



# Mapping Youth-Led Peacebuilding and Civic Engagement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

*September 2025*

People in Need (PIN) recognises that while the use of high-quality data is essential for the programming of development agencies, the workload of senior staff can make it a challenge for them to read through often lengthy publications. As a result, interesting reports are produced, but only a few professionals read them.

PIN's EXECUTIVE REPORT SERIES therefore focus on sharing PIN's research findings, best practices and practical recommendations in a brief, to-the-point and easy-to-read format. Implementing agencies, governments, and donors can then easily ensure that their programming decisions are based on reliable data and generated lessons, both contributing to the higher impact of their work.

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People in Need (PIN), as the lead organisation and Women Empowerment Organisation (WEO) as the implementing partner, are implementing the project "Pathways to Peace (P2P): A Capacity-Building Journey for Youth Peacebuilding Civic Actors in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq", funded by the European Union. This initiative seeks to enhance the capacities of youth-led civil society organisations (CSOs), whether established, grassroots, or informal groups, actively engaged in peacebuilding, social cohesion, and civic actions.

The Pathways to Peace (P2P) project aims to strengthen youth-led initiatives by providing comprehensive training, mentorship, and networking opportunities. Through this initiative, selected organisations will enhance their skills to implement sustainable peacebuilding interventions and establish strong networks within their communities and beyond. Upon successful completion of the tailored training program, selected participants will be eligible to apply for project financial support, provided they meet the established criteria.

# 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

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## Background:

As part of the inception phase of the "Pathways to Peace (P2P)" project, funded by the European Union, People in Need (PIN) as the lead organization and Women Empowerment Organization (WEO) as the implementing partner conducted a mapping and barrier analysis. This aimed to better understand the civic and peacebuilding landscape in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). This research was designed to inform the project's design and ensure its relevance and responsiveness to the needs of youth and women-led civil society organizations (CSOs), including grassroots, informal groups, and established CSOs.

This research supports the design of the Pathways to Peace (P2P) project by providing evidence on the needs and challenges of youth-led and women-led CSOs and informal groups in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The findings will help shape the project's capacity-building activities, women leadership program, and sub-granting scheme, ensuring they respond to local priorities. The research will also guide the project's outreach and communication efforts to promote inclusive, youth-led, and responsive peacebuilding throughout the 30-month implementation period.

## Objectives of the Research:

The main objectives of the research were to:

- Identify innovative and effective peacebuilding approaches used by youth-led civil society organizations and informal groups;
- Understand barriers and enabling factors for young women's leadership and participation in civic spaces;
- Challenges and opportunities for grassroots youth CSOs and informal youth groups to engage in civic initiatives in KRI and in Iraq
- Explore how regional, social and culture, ethnic, and political dynamics influence youth engagement in peacebuilding;
- Examine existing collaboration and networking mechanisms among youth CSOs and their engagement with other actors.

The research was designed to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and capacities of youth and women-led initiatives operating in diverse contexts across the governorates of Erbil, Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, and Halabja. The approach integrates a strong sex-inclusion lens in line with PIN's Protection, Equality and Social Inclusion (ESI) framework. The findings and analysis outlined in this report are grounded in primary data collected through key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and desk reviews with a broad range of stakeholders including young women and men, informal groups, grassroots and established CSOs, International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO), and young leaders.

This report serves as a foundation for informed action and aims to ensure that the voices and priorities of youth, especially young women, shape the peacebuilding agenda across KRI.

# 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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## Questionnaires Development and Pilot Testing

The research tools, including key informant interview guides, and focus group discussions guides, were developed based on key focus areas such as youth-inclusive peacebuilding, youth-led CSOs, and collaboration strategies. Tools were tailored to different stakeholder groups (Local and International Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), small and grassroots Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Informal Groups, youth leaders, young women, young men, and practitioners). Semi-structured interview formats were used, allowing for flexibility and follow-up questions.

Each tool was tested during the first round of interviews. Interviewers assessed the clarity, flow, time required, and whether questions led to the desired information. Based on pilot results, some questions were adjusted, added, or removed. For Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), the questions were derived from initial KII findings and focused on validating or deepening understanding of identified trends.



## **Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used to ensure inclusion of relevant stakeholder groups across the four governorates: Erbil, Duhok, Halabja, and Sulaymaniyah. Stakeholders included INGOs, established NGOs, small and grassroots youth CSOs, informal youth groups, youth leaders (women and men), and practitioners. Each Focus Group Discussion (FGD) consisted of 4 to 6 participants.

The assessment utilized a mixed-methods approach to gather a comprehensive understanding of the context in KRI. We conducted a total of 27 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): 11 with established non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international NGOs (INGOs), and 14 with informal groups and grassroots civil society organizations (CSOs). Additionally, we conducted two KIIs with a practitioner and a young leader. To gain deeper insights, we held a total of eight Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): three with young leaders, three with young women, and two with young men.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The process began with a desk review of secondary sources, including reports and academic publications to provide contextual background and identify existing models and power dynamics. This was followed by KIIs using semi-structured guides tailored to each stakeholder group. FGDs were then carried out to validate and expand on the findings from KIIs, with discussions held separately by sex and group type to create a safe and inclusive environment and allow for open discussion. The discussions explored barriers, motivations, and tested strategies for participation including youth, and both men and women. Additionally, stakeholder mapping helped visualize existing collaborations, power structures, and opportunities for synergy.

The KIIs provided initial insights into local peacebuilding dynamics, which were then validated and deepened through FGDs. These discussions, conducted separately by group type to ensure a safe environment, explored barriers, motivations, and tested strategies for youth participation. This approach ensured a comprehensive and nuanced analysis that directly informs project design. To analyse the qualitative data, all responses from KIIs and FGDs were organised into an Excel sheet. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes, common experiences, and contrasting perspectives among different stakeholder groups. Each row captured key quotes or summaries per question, and columns were used to categorize stakeholder type, location, sex, and emerging themes.

This method allowed for a systematic comparison across groups and regions. Patterns and frequently mentioned points were highlighted to determine key findings and trends. Regional analysis was applied throughout to reflect the sociocultural and political differences across Erbil, Duhok, Halabja, and Sulaymaniyah, identifying region-specific dynamics that influence youth engagement in peacebuilding.

## **Limitations and Lessons Learnt:**

- Small sample size for KIIs may not fully capture the diversity of views but provide deep insight.
- Potential for conflicting or diverse information from KIIs, which was addressed through follow-up FGDs.
- The importance of contextualizing tools based on local sociocultural and political dynamics was a key lesson, particularly when addressing sensitive topics such as peacebuilding and women participation.

### 3. Secondary Data

Youth and women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are central to any vision of sustainable peace, yet their participation in peacebuilding efforts remains limited. Although young people make up a significant portion of the population, many feel excluded from formal processes and public decision-making. Their potential to contribute meaningfully is often overlooked, despite clear interest and motivation to be involved.

Many young people describe peace as the absence of violence, injustice, or discrimination. However, their understanding of peacebuilding as a structured and long-term process is limited. When the term is recognized, it is often linked to NGO activities such as training, workshops, and community services. For some, peacebuilding is seen as a pathway to reconciliation, social recovery, and the creation of opportunities, particularly for youth. Young women in particular connect peacebuilding with the possibility of claiming their rights and finding space in politics and public life. Yet, cultural perceptions often frame peacebuilding as a male domain, limiting women's visibility and influence.

Barriers to youth and women's participation are numerous and complex. Many young people say they do not have enough space or opportunity to engage in peacebuilding activities. They cite nepotism, repeated selection of the same individuals for NGO programs, and lack of support from organizers. Young women face even steeper challenges. Patriarchal norms, lack of family approval, and limited personal freedom restrict their ability to participate. Many express the desire to lead, but internal and external pressures make it difficult to act on that potential. Some women noted they are not even free inside their own homes, raising doubts about how they can be free outside.

Generational gaps also present a serious challenge. Elders continue to dominate public and institutional spaces, often dismissing youth perspectives.

This lack of intergenerational understanding discourages young people from stepping forward or believing that their voices will be heard. When combined with rising unemployment, political disillusionment, and weak educational systems, the result is a sense of frustration that pushes some youth toward alternative forms of engagement, including activism through social media or, in some cases, alignment with armed groups seeking recognition and purpose.

Despite these challenges, youth and women have not been passive. As highlighted in the desk review, they have long played a role in Kurdish movements and continue to engage through civil society today. Several organizations actively support this engagement. For example, Rasan has implemented community-based initiatives such as the "Art for All" campaign, which involved painting public murals to foster dialogue and promote social cohesion among youth. The National Organization of Kurdish Youth (NOKY) works through structured bodies like the Public Relations Office, which builds ties with governmental and civil institutions, and the Civil Office, which focuses on human rights education, nonviolence, and youth empowerment through seminars and workshops. Justice Call supports youth-led peacebuilding through the TECH4YPS initiative, which uses technology to engage youth in peace processes and conflict resolution, and through the MENA Coalition on Youth, Peace, and Security, a regional platform connecting youth-led organizations to foster meaningful participation in peacebuilding. These initiatives, as documented in the reviewed literature, reflect a growing effort to expand peacebuilding spaces and make them more inclusive.

True and lasting peace in the Kurdistan Region depends on intentionally including youth and women in its design and implementation. This means creating transparent, accessible, and supportive opportunities for them to lead, contribute, and shape the processes that affect their lives. Their ideas, experiences, and ambitions are not just relevant to peacebuilding, they are essential to achieving real and lasting peace.

## 4. RESULTS

### Finding:

4.1

*Youth play a critical role in fostering peace and social cohesion across ethnic, religious, and political divides in the Kurdistan Region (KRI), despite operating in a context of political uncertainty, intergroup tension, and restricted civic space.*

#### DETERMINANTS:

##### Diversity-Sensitive Programming Barrier/Need:

Youth programs must move beyond skill training to foster inclusive, diverse engagement. Combining peacebuilding with livelihoods, and using arts, culture, and sports, builds empathy and mutual understanding across Yazidi, Christian, Muslim, and other groups.

#### BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

- Youth demand not just skills, but inclusive environments that connect different ethnic and religious groups. P2P bridges this by combining technical training with dialogue-based activities and by funding initiatives that merge peacebuilding with livelihoods, arts, and culture.
- Motivation is sustained when youth lead decisions and see concrete results. P2P builds this ownership by letting CSOs define their own Strategic Action Plans, involving youth in grant-making bodies, and financing advocacy campaigns that they design themselves.

#### P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.4 Training modules on inclusive peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity.
- A1.6 Sub-grants for grassroots/established CSOs to pilot livelihood-linked or art/culture-based peace initiatives.
- A2.1 Networking events that intentionally bring diverse groups together.

## DETERMINANTS:

### Youth Ownership and Decision-Making

Barrier/Need: Youth remain motivated when they see tangible results, have leadership roles, and are part of decision-making, not symbolic participants.

## BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→ Giving youth or women leadership roles empowers them, builds responsibility, and creates tailored approaches that resonate with their realities. This also enhances the credibility and sustainability of initiatives.

## P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.2 OCAT and Strategic Action Plans developed with CSOs to set their own priorities.
- A1.5 Women's Leadership Program to elevate young women's decision-making.
- A2.3 Advocacy sub-grants for youth-led campaigns.
- Youth participation in the Project Steering Committee and Women's Advisory Board.

### Safe and Creative Spaces for Expression

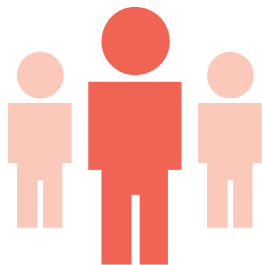
Barrier/Need: Youth, especially women, require safe environments to share ideas, challenge norms, and use creative platforms (social media, art, sports) for peacebuilding.

## BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→ Young women and men need safe platforms to express ideas and challenge norms. P2P enables this by creating social-sensitive spaces in training and leadership programs, while sub-grants fund creative peace projects that use art, sport, or social media as safe outlets.  
→ Exclusion is stronger in rural, minority, and conservative contexts. P2P addresses this by reducing entry barriers for grassroots groups, tailoring training on dialogue and conflict sensitivity, and deliberately creating cross-community and cross-governorate spaces for cooperation.

## P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.5 Women's Leadership Program with safe-space methodology.
- A1.6 Sub-grants supporting art, culture, or sport-based peacebuilding.
- A2.4 Regional exchanges to expand platforms for expression and learning.



## Regional and Ethnic Dynamics in Youth Peacebuilding

Barrier/Need: Youth remain motivated when they see tangible results, have leadership roles, and are part of decision-making, not symbolic participants.

### P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.3 Start-up grants to reduce barriers for grassroots groups in rural/remote areas.
- A1.4 Trainings on conflict sensitivity and intergroup dialogue.
- A2.1 Cross-governorate networking and A2.2 network grant to strengthen collaboration across divides.

## Youth Perceptions of Civic Engagement and Social Cohesion

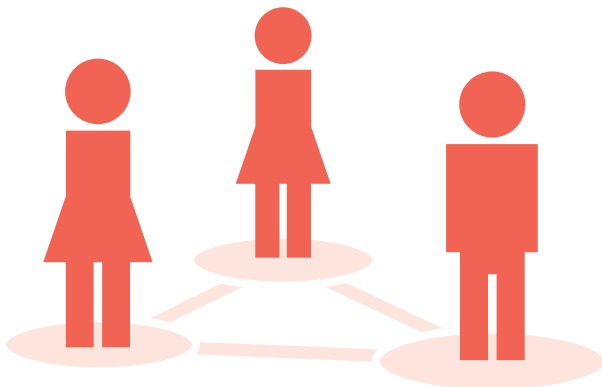
Barrier/Need: Youth see civic engagement as essential but lack resources and institutional support. They rely on voluntary work, social media, and local networks.

### BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→ **P2P** empowers KRI youth to move from voluntary community engagement to sustained civic leadership. The program provides the necessary resources and structure they currently lack. Participants will co-design action plans, receive training and funding, and use networking platforms to ensure their voices are heard by decision-makers.

### P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.4 Trainings on advocacy, project design, and civic participation.
- A1.6 Sub-grants for youth-led civic projects.
- A2.3 Advocacy sub-grants to institutionalize youth voices in decision-making.
- Participatory MEAL system to validate youth contributions and learning.





## Finding:

### 4.2

Young women across the KRI face rooted barriers in peacebuilding, but youth-led CSOs are helping shift their roles from passive participants to active changemakers through safe spaces, leadership programs, and inclusive outreach. While many organizations still lack formal social policies, these tailored and socially responsive strategies foster women's participation. Engagement of young men remains mixed and highlights the need for stronger frameworks and broader male allyship in peacebuilding.

#### DETERMINANTS:

##### Rooted Barriers to Women's Participation in Peacebuilding:

Barrier/Need: Cultural norms, safety concerns, weak protections, and lack of safe spaces limit women's ability to engage meaningfully in peacebuilding. Low confidence, stigma, and absence of mentors further restrict leadership opportunities.

#### BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→ P2P responds by building women-only safe spaces, integrating social sensitive training across all modules, and offering a dedicated women's leadership program. The program also provides logistical and financial support (transport, start-up grants) to reduce structural barriers, while mentorship and advocacy components address the lack of role models and pathways into decision-making.

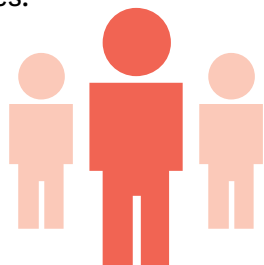
#### P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.5 Women's Leadership Program.
- A1.4 Safe-space approaches in training.
- A1.3 Start-up grants for grassroots CSOs.
- A1.4/A1.5 Mentorship.
- A2.3 Advocacy sub-grants

## DETERMINANTS:

### Youth-led CSOs as Catalysts for Women's Empowerment

Barrier/Need: Despite barriers, youth-led CSOs are already mobilising women through local initiatives, training, and dialogue, but they lack consistent resources, recognition, and sustainability to scale their impact. symbolic participants.



## BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→ **P2P** strengthens this catalytic role by pairing CSO-driven initiatives with sub-grants, linking them to regional and cross-governorate networks, and embedding balanced participation into organisational capacity building. This ensures that women's empowerment is not ad hoc but institutionalised within youth-led structures.

## P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.6 Sub-grants for peacebuilding initiatives.
- A1.2 OCAT and Strategic Action Plans with female focus.
- A2.1 Cross-governorate networking events
- A2.4 Regional linkages.

### Lack of Mentorship and Role Models

Barrier/Need: Youth CSOs report a lack of experienced mentors and visible role models, especially for women. The absence of structured mentorship discourages young peacebuilders and limits learning opportunities.

## BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→ **P2P** addresses this gap by integrating mentorship into all training and organisational support activities, ensuring each CSO receives tailored guidance. Special attention is given to women mentees by engaging female mentors and role models where possible, creating pathways for sustained leadership growth.

## P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.4, A1.5 Mentorship embedded in training and follow-up.
- A1.2 Assignment of mentors during Strategic Action Plans.

## Mixed Male Engagement and the Need for Stronger Allyship

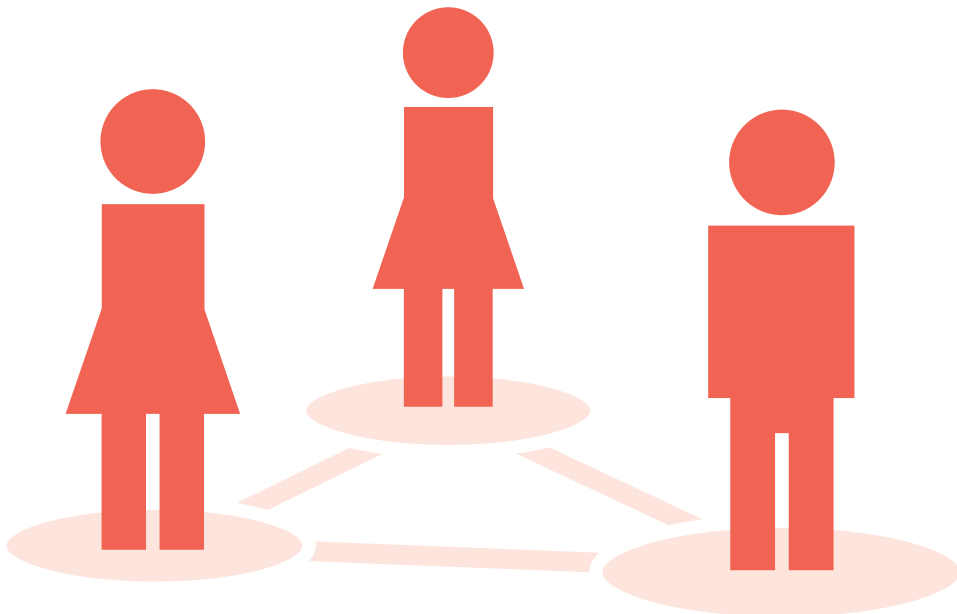
Barrier/Need: Male engagement in supporting women's leadership is inconsistent. Without stronger allyship, women remain in supportive rather than leading roles, and cultural norms go unchallenged.

### BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→P2P promotes male allyship by embedding sensitivity in all training, involving men in women's leadership sessions where appropriate, and funding initiatives that encourage joint participation of young men and women. Advocacy grants and networking events further create opportunities for men to actively support women's roles in peacebuilding.

### P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.4 Inclusive training modules.
- A1.6 Joint youth-led sub-grants promoting men/women balance.
- A1.5 Women's leadership program with male engagement elements.
- A2.3 Advocacy campaigns.



## Finding:

### 4.3 *Grassroots youth CSOs and informal groups face financial, technical, and structural challenges, but their rootedness in community needs and creativity offers strong potential for civic impact and social change.*

#### DETERMINANTS:

##### Funding and Infrastructure Deficits

Barrier/Need: Grassroots youth CSOs lack core funding, office space, and basic resources, making it hard to sustain activities or retain members.

#### BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→ **P2P** eases these constraints by offering start-up grants for essential costs, sub-grants for initiatives, and mentorship on financial management, helping groups become more sustainable and visible.

#### P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.3 Start-up grants.
- A1.6 Peacebuilding sub-grants.
- A1.4 Financial management training.
- A1.4/A1.5 Mentorship.

##### Skills Gaps in Management and Advocacy

Barrier/Need: Many groups lack expertise in project management, proposal writing, fundraising, and digital skills, which limits growth and access to donors.

#### BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→ **P2P** strengthens these skills by tailoring training modules to grassroots realities, pairing technical learning with mentorship, and providing practical opportunities to apply skills through sub-grants and advocacy initiatives.

#### P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.4 Training modules on governance, project management, advocacy, and digital skills.
- A1.4/A1.5 Mentorship follow-up.
- A2.3 Advocacy sub-grants.

## DETERMINANTS:

### Trust and Community Legitimacy

Barrier/Need: Informal youth groups enjoy strong community trust and credibility due to their grassroots presence, but this legitimacy is underutilised in larger peacebuilding networks.

## BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→ **P2P** leverages this trust by linking grassroots groups to wider networks, enabling them to share good practices and scale impact while preserving their local credibility.

## P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A2.1 Cross-governorate networking.
- A2.2 Network sub-grant to strengthen coordination.
- A2.4 Regional exchanges.

### Lack of Legal Recognition

Barrier/Need: Without legal registration, informal groups cannot access many donor funds or partnerships, limiting their reach despite active community work.

## BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→ **P2P** addresses this by offering start-up grants to reduce structural barriers, building organisational capacity through OCAT and tailored training, and advocating for more flexible partnership models that include informal groups.

## P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.2 OCAT and Strategic Action Plans.
- A1.3 Start-up grants.
- A1.4 Organisational governance training.
- A2.3, A2.2 Advocacy/networking for policy inclusion.





## High Motivation but Limited Pathways

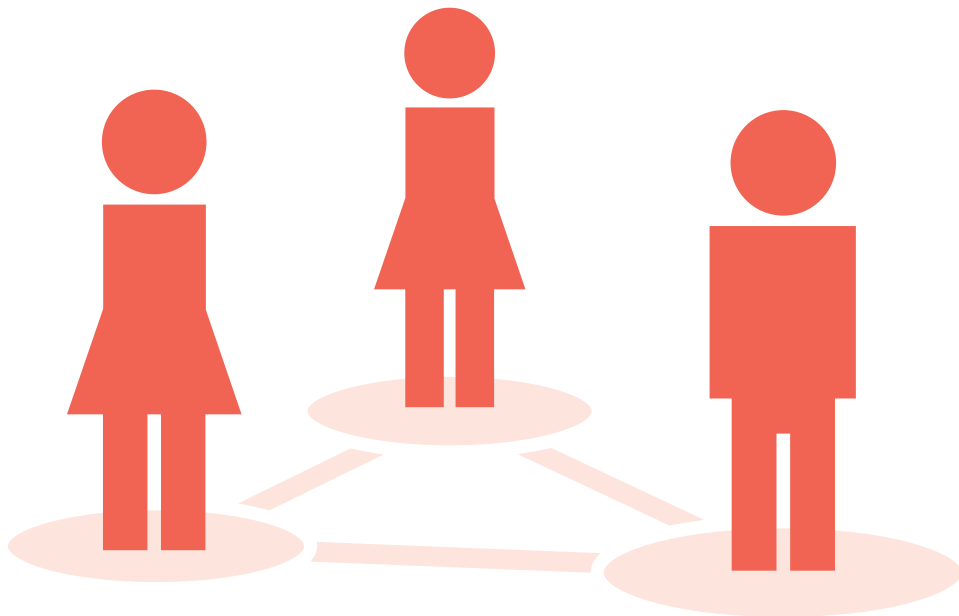
Barrier/Need: Youth groups show strong motivation and creativity but often lack opportunities to scale their initiatives or sustain engagement beyond short-term volunteering.

### BRIDGES TO ACTIVITIES:

→ P2P channels this motivation into structured pathways by providing sub-grants, mentorship, and advocacy opportunities, allowing groups to test, refine, and expand their initiatives into longer-term civic engagement.

### P2P ACTIVITIES:

- A1.6 Peacebuilding sub-grants.
- A1.4/A1.5 Mentorship embedded in implementation.
- A2.3 Advocacy sub-grants.



## REFLECTION

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The mapping exercise brought up several important findings, which are on continuous basis informing the design and implementation of the Pathways to Peace project.

Youth are driven to participate in peacebuilding by **a desire for positive change and a sense of responsibility to their communities**. Their motivation is fuelled by opportunities to gain leadership skills and knowledge, and to contribute to meaningful, long-term outcomes. This engagement is **sustained when they have genuine ownership** and are active in decision-making, rather than being given only symbolic roles. Financial stability, skill development, and seeing the tangible results of their efforts are also crucial for maintaining their commitment despite challenges.

Youth emphasized that safe and supportive environments, such as **community initiatives and grassroots activism platforms, allow women to express themselves, share ideas, and lead change**. Such spaces allow diverse groups to share experiences, foster inclusivity, and bridge divides. For young women, they provide a supportive environment free from judgment, enabling leadership and participation in civic initiatives. Social media, awareness campaigns, and community outreach also serve as creative platforms for expression. These spaces empower youth to voice ideas, challenge norms, and contribute meaningfully to peace and social cohesion.

Societal norms and family resistance are the primary barriers to young women's participation in peacebuilding across Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah. While urban areas generally offer more opportunities due to a higher concentration of civil society activities, **conservative cultural expectations in all three governorates restrict young women's engagement in public and leadership roles**. Young women in rural areas and from certain ethnic or religious minorities, face compounded challenges due to stronger traditional norms and discriminatory attitudes. Youth peacebuilding in KRI is shaped by **regional and ethnic dynamics**. Collaboration across communities strengthens dialogue and social cohesion. However, historical grievances, mistrust, and uneven access to resources sometimes limit engagement.

Youth in KRI view civic engagement and social cohesion as essential for positive change; they feel empowered by training and meaningful participation, yet face barriers like limited resources, family resistance, and norms. Despite uneven institutional support, they leverage community networks and digital platforms to overcome challenges, driven by a genuine desire to improve their neighbourhoods, foster dialogue across divides, and strengthen communal bonds.

# Mapping Youth-Led Peacebuilding and Civic Engagement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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