

Organizations, media collaborate to empower storytelling in Kurdistan

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Erbil. Photo: Rudaw/file

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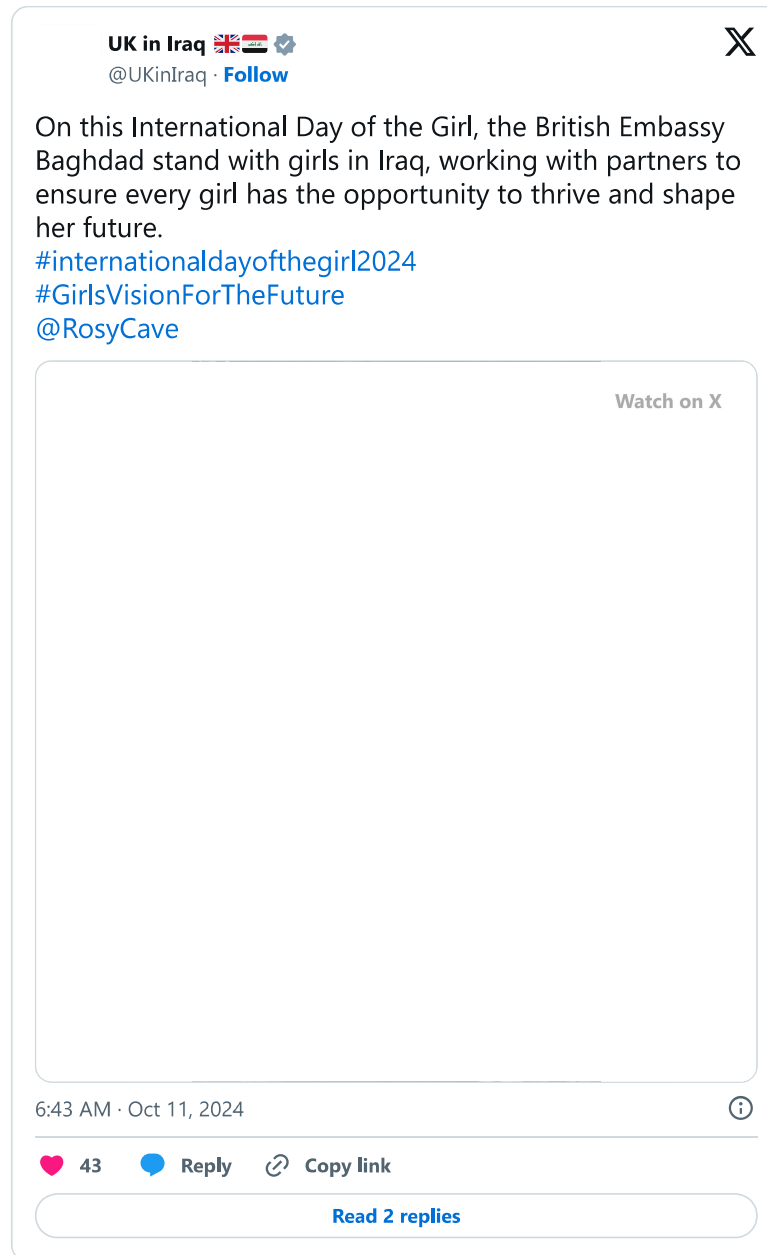
ERBIL, Kurdistan Region - Friday marked International Day of the Girl, an opportunity highlight and support initiatives to empower girls and women in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

"Girls are demanding that their voices be heard. It is high time we listened," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement, stressing the limitless potential of the world's more than 1.1 billion girls. The United Nations began observing October 11 for girls in 2011.

Globally, girls face unique challenges every day and are disproportionately disadvantaged by child marriage, sexual and physical abuse,

and in education and training opportunities, the UN highlighted.

The British Embassy in Baghdad said they “stand with girls in Iraq, working with partners to ensure every girl has the opportunity to thrive and shape her future.”



Amnesty International on Thursday [called on](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/10/iraq-reject-changes-to-personal-status-law-which-would-allow-child-marriage-and-further-entrench-discrimination/#:~:text=Iraqi%20lawmakers%20must%20drop%20amendments,parliamentary%20vote%20on%20the%20changes.) Iraqi lawmakers to drop proposed changes to its personal status law that could allow girls as young as nine years old to legally marry, “stripping women and girls of protections regarding divorce and inheritance.”

For more than a generation, the country has been exposed to cycles of violence, conflict, and political change - stories told by journalists and media practitioners which have included sensitive narratives ranging from domestic and gender-based violence (GBV) to genocide.

“Ethical reporting on GBV is crucial in both raising awareness and preventing further harm,” Tanya Gilly Khailany, the Vice-President and Co-Founder of SEED Foundation a women-led, local NGO in the Kurdistan Region, told Rudaw English. “At SEED, our goal is to foster more informed, respectful, and safe coverage that not only protects survivors but also reduces violence with society and promotes positive growth.”

With social media, journalists and media workers are able to report stories more quickly; however, SEED stressed the importance of "ethical" and "culturally responsive" reporting, especially when interviewing and sharing GBV survivors' stories.

Recent media training and initiatives supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have sought to provide media practitioners with the skills and tools to provide dignified, survivor-centered coverage for stories involving GBV and other topics.

The initiatives are "in response to rising cases of GBV, femicide, and 'honor' killing in Iraq and the KRI and the critical and growing need to address a lack of ethical treatment and accountable representation of women and survivors of GBV in the media," SEED told Rudaw English.

SEED and the US-based Journalism Initiative on GBV (JiG) **partnered** (<https://www.seedkurdistan.org/pocket-guide-for-media-practitioners/>) over the past year to refine JiG's "Silence and Omissions: A Media Guide For Covering Gender-Based Violence" as a pocket book.

The guide has been adapted to the Kurdistan context; some 38 media practitioners from 22 outlets, including Rudaw, were consulted in Erbil and Sulaimani in localization efforts prior to its launch last month.

"Indirectly, we hope this tool will benefit Kurdistan, and particularly women and children, who are at increased risk of violence," SEED detailed. "Media, by helping prevent dangerous and stigmatizing coverage that may negatively impact public opinion, leading to dangerous rhetoric within the community, or encouraging further violence against women."

Cathy Otten, **JiG's director** (<https://gbvjjournalism.org/book/introduction>), is a journalist and visiting assistant professor of media ethics and journalism at Rutgers University in the United States.

"We hope to spread the message further and reach more journalists in Kurdish and Arabic, too. Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq have fantastic, lively, intelligent journalists and media scenes so this will only add to the knowledge already there," Otten told Rudaw English.

Otten's award-winning writing in 2018 on the Yazidi genocide has been commended for her ability to humanize such grim topics.

"When I was reporting on the Yazidi enslavement and massacres, I tried to educate myself on trauma-informed interviewing because I was worried about making mistakes and causing further harm," Otten said.

When considering whether to publish a story or how to tell a narrative, media practitioners are taught to weigh the potential benefits versus risks.

"Journalists need to weigh up why they are covering a certain story, is it worth the potential risks to the survivors, and what precautions can they take to ensure the safety of those they're working with," Otten said. "Journalists also need to think about the safety of drivers, translators, fixers, and others involved in the news-making process."

Sahira Sedeeq is Rudaw's Digital Media Technical Officer and has worked as a participant and trainer on programs supported by NGOs and the UN.

She has worked for more than eight years in media in the Kurdistan Region, covering a range of stories about survivors of the Islamic State (ISIS), internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, and survivors of GBV. Sedeeq has leveraged that experience to help train journalists and others in the media on ethical reporting methods which emphasize the protection of survivors, reporters, and other media workers.

"We emphasize that people should use social media platforms in the right way, to respect others property and protect themselves from fakes and deep fakes," she told Rudaw English, referring the use of the manipulation of photos, videos, or even entire profiles and accounts which can be used for identity theft, blackmail, or other nefarious purposes.



Through her interaction journalists and media workers in such programs, Sedeeq is able to share her experiences with colleagues. "I appreciate the trust Rudaw has in me to do my work in a professional and ethical way in Kurdistan. In this way, we are making Kurdistan a safer and more open place for media where sensitive stories can be told and shared with our audiences."

The UN Population Fund **launched** (<https://iraq.unfpa.org/en/news/unfpa-and-rudaw-media-network-launch-pioneering-programme-empower-women-media>) a year-long 'Basics of Journalism' in collaboration with Rudaw last December.

"The collective goal is to amplify women's voices and actively address crucial issues pertaining to women in the media," the UNFPA said in a press release. "This alliance stands as a testament to the power of diverse sectors working in harmony for positive social change."

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