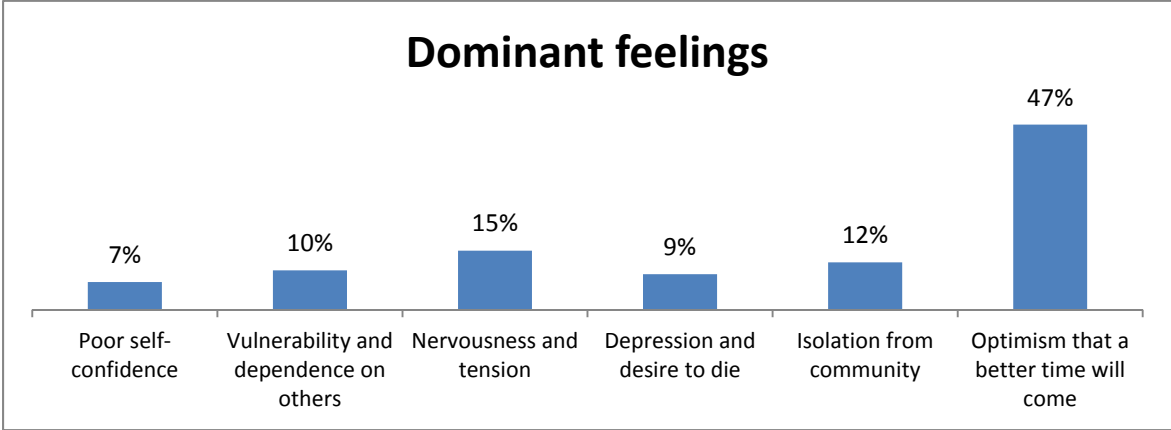
The way widows believe they are perceived can indicate how confident they are, which reflects how secure they are. When asked “how does the community look at you?” 34 percent said they believe that the community looks at them with compassion and a wish to support them. Four percent however, said they believe the community considers them “easily exposed to sin,” and three percent believe they are easy targets for crime. Seven percent believe that the community considers them weak and unable to shoulder their responsibilities, while four percent believe that the community considers them controlled by their families (i.e. unable to manage their circumstances on their own).



When asked “how do you see yourself?” more than half (53 percent) of the widows said they consider themselves as “women who believe in destiny,” in contrast to 17 percent who consider themselves able to assume responsibility for the direction of their lives. Eight percent think they are weak and vulnerable, while seven percent consider themselves subject to customs and traditions. Only one percent of the widows surveyed consider themselves as women who are able to remarry and start their lives again.



The assessment team asked the widows what their dominant feelings or thoughts were. About half (47 percent) of those surveyed said they felt optimistic that a better situation will develop.



Summary

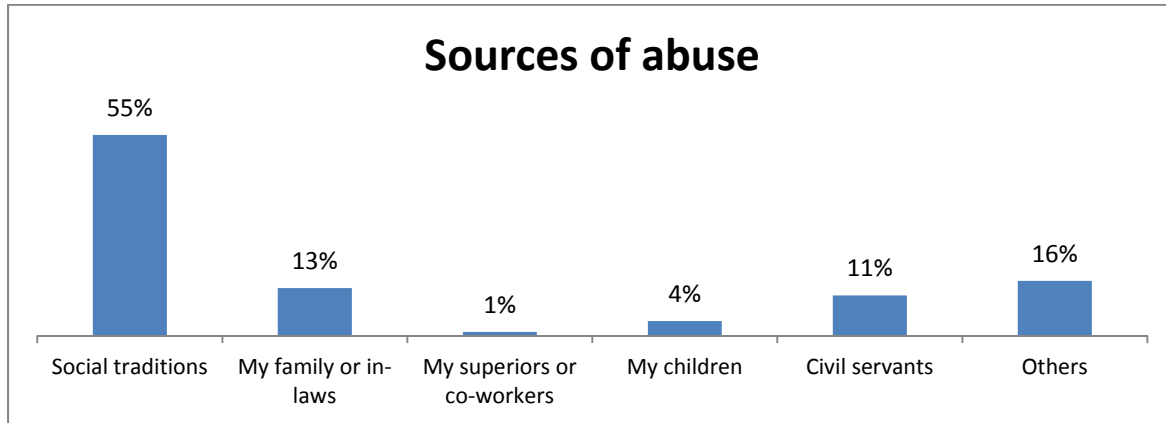
Widows often struggle with negative feelings about themselves and about their community. Yet despite often feeling that many of their struggles were beyond their control, almost half (47 percent) are able to keep a positive attitude and feel optimistic of better times to come.



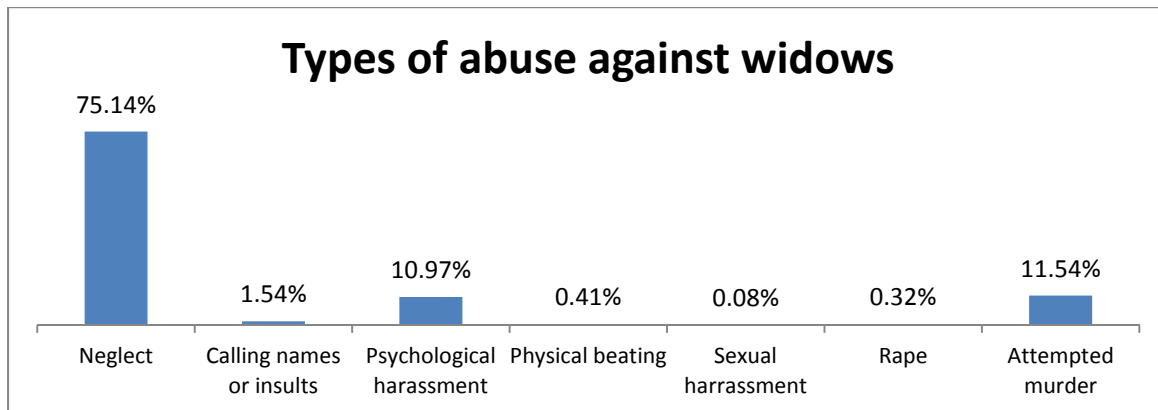
Two widows trained in dressmaking at RI's seamstress course display their handiwork.

Section Eight: Abuse against widows

Many widows faced what they described as “abuse” in the form of threats, physical violence or social attitudes that keep them invisible.



Abuse that was reported among widows took many forms, but the most prevalent was neglect (75.14 percent). Limitations on movement or freedom represented another form of abuse for 11.54 percent of respondents. Many suffered from harassment, insults and in some cases, attempted murder by the armed militias or other parties. It is possible that the survey data does not reflect the total picture of abuse or violence, since embarrassment can prevent the respondent from telling the full truth.



Types of Abuse	The most abusive parties				
	Social tradition	My family or in-laws	Co-workers and bosses	My children	Public servants when visited
Neglect	11%	37%	12%	35%	29%
Calling names and insults	7%	21%	0%	21%	0%
Psychological harassment	9%	12%	31%	8%	0%
Physical Beating	18%	6%	0%	2%	0%
Sexual harassment	0%	1%	57%	0%	71%
Attempted murder	16%	2%	0%	0%	0%
Limiting freedom	39%	21%	0%	34%	0%

The table above correlates the types of abuse that widows suffered from, and the most abusive parties against them. Neglect was likely the fault of families, in-laws or children, while sexual harassment was conducted by co-workers, bosses, or public servants. Social traditions were also a factor in limitations on social freedom, as well as physical beating and neglect to some degree.

Conclusion

RI's assessment and survey of widows allows us to understand the complex and difficult situations that widows in Iraq face today. Having estimated the number of widows in Iraq at 1,593,457, or approximately 9.81 percent of the female population of Iraq, RI found that:

- Illiteracy, lack of housing, poverty, unemployment and insufficient wages, as well as wars, bombs and murder, has each afflicted this population in significant ways.
- Many widows live precariously, with insufficient means to provide for emergencies, and little ability to improve their situation through employment, since many lack skills or educational degrees.
- The children of widows face difficulty in achieving a high educational level.
- Many widows reported predominately negative feelings about their situation, such as nervousness, isolation, and vulnerability, although almost half felt that their futures would improve.
- Widows felt that they were ignored and neglected by their communities, government, and in some cases, by their children or families.
- Widows also felt threatened and have often faced physical violence at the hands of their in-laws.
- Remarkably, widows identified social traditions as a main force in perpetuating abuse against them, manifested in practices such as limiting their movement, permitting physical beating, or harassment.

The data gathered by RI's Justice and Protection Center (JPC) Assessment team provides a clear picture of the lack of empowerment of widows in Iraq today. Widows suffer directly from many of the economic and social problems facing Iraqi society, as a result of war and sectarian violence. The findings are useful in pointing out the many possible ways to help widows, their children and their communities, and will inform RI's activities going forward. Increased awareness of the situation of widows in Iraq should help to diffuse negative attention, and challenge the forces that limit widows' freedoms or promote their neglect.