

# Hiveen's Story

*"Stitching Security into the Future"*



**"In that moment, everything was lost, the car, the house, everything.**

**We had no work, no safety and no hope. We had to leave."**

## Losing Everything

Hiveen recalls the details of her past as she sits on the hard floor of a tent in the Syrian Refugee camp, Domiz, in northern Iraq. The ten family members have carved out a small space for themselves amongst piles of fabric, garments and a new sewing machine.

Hiveen reflects on the days before their family was uprooted to Iraqi-Kurdistan. "For ten years, I owned a sewing shop where my sister and I made all sorts of clothing. Business was booming and to meet the demand, we worked 18 hours per day." The ongoing violence in Syria complicated Hiveen's efforts to sustain a normal life amidst the deadly civil war. With the death of her father, Hiveen was forced to become the main bread winner, her sewing business sustaining her entire family.

The war in Syria has subjected many families to suffering, separation, and resettlement. Hiveen takes a sip of sweet milk and coffee, and begins to remark on the slow decline of her family's life in Syria – straightforward and detached.

"There were daily lootings, bombings, and street shootings. Our electricity was cut off, so I couldn't operate my sewing machine. One day, armed militias broke into our home and stole everything. We were left with no money, no car, and a broken home."

### *Joint UNHCR-IOM Livelihood Project for Syrian Refugees*

*To address the social and economic challenges of displacement, UNHCR and IOM partnered to implement the program entitled, "Enhancing the livelihoods coping mechanisms of Syrian refugees in northern Iraq." The program provides job training and business development grants in order to enhance skills, productivity, and income among Syrian Refugees living in the host communities of Erbil and Dahouk, as well as Domiz refugee camp. Since the the program began in 2012, 916 beneficiaries have been assisted directly through phase I and II.*

#### **Contact IOM Iraq**

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## Finding Refuge in Domiz

This invasion of the war into Hiveen's home forced her and her family to make the difficult decision of leaving Syria. Late one night in February 2013, Hiveen's family crossed the Sahela border into Iraqi-Kurdistan. They believed settling in Erbil would allow them to establish some form of normalcy with the broken pieces of their past. Without any money or resources, Hiveen sought refuge in the Domiz camp. "We never imagined this, but we had no choice. We moved to the camp because we had nothing."

She admits that life in the camp is hard, but expresses gratitude for the safety the camp provides. "Even though we are all living in the same tent, it's better than the bullets and the bloodshed that we saw in Syria."

After a challenging four months without work in Domiz, Hiveen was at a loss for how to make a living for herself and her family. Hiveen represents a growing population of female-headed households, who become the primary caretaker and breadwinner for their entire families during war and conflict. This pressure heightened Hiveen's need to find a solution for her family's livelihood.

In June 2013, Hiveen enrolled in a three-day Business Development Seminar (BDS) as part of the UNHCR - IOM Livelihood Project for Syrian Refugees, phase II. The program provides vocational training and small grants for business development projects to vulnerable refugees, returnees, and internally displaced people (IDPs) in order to establish sustainable businesses in northern Iraq.

"After the training, I was able to open my own business in the camp," she says. "They taught me everything I know about how to run my business here, where to buy materials, and how to establish prices."

An in-kind grant (IKG) allowed her to buy fabrics, threads, buttons, and -most importantly - a new sewing machine.

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# Restoring Hope

Now Hiveen and her sister Wafa, operate this business together in their home in Domiz. Against the backdrop of a makeshift home, they stitch together dresses, clothes, stuffed animals, and costumes for dance recitals and plays at some of the local schools. Wafa models her five-year-old son in a red fish costume, which she recently sewed for a school play. Hiveen has 15 regular costumers now and her business is expanding, each thread stitching security into her future.



In-kind grant provides new sewing machine

“Before I started my sewing business in Domiz, I couldn’t earn any money for my family. Now, I make a few hundred dinars each month from my business,” she explains enthusiastically. “It doesn’t sound like much, but it has made a huge difference in our lives. I’m able to buy food for my family and send money to my brothers who are struggling in Syria. I also try to save money for the future because we don’t know what will happen next. I’ve had my business for about five months and hope that more people will come so I can continue to expand my work.”



Hiveen Mohammed, 31, Beneficiary

An elderly woman and her two young daughters appear at the entrance of the tent and Hiveen stands up to welcome them into her home. A few more customers trickle in behind them and the tent becomes filled with customers sifting through the newly sewn garments, as if they were at a stall in a bustling market.

“It’s not just about the money,” Hiveen says as she stretches her arms, folding a newly assembled sweater. “Sewing keeps me busy and reminds me of life before the war. I feel that my life is slowly becoming normal again.



Dress designed and assembled by Hiveen