

From Formal Inclusion to Meaningful Representation:

How trade unions and workers' syndicates in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region address the rights and participation of vulnerable and marginalized workers



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who are we

Peace and Freedom Organization, a non-governmental, non-profit organization, administratively and financially independent. It believes in a nonviolent option and aims to:

The organization's goals

Spread the culture of peace building, conflict resolution and non-violence ethics.

Promoting freedoms and human rights.

Protect diversity and promote citizenship.

Promote peaceful coexistence and values of tolerance.

Building youth capacities and promoting voluntary work in society.

Means of achieving objectives

١. Studies and research.
٢. Use different media.
٣. Training workshops.
٤. Conferences and symposia.
٥. printed books and books and various publications.
٦. Networking and cooperation between civil society organizations and establishing partnerships with concerned parties.

Established in ٢٠١٣ and registered with the concerned authorities in the Department of NGOs. Head office in Erbil and works in multiple areas in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

1. Introduction:

This policy brief explores how trade unions and workers' syndicates in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region address the rights and participation of vulnerable and marginalized groups including persons with disabilities, migrant and refugee workers, ethnic and religious minorities, and women and youth. It focuses particularly on whether formal commitments to inclusion are translated into meaningful representation, targeted services, monitoring, advocacy, and participation in decision-making. The assessment is based on a structured questionnaire completed by union presidents and representatives, covering 21 trade unions and workers' syndicates across Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. The analysis combines descriptive statistics with qualitative interviews with activists, experts, relevant governmental officials, and members of trade unions and worker's syndicates in order to identify both institutional practices and some of the practical barriers affecting inclusion. It is important to note that this policy brief was developed as part of the project **"Civil Society's Role in Reducing Inequality,"** implemented by Peace and Freedom Organization (PFO) in partnership with Norwegian People's Aid (NPA).

The findings reveal a recurring gap between formal openness and meaningful participation. While 66.7 percent of surveyed unions reported having a specific policy to support the participation of women, youth, and minorities in decision-making, stronger institutional mechanisms were less common. 57.1 percent had no designated seat, committee, or specialized structure for persons with disabilities, and 95.2 percent reported that migrant workers were not represented in union leadership. Ethnic and religious minorities showed comparatively stronger representation, with 61.9 percent of unions reporting fair representation of these groups in their senior governing bodies. Overall, the findings suggest that membership eligibility or general policy commitments alone do not necessarily provide vulnerable and marginalized workers with meaningful influence over union decisions. Stronger inclusion requires clearer representation rules, accessible and targeted services, proactive monitoring, sustained advocacy, and closer partnerships with organizations representing affected workers.

-----Core policy message -----

Unions should move from general commitments toward explicit representation rules, accessible and targeted services, proactive monitoring, and institutional partnerships with organizations representing affected workers.

These findings should nevertheless be interpreted within the scope of the assessment and its methodology approach. The participating unions should not be considered statistically representative of all trade unions and workers' syndicates in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

The results are based mainly on institutional self-reporting and the assessment did not independently verify whether reported policies and activities were fully implemented or effective. In addition, while the qualitative interviews help contextualize the survey findings, the small number of interviews conducted (**eight interviews**) means that they should not be considered a representative account of vulnerable and marginalized workers' lived experiences. Future assessments would therefore benefit from direct interviews or focus groups with women, youth, persons with disabilities, migrant and refugee workers, and workers from ethnic and religious minority communities.

2. The labour and policy context for inclusive trade unions

Trade unions and workers' syndicates in Iraq and Kurdistan region operate in a labour market where informal work, unemployment, and unequal access to jobs remain important problems. Recent International Labour Organization (ILO) work in Iraq has emphasized the need to expand employment opportunities, especially for young people, and to strengthen institutions that help workers enter and remain in the labour market¹. The United Nations has also supported Iraq's National Strategy to Prevent and Reduce Inequalities in the World of Work, which calls for fair treatment and stronger protection against discrimination.² At the same time, PFO's earlier analysis found that unions work within an unclear legal environment, with tension between the principle of having several independent unions and the older single-union system. It also identified weak cooperation among some union federations and limited public communication about workers' everyday concerns.³ Together, these conditions can weaken union representation, particularly for women, youth, workers from ethnic and religious minorities, and people in informal or insecure employment. Trade unions therefore need clearer legal protection, stronger cooperation, and internal systems that give marginalized workers real influence rather than only formal membership.

The need for stronger and more inclusive unions has become more visible during recent economic and employment pressures. Peace and Freedom Organization's 2026 monitoring report documented widespread protests over delayed wages, salary reductions, dismissals, temporary contracts, lack of permanent employment, and weak social-security coverage. The report also noted serious job losses in the private sector and among civil society organizations, showing how quickly workers can lose income when protection systems

1 International Labour Organization, "ILO and Ministry of Youth and Sport Launch Job Search Club National Programme," 25 November 2024. The programme was established to strengthen young Iraqis' job-search and employability skills and support their entry into the labour market. https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/ilo-and-ministry-youth-and-sport-launch-job-search-club-national-programme?utm_source=chatgpt.com

2 United Nations Iraq, "Groundbreaking Iraqi National Strategy Set to Reduce Inequalities in the World of Work," 2024.

3 Peace and Freedom Organization, Report on Workers' Rights and the Freedom of Trade Unions and Workers' Syndicates in Iraq. 2023, pp. 6-9.

are weak.⁴ These pressures are reinforced by broader weaknesses in labour protection. Peace and Freedom Organization's 2024 monitoring found that outdated labour and trade-union laws, insufficient labour inspection, and weak enforcement of occupational-safety standards continued to undermine workers' rights in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, with informal and unorganized workers facing particular difficulties in accessing social-security protection.⁵

These pressures are likely to be especially difficult for migrant workers, persons with disabilities, women, young workers, and people affected by displacement. IOM reports that Iraq hosts more than 370,000 migrant workers and has highlighted the importance of fair recruitment, regular migration systems, and stronger protection for migrants. It has also found that displaced and returning communities may experience limited livelihood opportunities, stigma, and barriers to services, with particularly serious risks for women, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. UNDP's national disability-inclusion forum has similarly called for fuller economic participation and more accessible opportunities for persons with disabilities. Human Rights Watch found that neither the federal government nor the Kurdistan Regional Government was meeting the legally mandated 5 percent public-sector employment quota for persons with disabilities, while enforcement of the 3 percent private-sector quota in federal Iraq remained ineffective. It also emphasized that employment quotas alone are insufficient unless they are combined with anti-discrimination enforcement, reasonable accommodation, accessible workplaces, and effective monitoring of employers and public institutions.⁶

These findings support a broader role for trade unions in reaching workers outside traditional workplaces, monitoring employer practices, providing accessible and multilingual information, supporting social-security registration, and ensuring that vulnerable workers can participate in leadership and collective decision-making.⁷⁸⁹

4 Peace and Freedom Organization, *Hundreds of Demonstrations, Thousands of Protesters: Monitoring Report* (Iraq: Peace and Freedom Organization, 15 April 2026). <https://pfo-ku.org/images/2017/pdf/001Iraqworker2026.pdf>

5 Peace and Freedom Organization. (2024). *The reality of workers' rights in Iraq and Kurdistan Region in the first half of 2024*. <https://pfo-ku.org/images/2017/pdf/Krekaranikee.pdf>

6 Human Rights Watch, "Iraqis with Disabilities Excluded from Jobs: Persistent Failure to Ensure Right to Work; Quotas Unfilled," June 4, 2024. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/06/iraqis-disabilities-excluded-jobs?utm_source=chatgpt.com

7 International Organization for Migration, "Iraq Launches Its First National Plan to Promote Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration," 27 August 2025. IOM reported that Iraq hosted more than 370,000 migrant workers. https://www.iom.int/news/iraq-launches-its-first-national-plan-promote-safe-orderly-and-regular-migration?utm_source=chatgpt.com

8 International Organization for Migration, *Iraq Crisis Response Plan 2025* (Geneva: IOM, 2025). The plan identifies limited livelihoods, stigma, harassment, and restricted access to services as risks affecting displaced and returning populations, particularly women, persons with disabilities, and marginalized groups. https://crisisresponse.iom.int/index.php/response/iraq-crisis-response-plan-2025?utm_source=chatgpt.com

9 United Nations Development Programme, "Empowering All Abilities: Iraq's First Forum for Disability Inclusion," 11 July 2024 https://www.undp.org/iraq/press-releases/empowering-all-abilities-iraq-first-forum-disability-inclusion?utm_source=chatgpt.com

3. Why meaningful inclusion in trade unions and worker's syndicates matters

Based on PFO's observations for more than a decade of work on workers' rights, trade unions and inclusion in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, meaningful inclusion cannot be understood only through membership. PFO's work has repeatedly shown that the more important question is whether different groups of workers are able to participate in decision-making, influence union priorities, access protection and services, and have their specific barriers recognized and addressed. These observations are also consistent with relevant international labour standards, particularly ILO principles on freedom of association, non-discrimination, representation, social dialogue, accessibility and accountability.

From this perspective, meaningful inclusion can be understood through four interconnected dimensions: representation and voice; equal access and non-discrimination; protection and accessible services; and accountability and sustained action. These dimensions provide a practical framework for assessing whether trade unions and workers' syndicates are moving beyond formal openness toward structures and practices that give vulnerable and marginalized workers real opportunities to participate, influence decisions and have their rights protected.

4. What are the main inclusion challenges?

Across the surveyed unions, formal policy commitments are generally more developed than the mechanisms needed to turn those commitments into sustained participation, leadership influence and tailored support. The following findings show where the main gaps occur.

4.1. Formal policies do not always translate into meaningful participation

Most respondents reported some form of policy support for the participation of women¹⁰, youth, and minorities in decision-making. Fourteen unions (66.7%) had a specific policy, six (28.6%) had a general policy, and one (4.8%) had no such policy. While this indicates that inclusion is formally recognized by most participating unions, the findings also suggest that policy commitments do not necessarily translate into meaningful participation or decision-making power. General provisions may not clearly specify which groups should be represented, how representatives are selected, what authority they hold, or how implementation is monitored.

PFO's earlier research¹¹ reinforces this concern by identifying structural imbalances in the

¹⁰ A forthcoming PFO policy brief will examine women's participation and representation in trade unions and worker's syndicates in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

¹¹ Peace and Freedom Organization. 2017. Freedom of worker's syndicates and condition of trade unions in Iraq and Kurdistan region.

composition of trade-union leadership and internal bodies. Young people were largely absent from executive structures, with no executive member under the age of 30 and 85.19% of members aged 41 or above. The same research also documented gender imbalances within other internal positions, where the occupational categories examined were entirely occupied by men. Taken together, these findings suggest that access to decision-making and organizational structures has not been equal for younger people and women.

“Youth movements are active across Iraq, but young people are rarely visible in decision-making positions within trade unions. Women also remain underrepresented because patriarchal attitudes continue among some union decision-makers.”

A youth activist, Kirkuk

The qualitative interviews further support this pattern. A youth activist from Kirkuk observed that, despite active youth movements across Iraq, young people remain rarely visible in union decision-making positions and that women continue to be underrepresented partly because of patriarchal attitudes among some decision-makers. Similarly, a women’s and labour-rights activist from Baghdad noted that even when women are present within union decision-making structures, they may have limited influence over final decisions. Taken together, the current survey findings, PFO’s earlier research, and the qualitative interviews point to a clear gap between formal policy recognition and substantive representation. Having an inclusion policy is an important first step, but meaningful inclusion also requires clear representation mechanisms, more equitable access to leadership positions, genuine decision-making authority, and practical measures that enable women and young people to influence union priorities and governance.

“The presence of youth and women in trade unions and workers’ syndicates is very low. Even when women are present in decision-making structures, they often lack real power, while final decisions remain in the hands of men. This is especially concerning because many workers are women.”

A women’s and labour-rights activist, Baghdad

What stronger policy design would include

- * Explicit reference to each marginalized group covered by the policy.
- * Clear nomination, election, or reserved-seat procedures.

- * Voting rights and decision-making authority for representatives.
- * Accessible participation arrangements and reasonable accommodation.
- * Annual reporting on representation, complaints, programmes, and outcomes.

4.2. Disability inclusion remains fragmented

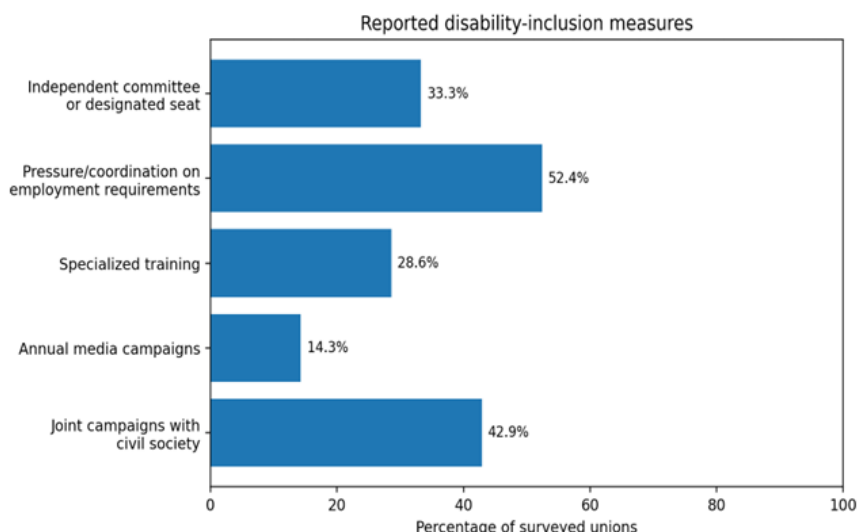
The findings show that disability inclusion within trade unions and workers' syndicates remains uneven and only partially institutionalized. While some unions reported representation mechanisms, advocacy activities, training, and cooperation with civil society, these measures were not consistently combined into a broader system of inclusion. More than half of the surveyed unions (57.1%) had no designated seat, committee, or specialized structure for persons with disabilities, while 19.0% reported having a designated seat and 14.3% an independent committee. Not worthy to mention that 2 trade unions and sendycates didn't report anything related to this subject.

A similar pattern appeared in relation to employment monitoring. Although 42.9% of unions reported pressuring employers to provide employment opportunities for persons with disabilities and 9.5% engaged relevant authorities to some extent, 38.1% considered this mainly the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. This suggests that many unions have not yet fully incorporated disability-related employment monitoring into their own institutional role.

The provision of tailored services was also limited. Only 28.6% of unions reported providing training adapted to disability-related needs, such as sign-language support or the use of assistive technology. By comparison, 33.3% provided general training without specific accommodation, and another 33.3% reported no training. Public advocacy showed a similar tendency toward occasional rather than sustained engagement. Only 14.3% reported annual campaigns or the regular promotion of success stories involving workers with disabilities, while 38.1% conducted more limited activities, often linked to international days or occasional social-media posts. One-third of unions (33.3%) had not conducted such campaigns.

Partnerships with specialized civil society organizations were somewhat more developed, but still inconsistent. Nine unions (42.9%) reported jointly organizing campaigns or activities with organizations working on disability rights, while 47.6% acknowledged that they had not worked sufficiently on the issue. Taken together, the findings suggest that disability inclusion is often addressed through individual or occasional activities rather than through an integrated institutional approach.

Qualitative interviews also point to sector-specific barriers. A workers' syndicate member in Halabja noted that workers with disabilities are rarely represented because building and woodwork jobs are often perceived as requiring workers without physical impairments. This suggests that occupational assumptions may further limit representation alongside institutional gaps.



Meaningful inclusion would require unions to have:

- * Designated representation in union decision-making.
- * Accessible training, services, and reasonable accommodation.
- * Regular monitoring of employment barriers and employer practices.
- * Sustained advocacy and partnerships with disability organizations.
- * Annual planning, budgeting, and reporting on inclusion measures.

“Communication with foreign workers is weak because many do not remain in one job for long, making sustained contact and organization difficult.”

A member of a trade union in Kirkuk

4.3. Migrant and refugee workers: membership access without leadership power

The survey shows a clear gap between formal membership access and actual representation of migrant and refugee workers within union structures. Sixteen unions (76.2%) stated that workers could become members regardless of nationality, while two (9.5%) restricted membership to Iraqi nationals and three (14.3%) used general language that did not clearly refer to migrants or refugees. However, this formal openness was not reflected in leadership. Twenty unions (95.2%) reported that their leadership consisted entirely of local workers, while only one union (4.8%) reported a reserved seat or elected migrant representative, and none involved migrant workers as non-voting advisers.

This suggests that membership eligibility alone does not guarantee meaningful participation or political voice. Without opportunities to vote, stand for office, serve on committees,

or influence collective bargaining and union priorities, migrant and refugee workers may remain formally included but institutionally marginal. The qualitative interviews also point to practical barriers to organization. A representative of a trade union in Kirkuk noted that communication with foreign workers is often weak because many do not remain in the same job for long, making sustained contact and organization difficult. Taken together, the findings suggest that both institutional arrangements and employment instability can limit the effective representation of migrant and refugee workers within trade unions.

Meaningful inclusion of migrant and refugee workers would require unions to have:

- * Clear rights to join, vote, and stand for union positions.
- * Representation in leadership and decision-making bodies.
- * Accessible information and support, including language assistance where needed.
- * Regular outreach to migrant and refugee workers, including those in temporary or changing jobs.
- * Monitoring and follow-up on discrimination, workplace problems, and access to rights.

4.4. Ethnic and religious minorities: stronger recognition, but action is often occasional

The survey suggests that ethnic and religious minorities are better represented than some other groups, although important gaps remain. Thirteen unions (61.9%) reported fair representation of minority groups in senior governing bodies. Three unions (14.3%) described representation as limited, while five (23.8%) said their leadership was made up of only one particular group.

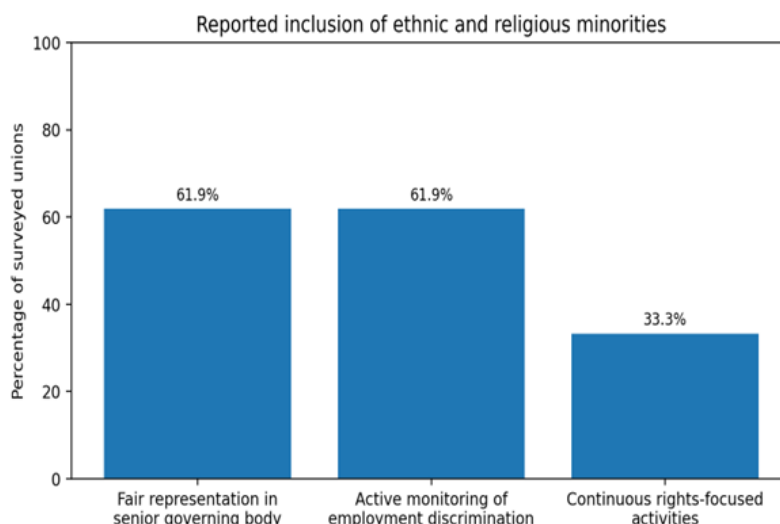
A similar pattern appears in the way unions respond to discrimination. Thirteen unions (61.9%) said they monitor discrimination in recruitment and employment and follow up on cases. Five unions (23.8%) acted only after receiving a direct complaint, while three (14.3%) said the issue was not among their priorities. Public awareness and advocacy were even less consistent. Only seven unions (33.3%) reported continuous activities on the rights of workers from ethnic and religious minorities, while more than half (52.4%) acted mainly during particular events or occasions. Three unions (14.3%) had not made the issue a priority. PFO's earlier research¹² also identified concerns relevant to minority inclusion. Although it did not directly examine minority participation, one of the five trade-union federations surveyed reported discrimination in the registration of unions and workers' syndicates based on religion, ethnicity, sect, or political affiliation. This suggests that barriers to inclusion may exist not only within union structures, but also in the broader institutional and regulatory environment.

12 Peace and Freedom Organization. 2017. Freedom of worker's syndicates and condition of trade unions in Iraq and Kurdistan region.

Overall, the findings show that formal representation is relatively stronger for ethnic and religious minorities, but continuous monitoring, advocacy, and follow-up are less consistent. This means that representation alone may not be enough unless it is supported by regular action to address discrimination and protect minority workers' rights.

Meaningful inclusion would require unions to have:

- * Fair representation of ethnic and religious minorities in leadership and decision-making bodies.
- * Clear rules against discrimination in membership, recruitment, and employment.
- * Regular monitoring and follow-up on discrimination and complaints.
- * Continuous awareness and advocacy on minority workers' rights.
- * Partnerships with minority organizations and relevant civil society groups.



5. Cross-cutting patterns:

Cross-cutting pattern	Indicators
Formal inclusion is stronger than meaningful participation	Membership and general policies are more common than leadership representation and decision-making power.
Targeted support remains limited	Many services are general and do not fully address accessibility, language, or group-specific barriers.
Action is often occasional	Some unions respond mainly to complaints or specific events rather than through continuous monitoring and planning.
Responsibility is sometimes shifted to government	Some inclusion issues, particularly disability employment, are viewed mainly as the responsibility of public authorities.
Inclusion varies across groups	Minority representation is relatively stronger, while migrant representation and disability-specific structures remain more limited.

6. Conclusions and the way forward:

The assessment indicates that trade unions and workers' syndicates in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region have taken steps toward recognizing the participation and rights of vulnerable and marginalized workers. However, inclusion is generally stronger at the level of policy language or membership eligibility than at the level of leadership, specialized services, continuous advocacy, and accountability.

The most significant gaps concern the near absence of migrant workers from leadership and the limited institutionalization of disability inclusion. Progress will require explicit and enforceable rules, representative structures, accessible programmes, proactive monitoring, and sustained cooperation with civil society organizations and the workers directly affected.

Considering the findings of this assessment, PFO proposes the following actions to strengthen meaningful representation and inclusion within trade unions and workers' syndicates. These recommendations aim to support more inclusive decision-making, targeted services, stronger accountability, and sustained participation of vulnerable and marginalized workers.

- * **Adopt explicit and enforceable inclusion policies:** Revise internal regulations to name the groups covered, specify representation rights, define institutional responsibilities, and establish implementation and reporting timelines.

- * **Establish representative committees and designated seats:** Create disability, migrant and refugee worker, equality, or minority committees and provide elected or reserved seats with voting rights in executive and decision-making bodies.

- * **Develop accessible and targeted training:** Adapt training to different needs through sign-language interpretation, accessible digital tools, accessible formats, physical access, language support, and leadership development.

- * **Create proactive monitoring and complaint mechanisms:** Establish confidential complaint channels, document discrimination, follow up with employers, refer cases to relevant authorities, and publish anonymized annual data.

- * **Move from occasional activities to annual advocacy plans:** Include campaigns, success stories, rights information, and employer engagement in annual plans and budgets rather than limiting action to international days.

- * **Build sustained partnerships with civil society:** Work with organizations of persons with disabilities, migrant and refugee support organizations, women's and youth organizations, minority-rights groups, legal-aid providers, and human-rights institutions.

- * **Clarify the rights of migrant and refugee workers:** State clearly whether they may join, vote, stand for office, serve on committees, submit complaints, participate in collective

bargaining, and receive legal and employment support.

* **Use measurable inclusion indicators:** Track leadership representation, complaints and resolutions, accessible training, campaigns, employer follow-up, partnerships, budget allocation, and changes in internal regulations.

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