From the 8th to 12th of March, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), in partnership with the UN, NGOs and local governments, marked International Women’s Day by holding events across Iraq.

Festivities held in Basra, Missan and Thi Qar in the South, Darashakran and Basirma camps in the North, and Baghdad celebrated the intrinsic role of women by showcasing their economic achievements and strengthening their positions in society.

Women and men from all walks of life participated in the events, from Syrian refugees, IOM beneficiaries and academic professors to members of the Iraqi parliament. Some of the participants and honourees had taken part in IOM’s various livelihood programmes, through which they had become social and economic pillars in their communities.

Displays of art, music and dancing at the events expressed the talent, creativity and resilience of the women who have braved and continue to brave hardship in their daily lives.

IOM marked International Women’s Day by celebrating the variety of ways in which these women inspire change in their societies.
Honouring the Creativity of Women:
International Women’s Day Celebration in Basra

On 11th March, the central IOM Iraq celebrations in Basra honoured the strength of women through art and fashion at the College of Fine Arts of the University of Basra. Senior government officials and representatives of the diplomatic core in Basra, as well as UN and NGO officials, attended the event.

“We must not only honour the strength and resilience of women across the globe, but also use this day as a reminder that gender inequalities still exist,” Michael Pillinger, Chief of the IOM Iraq Mission, said in his speech at the event. “Here in Iraq, like in many other post-war societies, women and girls in general are particularly vulnerable,” he added.

Quoting the 8th March message of IOM Director General, William Lacy Swing, Pillinger said that 111 million migrants around the world are women, some of which might be vulnerable to exclusion, poverty, ill-health, exploitation and violence. “As long as the needs of such a large and often vulnerable group go overlooked, we cannot truly fulfill our commitment to gender equality,” Pillinger said.

“We must not only honour the strength and resilience of women across the globe, but also use this day as a reminder that gender inequalities still exist.”

Hanadi Majeed and Shoonam Mohamed, CRP-III PA and RART PA from IOM Basra
Pillinger and Ferdinand Paredes, head of IOM Basra Hub, were joined in the celebration by U.S. Acting Consul General in Basra, Jason Cubas, as well as the Egyptian Consul General, members of the Iraqi parliament, members of the Basra Community Policing and the Basra Governor’s office, as well as representatives of UNHCR, UNICEF and NGOs.

The celebration of women’s creativity was kicked off with a fashion show representing the women throughout Iraq’s versatile civilisations, from Babylonian and Assyrian to Sheherezade and Shehrayare. The Noon Group presented the vibrant costumes, displaying the strength of women throughout the ages.
"Today, on International Women’s Day, we also commemorate and celebrate the birthday of Sayedah Zainab Bint Ali, one of the greatest female role models in the Islamic Arabic world," said Amta’r al Mayahi, Head of Woman and Child committee of the Basra Provincial Council, in her speech. She highlighted the faith, patience and pride of the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, expressing the importance of celebrating the virtues of women in society.

In his speech, Jason Cubas, U.S. Acting Consul General in Basra, emphasised the need to eliminate gender discrimination in the work environment and to grant women their full rights in education and decision-making.

Twenty-three creativity plaques were awarded to individuals to celebrate their accomplishments and struggle to further women’s rights. The recipients were academic professors, government employees, activists and women who are the sole breadwinners of their families.

As part of the event, attendees viewed handmade items such as clothes made by Iraqi women of vulnerable groups who are members of the women’s society Shumoos Women Centre. A gallery of paintings and pottery produced by students of the College of Fine Arts at Basra University was also on display. The works expressed the struggle for women’s rights and their fight to overcome barriers and assume their rightful role in society.

The complimentary role of women and men in building and developing society was the central theme of the day. Both the speeches of Dr. Abdullah Salem Abdulla, Dean of the College of Fine Arts, and Colonel Luay Abdel Ammer, Head of the Basra Community Policing Department, expressed the importance of enabling women to reach their potential in taking up a complimentary role to men in society.

“In looking towards the future and determining what still needs to be done to combat injustice, we must remember that our discussion about gender inequalities does not only mean women," Michael Pillinger said. “We need both men and women to join together and work as a productive whole.”
Dressed in brightly coloured traditional Kurdish garments, sequins and fabrics glistening in the sun, Syrian refugee women and children gathered with IOM staff, members of the Provincial Council of Erbil, and representatives from UNHCR, UNICEF, and local NGOs in Darashakran camp in the Kurdish region of Iraq on 8th March, where one of the main celebrations of International Women’s Day took place.

“International Women’s Day remains meaningful in that we take time out to highlight the importance of the contributions of women in families and communities,” Alvina Samjawon, Programme Manager for Hijra Amina at IOM Iraq, said at the opening of the festivities.

“We want to make women proud of what they do and the work they create,” Jinan Omar, IOM Iraq’s Livelihood National Officer, said.

As part of the celebration in Darashakran, twelve women from the camp received gifts from IOM and members of the Provincial Council of Erbil in recognition of their personal achievements. Some are vital pillars of their community, others are the sole bread-
winners for their families – and all have shown remarkable strength in the face of trying times.

“I am so happy to receive this gift. I know it will make my life here easier,” Ghazalia Ibrahim said, clutching her unopened present. The 99-year-old is the oldest woman in the camp. With an unbroken spirit, she left her home in Qamishli, Syria, to seek medical treatment in the Kurdish region of Iraq.

“As soon as I recover, I want to go back to the rest of my family in Syria,” she said with vigour.

Another recipient was 31-year-old Manal, who is the sole breadwinner for her family. She is a beneficiary of IOM’s Business Development Service (BDS), a three-day training that will help her develop vital business skills to sustain herself and her family.

With her husband struggling to find steady work, IOM is supporting Manal in opening up her own grocery store in the camp so that she can support her family.

“Thanks to IOM, I have completely new ideas on what I am capable of and I now have a new hope for the future,” Manal said.

The BDS is a pillar of IOM’s Livelihood Programme, which helps Syrians in all refugee camps throughout the Kurdish region of Iraq gain access to rewarding employment and regular income.
“The 8th of March is a holy day,” said Jamsheer Basheer Nooruldeen, member of the Provincial Council of Erbil. “We want to continue to support women in the camps, and we are grateful for all of IOM’s help.”

The International Women’s Day event also celebrated the achievements of the camp’s youth. Ten children from UNICEF-run schools in the camp participated in the event by singing traditional songs, and later received gifts from IOM such as pens and pencil cases.

Expressing the importance of women’s role through art, the 8th March celebrations in Darashakran camp displayed paintings by eleven young artists from within the camp.

“My painting symbolises my love for my child, the
connection I have with him and the hope I have for his future,” Kulistan said about her piece as she stood next to it proudly.

The 19-year-old mother from al-Hasakah in Syria has been living in the camp for eight months. The difficulty of finding a job for her and her husband has taken a toll on her.

With dreams of becoming a painter, she was eager to work on something artistic and meaningful, taking her mind off her daily struggles and allowing her to convey her emotions.

“We found Syrians from the camp that displayed great talent in drawing and painting,” Jinan explains. “We wanted to encourage and support them in their craft and show them that they have a future.”

For two weeks, the artists – boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 19 – passionately worked on their canvases together with art teacher Adnan Naif, himself a refugee living in Darashakran camp. Using materials provided by IOM, ranging from paints and canvases to a makeshift ‘studio’, the young Syrian refugees were

“My painting symbolises my love for my child, the connection I have with him and the hope I have for his future.”

Kulistan, Artist and IOM beneficiary living in Darashakran Camp
able to develop their craft.

“[I] wanted to help them translate their experiences into art,” 69-year-old Adnan said. “I wanted to use my expertise to help them become better.”

Along with channelling their experiences into art, the earnings from the paintings also provided much-needed financial relief. Artists were able to sell their artwork to the event’s guests, taking the money back to their families.

“I took part mainly so that I could give the money to my mother,” 15-year-old Aya said. “Our parents work hard for us, so we need to give back to them, especially now.”

For Aya, painting has been a refuge from the difficult life in the camp. “Whenever I was frustrated or sad, I would take out a pen and draw,” she explained.

“Aya, Artist and resident of Darashakran Camp. The teenager from Derak, Syria, proudly declared that she had sold both her paintings. Her biggest piece, a drawing of a scale weighing a bomb against a dove representing peace, was indicative of her thoughts on the situation the Syrian conflict has put her family in.

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Covered in splashes of colour, the tent in which the artworks were displayed turned into a vibrant gallery, with artists and their families, IOM staff and volunteers, Erbil government officials and visitors viewing the art. By the end of the event, 14 of the 24 paintings displayed had been sold.
“I wanted to help them translate their experiences into art. I wanted to use my expertise to help them become better.”

Adnan Naif, Art teacher and IOM beneficiary living in Darashakran Camp
Across the green countryside in Basirma refugee camp, the power of women found its expression in dance and music. Together with the Barzani Charity Foundation and UNHCR, IOM organised a dance performance of young Syrian women from the camp as part of a large International Women’s Day celebration on 8th March.

Dressed in dazzling costumes provided by IOM, the dancers jumped to the front of the stage and performed both traditional dances as well as newer choreography in front of an eager audience.

“When I first started to train the girls, it was difficult because the girls weren’t very interested in learning the dances or listening to me,” said Palusheen, the dance instructor who also resides in Basirma camp.

“But once they started to settle into the camp and get more involved with the dances, they began to love it, and they are all very excited to perform today.”

Despite the hardship of fleeing Syria, the 23-year-old dance instructor from Qamishli found happiness teaching the girls.

“I have always loved dancing, so when I came here to Erbil, I wanted to continue,” said 15-year-old Aysal, who lives in Basirma camp. “When I was asked to take part in this dance organized by IOM, I jumped at the opportunity.”

The powerful dances of Basirma were a vibrant expression of the strength of women. Facing hardship in their daily lives, the Syrian refugee women who took part in the festivities showed through their creativity that they truly embody the theme of the day, ‘inspiring change.’

“Today is the day that gives thanks to women, here in Iraq and all over the world,” Alvina Samjawon said.
“Today is the day that gives thanks to women, here in Iraq and all over the world.”
Highlighting Women’s Key Role in Inspiring Change:

International Women’s Day Celebration in Baghdad

Under the banner of “Inspiration is the Key for Change”, IOM Iraq in Baghdad, in cooperation with the Ministry of Women, celebrated International Women’s Day on the 12th of March at a youth theatre in the capital.

“I ask society to pave a way for women to take up their rightful role and become an active part of society,” said Nadiya al-Rubaiey, Programme Assistant and BDS Trainer at IOM, in her speech at the event. “Women have a momentous role in the building of society and life and in achieving equality between men and women.”

The event brought together beneficiaries of IOM as well as government and NGO representatives, celebrating the strength and perseverance of women under one roof.

Representatives of the provincial committee, Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), Integrity Commission, local authorities, local institutes and NGOs, IOM’s Women Empowerment Groups (WEGs) and local councils as well as WHO and UNHCR agencies attended this event.

“Women have a momentous role in the building of society and life and in achieving equality between men and women.”
The celebration, which was kicked off by a lively performance of songs by children from the Kawthar al-Rahman Kindergarten, also showcased traditional music by a zither player from the Iraqi Institute of Fine Arts.

The creative spirit of the women of Baghdad was celebrated at a bazaar selling products made by beneficiaries of IOM’s vocational training. 15 paintings expressing the plight of women through the ages were also displayed, produced by artists from the Iraqi Institute of Fine Arts.

Looking to the future, the Advisor of the Head of the Baghdad Provincial Council (BPC) also promised IOM’s staff members to further support the livelihood of these women by encouraging and marketing their products. He assured that future events and celebrations of the Baghdad Provincial Council will order the cakes, pastries and banners from these IOM beneficiaries.

“I want to express my high admiration for the women of Iraq and my optimism for their future,” said Mahdiya al-Lami, the head of the Baghdad Provincial Council’s NGOs committee, in her remarks. Highlighting the honour and courage of the women of Iraq, she emphasised the importance of strengthening them to develop society further.

“I’d like to express my appreciation to IOM for its painstaking efforts to support the Iraqi woman. Your efforts will be unforgettable,” she added.

As part of the ceremony, IOM presented a slideshow of photos from its activities in Baghdad since 2007, displaying the female beneficiaries of IOM and the work the organisation has accomplished in recent years. To round up the event, Mahdiya al-Lami and other female members of the Ministry of A (MoA), BPC, other NGOs and WEGs gathered on stage to cut the IOM cake.

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