



# UNITING TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN IRAQ

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**Organizations Involved:**

Jiyan Foundation for Human Rights, Oxfam, UNICEF, IMC, Free Yazidi Foundation, Women Empowerment Organization, Kurdistan Save the Children, Wochan, Peace Foundation Organization, SOSS, PDO, Judal, Yazda, The Lotus Flower, as well as syndicates, religious and community leaders, and survivor-led organizations.

The opinions expressed in this workshop are solely those of ECPAT International and Jiyan Foundation and do not necessarily reflect the views of partner organizations. The workshop was funded by AEGIS.

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## UNITING TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN IRAQ



On January 13, 2024, ECPAT International, in collaboration with Jiyan Foundation for Human Rights, organized a national workshop in Erbil, Iraq, to discuss the findings of a joint case study on [Child Sexual Exploitation \(SEC\) in humanitarian contexts](#). The study, conducted under the AEGIS project, highlighted key issues, including the stigma faced by survivors, the growing risks of SEC in Iraq due to previous and ongoing crises, and the need for evidence based advocacy to influence national and international actors.

The workshop brought together 30 participants, including CSOs, INGOs, government institutions, media, syndicates, religious and community leaders, and survivor led organizations, to engage in meaningful discussions and propose survivor centred responses.

# Objectives of the Workshop

The workshop aimed to:



Share findings from the joint case study conducted by Jiyan Foundation and ECPAT, alongside global insights.



Highlight the power of evidence and data in advocating for SEC responses.



Equip participants with tools to challenge stigmatizing behaviours and empower community action.



Develop collaborative strategies across sectors to enhance child protection systems, survivor support, and access to justice.

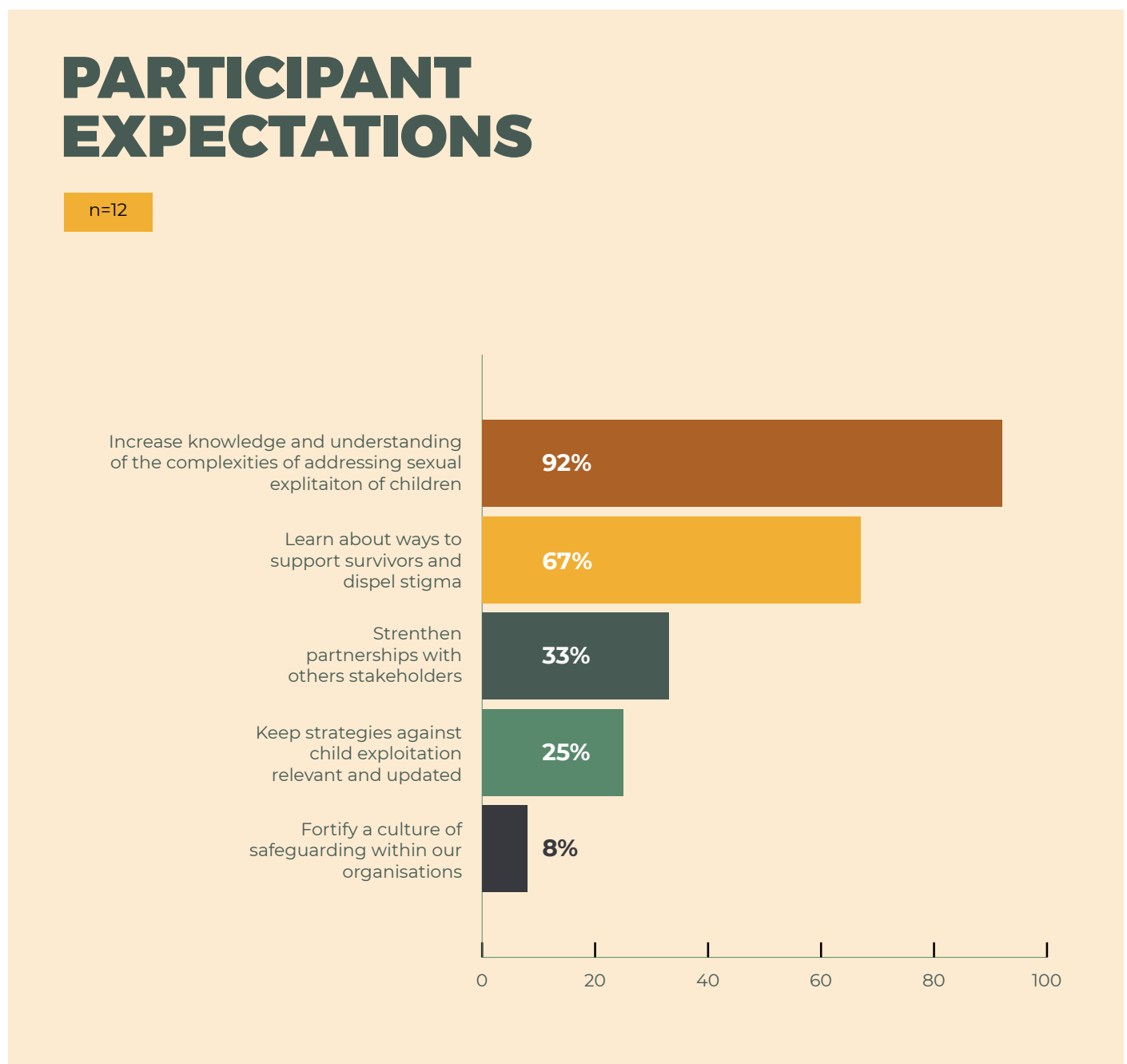


Foster cross-sectoral collaboration to integrate survivor centred approaches at the national and governance levels.

# Participant expectations and feedback

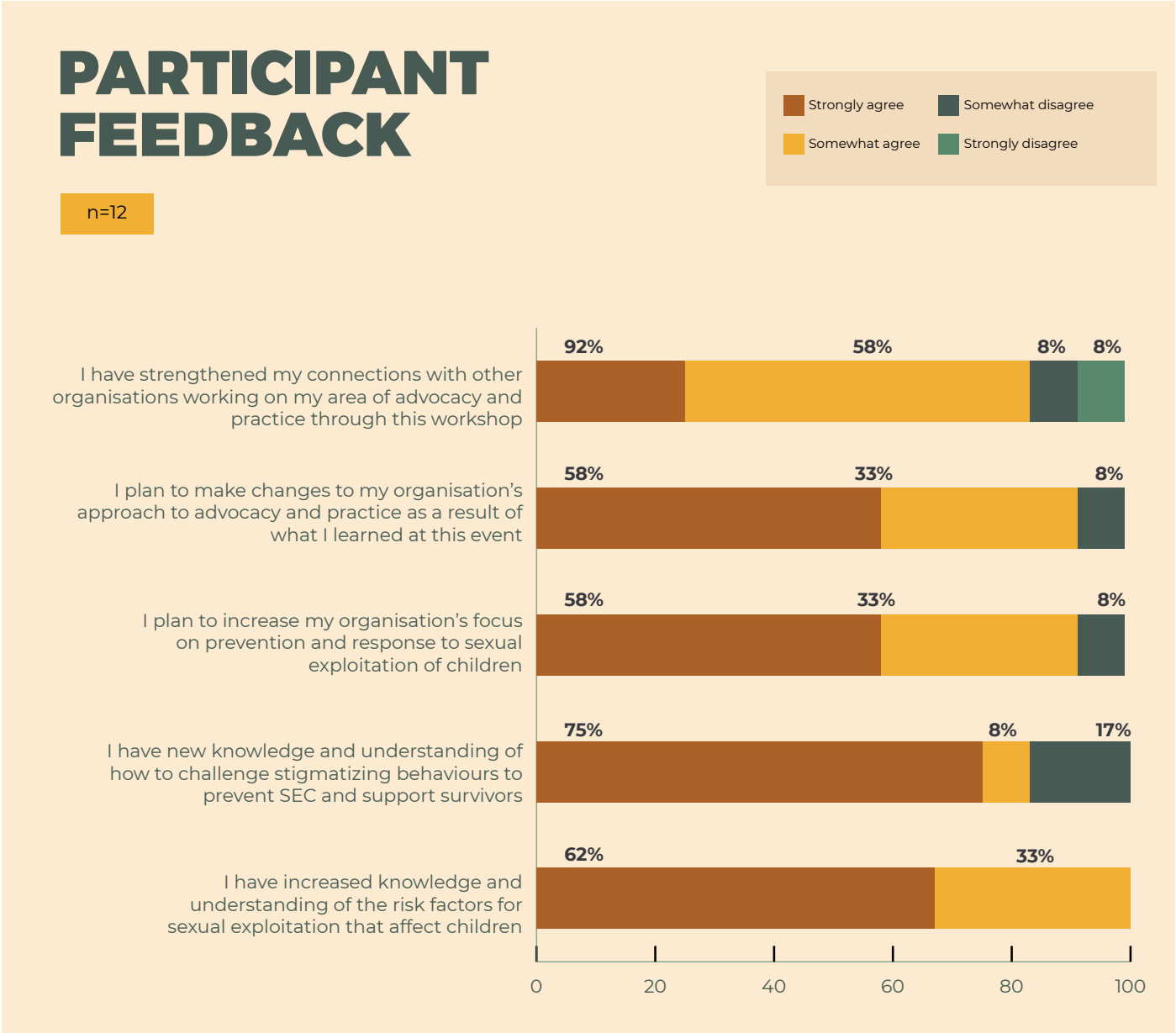
In response to the question, ‘What did you hope to gain by attending this workshop?’, participants focused on technical knowledge of SEC (92%), and support for survivors and tackling harmful stigma (67%) as the key areas of interest for the workshop (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Participant Expectations (n=12)



Participants were very satisfied (83%) and somewhat satisfied (17%) with the workshop, with most focusing on the technical knowledge gained on SEC, both for advocacy and combatting stigma as well as the drivers and risk factors that lead to SEC (Figure 2). 92% of participants agreed that they planned to increase their organisation’s focus on the topic and planned to make changes to their organisation’s advocacy and practice as a result of the workshop.

Figure 2 Participant Feedback (n=12)



83% of participants found the workshop very useful for strengthening their involvement in joint advocacy coordination, and 75% planned to collaborate with or exchange knowledge and resources with other organizations they met at the workshop in the future. Qualitative feedback suggested that the participants found the advocacy learnings and case study most useful, and would have wanted to extend the length of the workshop.



# WORKSHOP SESSIONS

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## Session 1:

### *Presentation and Discussion of Case Study Findings*



The workshop started with a presentation of the case study findings, followed by an open discussion among participants from different sectors.



Many participants initially thought SEC cases were isolated incidents but acknowledged the systemic nature of the issue, especially among vulnerable communities like refugees.



Participants emphasized the need for the study to expand into a nationwide quantitative research effort to generate a broader evidence base.



Government ministries were called upon to take responsibility for data collection and analysis instead of relying solely on civil society organizations.



## Session 2:

### *Stigma and Legal Barriers*



Participants discussed how social norms and weak law enforcement discourage survivors from seeking justice.



A major concern raised was the stigma faced by male survivors, who are often labelled as gay, placing them at additional risk of discrimination and violence.



Civil society organizations pointed out the lack of collaboration spaces where organizations can discuss cases, exchange knowledge, and engage in peer-to-peer learning.



Participants highlighted the stigma surrounding reaching out to service providers, particularly mental health services, which prevents many survivors especially males from seeking support.



The discussion also covered how community perceptions of harassment often focus on cases of rape and pregnancy. If a case does not involve rape or pregnancy, law enforcement and service providers frequently dismiss or normalize the abuse.





## Session 3:

### Community Responses and Prevention Strategies



Participants emphasized the need for community-driven solutions to combat stigma and improve prevention strategies.



Religious leaders discussed how faith-based messaging can be used to shift public attitudes and encourage survivor support.



Civil society organizations stressed the importance of making services more survivor-friendly, ensuring that survivors receive real, meaningful support rather than token responses.



Boys in refugee families were identified as particularly vulnerable due to the economic pressure placed on them to work, exposing them to greater exploitation risks.



The rapid growth of the tourism sector was another key concern, with participants calling for stricter monitoring and regulation to prevent exploitation in this industry.





## Session 4:

### Strategic collaboration & Outreach Strategies



Participants raised concerns about the limited strategic funding available for local organizations working on SEC.



Many organizations noted that they often have to align their work with donor priorities rather than community needs, making it difficult to implement locally relevant solutions.



There was strong advocacy for more localized funding mechanisms to enable CSOs to prioritize community-driven SEC responses.



The role of social media in outreach efforts was widely discussed, with TikTok being highlighted as a key platform for raising awareness and connecting with survivors.



Participants also discussed the stereotypes that put certain indigenous groups at higher risk of SEC, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive approaches to prevention and support.



# Key Takeaways & Next Steps

The discussions led to a range of concrete, actionable recommendations:



**UNICEF will convene a series of meetings** with CSOs and invite the Ministry of Social Affairs to integrate the case study and workshop findings into the national strategy.



**Thematic Capacity building efforts** will be strengthened, with a particular focus on legal support , faith based advocacy strategies , approaches to focus on thematic areas like sexual exploitation of boys and online sexual exploitation.



**A series of peer to peer learning events** will be organized by Jiyan , allowing diverse actors to share experiences and best practices.



**The diversity of the Kurdistan Region (KRI)** was highlighted as a key strength, underscoring the need for multi-language, community-friendly materials that incorporate indigenous knowledge.



**Advocacy for localized funding** to ensure CSOs can address community priorities rather than solely focusing on donor-driven agendas.



**Expanding outreach strategies** by leveraging social media platforms, such as TikTok, to engage with at-risk children and survivors.

# Conclusion

The Workshop served as a critical platform to discuss findings from the case study and propose survivor centred responses to SEC in humanitarian contexts. The presence of diverse stakeholders, including survivor led organizations, enriched the dialogue and strengthened commitments to collaborative action.

Based on post workshop survey feedback, participants found the workshop well organized and valuable for strengthening partnerships and advocacy strategies. Most participants reported an increased understanding of SEC risks and planned to integrate lessons learned into their organizational strategies. However, recommendations included extending the duration of the workshop and incorporating more group discussions.

Moving forward, ECPAT International and Jiyan Foundation will work closely with national and international partners to implement the workshop's recommendations, ensuring that SEC prevention and response efforts are strengthened at policy and operational levels.







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