

CREID INTERSECTIONS SERIES

Religious Inequalities and Gender

Violence and Discrimination against Women of Religious Minority Backgrounds in Iraq

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About CREID

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Front cover image credit: Derman Rasho Khalaf. Derman is a journalist from Sharya, a Yazidi town located in the Simele District of the Dohuk Governorate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This photo was taken in April 2021 during the lighting of the torches ceremony in the Lalish Temple on the evening of the Yazidi New Year, Red Wednesday, which is the first Wednesday of April according to the eastern calendar.

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Violence and Discrimination against Women of Religious Minority Backgrounds in Iraq

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Notes on Contributors

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Faiza Diab Sarhan is an Iraqi Sabeen-Mandaean activist. She has a Diploma in Accounting and works as an accountant at a private company. She is also Vice President of the Mandaean Culture Association, a member of the Sabeen-Mandaean Affairs Council in Erbil, and a Member of the Board of Directors of the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities Network.

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Women of Religious Minority Background in Iraq: Redressing Injustices, Past and Present

Mariz Tadros, Sofya Shahab and Amy Quinn-Graham

Keywords: Women's rights; Iraq; minorities; inequalities.

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1 Introduction

This volume is part of the Intersections series which explores how the intertwining of gender, religious marginality, socioeconomic exclusion and other factors shape the realities of women and men in contexts where religious inequalities are acute, and freedom of religion or belief is compromised. This volume looks at these intersections in the context of Iraq. Its aim is to amplify the voices of women (and men) whose experiences of religious otherisation have accentuated the impact of the intersections of gender, class, geography and ethnicity. At time of publication, in December 2022, the country is going through a particularly turbulent phase, prompting some to wonder why now? Isn't it bad timing to focus on the experiences of minorities, let alone inter- and intra-gender dynamics? Iraq is caught in the middle of geo-strategic struggles of tectonic proportions but this is all the more reason to understand the dynamics of micro-politics through a gender-sensitive lens. Doing so sheds light on the interface between global, regional and local power struggles in tangible and concrete ways.

For much of the past year, the country has been without a government, causing political uncertainty, sectarian division, protests and violence. At time of writing, in October 2022, a new president and prime minister were appointed, marking the end of Iraq's longest period without a government since 2003 and the US-led invasion. History is still alive and present in people's narratives. The US-led invasion 20 years ago and the occupation by ISIS fighters almost ten years ago are spoken of as if they happened yesterday. Sectarian fault lines are still very deeply drawn. Iraq is a mosaic of ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural components. According to reliable estimates, 99 per cent of Iraqis are Muslim, of whom 60 to 65 per cent are Shia and 32 to 37 per cent are Sunni (MRG 2022). The remaining 1 per cent of the population comprise the following religious minorities: an estimated 350,000 Christians in Iraq, 500,000 Yazidis, 200,000 Kakai, fewer than 5,000 Sabeen-Mandaeans and a small number of Bahai (*ibid.*). The UK government also recognises the presence of Jews and Zoroastrians in Iraq, although it does not give current population numbers (Home Office 2021).

There is a great deal of diversity in how individuals and communities self-identify in Iraq. For some, such as the Yazidis and the Assyrians, their identity refers to both their ethnicity and their religious affiliation. For others, their identity can be a merging of two aspects, for example being Turkmen *and* Shia or Sunna; or being Shabak *and* Sunna or Shia or

Armenian Orthodox or Catholic. It is also important to remember that some groups such as the Zoroastrians (Salloum 2016) and the Kakai (Abdulkhaliq, 2023 forthcoming) have had to, over many decades, conceal their identity and publicly self-identify as Muslim in order to avoid persecution. In some cases, public self-identification is not a matter of choice: for example, the law in Baghdad-administered Iraq does not give religious minorities the right to pass on their religious faith to their child if the child's father is a Muslim. Children are automatically considered Muslim even against the wishes of the child. They are registered as Muslims on identity cards, even if the Muslim father is absent (as in the cases of children born to Yazidi and Christian mothers after sexual abuse by ISIS fighters).

In other cases, finer distinctions in denominational affiliation within a religious minority matter a great deal for the religious/political leaders of that minority. For example, in some instances it is politically anathema to the leaders of the Chaldean, Syriac Orthodox and Assyrian religious denominations to assume that they can all be represented by one patriarch as the representative of the 'Christian denomination' in Iraq.

Another reason for caution against assuming a reified category of 'religious minority identity' in Iraq is that there are groups whose numbers are minute but whose presence is of great civilisational importance – such as the Zoroastrians and Sabians whose faiths date back thousands of years. This is significant given that sometimes it may be easy to focus on the Middle East as the cradle of Abrahamic religions, while overlooking the existence of other religious traditions that have existed over millennia. It is also important to recognise the plurality of administrative governance systems in contemporary Iraq. Religious minorities are governed by different laws, policies, and decrees under two different administrations: the Baghdad-administration and the Erbil-administration. In some ways, the ability of Iraqi women of minority backgrounds to access citizenship rights is significantly shaped by where they live and which administration they follow. For example, the inheritance laws for non-Muslim women living in Iraqi Kurdistan are different to those governing non-Muslim women in Baghdad-administered areas.

Moreover, public representation of identity is fluid and contingent on contextual and temporal dynamics. For example, the Tishreen uprising, which began in October 2019 and was sustained until 2021, represents the largest ever protest movement that the country has witnessed since 2003 and comprised citizens from all political persuasions, religious and ethnic backgrounds (International Crisis Group 2021). The protests, mainly led by youth, mobilised around demands for an end to corruption, better governance of

economic policy, including unemployment, and an end to foreign interference. Collective action was mobilised around Iraqi citizenship as a supra-identity, or as a form of collective representation that cuts across other political, religious or ethnic affiliations.

In times of political upheaval, excuses are often given for why a gendered power analysis needs to be deprioritised or postponed. Government officials often suggest that gender dynamics can only be discussed after a certain level of stability has been achieved. These goalposts then become perpetually moved forwards, thereby delaying any action (Ray and Korteweg 1999; Razavi 2000; Waylen 1994; 2007). There is a need to ensure that in the period that follows the overthrow or resignation of a political leadership, gender equality features at every step of the negotiations around a new contract between state and people (Beckwith 2007; Rai 2000; Tadros 2016).

However, the intersection of gender with religious marginality becomes even more likely to be relegated to a matter for future consideration after the situation has stabilised. Political, ideological and pragmatic factors influence the extent to which the situation pertaining to women of religious minority backgrounds features in policy debates. In making our case in this volume, we address some of the reservations that Western (and some non-Western) policymakers, academics and feminists hold with respect to an evidence-based focus on women who belong to religious minority backgrounds in Iraq.

This volume is organised as follows: after unpacking key concepts, we situate this research within broader academic and policy debates regarding Western representations of gender justice struggles in Iraq, followed by a description of the methodological approach, its rationale, strengths and limitations, and finally a discussion of the main findings and intended audience of the volume.

2 Conceptual conundrums

The concept of a religious minority has always been contentious in the context of the Muslim-majority Middle East. Professor Seteney Shami traces the political use of the term in the Arab world to colonialism (2009: 153). Her study demonstrates that the first time the word 'minority' entered the lexicon of terms used to describe Christians in the Middle East was in the early 1920s in Egypt when political elites were debating whether the new Egyptian constitution should include specific language concerning the protection of religious minorities. In 1923, the term 'non-Moslem minorities' (i.e., Greeks, Armenians

and Jews) was introduced and enshrined in the Treaty of Lausanne between Turkey and the Western powers. The labelling of non-Muslim communities as minorities was a political project, according to Seteney, intended to justify colonialist control over internal governance matters – i.e., in the name of protecting minorities, foreign powers would be given special interventionist privileges. In the twentieth century, when pan-nationalist and pan-Arab movements mobilised for independence, one of the ways in which the liberation movements sought to unify religiously and culturally diverse populations around the rallying cry of independence was to call upon the people to reject the divide-and-rule strategies of Western powers wanting to prevent the emergence of a unified front against them. Pan-Arab regimes that emerged post-independence in Iraq, Syria and Egypt sought to downplay the multiple identities of their citizens (religious, linguistic, ethnic) as a way of fostering a supra-allegiance to the nation-state. Yet state legitimacy remained contested throughout (Haddad 2017). There are contending historical accounts in the Middle East as to whether the political projects of the twentieth-century independence movements sought to unify the populations under one pan-Arab identity in a manner that was respectful of cultural, religious and linguistic diversity, or whether they worked in denial of that diversity, in a bid to mobilise societies around one common enemy (the coloniser) (Abu-Seif Youssef 2016).

Interestingly, it is not only the colonialist project that articulated a division of society into majorities and minorities. Political movements and parties whose visions of governance are inspired by Shariah-based governance (see Tadros 2013 for a discussion of citizenship rights with qualifiers for non-Muslim citizens). While the qualifiers vary from one context to another, and one period to the next, there are limitations to full equality with Muslims in a Shariah-inspired governance model. For example, the exclusion of non-Muslims from positions that involve leadership over Muslims, which is loosely defined and interpreted in multiple ways depending on the political power in question.

The Iraqi constitution uses the term *mouqawenat* (components) as a form of recognition of the different religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups in society, thereby avoiding the word 'minority'.¹ How the different non-Muslim communities in Iraq self-describe is not static; it changes according to person, community and context. Self-labelling is a highly dynamic process that is constantly being reconsidered. Groups that have historically

¹ See preamble to the Iraqi constitution (Constitute n.d.).

experienced deep systemic inequalities because of their non-Muslim religious affiliation find themselves in a very difficult position. On the one hand, there is a strong rationale for rejecting the concept of being a religious minority, namely that it plays into the Western construct of needing special protection and into the Islamist movements' conception of them as 'the non-Muslim other'. Some academics and policymakers have attacked minority-based claims on the basis that these play into the agendas of those who wish to entrench sectarianism in Iraq (see for example contributions in Hashemi and Postel 2017).

On the other hand, as the situation has continued to worsen for non-Muslim minorities in the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, there is a sense of urgency in having Iraqi power holders and the international community recognise the extent of the denial of the rights accorded by the majority. The term minority then comes to convey the collective disempowerment of whole groups on the basis of their different ethno-religious affiliations. In Iraq, there are several coalitions, networks and collective platforms that since the US-led invasion have emerged to respond to the threats to religious pluralism in the country, such as the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities Network (AIM 2022). Representatives of different religious groups have during the post-2003 period come to engage in claims-making as *members of religious minorities* in relation to their own governments and in the international arena.

In the narratives of the minorities under study here, the US-led invasion is held responsible for the creation of a post-Saddam political order based on sectarianism and the fragmentation of Iraqi society in deeply divisive ways, as is evident in the papers in this volume. In other words, in religious minorities' narratives, there is no alignment between a pro-minority West and the Muslim rest. On the contrary, many minorities consider Western policies as enabling and emboldening the national movements that sought to erase minority identity.

The situation is further complicated on account of the interventionist policies not only of the West, but also Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Russia. Those countries are among others that have played behind-the-scenes roles. Foreign fomentation of sectarianism is an indisputable reality in the context of Iraq – and a theme that features prominently in many of the papers in this volume. In such a context, can we use the term 'religious minority' and at the same time not feed into highly divisive political projects? Use of the term religious minorities does not in and of itself constitute a sectarian project. First, it is commensurate with how many members of various groups self-describe as minorities.

Moreover, there is a risk of denying the presence of groups who had to deny their identity such as the Kakai and the Zoroastrians. The context of extreme discrimination led the Kakai to conceal their identity in public. However, pressure for official recognition of minorities especially in Iraqi Kurdistan has emboldened both the Kakai and the Zoroastrians to begin to gradually manifest their identity in public (although not across the whole community). Some members within the Kakai community are now saying that they should no longer pretend to be Muslims and even change their identity cards to state 'Kakai' as their affiliation. In this context, the recognition of religious minorities is not so much about creating social fragmentation; rather it is part and parcel of the politics of recognition which is a prerequisite for redressing the inequalities that have been experienced for decades. Finally, in our use of the term religious minorities, we can always be nuanced by careful description of the intersections of gender, ethnicity, location, language, political affiliation and so forth.

3 Women of religious minority backgrounds: why an intersectional lens matters

Another reservation expressed by some scholars and activists is that if all women have suffered in Iraq, why specifically focus on women who belong to religious minorities? It is undoubtable that Iraqi women across all religious affiliations have suffered from a broad set of gender-specific rights violations, and also have experienced extreme hardship alongside men in Iraq on account of the highly turbulent political context.² The research undertaken here supports the view that many of the structural drivers of oppression and injustice cut across religious and ethnic lines, such as the prevailing lack of safety. A state of lawlessness and the rule of competing militias in many parts of Iraq are depriving citizens of a sense of safety when going about their everyday lives, with real gendered implications for Iraqi women's lives (Ali 2018).

Earlier studies by leading Iraq experts suggest that political fronts for countering the oppression of women tend to focus on issues that cut across religious/ethnic divides. For

² See Vilaro and Bittar (2018) for an Oxfam gender profile of Iraq; Alkhudary (2020) and Medica Mondiale (2021) for an overview of the barriers Iraqi women face in achieving their rights; Younis (2021) on Iraqi women's mental health struggles; and Jaber (2022) on Iraqi women's access to leadership and decision-making roles.

example, Al-Ali (2012: 103) tells us that the women's movement post-2003 is made up of women from 'various ethnic and religious backgrounds' and that 'most women I talked to stressed that their political activism cut across ethnic and religious lines' (Al-Ali 2008: 410). Additionally, when interviewing a large number of Iraqi women activists (from both inside and outside Iraq), Al-Ali and Pratt (2009) concluded that differences in opinion on a range of topics related to the women's movement were found to be more commonly because of political affiliations rather than ethnic (or religious) affiliations. One argument would be that if this is how Iraqi women mobilise, should we not accordingly frame issues along the same cross-cutting lines?

The specific focus on women who belong to religious minorities is informed by a number of important considerations. First, Al-Ali (2008) herself acknowledges that in feminist activism the presence of women who come from religious minorities does not mean that the specific grievances associated with the intersections of gender and religious marginality are reflected in these women's agenda-setting. Second, in some cases, the fact that women's rights activists and their allies strategically choose framings that do not pinpoint the religious affiliation of survivors of politically motivated gender-based violence does not negate the presence of any religious affiliation. For example, in Nigeria, in response to the capture of the girls in Chiboke in 2019 by Boko Haram, women leaders who formed into a collective to press the government for action to return the missing girls framed their campaign as 'bring back our girls'. The reasons for the choice of this framing have been meticulously studied (Aina *et al.* 2019). This, however, does not negate the fact that the majority of girls captured by Boko Haram were Christian and that this was not by chance, but was also partly ideologically motivated. By the same token, the fact that women from all backgrounds in Iraq choose to frame some campaigns without specific mention to religious marginality, does not mean that certain forms of oppression that women experience in Iraq are not shaped by religious affiliation. It is significant that Iraqi women's collectives themselves recognise that religious minority women are acutely disadvantaged. For example, while the Iraqi Women Network's (2014: 34) shadow report calls on the government to ensure the rights of 'migrants, ethnic and religious minorities', it also acknowledges that specifically 'women from...religious minorities are the most vulnerable' (*ibid.*: 8). Additionally, the Iraqi Women Network's 2019 shadow report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is specific in its naming of Yazidi women as those who have suffered some of the worst systematic

sexual violence at the hands of ISIS and who are still facing discrimination now, even from within their own community (Iraqi Women Network 2019).

A recurring concern raised by scholars around the focus on targeting women of a religious minority background in Iraq is that it may feed into orientalist, sensationalist, and hypocritical engagements with issues of sexuality in Muslim-majority contexts. For example, following the onslaught by ISIS in 2014, there was a great deal of Western media coverage of the sexual violence experienced by Yazidi women in particular. Several scholars, while acknowledging the plight of Yazidi women and the targeting of women who belong to religious minorities, expressed concern that when these stories are circulated in the West, 'sexualized violence is politically instrumentalized, often sensationalised and overblown in terms of scope and the threat it presents. It is used as a dehumanizing device deployed as part of wider racist and sectarian culturalist discourses counterposing their "barbaric" culture as essentially different from "our" civilised culture, a difference is that is articulated most dramatically through the bodies of women' (Al-Ali 2014; Ali 2018).

Al-Ali points to a number of further critiques in the representation of ISIS violence against Yazidi women following the ISIS occupation in 2014. She notes for example, that the very actors who call ISIS out, such as Western governments, have done nothing to prevent the violence and their policy has been consistently hypocritical in their engagement with gender-based violence in foreign policy. This is very much in line with the widely cited work of Lila Abu-Lughod in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*. She has critiqued US foreign policy leads and liberal American feminists who justified the invasion of Afghanistan in the name of 'saving women' (Abu-Lughod 2015). Al-Ali rightly highlights issues pertaining to positionality – whether the person has the legitimacy to launch attacks from an assumed moral pedestal especially when both their intentions and policies are dubious to say the least.

However, there is a way forward that allows issues of gender-based violence to be raised internationally while challenging the kind of problematic Western representations and instrumentalisations raised above. We believe that this volume contributes practically towards addressing this conundrum. All the reports are written by women and men whose positionality confers the legitimacy to share and analyse experiences of gender-based violence that their communities have encountered and continue to encounter. In other words, they are speaking not from the vantage point of outsiders with politicised

agendas, but as insiders keen to amplify in a multivocal manner the situation of the communities to which they belong.

Undoubtedly, as the volume is being published in the West, are there not issues still of instrumentalising data? The approach that we have taken in this volume (see methodology section) is one premised on the view that members of the community would undertake the research with participants from within, and that they would co-construct the research framing as well as ensure that the community participates in the validation of the data being generated. It is not only their positionality but their standpoint that gives weight to the issues being raised in this volume. There is of course a danger still that the content of this volume when published is still instrumentalised by Western actors for their own ulterior motives. However, inconsistent Western foreign policy should be challenged by using the evidence we have from the communities to call out hypocrisy and press for greater accountability. Avoiding speaking about the subject of specific forms of gender-based violence and the day-to-day encroachments that women experience in order to avoid Islamophobia or orientalist depictions is not the solution. It is true that gender-based violence exists along a spectrum, but when atrocities that amount to a genocide occur against a specific group of people because of their religious affiliations, then they deserve to be amplified. Almost ten years after the genocide perpetrated by ISIS, justice has not been granted to Yazidi women and the voices of transnational feminist activists pressing for recognition of their rights has in some respects waned.

This volume's emphasis is on the voices of women (and men) whose experiences of religious otherisation have amplified the impact of the intersections of gender, class, geography and ethnicity. While in these women's stories there are a number of overlapping and complex factors that drive how they have been targeted, ideology is certainly one of them. However, concern has been expressed that by focusing on the ideology of actors such as ISIS, this 'feeds into their media strategy, obscures women's resistance to their violence and promotes the Islamophobia that fuels the very war with "the West" that ISIS craves' (Susskind 2014). The challenge with this argument is that it represents the perpetration of violence by ISIS as reactive – that ISIS's violence is exclusively in response to the acts of aggression perpetrated by the West. While grievances against the West do fuel ISIS's war, it is a gross misreading of ISIS to understand it as operating exclusively in reactive mode; ISIS is informed by tactical

political and economic drivers but also by its vision. ISIS's gender-based targeting exists along an ideologically informed taxonomy of the level of violence exercised, depending on victims' religious and political affiliations. Hence, to speak of coverage of the assault on women who belong to religious minorities as a matter that needs to be contested on the basis of the provocation of further aggression would be to overlook the ideological drivers behind ISIS's targeting of these women in the first place.

4 Women of religious minority backgrounds: why their narrative matters

Susskind proposes a solution: 'Why not support the millions of progressive Muslims who reject violence, including violence against women?' (2014, unpaginated). This is well placed in terms of showing the many faces and expressions of solidarity among the many Muslims who are against ISIS and have fought their ideology. We need to acknowledge and celebrate them. However, this argument (perhaps inadvertently) removes the emphasis from the experiences and voices of the women from a religious minority background who have been the targets of ideologically motivated gender-based violence. The recognition of the multitudes of Muslims who condemn ISIS can only partially address the need to redress the injustices that minority women have faced. What is needed is not a de-accentuation of attention from minority women's voices and experiences, but the assurance that they have a platform to speak for themselves, that their demands are amplified and that transnational academia and feminism endorse them. In the name of avoiding provoking ISIS or Islamophobic representations, we risk muting the voices of women who are survivors of ideologically motivated violence and who want to tell their stories to the world. In other words, it is critically important that in countering misrepresentations in the West, we do not contribute to the same blind spot that thousands of women who belong to religious minorities have experienced across centuries in the Middle East: obscuring the specificity of their experience as women whose religious/gender intertwining creates particular kinds of injustices. We hope this volume challenges the racism that has obscured the specificity of the claims-making women of a religious minority background in Iraq. Several women who participated in the group inquiries undertaken have articulated their experiences not only in terms of

religious discrimination but racism in Iraq. They speak of a racial profiling in how they are treated, associated with their ethno-religious identity.

It is important also to note that even if some common systemic sources of injustice are experienced by women whose religious marginality intersects with other identifiers (class, location, ethnicity, age etc.), this does not signify that their experiences are one and the same. Hence our approach was to recognise that while women who come from a religious minority background can experience some common challenges of being seen as the non-Muslim religious other, they themselves do not represent one bloc with a common reified identity. Women of a religious minority background are also differently positioned, not only in the literal geographic sense but also in terms of access to and use of power. The reports in this volume also show that the expressions of women's (and men's) agency in terms of accommodation or adaptation to the shifting status quo of Iraq is both subjective but also hugely impacted by the collective strength and position of the community to which they are affiliated.

Finally, the case has been made that a focus on violence perpetrated by violent groups deflects attention from the patriarchal hierarchies within religious minority groups, which are in and of themselves sources of gender inequality and gender-based violence. The conversations with women and men that took place in the group inquiries shared by several contributors in this volume cover forms of encroachment and violence that are both in the public and private spheres. Women (and some men) acknowledge problems of domestic violence and psychological abuse as acute in many of these communities. This is further nuanced when status hierarchies are taken into account (such as in the contribution on the Kakai). In the same vein, the fact that religious leaders in some communities have been complacent in not holding to account men who abuse their wives and children has had far-reaching consequences. For example, among the Turkmen Shia, the fact that the religious leaders chose not to speak out against the rape, kidnappings and sexual assault that some Turkmen Shia women experienced at the hands of ISIS and other Islamist militia has had severe psychological repercussions for survivors, and obfuscated their opportunities of seeking restorative justice (Tadros 2020a).

5 Methodological approach

This section describes the subjects of the study and the selection of the researchers followed by an elucidation of the methods, their rationale, strengths and limitations.

The subjects of the study came from the religious minority groups outlined in Table 1, which also details how many women and men from each minority group participated in the research and in which geographic areas they resided.

Table 1: Research participants

Religious minority	No. of women	No. of men	Geographic areas
Yazidis	26	24	Bashiqa and Bahzani (Nineveh)
Displaced Yazidis	37	13	Essian camp (Ninewa governorate) and Shariya camp (Dohuk)
Assyrian Christians	26	21	Duhok
Christians	24	24	Al-Hamdaniya and Bartella (Nineveh) and Ankawa (Erbil)
Kakai	36	24	Safiya, Gwer subdistrict (Erbil)
Shabak	26	22	Nineveh Plain
Sabean-Mandaeans	22	23	Erbil and Baghdad

Source: Authors' own.

A number of points are noteworthy. Firstly, it is clear that the number of participants is low and is negligible in terms of generating generalisable data for the whole communities.

While this is true, the intention here was not to take a sample size to wield universal statements, rather it was to provide deep insights into the experiences of marginalisation that would be very difficult to gauge through more conventional data collection methods such as a community-wide survey. This is on account of the sensitivity of the topics and the poor levels of trust currently in Iraq, which are not likely to lead to participants sharing their experiences frankly through surveys. Ideally, the methodology would be repeated among more groups in different sites and across time to corroborate the evidence presented here.

Secondly, the decision to include two sets of inquiries for the Yazidis and Christians is in order to explore two kinds of intersections that are significant. In the case of the Yazidis, the location of the research has far-reaching consequences in terms of influencing the participants' reading of their reality. The two reports describe the situation of Yazidi women in Bashiqa and Behzane – two neighbouring towns which were occupied by ISIS but to which families have begun to return following rehabilitation – and another report focusing on the situation of Yazidi women within internally displaced person (IDP) camps in the Iraqi Kurdistan. This research also included a group consisting of survivors – Yazidi women who had been kidnapped and enslaved by ISIS – in recognition of their specific needs and circumstances, and was led by a peer-researcher who is herself a survivor. In terms of the rationale for undertaking two research processes among the Christians, this was done in recognition of the plurality of denominational affiliation, and of how when intertwined with location, this produces slightly differentiated readings of the drivers and outcomes of power configurations on the ground.

Thirdly, we acknowledge that there are limitations pertaining to the sites in which the research was undertaken, given its heavy concentration around the centre of Iraqi Kurdistan and Baghdad, the capital. While acknowledging the demographic spread of religious communities across the country, the focus sites of the research reflect to a very large extent the greatest current concentration of religious minorities, especially after the wave of displacement following the ISIS occupation, which has left many populations still displaced.

Fourthly, we acknowledge that not all religious minorities are included such as the Bahai and Zoroastrians, nor the rich intertwining of various ethnic-religious identities such as the Armenian Orthodox or Armenian Catholic, Turkmen Shia or Turkman Sunna.

It is important to emphasise that the experience of being a minority is very much informed by where a person is situated – they may be a religious minority in Iraqi Kurdistan (such as the Shabak Shia) but be a majority in another part of the country (for example, in Najaf).

6 Selection of researchers

Our choice of a participatory methodology approach was informed by our decision to privilege who generates the data as much as what kind of data is collected. With positionality and standpoint central to our inquiry into the realities of women and men from a marginalised religious background, the legitimacy of the researcher in the eyes of the community members was crucial. This was especially relevant given the sensitive contexts: namely, situations of ongoing displacement, insecurity and trauma related to religious marginalisation as well as a serious trust deficit towards those who are not from the same community. Utilising peer research enabled us to remain sensitive to the needs, interests and priorities of those we were working alongside. This is because the participatory approach we employed centred on community members as colleagues and researchers of their own and their communities' experiences. As a result, the focus was on 'conducting research "with and for" the subjects of the research' while being conscious of the power balances that traditionally arise within the research process (Institute for Community Studies n.d.). This was important due to the personal and sensitive nature of the topics under study – gender and religious marginalisation – which meant that they would most appropriately be explored and addressed by those from within the communities themselves. The peer-researchers were predominantly identified through existing networks and our knowledge of the different contexts. They were brought together for an initial training workshop in Erbil from 8 to 12 September 2021. The research was undertaken during the period October 2021 to March 2022. A further online group meeting to share findings and learning among peer-researchers from the first focus group discussions was held on 30 November 2021. For a majority of the studies, first drafts were received and translated at the end of December 2021, with online feedback and discussion meetings held on 12 January 2022. Another in-person meeting in Erbil on 26 January 2022 supplemented these, as did regular one-to-one meetings both in person (in Duhok and Erbil) and online throughout the research and writing period.

For those whose reports appear in this volume, applying participatory approaches and undertaking peer research was a new experience. The majority of researchers had backgrounds either within the NGO/development sectors or as women's rights activists while a minority were academics with strong activist backgrounds in their communities. This was an intentional aspect of the selection process, whereby a greater emphasis was placed on community engagement as opposed to research experience, so that the

researchers in collaboration with their communities could begin to mobilise their research findings in analysing instances of injustice. Selecting members of their own communities to be facilitators of the group inquiries or focus groups created a more enabling environment to openly discuss and share experiences relating to religious and gender marginalisation. This was because the issues discussed within the focus groups were also issues experienced by the researchers and this reduced the likelihood of misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Through an empathetic approach and the sharing of their own personal examples, the researchers were therefore able to cultivate a space for honest discussions around what they found to be meaningful. In some instances, these group inquiries around traumatic issues proved to be personally and collectively therapeutic. This was because the research approach enabled an open discussion of challenges that usually remained hidden. However, through collective sharing participants realised that they were not alone in their experiences, creating a sense of solidarity and cohesion. The positionality of being from within the communities was also crucial in making it possible to tackle more challenging topics, as the researchers were aware of the issues within their communities – including instances of honour killings and forced marriages – and how to manage them in a manner which would not risk exposing women to backlash or negative repercussions, were they to share sensitive issues arising in their families and/or communities. Working with peer-researchers in discussing such issues also helped to remove any sense of judgement or voyeurism which might be felt from an external researcher and to move away from more extractive models of research. In this way, it was not so much the researcher's experience of matters relating to freedom of religion and belief (FORB) and women's rights, but their ability to connect with people and to make them feel confident in sharing personal details about their lives and experiences. In turn this allowed a greater insight into the everyday lived experiences of those from religious minorities and how these experiences impact on their rights to identify freely with and practise their beliefs.

We began the research process with a five-day workshop in Erbil to explore what it means to undertake a participatory approach, the research questions and objectives in understanding the particular challenges faced by women from religious minorities. This focused on their experiences as these relate to being women (and therefore how this differs from the experiences of men in their community) and to belonging to a minority (and how this differs from the experiences of women more generally in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan). It also described the specific methods that would be employed by the

researchers within their communities. Although some aspects of the research design were set – for example, the focus on the intersections of religious and gender marginalisation, the methods to be used and a broad sense of the thematic areas – the researchers were able to tailor these to ensure that these were relevant. A further delineation of the priority areas for discussion was negotiated with the communities.

The research itself took the form of two predominant methods: focus group discussions and participatory ranking. The composition of the research groups varied slightly by community and according to how each peer-researcher felt would best ensure participants were as comfortable as possible in sharing their experiences. In most cases focus groups consisted of approximately 12 to 14 people and were organised by gender and age, although there were some variations. Although the primary focus of the study was on the experiences of women resulting from their gender and religion, it was important for men to be included within the research as a point of comparison. Additionally, by disaggregating the focus groups by age it was possible to attend to some of the intersectionalities within gendered identities and also to mitigate some power dynamics that might arise within the groups where deference to elders could prevent younger women from opening up about their experiences. The researchers' knowledge helped to contribute to a sense of security for participants within the focus groups: for example, separate discussions were held with Yazidis inside and outside the camp setting and also with Yazidi survivors who had been imprisoned and enslaved by ISIS. Participants were identified by the peer-researchers through their knowledge of their communities and in conjunction with local organisations and leaders. Researchers made a purposeful attempt to invite marginalised people whose voices are most commonly excluded. The focus group discussions were held in accessible locations – often local NGO offices – to minimise travel for participants, and at convenient hours. However, the short time frame for undertaking the research and multiple commitments of the researchers proved the most significant challenge, especially as it coincided with the Iraqi elections.

The benefits of these two particular methods were that in using the participatory ranking exercise, the participants were able to identify and assess the selection of issues that had the most relevance to their daily experiences according to their relative weight of frequency and intensity. Through the discussions it would also be possible to gain further understandings and insights into intersecting inequalities, most especially among those

who are at the margins of their societies, without the lengthy time frame required by extended anthropological investigations. Furthermore, such approaches gave space for and directly centred the experiences and voices of the women and men from within these communities (Tadros 2020b). This was important as a means of enabling a certain level of narrative control, by relaying participants' experiences in their own words so that they had greater control over how they were represented. Operating within a group also helped people to share and respond to details that might not otherwise be raised during individual interviews (*ibid.*).

Within the groups, the peer-researchers were given the freedom to decide whether they preferred to begin with the participatory ranking exercise or the discussion component. Most of the peer-researchers opted to begin with the participatory ranking exercise as it would provide a framework for the discussion section; it enabled identification of key topics of import among participants and captured initial thoughts and perceptions, before topics were discussed in more depth or participants had too much time to consider their responses. As part of the participatory ranking, participants were invited to put forward the key areas in which they faced challenges, for example health care, dress/religious symbols, and transport. In some cases, researchers who were facilitating the group inquiries asked participants to name the issues and then rank them. In other cases, after discussions, the facilitators presented a number of standardised categories for participants to rank. Some forms of standardisation across groups, contexts and ultimately countries were crucial to allow for comparisons across the different group inquiries. Each standardised topic was discussed in depth with the peer-researchers, to ensure it was relevant and applicable to raise within the participatory ranking exercise and discussion. Each researcher was also invited to include their own challenges which they had identified during the workshop according to the specific contexts of their communities. For example, some researchers raised the issue of displacement and camps, as well as online harassment and blackmail, which they saw as crucial for understanding people's realities in their contexts.

Having collated the key challenges, participants were then invited to rank these from the greatest to the least according to their personal experiences. This could be undertaken in any number of ways. In some instances, the peer-researchers collated a list on a board or flip chart and participants were asked to vote on each issue, through a show of hands or by each participant numbering each challenge on the board according to their ranking. In

other groups, participants were asked to write individual lists ordering each of the topics collectively identified according to the priority they would assign to it. Each participant was also invited to briefly expand on their reasons for the order they chose. The results and analysis of the participatory ranking exercise undertaken by each group within each community are detailed within the reports, with particular attention paid to points of differentiation between groups from the same communities and the potential reasons behind these differing experiences and challenges.

The participatory ranking exercise was followed in most cases by a more open discussion, often using the topics identified to guide and anchor the second part of the focus group discussions in order to draw out more detailed information and examples related to these challenges. When facilitating the focus groups, the peer-researchers were therefore requested to focus on three things: specific examples of marginalisation experienced by participants, the reasons behind this marginalisation, and the impact it had on them. As a result, it was necessary to ensure a safe space was cultivated within the discussions. A great deal of attention was paid to ethics to ensure anonymity and to designing the inquiry in such a way as to avoid negative repercussions as a result of the research process. As such, emphasis was put on the need to respect and listen to the experiences of each participant and on the requirement that experiences shared should not be repeated outside the discussion group. As part of the ethics procedure, it was necessary for the researchers to begin each focus group discussion with a full explanation of the project and how the information would be used and shared – with no names or identifying features included within the reports – as well as establishing some guiding principles for the discussion in which participants would not be pressured to share more than they felt comfortable with, in order to ensure free and informed consent. The peer-researchers were also encouraged to draw on and share examples from their own experiences as a form of modelling for focus group participants, to make them feel comfortable and to open up the conversation. However, this often also entailed asking follow-up questions to ensure that specific details were captured, alongside more general observations. There was also a recognition that some topics might be particularly hard to discuss in a group setting especially where the participants may be known to one another. This was most particularly the case in instances of domestic violence, suicide and honour killings. With regards to these areas the peer-researchers used their discretion: enabling the women to speak in more general terms, rather than giving specific examples from their own lives or those of women who might be recognisable to

others in the community. In some cases, participants also chose to speak one-to-one with the researchers. The trust cultivated through the peer-researchers was therefore essential in allowing participants to speak about areas of sensitivity within their communities.

7 Inroads and limitations of understanding intersecting inequalities through participatory approaches

In recognition of the expertise and knowledge that the peer-researchers bring to the research process, their analysis and interpretation is foregrounded within the reports they have produced (Macaulay *et al.* 1999). Having researchers from within the community lead the analysis and writing of the research reports subsequently provided greater depth of nuance and understanding of the research, and also allows for connections between experiences and events to be made in new ways. It also deepened the researchers' knowledge with regards to the challenges facing members of their communities, feeding into their work as activists and NGO actors – as was the case for the Yazidi researcher in Bashiqa who through a greater awareness of the needs of marginalised women in her community gained a renewed drive to incorporate that understanding within existing and new projects. Undertaking the research process within multiple communities and bringing the researchers together in their exploration of FORB also allowed for shared learning between peer-researchers by creating prompts with regards to points of similarity and divergence from other religious minorities included in the study. One of the strengths of using participatory approaches and peer-researchers was therefore that it enabled an iterative process of learning from one another; this entailed learning about the challenges encountered with regards to undertaking these forms of research, about the experiences highlighted within them and the ways in which they may be overcome. This emerged through informal peer-support networks between researchers that arose during the workshop and group meetings. It was particularly thanks to relationships built between the young Yazidi and Sabeen researchers, whereby an almost mentor relationship developed through shared encounters of working on sexual violence within their communities and in advocating for women's rights. The focus was on conducting the research with small groups in each community and on foregrounding individual personal stories through an investigation into the intersections of gender and religious marginalisation. As well as having local applicability, the learning and recommendations

from these communities may also have broader policy and programmatic relevance that takes account of 'local priorities, processes and perspectives' (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995).

As mentioned, the aim of the study was not to explore at scale the differing dimensions of religious and gender marginalisation. Instead, the focus was on creating a snapshot of particular individual and collective lived experiences of discrimination in varying forms and in relation to specific issues, identifying patterns and commonalities that emerge within and across groups. Consequently, sample sizes are limited to approximately 50 participants for each study, often from within the same localities (although these often incorporate both urban and semi-rural participants), or occasionally across two regions. This means that the accounts provided within the ensuing reports are set within specific community contexts, and differences in terms of rankings and challenges may be faced by those of the same religion and gender in other locations. As such, further research might seek to undertake similar processes across different regions and contexts within Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan – specifically Baghdad and Southern Iraq where there are also a proportion of religious minority communities. However, one particular challenge that emerged within this study, and which further studies would also need to account for, are the different languages, dialects and vernacular expressions of Arabic spoken throughout the country. These may be particular to specific religious groups and geographic locations, and they were a challenge when translating the research and reports.

While recognising the knowledge and experience of the peer-researchers and incorporating that into the research process, at times it was necessary for the peer-researchers to set aside their preconceptions and expectations with regards to their communities' experiences in relation to FORB. This was so that the participatory approach would be successful in enhancing knowledge and understandings of FORB within the everyday lived realities of participants. Peer-researchers may rely too heavily within the analysis on their own encounters rather than being led by participants' understandings. There may also be a tendency to exaggerate the scale and intensity of a problem, for example, the extent to which religious identity impinges on employment opportunities since at times it can be challenging to differentiate the reasons why a candidate might be unsuccessful in obtaining a job, given the high unemployment throughout Iraq. As such, peer-researchers were encouraged to approach the research as a learning process, in which each individual participant is positioned to appreciate the value of knowledge of every day women and men and not dismiss it as less valuable than

the knowledge that is shared by recognised experts in the community, such as religious leaders or academics.

Each report went through multiple stages of review with the editors and data was corroborated through multiple sources including within and between the groups of the study, as well as other relevant literature and the editors' own research and observations. Although research was undertaken with Turkmen Shia participants, it was not possible to include this within the final volume. This was due to the lack of transparency in selecting a co-researcher and participants for the focus group discussions, as well as a lack of rigour in research processes and an absence of robustness in research findings. The report did not meet the quality control measures that had been put in place.

We also faced ethical dilemmas pertaining to the process of engaging with the reporting on the group inquiries. Even when names were anonymised, some statements that were made as people spoke freely could be considered as offensive towards another group's religious doctrine or could be seen as inflammatory. In such cases an editorial decision was taken to remove such statements from this volume altogether. This may be considered a missed opportunity in understanding perceptions of the 'other', or about the extent of hostility or mistrust prevailing in the communities. However, in such highly sensitive research in which participants trusted that we would always put their safety first and foremost, we decided to remove statements that may be considered inflammatory or even a form of hate speech. This emanated not from an intention to meddle with people's narratives or to censor them but out of a commitment to uphold the values of duty of care towards partners and vulnerable groups.

One of the challenges was to disentangle perceptions and interpretations of reality and what constitutes evidence. For example, where groups shared perceptions of insecurity, vulnerability to discrimination and so on, we sought to relay their narratives in their own words as much as possible. However, where examples from their lived realities were presented as concrete evidence of injustice, we probed further, and sought to corroborate the evidence from other sources to address any credibility issue with the data. An example would be a mother complaining that her child did not get a high grade in a subject because the teacher is discriminating against him/her on religious grounds. Her child may not have attained a high grade for all kinds of reasons, so we sought to deal sensitively but selectively with the examples given by the communities that are shared here.

8 Key aggregate findings

The participatory rankings aggregated below do not indicate or reflect the scale and severity of the challenges encountered by all women identifying with the religious communities included within the research. This is because communities are not homogenous and there are a number of intersecting factors that may impact on daily interactions and power dynamics, such as geographic location, socioeconomic background and level of education. Rather, the findings present through the lens of those who participated in the group inquiries what they consider is most affecting them in terms of everyday acts of discrimination. The analysis of the data from across different groups allows for an identification of recurring patterns of areas where women experience powerlessness and power. The combination of the quantitative data deriving from the participatory rankings with the qualitative data from the group inquiries allowed for a triangulation of methods to ensure the overall robustness.

Table 2 outlines the results of the participatory ranking exercise aggregated across all focus group discussions (FGDs) from all of the studies. Columns two and three show the priorities as ranked by the women; columns four and five outline the same threats and challenges ranked by the men. Columns six and seven show the overall ranking when both women's and men's votes are aggregated. Not all issues were raised by all participants – for example, while some men across the studies recognised the negative impact that customs, norms and traditions can have on the lives of the women in their communities, none of the men in any of the studies raised 'gender discrimination' as a threat or challenge. This may be because the men in the majority of the studies, namely the Bashiqa and Bahzani Yazidi, Christian, Assyrian, Sabean-Mandaean and Kakai studies, chose to identify threats and challenges they face, rather than those they believe the women in their communities face. Nevertheless, the findings are still revealing, and it is significant that no men felt discriminated against because of their gender, in comparison to the women.

It is worth noting that each researcher approached the analysis of the participatory ranking slightly differently. Some asked participants only to vote on the threats and challenges they felt were of the highest priority to them, often allowing participants to vote on more than one issue as their top priority if they felt there were threats and challenges of equal prevalence and severity. The studies on displaced Yazidi women,

Sabeen-Mandaean women, and Assyrian women are examples of this. In contrast, other researchers asked participants to rank the threats and challenges from highest to lowest priority and then calculated a final ranking by weighting the votes accordingly. The study on Kakai women is an example of this. Consequently, an issue that only received one vote as the top priority but ten votes as the second priority, may feature high in that individual study’s aggregate ranking in a way that is not reflected in Table 2, which only accounts for the top priority votes.³ It is also worth noting that the report on Christian Catholic and Orthodox communities does not include the participatory ranking figures, with Christian women’s priorities excluded from the table.

The 20 most cited threats and challenges overall, identified in the participatory ranking exercises for both the women’s and men’s focus groups, are shown in Table 2. The top five most cited threats and challenges have been colour-coordinated (see key) for ease of comparison between the priority issues identified by the women and the men.

Table 2: Aggregation of participatory ranking exercise priority list of grievances

Priority order	Women		Men		Overall ranking	
	Threats and challenges identified by women	% of women’s votes as top priority threat or challenge	Threats and challenges identified by men	% of men’s votes as top priority threat or challenge	Threats and challenges identified	% of votes as top priority threat or challenge
1	Education (access to and quality of)	39.3	Religious discrimination (including discrimination linked specifically to clothing and food)	28.3	Education (access to and quality of)	30.9
2	Employment and job opportunities	13.3	Education (access to and quality of)	19.7	Religious discrimination (including discrimination linked specifically to clothing and food)	16.6

³ The reports on Yazidi women and Shabak women used both approaches to analyse their participatory ranking data.

3	Health (including access to health and social care)	13.3	Safety and security	14.2	Employment and job opportunities	12.3
4	Safety and security	9.2	Employment and job opportunities	11.0	Safety and security	11.3
5	Intra-community customs, community norms and traditions	8.7	Early marriage (& honour killings)	10.2	Health (including access to health and social care)	11.3
6	Inheritance customs	8.7	Health (including access to health and social care)	8.7	Intra-community customs, community norms and traditions	8.3
7	Religious discrimination (including discrimination linked specifically to clothing and food)	8.1	Intra-community customs, community norms and traditions	7.9	Early marriage (& honour killings)	7.0
8	Harassment	8.1	Economy	7.9	Displacement and migration	6.3
9	Displacement and migration	6.9	Role of government and political participation	6.3	Inheritance customs	6.3
10	Early marriage (& honour killings)	4.6	Displacement and migration	5.5	Economy	5.6
11	Lack of freedom (to move around, be out in public, and make personal decisions)	4.6	Lack of freedom (to move around, be out in public, and make personal decisions)	4.7	Harassment	5.0
12	Economy	4.0	Domestic and family violence	3.9	Lack of freedom (to move around, be out in public, and make personal decisions)	4.7

13	Gender discrimination and marginalisation	4.0	Inheritance customs	3.1	Role of government and political participation	3.7
14	Invasion of privacy	2.9	Transportation and travel	2.4	Gender discrimination and marginalisation	2.3
15	Ability to celebrate religious festivals and carry out religious rituals	2.9	Tribalism	2.4	Domestic and family violence	2.3
16	Access to services	2.3	Access to services	1.6	Invasion of privacy	2.0
17	Role of government and political participation	1.7	Divorce	1.6	Access to services	2.0
18	Poverty	1.7	Military service	1.6	Transportation and travel	1.7
19	Domestic and family violence	1.2	Harassment	0.8	Tribalism	1.7
20	Transportation and travel	1.2	Invasion of privacy	0.8	Ability to celebrate religious festivals and carry out religious rituals	1.7

Source: Authors' own.

Key

	First threat/challenge in overall ranking
	Second threat/challenge in overall ranking
	Third threat/challenge in overall ranking
	Fourth threat/challenge in overall ranking
	Fifth threat/challenge in overall ranking

As Table 2 shows, education was the area where women and men of different religious minority backgrounds felt that they experienced the most acute distress. This is significant because without inclusive and good quality education, families are likely to continue to migrate in search of education opportunities for their children, and young people are also going to leave in search of opportunities to continue their education. Another leading concern was unemployment, which is endemic across the country, but as will be seen from the reports is an area where participants feel that their opportunities are significantly undermined on account of religious discrimination. Religious discrimination is a theme in and of itself and re-appears down the table under different themes such as public displays of identity in festivals and celebrations. The top ranked causes of grievances are interconnected and point to a vicious circle: the lack of personal and communal safety, education and job opportunities, all amplified by religious discrimination, making it more likely for families to try to leave the country. The more families emigrate, the more vulnerable those left behind feel, thereby increasing their desire to leave the country as well. The qualitative research demonstrated clearly the gendered dimension of the intersections of these vulnerabilities in complex ways. Sometimes the gender intertwining with religious marginality manifests itself in a clear pattern for women of non-Muslim religious minorities from different backgrounds such as Christian, Sabeen, Yazidi and Kakai. It was most evident in terms of new restrictions on mobility and freedom of movement, greater exposure to sexual harassment, greater vulnerability to gendered expressions of hate speech. On the other hand, some forms of vulnerability are accentuated for particular groups, such as displaced Yazidi women living in camps taking away their lives, or Kakai women witnessing their husbands being ridiculed in public spaces because of their facial hair.

9 Intended audience of the study

This study is intended for multiple audiences, all of equal importance. We hope this study is useful for academics researching Iraq and with an interest in matters pertaining to religious diversity. Academics more familiar with conventional methods of data collection (in particular surveys and interviews) may question the impartiality of locally led research using participatory methods. However, it is important to note that participatory methods are considered robust, and measures such as triangulation and corroboration of evidence allow for identifying and addressing any concerns over rigour. It is also worth noting that

when engaging with highly sensitive subjects as freedom of religion or belief in very fragile settings, conventional research methods can generate distorted findings. This is because in contexts where there is a trust deficit, people may not share their thoughts or experiences honestly or openly in a survey or an interview with an outsider (an outsider here defined as someone from outside the country or someone whose background makes them a stranger in the eyes of the interviewee). The use of participatory ranking for example, allows for quantitative data to be generated in ways that may be more authentic than data-gathering through anonymous phone calls or questionnaires filled out online.

Moreover, the use of a participatory methodology directly contributes to pluralising the narratives featuring in academic research. In view of the rising calls within academia to recognise the unequal power relations that inform research design, implementation, analysis and dissemination, participatory methods allow for a redress of whose knowledge counts, whose interpretation and analysis are considered valid and most importantly, the extent to which the process itself is multivocal and inclusive.

We hope that this volume also speaks to practitioners engaged in activism, development or humanitarian action who are committed to supporting community-led action to address everyday forms of encroachment. Given that the research involves community members in the central role of identifying and defining challenges and opportunities, we hope that this may generate opportunities for further conversations to follow regarding actions needed to redress issues identified. At the very least, we hope the space afforded in the group inquiries has allowed for an interrogation of complex power relations as experienced on the ground in a different light.

We also hope that this volume is relevant to policymakers in Iraq and overseas who would like to understand the priorities as expressed by marginalised members of various communities. Often policymakers have access to the views of religious representatives and elite (often male) self-appointed leaders from within communities. We hope the insights and voices of women and men of different religious backgrounds will help to develop a tailored and nuanced approach to policies to support inclusive societies and orders in both Kurdistan-administered and Baghdad-administered Iraq.

Finally, we specifically hope that this volume will galvanise transnational feminist networks to take into consideration how the findings of the research presented in this volume can be addressed through the women, peace and conflict agenda.

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Challenges Faced by Yazidi Women as a Result of Displacement

Turkiya Shammo, Diana Amin Saleh and Nassima Khalaf

Summary

The Yazidi minority in Iraq has become the focus of international concern due to prolonged persecution from ISIS, after this group invaded the Yazidi stronghold of Sinjar in 2014, and forced its citizens to migrate to the mountains, murdering many Yazidi and kidnapping Yazidi women and forcing them into marriages, slavery and sexual abuse.

This research uses mixed methods to uncover the lived experiences of Yazidi women and girls living in displacement camps in Iraq. Through participatory ranking and focus group discussions, this research centres the voices of survivors – those Yazidi women and girls who were kidnapped, raped and forced into marriage, slavery and conversion to Islam at the hands of ISIS – by providing an opportunity for Yazidi women, men and survivors to identify the challenges facing them as women from a religious and ethnic minority. This paper closes with recommendations for the Iraqi government, civil society organisations and the international community on how to ensure Yazidi women and girls can live in freedom and dignity with access to the full spectrum of their rights.

Keywords: Yazidi, women, religious minority, marginality, gender discrimination, Iraq, participatory research.

Turkiya Shammo lives in Sinjar District, Nineveh Governorate, and was born in 1995. As a result of the actions of ISIS Turkiya currently lives in a displacement camp. She holds a bachelor's degree in electronic journalism, and has worked with several civil society organisations within displacement camps, as well as participating in workshops, conferences and seminars related to rights. Turkiya has always believed in one abiding principle: the abolition of all laws that discriminate between the sexes and the adoption of appropriate laws that prevent discrimination against women.

Diana Amin Saleh is 27 years old and a sixth-grade student. Diana is a Yazidi survivor who was kidnapped by the terrorist group ISIS and liberated from their hands after three years of torture. Diana has worked with several civil society organisations, including the French organisation Yahd, the International Organization for Migration, and the Farida International Organization. Diana is a member of the Yazidi Survivors Network, and has also participated in several conferences and seminars related to justice and human rights.

Nassima Khalaf is from Sinjar, al-Qahtaniyah district. After the terrorist attack by ISIS on the Sinjar district, Nassima was displaced to the Kurdistan region and currently lives in a displacement camp under pieces of fabric and a cloth. As victims of a genocidal campaign Nassima believes Yazidis should be ensured human rights, and granted equality under the law. Nassima has worked with several civil society organisations, as well as participating in training and workshops. Nassima believes women should have equality with men in employment, wages, and an equal right to participate in social security, public and political decision-making; that women must enjoy rights that guarantee them freedom and dignity, free from fear and exploitation.

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1 Background

Prior to 2014, there were an estimated 500,000 Yazidis living in Iraq, however population numbers are now unclear. It's estimated that by mid-2016, 210,000 Yazidis had emigrated to Europe, particularly Germany (Minority Rights Group International 2022).

Of those remaining in Kurdistan, most live near Mosul and the Sinjar Mountain region in Iraq, with a few groups still living in Turkey, Syria, Georgia and Armenia. The Lalish Al-Nurani temple in Iraq functions as the main Yazidi religious centre and holy place.

Yazidism is a monotheistic religion, believing in one God who is represented by seven angels. The foremost of these angels is Malak Tawous, the peacock angel or king, revered as the leader of the archangels and most loyal to God.

Yazidi rituals are thousands of years old and include prayers facing the sun in the morning and evening, a three day fast taking place in December each year, pilgrimages to the temple of Lalish in Ain Sifni, as well as feasting ceremonies around the Yazidi New Year, known as Red Wednesday.

When ISIS took the city of Sinjar in 2014, they persecuted the Yazidis, burning their homes, schools and places of worship. Some girls as young as nine were kidnapped, sold, sexually enslaved, beaten and forced to work (Cetorelli and Ashraph 2019). So far, more than 2,000 Yazidi women and children are missing and in captivity (Arraf and Khaleel 2021), over 200,000 Yazidis are currently displaced in IDP camps (Yazda 2021) (18,000 in Shariya camp alone) (Travers 2021), and seven years have passed since ISIS committed genocide against the Yazidi people, killing an estimated 12,000 Yazidis (Nobody's Listening 2022). Displaced people have been living in encampments of tents made from pieces of polyester and cloth.

Generally, Yazidi girls and women are marginalised and excluded from accessing health care and education, as well as being deprived of job opportunities. Those who have returned to Sinjar continue to suffer from a lack of services and infrastructure.

Those Yazidis who survived kidnapping and enslavement by ISIS continue to suffer seven years after their ordeal began. Living in camps, they are deprived of many basic rights and have no access to mental and material support or access to employment.

Yazidi women are disproportionately marginalised due to their experiences with violence, kidnapping, enslavement, killing and displacement. Even if they survived the atrocities, they may still be in the hands of ISIS, or have lost mothers, sisters, or children to the violence. Upon their escape from ISIS, many Yazidi women still live with the daily threat of violence within the refugee camps where they are forced to live. Many have no rights or laws to shield them, leaving them marginalised, and unprotected from abuse and oppression.

Upon their kidnapping and enslavement, most Yazidi women were forced into converting to Islam. Their imprisonment was characterised by indoctrination, persecution, enslavement, severe violence, sexual abuse, beatings, and living through the trauma of war and bombing. Upon their release, carrying these traumatic burdens, Yazidi women have struggled to integrate back into their societies, despite their resilience.

This research deals particularly with the lack of support and services provided to displaced Yazidi women now living in refugee camps. While research has been conducted on the experience of the Yazidi, most does not address the experiences of displaced people as they are written in English, a language not spoken by most who are currently living in camps. This removes the ability of the Yazidi women to tell their own stories and describe their own experiences.

Designed as temporary shelter solutions, some women have lived in the camps for as long as seven years, where their basic needs are not being addressed. Services and support for women inside the camps is woefully insufficient. These camps lack basic resources to provide healthcare and education, there are very few economic opportunities, and jobs are scarce. Having lost their homes due to war, they are now forced to live in tent cities that are subject to the ravages of the elements – fire, wind, floods – leaving them vulnerable and in a state of uncertainty and flux.

This research has found much evidence of the great suffering and persecution experienced by Yazidi women. They are victims of violence, displacement and trauma, facing extreme challenges and a loss of rights, resulting in their extreme marginalisation.

The needs of Yazidi women are multifarious. They need access to education from both local and international organisations. This education should include information on their own rights, and how to access these rights within the framework of the law. Education will also have the added benefit of supporting the women to tell their own stories, which can be shared with the wider world.

The women are in dire need of health services, for both their physical and mental wellbeing. There is a lack of ongoing care and rehabilitation, as they have been abandoned in makeshift camps where care is superficial and cursory. They require job opportunities to ensure economic security, and they require a safe living environment, where they can access the services they need.

2 Introduction

Yazidis form a significant proportion of the population in the area that spans across Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The Yazidis form part of the larger Indo-Aryan group, alongside the Persians and the Kurds. While most speak Kurdish, the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Syria speak Arabic. The Iraqi Yazidis live across many cities, including: Sheikhan, Bashiqa, Bahzani, Sinjar region, and Baadhra, Sumail and Zummar. The Yazidi have one main shrine, a holy place for Yazidis around the world, located in Lalish close to Ain Sifni, the centre of Sheikhan district.

The Yazidis sanctify the sun as one of the manifestations of the creator, a source of life, and a sacred source in the cosmic system that provides beings with spiritual, intellectual and physical energy. The Yazidi teach the importance of seeking good for all mankind and then for yourself, and prohibit premeditated murder, usury, fornication, usurping the money of an orphan, and assaulting others. They advocate for goodness, peace, tolerance and love, and promote peaceful coexistence with all human beings.

Throughout the history of their presence in Iraq, since the Islamic conquest, particularly under the Arab and Ottoman emperors, the Yazidi have been subjected to harassment,

persecution, displacement and killing. Yazidi people have been massacred many times (some sources have counted 74 separate massacres (Nicholls 2020)) throughout history, for no other reason than the hostility expressed towards those of a different religion generally, and the Yazidi specifically.

The worst of these campaigns of persecution was during the era of the Ottoman Caliphate. Over a period of more than 300 years the Yazidi were subjected to genocide and military campaigns against them. Despite this onslaught many Yazidi remained steadfast in their beliefs, resisting their total destruction. However, this extended period of terror left them exhausted and displaced, having lost much of their homeland.

History is filled with evidence of the heinous crimes committed by Muslim rulers against the Yazidis – in Sinjar, Bashiqa, Bahzani, Sheikhan and other areas – their armies attacking villages and bringing ruin to Yazidi cities. Islamic fatwas justified the enslavement of Yazidi women, the killing of Yazidi elders and children, and the looting of Yazidi property.

2.1 The marginalisation of the Yazidis today

The Yazidis have been marginalised and persecuted by successive modern Iraqi governments, and in August 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attempted to exterminate the Yazidi people. Thousands of women, girls and children were taken captive, men were killed, property was looted, homes, temples and shrines were destroyed, and thousands of Yazidi people fled to different regions and countries.

Beginning on 3rd August 2014, ISIS began a campaign of genocide to destroy the Yazidis. Their actions are defined as genocide according to the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The 2016 report, *UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: ISIS is committing genocide against the Yazidis*, states that:

ISIS sought to wipe out the Yazidis through murder, sexual slavery, servitude, torture and degrading treatment. In addition to this, the imposition of poor living conditions that brought a slow death, the use of means that impeded the birth of Yazidi children, including forcing Yazidi adults to change their religion, psychological trauma, separating Yazidi women and men, and removing Yazidi

children from their families and placing them with ISIS fighters, thereby separating them from their community's religious beliefs and practices.

(Human Rights Council 2016)

The report continues by describing the specific persecution carried out against Yazidi men and boys, such as murder and forcing boys to become child soldiers, while Yazidi women and girls, some as young as nine years old, were sold in slave markets and kept by ISIS fighters in conditions of servitude and sexual slavery, often being subjected to brutal rape on a daily basis.

The impacts of the genocide are far reaching – 2,745 orphans have been identified, 68 religious shrines destroyed, and more than 100,000 people were forced to flee. Over 6,400 Yazidi were kidnapped, with approximately 3548 of them female and 2869 male (Shafaq News 2021). The Office of the United Nations for Human Rights added that the number of survivors who managed to escape ISIS was 3537, including 1201 women, 339 men, 1043 female children and 954 male children, noting that these statistics are approved by the United Nations and do not include material losses in property, land, livestock, agricultural, cars, factories, and others (OHCHR 2016).

The Iraqi writer Amin Farhan Jeju, in his book *The Yazidi Nationalism: Its Roots, Constituents and Sufferings*, refers to the reasons many have taken such an aggressive stance against followers of the Yazidi religion:

- Acquisition of Yazidi spoils and property;
- The eradication of the Sumerian-Babylonian historical and civilisational extension of the Yazidi people;
- Erasure of the Yazidi language;
- Eradication of the Yazidi religion, which is an extension of the Babylonian religion;
- Elimination of the cultural, historical and heritage monuments of the Yazidi people;
- Acquisition of the entire Yazidi regions and geography;
- Exploiting the human potential of the Yazidis, who are at the mercy of the invaders for the slave profession and their recruitment into the ranks of the invading armies;
- Stealing children and abducting women;

- Elimination of the Yazidi people in order not to develop their human, geographical, intellectual and administrative capabilities.

This intellectual, political and social barbarity led to the commission of a heinous crime against the Yazidis throughout the history of the Abbasid and Ottoman Empire.

ISIS invaded the entire Sinjar district, in addition to the cities of Bahzani and Bashiqa in the Nineveh Plain. The destruction rate in the Sheikhan district centre exceeded 95 per cent of the total number of houses, homes, facilities, and government departments within it. Many Yazidis were executed. For those who survived, many were held captive, forced into slavery, vilified as infidels, and had the Islamic religion imposed upon them. In Bahzani and Bashiqa, infrastructure and economic projects were destroyed, factories and institutions were looted, and orchards were burned. These desperate conditions have caused a monumental increase in migration and displacement. Camps for Yazidi survivors exist in Zakho, Dohuk, Sharaya, Baadhra, Eisian, Amadiyah, Sarsink, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.

Many others were forced out of Iraq, seeking refuge in Syria and Turkey, before attempting to migrate to Europe. The immigration spanned different social strata and included the wealthy, the merchant and middle classes, as well as the well-educated - engineers, doctors, teachers and holders of high degrees in various scientific and intellectual disciplines (Habib 2018). The number of Yazidi immigrants moving to Germany and other European countries offering asylum is estimated at more than 120,000, since the invasion of Sinjar on August 3rd, 2014 (Minority Rights Group International 2022). More than 1,500 enslaved and raped girls and women were brought to Germany for psychological and medical treatment.

2.2 The situation of Yazidi women and girls

The experiences of Yazidi women and girls at the hands of ISIS, especially young Yazidi women and girls, was different to those of Yazidi men and boys. As mentioned above, Yazidi women and girls, some as young as nine years of age, were kidnapped by ISIS and sold into sexual slavery. They were forcibly converted to Islam and transferred to and between various holding sites in Iraq and Syria. Those who weren't forced into sexual slavery were forcibly married to ISIS fighters under the official endorsement and support of ISIS leadership (Khoudeida 2016).

Many of these women ('survivors') were freed from ISIS captivity in 2017, but unable to return to their homes, as they were destroyed by ISIS, and they were brought to camps for internally displaced people (IDP). Other Yazidi women who avoided capture by ISIS were still driven from their homes and are also still living in IDP camps today.

In addition to the trauma caused by ISIS, these women and girls are living in displacement conditions where they have no privacy, where their tents are at risk of combustion, and they are unable to complete their education. If they have received an education, they are unable to obtain jobs. The customs and traditions within the Yazidi community that prioritise education and employment for boys are still operating even in the camps. Consequently, Yazidi women and girls are battling a unique combination of vulnerabilities. They are struggling to cope with the physical, psychological and emotional impacts of their experiences with ISIS, alongside the harsh realities of living in displacement while also still experiencing marginalisation within their own community on account of their gender.

3 Research methodology

Initially researchers attended a training in Erbil, learning how to undertake the research and approach the methodology. It was agreed the team would use participatory ranking within the context of focus group discussions to better understand which challenges and threats affect Yazidi women and girls living in the IDP camps and to what extent their lives are impacted by each issue. We decided to run the focus group discussions (FGDs) with women of different ages, to obtain an understanding of how challenges and threats have affected Yazidi women across the life cycle, as well as to involve men, to better understand how they perceive the issues facing Yazidi women and girls. Significantly, we also planned to run a FGD with survivors; those Yazidi women and girls that on August 3rd, 2014, were captured by ISIS in Sinjar, as we suspected they may be dealing with very specific issues that wouldn't necessarily affect those who weren't captured. We also set out to select women from different locations and of different social backgrounds, including those who were married and unmarried, in order to work with a more representative sample.

Therefore, the focus group discussions were as follows:

- FGD 1 with women in Essien camp 25 and under,

- FGD 2 with women in Essien camp 26 and over,
- FGD 3 with young men in Essien camp 18-35, and
- FGD 4 with survivors in Shariya camp.

We identified those in the camp who had experienced specific marginalisation, for example economic hardship or health issues, and contacted them via their phones to ask if they would be interested in participation. We decided not to involve the authorities in the camp as we have found that they can be biased and choose those known to them for participation. This would potentially skew the data.

We began by introducing the research to ensure the participants were comfortable and knew the purpose of the FGD and how the information would be used. We additionally took care to inform them that all information would be kept confidential. We began the discussion by asking the women about the challenges and obstacles they face in their daily lives. In the third FGD we asked the men about the challenges the women face, and how they as men support the women with these challenges.

In order to carry out the participatory ranking exercise, each participant had a paper and pen to write their own challenges. They went through one by one to explain their challenges and these were noted on a flip chart. If the challenge was mentioned more than once it was given a mark for each time. We wrote all the challenges participants came up with, calculated all the marks that each challenge got, and then reordered them according to the number of mentions. More on these rankings is provided in Figure 1.

We began by asking questions about the identified challenges and the women and men were each given an opportunity to speak. We encouraged participants to share their experiences, especially the women.

The main purposes of the research were to collect evidence to prove or disprove theories we had about Yazidi women's marginalisation, as well as to record facts and the nature of the suffering experienced by women who are subjected to violence and persecution. These records serve the purpose of describing to a much wider global audience the nature of the suffering experienced by displaced Yazidi women. Specifically, this research draws attention to the fact that Yazidi women and girls face intersectional marginalisation - they are persecuted both on account of their gender and their religious and ethnic identity.

The ultimate aim of this research is to shed light on the reality that displaced women and girls are living, so as to secure their rights. Specifically, their right to equality, their right to gain freedom and personal security, their right to have equal enjoyment and be protected by the law, and their right not to be subjected to any form of abuse.

4 Findings

Figure 1: Overall results of participatory ranking exercise

Displacement	13
Economy	8
Education	6
Health	4
Employment	5
Law	2
Early marriage and so-called honour killings	2
Social habits and social environment	2
Privacy and personal decisions	2
Transportation	1
Unemployment	1
Environment	1
Discrimination and inequality	1
Genocide	1
Cases of tent combustion	1

Figure 2: Participatory ranking results, aggregated by focus group discussions (FGDs)

The most important challenges and problems faced by Yazidi women in displacement camps according to the number of participants who ranked each challenge in first place.

Challenge/problem identified, and number of votes it received as top priority

FGD 1: Young women, Essien		FGD 2: Older women, Essien		FGD 3: Young men, Essien		FGD 4: Survivors, Shariya	
1. Displacement	3	1. Displacement	3	1. Displacement	3	1. Displacement	4
2. Unemployment	3	2. Economy	3	2. Education	2	2. Economy	3
3. Education	2	3. Health	1	3. Economy and job opportunity	1	3. Education	1
4. Health	1	4. Education	1	4. Health	1	4. Environment	1
5. Economy	1	5. Job opportunity	1	5. Early marriage and honour killing	1	5. Cultural habits	1
6. Privacy	1	6. Law	1	6. Law	1	6. Health	1
7. Early marriage	1	7. Transportation	1	7. Privacy and decision making	1		
8. Discrimination based on religion	1			8. Insurance and health insurance	1		
9. Genocide	1			9. Social environment	1		
10. Personal decision making	1			10. Discrimination and inequality	1		

All the participants were internally displaced people (IDP) and had similar common problems and challenges. For example, all the participants ranked displacement as their biggest challenge, however age determined how they ranked other problems. For

example, where girls were suffering particularly due to a lack of employment, adult women were more concerned with a lack of economy.

The women live under particularly challenging conditions in the camps, and for this reason many have health problems. They spoke about the lack of health services in the camp and that the health clinic is not able to provide adequate treatment. Men discussed the educational problems in the camp, and that due to their own responsibilities they were not able to attend school, while the educational concerns of girls were down to a lack of specialised teaching staff.

4.1 Displacement

For most, the biggest challenge they faced daily was that of their displacement. Many of those in the camps in Iraq have lived under canvas with no access to services or facilities for seven years, through extreme weather conditions. This displacement affects every aspect of life – from health to education to employment and economy.

The living environment in the camps is very poor – streets are not paved so people are forced to live in mud and dirt, while the lack of space and privacy means there is nowhere for people to securely store their belongings or find a quiet place to study.

Women are particularly impacted due to their increased time spent in camp – preparing the meals, looking after the children, and doing household chores. Many of these responsibilities can also be dangerous – in 2021 a woman in a camp was badly burned when a gas cylinder exploded while she was cooking.

Living conditions also appear to be having a more significant psychological impact on the women. With no support or relief, suicide among young Yazidi women has become an increasing problem. Anecdotal evidence from participants suggested that in 2021, seven young women took their lives in Essien camp, with a total of 16 suicides of young women across all camps. While these numbers aren't confirmed by external sources, there are a range of sources that highlight the high numbers of Yazidi girls dying by suicide (Murad 2021, Cultural Center of Caucasian Yazidis 2022, Mohammed 2020). Causes include both physical violence and emotional abuse within the family unit. Stress, caused by unemployment, financial strain and cramped living conditions, which exacerbate difficult situations and can be the source of fighting and abuse. Within the

camps the needs of women have been largely neglected – there is a lack of mental and emotional wellbeing services, and no centres exist to support women dealing with domestic violence, emotional abuse or online harassment (which is on the increase).

4.2 Education

Education was identified as a key challenge by older women. They are concerned by the low quality of the education children receive within the camp, exacerbated by the fact that families do not have the resources to support their education with equipment, additional tutelage or fees. For many mothers in the camps, they themselves are uneducated, and therefore are unable to help their children with their studies. In some cases parents are in fact dependent on their children to assist them – due to their illiteracy, or financially as they are able to secure better jobs.

4.3 Early marriage

Early marriage was a concern for older women living in the camps. Many had been forced into early marriage themselves, and they were afraid that due to the current cultural and social situation in the camps their children might also be expected to marry young. Traditionally, women in Yazidi communities from Sinjar are expected to marry early, and therefore not continue in education. Sinjar was formerly a predominantly agricultural society, and farmers wanted to marry for economic reasons, in order to have a wife and children to assist them in their work. Additionally, the area lacked schools and universities, making it difficult for girls to access education.

Early marriage not only impacts how women are perceived in the broader society, but it also limits their opportunities, for example in education. As early marriage increases rates of divorce also increase, and the older women have experienced the social and economic challenges arising from divorce.

For the Yazidi survivors they also mentioned this challenge. Having survived ISIS they are now concerned that in order for their families to manage the shame and dishonour of having a daughter who has been 'violated', they may choose to marry her early.

Instances of early marriage in the camps are higher because of unemployment and a lack of awareness and trainings for young women about their rights and legal status

according to the government and what the risks – physical and mental – of being married at an early age may be.

Although there have not been any reported instances of so-called 'honour killings' in the camps, these have occurred in Yazidi society in the past and due to the current stresses of the living environment, there is a concern this may happen again.

4.4 Making personal decisions

Within the camps young women have very little autonomy over their lives, with their parents making the majority of decisions for them, from who they are allowed to be friends with to who they should marry. Parents see this as a means of keeping their daughters safe in an insecure environment, but do not recognise the strain this lack of autonomy can cause for young women. This is not a particular cultural or familial constraint, but a result of the treatment many Yazidi girls experienced under ISIS. For this reason, the same constraints may not be placed on girls outside of Iraq, for example in Germany. The lack of employment opportunities for women in the camps also decreases their autonomy, as economic freedom would contribute to their independence.

4.5 Transport

Transportation is a particular challenge for young women in the camps. This is both due to the cost of transport and lack of freedom to travel for women. The camps are situated outside of city centres, meaning there are no taxis or mini-buses. Instead, transportation tends to be provided by private cars, which charge a higher fare to transport people from the camps to the cities. Men find it easier to travel freely, while women, traumatised by their experiences under ISIS, fear travelling alone due to safety concerns.

5 Analysis

This section explores the challenges identified in the FGDs in more detail, including in the participants' own words.

5.1 Women and displacement

The women in the focus groups were clear that girls and women were among the most badly affected by the 2003 war, and the subsequent genocide of the Yazidi people. One

woman, a 48-year-old housewife from the Essien camp, described how this has followed them into the displacement camps, with women being the ones who continue to suffer the most.

Yazidi woman tried to gather her strength after years of wars...the rape of girls and their sexual slavery and when they were sold to slave markets. There is no programme that supports women in the security sector, the legal framework, and economic marginalisation. These factors and the increase in violence has led to the growth of extremism, which makes women a target today in the camps for the displaced.

One of the young women, a student aged 20 from the Essien camp, agreed, stating how:

We, Yazidi girls, are most affected at the moment and suffer from many problems because we do not have the simplest necessities to continue life inside the camps. From the camp at the same time there are no mechanisms to support us until we can get out.

She emphasised that despite everything Yazidi girls have already experienced, there has always been more to come.

What happened to her [the Yazidi girl] in the past, of poverty, persecution, fear, wound, crying, and the voice of her orphaned children who were waiting for their martyr father, who sacrificed his soul for the sake of the country, and also taking responsibility within a society and despite the economic conditions, with all these problems they settled with the situation and then were attacked. This Yazidi woman and her children were displaced to the Kurdistan region and lived in camps for the displaced again. She began to gather her strength inside a torn tent to provide safety to her children until they complete their education. It is not easy to fight the conditions to be a successful mother.

Another woman, a 28-year-old housewife from the Essien camp, expressed a similar feeling, asking how Yazidi women are expected to continue living when their rights are continually violated.

How can this continue against an ethnic religious minority, and against a woman who has lived through injustice, persecution, rape, torture, killing, displacement and many other sufferings? Today, we are victims of the government and civil society organisations and we are constantly exploited. The future of our children is lost before our eyes.

It was clear that these women's concerns were not just for themselves, but also for their children and their children's futures. One woman, a 32-year-old housewife from the Essien camp, shared how:

The present and future of the Yazidi woman and the future of her children are unknown, we live at the mercy of aid. Will the situation continue to wait for someone to extend the hand of cooperation? Will we remain under the summer and winter camps, and will our children remain under the dust and mud of harsh days? What is this ordeal?

The women explained how living in the camps means they have no way of supporting themselves and their families, stripping them of autonomy and leaving their fate in the hands of others. One woman, a 20-year-old survivor from the Shariya camp, described how women and girls are already traumatised and extremely fearful from their experiences of kidnapping and sexual slavery at the hands of ISIS, and now they are facing even more difficulties being responsible for their children without support.

Because of the war, many women lost their husbands and fought the suffering of life on their own. Today, these displaced women are facing the most difficult stages of life, being single women and they have children and responsibility. The government does not help these women and their economic conditions are difficult.

Another woman, a 33-year-old housewife from the Essien camp, agreed.

I am with my children and we do not have a monthly income. We live on humanitarian aid from benefactors and we are waiting for a helping hand from all who belong to humanity.

5.1.1 Conditions of displacement

As well as living at the mercy of others, the women identified how they struggled to survive in their current living conditions. The 28-year-old woman described how the conditions in the camps are not fit for human habitation.

In some countries it is not accepted for animals to live under a piece of fabric. They do not accept animals being persecuted, and today we are human beings of blood and flesh, but we have been living for seven years under the camps of the displaced. The educational level in the camps is at a very weak level, as well as the level of health. If you need treatment you must go to a doctor outside the camp from a second city, with the car fare, and the doctor, with the costs of treatment and huge sums. This means that the financially damaged woman cannot get treatment if she is sick.

The women discussed how the living conditions in the camps are particularly difficult during winter. They must constantly weigh up the risks of using an electric heater with the need to keep their children warm. A 32-year-old woman from Essien camp says she is worried about her children during the winter, particularly at night.

During winter nights at bedtime when I put my head on the pillow I feel apprehensive because I think about what will happen if the tent burns while I and my children are sleeping. These accidents have happened before, where the tents have burned due to the electricity supply, so we cannot light the electric heater as we are afraid of burning too. At the same time, we do not have oil as an alternative to the electric heater. In the harsh winter, we need white oil to ignite the heaters, but not enough oil was distributed to the displaced.

This is not the only threat to the life and health of women and girls within the camps. One young woman, a student aged 21 from the Essien camp, explained how:

There are environmental, health, and climatic problems that greatly affect the lives of the displaced, especially women. There are many types of pollutants that increase the danger of contamination in the environment, especially for people who suffer from psychological and skin diseases. It has a negative impact on this affected group, including skin diseases such as lice and scabies. In the past years, there was a huge number of displaced people who had scabies and lice because of the environment. There are girls who work as workers and clean places near

toxic waste, and some of them suffer from terrifying and dangerous conditions because they are close to waste and inhale harmful smoke and are exposed to toxic substances. Sometimes the displaced resort to burning the waste and this exacerbates the dangers that threaten the health of the displaced girls.

Despite the awful conditions, some of the women described finding some hope and solace within the camps. However, this was short lived. For example, one of the survivors, a 20-year-old from the Shariya camp, described finding comfort in an initiative started by a women's organisation before it was hampered by a lack of funding.

In fact, I did not imagine that I would find comfort...There was an interesting initiative by women's organisations to open a number of shelters for survivors of domestic and community violence in the governorates of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk, which provided important services in saving the lives of many of them and encouraged them to interact with their families as they used to do, and help in encouraging public opinion to stand against women's crimes. Because of the lack of funding and the difficulty of sustaining the centres by women's organisations, most of them were handed over to governmental authorities to manage. This led to reduced assistance to those survivors who were marginalised of the weakness of the government and organisations after their return, and most of the survivors live in the camp. And this is despite the conditions of the war that they were liberated from, including torture, rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage and forced conversion to Islam. The survivors, after all this suffering, today live under a tent, and they are not taken care of by parties... it is just a talk not action, giving them courses, seminars and conferences on human rights and travels, and all of this is just sayings, not a realistic action and protective work on the ground. A large number of them are waiting for God's mercy in order to go to Europe to get their rights.

It appeared to the women that the only way to escape this continued life of displacement in the camps was to migrate and start a life elsewhere. They were clear that there was no way they could return to their homes, even if they had the option, because of the trauma they and their families had experienced there. For example, one of the survivors, a 20-year-old from Shariya camp, shared her response when people ask why she hasn't gone back to her original home:

I will respond to him with a word. If your family is buried in a mass grave in front of a house, will you return to your home being a displaced person? The most difficult thing is that they leave the cemeteries in front of the families of the victims... In front of my house there is a mass grave. A while ago I went to see my memories when I saw the cemetery. I cannot go back. How will I go back when I know that there is a cemetery of Yazidi victims?

This situation makes returning home impossible for many, leading to prolonged displacement.

The alternative solution to this continued displacement is to migrate. One of the young women, a student, aged 22 from the Essien camp, explained why Yazidi girls are choosing to migrate:

Now the girls are choosing to immigrate to European countries in order to get security and safety. They are able to reach the most basic necessities of life, and they share freedom and equality in a region that respects its sovereignty, and they are integrated into a country that respects women's rights and their existence. Therefore, women here in the camps feel lonely, insecure, and deprived of all their rights as women and girls. They are marginalised, persecuted and exploited on a daily basis, especially as part of a minority that does not have a law to protect and preserves them and their dignity. As a Yazidi girl, if I were to choose between migrating and my country, I will choose to emigrate, without any hesitation. Some people will ask me, 'why are you thinking of emigrating and not staying in the mother country?' The answer is that I will get away from the terrible violence that results from armed conflicts or from persecution of Yazidi girls for political or ethnic reasons.

5.1.2 Psychological strain of displacement

During the focus group discussions, it became clear that the impacts of displacement and the conditions within the camps were not only physical and environmental. The conditions also had a significant psychological impact on women and girls. One of the young women from Essien camp, a 19-year-old student, described how:

Displacement is a very sensitive and difficult stage, so it is expected that you will feel sadness, anger and other feelings when you have a major setback in life. I,

and thousands of displaced Yazidi girls live in an environment in which all suffering multiplies, on top of all the tragedies that we've experienced for seven years. We have been fighting hardships enough to bear the cold winter and the heat of summer. A large proportion of this suffering is borne by the Yazidi girl, even though she was the biggest victim, and now she is the victim of economic, social, and health conditions, and she does not feel the importance of her presence in life and these results. It has led to psychological and moral pressure and lack of community support from family and friends, and also a tendency towards feeling lonely and negative thinking, and she cannot bear all these pressures and feels weak and has no strength to the utmost.

Another young woman, a 24-year-old employee from Essien camp, agreed, explaining how this psychological strain threatens the lives of Yazidi girls.

Poor psychological states lead to suicide. Our stay in the displaced camps is involuntary, and it affects our future and the future of those girls who are young and have dreams.

It was the young women in the focus groups that highlighted the psychological strain of displacement, suggesting that it is something that Yazidi girls feel more strongly than the older women. The same 24-year-old explained how girls in the camps don't have anyone to turn to when they experience violence and abuse, and this contributes to their declining psychological state:

There are many girls who are subjected to verbal and physical violence. These girls are afraid and avoid society and family. They are afraid and choose silence rather than talking about what happened to them because they do not have a safe and secret party to go to and complain about what happened to them. Because of these problems, the girl chooses to lie inside her and suffocate because of her problems and what she is exposed to, and also this girl gradually avoids society and chooses loneliness and in some cases resorts to suicide.

A 19-year-old student believed that the fact that the girls are often orphaned and therefore have no-one to care of them also contributes to this psychological strain being felt more acutely by younger women.

There are girls who are orphaned from parents in Essien camp because they do not have anyone to take care of them, to help and advise them about life matters or to ensure they are raised in a correct and successful manner. All of this creates problems for them and they are sent away. They have to leave their studies and hard work, possibly experience early marriage, the danger of having children, and divorce cases. All these negatives lead to a case of suicide.

Many of the young women highlighted the increased incidence of psychological illness among young Yazidi women in the camps. A 26-year-old student from Essien camp explained there is a lack of support for the young women experiencing psychological distress.

At the present time there is no support body for psychological cases in the camp and there is an increase in psychological cases day after day. There are girls who are deprived of school and their ages do not help them to enter schools [by the time they are able to attend school again, they are too old for the school camps]. This is how they remain people deprived of everything and dominated by a feeling of despair, frustration, internal collapse, anxiety, negative thinking, and their inability to solve their problems. They cannot adapt to all the circumstances that surround them due to special circumstances, as a result of all these obstacles. All of these struggles lead to negative psychological states. Some of the girls are exposed to psychological pressure because of the lack of job opportunities and comfortable places, and these pressures can cause suicide.

One of the survivors, aged 24, from the Shariya camp, highlighted how much more significant this psychological strain is for the young women who have survived kidnap, slavery, forced marriage and rape by ISIS. She felt that while:

It is true that there were organisations that helped the girls from the psychological point of view, but the assistance was not continuous. Most of us, as survivors, our psychological problems continue to deteriorate. We need psychologists, and we do not have the costs of treatment, transportation and sessions. There was a health centre for psychological solutions that was opened for survivors in Dohuk. At first, they received the survivors, but with very bad methods and bad treatment. They accused the survivors of not being mentally ill, and there was an insult by the staff in the centre. Nagham centre is still there, but

there are only a few cases. They only receive transportation expenses of 1,500 thousand dinars. They pay. If the patient needs medication, they write, and the patient buys outside the centre on her personal account.

Most survivors do not have the material means to pay for these vital health care services, and so they are left to suffer in silence as their physical and mental health continues to deteriorate.

5.2 Women and the economy

One of the most difficult challenges facing women in the camps is having to be the sole financial support for their families in the absence of a husband, either as a result of being widowed or divorced. A 36-year-old woman from Essien camp described how this is especially difficult when there are limited opportunities to generate income.

Seven years is never an easy thing for mothers who are the breadwinners for their families. We try with all our capabilities to obtain support and provide for our children's needs, but unfortunately, we are marginalised in all respects. Economically there are no job opportunities, no health insurance, monthly stipend, and also education. The educational level is very weak in the camps because of the incompetent teaching staff. The health sector is at a low level due - mothers are forced to go outside the camp and buy treatment for huge amounts.

The consequences of this lack of financial support are far-reaching and can include preventing children from gaining an education. One of the young men, a 27-year-old employee from Essien camp, shared the experience of a widow he knows, who was forced to take her children out of school because of the financial burden it placed on the family.

I know there is a widow who lives in Essien camp, she has children and they do not have a monthly salary, no government support, and she does not have health insurance. This mother is the breadwinner for her family and sends her children to school. The school is covering all their tuition fees, but unfortunately the mother has taken her children out of the school because of the economic situation [the cost of other school related fees and needing children to stay away from school

in order to earn money for the family]. *This matter needs financial support, but the woman is alone, widowed, economically marginalised and lives at the mercy of suffering. She and her children have no support from any side. And this widow is not alone. There are thousands of widows, divorcees and marginalised women living under tragic conditions in the camps.*

Participants were also critical of the lack of financial support allocated to Yazidis in general, in the wake of the 2003 war and subsequent genocide by ISIS. One young man, a 21-year-old graduate from Essien camp, described how he believed this lack of broader financial support was what was keeping women stuck in the displacement camps unable to claim their rights.

Not long ago, nearly \$8 billion was allocated to Palestinian women. We, the Yazidis, there are 15-17 camps, the amount that has been allocated is only \$500 million, meaning the Yazidi women kidnapped, raped and abused and returned from ISIS are stuck living in the camps and their psychological conditions are deteriorating.

A 25-year-old man also from Essien camp, agreed,

In other countries, we always hear about women's rights and about organisations and institutions that support women, but in fact, so far we have not seen many organisations and institutions that support Yazidi women, especially the Iraqi government.

5.3 Women and education

After the displacement, a large number of Yazidi girls were deprived of school education due to financial pressures and a lack of schools in the camps. In Kurdistan, those who have been displaced cannot access copies of their educational records as many documents were lost during the occupation and sacking of Mosul and Sinjar by ISIS. Schools require this documentation as an entrance requirement, and so many Yazidis, girls included, are not able to return to education.

For those wishing to take external examinations, they are expected to sit these in the city of Mosul. Participants explained how this is particularly traumatic for survivors, many of

whom were held captive and subjected to terrible abuse by ISIS in Mosul. This is already a significant barrier, paired with the financial implications of travel to Mosul for girls and young women who have no financial support.

A 24-year-old survivor from Shariya camp described meeting with the Director of Education for the Nineveh region to ask him if she, and other survivors, could return to their studies.

When we go to Nineveh Education and meet the Director of Education, we ask him to go back to our studies but the Director of Education said, 'You can, when you take external exams, go to Mosul and take your exams there.' Despite the distance and poor financial means, despite all the tragic circumstances we went through, they ask us to go to the province of Mosul to take the external exams.

Another survivor, also aged 24 from Shariya camp, shared how they tried to explain to the Director how difficult it would be for them to go to the city where their lives were destroyed:

The Director said, 'I cannot solve your problem, and this [the external examinations] is an obligatory matter for everyone to go.' I told him that when you were busy with your studies I was raped, and when you were busy with your dreams, we were tormented between the borders of Syria and Iraq, and from Baghouz to Raqqa, and from Raqqa to places that were under bombing by planes... How could I go for an exam in the same city in which I was captive by the most horrific terrorist organisation, ISIS. How? I can go and see all the places where I was raped, and then sold to ISIS. How can I go and carry all the painful memories in my chest and take this test? Why were the feelings of that survivor who was raped, enslaved, killed, forced to convert to Islam, imprisoned, tortured, and sexually enslaved for days and years, not important? That innocent girl whose dream was to graduate and get a specialty.

This survivor also shared how her friend, a fellow survivor, overcame these odds and made it to Mosul to take the exams, only to find herself sitting an examination alongside an ISIS member.

She said, 'I saw one of the ISIS members in the same hall in which I was examining, and my hand trembled and I entered an unstable psychological state. At that moment I came out of the hall and withdrew from the exam because of fear and because it is not an easy thing to watch the criminal and the terrorist in front of your eyes and remember everything that happened from rape, slavery, murder and displacement.' These horrors that Yazidi women experienced led to severe physical and psychological problems, such as shock and severe depression, to the point of attempting suicide because of what happened to them.

It was clear to the survivors that Yazidi women and girls, and particularly survivors, do not have any rights and their trauma is not taken seriously. They didn't understand why the examinations couldn't just be moved to another location, closer to them, where they would feel safe. This is a clear example of the needs and experiences of women and girls being disregarded and minimised.

Another obstacle the young women in the FGDs identified was a lack of access to the education they required. The survivors discussed the years of schooling they'd lost while living in ISIS captivity and how this affected the school year they needed to return to. One survivor, aged 30 from the Shariya camp, explained how survivors would now be much older than their classmates at the same level.

We did not choose that ISIS would take us. Graduation was the dream of every kidnapped Yazidi girl. We were hoping that they would take this into account. We did not choose this thing.

The 24-year-old survivor who previously described visiting the Director of Education explained how options for re-entry were particularly limited for the survivors who had grown too old for school while in captivity.

Many of us tried [to complete our studies]. Some came back when they were young and allowed were to study, but if their age is above school age, they are not accepted.

Nevertheless, education felt even more important to these survivors than it did before. The previously mentioned 30-year-old survivor from Shariya camp expressed a desire to use her education to combat ISIS.

We go to fight those who wronged us with our pens and our testimonies. We want to break their weapons that kill innocent children. The killing of men, the enslavement of women and the rape. Study is our hope to get out of where we are now.

A lack of access to education is not something new for Yazidi women and girls. Participants discussed how Yazidi girls have always been discouraged from gaining an education due to the belief, both within the Yazidi community and wider Iraqi society, that girls shouldn't be educated. One young man, a 27-year-old graduate from Essien camp, reflected on this belief and how Yazidi women and girls are still facing obstacles even as beliefs change.

If a girl went to school and excelled in her studies, she would have been talked about by the people and the village about her, and we would hear and see the encouragement of the parents for us, but we did not see encouragement from them. Before we lived in societies that did not allow women to go to school, and the truth of the matter is that we grew up in poor rural areas and villages, most of them were inclined to agriculture and sheep herding, and that these two needed working hands because they are considered a source of livelihood, so many of them were deprived of an education.

In the Sinjar district, although it is a district, it lacked an institute or university for learning. Why? Unfortunately, because of the government's neglect. For this reason, many girls were forced to not complete their studies. Their families prevented them from going to school because of the lack of universities and institutes close to them, and our inability to go to regional or central institutes or universities because of their distance from us and the lack of income.

The consequences of not receiving an education when they were younger for these women are incredibly significant. The women in the FGDs discussed women they know who cannot read or write, and how this illiteracy compounds the discrimination they already face, both as women and as Yazidis. For example, one woman, a 40-year-old employee from Essien camp, described a fellow Yazidi woman's experience.

I see one of the most important challenges she is facing is not teaching her to read and write. I see that if she was studying and educated, she would not have

needed a man to accompany her to government centres. If a woman cannot read and write, she becomes the victim twice in society.

A 38-year-old housewife from Essien shared her own experience of not being educated:

I am a woman deprived of my rights. Do you know what it means to pronounce the word deprived? With this sentence, it means I do not have anything. I've been in Essien refugee camp for seven years. I live in this camp, I am 38 years old, and I am the head of a family. I do not work outside the house because I am not an employee and I do not have a certificate, but I only wash the dishes daily. I do laundry and clean the house and cook food for my children. I also wish that I was a studying woman, I would be the mother and teacher for my children at the same time, I would be a support for them in times of need. When they needed someone to teach them one letter I was looking at them with sad eyes, because previously I was deprived of education due to economic and geographical conditions, and also society was part of this process. They prevented their daughters from studying and didn't send their daughters to schools...Until this day we pay the price for not being educated. Here in the camp when we go to the hospital, market or government department we can't move a step because we don't know anything or even read a single word. For this reason we remain silent and we don't know how to arrange our affairs and the affairs of our children.

Another of the participants shared the regret women feel at not being educated, while acknowledging that their options were severely limited.

All mothers wish if time could go back, they would have chosen study and education above all, but this is a dream and not in reality because a large proportion of Yazidi women are uneducated, not studying. This is due to geographic and economic reasons, because the Yazidi population of Sinjar were farmers and schools were kilometres away from their homes, and Sinjar was geographically far from the cities, and does not have a college and a university institute.

Lastly, participants identified a lack of financial resources as a huge obstacle education for Yazidi girls and women. A 22-year-old student from Essien camp described how her

father passed away while he was a prisoner of ISIS, putting financial pressure on the family.

My sister and my mother were alone. We did not have a brother and we lost our father, so we were suffering from difficult conditions. My sister was a student at university and she did not have the money to complete her studies, but my uncles helped my sister until she completed her studies. I am also currently a sixth preparatory student but because of economic conditions and the fact that we are displaced we live under a torn tent deprived of our most basic rights. I think how and in what way I will go to university in order to guarantee my future, but I do not know if the financial conditions will help me. When I think about it, I feel bad, because in this century to be deprived of your studies and educational rights for financial reasons is sad and shameful.

While this participant's sister was able to complete her studies with financial support from her uncle, there were other participants who highlighted that some Yazidi families have had to make difficult and dangerous sacrifices to enable their daughters to access education. One young woman, a 24-year-old graduate from Essien camp, explained how her father gave up his medication so the family had the financial means to send her to school.

My family and I suffer from severe financial conditions, and previously my father was sick and stopped buying his medicine to give me school money. In this way I continued my studies at the expense of buying my father's treatment. He was sick and his health condition deteriorated, and then I completed my studies under the circumstances.

A 19-year-old female student from Essien camp explained how she is responsible for her family as her father has special needs, and this has led to her having to compromise her studies.

I am responsible for my family because my father is one of the people with special needs. For this reason, I was forced to work to take care of my family. I got the opportunity to work as a daily wage labourer for a temporary period so I transferred to online studies to enable me to work for my family. Our financial

conditions are very difficult as my father cannot work. I am responsible for buying supplies for my family because I am the eldest daughter in the family.

While this participant was able to transfer her studies online, some of the young women described having to give up their studies altogether. One of the young women, a 22-year-old student from Essien camp, explained how she had to take on the responsibility of her family.

Due to displacement and financially difficult conditions, I work for a daily wage, even though I was a sixth student, and I had to leave my studies in order to make a living for my family and to be the breadwinner for them, and I neglected my future.

The young women also discussed the lengths some of the Yazidi girls in the camps go to in order to afford the fees for their next year of school. One young woman, 22, from Essien camp, explained looking for work in the surrounding fields.

After the end of each school year, a large number of the girls who live in the camp are looking for work in order to get their school fees for the next school year, so most of them go to work in the potato fields as daily wage workers that do not exceed (Eight thousand dinars). All this for the reasons of the difficult economic living conditions and to obtain their expenses and complete their studies.

5.4 Women and health

Linked strongly to living conditions in the displacement camps, the participants were quick to identify the ways that Yazidi women and girls are affected by poor health. For example, a 21-year-old student from the Essien camp explained the impact of the camp's air pollution on her health.

Because of the air pollution in the camp's atmosphere, there are diseases spread in the camp due to waste and the spread of skin diseases among children and women in the camp, which caused many types of fear and pollution.

A housewife, aged 33, from Essien camp, agreed.

Because of living in the displaced camps, there are many health problems, including skin diseases such as lice, scabies, shortness of breath and bad smell due to waste.

Another housewife, aged 40, from Essien camp, highlighted how the camps have also exacerbated existing health conditions among the displaced.

I have two sons who have poor eyesight, and my husband has back problems. My eldest son is in the fourth grade of middle school. He loves school and is attached to education. We live in IDP camps, in Essien camp. We do not have an extra tent for study. When the sun sets, my children do not see that well and they need to be inside the tent before sunset. I am a mother to sons who cannot see like the rest of the children. I am sad and devastated to see my children enter before sunset and I cannot to help them.

Despite all the health problems the displaced Yazidis face, partly due to conditions in the camps and partly, particularly for the women and girls, down to trauma related to their capture and abuse at the hands of ISIS, there are not nearly enough health services for the displaced. One of the survivors, an 18-year-old from Shariya camp, explained how:

There is a health centre in the Kurdistan Region but this centre is not specialised for survivors. It is supported by a German organisation [GIZ] but there are very few services. There is a gynaecologist but there is no specialised equipment for examinations. There is no treatment or operations there, and even the staff at the centre treat the survivors badly in terms of style, speech and manner of dealing.

The survivors discussed how difficult it is not to have any healthcare available to them that is informed by the trauma they've experienced. They explained how they need a space that is safe for them physically and psychologically. They highlighted how organisations neglect their mental health requirements, despite their need for continuous psychological social support sessions.

One survivor, aged 20 from Shariya camp, explained how the organisations set up to help them neglect to ensure the healthcare is accessible to them.

There are Yazidi women and girls that need to travel outside the country for the purpose of treatment, and for which many do not have the right or expense. The organisations responsible for this largely neglect these families who need medication or to complete treatment in order to live. They are left to be humiliated again inside those camps. Here in the camps there is no one to listen to their problems.

Another survivor, aged 24, from Shariya camp, agreed, arguing that if these organisations set up the appropriate support and made it accessible to survivors in the camp there would be fewer suicides.

In view of the difficult living conditions that we face and the individual's psyche that is almost exploding from the psychological pressure that occurs with them, the Yazidi community has seen many cases of suicide such as burning, hanging and killing... we need organisations to open courses and psychological sessions.

One of the most significant obstacles facing the participants in their ability to access appropriate and quality healthcare is finances. For example, one young woman, a 20-year-old graduate from Essien camp, described how:

Hospitals lack having specialties and sufficient medical equipment. As for private hospitals, they are too expensive.

As mentioned in the education section, Yazidi women and girls, especially those left widowed, divorced, or orphaned, have very few resources available to them. A 40-year-old housewife from Essien camp explained how her limited finances mean she has to sacrifice her own health in order to give her children what they need:

At one time, I used to take them [her children] to the doctors, and they used to make glasses for them. Every six months, I had to take them to the doctor, but the last period, because of my financial conditions, I could not complete their treatment. My husband also had six operations. And due to over thinking and instability, I have anxiety and I suffer from severe pain in my head. I often lessen matters from myself in order to give to my children. I do not buy the clothes that I need, I do not go to the doctor in order to provide for my children. There are

hundreds of Yazidi women who live like me. We suffer from economic, health and psychological conditions.

Many of the participants felt that Yazidi women and girls had no choice but to continue to sacrifice their health because they had no way of leaving the camps without the finances to migrate. One woman, aged 20 from Essien camp, described how:

Displaced girls do not have the most basic rights to the necessities of life, and they fight the economic conditions and sacrifice their health because they do not have the money to leave the camp environment and change the atmosphere.

Despite the limited options available to them, the 40-year-old housewife shared how important she feels it is that Yazidi girls and women talk about these issues facing them.

Some of them [other people] say that this is my fate and some do not see the benefit of talking, but in fact we need to talk and unburden our soul from the pain inside us from years of fatigue, illness and instability and feel comfortable.

5.5 Women and employment

When beginning to discuss employment, particularly the lack of employment available to Yazidi women and girls, the participants were quick to recognise the limitations that exist for all women and girls in Iraqi society when it comes to work. However, one of the young women, a 20-year-old graduate from Essien camp, identified how Yazidi women and girls are uniquely burdened because they have lost so many men in their families due to war and genocide.

We know very well girls' situation with regard to work within a patriarchal society, which largely rejects the work of girls or women. There are many families who do not have a man to work, so women are forced to work under any pressure and at any cost, and here comes the society's rejection of them, instead of encouraging them to support their families. And exploiting women at work because they need that work, and this is considered the biggest insult to society and the laws of the country. And there is no consideration of women's labour rights.

In addition to these challenges, a 26-year-old female graduate from Essien camp outlined how Yazidi girls are consistently subjected to discrimination in the camps when they try to work.

There are many Yazidi girls who own small projects and have great ideas and capabilities and work in multiple places in the camp, for example: restaurants, beauty salons, sewing, kindergartens, music, but there are different groups of people who criticise working girls who work for themselves and their family, for societal reasons, because they are girls and they should not work outside the home. They look at them inappropriately and that detracts from them and their reputation. These girls are also subjected to verbal and emotional harassment by people when all they're doing is demanding their most basic rights and nothing more.

The participants discussed the role of various organisations in the camps in supporting displaced people into employment. The aforementioned 20-year-old female graduate outlined how these organisations are failing Yazidi women and girls, discriminating against them in favour of Muslims.

There is discrimination against Yazidis and in favour of Muslims by organisations – they are less likely to hire Yazidi people, and the organisations have a lack of interest in education and camp management. The organisations that are working in the camp tend to accept a strange employee for work rather than us, although we have the same certification and skills. And when there is a job opportunity, we see that girls are marginalised once again, the pressures we face in studying and the lack of space in the camp is not taken in consideration, a stranger will come without having enough skills like us and will be accepted as employee.

Another survivor, a 20-year-old from Shariya camp, explained how there are many organisations and institutions set up to work for the benefit of the survivors, but in many of these the Yazidi survivors are not accepted because they survivors do not have certificates of competency.

Job opportunities are not available to survivors despite their suffering, and many survivors desperately need these job opportunities as many are the breadwinners for their families. All these organisations and institutions are working under the

banners of humanity minority rights, human rights, survivors' rights and compensation, they do this in name only. They do not work for the benefit of the survivors and their cause. If their goal and their suffering were correct, they would have helped those survivors who were psychologically, healthily and economically persecuted.

This discrimination is one of the reasons that Yazidi girls are leaving their studies before completion. They feel that there is no hope of employment even if they are to graduate. A young woman, aged 26, from Essien camp, explained how the:

Distinction between Yazidis and Muslims is very clear in terms of employment, appointments, job opportunities and the right to live in the camp and all of Kurdistan, such as the distinction that occurs between the Yazidis and the Muslims of Sinjar in the dealings that occur by the parties, the people, the government and the organisations.

Participants explained how Yazidi girls felt that the only option left to them to earn money is to go to the potato fields and work for a small amount. They have no other solution, despite their young age and education.

A 36-year-old woman from Essien camp said providing Yazidi women with job opportunities would reduce their marginalisation, especially when they are heads of their families like herself.

The main problem in the camps is that there is no guarantee of an end to discrimination against women and girls everywhere, as there are still significant inequalities in the labour market in some areas, with women systematically denied equal access to jobs. The government need to provide job opportunities, especially for women in a vulnerable situation, so that women can find private work for themselves. They must be supported in all sectors in order to reduce the marginalisation currently experienced by women.

When there are job opportunities available to Yazidi women it can be very difficult for them to take them, especially if there is no-one to look after their children while they're away. A 28-year-old housewife from Essien camp explained how:

There is no continuous work for women and we need job opportunities for marginalised women, especially women who provide for their families. If job opportunities are available, will you go? Yes, once I got a 40 day job opportunity and went in, but my children's livelihood and future was affected because they had no one to take care of them.

However, another of the women, a 33-year-old from Essien camp, emphasised how employment can help to foster Yazidi women's independence and help her psychologically.

Some of the organisations and institutions have provided job opportunities for women but for a limited period. These women need continuous investment in order to be able to form a healthy family away from problems and challenges, suicide and social problems due to economic conditions and displacement. It is difficult for a woman all the time to stay in her tent and have the responsibility of the family. Years and days are the same in the tent, suffering and problems, and the atmosphere does not change. This in itself constitutes a bad psychological state and its result is negative.

A 33-year-old employed man from Essien camp agreed, explaining how:

There was a job opportunity and I personally sent my wife to get out of the tents and improve her psychological condition. Other families did not allow women to work outside the home. I sent my wife to convince the families to send women to work, and indeed she succeeded with my idea and many women went to this opportunity. They say shame on the man that the woman goes to work, but this woman broke the barrier and there is nothing wrong with the woman working.

This suggests that there is the potential for attitude change towards the freedoms of women and girls to work in the Yazidi community. However, they still face substantial obstacles – from wider Iraqi society, the reality of living in the camps and the trauma of the horrors they experienced at the hands of ISIS.

5.6 Women and laws

Many participants raised the issue that Yazidi women and girls are only truly recognised and considered by political parties and decision-makers when the Yazidi community's support would benefit them. One young woman, a 24-year-old graduate from Essien camp, explained how Yazidis are robbed of their rights until there is an upcoming election.

We are genuine Iraqi citizens, but these words only mean something at the time of the elections, for their political interest. They affirm that we are an ethnic minority and we have constitutional rights, but the reality is the opposite. Yazidi girls are marginalised from all service sectors in Iraq and girls are tormented. They were victims and are still victims of war and terrorist acts.

A survivor, 27, from Shariya camp, explained how decision-makers and organisations are negligent towards the young women and girls who have survived ISIS, even though there is legislation designed to compensate survivors.

It is true that there is a law for Yazidi survivors by the Iraqi parliament, but it is only ink on paper and there is no implementation by them. If this law is implemented, there will be a number of important compensation measures for women who were captured by the Islamic State, including financial compensation, rehabilitation, medical treatment, and economic opportunities. The law also considers crimes against the Yazidis as genocide and stipulates that the perpetrators of 'kidnapping and captivity' shall not be included in any 'general or special amnesty (forgiveness)'.

More specifically, Yazidi girls and survivors feel betrayed by the Iraqi government for not taking more action to free girls being held captive in the Al-Hol camp in Syria. Al-Hol camp is one of the camps where ISIS women live in Syria, and many Yazidi women and girls are trapped there. Families of those women and girls demand the government bring their daughters and family members home. But so far the Iraqi government has failed to take action, and the reasons why are unknown. One of the survivors, 24, from Shariya camp, explained how:

The fate of a large number of Yazidi girls and women is still unknown in the Syrian Al-Hol camp, and there is no serious move by the government to reveal the fate of these female survivors, the captives. Inside that camp there are thousands of ISIS women, steeped in the ideology of ISIS and the approach of killing and capturing the Yazidis. They see that we are the minority. They see Yazidis as infidels. This is the motto of the ISIS women in the Syrian Al-Hol camp.

Another survivor, 19, from Shariya camp, explained how the survivors in Al-Hol camp cannot reveal they are Yazidi because of fear of repercussions at the hands of those women still linked to ISIS. And yet, the government still does nothing to protect them.

Al-Hol camp is located in Syria. Yes, they [the government] know, but they say that we cannot go and liberate the women and children. They cannot show that they are Yazidis. They are afraid there of all ages.

Participants also discussed the fact that the government have not come and seen their suffering in the Iraqi camps with their own eyes, and instead installed an administration that has no displaced people in it. A 25-year-old male graduate from Essien camp described how some survivors were invited to Baghdad, however he feels that this did not adequately show the government their true suffering.

Why did they not choose once to come and see the suffering for themselves? In the camp administration in Essien, there is no displaced representative and we have a lot. The graduates are men and women, all employees are from the host community, not from the displaced.

Nevertheless, despite the silence and lack of support from the government, participants spoke about Yazidi women and girls who are stepping forward and speaking out to claim their rights. A 38-year-old housewife from Essien camp described what she has learnt through her displacement.

I have learnt to look at promising women and the change that they can make in the fields of claiming their rights. It is true that no one encourages displaced women, there are groups and organisations that only gather women and give them courses. It encourages them verbally, nothing more. It means ink on paper or empty words without actual help. There is no serious, effective action taken by

anyone. Displaced women are marginalised at the time of the elections and their right to vote is given up. The women were supposed to be encouraged and told that they can achieve democracy and bring about change with their votes, given promises their rights won't be stripped away, but the opposite happens. In every election, a women's representative goes to the Iraqi parliament in the name of the women group. But this is in name only. She is a representative of her party, a politician. Women in the camps must understand that they are on the right path. The road does not seem short and it may take several years until we get a change in our current reality, get a safe place and go back to our homes. It may be a long time until we can be leaders in our city, but in the end, we women appreciate the ability to make our voices heard to the opportunity to be leaders in our city.

5.7 Women and early marriage

FGD participants identified early marriage as a negative phenomenon taking place within the camps. A women, aged 24, from Essien camp, outlined some of the reasons for this:

The early marriage of many girls is done for the sake of her dowry - so that her family might cover their expenses for the next year. An unmarried girl can be seen as a disgrace or a problem on the shoulder of the family. Early marriage is seen as better than growing old having no one. This is a very common phenomenon in this society. The marriage of minors has a great impact on their children. Most will likely not be born perfect, meaning that they are physically handicapped or psychologically disturbed when they grow up.

A 19-year-old female student from Essien camp expanded on the role disgrace has in forcing girls into marriage:

[There are] rape cases in the community, but for social reasons that are not mentioned. When we come to the side of the law and legal accountability, the defendant is not held accountable because the clans are responsible for solving the problem. But they don't solve the problem with equality, they cover the problem. At the expense of the girl, the girl is given to the person who raped her and they give her in marriage because for the family this is considered a matter of honour and shame.

Another female student, aged 22, from Essien camp, identified how the lack of adequate schools and quality education contributed to early marriage because it led to girls' needs being ignored.

The lack of adequate schools in the camps and the lack of assistance for families who lose their tents to fire, is largely neglected by government and other organisations.

However, as with education and employment, participants recognised that early marriage has always been an issue in the Yazidi community, and it is not just a result of being displaced. As reflected earlier, this was largely due to the agrarian nature of the society, and the desire of farmers to marry early, to have someone to share the burden of labour.

Nevertheless, being displaced has played a particular role in increasing early marriage because, as described by a 22-year-old woman from Essien camp, there is a lack of rehabilitation and no safe environment for Yazidi girls to recover from their trauma.

[They cannot] integrate with reality. Some of them do not have a breadwinner for their family or in the war their father was killed and their mother kidnapped and she is now alone with her sisters. There is psychological pressure on her and a great responsibility despite her young age and she does not have a second solution, so she leaves school and goes to marry a boy who is also a minor. They are two children who are 16 years old, and therefore the result after some months would be divorce [as they were too young for marriage], and this creates greater problems.

Divorce was identified as one of the most significant consequences of early marriages, which leaves women and girls as the breadwinners of their families, unsupported and outcast. One of the young men, an unemployed 26-year-old from Essien camp, explained how divorce is increasing in the camps because of early marriage.

There are problems against underage girls because there is no awareness and this mixing of groups leads to early marriage [girls in the camps are not mature enough thus they do what their friends do, which includes marrying at a young

age]. *There should be a right of childhood, but there is a failure to provide a safe and stable life and environment, and this creates negative consequences and leads girls marrying at a young age, and now the divorce rate is increasing in the camps.*

A 21-year-old woman, a student from Essien camp, agreed.

Underage marriage in general in the camps of the displaced is a dangerous phenomenon for the lives of girls who marry at a minor age, and their lives lead to an unknown future, instability, many problems and challenges, and because of their age, because these girls are not the place of responsibility for marriage, a large percentage of people who marry at a young age led to a state of separation (divorce).

5.8 Women, social habits and their environment

The participants discussed the environment that the Yazidi women and girls live and grow up in. One of the young women, a 24-year-old graduate from Essien camp, described how:

As a Yazidi girl, I have not yet been able to obtain my most basic rights and freedoms. As a Yazidi young woman, I have lived a tragic life of genocide, murder, and kidnapping, and there are still members of my family with the terrorist organisation ISIS, they are captive and the fate of their lives is unknown. My sisters and I live in a common tent, and even the bathrooms are shared, and sometimes even the clothes and bed are shared. I, and all the Yazidi girls who live in the IDPs camps, do not have privacy, especially as we Yazidi girls live in a clan society... a girl cannot go out alone and wear the clothes she likes, and she cannot make her own decisions and act according to her desires, due to being a girl and living in a clan society. Because of this custom in our society, we avoid and stay away from the things we want and dream about and hope for, because of the fear of the family that these things will damage reputation.

Every society has its own customs and traditions. In eastern societies, there are closed clan societies which impose specific rules and expectations which can curb freedoms. The

Yazidi are a form of clan society - imposing laws on the lives of their people, particularly women and girls.

However, inside the camps there is no access to the support living in a clan society would ordinarily provide. One 24-year-old female employee from Essien camp described how:

Yazidi girls in the camp are among the most affected group. Inside the camp, there is no specific party that supports marginalised girls who have been persecuted and they are currently living through crises and suffering. As much as we need financial support, we miss and need moral support and encouragement. There are girls who have beautiful talents and abilities, but no support. The community should take care of them, support them and support their talents, to be prominent personalities, achieve their dream, because the displaced girls need support and assistance at all times.

5.9 Women and online exploitation

Technology, and the world of social media in particular, was discussed as a negative aspect of the environment Yazidi girls are living in. A 19-year-old female student from Essien camp described how using social media has opened Yazidi girls up to ridicule and abuse which they have then been blamed for:

With the development of technology and the emergence of social networking sites, there have been negative experiences a result of the use of communication sites by the community. Many Yazidi girls used the communication sites on a daily basis and for many hours. Many were victimised on these communication sites - electronic exploitation by young people and exposure to ridicule and electronic mockery. This silenced the girls. In our tribal society, even if the girl is innocent, the blame is due to her for using the communication sites and showing her image and personal information on her page in the communication sites.

5.10 Women and traditions and customs

The women in the FGDs identified that beyond the difficulties of displacement they are also restricted by traditions and customs that determine how men and women should

live, both within the Yazidi community and within wider Iraqi society. A 21-year-old female student from Essien camp outlined how women and girls are marginalised within cultural expectations and traditions:

The daily or monthly expenses that women and girls receive is less than a little in most families compared to young men in their daily expenses. A discrimination that occurs in most eastern societies is choosing a young boy over a girl from childhood until they reach the age as if they are a disgrace to that family. The same goes for inheritance. In most cases the young man gets the largest part or the entire inheritance, and there is no way for women or girl to do that, and even if the family are alone (lost their father) in that case, the decision is up to the uncles. The school fees have had a great impact on the family's livelihood. Marriage of close relatives or cousins to each other was and still is a common phenomenon.

A 38-year-old housewife from Essien camp agreed that these differences between men and women are established when children are young:

Since childhood, society has begun to make these differences between male and female, by categorising clothes, toys, and behaviour into "boyish" and "girlish", in addition to the role of education, propaganda and media in this. Thus, social conditions depict the male character: (aggressive - intelligent - strong - active) and the female character: (negative - ignorant - obedient - passive). [Kate] Millett sees that this falls within an ancient and universal scheme to ensure the continued domination of one human group over another, the first being dominant due to the "virtue" of being born male, and the second being subordinated due to the "vice" of being born female [Millett 2016].

She went on to explain how this belief that men are dominant has affected her, and continues to affect Yazidi women like her.

Here the mother bears the greatest responsibility (for clothing, eating, drinking, washing, food) because we always repeat this phrase and say the father is the guest and he cannot stay at home because he goes to work to provide material (financial) support for his children, and he is their backbone and provides them with a suitable life. Yes, sometimes the husband, if he is at home and does not

have work outside the house, he helps his wife by raising the children, but the domestic work here in the eastern societies the husband does not help his wife, because of societal expectations. This has a negative impact on the cultural future of our societies, and sometimes the woman is the main reason for her husband not helping - by not accepting her husband's help with the housework. She says this is a woman's work, why do you do this and that is why the husband avoids helping his wife, this is from the woman's side... In life they use this phrase 'males for external work, females for domestic work'.

Many Yazidi women have lost their husbands. In these cases the restrictions placed on them by these traditions and customs can be even worse. They have no choice but to break traditions in order to provide for their families. For example, a 48-year-old housewife from Essien camp, explained how:

My husband was killed in 2006 by an explosive device along with one of his soldiers. He was a soldier and fought for his country and land, but in the end he was a victim of acts of terrorism and left behind his wife and children who were younger. After the martyrdom of their father, my children suffered a lot. I was responsible for my children and their upbringing and I was sending them to school. I was taking care of all the expenses of the study and at the same time our financial conditions were very difficult, and with the restrictions of society being a widow, I have a kind of responsibility different from the rest of the women who have husband. For a widow or a divorced woman, this is a different matter and I must bear all the difficulties. I saw problems from all sides, even when I send my daughters to school, the blame of society falls on us, why? You send your daughters to school or college, she is a girl, and if there is any problem, you will be responsible. Even when we were in Sinjar in 2014, we were sending our children to schools with great fear. In Sinjar, most of the schools were Muslim, I was supposed to stop my daughter from studying, but she continued to complete her studies, even when we fled from Sinjar to Kurdistan.

Participants highlighted that women who try to break out of these traditions and customs are sometimes met with violence in an effort to maintain the status quo. The 38-year-old housewife explained that:

Women are afraid to show their capabilities in the complex political and economic conditions that the country is going through, especially while living in displacement camps. This is the biggest fear for women leaders, those who possess superpowers but must remain silent, their physical potential quashed by violence.

5.11 Women, privacy and personal decision-making

Young women within the camps have little autonomy in their lives, and their fathers make most decisions for them, such as who they will be friends with or who they should marry. This is a challenge for most young women because they are not included in decisions about their lives. Parents see this as a way to keep their daughters safe in an unsafe environment but are unaware of the pressure this causes for girls and young women. This is not a particular cultural or familial constraint but a result of the experiences Yazidi women went through under ISIS. These same restrictions are not imposed on Yazidi women outside of Iraq (for example in Germany). As already discussed, the lack of employment opportunities for women within the camps reduces their independence. If provided with job opportunities having their own income would contribute towards independence.

A 38-year-old housewife from Essien camp explains:

I, as a Yazidi woman, cannot make my own decisions, as I belong to a clan community, and there are laws, obligations and responsibility on the Yazidi woman. All this responsibility and pressure regarding social customs and traditions. If a woman is married and has children, she may have a house and a family, and she should take responsibility for her home and children. But she has no right to participate in making all the decisions that pertained to her life, even if the decisions concerned the lives of her children.

Even those women without husbands are not allowed to make their own decisions. Another woman, 33, from Essien camp, described not being able to make any decisions without gaining permission from her husband's house, in his absence:

I can't move one step without taking permission from my husband's house because now I am their responsibility and the tribal order does not accept that

because I am a widow and my husband is missing and I have not known anything about him since August 3, 2014 until now. My children do not have news about their father, who did not get enough from his tenderness, and now I take care them being their mother and father, this is an enormous responsibility on my shoulders. Sometimes I need treatment or should go to the market, but I can't do that. They find it inappropriate. Being the wife of a missing husband they ask me to complete his documents and send it to the Martyrs Department in Mosul. But I cannot go and complete the file of my missing husband unless my brother-in-law accompanies my journey.

Women are even further restricted if they then lose additional male members of their husband's family. Not only do they experience further trauma, but they find themselves unable to enter public spaces and thereby unable to make the decisions that need to be made for their family.

A 30-year-old housewife from Essien camp shared a painful example of this:

On August 3, 2014 I lost my husband. He was kidnapped and I did not hear from him for a few years. I always watched social media and television in the hope that I would see something about my husband. At one time, me, my father-in-law and my mother-in-law were watching a news tape on TV from ISIS. They sent the tape. I saw my husband among a large group of Yazidi men. Then I was very happy. I said, 'Finally, I have a glimmer of hope.' Then my father-in-law and I decided to look for him. We tried everything, and we didn't hear any news.

Now my father-in-law has died, and I can't go anywhere because of what society has to say about women going places alone. So I am unable to do anything for myself and my children.

My eldest son is 12 years old. He had a shock from the time he lost his father. He suffers from amnesia for seven years. He goes to school and the teachers help him through the school stages. He comes home and ask him what are your homework? He replies, 'I don't remember,' and we have to ask his friends.

5.12 Women and transport

As previously mentioned, transportation is a particular challenge for young women living in the camps. This is due to the cost of transportation, as well as a lack of freedom to travel for women. Since the camps are outside city centres, there are no taxis or minibuses, and instead camp residents have to rely on private cars that charge a higher amount for transportation from the camps to the cities. It is easier for men to travel freely. It is difficult for a single Yazidi woman to travel alone as there is still a lot of fear following their horrific experiences at the hands of ISIS.

A 20-year-old woman from Essien camp described how limiting it is to Yazidi women and girls to not have access to affordable transport:

Many female students do not have a car subscription in order to go to school, and also many displaced families today are in dire need of transportation in the camps because of their poor conditions.

5.13 Women and discrimination and inequality

While participants in the FGDs had a lot to share about how Yazidi women and girls are discriminated against because of their gender, they were also clear that the Yazidi people have always experienced discrimination on both religious and ethnic grounds. A woman, 26 from Essien camp, described how:

The Yazidi people, as an ethnic, religious minority, have been subjected throughout their history to massacres, genocide, tragic events, and terrorist group attacks. As a minority, the Yazidi do not have a safe and stable environment. They always live with fear and anxiety, and this leads to an uncertain future within their own country. Pressure to change their religious identity and conform to Muslim norms is ongoing. The instability caused by war, genocide and displacement has led to many problems, including a lack of job opportunities.

Another of the survivors, aged 20 from Shariya camp, expanded on the history of the Yazidis and how this has led to their marginalisation:

It is very difficult for a small minority such as the Yazidi living within a large Islamic state. Before the displacement a large proportion of the Yazidis lived in the district of Sinjar and its suburbs. The Yazidi lived quiet agrarian lives far from the developed cities of Iraq, and as farmers and peasants with limited financial resources, most did not gain a formal education. Many lived largely in ignorance, and therefore would not be able to enter into politics, nor hold government positions. This continued to prevent them from having rights within the state. The Yazidi have been subjected to mass exterminations for years at the hands of Muslims because of their religion and ethnicity, and have lived their history in fear and terror from the neighbours.

A 33-year-old male worker from Essien camp shared how, in his opinion, Yazidi women are not the only ones marginalised in Iraq. There are specific issues faced by Yazidi men:

We as men have been marginalised by successive governments. Even hospitals and government departments deal with powerful citizens only. People need surgery and cannot have it because of the cost of the operation or because of the late appointments they give the patient. The Yazidi are men, women, and children deprived of our most basic rights. The two governments have destroyed us. We know what the future of our children will be like here. The schools are not good, and our families are in the camps. We fear for them from the cold winter, the heat of summer, and the fires. I cannot guarantee the safety of my family.

Nevertheless, participants were clear that Yazidi women and girls suffer a unique combination of challenges based on their gender, religious and ethnic identity and their reality as displaced people. A 21-year-old female student from Essien camp described this triple marginalisation in the following way:

I am a Yazidi girl and belong to an ethnic religious minority. I go to a government department or institution and I am subjected to discrimination and obstruction because of my religion, because I am a displaced person, and I live in IDP [Internally Displaced Peoples] camps, and there is also another issue that we must mention and not forget, is that I am a girl of the Yazidi religion, I am not veiled, and I do not wear the hijab and I am far from obeying the laws that were imposed by an Islamic society and violated the freedom of other religions.

A 48-year-old housewife from Essien camp saw herself as part of two minorities – a widow who has no support because of the way women are viewed in society, and a Yazidi who has been through years of persecution:

This is us, the Yazidi women are marginalised and suffer from a loss of our most basic rights. No law protects us and no government parliament gives us our rights. We, the Yazidi minority, have gone through circumstances that no one should have to go through. There is no right to humanity and human rights after seven years of persecution and suffering, Today many Yazidis, especially young people, migrate to Europe and leave the country behind because of economic and political problems. There is racism - because of religion, nationalism, belief, and sects - in Iraq, so people migrate to countries for the sake of safety and security. I always feel afraid because of discrimination on the basis of religion because we are Yazidis, we are threatened, threatened because of our identity. We are killed, and our daughters raped, because of our identity.

5.14 Women and institutionalised discrimination

The participants discussed the layers of discrimination they face – due to their gender as well as religious and ethnic identities – and how this is built into government structures, workplaces and even civil society organisations. For example, a 27-year-old male graduate from Essien camp explained how:

There is a weakness in the professional, technical, administrative and institutional capacities of government agencies and civil society organisations, both quantitatively and qualitatively, with regard to addressing issues of discrimination against women as well as job opportunities. There are no laws regarding women's rights in the country, and they are marginalised even legally.

A 24-year-old survivor from Shariya camp described her experience of being discriminated against by government departments.

Even the government departments, when we go to complete a transaction, and they know that we have lost all our documents, they do not tolerate us. The employees will take a bribe in return for completing the transaction you need.

She went on to explain how for survivors the discrimination is even worse, as there is the added stigma of having been a victim of ISIS:

There is no interest in the survivors. There are many organisations and institutions that work supposedly for the survivors, but the survivors do not benefit from them. Job opportunities are not available to them in all respects. They are marginalised by government agencies, organisations, institutions, and health centres are not available to them when they need psychological treatment.

It was clear that the focus group members felt that while on paper there is support for survivors, this isn't the reality. A 27-year-old graduate went on to explain how Yazidi women and survivors are in desperate need of political representation as there is no clear vision for women within the Iraqi government, and no-one to fight their corner. Without political will and accurate statistics, Yazidi women and girls are invisible:

The masculine mentality dominates the structure and programmes of political parties, as there is no clear vision for the participation of women, just as the parties do not have a clear party program that works to develop women's cadres within them. The government is not concerned with the fate of women.

A large number of women have been subjected to murder, kidnapping and threats. The phenomenon of sexual harassment continues to grow, and the weakness of law enforcement agencies has led to impunity for the perpetrators. All women including those from minorities, are being subjected to all kinds of violence, both internally and externally. There is a rise in killings and kidnappings of Yazidi women and adolescents. Minority women also suffer from harassment in life opportunities. There are still large numbers of marginalised women. Also, indirect pressures are exercised in many government departments. There have also been cases of transferring Yazidi female employees from non-Yazidi departments because of their Yazidi divisions.

A survivor, aged 20, from Shariya camp, spoke about the two Yazidi representatives currently in parliament, and how they do not represent the interests of Yazidi women:

After the genocide and at the time of displacement, organisations and institutions came under the name of humanitarian aid, but some of them exploited women and the Yazidi cause and worked in the camps for the purpose of their personal interest and not the cause and problems of women. This led to great disappointment and loss of confidence in the organisations who were exploiting their wounds.

Yazidi women are deprived of government positions and of the benefits of public spending. There are two Yazidi representatives in parliament, but they work for the benefit of their parties and not for the benefit of the Yazidi people. We need to choose women who are qualified to represent Yazidi women in parliament.

5.15 Genocide and the kidnapping of Yazidi women and girls

In recent years, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Yazidi women and girls have been forced into marriage, 'sold' or 'given as gifts' to ISIS fighters and supporters. They were often forced to convert to Islam. One young woman, aged 22 and from Essien camp, described her experience in the following way:

The terrorist organisation ISIS kidnapped and killed thousands of Yazidi women and girls and sold and bought them in slave markets in Raqqa, Syria. These women were, and some still are, being tortured, killed and raped, and forced to change their religion. The liberated women are still living in displacement camps despite their injuries and trauma. And there are no serious moves being made by the government to move genocide charges forward, and hold the perpetrators of these crimes against minorities, especially the Yazidis, accountable. These women demand their rights from the law.

A 21-year-old survivor from Shariya camp identified this persecution as an attempt by the Islamic State to eliminate the presence of ethnic and religious minorities in the region:

These women and girls are among the thousands of Yazidis from the Sinjar region in north-western Iraq who have been targeted since August 2014 in the wake of a wave of ethnic cleansing by Islamic State fighters bent on eliminating the presence of ethnic and religious minorities in the region. We experienced persecution, torture, and enforced conversion to Islam, and our mothers and father being killed before our eyes and thrown into mass graves.

The horrors that women and girls went through in the grip of the Islamic State caused trauma to them, and led some of them to commit suicide. Gilan, a 19-year-old, committed suicide after being captured in Mosul, fearing that she would be raped.

Many women, who were captives, were brought back to their families, but they were mired in despair and pain, as a result of wounds that did not heal due to the horrors they were subjected to, including rape, torture and forced marriage at the hands of ISIS members.

We, the survivors, today are in dire need of help from competent authorities and cooperation from all people, because we are the ones who are affected physically and mentally, and this stage is very difficult to overcome.

The Yazidi survivors have been double-affected, as they try to cope with the tragedy of losing dozens of their female relatives still in captivity or killed at the hands of Islamic State fighters, while attempting to process their own traumas.

Another of the survivors, 45, from Shariya camp, explained how young Yazidi women and girls were specifically targeted:

ISIS forces detained several thousand Yazidis civilians in Nineveh Governorate in northern Iraq in August 2014. The fighters worked systematically to separate young women and teenage girls from their families and the rest of the prisoners, and transferred them from one place to another inside Iraq and Syria. It was the 11 women and the 9 girls who had escaped. Half of them, including two 12-year-old girls, were raped - multiple times in some cases, by a number of ISIS fighters. Almost all of them were forced into marriage or sold, multiple times, or given as 'gifts'. The survivors and girls also witnessed the abuse of other captives.

Therefore, what happened to us is not an easy matter, and we need material and moral support at the same time.

Participants also discussed how young Yazidi boys were affected by ISIS, with one of the survivors, a 24-year-old from Shariya camp, explaining exactly what happened when ISIS attacked Sinjar:

They came to my village, they took men and killed them. They kidnapped women, girls. Young boys were taken to training camps to train with weapons and on how to use explosions and suicide belts, and how bombers blew themselves up in all countries Afghanistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, etc. They used to come and buy Yazidi girls from ISIS by thousand Iraqi dinars, and women who were over fifty years were forced to work as a maid for them. I was kidnapped on the 3rd of August 2014, and liberated on the 10th of January 2017.

5.16 Women and targeted attacks on the Yazidi community

Prior to the ISIS invasion, there were attacks targeting the Yazidi community. A 40-year-old female employee from Essien camp described a terrorist attack that took place in August 2007 by an unknown terrorist group in Tel-Ezer and Siba-Shekhedre in Sinjar:

I was very close to the scene of the explosion. My friend was a widow and she had a child. She was building a house for her and her children. Me and my little niece, who is about six years old, went to help her. At that time, the houses were made of mud. I was about to go on my way. My friend's brother was standing at the mirror and combing his hair. Then, I didn't hear any sound, but I turned around while I was lying on the ground and the sky was full of dust and the houses were destroyed and people were screaming out loud, 'Save me!' That young man, my friend's brother, was under the roof of the house calling for help. We went to save him, but the ceiling was too big and we couldn't save him, and my friend's brother-in-law and her children died, under the roof of the house. For a moment I forgot about my sister's daughter who was accompanying me, I turned to her. She was hiding under a small door, and she too was wounded on her knees. I took her and ran into the street. I saw many people injured and I didn't know what happened. Then I saw my father running towards us and saying, 'Thank God you are fine, I thought I lost you'. I asked him what happened and he

said, "there was an explosion, and we don't know what happened yet". We went home, my brother and the rest of my family were at the door screaming. Our sister is with two of her daughters and she had three wounds on her head and the rest of her body, we took her home to dress her wounds. As for my other sister and her children, my niece, who was nine years old, we did not even find their bones because the explosion was inside their houses. We lost about 376 people in the explosion of Tal Uzair, and many became disabled and wounded.

There were families so far that do not know anything about their victims, and mothers are still crying over their missing children. We have seen a lot of tragedy.

A 35-year-old housewife from Essien camp highlighted how this demonstrates how much Yazidi women have always suffered and continue to suffer:

It was summer at sunset, the village was beautiful and calm and Tal Uzair's streets were full of people. There is a place called a union in Tal Uzair, which is one of the places where the most residents of the village gather together. At around 7pm I was preparing dinner and my mother-in-law was sitting close to the wall. The explosion happened in Tel Uzair, Seba Sheikh Khudri, and the village of Uzair, which are three Yazidi zones, at the same moment. They entered the villages in big trucks and blew them up among people. My mother-in-law lost her leg and became handicapped. Yazidi women have suffered a lot and are still suffering. My mother-in-law is an example of a strong, patient and enduring woman. She really continues to live and will resist any difficulties or challenges.

5.17 Women and tent combustion

One of the final issues identified by participants in the FGDs is that of tent combustion. Linked to the living conditions in the camps, the women highlighted the fear they live with every day – that the volatile gas supply will destroy their tent and injure or kill their families. A 38-year-old housewife from Essien camp described a moment in the camps when she thought she was reliving the explosion in Tel Uzair mentioned in the previous section:

In a single moment, I did not think that I would live and see life again, since we live in tents and my children go to school about 11:00 in the morning every day. I prepare lunch early, so that they wouldn't go without food. At ten o'clock I went to the kitchen and turned on the cook and went to get rice from the store, here the kitchens are so small and narrow we can't fit all the things in the kitchen, and when I came back to the kitchen there was an explosion in the kitchen. Fortunately for me, the windows and the doors were open and nothing bad happened to me. The sound of the gas explosion was very strong, all the neighbours heard the sound, rescued me and extinguished the fire, no one was there except me and my mother-in-law and she was also handicapped by the explosion at Tel Uzair. She could not run but she screamed and said 'what happened,' she was afraid. I thought there was an explosion like the previous time in Tel Uzair.

The Yazidi girls described how they live in constant fear of their tents burning down, and this just adds to their existing trauma. A survivor, 20, from Shariya camp, explained how:

The Yazidi girls who are currently displaced have lost many of their ambitions, some of them have lost their studies, they have no work, and they live under the torn tents. They do not know when their tent will burn down and they will be the victims of the fire because there are many cases when that happened in the camps, and people died. So these girls choose to emigrate. They wish to get out of Iraq and the camps, because according to what they say, 'there is no future in this hell because the life of displacement is all suffering, tragedy and persecution', and the law does not respect the existence of minorities.

The fear of tent combustion seemed to represent the ongoing despair felt by women - having gone through hell already and continuing to live with fear and suffering. This 20-year-old survivor continued:

I have previously mentioned suffering that has not ended for many years. Every day we hear painful news about the displaced camps. The tents are burning, the gas canisters in the kitchens explode. There are children who died in the fire of the tents. Those innocent children were burned inside their tent. There are mothers and fathers who have lost their lives as a result of displacement, there are many cases of death and suicide that have occurred and the suffering is still continuing in the camps.

6 Conclusion

In this research we presented the problems and challenges facing marginalised Yazidi women and girls as articulated in their own words. These included displacement, family violence, suppressive social customs, economic issues, lack of access to healthcare, both physical and mental, lack of job opportunities, and significantly, gender discrimination. Yazidi women live in camps for the displaced. What is currently being experienced by Yazidi women has become a difficult matter to speak about, because of the levels of persecution, violence, rape, sexual slavery, murder, displacement, kidnapping and smuggling between the borders of the countries of Syria, Iraq and other regions that has been experienced by these women. Yazidi women have been sold in markets for slavery, forced to watch the killing their parents, sexually abused and forced to give up their own religion.

These women and girls are already traumatised from living with the painful reality of these bloody events, wars and killings based on religion, on top of the challenges and problems they then identified as part of this research. In fact, thousands of girls and women are still in ISIS prisons, missing from their families for over seven years. The Yazidis are still displaced, and Yazidi women live under particularly poor economic conditions. They live in camps, without many of the most basic necessities due to the government's lack of interest in them. Many health and economic problems are rooted in displacement, and life has become increasingly dangerous in the camps.

7 Recommendations

The following are recommended solutions to the problems facing the Yazidi women who participated in this study:

- Closing the camps for the displaced and returning the women who want to return to Sinjar. There would need to be infrastructure in place to support them to rebuild their lives. For example, providing them with security, safety and job opportunities.
- Yazidi women are in dire need of improving the educational level of their children through building schools, hiring female graduates, increasing the teaching staff, and providing them with study supplies.
- The government must provide job opportunities to widows and divorced women. Customs and traditions within the Yazidi community must also be challenged within this area, so it becomes socially acceptable for these women to work.
- Providing Yazidi women and girls with health insurance, which includes access to mental health support, with particular attention given to survivors and the families of those who were killed.
- Attention must be paid to the female staff in government departments, especially Yazidi women, providing them with opportunities for political and governmental participation.
- Opening institutions to support Yazidi women and girls experiencing domestic violence
- Establishing workshops and courses for women who lack security and are living in a poor psychological state, in order to take care of them.
- Increasing the interest of the departments, institutions and civil society organisations in Yazidi women and their rights. Increasing their understanding of what has happened to Yazidi women, and what is still happening to them due to psychological pressures, their economic situation, war, and being forced to live in unsuitable accommodation. Yazidi women and girls must be listened to.

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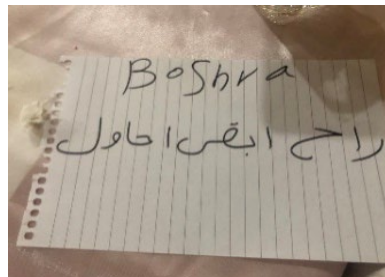
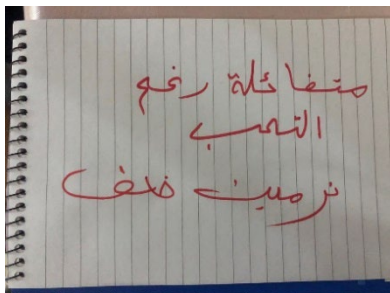
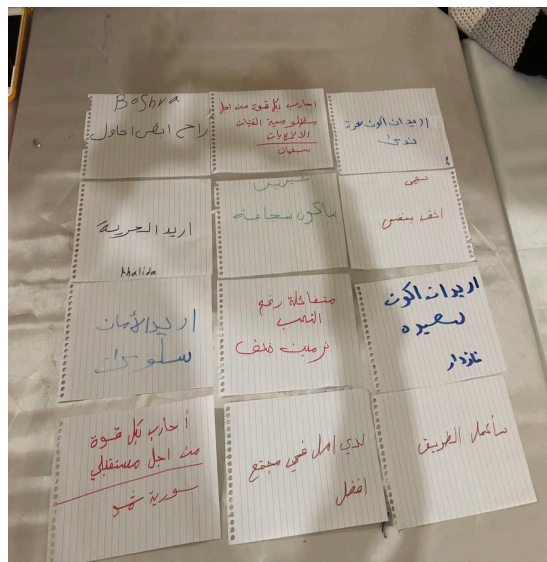
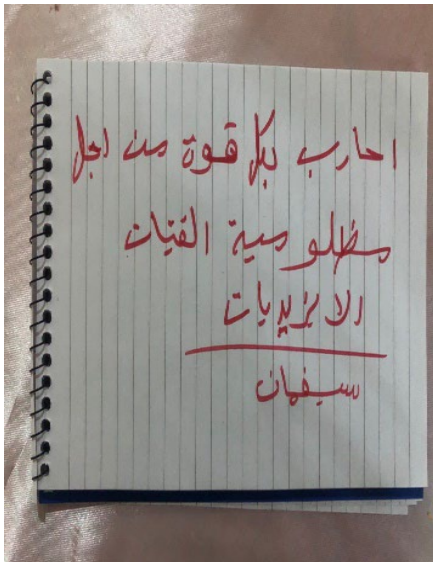
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Annexe 1: Photos from the focus group discussions

"I try with all my power due to oppressed Yazidi girls."



Problems and Challenges Facing Shabak Women and its Impact on their Daily Lives

Syria Mahmoud Ahmad Al-Qaddo

Summary

This research explores the most significant challenges facing Shabak women in Iraq and their connection to temporal, spatial and societal relations. This research addresses gaps in the literature related to the suffering and persecution of Shabak women throughout history due to the customs and traditions of the clan and religious community in Nineveh (an ancient Assyrian city that today makes up the eastern half of Mosul). These challenges were identified through focus group discussions (FGDs), including participatory ranking exercises, with Shabak women and men across Nineveh.

Shabak woman experience daily difficulties, including harassment and marginalisation, largely due to not having a voice in broader society, nor in central or local governance. The experiences of Shabak women are magnified through the intersecting inequalities of being women and belonging to an ethnic and religious minority. Many are also part of a minority within a minority, as 75 per cent of the Shabak are from the Shia sect but live in governmental administrations where most residents are Sunni (Office of International Religious Freedom 2019). As a result, a Shabak woman's suffering is multiplied.

Prior to 2003 the Shabak did not openly practice their Shia faith under the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein, and so they were not targeted. From 2004, there was more freedom within Iraq to express their religion. However, this came at a high price: from 2004 to 2014, 1,613 Shabak people were killed in the direct targeting of places of worship and the planting of explosives in houses by groups such as Al Qaeda and later Daesh (Human Rights Watch 2014). After Daesh took control of Mosul and the Nineveh Plains, major massacres took place in Shabak villages. No accurate reports have been issued so far, but the number of victims is estimated to be in the hundreds (Mamouri 2014).

Since Daesh's attack, 248 Shabak people remain missing. When Daesh kidnapped Yazidi girls and women, they also kidnapped Shabak girls. However, this issue is not always acknowledged or spoken openly about in the community because of the shame attached to the violations carried out against women and girls by Daesh.

This research reveals the problems experienced by Shabak women and outlines proposed solutions identified by the Shabak community in Nineveh.

Key words: Shabak, Iraq, women, religious minority, marginality, gender discrimination, participatory research.

Syria Mahmoud Ahmad Al-Qaddo has a science background and holds a bachelor's degree in Agricultural Science, specialising in Animal Production. She is a teacher at the Northern Technical University. Her experience spans administrative and agricultural work, as well as expertise in the field of computing. She has undertaken scientific research resulting in published papers in scientific journals by the University of Mosul, as well as a study on minority women carried out with the United Nations in 2007. She was one of the founders of the Iraqi Minority Council, is the head of the Shabak Women's Association, and is a member of both the Iraqi Minorities Alliance Shabak and the Crisis Cell Committee in Hamdaniya District. Alongside being a woman from the Shabak minority and an activist in the field of women's rights, especially Shabak women's rights, her current and past positions in various bodies and associations demonstrate that she is well placed to undertake research and comment on the situation of Shabak women. Syria has unique insight into the Shabak community that has allowed her to diagnose many problems that Shabak women suffer, both at present and in the past, and has given her access to continuous communication with Shabak women focusing on their issues and how to treat these issues.

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To those who stayed up through the night for my sake, for my comfort and for drawing a smile on my lips, to those who, if I lived forever, would not fulfil their rights, to whom my Lord commanded me to obey them without disobeying Him, to the reason for my success and happiness in this world, my thanks and gratitude to my children and their wives who stood with me and supported me, thanks and praise to my brothers and sisters for standing by my side. Whoever does not thank people does not thank God, my sincerest thanks and gratitude to the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and to Professor Mariz Tadros and Dr Sofya Shahab, you deserve all thanks and praise. Without you, we would not have conducted the research, and without your efforts and communication, the research would not have been accomplished.

Recent studies, research and social and historical statistics have proven that women in the Middle East in general, and minority women in Iraq in particular, are subjected to challenges, persecution and the denial of rights in all fields, where the issue of problems and challenges facing Shabak women is a vital and important topic in our present time while the research and reports that deal with this topic are very few if not rare. Therefore, raising such a topic is of great scientific importance to human rights and international bodies, as well as to minority and women's rights organisations and those interested in this field.

1 Introduction

1.1 The origin of the Shabak

While there are different sayings and opinions about the origins of the Shabak, there is a lack of in-depth research from outside the Shabak community. For example, Anastas Al-Karmali identified the Shabak people as ethnically Kurds (Moosa 1988) and many Western sources cite 1502 as the year that Shabaki people arrived in Iraq (Minority Rights Group International 2017). However, Shabaks themselves, having researched their own history, have come to two theories.

The first identifies the Shabak people as coming from the Persian East, having lived since ancient times in this region after being displaced a thousand years before the birth of Christ (peace be upon him) from the northern Caspian Sea region. Historians differ on the exact location, after a large group of white people inhabited that region and

dispersed into two groups, one of which headed west and spread in Europe and the other which headed to the east. These were the Indo-Iranian peoples, and they divided again into two parts, one of them descended into northern India and the other into the Aryan plateau. The latter became the Baluch, Kurds, Persians, Shabaks, Tajiks and Uzbeks, and they distributed themselves over the neighbouring regions. The early Shabaks inhabited the Nineveh area (van Zoonen and Wirya 2017).

The second theory is that Shabaks are descendants of the Medes, who seized Nineveh after the battle of 'Bkhuda Da' (meaning God's gift), and ended the Assyrian state in cooperation with the Sumerians. In this instance, Shabaks are believed to have either descended from the Zagros tribes or from the remnants of the Medes or the Median army that overthrew Nineveh in 612 BC (Botani 2007).

Regardless of these differing opinions, many agree that the Shabak share origins with the Kakai, Faili, Hawarman and Zaza minorities. Various Arabic writers have said that the name 'Shabak' comes from the intertwining of peoples, citing that local people "see the very name 'Shabak', which they derive from Arabic 'shabaka': 'to intertwine', as an indication that the Shabak are composed of many different tribes" (Vinogradov 1974, cited in Leezenberg 1994: 6).

However, it may also be the case that the name of various religious and ethnic groups simply changed over time. The most important aspect of the Shabak name is the acknowledgement of its ancestry, and the acceptance and inclusion of other nationalities who were experiencing displacement, be they Arabs, Kurds or Yazidis. This confirms their antiquity. Consequently, these various sects live with the Shabak in their villages, intermarrying, having children together and becoming Shabak.

The Shabak live in an area of land that extends from the Khazar River in the east to Tal Kaif district in the west, and from Sheikhan district in the north to the city of Mosul in the south, forming a separating belt between the Arab Mosul and the Kurdistan region of Iraq. All the Shabak villages are located in a flat area that represents the Nineveh Plain. It is known historically that the Shabak lands included the left coast, which represented the historical city of Nineveh. The Shabak live in the district of Hamdaniya, Nimrud sub-district, Bartella sub-district, Bashiqa sub-district, Tal Kaif district, and in 70 villages and complexes. In addition to this, there is a Shabak presence inside the city centre of Mosul, on the left side of the city of Mosul, and in the following neighbourhoods: Nineveh East, North Garage, Hob Tamim, Aden, Al-Jaza'ir, Al-Zohour, Al-Qadisiyah, Al-Arbajiyah, Al-Bakr, Al-Masarif, Al-Nabi Yunis, Al-Qudos, Al-Karama, Al-

Methath, Al-Wahda, Sumer, and Al-Samah. The number of Shabak in Iraq is currently estimated to range from 350,000 to 400,000 people (Office of International Religious Freedom 2019). A full list of Shabak villages can be found in Annexe 1.

1.2 Religious beliefs

The Shabak have known no religion other than Islam since it spread in the lands of Mosul. Their villages reflect the extent of the Shabak's commitment to Islam; all villages have a mosque, or a hussainiya, in which the five pillars of Islam (shahada, prayer, Zakat, fasting, hajj) are held and religious occasions, such as births and holidays are celebrated. The hall is used for the establishment of mourning gatherings, whether public or when a member of the village dies.

The Shabak religious doctrine has often been distorted. For example, the Shia community in south Iraq does not recognise the Shabak as Shia as they have some different traditions. However, the Shabaks are Muslims who believe in God as their Lord, in Muhammad as a Prophet, in the Qur'an as a book, and in the Kaaba as a qiblah. The majority of them follow the Ja'fari Twelver school of thought.¹ The rest are Sunni sects, and some of them were influenced by the various Sufi sects, including the Bektashi Order (Al-Dulaimi 2016: 10).

1.3 Language

The descendants of the Shabak people speak the Shabakí language, which belongs to the Indo-Iranian Aryan language group. It is an independent language and not a dialect of other languages. It is characterised by its own distinct vocabulary and style of pronunciation. Nevertheless, it contains vocabulary shared with other languages, such as Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hindi and Kurdish (Leezenberg 2020: 50-76). This may be due to exposure to colonisation, as well as the rapprochement in religious beliefs, mixing with neighbours and trade.

1.4 Violations

The Shabak have been robbed of their rights to freedom, security and to live in peace since 2004 by Al Qaeda and Daesh. They have been the victims of horrendous crimes, including the killing of individuals and groups through targeting in the streets and alleys of Mosul, in their places of work, or while travelling to the city. Their safe houses have

¹ A school of thought within Shia Islam based on the belief that the Prophet Ali (Prophet Muhammad's successor) had twelve Imams who would be his successors (Gaitanos, 2020).

been attacked and explosives have been planted in front of Shabak houses or under cars.

Unfortunately, in areas such as Hamdaniya and Bartella, some believe that the displacement of Shabak people is part of an effort to forcibly change the demographics of areas of Iraq that have been historically non-Muslim majorities. Consequently, Shabaki people also experience discrimination from Christians, not just from the Muslim majority. This was reflected in some of the accounts given in the FGDs, although it is important to acknowledge that Christians themselves are also a persecuted minority within Iraq.

1.5 The situation of women in the Shabak community

Shabak society in the Nineveh Plain is tribal, religious, and fairly 'closed'. The role of women is very weak and limited to the home, i.e., to marital duties, taking care of children and doing housework. It is a patriarchal society that gives priority to men in all fields, such as in the access to job opportunities and positions in the public and private sectors, participation in political processes, and even inheritance division.

This constitutes an abuse of Shabak women's rights in Nineveh. As such the challenges facing women are much greater than the challenges facing men. Shabak women suffer more than some of their neighbours, as they are both women suffering within a patriarchal society, and a member of a minority suffering within a society fragmented by religious and ethnic marginalisation and discrimination. After 2003 and the entry of ISIS terrorist gangs into the area, the mosaic of ethnic and religious groups who live in Nineveh turned towards citizenship and the homeland, as they were under threat. This caused a rift in society and weakened bonds of trust.

The situation of Shabak women is currently much better than it was before, thanks to cultural and educational development, and increasing awareness and desire to keep pace with developments taking place in neighbouring communities. In addition to this, the displacement of the Shabak minority in 2014, and their residence in the northern and southern governorates, and the capital Baghdad, challenged some of their customs and traditions, as these governorates are increasingly culturally developed in comparison to the villages in which the Shabak traditionally live.

The years of displacement demonstrated positive cultural, social and scientific practices to Shabak women. Today Shabak women go to school, university and cultural seminars as well as participating in political processes. However, this development has not been consistent or comprehensive for all Shabak women in all areas of the country.

Unfortunately, many in the Shabak community believe that these developments have negative aspects. They are critical of changes to women's clothing, their frequenting of major stores, their reluctance to work for comfort, and their use of social media sites, which men within the Shabak community believe affect society negatively.

Being a Shabak woman negatively affects academic and professional choices, as there are many jobs and professions that women cannot practice in the Nineveh Plain because of the negative social outlook and the tribal customs and traditions of the Shabak community. These include the legal profession and nursing, because these professions involve mixing with men. Consequently, Shabak women cannot apply to study in the colleges and fields they desire, work in some areas of self-employment, such as commerce, or in the private sector.

2 Research aims and methodology

The aim of this research is to shed light on the daily experiences of Shabak women and their families. This research paper reveals the extent of injustice practiced against Shabak women and the extent of marginalisation they suffer from Shabak men, other components of society, particularly the majority religion, and from successive government regimes. This research also provides recommendations of practical and realistic mechanisms to address Shabak women's problems, alongside providing analysis of some of the roots of key challenges faced.

This research aims to improve the reality of Shabak women's day-to-day lives in the Nineveh Plain, to defend their stolen rights, and to increase their role in Iraqi society and the Shabak community in all professional, social, cultural, economic and political fields, similar to women of other nationalities.

Consequently, the main question guiding this research is, **"What are the challenges that Shabak women are facing that affect their daily life routines, and what are the effects of these challenges on these women?"**

The sub-questions discussed with participants in the focus groups are listed in Annexe 2.

2.1 Research methodology

The research was conducted through four focus group discussions (FGDs) with 48 men and women, aged 18-70 years. Participants came from different areas of the Nineveh Plain, from the district of Al-Hamdaniya and its affiliated villages, Bartella district and its affiliated villages, Bashiqa district and its affiliated villages, and the Shabaki villages

affiliated to Tal Kaif district. The selection of participants took into consideration sectarian, cultural and urban diversity.

Participatory ranking, conducted during the FGDs, was used to gather the opinions of all participants and to understand the prioritisation of issues. Sensitive matters that affect the feelings of the participants were uncovered as part of this process. A set of problems and challenges were raised by the women, and then priorities were arranged according to the number of votes obtained for each challenge or problem using participatory ranking. Gathering women's opinions and obtaining case studies and real stories was integral to this research, since these women's voices are rarely heard by society. Through the combined sessions, we also heard potential strategies that could address the challenges facing Shabaki woman in Iraq.

2.2 Research importance

This research is important from a scientific and historical point of view in a context where research about the experiences of the Shabak community, and particularly Shabak women, is lacking. This research sheds light on women in a closed society with an emphasis on diagnosing the problems facing Shabak women that impede the realisation of their rights, their exercise of freedom and their full participation in work, social and political life. The findings of this work are of importance to the fields of international human rights and women's rights.

2.3 Research process and methods

The research was conducted in the Nineveh region in November 2021 through FGDs with Shabak women and men. This aimed to uncover the challenges and problems facing women and the impact on their daily lives from the perspectives of both Shabak women and men, since they are a minority and live in a community of different religions, nationalities and sects.

Two FGDs were carried out with 26 Shabak women from different cultural and sectarian backgrounds. This included educated women, those unable to complete a formal education, housewives, employees, students, graduates and civil society activists aged between 18-70 years. In order to capture a range of experiences, these women came from different areas of the villages and the centres of districts and sub-districts in the Nineveh Plain. They were divided into two FGDs by age. The first FGD was run with women aged 18-35, and the second with women aged 36-70.

Additionally, two FGDs were carried out with 22 Shabak men from different cultural and sectarian backgrounds, including employees, earners, civil activists, students and graduates, aged 18-70 years. They also came from different areas of villages and district and sub-district centres in the Nineveh Plain. Similarly to the women, the men were divided into two FGDs by age. The first FGD was run with men aged 18-35, and the second with men aged 36-70.

The method of asking questions of the participants and then using participatory ranking was chosen to prioritise the voices of the participants themselves, particularly Shabak women. The participatory ranking was used to better understand the significance of each of the issues to the women and the impact of each challenge on their lives.

For the participatory ranking, participants named the main challenges they face and these were collected on a flip chart. Each participant then wrote down their rankings on a sheet of paper according to their perspective. These were then collected, and each challenge marked for how many times it was mentioned.

2.4 Limitations, strengths and challenges of the research

Many of the restrictions experienced in this study were related to time pressures. The limited time for the FGDs meant participants weren't able to generate solutions to all of the challenges identified, such as participation in political decision-making and economic empowerment, and they felt they didn't have long enough to speak in-depth about the many challenges they suffer. Additionally, time was a challenge to the researcher and author because of other commitments and responsibilities.

However, the biggest obstacle this research faced is that the Shabak society is introverted and shy. Many Shabak people refused to talk about topics of suicide and rape, and some of them were afraid of their parents and relatives. Others felt shy due to the customs, traditions and expectations of women's behaviour inherited and preserved by the Shabak family. This can prevent freedom of speech and expression of opinion. The other obstacle is that there are no sources, research or books written in this field, and even if found, they do not contain the voices of Shabak people, especially not Shabak women. This is one of the factors which makes this research so unique.

3 Findings

During the FGDs, education was identified as the most significant issue facing Shabak women. Part of the difference between the Shabak and other communities is their geographic locations in villages. Schools have only begun to be built in these locations in the past two decades. Where schools in the region are still fairly new there is a problem convincing communities to send their daughters to school, as this is not a part of their traditional customs. For high school level education this becomes even more of a challenge as Shabak youth must travel to receive education. As the Shabak community is somewhat closed, they tend to prevent girls from travelling.

Other issues identified include the customs and traditions that are seen as integral to the Shabak identity. For example, divorce is almost forbidden, and as a result a Shabak woman may not be divorced but will instead be sent back to her parents' house. However, as she is still technically married she is not able to marry again and has no rights. Also, some professions are closed to Shabaki women, for example Shabak women are forbidden from being actors or singers.

While there have been many challenges that have occurred due to the displacement of the Shabak community by Daesh, some positive changes have come as a result of having to integrate into other communities. This mingling with more open-minded society has meant women have been able to take on different types of jobs, and work with new organisations. This has included giving women the opportunity to participate in seminars and workshops held by local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

3.1 Participatory ranking

Table 1: The challenges facing Shabak women from the point of view of men and women aged 18-70

N	Challenges facing Shabak women from the point of view of women and men aged 18-70	Participatory ranking and prioritisation according to the number of votes for each challenge from the point of view of women and men aged 18-70	The number of votes for each challenge or threat
1	Harassment	Education	40
2	Early marriage	Jobs opportunities	21
3	Jobs opportunities	Health	21

4	Education	Early marriage	19
5	Customs and traditions	Customs and traditions	17
6	Freedom (travelling, choosing a spouse)	Inheritance	17
7	Domestic violence	Discrimination	13
8	Community environment	Freedom (travelling, choosing a spouse)	9
9	Political participation	Domestic violence	7
10	Marriage in exchange for leaving work	Harassment	7
11	Inheritance	Claiming her rights (not allowing Shabak women to resort to the judiciary and file complaints)	5
12	Health	Divorce	4
13	Divorce	Community environment	4
14	Discrimination	Political participation	3
15	Claiming her rights (not allowing Shabak women to resort to the judiciary and file complaints)	Marriage in exchange for leaving work	2

Source: Author's own.

The second column shows the priority order of the problems and challenges identified when only the votes for the most important issue are taken into consideration. The third column accounts for the whole participatory ranking process, which has placed the problems and challenges into an order based on all the votes received, which includes voting for an issue as a second, third, fourth priority, etc. The fourth and final column shows how many overall votes an issue received when the whole participatory ranking process is considered.

Table 2: The challenges facing Shabak women from the point of view of women aged 18-70

N	Participatory classification and prioritisation according to the number of votes for each challenge - women aged 18-35		Participatory classification and prioritisation according to the number of votes for each challenge - women aged 36-70		Overall	
1	Education	11	Education	12	Education	23
2	Inheritance	10	Health	12	Health	14
3	Work	8	Early marriage	5	Inheritance	13
4	Harassment	7	Inheritance	3	Work	8
5	Customs and traditions	7	Women's Rights	3	Customs and traditions	8
6	Community environment	4	Distinguishing sects	2	Early marriage	7
7	Lack of freedom to choose a spouse and education (freedom to make decisions)	3	Divorce	2	Harassment	7
8	Political Participation	3	Social care	2	Community environment	4
9	Family violence	2	Customs and traditions	1	Women's rights	3

10	Early marriage	2	Widows' rights	1	Lack of freedom to choose a spouse and education (freedom to make decisions)	3
11		2	Marginalisation	1	Political participation	3
12	Marriage in exchange for leaving work	2			Distinguishing sects	2
13	Travel	1			Divorce	2
					Social care	2
					Family violence	2
					Marriage in exchange for leaving work	2
					Travel	1
					Widows' rights	1
					Marginalisation	1

Source: Author's own.

As shown in the table, there is a difference in the prioritisation of challenges between women aged 18-35 and women aged 36-70. However, there are also clear similarities. Many of the older women were prevented from completing formal education by their families and the Shabak community when they were younger, whereas many of the women in the younger age group have had some access to education. Despite this difference, both groups rated education as the most significant issue facing them.

Inheritance was ranked more highly by the younger women. This is likely because they are more familiar with Islamic laws and Sharia, due to their increased education, so they know that they should have a right to inheritance but are denied this by the customs

and traditions within Shabak society. Another challenge that was ranked highly by the younger women and not by the older group is harassment. The reason for this is that young women are more likely to be harassed as a result of mixing with society and leaving the house to go to university, work, the market or any other place. As for the women who are older, they only go out briefly for shopping, and generally this is with their husbands. This decreases the likelihood of them being harassed.

Table 3: The challenges facing Shabak women from the point of view of men aged 18-70

N	Participatory classification and prioritisation according to the number of votes for each challenge facing Shabak women - men aged 18-35		Participatory classification and prioritisation according to the number of votes for each challenge facing Shabak women - men aged 36-70		Overall	
1	Education	10	Customs and traditions	7	Education	17
2	Discrimination	8	Education	7	Early marriage	12
3	Early marriage	6	Early marriage	6	Discrimination	11
4	Employment opportunities	6	Freedom	6	Employment opportunities	10
5	Health	5	Domestic violence	5	Customs and traditions	9
6	Inheritance	3	Employment Opportunities	4	Health	7
7	Customs and traditions	2	Discrimination	3	Freedom	6

8	Divorce	2	Health	2	Domestic violence	5
9	Claiming their rights (not allowing women from the Shabak to resort to the judiciary and file complaints)		Inheritance	1	Inheritance	4
10			Intolerance in religious discourse		Divorce	2

Source: Author's own.

Interestingly, despite the likelihood that the older men act as the gatekeepers of customs and traditions within the Shabak community, as is often the case with older generations, it was the men in the older FGD that ranked customs and traditions as the most significant issue facing Shabak women, alongside education. It is perhaps the case that the younger men are under the impression that customs and traditions no longer affect Shabak women, which does not match the view of younger Shabak women themselves, who ranked customs and traditions among the top five challenges they face.

As shown in the above tables, the women and men generated different lists of threats and challenges during the participatory ranking. For example, the men identified early marriage as the second most significant problem facing Shabak women, whereas Shabak women themselves placed it only in sixth place. It's worth noting, firstly, that early marriage was much less significant for younger women than older women, as the younger women tended to have stayed in education until adulthood, therefore delaying marriage, whereas the older women had relevant experiences of it. However, for the men, it was their belief that early marriage positively correlated to the significant increase in divorce within the Shabak community that led them to rate it so highly. Health also featured much higher in the ranking for women than it did for men. This may be because many of the health challenges that the women described were related to their experiences in the maternity halls of hospitals, and with reproductive health. Therefore, the men in their community may not be as familiar with these challenges.

Nevertheless, despite the differences, education was ranked as the most significant issue facing Shabak women by both the men and the women in the FGDs.

3.2 Analysis

The following sections outline what participants in the FGDs had to say about each of the issues identified as being priority problems, threats and challenges facing Shabak women. This includes how these issues are experienced differently, and often more severely, by Shabak women than by Shabak men and Iraqi women from the majority.

3.2.1 Education

Education was identified by both men and women in the FGDs as the most significant threat facing Shabak women overall. In the FGDs, we found that 40 participants, from a total of 48 (23 women (eleven aged 18-35 and 12 aged 36-70) and 17 men (ten aged 18-35 and seven aged 36-70)), said that the biggest challenge that the Shabak woman suffers is related to education. The participants revealed the following reasons for this lack of access to education:

- Too few Shabak middle and secondary schools nearby, meaning Shabak girls have to mix with students of other religions;
- A lack of financial means to send Shabak girls to school;
- The discrimination that Shabak girls face at school.

3.2.2 Customs

From childhood, Shabak girls hear from their mothers that they must learn housework and marry at an early age, and that a successful woman is one who can do all the housework while not talking about the importance of education for her life. It is said that the nature of these inherited customs and traditions and their transmission to future generations is the responsibility of men. However, in reality, women are equally responsible for transmitting these customs that have been built and learned over many generations.

For example, a 35-year-old housewife from Bartella sub-district, Khazna TabeH village, explained:

I did not complete primary school, because of living in the village, and customs and traditions at that time ruled everyone.

Another of the women, a 37-year-old housewife from the district of Bartella, Ansar Complex, agreed:

The customs and traditions of Shabak family say that the girl's completion of education is a shame for her and her family. It is forbidden for her to leave the house alone...she goes to the market, but she does not go to school for education, and this is all as a result of customs and the ignorance of the family.

This woman continued by explaining that this happens just as much in families where the parents are educated:

There is no condition for the family to be educated or not. There are families where the father is educated, but he prevents his daughter from going to school.

Another of the women, a 53-year-old civil society activist from Bartella sub-district, Bashpita village, explained where these customs and traditions originated from:

It becomes clear to us that the Shabak society has fanatical customs and traditions, and this society is fighting the completion of Shabak women study, and this is the result of accumulations of old ideas and habits of ancient clans.

Consequently, parents are the obstacle to girls completing their education because of ignorance, an unfamiliarity with education and a lack of awareness of its importance. They have the view that as the girl is not responsible for providing a living, completing studies and education is not as important to them as the livelihood rests with the husband only. There is a view that parents do not care about education in general, and this is a dangerous indicator.

However, some of the participants felt that family was not the issue, and it was wider Shabak and Iraqi society that limited girls with these customs and traditions. For example, one of the women, a 24-year-old activist from Bartella district, explained that:

From my point of view, society is the one that restricts the Shabak girl to her behaviour or the field of her study, with evidence that the period of migration to the northern and southern governorates when ISIS was occupying Nineveh Governorate. The Shabak society mixed with the rest of the societies, which helped to raise awareness for them and make the girl act more freely, and this evidence shows that the obstacle is society, not the family.

When asked to expand on this, her reasoning was that if the obstacle was the family, the family would prevent its women and girls from working in organisations and

participating in awareness sessions during displacement. While there is a fear of girls working in organisations or participating in educational courses and workshops, the reason for this fear is community gossip, which would severely affect girls' reputations.

Time is another obstacle to the education of Shabak women, as Shabak women devote most of their time to household chores. For example, one woman, a 26-year-old teacher from the Bartella district, mentioned:

During my teaching the female students, I hear from them that they help their mothers with household matters, and there is not enough time left for them to study and then [they] leave school.

Likewise, a 53-year-old female participant, a civil society activist, from the district of Bartella, the village of Bashpita, said:

When I reached a certain age, my family forced me to leave education, but because of my love for education, I developed myself and reached what I am now.

One of the men, a 30-year-old employee from the Bashiqa district, also had experience to share on this topic:

I am currently a school principal. For 19 years I was the principal of a girls' school, meaning girls have a desire to complete education, and there are even competitions between girls. There are girls who graduate to become doctors, but parents are the hardest barrier to their completion of studies.

If a young Shabak woman is able to gain an education, the most prominent problem facing her comes after finishing high school and selecting the department that she will study in university. She is only allowed to study in colleges for teaching and medicine, as these are the only ones allowed for young women by parents and Shabak society.

The 30-year-old male employee expanded on this from his perspective:

What prevents the Shabak woman from learning and does not give her the opportunity to complete the study is the customs and traditions, but currently more than 50 per cent or 60 per cent there is a demand and encouragement for education. Another reason is the lack of schools in the villages and countryside in the Nineveh Plain, which are few, and they did not have them. Currently, every village has a primary school for girls, but it needs support and encouragement.

3.2.3 Lack of accessible schools

The 30-year-old man continued by recognising the role a lack of accessible secondary schools plays in Shabak girls' ability to continue education beyond primary level.

In the district centres and cities, we see female teachers and female employees, and this we do not see in the villages, because of the lack of secondary schools in the villages and the dependence of four or five villages on one secondary school for girls.

One woman, a 36-year-old teacher from Hamdaniya, stated:

In the past, the Shabak girl used to complete her studies with difficulty due to the small number of schools and their distance from the village, in addition to the harsh view of the Shabak community for girls who complete their education. This also applies to Iraqi girls who live in remote villages.

This opinion was supported by another of the participants, a 46-year-old male graduate from Bashiqa village in Bazwaya. He explained that:

Education did not exist in the region because of the lack of schools or the distance of schools from the place of residence of the Shabak students, as they face difficulties in going to school.

Likewise, one of the men, a 32-year-old employee from Bartella district, Al-Akhaa neighbourhood, said the same thing.

We have a shortage of Shabak women in educational institutions. It should be noted that the availability of schools has a role in the education of Shabak women and their completion of studies. Before 2003 there were no middle and secondary schools for girls in most Shabak villages, which led them to force their daughters who completed primary school to leave school for fear of mixing with boys in intermediate and secondary schools. However, now and after the availability of middle and secondary schools in some villages, i.e., after the year 2003, we see that the Shabak women complete their studies in all stages.

3.2.4 Mixing with those from other religions

Not having accessible schools leads to Shabak girls and boys having to attend schools with members of other religions. One of the women, a 35-year-old housewife from the district of Bartella, Khazna Tabeh village, explained she was not allowed to complete her

studies when she was a girl because her school contained students from the majority religion.

Currently, I do not have girls, but I did not complete my education because of my family. I only completed the third stage of primary school and finished. I cannot read and write because of my family, and the reason behind this is that the school is mixed, boys and girls (Arabs and Shabak). Because the school was mixed, my parents prevented me from completing my education, and now I cannot teach my children because I am illiterate.

This issue of mixed schools ties into the customs and traditions that restrict Shabak girls. One woman, a 35-year-old housewife from Bartella sub-district, Khazna TabeH village mentioned:

The school is close but mixed, that is why I completed the study only to fifth primary stage, then I left education.

One of the men, a 21-year-old from Nimrud, Omarkan village, felt that while the desire for Shabak girls to not mix with those from other religions has eased over time, young Shabak women are still restricted by customs and traditions as they get older.

Over the passage of previous generations until now, it was not allowed for the Shabak girl to go to middle and high school because it was mixed and now they even allow their daughters to complete college, but they do not allow her to complete graduate studies or master's studies, because when she reaches the age of 20 or 23, she must get married, because in their eyes she has become old.

3.2.5 Discrimination within schools

The desire within the Shabak community for Shabak girls not to mix with students from other religions is linked to the discrimination that Shabak students face from these other students when studying at these mixed schools.

For example, one of the women, a 26-year-old teacher and activist from Bartella, stated that discrimination had increased in recent years and there is a clear rift between those of different components within schools.

Sitting in the classroom is in the form of groups of Christians separately and Muslims on one side, and the school administration is trying several times to solve this problem but cannot.

There is also the issue of the different clothing worn by the different religions. A 25-year-old female student from Bartella, Ali Rash village, described how some non-Shabak teachers ask Shabak girls to remove their veil [hijab] when they're at school.

However, one of the men, a 30-year-old photographer from Bartella sub-district, Taiba Complex, was critical of the Shabak schools in the Nineveh Plain because they force the students to wear a hijab. He stated:

I have a female student from my relatives and she is a student in a school in Bartella and she does not wear the hijab, but she was forced by the Shabak school director to wear the hijab, so I saw that this behaviour is an interference and an end to the freedom of that girl.

This is another obstacle that stands in the way of Shabak women's education, although this obstacle was not mentioned by any of the participants because the Shabak community is of a religious nature. This suggests that in this way Shabak women's rights as women are seen as less important by their community than their religious identity.

3.2.6 Lack of financial means

Lastly, through a questionnaire conducted with one of the women, a 26-year-old master's student from Bartella district, it was found that most families mentioned their economic status as one of the problems that families face that stops girls completing their education.

3.2.7 Consequences of a lack of education

Participants were clear that there are significant consequences for Shabak girls, and the wider Shabak community, if girls are not able to access a full education. For example, one of the men, a 31-year-old teacher from Bartella sub-district, Bashpita village, mentioned how education eliminates early marriage.

I believe that if the Shabak woman completes education, we will eliminate early marriage, and this is common, because if she continues the study, she will not think about marriage.

This ties back to customs and traditions, as it becomes clear that Shabak society prefers that the girl does not complete studies in order for the girl to marry at an early age, so she doesn't miss the opportunity to marry. This is in addition to family pressure for early marriage, especially the marriage of a cousin to a cousin.

A second consequence of Shabak women and girls not completing education is that Shabak women do not work in any government institutions or departments, whether educational, health, or in other sectors. This has an impact on Shabak society because the lack of women in decision-making positions marginalises Shabak society more broadly. This opinion is supported by one of the male participants, the 30-year-old school principal from Bashiqa district:

Let's look in the Nineveh Plain, are there Shabak women employed? Yes, there are, but in a small number, and if there were Shabak women in schools, they would have played a role in educating the remaining women in order to complete their education.

A 31-year-old civil activist from Hamdaniya, Qara Shore village, also mentioned the need for female Shabak employees in healthcare.

In the health sector there are a few numbers of female employees and Shabak doctors in hospitals and health centres, and this is a problem in itself.

The Shabak women's abandonment of education negatively affects their children as well, as they cannot teach their children or guide them on how to study and do homework. The same 31-year-old confirmed this from his experience.

I am a teacher in a school and I have students whose academic level is low. When I ask them why they do not study at home and prepare for homework, they say that their mother is illiterate and cannot read and does not teach them. This means that the woman, by leaving her study, does not only destroy herself, but also destroys her children's academic future.

It is worth mentioning that the Shabak who live in city and district centres encourage their daughters and women to complete their studies and do not mind hiring them in the public sector, unlike Shabaks who live in villages, where we see a low percentage of employment and education among women.

3.2.8 Job opportunities

Work is a protection for women, as it guarantees many women who do not have an income to support them to help secure their daily food and a living for themselves and their children. It also protects them from being forced into forms of work they don't want to undertake. Therefore, work is necessary to protect women, and it is a right protected by law and the constitution for every Iraqi citizen, whether male or female. It is not Iraqi law but Iraqi society that prevents women from working.

This is especially the case in the Nineveh Plain, where working women are seen in a negative light. This includes customs and traditions within the Shabak community that forbid Shabak women from working to prevent them from mixing with men. This limits women's options to working on small projects inside the home, where previously, most of the work inside the house of raising animals, harvesting and agriculture was on the shoulders of both women and men together. This means that sometimes women end up doing more to secure the family's livelihood - carrying out all household tasks and working from within the home - even though they are more dependent on men as the only one who can go outside the home.

Participants in the FGDs had a great deal to share about the challenges facing Shabak women and Shabak society's view of women working outside the home. For example, one of the women, a 24-year-old activist from Bartella district, explained that:

Society's view has changed towards the Shabak women who works in the government sector, while working in civil society organisations or companies is rejected, and women who work in this field are criticised by Shabak society.

This means the chance of her getting married is reduced or absent, because the negative attitude of society regarding women's work in companies or the private sector and organisations makes them think that women will be subjected to harassment and extortion.

Another woman, a 36-year-old teacher from Bartella district, agreed.

Honestly, in the past there was a harsh view from society towards women working in civil society organisations, and I was afraid to mention that I work in a civil society organisation to my relatives and neighbours in the village and to the Shabak community. But nowadays the view differs a little and there is more freedom to practice working with civil society organisations.

The 24-year-old activist continued by explaining the impact of only Shabak men being able to work.

The lifestyle is very difficult because the woman works inside the house and the man works outside the house, so both of them feel bored because it is a repetitive routine on a daily basis. In addition, the Shabak woman is always behind the scenes despite her efforts and work, and also the Shabak women suffer from defamation and abuse when they work in a field that is not accepted by Shabak society, such as civil society organisations and the private sector. While

men are allowed to work in all government sectors, the private sector and civil society organisations. This is a distinction between the sexes, men and women, gender-based discrimination.

In fact, one of the women, a 24-year-old activist from Yartala district, raised how:

Some young men from the Shabak component force women to leave work after marriage under the pretext of caring for the home and children, and the main reason is backwardness and ignorance.

Conversely, another of the women, a 37-year-old teacher from Bashiqa/Kogali sub-district, explained how her husband was supportive of her working, but Shabak society wasn't.

My husband does not mind if I work, but society forbids a woman to take her freedom, for example, to help her husband.

Another woman, a 25-year-old activist from Ali Rash village, agreed that the problem is Shabak society in general.

From my point of view, Shabak society prevents women from working, especially in the private sector and civil society organisations.

A 25-year-old female graduate and activist from Bartella sub-district, Ali Rash, went into more detail about why Shabak society views organisations in this way.

From the Shabak society's point of view, employees' rooms in government departments contain surveillance cameras and no one can harass them, while cameras are not available within civil society organisations which contributes to protecting women from harassment and thus protecting their reputation.

This perception of organisations is widely accepted in the Shabak community. One of the young women, a 21-year-old university student from Bartella sub-district, explained how:

My family refuses to let me go to civil society organisations, despite their acceptance of going to university.

Another of the women, a 27-year-old activist from Bartella sub-district, Tai complex, expanded on this.

There are several points on the work of girls in civil society organisations: First, they [the Shabak community] consider that the organisations are linked to international intelligence. Second, they consider organisations' work to change

customs and traditions. Third, the organisations force the employee to sign the safety paper, and thus he/she is forced to conduct a behaviour that prevents any person from attacking the other, which some Shabak people believe would prevent them from responding if they were harassed.

Unfortunately, the customs and traditions that restrict women and girls from working also make Shabak girls fear the working world, as explained by one of the young women, a 25-year-old student from Bartella sub-district, Ali Rash village.

Sometimes, because of raising the girl according to the customs and traditions, this causes her to have fear of work.

Additionally, a 24-year-old woman explained that:

If a woman fails during work or is exposed to a certain situation, then dealing with her is harsher from the side of her family and society compared to men. Because the woman is the weakest link in Shabak society, and her failure or exposure to harassment confirms that she is the reason.

In this way, Shabak society is waiting for her to fail in the workplace to 'prove' that she shouldn't be there. Aside from these customs and traditions, the lack of job opportunities, unemployment of their husbands, the failure of their husbands to find work, or the lack of daily income also affects the lives of Shabak women. For example, one of the women, a 37-year-old housewife from Bartella sub-district, Al-Ansar Complex stated:

It will increase family problems and the husband will live in a state of grumbling with the increase in the violence that the woman will face if she asks for anything from the husband.

It is worth noting that Shabak society prevents Shabak women from working in the private sector, because the private sector lacks oversight and it may facilitate assault on women by the employer or some co-workers. This is the prevailing opinion in Shabak society. We may see a small percentage of Shabak women working in the public sector, unlike the private sector, which does not include any Shabak women, and this is due to many reasons, the most important of which is fear of harassment, customs, traditions and the extremist religious discourse towards women working in the private sector. This phenomenon is not seen in societies such as Christians, Yazidis and Kurds.

For example, the women explained that if there was a job opportunity in a mall they would not be allowed to work there. The reason is that society is ruthless and there

would be a lot of talk about women in the region as if they had committed a crime, due in part to Shabak society's inferior view of women. The other reason is the perception that any woman working in the mall, private companies or civil society organisations will be subject to harassment.

Many of the women had experiences to share that reflected this reality. For example, one woman, a 43-year-old housewife from Bartella sub-district, Qalaria al-Muwaffaqa, mentioned how:

I had a job opportunity in the mall, but I did not go because of the family and the distance.

Another woman, who was 53 years old and a civil society activist from Bartella sub-district, Bashpita village, agreed, sharing a similar experience.

It is according to the work location. If the location is a small market or mall at most they will refuse because of the view of society and the region.

For another of the women, a 42-year-old housewife from Bartella sub-district, Al-Muwafaqiya village, her husband was a direct barrier:

My husband does not allow me to work in those places.

Whereas for a 53-year-old civil society activist from Bartella sub-district, Bashpita village, being a widow compounded the restrictions.

For me, I can make my daughter work anywhere, but being a widow and I have no support except for the Lord of the Worlds, perhaps being a widow will bring her talk and increase the chances of harassment on her.

However, there was also another opinion among the participants about why Shabak women do not work in the malls. One of the men, a 31-year-old activist, from Hamdaniya, Qara Shore village, explained that this is linked to the way women are expected to dress.

The owners of the malls require a kind of dress and semi-naked clothing for women working in those malls, in order to bring customers and shoppers to the mall...The Shabak woman is a veiled woman and she is conservative in terms of dress and clothing, and therefore she is not desirable to work in malls, shops, and luxury shops.

There are few Shabak women in the public sector. For example, one of the men, a 38-year-old graduate from Bartella sub-district, Manaret Shabak village indicated:

I would prefer as for the work of Shabak women in our time now the situation is different in a way. It is simple, as we have Shabak employees, but in a very small range, but it is not found in organisations and private companies, but the difficulties they face are harassment in the workplace. This will be an obstacle to her, and she will quit her job one hundred per cent.

Another of the men, a 24-year-old lecturer from Bashiqa district, agreed.

I work as a teacher in a school located in one of the Shabak villages, and on one occasion the school needed a service employee, so we asked in the village and we searched a lot for a service employee, but we did not find one, and this indicates the fight against Shabak women working even in the public sector.

Some participants believe that there is another challenge to Shabak women's work, which is the lack of encouragement by the parents. For example, one of the men, a 31-year-old activist from Hamdaniya, Qara Shore village, said women are limited by:

The lack of encouragement from the side of the family and society caused by customs and traditions that do not allow or encourage the Shabak woman to open a private project, and this is due to two important reasons, namely the lack of trust and the lack of encouragement by the parents.

Lastly, there are phrases that have become a kind of custom in the Shabak society, such as it is 'shameful for women to work'. This is perhaps the most prevalent phrase among men and families of women who forbid women from working. A 33-year-old male civil society activist from Bartella district, Al-Muwfaqiya village, said that:

More than 75 per cent of those who believe in the statement that see women's work as shameful, and the word shame has been linked to the Shabak community, have become a social norm in the Shabak.

In seeing women's work outside the home as shameful, the Shabak community do not realise the importance of work in protecting women. It prevents her involvement in illegal ways of making a living, especially for women who are widows or who do not have a livelihood source or any alternative forms of income. For example, one of the men, a 37-year-old employee from Tel Kaif District, explained that:

Work is one of the most important things that must be focused on, work is an essential thing for women and it is a protection for her. We can find radical solutions about the deviation of women, and this is because they do not work, and if they were working, they would not engage in this dark path. Perhaps the husband of that woman is stingy with her and her children's needs, especially if she has separated from him. In this case, work is a way to save her from need.

Overall, while appearing to be supportive of Shabak women working, there was a trend in the men's focus group of needing to give enough space and support for Shabak women to work, but only in the government sector or in the home. However, these jobs are hard to come by and are competitive. Most men prevent women from working in the private sector due to the threat of harassment and conflict with Shabak customs and traditions, as explored above.

3.2.9 Health

The participants identified discrimination in treatment during visits to hospitals and health centres in the Nineveh Plain or within the city of Mosul as the most significant barrier facing Shabak women and their access to healthcare. This is where Shabak women receive a great deal of abuse, including racist behaviour, and lack of attention from hospital staff in Hamdaniya and Mosul.

For example, one of the women, a 43-year-old housewife from Bartella sub-district, Qalaria al-Muwaffaqa, explained:

Because we are Shabak, we are treated with contempt and considered second-class citizens when we go to the Hamdaniya hospital, especially in the maternity hall, Shabak women are treated very badly.

Shabak women not only suffer in their initial interactions with staff when arriving at hospital, they also experience discrimination in treatment. For example, one of the women, a 34-year-old housewife from Bartella sub-district, Al-Ikhaa neighbourhood, shared her experience of giving birth.

Within the Kurdistan Region, there is also discrimination in treatment, as I had a birth in 2015 from three o'clock in the morning, where I had labour and it continued until eight o'clock in the morning. I gave birth and I needed stitches but they didn't complete it and they left me for about an hour until they completed their work, but with the Kurdish citizens they treat them well.

This was also confirmed by one of the men, a 54-year-old employee from Hamdaniya.

Recently we noticed racial discrimination in the health sector, especially in Al-Hamdaniya Hospital, especially in maternity halls, for example, the Shabak woman is in a critical condition and goes to give birth, but they do not accept her in the hospital, so they have to take her to Mosul hospitals.

In addition to the persecution and ill-treatment of Shabak women, there is an even bigger challenge due to the beliefs of some non-Shabak doctors and staff, who prevent Shabak women from giving birth in Al-Hamdaniya hospitals for fear that they will be issued with birth certificates from Al-Hamdaniya, which is considered to be a demographic change. One of the women, a 34-year-old housewife from Bartella sub-district, Al-Ikhaa neighbourhood, shared her brother's wife's experience.

[My brother's wife] wanted to give birth to her child in Al-Hamdaniya Hospital, because they cannot go to Mosul because of the control of ISIS over it. The staff and doctors of Al-Hamdaniya Hospital did not allow my brother's wife to give birth at first, but they allowed her to give birth later after we told them that we will file a complaint against them.

The examples and experiences above highlight the religious and racial discrimination that Shabak women face while trying to access healthcare, however there is also gender discrimination, specifically from their own community. In the villages, the Shabak community do not allow their wives and young daughters to be treated except in hospitals whose staff and doctors are women, and in some cases they are only taken to a local treatment centre. This means being seen by a local woman who may not have a degree or a graduate of one of the medical specialties.

One of the men, a 37-year-old employee from Tel Kaif District, explained how this is again an issue of customs and traditions.

Like the previous topics that we talked about, it is the result of backwardness, meaning when a woman wants to be treated, she is forced to be treated in a hospital where there are female doctors, and in the case of hospitals that have male staff, she cannot be treated because of the traditions and religious thought in society. In some cases, even if there are female doctors in the hospital, her family prevents her from receiving treatment in that hospital and allows her to be treated only with a local treatment, and certainly that local treatment is of a low scientific level.

This shows that this phenomenon is due to underdevelopment, lack of health awareness and the low level of knowledge among individuals.

3.2.10 Underage/early marriage

Early marriage is a phenomenon across all of Iraq, and the Shabak community are not exempt. The Nineveh province has the second highest rate of early marriages in the country, according to the Iraqi Planning Ministry, who cite that three out of ten of the marriage documents the country's courts are sent to process are from girls under the age of 18 (Sattar 2021). One of the young women explained that:

The Iraqi law encourages the marriage of minors, and the contract is made for a girl aged 14, as soon as a statement of susceptibility to marriage is brought from the hospitals. This is where the girl's body is examined for the purpose of demonstrating the health and ability of her body to marry. As for girls who are 12 or 13 years old, their marriage is done by religious men, and after reaching the age that the law allows them to marry, the court's marriage is held.

Another of the young women explained how:

There is a wrong understanding of religious teachings on the pretext that the Islamic religion encourages early marriage and that the Prophet married a nine year old girl, and this is wrong information.

In addition to a particular interpretation of marriage within Islam, the participants identified the custom of viewing girls of a certain age as women who have exceeded marriageable age. They cited this as one of the main reasons for early marriage within the Shabak community. A 15-year-old girl is seen to be beyond marriageable age, which results in Shabak society forcing the girl to marry early. An example was given by a 43-year-old woman:

In the event that the girl reaches the age of 15 and above, if she does not marry, society looks at her as a spinster, so parents are often forced to marry off their daughters at an early age. One of my relatives is currently 13 years old and has four children, and this is because she got married at an early age.

Another of the women, a 54-year-old, confirmed this, by stating how:

In the past, before the girl reached the age of 15 years, the parents married the girl in the belief that the girl's place was with the husband.

However, another of the participants, a young woman, shared another reason for early marriage that differed from the rest.

Frankly, the marriage of minors sometimes is for reasons other than the ones I mentioned, for example, the poor living situation or wars and immigration.

There is also the legal perspective of early marriage to consider. From a legal point of view, the amended Law on Personal Affairs No. 188/1959 puts the age of marriage at 18, however there is a clause that allows for 'urgent' marriages with parental permission that can happen from age 15 (Girls Not Brides 2017). The Iraqi legislator in the Personal Status Law in Article Ten, Paragraph Five, set and impose a fine or imprisonment penalty on every marriage that takes place outside the court.² While the Iraqi legislator is obliged to impose a penalty on the marriage of a minor outside the court, or tighten the penalty for marriage outside the court if one of the spouses is a minor as a means to eliminate early marriage, in reality, this isn't implemented effectively.

Participants also discussed the consequences of early marriage. The same young woman identified the following as consequences of early marriage:

Divorce, raising children in a bad way and the family is fragile.

The participants, particularly the young women, also mentioned the mother's health being threatened and the mother losing her right to childhood.

3.2.11 Traditions

As is already clear throughout this report, customs and traditions are among the main challenges facing Shabak women, as they prevent them from obtaining many of their rights, as well as being the main cause of other challenges mentioned. Customs and traditions affect women in all aspects, such as education, health, receiving treatment, early marriage, work, inheritance, domestic violence, discrimination, and many of the problems that women face daily. For example, customs and traditions prevent Shabak women from driving a car, as explained by one of the women, a 43-year-old housewife from the Bartella village of Al-Muwfaqiya. Many believe that these customs and traditions are difficult to change because they have become accustomed to them. This

² The text for this is as follows: he shall be punished with imprisonment for a period of not less than six months and not exceeding a year or a fine of not less than three hundred dinars and not more than One thousand dinars for every man to contract a marriage outside the court, and the penalty is imprisonment for a period of no less than three years and not more than five years if he concludes another marriage outside the court with the establishment of the marriage.

was the opinion of one of the men, a 31-year-old teacher from Bartella village of Bashpenta, who believes the solution to be in educating the community.

There are some families, by virtue of customs and traditions, who grieve when they have a baby girl. There is also another negative custom that prevails in the Shabak society, which is forcing the girl to marry her cousin, even if there is a difference between them in the level of education and age. This was confirmed by a 30-year-old man, an employee from Bashiqa.

A girl must marry her cousin, whether she accepts it or not, and this is the opinion of the Shabak society.

However, one of the men, a 37-year-old employee from Tel Kaif district, had a different opinion and called for the preservation of customs and traditions. He stated:

When we talk about customs and traditions, we must not speak in an offensive manner and always in the form of criticism and in the form of a correct attack. We want to change the current rotten and backward reality, but at the same time, let us look at the bright side of customs and traditions. We, as a people, as a nation, and are proud of our customs and traditions. We are a peaceful society. We have customs and traditions that forbid aggression against others, as well as protecting the intruder...The neighbourhood may also be respected, as they are a peaceful and educated people despite war and persecution. I mean, in 2021, we suffer from a lack of water. We do not have roads and schools, and we are the most oppressed nation in Iraq. When we talk about backward customs and traditions, we have this as a result of persecution and this is from successive governments. A backward society will be born, and this will be reflected on women, even as the form of women in society is distorted, as they have no right to be political or to speak.

This view demonstrates how the rights of women and the desire for the preservation of customs and traditions can sometimes stand in contrast to each other, leading to women's rights being undermined so as not to lose group identity. This can especially be the case when that identity is marginalised by wider society, as it is with the Shabak. However, the views of this 37-year-old were not shared by all the men. Another man, who was 34 years old and a student from Bashiqa sub-district, Bazwaya village, stated that he disagreed with the above:

Because there are no positive customs and traditions against women because all of them are negative, and therefore it is necessary to rely on civil laws more from customs and traditions, because we are in 2021, customs and traditions must end once and for all.

In general, all of the women and men in the FGDs wanted both an end to negative customs and traditions and a resurrection of positive customs and traditions that had been lost after the ISIS invasion. This conversation demonstrates the difficulty facing the Shabak people when it comes to balancing the preservation of customs and traditions that many feel are essential to the Shabak identity with the acknowledgement that these customs and traditions are often negative to women.

3.2.12 Inheritance

Inheritance is a basic right for women. Sharia law gives this to women and therefore, rights are secured for both boys and girls. However, Shabak society in general forbids women from inheriting and this is passed on through the generations. If women demand their right to inheritance, they can be seen as rebelling against their family, perhaps leading to lifelong estrangements. Faced with such harsh consequences they can disavow their inheritance entitlements. For example, one of the young women, a 25-year-old university student from the village of Ali Rash in the district of Bartella, explained how:

They [the family] see this money for the family and the daughter's husband is a stranger.

Therefore, on behalf of the family, women are not entitled to inherit as her husband would benefit also.

A 25-year-old student and activist from Bartella sub-district linked this back to the belief that women should have no responsibility for finances within the family.

Sometimes the Shabak woman is deprived of the inheritance on the pretext that she is not responsible for the expenses in the family, and the husband is responsible for all of this.

This is another area where customs and traditions hold influence, alongside the tradition of leaving the inheritance to the brother, as outlined by a 36-year-old female teacher from Al-Hamdaniya.

Part of the customs and traditions in which the girl grows up is to leave the inheritance to the brother.

Another woman, a 35-year-old housewife from Bartella sub-district, expanded on this from a woman's perspective.

Some women do not take the inheritance from her family on the pretext that if she encounters problems with her husband, she can return to the family, or in case her husband dies.

This was supported by a 26-year-old female Masters student from Bartella sub-district.

Sometimes the reason is from the woman herself, so we notice that the mother raises the girl and advises her that she does not take her inheritance from her brothers.

This is an example of the role Shabak women themselves play in upholding customs and traditions. This Masters student went on to say that Shabak women:

Need some women who demand their rights so that other women can learn and take an action.

Nevertheless, some women do try to circumvent these traditions. Another of the young women, a 25-year-old university student from Bartella, Ali Rash village, stated that:

The mother leaves her jewellery to her daughters after she dies, and sometimes the daughter is deprived of that.

An example of a Shabak women being denied inheritance was shared by one of the women, a 35-year-old housewife from Bartella sub-district, Ali Rash village. She shared that:

Not long ago I asked my older brother for my share of my father's inheritance. My brother got angry and refused at first, but I pressured him because my financial situation was critical, so they gave me a little per cent that does not fit with my real share of the inheritance, yet they did not talk to me.

This demonstrates how a Shabak woman asking for her inheritance can cause family rifts, despite it being her right, and this was not something the Shabak women wanted to be seen as responsible for.

Traditions and customs in Shabak society play a major role in depriving women of inheritance and this is the result of backwardness, but often a husband may ask his wife to ask her brothers for her right to inherit, though the husband himself would not accept giving his sister her share of the inheritance. This was shared by one of the women, a

42-year-old housewife from the village of Manara Shabak in the district of Bartella. She explained that:

This thing is generally found in the Shabak community, except for a few Shabak who distribute the inheritance fairly and according to Islamic law.

This was also discussed by one of the men, a 24-year-old civil society activist from Omar Qabji village in Bashiqa sub-district.

This happened between us in the village, relatives of the uncle and the father died and they have heirs, daughters and sons. The girls are married and they are promised children and their financial condition is weak. They asked for the inheritance from the brothers, but those who asked for the inheritance were beaten. There was violence and even the mother was going to get a divorce because her family insisted that they give the inheritance to their sister. They reached the stage of divorce and assault.

Ultimately, one of the men, a 38-year-old graduate from Manaret Shabak village, Bartella sub-district, thanked the organisations who hold awareness sessions on women's rights as they've helped him, and other men, to see how they weren't applying the word of God the way they thought they were when it came to inheritance.

We have in Islam the full rights of women and in the Sharia as well. However, [we realised] we do not give women rights in terms of inheritance because customs, traditions and the weakness of a person's religious comprehension [misinterpreting what Islam says about women's right to inheritance]. We thank the organisations that hold awareness sessions for the Shabak community. We men and women need these courses to benefit more.

3.2.13 Discrimination

Discrimination is another dilemma that the Shabak woman faces in her daily life which prevents her from obtaining her legitimate rights. Discrimination has many faces, as demonstrated by the range of examples given by the participants in the FGDs. In general, Shabak women are always at a disadvantage because, as outlined by one of the men, a 31-year-old activist from Qara Shore village, Hamdaniya:

Always the Shabak family gives more importance to the male than the female. Their focus on the male to the detriment of the female will cause the factors of oppression outside the home, and encourage the factors of discrimination within the family.

Another of the men, a 37-year-old employee from Tel Kaif District, believes that discrimination has many aspects.

Discrimination is a big and broad topic because discrimination has many aspects in the field of work, rights, inheritance and political positions, but we must talk about this issue briefly, and we, as Shabak in the Nineveh Plain, do not have any political position or Governmental positions for Shabak women in the state. Also, on the issue of inheritance, we see that the woman is deprived of the inheritance. This discrimination is not considered religious discrimination because originally Islamic law gave women the right to inherit.

This is a helpful reminder of the fact that while the Shabak community in general faces much discrimination, Shabak women face an additional layer of gendered discrimination.

Participants discussed how discrimination is present in all workplaces and public services. One of the men, a 36-year-old teacher from Bartella sub-district, Al-Naseem neighbourhood, highlighted how:

Even in the field of jobs and job opportunities, there is discrimination between men and women in the Shabak society. The priority for jobs is for men, as the majority of jobs are given to men.

Another of the men, a 54-year-old employee from Hamdaniya, agreed with him.

It is family discrimination and also [Shabak] societal discrimination. We see that there is no Shabak female staff in many hospitals and departments, and this is due to the influence of society, customs, traditions and discrimination inside families that the male is allowed to complete the study, or the woman is not allowed to do so. So that she gets married at the age of (13, 14 and 15), so we do not see a Shabak woman employed at the age of (30, 40 and 50). But now the situation is better, as we see a lot of demand for study and employment by Shabak women, and the future will be better, Insha-Allah.

3.2.14 Freedom (travelling, choosing a spouse)

The deprivation of freedom is one of the biggest challenges facing Shabak women, restricting the freedom to travel, the freedom to choose a husband, the freedom to express opinions, the freedom to dress, and the freedom to drive a car. Participants in the FGDs identified many freedoms that Shabak women have been robbed of. For example, one of the men, a 34-year-old university student from Bashiqa, Bazwaya village, explained that:

In our society there is no freedom for a Shabak woman at all, especially the freedom to choose a husband, as she is forced into marriage, and also in most of the times the Shabak woman wants to complete her studies and is not allowed.

One of the women, a 34-year-old, echoed this by stating that:

Women do not have the freedom to draw her future plans, as the parents are the ones who draw her future according to their mood.

Another of the men, a 37-year-old employee from Tel Kaif District, reflected on when the issue of women's freedom had started.

Since the fall of the regime until now, we have been suffering from the problem of women's freedom, and the current government does not care about the problem of women's freedom, and its solutions are weak. Now it is better, and this is due to the cultural and liberation movements in Iraq, but we have to explain freedom in the positive sense of freedom and not the distorted meaning that some are trying to apply to our society. There is a bright side and a development in the field of freedom and the spread of a positive liberating thought, thanks to some humanitarian personalities and some organisations such as the Shabak Women Association, who have a very big role in conveying the beautiful image of the Shabak woman and the transfer of her suffering. But we must not forget that we are in Nineveh and Nineveh governorates have strict, conservative and strict, religious and tribal traditions.

Another of the men, a 54-year-old employee from Hamdaniya, also felt that the freedom Shabak women now have:

is much better than it was in the past, so that we see today many Shabak women in important positions in many departments and in good numbers in many departments.

He felt that since the fall of the regime, Shabak women's role has increased in parliament and political life, however he acknowledged that in elections:

She has no role because her husband pressures her to choose the candidate and she implements what her husband says and chooses the candidate he wants.

This point was supported by another man, a 46-year-old graduate from Bazwaya village, Bashiqa district.

In the elections they do not have freedom, but in choosing a profession there is some freedom.

The women in the FGDs didn't necessarily agree that the situation was better in terms of their freedom. For example, there are still some employment fields where you would not find Shabak women. One of the young women, a 21-year-old university student from Bartella, shared her friend's situation.

I have a friend, a talented actress who does not practice her talent because of the lack of parental support.

From this it becomes clear that depriving Shabak women of their freedom reaches the suppresses talents and skills. Likewise, another of the women, a 24-year-old activist and graduate from the district of Bartella, shared how she:

Had the desire to study engineering, but my family refused that because of customs and traditions, under the pretext that I am a girl and I cannot work in the streets, bridges and buildings.

The Shabak woman is restricted even in choosing the academic major she desires, and is not given the freedom to choose for herself. One of the women, a 25-year-old activist from the village of Manara Shabak, Bartella, revealed the extent of the problem.

Shabak society does not give the Shabak woman the freedom to move, and the parents refuse to allow her to work outside the governorate or the country in which they live.

3.2.15 Domestic violence

One of the problems that Iraqi society suffers from, including Shabak society, in varying degrees, is violence against women. It is rooted within the building of society and its cultural, social and legislative concepts that uphold stereotypes of men and women, including the idea that men are, and should be, dominant. This makes men degrade women, and women forfeit their rights, believing that this is acceptable. These beliefs encourage women to accept the many manifestations of violence practiced against them.

The customs and traditions, particularly social upbringing, in Shabak society still obscures domestic violence, which is considered to be a secret of the home. This problem was exacerbated by the economic and political conditions Iraqi society went through after 2003. The men in the Shabak society see that domestic violence is one of the challenges and problems that Shabak women face, even if this violence is practiced by them. Yet

there is a sub-section of men who see that the practice of violence is a characteristic of their masculinity. The women in the FGDs had a great deal to share about domestic violence, however, much of what they shared are personal stories that would make them identifiable, so it was decided to not share them in this paper to protect participants' anonymity.

One of the men, a 21-year-old student from Hay al-Salam. Bartella, shared an example of domestic violence within the Shabak community, highlighting how Shabak women are failed by state institutions, leaving them with no choice but to stay with their abusive husbands.

A time ago, there was a session with the Justice president of the Hamdaniya Court. He mentioned an example of a broken (violated) woman came to him. She jumped off the roof and tried to commit suicide because the man came home tired and asked for the TV remote control, and she did not respond to her husband and ignored him. The incident led to the separation between them, after that, the woman gave up her rights and all this violence was for nothing in light of the fact that she preserves her husband and her children, and this is the that women should have more protection in state institutions, especially in the courts. In general, women say that even if they file a complaint against him, the matter will reach divorce, and it may lead to murder and bloodshed, but in the end we always notice that it is the woman who tries to make the family cohesive in order that it keep her children.

However, another of the men, a 31-year-old teacher and activist from Bartella sub-district, Bashpita village, stated a different opinion.

What happened in our society, we were suffering from pressure and suddenly we had an openness to the world? We should not directly apply the law of another country to our country, it is difficult for Iraqi society, a tribal customary society. As for us, our Shabak society, we are a very cohesive society. I will give you an evidence, we have a Shabak man who marries only one woman and does not marry two. And domestic violence is low and in small percentage. We do not have one, for example, who is immoral and does not return home and is a drug user, so our society is a cohesive and clean society. What we need is a few updates and this role comes to women, but we don't want to lose hope that our society is hopeless.

Unfortunately, this opinion reveals an ignorance from some Shabak men about the reality Shabak women face when it comes to violence. For example, Shabak women face a severe violence called 'Al-Fassliya', which is the most horrific way the Shabak girl is violently abused. She is used as a *Fassliya* to resolve a conflict between two clans and becomes a victim of blood marriage. This involves providing one of the daughters of the aggressor clan to the victim or one of his relatives for marriage, under the title of "revenge", and this woman lives during this marriage mostly under psychological pressure and shunned by her husband and the husband's family.

The following account was told by one of the women in the FGDs in private. It took place in one of the villages belonging to the Bashiqa sub-district. The fact that it was shared in private is testament to its horrific nature, however it also shows how domestic violence within the Shabak community is surrounded by shame and secrecy, pushing women, especially victims, into an even more vulnerable situation.

*There was a young man who had an affair with a married woman and he met her secretly. As the days passed, her relationship with him was exposed by her brothers. The young man was severely beaten and he managed to escape from them. In order to resolve the conflict between the two families, the young man's sister was married off to one of the brothers of the married woman as a *Fassliya*, and a large sum of money was taken from them, as well as a modern car estimated at many millions. The virgin girl's early marriage took place, on the wedding night her husband had a sexual relations with her first, then his older brother and the other brother after them, and their sister's husband (the mistress) was the last one, meaning the girl was raped by four men on the same night and the next morning the girl was thrown in front of her father's house. The young man (the lover) was smuggled out of the city for fear of being killed, and his family left their home and work and moved to a faraway place. Despite all this, the rape of the girl did not receive support and justice from the government, but rather they cancelled all procedures without holding the rapists accountable. The girl's life was destroyed, and on the other hand, the mistress lived a decent life under the shadow of her rapist husband and brothers. The violence that the Shabak woman is exposed to if it is from the husband, father, brother or mother (beating, insulting) in addition to murder. If the abused woman, for example, has an affair or a love affair with a young man, and her case is revealed, where she is killed, and in the simplest way, to keep the shame away from the family, is by*

burning. Where the police station and the hospital are informed that she committed suicide by exploding a gas bottle or an oil heater.

3.2.16 Harassment

Harassment is considered one of the challenges faced by women in general, as well as Shabak women. Sexual harassment is any unwelcome sexual act by the other party, whether verbal or physical. Harassment also takes place via phone messages or social media. Sexual harassment can also escalate to blackmail, threats, and even rape.

It is worth noting that while harassment exists in all societies, this topic was only raised and discussed by the women in the 18-35 age category. The men did not discuss harassment at all. As with domestic violence, this indicates that there is a gap in Shabak men's knowledge of what Shabak women experience. It could also suggest that Shabak men view this harassment as an acceptable and unquestioned social norm, not realising the role they play in upholding this form of discrimination.

One of the women, a 26-year-old, argued that the reason for harassment is the lack of communication between men and women:

The reason for harassment is the isolation of men and women from each other within the Shabak community and the lack of knowledge of how to deal with each other, and this causes harassment.

Another participant, a young woman, had a slightly different view, claiming that the reason:

is the weak personality [shyness, meekness] of the Shabak woman. The harasser is sure of the weak personality of the woman, so he continues to harass.

The shyness and meekness that this participant refers to is often a result of the community telling Shabak women and girls that they should be timid, docile and submissive.

Participants also discussed the way that Shabak women and girls who are harassed are viewed by Shabak society. For example, another of the young women mentioned how:

The society's view for the harassed girl is worse than the harasser himself. In addition to this, there is electronic extortion that Shabak women are subjected to because of the lack of knowledge of how to protect themselves digitally and lack of knowledge of ways to file complaints. Honestly, the Shabak woman is ignorant

of teaching her daughter how to protect herself when she is subjected to harassment.

Another participant, also a young woman, agreed.

Sometimes the victim is afraid of informing the parents of the harassment because of the penalties that she may face from the parents, as if she is the reason.

Additionally, sometimes women subjected to harassment leave employment as a result.

Through the discussion, we found that Shabak women were unable to submit complaints to the courts in cases of harassment. For example, one of the women, a 26-year-old Masters student from Bartella sub-district, explained how:

Sometimes the victim is threatened in order to protect the harasser himself from complaints.

A solution to this challenge was suggested by one of the participants:

We need awareness from the community police so that girls know the necessary steps to protect themselves.

Another of the women, a 25-year-old teacher from Bartella sub-district, also felt that:

It is very necessary for girls to feel safe from the side of their parents so that they can refer to them in cases of harassment.

3.2.17 Claiming rights through the legal system

Shabak society sees women who file complaints as shameful and prevents them from doing so. In fact, they may disavow women for doing so, as one of the women, a 37-year-old, explained.

Societal customs and traditions do not allow me to file a complaint, and my husband does not accept divorce, does not return to me, nor justify between me and his second wife. Customs and traditions do not allow a divorced woman to live alone with her children, and my husband does not provide me with the expenses for my needs.

She also highlighted how:

Our clans do not allow us to file a complaint against the husband, and we do not have the right to do so because he is my cousin and this is the biggest problem that prevents me from filing a complaint.

3.2.18 Divorce

Shabak society views divorced women as easy prey or as having a bad reputation. This view is not directed at divorced men, but rather society blames women, even if the cause of the divorce is the man. Even the treatment of divorced women by their family is negative. They are often forbidden to leave the house, and if they go out it must be with one of their family members. If women have children, the law allows them custody, but if their family refuses to receive the children women must waive custody to their ex-husbands. Women are then married off to anyone who asks for them and given no choice in this regard. As a result of these norms the topic of divorce was uncomfortable for many of the women in the research project and they did not feel comfortable talking about it, even in a women-only discussion space. As a result, many of the views explored in this section are from men.

Before 2003, men in the Shabak community did not divorce their wives, and they remained in their family's home. One of the women, a 54-year-old, confirmed this:

I was abandoned by my husband five years ago and this problem affected my life because I am married and I do not have the right to receive social care. I asked to be divorced but I need a lawyer, and the lawyer asks for an amount of money that I don't have. I'm an orphan, no father and mother, and I currently live with my nephew. It does not work to solve the problem in a tribal way because my husband is not afraid. I filed a complaint and he needs to be notified, and since he lives in Baghdad and I am in Mosul and the notification must be delivered manually and I cannot go Baghdad to deliver the complaint.

Conversely, one of the men, a 37-year-old, had a different view, believing men to be in a worse position when it comes to divorce.

Currently, all rights belong to the woman. My brother divorced his wife and pays 100,000 alimonies and has one daughter. Of course, since he has a salary and according to the percentage of the husband's salary, they deduct alimony, whether it is her alimony or child support, but the application of the law depends on judges and lawyers. Every woman can take her rights, but she must know how

to take them, but if the woman is ignorant of the law and does not know how to take her right, then this is the suffering.

Another of the men, a 31-year-old activist from Qara Shore village, Hamdaniya, disagreed that women can claim their rights if they want to divorce their husband. He explained how:

If the woman does [file for divorce], all her rights will fall. If the law gives full rights to women, such as European countries and now the Kurdistan region, even if the woman files a divorce case, the man must give her all her rights and this is a positive thing, but according to Iraqi law, the women, and all women in Iraq in general, should give up her rights in the event that she asks for separation, she only has the right to the dowry allocated to her. As the Shabak society uses traditional methods, i.e., clans, to solve problems between men and women before divorce proceedings bargaining takes place here, and in most cases, women are the weakest link. If a solution is not reached, the courts are resorted to and national laws are adhered to, which is the Personal Status Law.

It was generally agreed that women within Shabak society are treated negatively when it comes to divorce. For example, one of the men, a 24-year-old civil society activist from the Bashiqa district of the village of Omar Qabji, affirmed that:

Women in the Shabak society are somewhat ostracised and have a bad reputation because of divorce. And if she is always wronged, she is the weak party in the matter and the losing party, and she is broken-hearted and it [has an] impact on her psychological state.

Various reasons for divorce within Shabak society were discussed by the groups, with some men seeing Shabak women's behaviour as a contributing factor and others recognising that a marriage is less likely to last if women are not listened to when entering the marriage. For example, the 31-year-old activist recognised early and forced marriage as a problem, but also lack of economic freedom.

The reason for divorce is the marriage of cousins, forced marriage, early marriage, and also the economic situation that may affect the decisions of Shabak women, and also the misuse of social media.

In contrast, the 30-year-old photographer from Bartella, Taiba Complex, shared his view that:

The reason for the divorce is not taking the girl's opinion in a correct way, and if they ask her, they will ask her in the form of threat and compulsion to consent to marriage and this leads to disagreement and lack of acceptance and thus leads to divorce and incorrect choices.

Nevertheless, customs and traditions were viewed by some as a positive preventer of divorce within the Shabak community. For example, one of the men, a 28-year-old earner from Bartella sub-district, Ansar Complex explained how he believed that:

The divorce rate is very low in Shabak society because of customs and traditions. It is a good thing. The society is built on customs and traditions, but our customs and traditions must develop more and more with the passage of time.

3.2.19 Community environment

Migration and mixing with other nationalities has an impact on the openness of Shabak society, which was previously closed. This forced mixing was a result of the control of ISIS terrorists on the Nineveh Plain and the forced displacement of many Shabak people to the northern governorates (Kurdistan region), the southern governorates and the capital Baghdad. Living alongside other communities has influenced Shabak society and shed light on how restrictive the Shabak community can be towards women and girls.

For example, one of the women, a 24-year-old activist from Bartella district, mentioned that:

From my point of view, society is the one that restricts the Shabak girl to her behaviour or the field of her studies, with evidence that the period of migration to the northern and southern governorates when ISIS was occupying Nineveh Governorate, the mixing of the Shabak society with the rest of society helped to raise awareness of them and made the girl act more freely, and this is evidence that the obstacle is the Shabak society not the family.

3.2.20 Political participation

Political participation was discussed in the FGD with the 18-35 age group. One of the women, a 31-year-old activist from Bartella, Ansar Complex, suggested customs and traditions prevented Shabak women from participating in political life, whether that be organising into parties or establishing women's organisations. They do not greatly participate in the electoral process in comparison with men or assume positions in state institutions.

3.2.21 Marriage in exchange for leaving work

Women aged 18-35 years suggested that men in the community tell employed women that if they want to get married they must leave work. For example, one of the women, a 53-year-old civil society activist from Bartella sub-district, Bashpita village, explained the challenge in the following way:

Most of what happens in marriage is that those who ask for marriage they want a graduate and an employee, and when they get married, they prevent her from working. Even if she is a student, she must leave her studies. [This happens because] some men do not accept that a woman has a better position in society than them, in addition to the harsh society's view of some jobs.

Another of the women, a 27-year-old activist from Bartella district, Taiba complex, articulated the problem as:

A Shabak man prefers an educated but not employed woman.

Although this has traditionally been the way in rural communities, in city centres the opposite phenomenon is being seen. Men are looking for employed women to help them because the cost of living in the city is higher, as people need to rent rather than living with family or building a house.

4 Priority needs for the community

Once the challenges and threats had been identified, participants in the FGDs shared and discussed ways to overcome them. Unfortunately, as outlined in the methodology section, women's voices were not as strong in the suggested solutions element of the work as the FGDs ran out of time. This is unsurprising given how many issues and challenges they identified and wished to discuss in detail. Therefore, there is space for future research that empowers Shabak women to generate solutions to the issues they face.

The provision of education: The lack of schools, especially schools for the advanced stages of education, is a major obstacle to Shabak women's realisation of their rights. This is the responsibility of government. Schools must be provided in villages near to communities because Shabak women are prevented from travelling to remote places. They should also hire professional female staff from the Shabak minority to make the environment more welcoming and culturally appropriate. For this to occur other

communities need to accept the Shabak and they must welcome them into their places of education. Shabak parents and families must also support their girls to finish their studies.

Job opportunities: The government is responsible for providing job opportunities for women, encouraging women to work in the private sector, and raising women's awareness of their legal rights in the Iraqi Labor Law No. 37/2015. The Shabak community should support women so that they can work and use their businesses. Seminars should be held for husbands and fathers so that they are educated on women's rights and employment. This kind of awareness raising can also be conducted on Al-Shabak Radio. Harassment at work must be tackled by the criminal justice system as should discrimination on the grounds of gender or membership of the Shabak community.

Health: Health centres and hospitals must be established in the villages of the Nineveh Plain, complete with all necessary equipment. Travelling to seek care is too expensive for some and can come with risks so this needs to be local. Female staff must be provided in hospitals within Shabak villages and they should practice non-discrimination.

Early marriage: The responsibility for ending early marriage falls first on the shoulders of the Iraqi legislator, as he has to legislate a legal article within the Iraqi Penal Code criminalising early marriage, or at least tighten the penalty for marriage outside the court if one of the spouses is a minor. Awareness needs to be raised among communities and families of the negative impacts of early marriage on women and on society. The clergy and mullahs also need to be educated not to sign the marriage contract to young girls and they should be punished if they do.

Harassment: Educational centres, courses and cultural seminars for men should be established to educate them about the danger of the phenomenon of harassment to society and the need to eliminate it.

Customs and traditions: Education is key to countering harmful culture and traditions and should be provided through governmental and non-governmental organisations.

Inheritance: The Shabak community needs to raise awareness, educate and eliminate negative ideas about inheritance that are contrary to Sharia and the law, and this task falls on the shoulders of religious leaders, as well as civil society organisations, through workshops and awareness seminars.

Discrimination: Discrimination is strongly linked to negative customs and traditions. Culture should be adapted to be more inclusive of the needs of women.

Freedom: Girls and women should be allowed to make choices over their education and employment. Non-governmental organisations can play a role in education.

Domestic violence: The law must protect women from violence and provide them with job opportunities, empowering them economically. The community must be educated about the negative impacts of violence.

Access to the legal system: The community must educate women on their rights under the law and support them in filing lawsuits.

Divorce: Shabak society needs to be educated about changing their negative view of divorced women and giving them their rights.

Community environment: Shabak society needs to direct the media to spread a culture of respect for women and recognition of their rights mentioned in the Holy Qur'an and guaranteed by the Iraqi constitution.

Political participation: The community must raise awareness of the important role women play in politics and they should be employed and present in decision-making roles.

Marriage in exchange for leaving work: Awareness must be raised in villages about the importance of women's work.

Addressing these challenges is in the hands of men and women, but since Iraq is an authoritarian, patriarchal society governed by outdated customs and traditions, men's understanding of these challenges will greatly contribute towards meeting the largest possible number of women's needs, which women consider their human and legal rights.

5 Conclusion

This research outlines realistic and easy-to-apply solutions because they do not conflict with the principles of the Shabak society and are in line with the current cultural development. They must, however, be supported by the concerned authorities and by human rights and humanitarian agencies.

This research conveys the voice of Shabak women, who have been robbed of their most basic rights and freedom throughout their history. We hope it will be a step towards providing hope and freedom. Women are considered half of society, and they are the

ones who give birth and raise the other half. They are the mothers who have a position and respected role in society. They give birth to leaders, heroes and righteous people. They are themselves literary, political and academic personalities in Iraq who have made important and great achievements for the country and have made their mark in history. Their importance cannot be erased.

6 Recommendations

1. Enhance and strengthen the Shabak woman's role in society through community awareness campaigns and seminars held on this topic.
2. The government and the legislative authority must legislate to combat violence against women, especially early marriage, and protect their right to work, study, and engage in civil and political activity. The government must also eliminate extremist discourses that persecute women and punish them legally and judicially.
3. Build schools for girls for all levels in the villages of the Nineveh Plain. This is because many families refuse to send their daughters to remote places or to the city due to tribal customs, and this is an obstacle for women to complete her study and education.
4. Raise awareness in Shabak society on women and girls' rights in order to eliminate many of the negative phenomena, customs and traditions that marginalise women, such as forcing them to give up their right to their inheritance, as well as preventing them from choosing professions and academic specialisations, destroying their desire and scientific ambition.
5. Iraqi law sets a minimum age for marriage at 18 years, and in the case of marital necessity, 15 years. This has difficult and exceptional conditions and the Iraqi legislator in the Personal Status Law in Article Ten, Paragraph Five, sets and imposes a fine or imprisonment penalty on every marriage that takes place outside the court.³ Shabaki society must follow this law to eliminate early marriage.

³ Exact text as follows: he shall be punished with imprisonment for a period of not less than six months and not exceeding a year or a fine of not less than three hundred dinars and not more than One thousand dinars for every man to contract a marriage outside the court, and the penalty is imprisonment for a period of no less than three years and not more than five years if he concludes another marriage outside the court with the establishment of the marriage.

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⁴ Publisher details not provided by author.

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Annexe 1: The names of the Shabak villages

No	The name of the district / sub-district	Name of the village/complex
1	Hamdaniya District	Keberly
2	Hamdaniya District	Badnah Al-kabira
3	Hamdaniya District	Badnah AL-saghira
4	Hamdaniya District	Towanja
5	Hamdaniya District	Qera Tiba Arab
6	Hamdaniya District	Zahra Khatun
7	Hamdaniya District	Muftiya
8	Hamdaniya District	Shaqli
9	Hamdaniya District	Shekh Ameer
10	Hamdaniya District	Tarjila
11	Nimrud sub-district	Qarqasha
12	Nimrud sub-district	Blawat
13	Nimrud sub-district	Qarshor
14	Nimrud sub-district	Omar Kan
15	Nimrud sub-district	Bastile Kabir

16	Nimrud sub-district	Kharabat Sulatn
17	Bartella sub-district	Bazrkrtan
18	Bartella sub-district	Basakhra
19	Bartella sub-district	Khazna Tebah
20	Bartella sub-district	Al-muwafaqia
21	Bartella sub-district	Tahrawah
22	Bartella sub-district	Bashpita
23	Bartella sub-district	Manarat Shabak
24	Bartella sub-district	Ali Rash
25	Bartella sub-district	Tabraq Ziyara Al-slfy
26	Bartella sub-district	Tabraq Ziyara Al-'aly
27	Bartella sub-district	Al-lak
28	Bartella sub-district	Geliokhan
29	Bartella sub-district	Shahrazad
30	Bartella sub-district	Khwetla
31	Bartella sub-district	Al-ansar Complex
32	Bartella sub-district	Al-hayat Complex
33	Bartella sub-district	Al-noor Complex
34	Bartella sub-district	Al-zahraa Complex

35	Bartella sub-district	Al-ghadir Complex
36	Bartella sub-district	Al-tiba Complex
37	Bartella sub-district	Al abas Complex
38	Bartella sub-district	Al Hussein Complex
39	Bartella sub-district	Al-sader Complex
40	Bartella sub-district	Al-karara Complex
41	Bashiqa district	Koklgi
42	Bashiqa district	Bazwaya
43	Bashiqa district	Toberzawa
44	Bashiqa district	Tis kharab
45	Bashiqa district	Angega
46	Bashiqa district	Darawish
47	Bashiqa district	Abu garbua'a
48	Bashiqa district	Gore Hgariban
49	Bashiqa district	Qara tiba Shabak
50	Bashiqa district	Awrtā Kharab
51	Bashiqa district	Kani Kowan
52	Bashiqa district	Shekh Shili
53	Bashiqa district	Kani Nu

54	Bashiqa district	Khorsibad
55	Bashiqa district	Smaqia
56	Bashiqa district	Telyara
57	Bashiqa district	Oamar Qapchi
58	Bashiqa district	Fadhlia
59	Bashiqa district	Yarima
60	Bashiqa district	Nawran
61	Bashiqa district	Gengi
62	Bashiqa district	Direch
63	Bashiqa district	Tershik Complex
64	Bashiqa district	Roshbiyan Village
65	Bashiqa district	Al-shahid Hameed Complex
66	Bashiqa district	Al-noor complex
67	Tel Kaif District	Al-sadah
68	Tel Kaif District	Baa'weza
69	Tel Kaif District	Ala'basia
70	Tel Kaif District	Tawila

Source: Author's own.

Annexe 2: FGD questions

The following are the specific questions asked to the men and women within the focus group discussions:

1. From your point of view and being one of the Shabak minority, what is your suffering in education and what is its impact on you and the future of your children? And in general, what is the negative impact of lack of education on Shabak women?
2. When the child reaches the age of six years, he is automatically registered in school, but the question is, are there Shabak families who prevent or do not enrol girls in school?
3. How easy is it for girls in your community to complete their education?
4. What is the reason behind the girl forcibly leaving her education by her parents? In this case, the girl does not go to the market. Is the family educated or not (father and mother)?
5. How has education affected your life, the family, women, and consequently society?
6. Are girls' opportunities for education the same as boys?
7. From your point of view, what is the reason behind the fact that the current generation is graduating and not educated?
8. Is all this pressure on women due to the view, customs and traditions of society or the family itself?
9. Are there forms of discrimination that you feel the children of your religious group are subjected to? (Explain which discriminatory practices affect your daughters the most).
10. What is discrimination or what is the image of this distinction and how does it happen?
11. It is known that the schools in the district centre of Bartella and Qaraqosh are mixed components (Christians, Shabaks and Turkmen). Is there any discrimination between students?

12. How does health affect the Shabak woman, and do you notice, through your presence in the Nineveh Plain, in Mosul, or in Bashiqa, is there some kind of discrimination between the Shabak woman and the rest of women in dealing with health care in all aspects, which includes health?
13. Do people in your community enjoy free or affordable health care for their financial capabilities?
14. Is there a difference between the availability of appropriate health care in your community, and the health care available to other communities that do not have a high representation of religious minorities? If there is a difference, please explain, how is the situation different? Please give examples of this.
15. Is there a difference between the quality of health care available to members of religious minorities, and the quality of the same services provided to communities in which the majority follow the majority religion? If there is a difference, please explain, how is the situation different? Please give examples of this.
16. Do women belonging to your community have the same access to education, treatment and services as women belonging to the majority religion?
17. What are the negative cases that have been observed regarding the issue of discrimination and oppression of women in society?
18. The problem of discrimination and marginalisation of women Shabak, how is it practiced and what are its consequences and solutions?
19. What are the negative customs and traditions that affect the Shabak of women in general in the Nineveh Plain?
20. Is all this pressure on women due to the look, customs and traditions of society or the family itself?
21. What is the Shabak society's view of women who work outside the home? It is known that in the past, the Shabak woman worked inside the house only, and she had all the responsibilities of raising children, household matters, raising animals, and even construction, and the man worked outside the house..... Nowadays, has this situation changed?
22. How does the lack of job opportunities affect the lives of Shabak women?

23. Why does society take a bad view of organisations and prevent women from working in organisations, what is the reason for that?
24. If you had the opportunity to work outside the home, would you work? Do you work inside a mall or market, if the opportunity presents itself?
25. What are the restrictions imposed on the Shabak woman and the impact of those on her in daily life?
26. Why don't we find Shabak women working in all different fields such as acting, journalism and music?
27. As for Sharia and the law, it gave women the right!? But what is the reason for depriving the Shabak of women of the inheritance, and when they demand it, they treat them harshly? Some husbands separated from each other because the wife was forced to take the inheritance.
28. What is the reason for the harassment of Shabak women? What is the effect of this on women's Shabak?
29. Is the harassment you are exposed to only by the Shabak community or by the rest of the majority and minority communities of other religions?
30. Can the Shabak woman submit complaints to the courts in cases of harassment?
31. Where is early marriage prevalent at the present time? Does it exist in the Shabak society?? And what is the reason?
32. What is the reason for early marriage of Shabak girls?
33. What can the marriage of minors lead to and what effect does it have on the Shabak woman and on society?
34. What is the cause of divorce and what effect does it have on the Shabak woman?
35. What if the Shabak woman is asking for a divorce and the man does not want a divorce? If we reverse the picture, the man wants divorce and the woman does not want divorce?
36. What is the effect of intolerance in religious discourse on women?
37. What do you think about confronting religious extremists with direct discourse, and confronting them in the media as well as culturally?

Sabean-Mandaean Women and Religious and Ideological Conflict in Iraqi Society

Faiza Diab Sarhan

Summary

This paper introduces the challenges facing Sabean-Mandaean women in Iraq, interrogating the difficulties they experience as women and as members of a religious minority. Sabean-Mandaean women find themselves caught between the jaws of religious and gender discrimination. This paper explores the challenges that they face in their day-to-day lives, the causal factors, and how their situation has changed in the past five to ten years.

This paper draws on participatory research with the Sabean-Mandaean community in Iraq. The importance of this research lies in bringing the suffering of women who belong to religious minorities to light, specifically Sabean-Mandaean women. It also reveals the negative effects of living in a patriarchal society that marginalises women and how this intersects with religious discrimination to prevent women from reaching their potential. For the Sabean-Mandaean women who live in Erbil, religious discrimination was the most severe and pervasive threat facing them. This included intimidation and threats to convert to the majority religion as well as the imposition of the veil, despite the fact that wearing a veil (hijab) is not part of the Sabean-Mandaean religion. For women in Baghdad, the security situation was of greater concern because of their numerically small presence in the city. Other threats and challenges identified include a lack of job opportunities for minorities (compounded for these women by the difficulties women face in gaining employment) and harassment in public from the majority.

This research highlights the plight of Sabean-Mandaean women and presents policy recommendations to ensure the government of Iraq prioritises the survival of this marginalised religious minority. These include protecting Iraqi minorities' physical existence, particularly in cases of conflict, promoting their equality in law and practice, and addressing direct and indirect discrimination.

Keywords: Sabean-Mandaean, women, religious minority, marginality, gender discrimination, Iraq, participatory research.

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1 Background

The following summary of the history, beliefs, and language of the Sabean-Mandaeans is based on information prepared and written by the Sabean-Mandaean association in Erbil, including a brief introduction by Raed Hassoun Baqal and Aday Asaad Khammas, a section on the *Knowledge of Life* by composer S. Kondos, translated by Dr Saadi Al-Saadi, and the Ahlam Humayana written by Ahlam Saeed.¹

The Sabean-Mandaean people originate from the land of Mesopotamia, a place tightly bound with their existence and survival. They uphold Adam's law; a series of teachings delivered to Adam, the first human, by an archangel (Mite, 2004), and consider him to be the first prophet. The last of the prophets and their teacher is Prophet Yahya bin Zakaria (peace be upon him), who resurrected their ancient religion and established the act of baptism. Baptism is a central commitment for the Sabean-Mandaean people, following the practices of Adam.

Mandaeism is a religious belief with its own thought, rituals, and language that still exists today, despite the fact that it is no longer a missionary religion. However, its existence is not marginal. Rather, Mandaeism is based on the insistence of its followers to survive despite the kinds of conflicts and persecutions they have been subjected to, including the challenges of the era and today's culture which is resistant to closed societies defined by religious beliefs and ritual performance such as Mandaeism.

Since ancient times, the Sabean-Mandaeans have lived in many places over a large geographical area, but they now mainly live in Iraq (the vast majority in Baghdad) and Iran. Following the migration, which took place for a limited period between 1991– 2012, they have spread to more than 25 countries around the world; their population, however, does not exceed 100,000 people in total. Despite their small number, they have played an important role in the fields of science, literature, art, and knowledge, from ancient times until now.

The word 'Sabean' is derived from the Aramaic verb *Saba*, which means 'to baptise or immerse in water', while the word 'Mandaean' is derived from the Aramaic word *Manda*, meaning 'knowledge' or 'science'. Thus, Sabean-Mandaean means, 'those who are baptised and who know the true religion'.

¹ The details of these references are not available online and/or were not provided by the author.

The five pillars of Mandaism are:

1. Monotheism
2. Baptism
3. Prayer
4. Fasting
5. Almsgiving

Their beliefs can be summed up in the following sentence: Sabean-Mandaeans believe in God, His oneness, angels, the last day, and the punishment and reward linked with it.

Mandaism's holy books include:

1. The holy book *Ginza Rba*, which means 'The Great Treasure';
2. The *Book of John the Baptist (Drasha id yahia)*, which is the teachings and principles of Prophet Yahya (peace be upon him);
3. *Aniany*, the book of prayers and supplications;
4. The *Book of Adam pagra*, which is a detailed explanation of the human body;
5. *Asfar Malwasha*, a book specialising in astronomy and the movement of celestial bodies;
6. Many different books and collections for various rituals and religious purposes.

The Sabean-Mandaeans speak a special language called Mandaean, which is an Aramaic dialect similar to Syriac, Hebrew, and other languages.

The government has recognised the role of the Sabean-Mandaean community through their speeches, but these words are not backed up by policies or support. It is also difficult for Sabean-Mandaeans to progress within government to higher positions.

1.1 Sabean-Mandaean women's situation in society

Within the Sabean-Mandaean community, women are seen to have great value. In Mandaism, when it comes to inheritance, families split it equally between the women and the men. The children within the family have a religious name as well as a lay name and this traces the lineage of the mother's name; for example, Hewa (Eve), Bint (daughter of), Simit (the mother's name). In Sabean-Mandaean historical accounts, the Sabean-Mandaean community faced a lot of oppression and the religious men were massacred [in Diwan Masbuta d Hibil Ziwa]. As a result, it is believed that one woman – Hayunna –

was responsible for the revival of the community. Consequently, women are supported to be in leadership positions within the Sabean-Mandaean community.

However, Sabean-Mandaean women face harassment outside of their community; for example, due to the way they dress, as they do not wear a veil as with the majority Sunni or Shia Muslim populations. For this reason, the life of Sabean-Mandaean women becomes more restricted as their families do not want to expose them to this harassment or for them to suffer in this way, so they sometimes prefer for the women to stay safe within the home. As the women are identifiable as non-Muslim through their dress, they may be asked, 'Why don't you become Muslim?' and there have been cases of forced conversion through kidnapping and marriage to Muslim men. The community has been threatened through messages that proclaim that 'your women and your money is ours to take and if I were to kill you, I would go straight to heaven'.

The community has been impacted by the situation of Yazidi women who were kidnapped by Daesh as they are afraid that such events might also happen to the Sabean-Mandaean women. This makes them wary for the safety of their families, particularly women and girls, and is also a motivation for emigration among the community. As a result, there are concerns for the survival of the community and that they will begin to lose their Sabean-Mandaean identity as they become more dispersed and integrated into other communities. The emigration of men for safety and security, due to the threat of kidnap, persecution, and religious discrimination, also has knock-on effects. Men are in some instances more exposed than the women to these threats because they interact more outside of the Sabean-Mandaean community for work or economic reasons and may need to migrate. This has meant that there are many Sabean-Mandaean women who are not married, as there are few men left within their communities. It is necessary to be born into the Sabean-Mandaean religion and individuals cannot marry outside of it. Emigration and displacement therefore threatens the survival of the community.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research aims

This research explores the problems experienced by Sabean-Mandaean women and men through their own words, allowing for a deeper understanding of their needs and

interests. The unique situation of Sabeian-Mandaean women is specifically analysed to better understand how the gender discrimination they face within Iraqi society intersects with religious discrimination. This also includes how they experience gender discrimination within the Sabeian-Mandaean community.

Religious and national minorities continue to live in an insecure political, economic, and social environment. This is a result of the unstable security situation that has existed in Iraq since 2003. Some parts of Iraqi society have developed a propensity for exclusion and marginalisation, which has led to the expansion of quotas, a growing lack of interest in policies that lead to changes in Iraqi infrastructure, and the forced migration of a large number of minorities from their place of origin. Furthermore, despite the clarity of the constitutional texts regarding this subject, some parties encouraged minorities to migrate out of Iraq by continuing to ignore minorities' rights while making laws.

The international community has also been weak in its response to crimes committed against minorities, including the adoption of the Iraqi state and political system, the contribution of education curricula in eliminating and erasing the identities of minorities in Iraqi society, and the negative discrimination in civil status laws.

Highlighting the suffering of Sabeian-Mandaean women also reveals the blind spots that are not subject to local and international oversight. This research creates an opportunity for these blind spots to be included in reports sent to the local and international bodies responsible for holding states accountable to the covenants and charters they have signed and ratified. This research aims to support Sabeian-Mandaean women to achieve whatever they aspire to, to participate in Iraqi society equally based on the principle of respect.

2.2 Research methods and participant selection

The research was conducted through four focus group discussions (FGDs); two in Erbil (one with Sabeian-Mandaean women and one with Sabeian-Mandaean men) and two in Baghdad (one with Sabeian-Mandaean women and one with Sabeian-Mandaean men):

Table 1: Locations and dates of FGDs

Location	Gender	Date of FGD
Erbil	Women	19 Nov 2021

Location	Gender	Date of FGD
Erbil	Men	11 Dec 2021
Baghdad	Women	17 Dec 2021, am
Baghdad	Men	17 Dec 2021, pm

Source: Author's own.

The participants were selected based on their backgrounds, to ensure that the research was representative of a broad range of perspectives. Participants included housewives, those who are educated and uneducated, and those who are employed and unemployed. This enriched the research and encouraged diversity in discussions around the research topics.

The groups included 22 women and 23 men, with a total of 45 participants. They ranged in age from 18 to 70 years old. The perspectives of both women and men were sought in the focus groups to highlight the different experiences of discrimination based on gender within the Sabean-Mandaean community.

Likewise, different age groups were chosen to show a diversity of experiences, as each generation has its own concerns and problems, just as those who live in Erbil experience some problems differently to those in Baghdad, and vice versa.

The FGDs allowed rich qualitative data to be collected. This was complemented by quantitative data collected through participatory ranking. Participants were asked to identify what obstacles, problems, and challenges they face. For the women's group in Erbil, the challenges were written on the board and the women voted on which one was the most important that they faced. In the remaining FGDs, participants created their own lists ranking the challenges they faced after a discussion of the core topics, although some participants also included other challenges in their lists. The writing of the lists as opposed to the voting helped to clarify the challenges in each person's mind without being influenced by others' opinions and to gain more in-depth of understanding with regard to each individual's priorities.

This approach allowed each participant to speak freely and feel safe to explain the experiences and the pressures they have been suffering from. In the FGDs with the men,

they spoke about their personal challenges and experiences as well as those of their family, including their perceptions of the issues facing women. Participants were then asked, from their point of view, what recommendations would improve their living conditions, and these are included within the recommendations at the end of this report.

2.3 Study restrictions

Table 2: Strengths and weaknesses of the study

Strengths	Weaknesses
1 The author has good knowledge of the majority of the people involved in the research and the surrounding circumstances, which gives an additional value to the research process and enriches it, revealing hidden information.	1 The fear of participating, especially with individuals they didn't know.
2 The work of the staff within the sect's institutions, which includes long-term workers in this field. This resulted in knowledge and rapprochement between the researcher and the participants.	2 Family pressure on participants not to attend, particularly women, due to the lack of having a male driver to give them a lift. This meant that they were unable to reach the meeting venue. This is a lived example of the restrictions Sabean-Mandaean women face that the men in their community don't.
3 The work of the staff on social committees (their knowledge of the problems occurring in society which are the subject of this study) which facilitated the process of selecting participants and shed light on the depth of the problems that occur.	3 For some participants across all the groups, it was a lack of faith in the ability of reports and research methods to change the reality of the situation, especially in the long term, as a result of the Sabean-Mandaean people's repeated disappointments and sense of hopelessness.

<p>4 Mutual trust in the researcher, which is the result of working in institutions for a long time, the love and respect, and the understanding that the purpose of this work is for the common good, not for personal benefit.</p>	<p>4 The low cultural level of society in general and Sabeen-Mandaean society in particular, which results in people's lack of knowledge of their natural rights and how to express them. This was particularly the case among the women as they do not have the educational background or confidence in their abilities to assert themselves. This is particularly in the case of the women in this research from Baghdad.</p>
<p>5 The factor of confidentiality in the research process, which allowed the participants to communicate their experience without reservation or fear.</p>	<p>5 Terror of society and its dominance among men and women, as well as a sense of fear, prevents people from expressing their right to freedom of speech. This is especially the case in Baghdad and among men, as they are more involved in public life.</p>
<p>6 The trainings received by the researcher, which improved her skills in extracting information from the conversation and persuading participants to express themselves by having confidence and a belief in the importance of the work they perform through their participation.</p>	<p>6 The targeted age group of women in Baghdad was not achieved 100 per cent.</p>

Source: Author's own.

2.4 Obstacles

The main obstacles to completing this research as planned were in Baghdad. The researchers didn't have knowledge of the people involved so the selection of participants was conducted based on the knowledge of those who worked in the sect's institutions. The majority of the women relied on male drivers to bring them to the session venue, and these drivers were limited by which days they could take the time out of work to

transport the women. This limited not only the women's participation but also restricted the Baghdad FGDs to one specific day, resulting in additional time pressure.

Young people in the Sabeen-Mandaean community also struggle to integrate and work with civil society institutions, as a result of their difficult financial situation and preoccupation with work. This creates a communication gap between them and the societal institutions to which they belong, as they consider cooperation with them a luxury and only for entertainment purposes. This resulted in a lack of female youth in the study. It also meant that the majority of those young women who did take part were housewives, especially in Baghdad. While this meant that there was less diversity in the experiences of the young women, it also meant that the study did capture the reality of being a young Sabeen-Mandaean woman restricted in work opportunities.

From a personal perspective, the geographical distance between the two research areas made travelling and logistical arrangements difficult. As a volunteer, my time commitments were to my paid employment which affected the speed of completion, especially given the richness of the topic which has a lot of information to explore in greater depth.

2.5 Characteristics and features

A key characteristic of this research is its realism. The selected sample of participants is representative of the target group and the obstacles, problems, and challenges identified were generated by them, as true to their reality. This research also provided an opportunity for the target group to identify hopes for the future and goals that they aspire to achieve.

On a broader scale, wider than just the Sabeen-Mandaean community, this research also gives an indication of the violations that occur for all minorities in Iraq, especially in relation to international law and treaties ratified and signed by Iraq. It contributes to a body of research which brings the reality of religious minorities to light.

3 Findings

3.1 Summary

The sequence of events in Iraq, from the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 and sectarian wars, to the 2014 ISIS invasion, had a profound impact on Sabeian-Mandaean women's lives in every way, as they experienced the largest share of suffering in comparison to Sabeian-Mandaean men and women from the majority. Despite some of them completing higher educational levels, many women have failed to complete their studies and educational attainment as a result of these events. Furthermore, the wars created a generation of young, single Sabeian-Mandaean women considered to be past marriageable age, as wars and migration prevented them from starting their own families and increasing Sabeian-Mandaean society, which now has a small population. Sabeian-Mandaean women are very rarely afforded the opportunity of choosing who to marry, so the conflict and loss of men to war further restricted and isolated them.

Public freedoms also declined, particularly for Sabeian-Mandaean women, who were forced to wear a veil (hijab) and had their freedom taken away when outside their homes or in public spaces. They faced pressures and threats to convert to Islam, with the excuse being used that their culture is Islamic and that all women must dress similarly to Muslims. If a Sabeian-Mandaean woman refused to change her clothing or convert she was threatened with kidnapping, murder, and her money and property could be stolen from her.

After mosque pulpits and Friday sermons (*khutbah*) were launched, pushing Muslims to attack non-Muslims and providing explicit permission to possess their women and money, there were many incidents and repeated attacks (UNHCR, 2005, p.5). This was mentioned by two participants in the FGDs in Erbil. Despite the fact that the state claims to be against such activities and does not accept them, with those who openly commit them punished, the state's adoption of Islamic law as a legal system encouraged extremist elements to exert pressure to achieve their objectives.

The events of 2003 and what happened to Iraq after that were the straw that broke the camel's back. Iraq entered a dangerous and brutal sectarian war, in which Sabeian-Mandaeans were crushed in the heart of the conflict and their dignity desecrated by the extremist religious gangs and militias fighting over land and power. Hundreds of Sabeian-Mandaeans, men and women, were kidnapped by these gangs. Some of them did not

return and were found dead, while others were returned with a ransom. Many Sabean-Mandaeans were subjected to robbery and murder in broad daylight, and these crimes were recorded without note of the victims' religious affiliation, leading to the loss of an ancient minority. Only 15,000 Sabean-Mandaeans remained in Iraq, out of 70,000 Sabean-Mandaeans who had lived there before 2003. They could not find anyone to seek refuge with, and even the religious authority that was hired did not issue any religious decisions (*fatwa*) forbidding killing and harming them.

Sabeian-Mandaean women lived in a state of great anxiety about their futures, as they had lost a lot of what they had gained as a result of societal pressures, which led many of them to leave and migrate in search of safety. This was a new turning point and a new challenge. Because of the change of lifestyle and the experience of merging with a new society, as well as the challenges of living, studying, and connecting with a life partner, the existence of a Sabean-Mandaean society is critical. This society is especially important for Sabean-Mandaean women as they cannot marry outside of the Sabean-Mandaean sect, as it would bring shame and dishonour on their families. This is in order to protect the Sabean-Mandaean religion and ensure that the knowledge of how to perform its rituals, even at a minimum level, is passed down to future generations.

The following table lists the obstacles, problems, and challenges identified by the women in the FGDs. They are listed in order of how many of the women selected them as the most significant issue facing them during the participatory ranking.

Table 3: Challenges for Sabeen-Mandaean women in the two focus groups

No.	Challenges of women in Erbil	No. of votes for top priority issue	No.	Challenges of women in Baghdad	No. of votes for top priority issue
1	Religious discrimination	4	1	Security situation	4
2	Security situation	2	2	Employment	2
2	Access to services	2	2	Migration	2
4	Marginalisation	1	2	Access to services	2
4	Employment	1	5	Education	1
4	Education	1	5	Religious discrimination	1
	Language	0	5	Harassment	1
	Personal freedom	0		Lack of privacy	0
	Harassment	0		Economic situation	0
	Mediation	0		Personal status	0
	Clan system	0			
	Weakness of law enforcement	0			
	Immigration	0			

Source: Author's own.

Table 3 shows that women in both Erbil and Baghdad suffer from the same problems. However, each environment has its own priorities, based on the results of focus groups and the problems experienced by women in different age groups and according to differing social and occupational status.

In Erbil, religious discrimination came out as the most significant issue facing Sabean-Mandaean women, followed by the security situation, and access to services. Marginalisation, employment, and education were then identified as priorities. While the results for women in Baghdad were similar, the security situation came out as the top concern. This was followed by employment, migration, and access to services. Education, religious discrimination, and harassment were then ranked next.

The Erbil group ranked religious discrimination as the primary issue they face, which is what has driven Sabean-Mandaean families, particularly those in southern Iraq, to settle in the region. This affects Sabean-Mandaean women through the imposition of social and religious restrictions, such as the imposition of the veil, the call to change religion (often communicated in an intimidating way), and a refusal by the majority to mix with Sabean-Mandaean people. These women all came to Erbil from different governorates of Iraq because of their concern about the religious discrimination they experienced whilst working. They considered Erbil to be relatively safe in comparison to Baghdad, and therefore safe enough for women to work. Unfortunately, they felt that this increased the religious discrimination they experienced as they were spending more time out of the Sabean-Mandaean community and interacting with the wider society.

Security was also highly ranked by both women's FGDs. This was the top priority for women from Baghdad and one of the second priorities for those in Erbil. It was a lower priority for those in Erbil because the women felt that the region's environment was safer and more disciplined in terms of laws than Baghdad. As for the services that burden the majority of Iraqis, it is one of the general problems, followed by other ranked problems according to the priority order shown in Table 3.

In the Baghdad women's group, we find that the first issue is the security aspect, where significant insecurity is felt by the Sabean-Mandaean minority due to their small number and the impact of the unfairness and injustice they experience as one of society's most vulnerable groups. Religious discrimination was much lower down the list for women in Baghdad than women in Erbil because the majority of women in Baghdad are

housewives, and even the majority of graduates do not work. They are limited in their interactions with society, which may decrease the religious discrimination they face, but also illustrates a form of gender discrimination.

Job opportunities for minorities are almost non-existent compared to their numbers, particularly for women, who find it impossible to acquire a guarantee of a decent life given the conditions that minorities face.

Among the challenges that affect minority women is the widespread phenomenon of harassment in Iraqi society, especially of minority women, because they are not covered with a hijab, and are therefore identifiable as being non-Muslim. This makes them more vulnerable to harassment. As a result, Sabean-Mandaean families forbid women to work, for fear of them being harmed. Despite the fact that it is one of the second priorities for women in Baghdad, migration was also an important factor, as expressed by many participants. After the number of Sabean-Mandaeans in Iraq reached 70,000, the number declined significantly as a result of forced migration, persecution, religious discrimination, ineffective law enforcement, and lack of efforts to uphold Sabean-Mandaean rights and identity. The number of Sabean-Mandaeans surviving in Iraq has now shrunk to only 5,000 (Minority Rights, 2017).

Table 4: Challenges for Sabeen-Mandaean men in the two focus groups

No.	Challenges of men in Erbil	No. of votes for top priority issue	No.	Challenges of men in Baghdad	No. of votes for top priority issue
1	Economic situation	7	1	Security situation	6
2	Religious discrimination	3	2	Economic situation	2
3	Tribalism	1	2	Tribalism	2
	Security situation		4	Roads and transportation	1
	Racism		4	Lack of job opportunities	1
	Education		4	Religious discrimination	1
	All kinds of services			Low awareness level/media	
	Displacement			The spread of illiteracy	
	Recruitment			Services	
	Language			Social security	
	Immigration			Education	
	Political events			Weak law enforcement	
	Defamation and reputation			Technology	
	Political representation			Immigration	
	Personal status			Societal integration	

	Weak law enforcement			Not having many places of worship	
				Lack of political representation	

Source: Author's own.

The Sabean-Mandaean men's session in Erbil revealed that the issue they felt most affected them was, overwhelmingly, the economic situation. This was followed by religious discrimination, then tribalism. This differed significantly from the men in Baghdad, who identified the security situation as their top priority issue. Similarly to their counterparts in Erbil, they then rated their economic situation and tribalism as their second and third concerns, followed by roads and transportation, lack of job opportunities, and religious discrimination.

Sabean-Mandaeans practise a profession associated with their identity, which is considered to be a legacy for them. This is the art of gold and silver smithing, engraving skilfully, and producing enamel art. The pressing circumstances and persecution that Sabean-Mandaeans have historically experienced drove them to seek protection, strength, or an authority to protect them, achieved through giving gifts to rulers, sultans, and kings.

The Sabean-Mandaeans were required to create gifts that they could be proud of, and this served as an incentive for them to be interested in the art and improve their talents and experience to pursue the work to advanced levels. They developed remarkable skills and abilities in this profession over time, and people began to ask them to make any jewellery and presents that they desired, and their reputation grew. They turned to crafts as a source of income and pursued it as a career. As in many Middle Eastern countries, children inherit their fathers' and grandfathers' professions, learn the principles of craftsmanship from them, and pass down the flag from generation to generation.

However, in recent years, Sabean-Mandaeans have been targeted by thieves, putting their lives and property at risk. As a result, many of them emigrated or left the profession, and Iraq lost a significant number of skilled and expert Sabean-Mandaean craftsmen in this profession, both a cultural and economic resource for the country. However, it is worth noting that traditionally, this profession is only open to Sabean-

Mandaean men (with the exception of a few Sabean-Mandaean women), even further limiting women's job opportunities and economic freedom.

The second challenge is that of religious discrimination, which threatens Sabean-Mandaeans being able to remain in their original homeland, forcing them to choose dispersal and emigration to various parts of the world in order to live in peace and security. Despite the numerous issues that emigration causes, as small communities collapse and merge into larger ones, people gain a sense of loyalty to, and belonging in, their new communities, often forgetting their deep cultural history and customs elsewhere.

The third challenge identified by the men in Erbil was tribalism, something all Sabean-Mandaeans face. Since intolerance and racism towards minorities rises according to the nature of the political system, in democratic systems, the process of transition and advancement for minorities is thwarted as they attempt to climb the ladder of social relations, political and economic positions. While regimes with a single ideological focus continue to monopolise power in the name of the majority, the isolation and marginalisation that other groups experience escalates.

It was interesting that the men from Erbil didn't prioritise the security situation. However, it was not surprising that it was ranked first for the men from Baghdad. Baghdad is considered to be less safe than Erbil, and safety is a principal requirement for any human being. In Table 5, the following problems emerge as a consequence of not having that safety, and when it is lost, participants turn their attention to other obstacles.

Table 5: A comparison of the challenges faced by women and men in all groups

No.	Women's challenges according to priority	No. of votes	No.	Men's challenges according to priority	No. of votes
1	Security situation	6	1	Economic situation	9
2	Religious discrimination	5	2	Security situation	6
3	Access to services	4	3	Religious discrimination	4
4	Employment	3	4	Tribalism	3
5	Education	2	5	Roads and transportation	1
5	Migration	2	5	Lack of job opportunities	1
7	Harassment	1			
7	Marginalisation	1			

Source: Author's own.

The security situation is one of the most prominent issues raised across both the men's and women's FGDs. Following this is religious discrimination, which is a key factor affecting the survival of minorities in Iraq, leading to the migration of many Sabean-Mandaean families. Without a safe haven and protective laws, they have needed to search for safety and opportunities outside of Iraq.

3.2 Analysis

The obstacles, problems, and challenges identified in Table 5 are analysed in more detail in the following sections.

3.2.1 The security situation

The safety and security situation was identified as the number one challenge by the women across both FGDs in Erbil and Baghdad. This is because it pervades all aspects of their lives, especially because there are no security services, such as the police, to provide the necessary protection to religious minorities. As a result, it decreases the opportunity for women to participate in public life and has also contributed to the emigration of men.

The challenges in Baghdad also differ from Erbil because there is more safety in Erbil and the laws are observed more closely there. This is evidenced by the members of the Sabeen-Mandaean community who have also left their homes in Baghdad and other areas of Iraq to move to Erbil because of this greater security. Additionally, due to the enhanced security in Erbil, men and women started to find jobs outside of the home in Erbil. However, this has exposed them to other forms of discrimination. For example, if they are unable to speak Kurdish, they will be unable to secure certain jobs.

S.N., a woman from Kirkuk, described the following:

After 2003, I moved to a governorate with religious diversity, but another type of targeting came, as my house was robbed twice after we left the house because my husband works in the field of goldsmith (manufacture and sale of gold jewellery) and I help him.

Then the extremist Islamists came and assassinated my brother-in-law after threatening to leave his job as he was working as an officer in the police force and from the Sabeen-Mandaeans in front of his children and wife who after this incident, chose to emigrate as a solution in order to be safe. The perpetrators were not revealed.

Then my husband was threatened by phone messages to leave the area and pay a ransom of US\$150,000 or be killed, because we are Sabeen-Mandaeans. So he turned off his phone, then the threatening messages continued and were coming on my phone, and we learned after that that the neighbours are participating in the crime. So we had to leave to be safe.

Another woman, R.R., who is 28 from Baghdad, described how her family had been similarly threatened and the impact this had had on her education and opportunities:

We, as Sabeans, belong to minorities. We no longer have rights or safety. My family travelled in 2010 for the sake of my brother, because he works as a jeweller. They threatened him, you will become a Muslim, or we kill you, and this is the only brother we have.

I was in school and left because of the fear of kidnapping and I never went out of the house to school. My mother was afraid for us until my husband proposed to me and I married him at an early age and they travelled to protect my brother.

The levels of insecurity for the Sabeen-Mandaean community have been a driver of emigration, as B.A., who is 65 and from Baghdad, explained:

The biggest challenge to our sect is immigration, the causes of immigration are kidnapping. Our family consists of ten people, all of them have high school diplomas. They kidnapped one of my brothers. They came to the house at 10 o'clock and kidnapped him, and none of them are left.

I was left alone, no one in my family is left, me and my daughter only. But these circumstances made me a strong woman so that I face every problem that the participants have talked about, all of them exist, but I must stop.

My brother when they kidnapped him was a goldsmith in Sidiya and his family was in Jordan. He was alone, they came to the house, they stayed at home with him

and prepared dinner and the second day they ate breakfast. In the morning we went to the house and found it empty, the second day they called us and said your son is with us, they want money, they asked for (US\$50,000) and after negotiations it became US\$20,000. After that, they released him and my older brother travelled. He was a general in the army. He migrated, and did not stay, and all of my siblings left. Only my young daughter, 25 years old, and I stayed.

One of the most extreme manifestations of this religious discrimination is threats of forced conversion. Many of the women discussed experiencing intimidating requests that they convert to Islam. However, one man, H.S. from Erbil, but originally from Ramadi, described how after 2003, this threat increased in frequency and severity:

They [members of the majority religion] told me that I must leave my religion and become a Muslim. I met with the families who live in Ramadi, and I told them, 'Let's get out of here because problems will happen, they came from mosques and told me either you will become Muslims or you will have to leave.' The security situation has worsened. Then they kidnapped my son to blackmail me and I paid a ransom. They also attacked the Ramadi market, and a strong

confrontation took place. Many Sabeans were killed, and many families in Ramadi were forced to change their religion to Islam.

One of the men in the focus groups, Th.J., from Erbil, but originally from Maysan, shared his experience of trying to obtain justice when his store was robbed, and finding obstacles at every step of the process, because he is Sabean-Mandaeen.

My store was robbed. I reported the theft to the authorities first. They did not take health measures, did not collect fingerprints. One of the officers told me in one of the interrogation sessions, 'You should not stay in the country'... They went out to investigate but didn't take any fingerprints or camera footage. Everyone they asked for CCTV camera footage from would say that the cameras are not working and they don't know who the robber is. Then, they were sentenced to seven years in prison. I stood in front of the judge and told him that the person who stole pigeons had been sentenced to six years in prison. And you judged criminals who stole half a billion dollars for seven years?

3.2.2 Religious discrimination and marginalisation

Religious discrimination has been and remains a major issue for Sabean-Mandaeans in various societies, particularly in southern Iraq. Women in Iraqi society experience discrimination because of their gender and an inability to claim their rights. In addition to this, Sabean-Mandaeen women experience religious discrimination that further limits and restricts them, such as the harassment that comes from not wearing the hijab.

For Sabean-Mandaeen men, this religious discrimination limits where they can carry out economic activity in the form of the gold and silver crafting in which they specialise. Their presence is also absent from other commercial activities such as managing restaurants or food stores, as Muslims have reservations in dealing with them in these areas. For example, one woman from Baghdad, R.S., confirmed that there is a clear distinction maintained in workplaces between Muslims and Sabean-Mandaeans:

The food that I prepared, they never ate it; the spoons and knives that I used, they refused to use them, even though they were educated employees, and we have been working with each other for many years.

Another woman, K.S., from Erbil, but originally from Thiqar/Nassria, agreed with this:

Once I made Kleja ('Maamoul') and brought it to the manager, but he did not eat it. Instead, he asked the service worker to distribute it to the employees because I am Sabean and they don't want me to share any food with them, this made me avoid them, I even told them that I am sick and not able to eat any kinds of meat, only to avoid embarrassment.

Despite the dearth of Sabean-Mandaean women in employment, religious discrimination in the workplace is not limited to Sabean-Mandaean men. In fact, one woman, N.S., 35 years old from Erbil, but originally from Maysan, shared her experience, demonstrating how Sabean-Mandaean women experience a combination of both religious and gender discrimination:

When I became pregnant, I needed to stay at home for the duration of my pregnancy, so I requested to extend my leave, but I ran into the manager who refused to do so despite my provision of medical reports verifying my health condition. Noting that my manager is a person who assists everyone with vacations and fellowships, however, because I am a Sabean-Mandaean, he refused to help me and reported me absent from work, which resulted in my termination from the employment.

Another woman, S.F., a dentist who is 45 years old from Erbil, shared how she was encouraged by a friend in dental college in Baghdad to convert to Islam, and when she moved to another district after graduating, she experienced this again. This discrimination has followed her throughout her career:

When I opened my private clinic, which is within a dental complex, the majority of patients would ask me about my religious background and find out that I was different from theirs; they would never visit me again.

N.S. also highlighted how Sabean-Mandaean children experience religious discrimination in education:

I have a daughter at primary stage, and the school she is in is of the majority religious faith. When the religious class starts, they ask my daughter to leave the classroom and go out to the yard alone, frightened, feeling different from her

fellow students, which has a negative psychological impact on her. She complains about it and asks me 'Mum, why am I not like them? I wish I was'. I wish that religious classes at schools would be eliminated.

3.2.3 Access to services

Participants discussed the discrimination they face in accessing health care. For example, one of the women, K.L., 60 years old and from Erbil, described how she was sick and suffering from anaemia so:

I went to a nurse for a needle injection. As soon as she knew that I was a Sabean, she got upset and she said, 'I will ask in front of the mosque, is it permissible for me to treat a non-Muslim?'

Another woman, K.S., who is 35 from Baghdad, described the challenges of her family in caring for her disabled son and their isolation as Sabean-Mandaeans in detail.

Now neither my family nor my husband's family remains in Iraq. All have gone, but my husband and I are in a poor financial situation, so we cannot travel. If I had the chance, I would be the first one to emigrate because my son is sick, he is 19 years old, and I am looking for a social care salary for him. He has epilepsy and a brain cyst and damage. There is no support for him, they say if you have good connections [wasta] they will make a salary for him. So far, we have not obtained anything, and he is living with sedatives and my psychological state is very bad. I came to work in the Sabean-Mandaean Forum to see my family because I have no relatives. I do not mix with Muslims.

There is no one left [from the Sabean-Mandaean community] and all with a good financial condition are gone. My husband is an employee and his salary is limited, it's not enough for the rent and the requirements for living. There is no social care. I feel sad because I feel that my son deserves a social care salary of 100 per cent, and there are people who do not need it and receive it. There is no justice.

I've lived in a rented house for 13 years, and they say to me: 'Do you own the house?' So I tell them that if I had a house, I would sell it and treat my son with it and take him abroad. The sick boy feels inferior. When he was in the fourth grade of primary school, I said I must register him in the school. They treated him as

they treat the rest in schools. They do not take care of the sick child and the students laugh at him and take his food and take advantage of him. I wanted to take him to private centres. He likes to go out and change his mood, but no school or institute accepted him, they say your son has epilepsy, they said you must enrol him in an institute on your expenses, which costs 400 thousand, 500 thousand, the financial situation is not helpful.

Until now, my son is in a very bad psychological state. He is jealous of his sister and her books, he takes them away. In the morning, I don't let him see his sister who goes to school, I'm afraid he gets upset and makes a problem, he hits and breaks [things], I'm trying to avoid this, I mean the atmosphere of the house is uncomfortable. Our psychological state is tired, from the small to the old.

Within Iraq, there is an overall shortage of services and care. However, this has been compounded for K.S. due to the isolation from her community and a lack of social stature that might enable her son to receive the support he requires with regard to health care and access to education. This takes an additional psychological toll.

Another woman, H.M., 50 years old from Baghdad, explained how she is a cancer patient and as there is a lack of health-care services available to her, she has had to sell almost all of her belongings in order to afford the medicines necessary for her treatment.

3.2.4 Employment

As already explored in relation to the priorities identified by the men, the difficult economic situation Sabeian-Mandaeans face is strongly linked to the loss of opportunities for Sabeian-Mandaean men to practise the art of gold and silversmithing, engraving skilfully, and the enamel art that the community is known for. The men explained how the greatest burden for ensuring the survival of their families falls on their shoulders. However, the Sabeian-Mandaean women also identified employment, or more specifically, the lack of employment, as a significant issue they face.

For example, H.K., a man who is 35 years old from Baghdad, shared an example about his friend, a young Sabeian-Mandaean who was working in a restaurant in Baghdad, but whom eventually the owner fired. The reason was that people refused to eat food there after they realised that he was a Sabeian-Mandaean. This is still happening today. This

mirrors another situation faced by the children of K.L. (a woman from Erbil) who worked in an ice-cream shop but was dismissed by the owner when people said they would not buy from him if he employed Sabean-Mandaeans.

Participants explained that there are two aspects to this problem. The first is the lack of job opportunities and the second is the discrimination Sabean-Mandaeans face in the jobs they do have, as demonstrated by the above anecdotes.

Many of the Sabean-Mandaean women expressed suffering from a lack of work. In many cases, those from the majority religion prefer giving jobs to non-Sabean-Mandaeans. However, when Sabean-Mandaeans are hired, the jobs tend to go to Sabean-Mandaean men. This is because Sabean-Mandaean men often discourage women from working out of fear of how they will be treated. They fear the way that non-Sabean-Mandaean society views women, especially those who are not veiled or who belong to minorities.

For example, K.S., a woman, 60 years old from Erbil, but originally from Nassria, shared how:

They [her employer] forced me to wear the veil. One day a co-worker came up to me and said, 'Quickly Ms., hurry and go home to change your clothes!' Because I didn't wear the veil, they thought I was impure, and some people [from the majority religion] were planning to harm me as a result. So, the next day, I came to work dressed in a hijab, according to what they were wearing.

This discrimination that Sabean-Mandaean women experience in employment is also because of their gender. One woman from Baghdad, but who took part in the focus group in Erbil, N.S., explained that:

No matter how educated a woman is, or what her career level is, they [Sabean-Mandaeans and non-Sabean-Mandaeans] still prefer to hire a man. In addition, some corporations take advantage of women by placing them in positions where they can profit at the cost of their dignity. As a working woman, I had to bargain a lot in order to get a job. This often means Mandaean women being harassed and having to either accept this harassment in order to continue working or fulfilling the employer's desires to have a relationship with him. Women are also put to work in cafeterias or bars for the purpose of attracting customers and satisfying their desires.

The women felt safe enough within the focus groups to reveal how it is not just those from the majority religion who discriminate against them. Sabean-Mandaean men also contribute to their marginalisation, particularly by restricting them and preventing them from pursuing opportunities. One woman from Baghdad, R.S., described how her husband prevented his sister from getting a job: 'Many job opportunities were available, but my husband didn't accept this and he has locked her inside the house'.

Another woman, R.R., who is 28 and from Baghdad, agreed about the role male family members play in restricting Sabean-Mandaean women from taking employment opportunities:

Our husbands don't let us work... they feel that there is a difference between a man and a woman. [It's] society's culture. They differentiate between men and women, meaning, they want men to work and women at home. It is my wish to work and see my life and help my husband, due to circumstances I cannot.

3.2.5 Education

Linked strongly to employment is the issue of education. The Sabean-Mandaean women explained how they are not able to obtain their share of education as a result of the great societal pressures from the outside community – pressures to veil or to convert, and the threat of harassment – and it is reflected in Sabean-Mandaean society, where they receive a simple level of education and have no choice but to stay at home. H.K, a man from Baghdad, gave an example of how Sabean-Mandaean women are put into situations where they are forced to compromise their religious beliefs if they want to complete their education:

They forced my sister to wear a veil; we went to the school to explain to them that we are Sabeans and our religion does not include wearing a veil. However, they said she could stay only if she wears the veil. She is forced by the social reality and the absence of a religious culture that knows what it means to be a Sabean-Mandaean.

There was a similar situation encountered by the granddaughters of A.F., a woman from Baghdad, who were removed by their father from the school because they were forced

to read religion (Islam) at school and to wear a hijab. Their family were afraid they would forget their community.

Even if they were able to get a good level of education, the women explained how they are not able to work because of the lack of opportunities and the fear that occurs as a result of religious discrimination. This results in Sabeian-Mandaean women being restricted to the home.

3.2.6 Migration and displacement

The immigration factor has had an impact on all Iraqis, but it was more noticeable among minorities due to their low population density, which resulted in a significant decline in their numbers. There is a fear that Iraq will become devoid of its deep-rooted minorities.

The Sabeian-Mandaean population has declined significantly, from 70,000 people in 2003 to about 5,000 people today (Minority Rights, 2017). The spread of Sabeian-Mandaeans across different countries has led to the dispersal of members of the same family across multiple countries and the disintegration of family ties due to geographical distance. While reaching the diaspora cost them a lot of money and drained them financially, upon arrival, the suffering was greater because minorities disappear in new societies and fade away, losing their customs, traditions, and rituals. Thus begins another form of pain, in which the individual has to start over when it comes to their academic achievement and search for an equivalent education, not to mention all the years that were lost.

One woman, B.A. from Baghdad, described how all her family had to emigrate because her brother was kidnapped and so they were forced to leave the country. However, she remains in Iraq with her husband and daughter. This state of being separated from their families can have negative impacts on women's health. Participants who have remained in Iraq while community and family members have migrated highlighted the negative effects on their mental health of being 'left behind'. For example, one woman, I.A., from Baghdad, explained how she has suffered because of migration.

All my family and brothers have travelled, and my heart aches to see them. We are at home, we do not go out. I only have a brother and my brother does not work.

One of the men from Erbil, but originally from Baghdad, I.Th., described his own experience of being forced to migrate in 2006.

Where I used to work as a jeweller, sectarianism was intense. When one of my relatives was kidnapped, he heard a conversation between them mentioning my name and the name of my brother, and after his release with a cash payment, he told us, 'Be careful, because the kidnappers are powerful political parties.' We had no other solution but to travel to Syria, leaving behind our lives and what we have, and becoming unemployed, spending from our savings and receiving help from the UN. Our children were affected in their studies as a result of the different curricula. We submitted our files to the UN, but did not get resettlement in any country.

We tried to emigrate through smugglers, but did not succeed in the first attempt, and we lost our money with it. Then we tried again and arrived in Sweden. My two daughters and I submitted our files for resettlement, but got rejected three times. After we stayed for a year and a half in Sweden, our residency was refused, and then we returned to Iraq in 2013 and started again.

My children have missed years of school and started from scratch. We became displaced in a safer place in our country. Just then, another kind of suffering began, where discrimination based on nationality and language, where state employees and government departments dealt with Arabs more strictly than their Kurdish peers. As for the children, their suffering with the new language has become a factor affecting their academic achievement, and even at the level of employment, they ask to be fluent in the Kurdish language. And the security concern and instability remain. In the event of a security breach, where is the escape? We feel insecure and say where to flee?

Others discussed the impact of trying to continue working and living in a different place. One man from Erbil, Gh.Q., explained how there is:

Discrimination based on language and business dealings, where they listen to your speech and enquire where you are from. Many people avoid dealing with you if they know you are of a different nationality, limiting your sources of income and limiting your options for livelihoods. In our original areas of residence, when they associate with you, they know who you are, and when you

say to them Sabeans, they understand the meaning of Sabeans, but here they don't have much information about it.

3.2.7 Harassment

As already discussed in previous sections, Sabean-Mandaean women experience a great deal of harassment as a result of the way they dress, specifically not wearing the hijab. This makes them identifiable as non-Muslim and opens them up to threats and verbal abuse. Sabean-Mandaean women, both young and old, also suffer from sexual harassment in public, because of not wearing the hijab, and in the workplace because of the precarious nature of their employment. As discussed in the employment section, employers know they can harass them as they are less likely to leave one of the very few positions open to them. The targeted harassment of Sabean-Mandaean women also means that fewer Sabean-Mandaean women feel able or comfortable to apply for or accept jobs – especially in private companies – as they know this is a challenge they might face. The harassment the women face is not only from other communities, but also from within their own community, especially if they are unmarried.

One woman, A.K who is 60 years old and from Erbil, explained how:

Women are subjected to violence and harassment, so we hear various obscene words, whether on the street or in the means of transport, and of different ages, despite being a middle-aged woman, but I am subjected to harassment, especially from young people, so I resort to riding a taxi, so the taxi driver is often harassing either by his words or by looking at me or by interfering, and asking personal questions, especially if the woman is not wearing hijab.

The women in the FGDs also discussed how they respond to this harassment. Ultimately, it takes its toll on them, and as one woman, N.S., from Baghdad, described, sometimes it's just easier to conform to the majority's demands in order to avoid harassment:

I am committed to wearing socks and hijab so that they don't know that I am a Mandaean, not because I am not able to face them while meeting their eyes, but after facing one or two of them I get tired, and I already have my own problems, I don't want to add more to them.

3.3 Additional challenges

The following sections explore additional issues that the participants raised that weren't voted as priority issues but were discussed in detail in the FGDs.

3.3.1 *The clans*

Despite the urbanisation that has taken place, clans still control Iraqi society, as the clan exercises the authority that society has given them. The clan has emerged as a well-defined societal force in the formation of Iraqi society as a result of weaknesses in the state's institutions. The decisions of the clans control the destinies of the people, so it has become imperative for everyone, including minorities such as Sabeans-Mandaeans, to seek safety from the clans in the absence of effective law enforcement.

For example, one woman, K.L., 60 years old from Erbil, but originally from Nassria, shared how the clans intervened on behalf of her family. However, her family still experienced discrimination at the hands of the clan:

My husband owned an alcoholic drinks store where they [members of the majority faith] burned it; they even threatened to burn our house. They wanted to burn it under the pretext that we had an alcohol factory, so my husband filed a complaint against them and enlisted the help of the clans. The Sabeans-Mandaeans do not have the clan system, but they get into any Muslim clan by paying a financial contribution for the purpose of defending and supporting them in case of any problem. When the problem occurred, the clan's Sheikh, concerned with solving the problem, refused to sit in our house and on our bed because we were Sabeans, preventing us from obtaining our rights.

3.3.2 *Weakness of legal protection*

Many laws protect religious, racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities, stating that they are free to engage in religious ceremonies and rituals, proclaim their religion, or speak their native language with other members of their community. Furthermore, they have the same rights as other people, including legal protection, in the event that one of them is threatened.

Even when justice is achieved, participants discussed how many Sabeian-Mandaeans are left scared of the repercussions, even choosing to migrate out of the country in order to protect their families. One man, N.Sh, 72 years old from Erbil, but originally from Maysan where the incident took place, explained how:

One of the Mandaeans was also killed, and the town's police head happened to be a friend of mine, so when I told him about this, he followed up on the matter, and they identified the culprit, arrested him, and got his confession to the crime. So, he told me to inform the victim's relatives and ask them to file a complaint. I contacted the victim's siblings and told them to do so because the perpetrator confessed, but they refused, and they all migrated to the south, fearing the perpetrator's relatives would oppress them.

One woman, S.S., from Erbil, but originally from Nassria, shared a similar experience:

Some of my relatives travelled to a neighbouring country to escape sectarianism. While there, one of the families from the majority took over their house and lived in it without permission and without paying any rent. And whoever interferes, they would tell them to do what they want. The matter remained suspended until they offered the house for sale, so they imposed a cheap price on them, much more than its real price and they had to sell it. This is our situation. We live under duress in a majority society, especially in religiously extremist areas.

3.3.3 Reputation and defamation

The Sabeian-Mandaeans' suffering is renewed every day by them being accused of witchcraft and sorcery, which are forbidden in the ancient Mandaean religion, and by the spreading of myths and stereotypes, such as the belief that Sabeian-Mandaeans use a strong and powerful magic.

The women in the FGDs shared experiences that demonstrated how the impact of these myths and stereotypes is even worse for Sabeian-Mandaean women. For example, one woman, S.F., from Baghdad, shared how her family suffered accusations of practising witchcraft and sorcery from their neighbours, and:

They fought us in various ways because we were Sabeen-Mandaeans and women without the presence of a man with us. Where they used to say 'You do magic in your house for the purpose of expelling evil, and it returns back to us through the waterways', we suffered. We brought the government agencies to this matter and they stood by us, but how frustrated we were when we came to get rid of sectarianism only to encounter negative discrimination of a different kind.

3.4 Solutions to priority needs

The suffering of the Sabeen-Mandaean community has been great, and continues to be so as their religious beliefs differ from the majority in Iraq. They continue to find themselves subject to oppression, torture, and exile. Many Sabeen-Mandaeans have been killed as a result of the devastating wars, including women and young people, who have been left without resources and protection. This has resulted in many families in which, in the absence of men, women had to take on the role of breadwinner, opening themselves up to discrimination from a society that believes women should be restricted to the home. Those who survived were forced to abandon their homes and possessions and risk emigrating and travelling around countries in an attempt to maintain their Sabeen-Mandaean identity. In addition to this persecution, killing, and displacement, Sabeen-Mandaeans have had their shops and homes looted by militias affiliated with other religious parties.

The number of Sabeen-Mandaeans forcibly displaced under various conditions has risen to 85 per cent, or 60,000 people, currently residing in various countries around the world. Crimes against Sabeen-Mandaeans continue to be committed with the aim of spreading terror and forcing them to leave their homeland, enabling the perpetrators to seize their property. This is an ongoing crime which has yet to be resolved.

There is a sense of insecurity and fear for the future as a result of constitutional charters and laws not being implemented and put into practice, which disturbs the Sabeen-Mandaean individual's path and frustrates their future ambitions. As they are treated as second-class citizens, their feeling of inferiority is increased, despite the fact that they are from the original homeland. The Sabeen-Mandaeans have no real freedom, as they live under constant threat from extremist political Islam. Furthermore, the government does not provide them with any security, and it even encourages Sabeen-Mandaeans to migrate in big numbers, leaving the country barren of these indigenous people.

The Sabeen-Mandaeen community hopes to enjoy a system that protects the individual's freedom of belonging, which is a constitutional and international right under law. Also, that support be made available to protect their existence and to prevent their children from being forced to convert to Islam, even if their father or mother has converted to Islam, willingly, or under duress (as per articles of the Civil Status Law (Hammurabi Human Rights Organization 2022)).

With this reality in mind, these are the solutions that the men and women in the FGDs suggested to address the problems identified:

1. The promotion of equality and non-discrimination, whether direct or indirect, and whether religious, gendered, or both, in law and practice;
2. For equality to be treated in law and society as a guarantee, with equity in practice, in order to reach equality, with impartiality in legislation;
3. The Sabeen-Mandaeans must receive differential treatment aimed at eliminating previous discrimination or remedying existing injustices against them;
4. There must be efforts made to protect the existence and survival of minorities; that is, physical protection of persons belonging to minorities, especially in situations of conflict, and protection from violence and its consequences;
5. There must be efforts made to protect the rights of minorities, because they are often the target of extermination, migration, and displacement;
6. There must be a renewed commitment to international human rights law and its texts, which are universal legal guarantees that aim to protect individuals and groups from authorities' interference in fundamental freedoms which obligates them to perform certain actions or refrain from other actions in order to preserve human dignity through the International Bill of Human Rights. That comes through:
 - a. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
 - b. International covenants on economic, social, and cultural rights;
 - c. Protocols.

If human rights were applied, justice would prevail. Those rights are a collection of natural rights that include all aspects of political, civil, social, economic, and cultural life and are enjoyed by every human being at all stages of life, individually or collectively.

3.4.1 Specific solutions to the issues facing young women

The FGDs recognised that young women face a disturbingly large amount of harassment, which obstructs their movement and makes parents afraid of allowing them to live normal lives. Therefore, they suggested solutions specifically aimed at supporting young Sabean-Mandaean women and girls:

1. Creating laws to protect women from harassment and to punish harassers;
2. Allowing young women in all fields of work to fulfil their potential, serve their communities, and engage actively in all fields;
3. Stricter enforcement of rules prohibiting child marriage. This was discussed briefly by the participants, and it was agreed that it is a problem in Sabean-Mandaean society. There are pressures from within the Sabean-Mandaean community for girls and young women to be under the protection of a man and to reduce the financial burden on families. Additionally, marriage can provide girls and young women with the opportunity to emigrate and travel;
4. Iraqi society must gain awareness of the religious diversity that it contains, as well as the various traditions within it, and appreciate this diversity;
5. Making discrimination, in any form, a crime, and punishing those who commit it.

3.4.2 Specific solutions to the issues facing older women

As discussed in this report, older Sabean-Mandaean women, particularly widows, face increased discrimination and marginalisation as breadwinners and as those without support and protection. Therefore, the FGD participants generated solutions aimed at supporting older Sabean-Mandaean women, specifically:

1. Providing social and health support for elderly women, as well as essential care;
2. Caring for and including their disabled children in health and social services;
3. Taking care of divorced and widowed women and finding a specific care facility for them and their children.

4 Conclusion

The Sabean-Mandaeen woman is a special case as she has been subjected to a great deal of pressure due to society's inadequate and inferior view of her, both as a woman and a religious minority.

Through limited educational attainment, many women end up getting married at a young age, resulting in the terrifying phenomenon of child marriage. In light of the fact that this male-dominated society controls women's capacities, the outcome is a generation of young women who are divorced and have children requiring care.

In addition, the great migration forced on Sabean-Mandaeans has created a generation of single Sabean-Mandaeen women considered to be past marriageable age who missed out on marriage opportunities due to limited choice. Sabean-Mandaeen women must marry from within their religion to be accepted both from a religious standpoint and socially, and they are unable to do so with so many Sabean-Mandaeen men missing and abroad.

The circumstances that Iraq has gone through has brought us to the current stage. As is well known, the current government in Iraq has weakened its interest in minorities, who have become easy prey for extremists. Iraq has consequently become an open arena for sectarian and racial conflicts. The followers of the non-Muslim religions have been displaced and extremists have seized everything. As a result, minorities such as the Sabean-Mandaeans have faced increased religious, political, and social persecution for no reason other than their religious devotion and affection for the land of their fathers and grandfathers, which they are continually forced to leave.

5 Recommendations

Based on the challenges and threats identified and discussed in the focus groups, we make the following recommendations to uphold the rights of Sabean-Mandaean women and ensure that they can live in dignity and freedom:

1. Assisting minorities in ensuring protection for their existence through the use of law enforcement;
2. Equality and non-discrimination regardless of gender, colour, religion, and race;
3. Changing school curricula to include the history and civilisation of minorities in accordance with their historical presence;
4. Eliminating religious studies that focus only on the majority religion and restrict these only to religious institutions. Instead, schools should provide a subject that allows students to study the religious diversity that exists in Iraq and the world, so that the student has sufficient knowledge of the religions that exist in their country and the world;
5. Repealing Article 26 of the Civil Status Law for the Islamisation of minors;
6. Focusing on the media in highlighting minority religions and supporting their case;
7. Enacting strict laws to guarantee, defend, and activate women's rights.

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The Identity Struggle of the Kakai Minority in Iraq

Solaf Muhammed Amin Kakai

Summary

Article 14 of the Permanent Iraqi Constitution of 2005 states 'Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, colour, religion, sect, belief or creed, or economic or social status'. Countries create laws to ensure this freedom, such as the Kurdistan Region Law (5) of 2015 known as the "Protection of the Rights of the Components of Iraqi Kurdistan Law" on minority rights (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2018).

This research, which is a product of five focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with members of the Kakai minority group in the village of Safiya, Iraq between 6th November and 12th December 2021, tackles a very important issue, discrimination, which is a violation of international and constitutional principles of equality. The Kakai experience racial and religious discrimination in Iraq because they differ from the majority in some of their cultural characteristics. This research also explores another axis of inequality in examining gendered discrimination against Kakai women, interpersonal discrimination in the community among neighbours, institutional discrimination within education and the workplace, media bias, and legal discrimination in the laws, decisions, and instructions that are publicised to citizens.

This paper explores the stories and life experiences of Iraqi Kakais in their own words. There is a scarcity of literature on the Kakai minority in Iraq (Abas, Jaff and Karami, 2021), so this research is unique in its focus not only on the Kakai people but specifically on the challenges Kakai women encounter within their society at various levels, because of both their religious and gender identities.

Key words: Kakais, women, religious minority, marginality, gender discrimination, Iraq, participatory research.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Kakai

The first population study which captured the national and religious backgrounds of the different communities in Iraq was conducted by the Center for Cultural Training and Development of the Public Security Directorate. It was based on the results of the comprehensive population census of 1977. The study explored the geographical distribution of religious groups according to the governorates, trends in population growth among religious groups between 1947 and 1977, and the religious composition of the population of the provinces by nationality - that is, the distribution of religious minorities within each province based on their national affiliation (Al-Khayoun 2007).

In the 1987 census, conducted during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the form included two fields referring to the Iraqi either as Arab or Kurdish. These were expected to be inclusive of Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians and Yazidi minorities. Those who rejected either of the two options were punished by deprivation of the right to Iraqi citizenship (The New Humanitarian, 2005).

The last population census was in 1995 and did not include the three Kurdish provinces (Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah) because they were outside the jurisdiction of the Iraqi government from 1991.¹

In all cases, the Kakais were not counted among the national or religious groups. Instead they were counted among the Muslim groups based on the civil status identity register, which does not provide an option to identify as Kakai.

1.1.1 Constitutional, legal and political background

The Kakai minority have never been mentioned in any of the iterations of the constitution of the Iraqi state, from the first constitution (The Basic Law of 1925) to the permanent Iraqi constitution of 2005 (Abas, Jaff and Karami, 2021: 147).

The Iraqi constitution of 2005 is the first to recognise minorities by name and stipulating their national, linguistic, religious and sectarian rights, following the end of the previous regime on April 9, 2003, under what is known as consensual democracy.² However, this democracy more closely resembles the sectarian quotas in force in Lebanon than a consensual democracy.³

The Law on the Protection of the Rights of Components in Iraqi Kurdistan No. 5 of 2015 is considered the first legal document that recognises the rights of the Kakai minority, naming Kakais among the religious minorities stated in the second section of Article 1 of the law:

¹ Since 2005, legislative and provincial council elections have been conducted based on the data of the Ministry of Commerce in the ration card of the governorates for 2005, provided that an annual population growth rate of 2.8 per cent for each governorate is added, which is a speculation practiced in most Middle Eastern countries. First section of Article 1 of (Law Amending the Elections Law No. 16 of 2005), No. 26 of 2009, Al-Waqa'a Al-Iraqiya No. 4140, December 28, 2009.

² Iraqi politicians insist that what takes place when the government is formed is a consensual democracy, similar to the approach followed by the Swiss and Belgian governments according to the constitutional principle referred to by the Dutch researcher Arend Lijphart in his book *Democracy in Plural Societies*, translated by: Hosni Zeina, Beirut, Institute of Strategic Studies, First Edition, 2006.

³ Since 2003, the political process in Iraq has been taking place based on a sectarian quota system according to the distribution of the three main sovereign positions - the Presidency of the Council of the Republic, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the Presidency of the House of Representatives - among the three components, the Kurds, Shi'ites and Sunnis, with some service ministries given to some components, each according to their population weight. The largest share belongs to the most numerous component, which is the Shi'ite component.

National groups: Turkmen, Chaldean Syriac, Assyrians and Armenians, and religious and sectarian groups: Christianity, Yazidis, Sabeen Mandaean, Kakai, Shabak, Faili, Zoroastrian and other citizens of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Kakai are present in the ranks of the political parties of various national and ideological orientations, both right and left, such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Movement for Change, the New Generation Movement, the Communist Party of Kurdistan, Kurdistan Workers' Party, the Kurdistan Socialist Democratic Party, the People's Party as well as other Kurdish political parties.

However, problems arose politically after 2003, when some people started calling for positive discrimination in favour of the Kakai minority by allocating a quota seat in the Iraqi Parliament and the Kurdistan Region Parliament, similar to those granted to the Turkmen, Christian and Yazidi minorities. This coincided with the governments' demand for the Kakai sect to define its identity, and the basis on which the quota would be granted to it. Divisions within the Kakai emerged at this point. Some believed that the Kakai are a Kurdish minority with a religious specificity, without declaring the nature of this specificity. Others believed that the Kakai are a minority of the Shi'ite Muslim community, or close to the Shi'ite sect.

Some influential parties in Iraq moved to solidify the Kakai as a minority in the Shi'ite community to establish a quota, appointing young people within the ranks of the Popular Mobilization Forces (Shi'ite armed factions) in Kirkuk and other areas outside the Kurdistan Region, taking advantage of the deteriorating economic situation of the population in those areas.

This was in addition to integrating the shrines and holy sites of this component - in areas outside the Kurdistan Region - and including them into the Shi'ite endowment, which is considered to represent a fusion of the Kakai component within the Shi'ite doctrine.

Others felt the Kakai are a different Muslim minority in terms of race/ethnicity from the Arabs, Kurds and Turkmens. This understanding is risky for the Kakai because Kurdistan plays a major role in protecting Kurdish components with cultural peculiarities, including the Kakai community.

The regional government has supported the participation of minorities in state institutions since 1991, whether through a quota - a system of positive discrimination -

or by ensuring the diversity and the interculturality of the Kurdish religious and ethnic groups. In this way, the Kakai have trusted that its political participation was guaranteed.

However, from 2003, the Kakais' demands for their rights increased in Kurdish regions that are administratively subordinate to the governorates of Mosul, Kirkuk and Diyala. This is because the Kakai minority in these areas deemed it necessary to regulate matters constitutionally and legally, like other minorities. These governorates are covered by Article 140 of the Permanent Iraqi Constitution of 2005, which stipulates taking three steps regarding disputed areas: 'Normalization, Census and finally a referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed areas to determine the will of their citizens' no later than 31 December 2007 (Saeed, 2017).

However, unfortunately the Kakai are still not recognised in the Iraqi constitution and there are ongoing debates within the Kakai community about the role of secrecy in inviting further harm. Some believe that it is necessary to reveal more about their culture, beliefs and practices in order to gain legal and political rights (Abas, Jaff and Karami, 2021:156).

1.1.2 The historical background

The history of the Kakai is disputed. Some researchers link the Kurdish word "Kaka", which means older brother, and the futuwwa organization, which means brotherhood known during the Abbasid Islamic era. Other researchers object to this association between the Arab futuwwa and the Kurdish Kakai (Al-Khayoun 2007). As there are few sources to draw on for the historical background of the Kakai, this paper draws extensively on the work Rashid Al-Kayoun.

British intelligence reported that the Kakais were originally a Sufi sect, a Darwsheh, both in terms of organisation and social origin. Its founder is Sultan bin Ishaq Al-Barzanji, and the shrine of Sultan Ishaq is still a Kakai shrine on Mount Horaman (*ibid*: 465). The British labelled the Kakai as a sect of ambiguous doctrine, present in and around Kirkuk. As a result of this ambiguity, their existence was not mentioned by writers and historians. In some cases, they are considered among the group that deify Imam Ali or People of the Truth (*ibid*: 466-467), while in fact the Kakai are quite different from them.

While there is little information about the origin of the Kakai, especially from a religious perspective, they have religious books written in the Kurdish language⁴. They also have many shrines, including: the Shrine of Sultan Ishaq in Mount Horaman, the Shrine of Sayyid Ibrahim in Baghdad, Dukkan-e Daud, the Shrine of Zain al-Abidin in Daquq, the Shrine of Ahmed in the Musalla in Kirkuk, and the Shrine of Omar Mandan in Kifri (Al-Kahyoun 2007: 470).

Some historians consider that Kakatism (or Yarsanism, as it is sometimes known) is nothing but an extension of a mystical path, which was established by Amr Ibn Lahab in the 8th century AD (Salloum 2013). Others link it to the Shi'ite sect due to the similarities such as the sanctification of Imam Ali. Kakatism is also influenced by other religions, such as Islam, Christianity and Yazidism.

Kakatism is surrounded by an air of mystery and secrecy due to a lack of explanation of their beliefs, rituals and practices. This is in addition to Kakais' civil status registration as Muslim; a practice which invisibilises⁵ them.

Under the weight of persecution and marginalisation within a society with an Islamic majority, the Kakai were forced to assimilate some of their customs, ideas and values in order to ensure their religious and social existence and avoid harm or persecution that would threaten their survival. This has ultimately led to more ambiguity and complexity surrounding the Kakai religion.

1.1.3 The location of the Kakai

The Kakai minority lives within the Kurdish regions of Iraq, namely the governorates of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, and Halabja, with a small minority in Dohuk. There are also Kakais in the Ramadi governorate, who are originally from Kirkuk and deported by the Iraqi government before 2003. The aim of their displacement was to change the demographics of the Kurdish-majority city of Kirkuk, as the Iraqi government considered the Kakais to be Kurds. The Kakais were therefore settled in the provinces with a Sunni

⁴ Macho is the dialect used by the Kakai in their communications and conversations. It is a dialect close in vocabulary to the Horami dialect, which is one of the Kurdish languages, in addition to Sorani, Korani and Kurmanji.

⁵ The processes of making someone, or a group of people, invisible within society, be that refusing to name them explicitly or creating a situation where they are unable to exert any power over their lives. Herzog (2018) understands invisibilisation (and silencing) to be processes which lead to exclusion and marginalisation, where individuals or groups are made to be considered irrelevant, either in communication or in general discourse.

majority, and Sunni and Shi'ite Arabs were put in their place. The Arab settlers were also granted furnished apartments, cars, jobs in state departments, and 10,000 Iraqi dinars. Hence, the name the "Ten Thousand Group" in the Iraqi dialect, meaning the migrant Arabs who obtained these privileges. The aim of this name was to distinguish the Arab settlers from the original Arabs of the city of Kirkuk, who are deemed the real owners of the land.

The deportation campaigns continued for a long time and did not cease despite Iraq's involvement in two wars that drained the country's resources and energies: the war with Iran (1980–1988), and the war against the multi-national forces following their occupation of Kuwait on 2nd August 1990.

At the end of the 1990s, the Iraqi government's strategy towards the Kakais and the Kurds in general in Kirkuk changed. It started distributing 'nationality change forms', in which the Kurdish citizen had the option of either being deported from the city of Kirkuk or changing their nationality to Arab. This came in addition to preventing Kakais and Kurds from giving their children Kurdish names.

However, after 2003, the Kakai majority in the city of Ramadi and other cities in the central and southern governorates of Iraq returned to their original homes, either voluntarily, out of their own desire to return, or by force due to sectarian conflicts because of their targeting by extremist groups.

1.1.4 The limits of the Kakai presence

Sources indicate that the borders of the Kakai land are as follows: to the south, the plain extending north of Hamrin and Qara Dagħ, to the east the main road between Taza and Tuz Khurmatu, and to the west the Hawija region. They also have a presence in Tal Afar in the Mosul governorate (Al-Khayoun 2007: 471). Kakais tend to live in villages located within the Kurdish regions (Al-Azzawi 1949: 36-39).

1.2 The position of Kakai women in society

Women in Middle Eastern societies experience marginalisation and neglect, regardless of their religious or sectarian affiliations. However, gender and membership of a religious minority can intersect to create different experiences of discrimination when compared to majority women (Tadros, 2020).

The pressure that a Kakai woman suffers is both internal and external. Internal pressures are associated with the men in her family who control her destiny, and may sometimes force her into marriage or exchange her into marriage for economic, social or political capital. This could include the marriage of young girls when they are infants or immediately after birth. External pressures include harassment from those in the majority religion, especially as Kakai women do not wear a veil (hijab) and are therefore identifiable as non-Muslim.

2 Goals of the research

This research aims to explore the types of discrimination that the Kakai are subjected to, with a specific focus on Kakai women, recognising that they experience a unique and compounded discrimination because of the intersection of their religious and gender identities. This research also aims to explore the origins of this discrimination at various levels, whether at the state level, through laws and decision making, or at the level of the environment, in which different religious and ethnic groups live and mingle with each other day-to-day, whether at school, university, work, in markets, or during celebrations, events and gatherings in public places.

Additionally, this research provides analysis and comparison of the conditions of the Kakai minority throughout the different periods of the Iraqi state, through their exposure to deportation and Arabisation during the rule of the former Baathist regime from 1963 - 2003, as well as the oppression during the period of sectarian fighting after 2003, all the way up to the ISIS attack on Iraq and the Levant in 2014.

2.1 Research methodology

Data were extrapolated from the opinions of focus group members, consisting of men and women, through the use of participatory ranking and semi-structured group discussion. Questions posed to the focus group members revolved around selected examples of the key challenges faced by women from the Kakai minority in their society. Participants had the opportunity to add other threats that they believed Kakai women are exposed to and all of these were written down in the list presented to them on the white board. Alongside identifying challenges affecting Kakai women, the male participants were also asked to identify challenges they face.

Participants then rated those challenges and threats according to their gravity and severity for each individual. The researcher also explored the motives behind the ranking of a challenge as more severe than others by listening to participants' stories and personal experience.

When analysing the data, both inductive and deductive approaches were used. Literature from reliable references and sources on the Kakai minority was analysed using an inductive approach, drawing themes from the text as they emerged. These themes then guided a deductive analysis of the focus group data, revealing specific challenges and threats faced by members of the Kakai minority in their geographical regions, or as a result of their contact with others from the majority religion.

2.2 Participant selection

The research sample of 60 people belonging to the Kakai minority was selected and divided into five focus groups, according to the parameters below:

Three focus group discussions (FGDs) for women, aged between 18-34 years (FGD 1), 35-45 years (FGD 2), and 46-70 years (FGD 3). Each of these focus groups had 12 participants.

Two focus groups for men, aged between 18-40 years (FGD 4) and 41-58 years (FGD 5). The first of these focus groups had 14 participants and the second had ten.

The 60 people in the research sample were chosen from among the residents of the village of Safiya, which has a Kakai majority. Focus groups were conducted from 6 November to 12 December 2021.

2.3 Study limitations, strengths and challenges

The significance of this research lies in the richness of the data collected. The experiences outlined in this report are captured in the participants' own words, giving a voice to members of a persecuted minority. This is particularly significant for the women involved, who are often further marginalised because of their gender.

This research coincided with the advent of the Kakai fasting and feast and the subsequent exchange of congratulations and blessings. These congratulations are

accompanied every year by congratulations at the governmental level by the Masrour Barzan, Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Nechirvan Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Region, and Masoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Democratic Party.

This research also comes as the Kakai attempt to ensure their rights within the Draft Constitution of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, similar to the Kurdistan Region Law (5) of 2015, known as the "Protection of the Rights of the Components of Iraqi Kurdistan Law" (Abas, Jaff and Karami, 2021). Should this be achieved, it will be the first constitutional recognition of the Kakai in the history of the Iraqi state.

There were challenges in conducting this research. It was difficult to accommodate the focus group members - of both genders - when addressing a thorny and forbidden subject for them; the challenges and discrimination a person faces just because they are Kakai within a Muslim-majority community, and the discrimination Kakai women face, which includes discrimination from within their own community. These are seen to be deeply private topics.

Since their inception, the Kakai have been subjected to various types of discrimination, to the extent that it has become natural to them. They rarely argue or defend themselves with arguments or quote Quran verses tackling equality between all human beings, as in the sayings: 'You have your own religion, and I have mine', 'There is no compulsion in religion' or 'And made you into tribes and families so that you may know one another'. They are of the opinion that doctrinal disputes would fracture relations between them and their classmates, workmates, or neighbours. Others prefer to remain silent and discontinue the discussion, as they fear that their privacy will be violated. They prefer silence to delving into arguments where they believe the outcome will not be favourable towards them.

The first obstacle encountered was difficulty in convincing the participants of the need to specify the challenges they face in their lives in simple terms. There are many reasons for this, either due to a lack of literacy, or because they tend to write down detailed phrases with lengthy explanations. This is likely because these issues feel complex and come with extensive lived experience. Instead, the majority preferred to discuss each challenge individually and in detail, to share their stories and experiences.

This paper therefore relies upon the researcher's interpretation of the experiences shared during the FGDs when drawing out the challenges in simple terms, putting them sequentially according to what participants stated during the discussions, and writing them down on the white board. While this process was time-consuming, this research stays as true to the words and descriptions used by the Kakai participants where possible.

Secondly, the time allocated for discussions with members of the women's focus groups was a challenge. Married women take care of their children, sending them to school, preparing meals and managing all other household chores. It was therefore necessary to set a fixed time for them – 2 p.m. – to conduct the discussion for at least two hours. This meant the meeting would be concluded at around 4:30 p.m., at which point they would resume their daily routine of preparing dinner for their families as well as other household duties. Some women even brought their children with them since there was no one to look after them during those two hours of discussion with the rest of the focus group.

Lastly, participants were generally reluctant to identify any challenges they face. When asked whether they were discriminated against by others, at first they would say: 'No, we are fine, we are a peaceful people, we love others and we have no problem'. When I tried to explain what I meant by the question, or attempted to rephrase the question, they would answer saying: 'No, thank God there are no problems, I did not sense any discrimination, and so on'. However, they would then add, 'Honestly, sometimes I get ridiculed or mocked when they know I am a Kakai woman' or 'when they see my thick, long moustache and know I am a Kakai man'.

The main reason for the contradiction in the statements of the focus group members is that they do not understand the fact that they have been subjected to discrimination. They do not consider what they are going through to be discrimination against them, which distorts their personal freedom and constitutional rights.

Issues such as bullying, harassment, ridicule, mockery, obscene and offensive words, insulting sanctities, accusations of dishonour or blasphemy, incitement and other aspects of discrimination are considered normal for the Kakai. For them, such matters should not be spoken about so to avoid escalation into violence.

3 Research findings

3.1 Participatory ranking findings

The following tables show the final priority lists from each FGD alongside tables aggregating the women's rankings and men's rankings. The individual priority lists for each person can be found in Appendix One.

Table 1: Challenges faced by Kakai women of all ages

Challenges	Prioritisation by Kakai women					Final ranking
	No. of votes for 1st place	No. of votes for 2nd place	No. of votes for 3rd place	No. of votes for 4th place	No. of votes for a ranking of 5 th or lower	
Education	24	4	2	1	3	1st
Gender discrimination	2	14	5	2	5	2nd
Displacement due to ISIS	0	1	6	3	26	3rd
Poverty	3	1	1	0	1	4th
Bullying within the clan	1	0	1	1	8	5th
Invasion of privacy	0	0	3	0	8	6th

Bullying/ harassment	1	0	0	1	9	7th
Superstitions and myths	0	1	0	2	7	8th
Discrimination at work	0	1	1	2	1	9th
Forced Marriage	0	0	0	1	3	10th

Source: Authors' own.

The table above presents the ten challenges identified by Kakai women in the first three FGDs. As shown in the following tables, not all of these challenges were identified by all of the women across the three FGDs, however there were clear similarities, such as education, gender discrimination and displacement due to ISIS.

The second column of this table shows the number of participants who voted for the identified challenge as their top priority issue. Likewise, the third column shows how many voted for each challenge as the second most important issue, etc. The final column shows the ranking of these issues based on the total figure generated when the votes for each issue are weighted appropriately.⁶

The following tables show how the differently aged women in each of the FGDs voted on the challenges they identified, and each table is structured in the same way.

⁶ The weighting was calculated using the following equation: total = (number of votes for 1st place*5)+(number of votes for second place*4)+(number of votes for 3rd place*3)+(number of votes for 4th place*2)+(number of votes for fifth place*1).

Table 2: Challenges faced by women aged 18 - 34 years (FGD 1)

Challenges	Prioritisation by women aged 18 - 34					Final ranking
	No. of votes for 1st place	No. of votes for 2nd place	No. of votes for 3rd place	No. of votes for 4th place	No. of votes for a ranking of 5 th or lower	
Education	9	1	1	1	-	1st
Gender discrimination	2	6	-	1	-	2nd
Displacement due to ISIS	-	-	3	-	9	3rd
Discrimination at work	-	1	1	2	1	4th
Bullying within the clan	-	-	1	1	2	5th
Forced marriage	-	-	-	1	3	6th

Source: Authors' own.

Table 3: Challenges faced by women aged 35 - 45 years (FGD 2)

Challenges	Prioritisation by women aged 35 - 45					Final ranking
	No. of votes for 1st place	No. of votes for 2nd place	No. of votes for 3rd place	No. of votes for 4th place	No. of votes for a ranking of 5 th or lower	
Education	4	3	1	-	2	1st
Poverty	3	1	1	-	1	2nd
Gender discrimination	-	1	4	1	4	3rd
Displacement due to ISIS	-	1	1	2	8	4th
Bullying within the clan	1	-	-	-	6	5th

Source: Authors' own.

Table 4: Challenges faced by women aged 46 - 70 years (FGD 3)

Challenges	Prioritisation by women aged 46 - 70					Final ranking
	No. of votes for 1st place	No. of votes for 2nd place	No. of votes for 3rd place	No. of votes for 4th place	No. of votes for a ranking of 5 th or lower	
Education	11	-	-	-	1	1st
Gender discrimination	-	7	1	-	1	2nd
Invasion of privacy	-	-	3	-	8	3rd
Displacement due to ISIS	-	-	2	1	9	4th
Bullying/harassment	1	-	-	1	9	5th
Superstitions and myths	-	1	-	2	7	6th

Source: Authors' own.

Table 5: Challenges faced by Kakai men of all ages

Challenges	Prioritisation by Kakai men					Final ranking
	No. of votes for 1st place	No. of votes for 2nd place	No. of votes for 3rd place	No. of votes for 4th place	No. of votes for a ranking of 5 th or lower	
Invasion of privacy	4	6	1	2	11	1st
Discrimination at work	5	2	1	2	11	2nd
Displacement due to ISIS	1	1	5	4	13	3rd
Bullying/harassment	1	4	1	3	15	4th
Superstitions and myths	-	1	3	2	15	5th
Displacement before 2003	3	1	2	2	2	6th
Displacement after 2003	-	3	1	2	4	7th

Source: Authors' own.

Table 6: Challenges faced by men aged 18 - 40 years (FGD 4)

Challenges	Prioritisation by men aged 18 - 40					Final ranking
	No. of votes for 1st place	No. of votes for 2nd place	No. of votes for 3rd place	No. of votes for 4th place	No. of votes for a ranking of 5 th or lower	
Invasion of privacy	2	4	-	2	6	1st
Displacement due to ISIS	1	1	2	3	7	2nd
Bullying/harassment	-	2	1	1	10	3rd
Discrimination at work	2	1	-	1	7	4th
Superstitions and myths	-	1	2	1	8	5th

Source: Authors' own.

Table 7: Challenges faced by men aged 41 - 58 years (FGD 5)

Challenges	Prioritisation by men aged 41 – 58					Final ranking
	No. of votes for 1st place	No. of votes for 2nd place	No. of votes for 3rd place	No. of votes for 4th place	No. of votes for a ranking of 5 th or lower	
Displacement before 2003	3	1	2	2	2	1st
Discrimination at work	3	1	1	1	4	2nd
Invasion of privacy	2	2	1	-	5	3rd
Displacement after 2003	-	3	1	2	4	4th
Bullying/harassment	1	2	-	2	5	5th
Displacement due to ISIS	-	-	3	1	6	6th
Superstitions and myths	-	-	1	1	7	7th

Source: Authors' own.

Table 8: A comparison of the women's and men's rankings

	Ranking for women	Ranking for men	Aggregate ranking for both men and women
1st	Education	Invasion of privacy	Education
2nd	Gender discrimination	Discrimination at work	Displacement due to ISIS
3rd	Displacement due to ISIS	Displacement due to ISIS	Gender discrimination
4th	Poverty	Bullying/harassment	Invasion of privacy
5th	Bullying within the clan	Superstitions and myths	Discrimination at work
6th	Invasion of privacy	Displacement before 2003	Bullying/harassment
7th	Bullying/harassment	Displacement after 2003	Superstitions and myths
8th	Superstitions and myths		Displacement before 2003
9th	Discrimination at work		Poverty
10th	Forced marriage		Displacement after 2003
11th			Bullying within the clan
12th			Forced marriage

Source: Authors' own.

As outlined in the above tables, there were differences between the issues identified by the different focus groups and the way they were ranked. For example, there are gaps in the above table because each FGD identified a different number of threats and challenges facing them. In terms of differences, the most significant were between the threats and challenges identified by the women and the men. For example, education was overwhelmingly the most significant challenge identified by the women, but it didn't feature in the lists generated by the men. The analysis of these similarities, differences and the comparative lived experiences of the participants follows below.

3.2 Discussion and analysis

Table 9: List of acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
F	Female
M	Male
E	Erbil
S	Safiya
H	Hamdaniya
KH	Khabat
HW	Housewife
ST	Student
S&T	Student and Tailor
T	Teacher
GI	Graduate of an Institute
W	Worker
RM	Retired from the military (Pêşmerge)
VS	Vegetable Seller

Source: Authors' own.

By listening to the stories of the participants in the focus groups, both men and women, we determined a number of threats/challenges faced by the Kakai due to religion and gender. Within the second (35-45 years) and third group (46-68 years), there were women in their thirties all the way up to their sixties. Among them were women who did not have any opportunities for formal education. They lamented their situation and regretted their lost dreams of having a brighter future, as they believed that if they had been educated, they would have been in a better situation.

According to their testimonies, their parents used to send the boys, not the girls, to school, arguing that girls are not to receive education, because educating girls was perceived to be improper.

The first focus group members were younger (18-34 years). The group included two women who could not read. One of them did not go to school, and the other had left school at an early age.

Women in this group believed that the condition of Kakai women has changed dramatically for the better. There are many families that now send their daughters to school and even allow them to complete their studies until they reach university level. The reason for this is that there are schools for all stages of education in villages and rural areas, in addition to ease of transportation and communication between the village and the sub-districts. They stated that the issue of exchange marriages (where a woman is married in exchange for her leaving employment) or the marriage of young girls has become rare.

However, members of the first FGD felt discrimination by the majority started at school, where peers attempted to talk Kakais into wearing the veil or started conversations that sought to delve into details about their worship, rituals, customs, etc. This led Kakais to feel isolated or to withdraw from others to avoid discussing religious issues, or to only sit with other Kakai in cafeterias, during school and university trips and other occasions.

Conversely, members of the second and third FGDs did not recognise this kind of discrimination, since they do not leave the house often, or if they do, they go out with the male of the household - the father, brother, husband or son, and the man is the one who leads conversations and discussions. What they suffer most is the mocking of men's moustaches and the uttering of offensive or degrading words or jokes about the long

and thick moustache of Kakai men on the bus, in the market and in other public places. They are exposed to the painful rejection of their food by their Muslim neighbours, although they kindly accept everything that is sent to them.

Moreover, they try to pretend in front of their neighbours that they are fasting during Ramadan, by entering the house at the time of breaking the fast or getting up during the pre-dawn meal (Suhoor) and making some noise, so that their Muslim neighbours hear that their Kakai neighbours are awake. Nevertheless, the women realised that these attempts to hide their identity and mimic another religion do not work, because their Muslim neighbours know the truth about them having rituals and ceremonies of their own and are not convinced by their acting and their attempts to conceal their reality.

The following sections explore each of the challenges identified by the Kakai women in more detail, comparing and contrasting the differing views across and within the FGDs.

3.2.1 Education

Education sat at the top of all three of the priority lists generated by the women in the FGDs, demonstrating its significance as a barrier for Kakai women. For example, of the 12 participants in the first FGD of women aged 18 - 34, nine were deprived of education by their parents because of their gender. In the second focus group (women aged 35 - 45), ten of the 12 participants declared education to be a great challenge for them, with eight of them having been forced to leave school. In the third FGD (women aged 46 - 70), education was the biggest threat for eleven of the 12 women. Across the three FGDs, the women had examples to share of how their parents had stopped them from going to school, or cut their education short, because they were girls:

I was deprived of many things and suffered a lot. That is why I hate boys, my brothers. I suffered from the difference, i.e. discrimination. You are a girl, so you do not leave the house, you do not read/learn, I was deprived of education.

(Participant F 20 HW KH, Single)

I don't know how to write...We didn't have an older brother at home...Our economic conditions were very rough. So they took us out of school, so that we could work for a living. We were six girls, and when my brother grew up, he went to school, but we are four sisters now who do not know how to read or write.

(Participant F 44 HW S, Married)

This second example demonstrates how even when discrimination isn't directly the factor for keeping girls out of school, there may be additional economic barriers, and girls are still the ones who suffer. It is often believed that education is improper for girls:

In villages they say that it is a shame for girls to study and learn. This is a girl. It is improper and shameful for her to go to school.

(Participant F 38 HW KH, Married)

I was deprived of education, because the Kakai do not allow girls to study. We were in Mosul. They asked how I would travel such long distances!

(Participant F 49 HW KH, Married)

In addition to this overt gender discrimination, participants identified various reasons Kakai parents give to prevent girls and women from receiving an education. Within the first FGD, one of these reasons provided was that girls were forced to leave school in order to be married off at an early age:

When I went to school, my family used to ask me to go late, while my brother, who was with me in the same school, would go early. As for me, I had to go late, after him, because they wanted make sure I arrive at the time when the lesson begins. So, when I go to school, I must immediately sit at my desk and start my lessons. And the goal is that I would not get busy talking to others, particularly boys, because the school was mixed (boys and girls). I had to return home earlier than my brother, who was often late to return home. I could not stay with my friends for a little while to chat or stop at a store or a shop to buy sweets, as I would get beaten by my brothers. If I returned a little late or if I stopped at a certain grocery store to buy a certain thing, I would eat it in secret, because if they knew about it they would beat me and say how can a girl go to the store. When I asked them about the reason for this discriminatory treatment between me and my young brothers, they used to say, "You are a girl, it is a shame that you do such and such, it is not correct because you are a girl".

(Participant F 27 HW S, Married)

Even for girls who were allowed to attend school, they might not have been allowed to study at a higher, university level. Parents were said to avoid this possibility by marrying off girls while they were still at school, so that the husband would have the power to make them continue or discontinue their education for whatever reason:

Last year I was in the sixth grade of middle school. I had class which I had to be examined for in the second term. Because of people's interference in our affairs and their inciting my husband to prevent me from continuing my education, he did not allow me to sit for the exam. Our financial situation is quite degraded, because my husband is a construction worker, so I was deprived of education.

(Participant F 22 HW S, Married)

Additionally, participants discussed how poverty means that the villages they live in do not have schools for girls:

I was deprived of education. I studied until the fourth grade of primary school. Then, left school due to the deteriorating economic conditions.

(Participant F 38 HW KH, Married)

In fact, the participants' perceptions were that sometimes the Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime deliberately deported Kurdish families to areas where there were no schools, so that an ignorant generation would emerge, not knowing how to read or write.

Interestingly, one of the women in the third FGD also identified how ethno-religious discrimination kept girls out of school alongside gender discrimination:

We used to live in Al Abbas in Diyala governorate. I was forced to leave school after finishing the sixth grade of primary school, because they said, "You are Kakai and our region is Arab. They will abuse you." That is why I gave up on my education.

(Participant F 49 HW S, Married)

In contrast, some of the women considered a lack of education for girls to be a normal issue considering the period in which they lived, identifying it as something girls in the majority also faced:

In the seventies and eighties, the issue of girls not going to school was a normal thing, because the majority did not send their daughters to school, that is why this did not affect me.

(Participant F 53 HW S)

3.2.2 Gender discrimination

As with education, gender discrimination was only identified as a challenge and threat in the women's FGDs. In fact, it featured as the second priority for women in FGDs one (aged 18 - 34) and three (aged 46 - 70), and third in the second FGD (aged 35 - 45). In total, across all three FGDs, 28 of the 36 participants, confirmed that they had been discriminated against because of their gender, by parents and/or male relatives.

One of the women in the second focus group expressed frustration that there is a stark difference in the respect afforded to women in comparison to men in Kakai society:

I have a question: Why is respect for men greater than respect for women? Women also have rights. Why can a man move freely and speak freely? Why can a man go out whenever he wishes? It is true that women have their status and respect, but why does the man enjoy a greater share of respect? [...] Even when a woman makes a mistake, even if it is not great, and while the man also makes mistakes, it is said that the man is a man. However, a woman is criticised when she commits a mistake, no matter what its size is!

(Participant F 40 HW S, Married)

Many of the women, particularly those aged 18 - 34, emphasised how they were discriminated against by their parents. They described how they were prevented from studying or working for the purpose of restricting their freedom of moving outside the house, contrary to the wide range of freedoms granted to their brothers:

I feel this discrimination within my family. The boy is free in his movements and can return late at night, but the girl cannot do that.

(Participant F 31 E HW, Married)

My father did not allow me to receive education, but my brothers were allowed. Because I was the eldest daughter in the house, and he did not have children

older than me, he deprived me of an education, so that I would work in the field with him...I signed away my right of inheritance to my male brothers, and they gave me little in return for my relinquishment.

(Participant F 41 HW S, Widow)

This second example shows how discrimination against Kakai women is passed down through generations. Discrimination carried out by parents is compounded by discrimination by younger male relatives, such as brothers. Discrimination may even be practiced by the son over his mother:

There are men who do not respect their mothers, just because they are women. I notice this phenomenon among those who are close to me, how a boy does not respect his mother and does not esteem her just because she is a woman.

(Participant F 27 HW S, Married)

Another of the women, from the third FGD, expressed how even the threat of ethno-religious discrimination didn't stop her brothers' freedoms being curtailed, whereas her movement was restricted:

My brothers used to enjoy freedom of movement and going around even among the Arabs.

(Participant F 49 HW S, Married)

The women also explained how discrimination is even seen in the ability to own things, such as mobile phones:

I am discriminated against within my family...They discriminate between me and my brother at home. For example, they buy a mobile phone for the boy and they don't do the same for me, telling me that I shouldn't have one.

(Participant F 18 HW KH, Single)

Outside the family, participants identified how discrimination is also exercised through the law:

The man kills his wife, is not punished, but is rather released with the help of his parents or sometimes even his wife's parents. He committed a crime, so why not be punished? Why this injustice? Sometimes the girl would be killed by her

cousin. His uncle, the victim's father, would release his criminal nephew from prison, either for clan considerations such as reconciliation or settlements, and also because women are not of much significance.... Parents of the murdered girl/woman would concede, so the criminal who killed their daughter would be released.

(Participant F 24 HW S, Married)

3.2.3 Displacement due to ISIS

All participants across all five FGDs were subjected to migration and displacement to escape the ISIS armed factions in Iraq and the Levant in 2014, although two of the women in the second FGD (aged 35 - 45) didn't mention this as a challenge they face. Participants recognised that they were at risk at that time due to their dual religious minority and Kurdish identities.

When ISIS took control of Mosul, we felt more afraid. The reason for our fleeing from our homeland was because we, like the Yazidis and Christians, are different from Muslims. Since its onset, ISIS was spreading statements, like: "If you fall in our hands, we will slaughter you or cut off your heads, because you are infidels, because you are Kakai." So, we were afraid of them because we are different from Muslims, who consider us to be infidels only because we are Kakais.

(Participant F 24 HW S, Single)

After 2005 and 2006 persecution was practiced against us in Mosul, because we were exposed to killing or threats of killing because of our Kurdish identity, as we provided food to the Pêşmerge military, and so, we were threatened...because we are Kurdish...we moved and left Mosul and came to the Kurdistan Region.

(Participant M 32 GI KH)

While none of the participants identified different ways in which Kakai men and women were at risk during this period of displacement, one of the women from the third FGD (aged 46 - 70) detailed feeling fearful of experiencing the same violence as the Yazidis, many of whom were women who were kidnapped and enslaved by ISIS.

As soon as we heard about the possibility of ISIS arriving, we fled from Safiya, since we heard what they had done to the Yazidis. We said that worse things

would happen to us than what happened to them. When they get hold of Kakais, they will surely not let them live...They will kill us and assault us.

(Participant F 53 HW S)

Participants discussed how displacement included fleeing from bombs, attacks on their homes and the threat of violence. Whole villages were evacuated.

We fled from Safiya to Erbil after the ISIS attack in 2014. We were bombed...Our windows were smashed. We were close to the ISIS attack where our homes were destroyed.

(Participant F 41 HW S, Widow)

We were subjected to displacement and deportation, and we were deported in 2014 to escape from ISIS. The village was completely evacuated.

(Participant M 27 W S)

Some of the participants described being displaced and deported more than once, and for different reasons each time. They explained how the Kakai people have been historically vulnerable to discrimination because of their religion and nationality, and the invasion from ISIS was one more instance of this violence:

We were subjected to displacement and deportation several times, since we were bombed during the rule of President Saddam in 1991 for political reasons, because we are Kurds. So, they considered us Kurds...In 2014, due to the fact that ISIS was carrying out these actions in the name of the Islamic State, we, the Kakai, as well as all the components and all the minorities...They had an impact at most on the minorities. The components no longer had a place here.

(Participant M 40 W S)

We were subjected to migration several times: By the Baathist regime in 1988, when we were given the choice between changing our nationality or emigrating. We were in Mosul, so we chose deportation and did not change our nationality...In 1991, we returned to our original place in Hamdaniya, but our homes were completely demolished. Also, in 2014, we fled from ISIS.

(Participant M 43 W H)

Unfortunately, displacement of the Kakai people did not start with ISIS. In fact, there were two challenges related to displacement identified by the men in the fifth FGD (aged 41 - 58) that weren't mentioned by the women - these were displacement before 2003 and displacement after 2003 (but before ISIS).

All ten male FGD members were subjected to displacement under the Baathist regime (1979 - 2003) because of their Kurdish identity. The former regime deported Kakai families from their original place of residence in Kirkuk, Mosul and Erbil under what is known as the Arab belt, i.e. changing the demographics of Kurdish provinces populated by a Kurdish-majority.

The Kakais were considered to be among the Kurdish component. That is why they were subjected to deportation from their original areas of residence in Kirkuk to the Ramadi governorate in Western Iraq, or to the governorates of the Kurdistan Region, such as Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.

At the end of the 1990s, this minority was subjected to Arabisation by forcing them to change their nationality from Kurdish to Arab in order to influence the demographic structure. The decisions of "Nationality Correction" (Jambaz 2008: 80) issued by the Revolutionary Command Council, and the distribution of "Nationality Correction" forms (*ibid.*: 32, 104, 106) to citizens, state: 'Please kindly agree to correct my nationality fromnationality to Arab nationality'.

According to the Revolutionary Command Council Resolution No. 199/2001, everyone who turned 18 years of age had the right to change their nationality to Arab nationality. The deportation of the Kakai, for nationalistic considerations and the correction of their nationality, had the largest share, as it constitutes a significant population weight in Kirkuk and Mosul.

We were subjected to migration twice, once during Saddam's era, i.e. before 2003, when we were in Mosul, and we came here - to Safiya village - and we were displaced once more because of ISIS in 2014.

(Participant M 41 W S)

The Kakai minority in Mosul were forced to flee and leave their original residence after being exposed to killing or being threatened. This is similar to what other minorities, such as Yazidis and Christians, faced through the Sunni armed factions, since the latter carried the banner of opposition to the new Iraqi government and to everything that is American and foreign. These attitudes were associated with Al-Qaeda, so brought criticism and violence from the majority government.

We were exposed to displacement several times, during the Baath era, and later after the fall of the Baath regime in 2003. We were in Mosul, we have been displaced since then. Also in 2014 because of ISIS.

(Participant M 45 W S)

3.2.4 Poverty

While poverty was only mentioned by the women in the second FGD (ages 35 - 45), three of these women placed it as the top challenge facing them as Kakai women. In total, six of these women mentioned the poor economic situation of their families and its impact on the course of their lives, depriving them of education and other opportunities:

I studied until the fourth grade of primary school, but I dropped out of school due to our poor living conditions...My brothers went to school, but also dropped out due to the rough economic conditions.

(Participant F 38 HW KH)

As already explored in the education section, when economic conditions are poor, it is often the girls and women who have opportunities removed first, such as education. However, in this instance, the participant was clear that the economic situation was so bad that even her brother had to drop out of school alongside her. These women also discussed how their children are deprived of educational opportunities because of poverty:

My 14-year-old daughter threw herself off the roof due to poverty. She asked for new clothes, and we could not buy them for her. My children went to school, but dropped out due to the deteriorating economic conditions.

(Participant F 45 HW S)

3.2.5 Bullying within the clan

Bullying within the clan was identified as a threat and challenge by women in the first and second FGDs (aged 18 - 34 and 35 - 45). The 12 participants in the first FGD confirmed that they were victims of bullying and gossip by members of the same clan, but only three of them chose this as a negative point that represents a challenge to them:

Sometimes neighbours, relatives, and those around me talk behind my back and criticise my work and my profession, and attack me in their conversations. Hypocrisy is widespread among people, so they would appear one way before me and stab me with their words behind my back.

(Participant F 27 HW S Married)

Within the second group, seven of the participants confirmed being bullied by the residents of their village:

Sometimes I would hear the words, but I would neglect them, and I submit my affairs to God. This happened in our village. All residents of my village are Kakai.

(Participant A37 HW S)

This example shows how Kakai women experience discrimination from within their community, not only from those outside or from an opposing clan. Sometimes, this does not stop at bullying, verbal abuse, or discrimination, but may even extend to graver issues:

My husband was kidnapped in Mosul by ISIS in 2014, and what happened to him remains unknown until now, I lived with my husband's family for a while. Then, they announced his death, then the issue of money and inheritance was brought up. So, my husband's family expelled me and took my daughters to deprive me of my husband's inheritance. Because they think that I will take the money and spend it or give it to my family. The laws failed to do me justice despite my attorney, who failed to protect my rights because of the economic power and authority that my in-laws enjoy in the region.

(Participant F 38 HW KH, Married/widow)

3.2.6 Invasion of privacy

Participants defined 'invasion of privacy' as persistent questions about what the Kakai are, their rituals, beliefs, and other relevant matters, including the men's moustaches. Eleven of the women in the third FGD (aged 46 - 70) expressed annoyance at their privacy being invaded, while all of the men across both FGDs agreed that this is one of the daily issues faced by Kakai men. It is likely that this was mentioned by the men in the FGDs more than the women as they have more interactions in the wider community with non-Kakai members. One of the women described the dilemma Kakai women face when these questions are posed to them:

We do not mind dealing with Muslims. The problem is with them. Therefore, I do not prefer mixing with Karamanj/Muslims, because after one or two meetings, they immediately ask, "Why don't you pray? Why don't you go to the mosque? Why is your religion like this? What is your religion? What do you do?" We have one of two paths: Either we don't mix with them or we respond by saying we are Kakai and we don't do these things. Then, they would accuse us of blasphemy.

(Participant F 53 HW S)

In contrast, many of the men described how the questions they were asked were centred around their moustaches, which make them recognisable as Kakai to those outside their community:

I am a farmer. They tell me in Al Alway, "Why don't you shave your moustache. We will not buy anything from you. You are Kakai. You are an infidel. Shave your moustache".

(Participant M 20 W KH)

I get asked this question often: What is this moustache? What does it mean? What does it symbolise? Why don't you pray? ... They put us into awkward situations.

(Participant M 27 W S)

These questions are often asked. What is this moustache? Why don't you shave it?...This happens a lot.

(Participant M 43 W H)

Participants described how invasions of their privacy can also be indirect. For example:

We have a Kurdish extremist Muslim neighbour who has a sweet shop in our area. He gives children free sweets and candies as a bribe, so he would ask them special information about the Kakai, particularly when there is a crowd or a gathering in the area, to the extent that we asked our children not to go there.

(Participant M 32 GI KH)

It is stated in the existing literature about the Kakai that they are a private people who prefer to keep their beliefs and rituals to themselves. This is partly because Kakaism is not a religion that individuals can be converted to, but rather passed on through generations (Salloum 2013: 167). It is also because the Kakai wish to avoid being questioned and interrogated. The impact of this on Kakai individuals is significant. The participants felt that the internalised fear of exposure means the community has become inward-looking and overly concerned with integration into society, to the detriment of their beliefs, values and their sense of who they are.

In 2010 we had an Arabic Language professor, who had a doctorate degree. When he came to class, he would ask us to read the Quran, and at first he said: "Kamran, Get out of the class", I said: "Why?" He said: "Does the Kakai read the Quran?" I said: "Why would he not read it?" He said: "Hmmm, I thought they do not read", so I told him: "You have attained a PhD degree and say, "I thought"? Shouldn't you be sure before saying that", and I read the Quran.

(Participant M 32 GI KH)

Nevertheless, in contrast to the above quote, most Kakai people prefer to keep silent when challenged about their beliefs or practices. FGD participants from all the groups agreed that silence is safer than responding, either because responding often develops into a quarrel or alienation, or because others are not convinced by their arguments, no matter how strong they are. In the end these arguments are futile and unhelpful:

Honestly, I hear a lot, but what do I answer them, what is the response? It is not just one incident or two. I am forced to stay silent and not respond to them, because of our religion. We must not talk about our religion. That is why we have to swallow words and insults, I get exposed to that often, not just once, twice or

thrice, but hundreds of thousands of times. We cannot confront everyone. We, the Kakai, are few compared to Muslims, so we stay away and remain silent. The problem with Muslims is that they do not recognise us nor do they accept us.

(Participant M 50 W S)

Or because for them responding and not responding are the same:

Whether you respond to them or not, it does not help. I prefer not to respond, because even if I wanted to explain to them, no matter how much I tried, they are pre-set on not believing us. So, it is better not to respond to them.

(Participant M 25 W S)

Others prefer silence and are quite convinced about it for other reasons that are considered sacred to them:

You should only listen, be silent and not respond to them. You should not argue with them, do you know why? Because that entails revealing our religion.

(Participant F 68 HW S, Married)

As a potential solution to the invasions the Kakai experience to their privacy, three of the men mentioned the need for a better shared definition of the Kakai. This would prevent much of the intrusive questioning that troubled many and mean that they no longer needed to be evasive. It would also help to counter the harmful myths and misconceptions about the Kakai. However, older men rejected the idea completely, and demanded that things remain the same (not speaking out about Kakai rituals and beliefs), because it is better that they remain a secret.

3.2.7 Bullying/harassment

Due to the norms and restrictions facing Kakai women, which keep them in the village with no job or profession, the number of women who identified bullying and harassment as a threat was low, especially compared to the men. The vast majority mentioned in their stories that they were harassed and bullied by Muslims while they were with their husbands in public places, as this is one of the few times they come into contact with those who aren't from the Kakai community:

They bully me because of the traditional outfit that I wear...I am sad because they look at us differently. Once I was walking with my husband in the main street,

*and a Muslim man spat on my husband and said to him: "You are a dog."
Because we are Kakai, they make fun of our moustaches.*

(Participant F 62 HW S, Married)

As with the invasion of privacy, it was clear that clothing and appearance makes Kakai people identifiable to the Muslim majority, making it difficult for them to spend time in public without experiencing bullying and/or harassment. In fact, all 24 of the men across FGDs four (aged 18 - 40) and five (aged 41 - 58) confirmed that they experience persistent, almost daily discrimination, for no reason, at school, at work, or even in public places, and even among colleagues. They felt that this sometimes escalated to slander:

Their problem is with the moustache and prayer...We get exposed to this situation a lot. I can say it happens daily.

(Participant M 45 W S)

I got to know someone through Facebook, and did not tell him that I am Kakai. I met him by chance in the market. When we talked and he knew that I am Kakai, he told me, "Your moustache is ugly and dirty and other things". So, I ended my relationship with him.

(Participant M 25 W S)

Unfortunately, this bullying and harassment often leads to physical violence against the Kakai. This might include inciting others to hurt the Kakai in their homes, such as by breaking in and smashing their windows, throwing stones into the house in the presence of the owners, or leaving threatening messages that they must move to another place, otherwise they will be exposed to killing or harm:

We used to hear openly and clearly on broadcasting devices that the killing of the Kakai was legal.

(Participant, M 56 W S RM)

There are official books available in libraries that incite the general killing of the Kakai. These instigators now have prominent positions in the political office of some Islamic political parties.

(Participant M 40 W S)

As a result of these actions, the Kakai are forced to abandon their homes, their regions and their cities to move to villages and rural areas in order to be close to the members of their sect, even if this is at the expense of leaving their jobs and source of livelihood and the deterioration of their economic situation, as well as the loss of the privileges and opportunities they enjoyed in the city. This is particularly significant for women because they tend to rely extensively on informal networks due to their restricted mobility. Therefore, the uprooting from their community tends to have particularly severe effects on their social capital and mental wellbeing.

We left our home in the city in Erbil ten years ago, and moved to the village in Safiya, because of their harassment and mockery of my husband's moustache. Every day he would be troubled and get into quarrels, and I was worried about his health, because he is diabetic. My children are young people who suffer from unemployment and lack of job opportunities. If we were in the city, it would be better.

(Participant F 47 HW S, Married)

3.2.8 Superstitions and myths

When participants identified superstitions and myths as a challenge, they were referring to the misconceptions about the Kakai that they are regularly subjected to. Ten of the women in the second FGD (aged 46-70) mentioned being accused of superstition, blasphemy and heresy. In contrast, 19 of the men mentioned superstitions and myths as a challenge they face, perhaps again because they have more contact with those outside of the Kakai community.

Participants discussed how rumours and incorrect preconceptions about the Kakai are spread among the majority of Muslims and how people outside the sect have ideas that stem from their own analysis and perspective about this sect. The Kakai are perceived by the wider community to connect with the *Djinn* (a supernatural being), deal with them and exploit them for their personal purposes, in addition to practicing magic and sorcery.

One day we were in Kirkuk to visit my father. And when we came back, I saw that the windows of our house were smashed, as our neighbours broke into our

house. When my husband asked them why they did this, they said because there is Djinn in this house.

(Participant F 47 HW S)

The Kakai are also accused of being *Sarili*, or infidels:

My neighbours are religious people. I usually let my children play for one hour outside the house. One day while my children were playing outside the house as usual, my neighbours' children came and broke their toys. And instead of apologising for what they did, they told us: "You are Sarlo", and I said: "We are Kakai." They said: "We tell you Kakai you get upset, we tell you Sarlo you are also upset."

(Participant F 47 HW S)

Calling Kakai 'Sarili' or 'Sarlo' was not limited to just one set of people, as one of the men outlined:

Not only the Kurds, but the Arabs also give us the name Sarlo or Sarili, meaning we have no religion.

(Participant M 40 W S)

The Kakai are also accused of blasphemy or words and actions that are offensive to Muslims and Islam.

Once in 2004 we were in the market with my cousin. People were mocking his moustache and shouting at us "Sarlo", meaning infidels, meaning you are Kakai and for this you are infidels. Things escalated to a fight, and a quarrel broke out. We asked my cousin to leave them alone, so the conflict would not escalate and the situation would not worsen.

(Participant F 46 HW S, Married)

Unfortunately, one of the men described how friendship isn't even enough to overpower the belief among those outside the sect that the Kakai are guilty of blasphemy:

My closest colleague knew after two years that I was a Kakai. He came and asked me: "Are you Kakai? You are an infidel". I asked him: You have known me for two years, did you see anything wrong with me?

(Participant M 38 T H)

One myth that was particularly prevalent in the discussions that took place in the FGDs with the men was 'Shawa Rash/Rash Ballah', which means gathering in a closed place, removing clothes and engaging in sexual activities with no rules, for example sex between family members. It is sometimes known as a 'black gathering'.

I used to work in a security position. They used to tell me that you meet once a month and turn off the lights.

(Participant M 40 W S)

They speak ill without having evidence. For example, they say to you, "You do the black gathering", meaning you have a sexual relationship with each other, the brother with his sister... And so on.

(Participant M 23 S & T S)

Millions of times I hear...For example, in the taxi conversation that I mentioned - they say you Kakai have a black night, when men and women gather in a dark room, be that a wife or a mother or a sister, and they meet for sexual purposes...This is very far from being true.

(Participant M 46 W S)

Some Muslims believe that the Kakai revere and worship Satan, or at least respect and love him. They believe that the Kakai do not accept insults levelled against him, and defend him when he is insulted.

They tell us, "You worship Satan".

(Participant M 27 W S)

Muslims believe that the Kakais bury their dead vertically, by digging a hole in the ground that fits the person's body to bury them longitudinally and not transversely as is customary in the methods of burial of the dead among most peoples and nations. This is seen as deviant and suspicious behaviour.

One day I was at work, working for an engineer. He is an engineer and has a degree. He told me: "I have a question", I said: "Go ahead", he said: "It is said that you, the Kakais, bury your dead standing in the grave". So I told him: "You are an engineer and you have a degree, how do you believe such allegations?"

(Participant M 43 W H)

One of the impacts of these superstitions and myths is that any minor friction or discussion can develop into a quarrel. Unfortunately, some participants explained that such accusations are heard so often, they may be taken simply and accepted by the Kakai without grumbling or complaint:

It is natural for the Kurds to call the Kakai infidels.

(Participant F 48 HW S, Married)

Another difficult impact of these superstitions and incorrect beliefs on the Kakai is linked to their ability to form community with others and partake together in important rituals, such as sharing food.

We eat their food, but they do not accept it from us because we are Kakai. They tell us, "We do not eat from your food because it is forbidden and you are filthy. It hurts me that they do not eat my food...I stopped sending them any food, but we eat their food when they give it to us.

(Participant F 45 HW S)

I have a neighbour and I used to give them part of every meal I made, one time her husband came - and there was a problem between them - and he said: "Umm Hussein, why do you send us food?" I said: "Why? Don't you eat it?" He said: "My wife throws the food, even the bread you send us, in the garbage". I didn't believe him. I said: "No, there is no such thing, she eats it". He said: "Don't you believe me? Come". He took me to show me, and he lifted the garbage lid. I saw the meatball I gave her that day thrown in the trash...I was very annoyed... And when she was sick and had an operation, and had problems, I visited her, but I didn't bring her any food. I said she doesn't eat it.

(Participant F 46 HW KH, divorced)

They accuse women of being hairy, meaning they have hair on their hands and arms, and therefore are unclean. So they do not eat from our food. At school, when I used to take certain home-cooked foods or homemade cakes, my friends would not eat of my food or apologise for any reason so as not to share the food with me.

(Participant F 20 ST S, Single)

3.2.9 Discrimination at work

Discrimination at work was highlighted by the women in the first FGD and men in both of their FGDs. One possible explanation for this is because women in the younger generation are more likely to work than women of the older generations, due to changing customs. Since the participants in the first FGD are young women aged 18-34 years, there were those among them who have finished their studies in higher education. They emphasised the discrimination they were exposed to in obtaining a profession that matches their level of education:

Two months ago I read about a ministerial order from the Ministry of Health to appoint Christians, Yazidis and Shabaks in Mosul. This did not include the Kakais. I wondered about this discrimination. Why this discrimination while we all believe in and worship God?

(Participant F 24 S Single)

In relation to this particular ministerial order, one of the men highlighted how this is also a consequence of not having any Kakai representatives in positions of decision-making:

As happened in 2020/2021, with the issuance of a decision regarding the appointment of Christian and Shabak people in state institutions, such as schools, universities and other government departments. This did not include Kakais. This was quite difficult for us. This was prepared by the efforts of the deputies of the Christian and Shabak components in the Iraqi Parliament, and we had no representative to support us regarding this decision.

(Participant M 38 T H)

The majority of the women who identified discrimination at work as an issue, addressed the issue of gender discrimination in the field of work and market-based professions and enterprises:

Liberal professions are not available for women. They are not free to engage in self-employment, as in sewing or establishing a women's hairdresser shop. We have some among the Kakai, but they are very few...One of the reasons for the difficulty in achieving this is the lack of economic capacity, since it requires a considerable amount of money to open a shop and provide the required tools such as a sewing machine...I focused on self-employment, because women are restricted in this field and are not like men who take up any job, while women cannot.

(Participant F 26 HW KH, Married)

The impact of discrimination is even more severe in the private sector, in comparison to government work, because the issue of employment or dismissal, vacations, bonuses and all other matters relevant to work depends on the owner of the business or the manager.

Employers can reject people based on their personal convictions and mood, and not according to the administrative regulations or the provisions of the administrative control of the public office:

I am a graduate of the school of Tourism Management. When I apply for a job in the private sector, whether in hotels or in tourism companies, after submitting my CV and going through an interview, I find them telling me: "You must change your appearance". I ask them, "And what do my face and appearance have to do with the job?" They say: "This is our policy", and I answer them that I will not work with them.

(Participant M 32 GI KH)

I would apply for a job and when they see my moustache, they would say: "We do not need workers, we have our own workers". But I know that they did not grant me a job, because I am Kakai. I was exposed to such situations a lot.

(Participant M 50 W S)

I am a daily wager, I am self-employed, I work in everything, I worked for a period in a kitchen manufacturing pastry and sweets for 15 days. Then, when they found out that I was a Kakai, they fired me.

(Participant M 46 W S)

Where they are not outrightly denied jobs, the Kakai may be forced to perform actions that are contrary to their religion in return for jobs or privileges:

During 2011/2012, an official with a high government position asked me to shave my moustache in exchange for a certain political party position, but I refused.

(Participant M 40 W S)

A few years ago, my cousin applied for the military college in Zakho. He went for the interview, and they all stood in a long queue. When the commander appeared, he looked at my cousin and saw his moustache. He said to him: "We have a condition, either you shave your moustache or we won't accept you." My cousin threw down the file and went back to Erbil. He now works as a salesman in a shop.

(Participant M 29 W KH)

Coercion may take other forms, for example:

In October 2021, when I applied for a government position, they asked me to register myself as being from the Shabak component, so that I would be accepted in the job. But, I refused. I said, "How can I change myself for a job!"

(Participant M 38 T H)

They pressure me a lot to give the Islamic testimony⁷, but I refuse.

(Participant M 20 W KH)

Participants explained how the Kakai are exposed to discrimination at work and in employment no matter what work they do. Sometimes the discrimination is so bad that they choose to leave, despite the negative economic consequences:

Previously we used to live in Mosul, during the Saddam era before 2003. For example, we often used to stand with our colleagues in a public place in Mosul, and they would say: "You Sarlo don't pray and so". We turned away from them, and for me I am a daily wager, and I often quit my job because of that....I often

⁷ The first pillar of Islam is the testimony that "There is no God but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God".

left my work, although my work was good and profitable. Yet, I quit it, because of their words: "Why don't you pray?" and things like this. Even now I do the same thing and I quit my job.

(Participant M 41 W S)

In some cases, the discrimination is more subtle, but the participants know they were being watched and judged:

Four years ago, I trained women on sewing in a course for women of all religions, sects and nationalities. However, I noticed that Muslim women were watching me at prayer times and whether I was going to pray or not. I noticed this only with the Kurds and not by other nationalities.

(Participant F 49 HW KH)

Even owning their own business doesn't protect the Kakai from discrimination, as people from the Muslim majority simply refuse to buy their goods:

I have a shop/store, in the market. However, no one comes to buy from me. Only the Kakai come, those around me and my neighbours, only the Kakai.

(Participant M 45 W S)

I am a man who sells vegetables and fruits. I bring them from far away, and they get sold in our village. However, villagers from other areas like Kalak and Khabat do not buy from us... Or buy but very little. For example, they ask us, "Where did you get the goods from?" I say: "From Shaikhan", so they say: "Shaikhan is all Yezidis, and you are Kakai and we are Islam... So my goods are sold with difficulty.

(Participant M 43 S VS)

This boycotting of Kakai businesses is not new. In the 1990s in Khabat and Aski Kalak, on the border between Erbil and Mosul, Muslims refused to buy bread from a bakery owned by a Kakai. This happens elsewhere:

We had a shop selling chicken. Muslims were urging people not to buy chicken from us, saying it is forbidden. Muslims do not buy from us, only the Kakai used to buy from us. Once a woman came and bought some chicken, but she refused

to have me slaughter the chicken, saying: "I will slaughter it. It is forbidden for you to slaughter it." I was hurt by the situation, so I took the chicken from her and did not sell it to her. After that, we changed the shop to a sweet shop, but they still boycott our goods and do not buy from them, and even demand people not to buy from us, because it is forbidden.

(Participant F 38 HW KH, Married, Illiterate)

The boycott of Kakai goods led to closure of the shops, which has a negative impact on their economic situation:

Some owners of vegetable and fruit stores in Khabat closed their stores because there are no buyers for their goods...There are butcher shops that no one buys meat from...Take a pot of milk and say I want to sell it, if you go around the market, no one will buy it from you.

(Participant M 56 W S RM)

3.2.10 Forced marriage

Forced marriage was only mentioned by four of the women in the first FGD (aged 18 - 34). Most of them are young and have four or five children, and do not consider themselves to be forced into marrying at a young age. They believe this to be normal, and not unfair to them.⁸ This shows how usual it is within the Kakai community for girls to be married young without any real concept of choice.

The women who did identify forced marriage as a threat stated that they were subjected to it or were pressured into marrying a man they neither wanted nor liked:

I feel that the girl has no opinion, and her opinion is not well respected in most families, so I am afraid to talk about my dreams and ambitions. Her family forces her to marry.

(Participant F 20 ST S, Single)

⁸ However, during the break and after the meeting ended, I found them showering me with questions about the reason for marrying girls off at a young age, for example: 'Is it my fault that I am deprived of my childhood and that I have been preoccupied with marriage, motherhood and housework? Why is the boy free to choose his life partner, divorce and marry another, while the wife has to bear the husband's faults for the children's sake?...etc.'

3.2.11 Researcher reflections on the women's focus groups

Each of the FGDs with the women resulted in slightly different discussions and reflections. It was clear from the first FGD (women aged 18 - 34) that discrimination within the family against girls continues after marriage. Some husbands deprive their daughters of an education, as if history is repeating itself. There was a sense of resentment, even anger, from the women in the FGDs, who had strong complaints about the discrimination practiced against them by their families, just because they are women.

In the second FGD (women aged 35 - 45), there was a sense of injustice regarding the restriction of their rights to education and employment by their families, as well as their rejection of the idea of gender discrimination despite their forced submission. In contrast, the percentage of complaints about discrimination within the family among the third FGD (women aged 46 - 70) was lower, where participants tended to accept discrimination within the family as if it were a given.

The reason for this could be because they are mothers of daughters beyond adolescence. Thus, they are used to refraining from complaining and grumbling, so that these feelings would not get transmitted to their daughters, who must accept their fate as their mothers accepted theirs before them.

4 Priority needs: education, gender discrimination and the economic situation

The demand for education is one of the basic demands of women of all age groups, because if families believe in educating their children, they prefer to educate boys rather than girls. At best, a girl is sent to school at the primary or intermediate level, and is not allowed to continue onto secondary school or university level. For families with limited incomes, girls' chances of education gradually diminish. Even boys may be forced to drop out of school, and their fathers may force them to work to earn a living instead of 'wasting' their time in school.

Discrimination at school and pressure to conform to the majority religion hampers children's education. For girls, this can include being urged to wear the hijab or to wear an Islamic outfit. When students seek to hide their religious identities they can face suspicion if they are not seen to follow Muslim rituals (prayers, fasting, etc.).

Furthermore, family and clans can limit girls' education, particularly at the university level. Prior to 2003, there were a limited number of universities and institutes, all of which were governmental and located in the city centre. Thus, the girl would be forced to stay in boarding schools or the students' dormitory for days, weeks, months or even years if they were to attend. Parents may fear that their girls will convert or choose to marry a Muslim man. Alternatively, they are concerned that educated young women may be in a better position to question clan and family decisions in a way that is considered rude and untraditional. The desire to keep girls uneducated and unquestioning is a prompt for early marriage.

However, the majority of families now send their daughters to institutes and universities as circumstances have changed, with more public and private institutes and universities now available. In addition, there are better transport links between villages and the city, enabling women and girls to more easily commute.

The men's FGDs placed less emphasis on education, perhaps because their freedom of movement is less curtailed and their parents are more likely to support their education, with the exception of rare cases, where the father may force his son to leave school to work with him in the field or some other form of labour.

Hence, the deteriorating economic conditions of a family that believes in the importance of education means choosing which of the children gets the privilege to learn. This battle is decided in favour of the males, while the females stay at home to help their mother with the housework. It is also believed that there is no need to spend much on her, since her destiny is marriage and stability in the house of her husband, who will take care of her expenses.

Some families even consider the expenses spent on a girl in school and university education as excess and wasted expenses, since she will eventually go to her husband's house, who will reap the fruits of her family's labour and will benefit from her allowances and salary if she gets appointed a job in the future.

5 Conclusion

A woman belonging to a particular religion faces challenges of a special nature, both internally and externally. The internal level is represented in those challenges that she faces from within her community, starting in the household with her family, relatives, and even the well-respected men of religion in her community through fatwas issued prohibiting and permitting certain actions. In small communities, where people know each other well, women can be surveilled and forced into compliance with community norms. Women can also choose to conform to rules because it provides them with certain benefits or as a means to evade punishment.

This can lead to women's exclusion from education and the workplace, with the knock-on effect of impoverishing the family. Early marriage may be a solution to rising household costs and the exertion of ensuring compliance. Sometimes, an exchange marriage is arranged, so the girl would be exchanged for the dowry, and the furnishing of the new home would be split between the two families. Each family would get a girl from the other, taking into account as much equality as possible in terms of the expenses incurred by each girl. While some couples in an exchange marriage may feel intimate and connected, others experience quarrels and problems. Women can also be treated like a commodity, with no respect for an individual's will.

Even after a woman has overcome all these obstacles and threats, women suffer when they mix with other components of society, in school, at university, or at work. There is also the journey of endless debate and discussion about the Kakai, their rituals and customs, and whether Kakaism is a religion, sect, or clan, etc. Kakais are also pressured to conform religiously. This is the day-to-day experience of Kakai women in Iraq.

To improve the conditions of the Kakai women in Iraq, this paper recommends:

- Encouraging investment banks to grant low-interest loans for small projects to women who live in poor economic conditions. These conditions are to be assessed according to the reports and studies of social supervisors in the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.
- Establishing handicraft factories that allow women to work and earn an income for their family without having to travel far or having to travel to cities.

- Availing institutes within the districts and sub-districts, and providing means of transportation to facilitate the access of girls from the village to the centre of the district or to the sub-district to study, without having to travel to other cities or to join boarding schools or dormitories.
- Holding courses and workshops in the form of meetings with focus group members and expanding their numerical scope to listen to their stories and experiences. Through the FGDs conducted for this research, there was an evident desire among the Kakai women to speak about and reveal their suffering. Many participants expressed their happiness to join such discussions, revealing how, for the first time in their lives, they had an opportunity to speak freely about their experiences and suffering within their families, clan and community without being ridiculed or silenced because they are women who should not speak about such topics.
- Issuance of a law enforcing compulsory education until a certain age for girls and boys, as well as imposing punishment on anyone who does not comply. This would be similar to the law that was in force under the former Baathist regime before 2003⁹, where families were forced to send their daughters to school until the intermediate stage, which was an opportunity to teach women to read and write.
- Modifying the curricula for the primary stages in a manner consistent with the diversity that exists in Iraq, such as introducing the curriculum of the demographic composition of the Iraqi people with its diverse components in terms of nationality, language, religion, sect, race, etc. The curriculum should introduce children early on to the rich structure of the Iraqi people, their cultural peculiarities, and the geographical locations of each component, without this implying a missionary campaign¹⁰ calling for a religion other than the Islamic religion, which is the majority religion both for the state and the region.

⁹ Education was not only compulsory, but the Iraqi government during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) launched a literacy campaign to enable women deprived of education to combat ignorance and illiteracy. The researcher's mother was one of the participants in that campaign. Despite being married and having three children, she learned to read and write, and obtained an elementary education certificate, thanks to which she managed to help her children pursue their studies.

¹⁰ In 2018, a committee was selected to develop a Kurdology curriculum for first-year students at Salahaddin University. The researcher was among the candidates put forward to develop the social section of the curriculum, among other

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professors, and had proposed to allocate a section that tackles the demographic composition of the population in the Kurdistan Region (in terms of historical origin and the geographical space they occupy, their locations, languages or dialects, as well as other matters). This was with the intention of introducing Kurdish children to the different nationalities within the region. Surprisingly, this suggestion was met with disapproval by university professors at the Faculty of Islamic Law, as this was considered to be a threat to the Islamic religion and deemed to be a missionary campaign to invite Muslims to enter a non-Islamic religion, alongside other accusations.

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Annexe 1 – Participatory ranking

The following tables are keyed according to the below colours to show the choices behind the challenges raised by the focus group members:

Key:





Colour/symbol	Meaning
	the participant answered to their critics and did not keep silent before them.
	the participant wants to resolve the issue of identity.
	there is positive discrimination against minorities by government decisions or political positions.
	the (female) participant did not experience rejection of her food or vows.
-	the participant did not mention this in their talk.

Table A1 The first FGD of women aged 18-34 years

Challenge	Sequence of participants											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Age	34	24	24	20	27	20	31	18	26	22	20	25
Deprivation of education	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Dropping out of school	1	-	3	-	1	1	4	2	1	1	-	1
Educated	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
Gender discrimination	4	-	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	-	-
Displacement before 2003	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Displacement after 2003	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Displacement due to ISIS	6	8	5	10	8	6	5	3	3	6	7	3
Laws	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Discrimination at work	-	2	-	5	4	-	3	-	4	-	-	-
Coercion	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Forced marriage	-	-	-	8	-	7	-	4	-	-	8	-
Bullying/harassment	-	5	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	3	-
Bullying within the tribe	-	-	-	7	5	-	-	-	-	3	4	-
Invasion of privacy	-	3	-	3	-	4	-	-	-	-	2	-
Suicide	-	-	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Withdrawal/isolation	-	7	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	-

Silence/avoiding responding	-	6	-	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	-
Freedom of movement	-	-	4	-	3	5	2	-	-	4	-	-
Poverty	-	-	-	-	6	-	-	-	5	5	-	2
Life in the camp	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Respect for women	3	-	-	-	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
An inferior view	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Refusing to share food	-	-	-	11	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table A2 The second FGD of women 35-45 years old

Challenge	Sequence of participants											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Age	45	35	37	40	41	39	44	41	38	45	38	35
Deprivation of education	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	6	-	-	-	-
Dropping out of school	1	-	-	6	3	1	2	-	2	-	1	2
Educated	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Safety and stability				8	1	3	6	4	3	2	-	3
Displacement before 2003	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-
Displacement after 2003	-	9	4	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-

Displacement due to ISIS	4	10	5	9	2	5	7	5	5	3	15	4
Discrimination at work	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	-
Coercion	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10	-
Incitement	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	-
Superstitions and myths	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	-
Bullying/harassment	8	8	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	9	8	-
Bullying within the tribe	-	5	6	5	-	9	5	-	8	-	-	1
Underage marriage	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	6	4	4	6
Forced marriage	-	-	3	4	-	-	-	-	7	5	5	7
Invasion of privacy	7	7	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	7	12	-

Concealing the identity	5	-	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Withdrawal/isolation	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Silence/avoiding responding	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Freedom of movement	-	-	-	7	5	8	-	-	-	-	-	-
Family stability	2	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Gender discrimination	3	3	-	3	4	7	3	7	-	6	2	8
Harassing young girls	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Laws	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	9	-	-	-
Suicide	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Education is improper	-	-	-	-	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	-

Poverty	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	8	1	1	3	-
An inferior view	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	-
Refusing to share food	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	14	-
Discrimination in public places	10	6	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	11	-
Language	-	-	-	-	6	9	4	-	-	-	-	-

Table A3 The third FGD of 46-68-year-old women

Challenge	Sequence of participants											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Age	49	46	53	47	57	48	62	68	46	66	49	46
Deprivation of education	-	1	1	-	1	-	1	1	1	1	-	-
Dropping out of school	1	-	-	1	-	8	-	-	-	-	1	1
Gender discrimination	2	3	2	-	2	9	2	-	-	2	2	2
Displacement before 2003	-	-	3	-	5	6	3	7	2	3	-	-
Displacement after 2003	-	-	4	8	-	-	4	-	-	4	4	-
Displacement due to ISIS	12	4	5	9	6	7	5	8	3	5	5	3

Discrimination at work	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	-
Coercion	4	-	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Incitement	-	-	-	7	4	-	-	11	-	-	6	-
Superstitions and myths	11	8	7	4	-	2	9	4	6	8	10	-
Bullying/harassment	8	7	8	5	8	1	8	5	4	7	7	-
Invasion of privacy	3	5	6	3	7	3	7	9	10	13	9	-
Refusing to share food	9	-	-	-	11	-	-	-	9	11	13	4
An inferior view	10	9	-	-	-	12	-	-	-	10	-	-
Concealing identity	6	6	-	10	10	4	11	6	-	9	12	-

Withdrawal/isolation	-	-	10	11	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Silence/avoiding responding	7	-	9	12	-	5	-	10	7	-	11	-
Freedom of movement	5	-	-	2	-	10	-	-	-	-	3	-
Underage marriage	-	-	-	-	3	-	10	2	-	-	-	-
Forced marriage	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	3	8	-	-	-
Poverty	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	-	8	-
Discrimination in public places	13	10	-	-	-	11	12	-	5	12	14	-
Laws	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	-	-

Table A4 The fourth FGD (men) 18-40 years old

Challenge	Sequence of participants													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Age	38	35	24	40	19	25	27	24	25	32	29	23	40	20
Education	2	5	-	-	6	1	-	5	13	3	8	1	1	6
Displacement before 2003	-	-	-	-	-	5	-	-	1	-	-	-	11	-
Displacement after 2003	-	-	-	-	-	6	-	-	2	1	-	2	12	-
Displacement due to ISIS	8	10	1	6	5	4	4	4	3	2	7	3	13	5
Discrimination at work	1	-	2	7	-	10	1	-	14	4	9	6	7	7
Coercion	11	-	4	-	-	9	3	7	7	6	10	5	8	8

Incitement	9	7	3	-	-	11	-	-	-	10	-	4	9	4
Superstitions and myths	7	4	7	3	-	-	6	6	8	8	6	9	2	3
Bullying/harassment	3	6	8	2	4	7	5	2	6	5	5	7	5	10
Invasion of privacy	6	2	5	1	2	2	2	1	5	7	4	8	4	9
Concealing identity	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	-	-	-
Withdrawal/isolation	5	-	10	5	-	-	-	-	12	-	-	-	-	-
Silence/avoiding responding	4	3	9	4	3	8	-	3	9	9	3	10	3	-
Discrimination in public places	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	-	11	11	1	-	-	11

An inferior view	10	1	6	-	-	12	8	-	10	12	2	11	6	1
Refusing to share food	-	8	-	-	-	-	-	8	-	-	-	-	-	12
Determination of identity	-	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	-	-	-	2
Discrimination in sports	-	-	-	-	1	3	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	-
Positive discrimination	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	11	-	10	-

Table A5 The fifth FGD (men 41-58 years old)

Challenge	Sequence of participants									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Age	50	41	45	50	43	46	58	42	55	43
Education	6	11	8	12	-	12	7	7	-	9
Displacement before 2003	1	1	1	7	6	4	2	4	3	3
Displacement after 2003	2	2	2	8	7	5	3	5	4	4
Displacement due to ISIS	3	3	3	9	8	6	4	6	5	5
Discrimination at work	7	6	4	1	1	3	10	8	2	1
Coercion	-	7	-	6	5	8	9	-	-	-
Incitement	5	12	-	-	9	-		9	6	10
Superstitions and myths	9	4	-	10	3	9	6	3	9	8

Bullying/harassment	4	9	6	2	4	7	5	2	1	6
Invasion of privacy	8	5	5	3	2	2	1	1	10	7
Concealing identity	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
Withdrawal/isolation	11	10	-	5	11	11	12	-	-	-
Silence/avoiding responding	10	13	-	4	10	10	11	-	7	-
An inferior view	12	8	7	11	-	13	13	-	8	2

Discrimination and Conflict: Experiences of Yazidi Women and Men within their Community and Iraqi Society

Zeri Khairy Gedi

Summary

This research sets out to identify problems facing the Yazidi community in Iraq, to uncover the challenges in the areas inhabited by the Yazidis, and to find out if they have been discriminated against because of their religion, customs and traditions. Specifically, this research focuses on revealing the marginalisation that Yazidi women experience both within the Yazidi community and from wider Iraqi society because of their identity as a Yazidi and as a woman.

Keywords: women, marginalisation, Yazidi, religious minority, Iraq, participatory research

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I would like to thank both of my parents, who have always supported and helped me a great deal throughout the difficult circumstances Iraq has been going through. I would also like to thank all of my schoolteachers, who taught me to read and write. I would especially like to thank my husband because, despite our rather conservative society, he supports me in everything I do. I appreciate all of the organisations with whom I have worked, as well as Professor Ghanim Elias, who nominated me for this excellent research, which has allowed me to dive deeper into the difficulties of my community. I would also like to thank everyone who shared their experiences with me in the research workshops.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the Yazidi people of Iraq

When it comes to understanding the Yazidi people, we must first talk about the beautiful towns in which they live, Bashiqa and Bahzani. They are also known by the name 'The City of Olives', due to the abundance of olive groves. It was previously said that these towns were also famous for their orchards of pistachios and hazelnuts, and that they had springs of running water to irrigate the land and orchards. Bashiqa is also famous for the heritage dam of Sheikh Hassan, which was built around 3,000 years ago. At the time, it was a dam with running water. It is now a shrine to Sheikh Hassan and has become a place for people to gather and hold Yazidi celebrations.

Bashiqa is also renowned for local industries that existed in the past, such as tahini (sesame paste), soap, olive oil production, and other products, which have now been discontinued. Bashiqa was also once known for the weaving of local carpets and traditional clothes, and for the manufacture of *arak* (alcoholic drinks).

These towns are home to many religions. There are Muslims and Christians, including Shabak and Turkmen people. Some of these, such as the Shabak and Turkmen, are also ethnically distinct. One of these is the Yazidi component. The Yazidi religion is one of the ancient *Shamsaniya* (sun) religions in the Middle East. The word *Shamsaniya* originated from the word *shams*, which means 'sun', as in 'sun worship'. Most Yazidi rituals depend on sunset and sunrise. Yazidis are now a monotheistic religious minority in their own right, and the Yazidi component represents 90 per cent of this community. These towns have a population of about 35,000 people. They are located 12-15 kilometres northeast

of the city of Mosul. The north is bordered by a mountain range called Jabal Bashiqa, and there are around 60 villages belonging to the centre of this district.

In these towns, the community consists of several religiously and ethnically distinct groups, and each group has its own language. The language spoken by the people of the region is Arabic, but in the Bashiqi or Bahzan dialect, which is close to both the Egyptian dialect and the dialect of the people of the Levant, the city of Aleppo, and the city of Mardin in Turkey. The Kurdish language is also spoken by a small number of Muslim Kurds living Bashiqa. There are also displaced people, students, and some families who work in the fields, from Sinjar, who speak the Kurmanji or Kurdish language. The Shabak people speak the Shabak language, and the Christian people speak Arabic and Syriac.

These groups live peacefully. While there are some tensions, they are under control because the Yazidis prefer peace. Accordingly, they tend to avoid conflict. There are cultural and religious differences between the peoples of the region, but this is a source of strength rather than weakness. In terms of clothing, the Yazidi people are characterised by wearing clothes close in style to Kurdish dress, which is a *sirwal* (Harem trousers) and shirt. Yazidi traditional dress is worn only on religious occasions, and sometimes old men wear the former Arab *agal* (headband). As for the Muslims, they wear the Arab *dishdasha* (a long robe with long sleeves), similar to the people of Mosul, and the Christians are inclined to wear Western clothing, such as trousers, shirts, and jackets.

There are also differences in rituals and religious ceremonies between the groups. The Yazidi element practises its religious rituals and ceremonies in religious shrines. They are also practised on Sheikh Hassan Hill, in the squares and in open areas, and the Yazidi celebrations are very close to the spring celebrations. Yazidis have religious celebrations called *Tawaf* that are always held in the spring, with beautiful customs and traditions filled with joy and happiness. Yazidis rarely have rituals or ceremonies inside a room or hall, except for wedding ceremonies, which are held in marriage halls in general. As for the Muslim and Christian groups, they practise their religious rituals either inside mosques or inside churches. However, from a cultural point of view, these ethno-religious groups are broadly similar.

1.2 The Yazidi genocide

The Yazidi minority in Iraq was subjected to genocide by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) on 3 August 2014 in the city of Sinjar. This terrorist organisation committed the most heinous types of crimes known in that period towards the Yazidis, which included killing men, capturing women, mass executions, the conversion to Islam by force, recruiting children to ISIS and training them in how to use weapons, and trading women by opening slave markets for Yazidi women (OHCHR 2016). When ISIS entered Bashiqa, they immediately blew up all the domes (Yazidi shrines) in order to try to tear apart and erase the cultural and religious identity of the Yazidis. These clear and explicit violations committed against cultural heritage were also a significant part of the genocide.

Immediately after ISIS entered Sinjar, Bashiqa's inhabitants decided to flee to northern Iraq, because they feared these criminal operations against the Yazidi. ISIS blew up 32 domes or shrines inside Bashiqa and Bahzani, and 21 *Nishan* (small domes). Their crimes did not end there: they also blew up the olive groves (Al-Adani 2021). As well as the demolition and burning of domes and olive groves, which were considered the identity of Bashiqa and Bahzani, ISIS also stole and blew up the factories, which were the source of livelihoods for the people of the area. Not a single rock was spared from the terrorist gangs of ISIS in Bashiqa.

1.3 The situation of women in the Yazidi community

The Yazidi woman in Bashiqa and Bahzani today have become more developed in terms of engaging in study, achieving qualifications, and taking up and succeeding in job roles. However, Yazidi women still suffer from marginalisation within both Yazidi and Iraqi society because of customs and traditions. For example, the Yazidi woman now works 'like a man' and relies on herself to make a living, but she still returns home as a housewife, mother, and wife. However, there are Yazidi women who cannot study or work because of racist views, due to a lack of safety, or even the absence of law. For example, one of the simplest rights that Yazidi women lose is competition with men for work, where Yazidi men are often chosen over Yazidi women because of the stigma of women taking maternity leave.

Yazidi women are also restricted in terms of clothing because of customs, traditions, and an absence of security. If women don't follow the dress code, they will be exposed to verbal and sexual harassment and exploitation. Therefore, the Yazidi woman today does

not have complete freedom in her choices. Further, in Iraqi society as a Yazidi, a woman cannot travel alone without a man or someone responsible for her due to fear of society's view of her. She is afraid of someone finding out that she is a Yazidi. Today, Yazidi women are considered to be a *Sabiya* (captive), or even an infidel, and consequently exposed to verbal harassment. Yazidi women may also be forced into slavery or even killed, just as the ISIS gangs did with Sinjar girls due to the belief that Yazidi girls are infidels.

Many Yazidi girls have many talents in various fields that are suppressed by Yazidi society through fear of how they will be portrayed by the wider Iraqi society. Therefore, there is no encouragement or support for them and their abilities. The majority of Yazidi girls do not exercise their rights in terms of work opportunities, and they suffer unemployment as they cannot go out into society and enter the field of work because of gender and religious-based discrimination. Widows can't find job opportunities easily because of people's views of them, and they are also vulnerable to exploitation. Community members believe that widows are vulnerable as no man is available to protect them.

The Yazidi widow is the biggest victim in society out of all of the categories of women because she loses all her rights. Her children are taken away and she is not permitted to marry again, and there is limited legal protection. A divorced woman is given a small pension, but this often isn't enough to meet the needs of her children. Further, the government doesn't provide divorced women with job opportunities, so it is difficult for them to fully realise their rights. This is partly due to constitutional error.

Yazidi women are therefore a little afraid of engaging with society because of the views held by wider Iraqi society. Society belittles Yazidi women's values and personalities. Additionally, Yazidi women have been raised on fear. In the present day, there has been a slight change in the lives of women after the entry of the ISIS terrorist gangs in Iraq. After the displacement, women saw much injustice and were further marginalised at the psychological level in the marketplace, with derogatory words said about Yazidi women. Sometimes, Yazidi women are also subjected to physical abuse. In addition, in health centres, Yazidi women aren't examined as they are seen as unclean. In schools and universities, Yazidis can't share their food with others, and they can't make friends easily. Yazidis always hear these words: 'You are Yazidi and you don't master the Kurdish language'. All of these issues put more pressure on Yazidi women.

However, despite everything they have been through, and everything they have seen in wider Iraqi society, Bashiqa women today have become more powerful and more open to society. They are not afraid to express their feelings, they are more powerful than they were before and are empowered to talk about the problems they face as Yazidis, including discrimination and displacement. Yazidi women have suffered a lot, yet the whole world seemingly did nothing, and the Iraqi government didn't respond to the killing, raping, selling, and enslavement of the Yazidis. The Yazidis therefore believe that they have to protect themselves. Today, they are stronger and more connected with other communities. The different culture of the hosting community has resulted in positive progress. Women have become bolder than before. The survivor Nadia Murad¹ is a good example of Yazidi women's increasing boldness.

However, day-to-day marginalisation continues for Yazidi women, men, and children, who are still seen as infidels, as not having a religion, and as being weak.

2 Research aims and methodology

The aim of this research is to identify and understand the problems facing Yazidi women and men within certain groups living in Bashiqa and Bahzani, with a particular focus on the unique challenges facing Yazidi women as both members of a religious minority and as women. This research sheds light on some of the needs and problems that the Yazidi community, and women in particular, suffer.

Participants for this research were selected using two methods:

- Posting on the social networking site 'Facebook' in women's groups in Bashiqa, to find out whether members felt they were being discriminated against or not, and searching for marginalised women.
- Visiting and liaising with the social committees in Bashiqa and Bahzani (the focus areas for this research because of the presence of the Yazidi communities there), as well as visiting the clergy and notable figures in the region in Bahzani and Bashiqa. The researcher also liaised with various organisations in the area, alongside visiting local women's associations.

¹ Nadia Murad is a Yazidi survivor of ISIS, a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, and a UNODC Goodwill Ambassador. She lives in Germany and advocates for survivors of genocide and sexual violence through 'Nadia's Initiative', which actively works to persuade governments and international organisations to support the sustainable re-development of the Yazidi homeland (Nadia's Initiative 2022).

This research is considered the first of its kind to address the problems of discrimination facing the Yazidi people. Every person in the Bashiqa and Bahzani communities has been exposed to discrimination, both direct and indirect, and participants were not afraid of being involved in the research, of speaking up, and revealing the discrimination that Yazidis are subjected to.

The direct participation of marginalised women, talking openly about their problems, is a unique feature of this research. Yazidi women in Bashiqa and Bahzani were motivated to participate to share their stories and the day-to-day discrimination they still face that leaves them without power or strength. This research also shows the importance of men's participation in giving their voice to the problems facing them and Yazidi women in their society.

2.1 Research questions

To better understand the particular forms of marginalisation that Yazidi women in Bashiqa and Bahzani face, and the reasons for this marginalisation, the following questions were discussed in four focus group discussions (FGDs):

1. What are the problems you face being a man or a woman belonging to a religious minority?
2. Do you think you are facing these problems only because you belong to a religious minority?
3. Can you practise your customs and traditions comfortably and freely?
4. Have you been exposed to a situation that made you face discrimination, directly or indirectly?
5. What was the effect of this situation on you?
6. What are the side effects of differences in attitude towards being a man or a woman belonging to a religious minority?
7. Do you think if you were a man instead of a woman, you would be exposed to the same problem, and vice versa for men?

2.2 Research methods and participant selection

The research methods used were focus group discussions (FGDs) and participatory ranking. The FGDs were split, with two sessions with men and two sessions with women. The same questions were asked across all groups; namely, what issues they face in their

communities. As a result, this research is able to compare the experiences and priorities of men and women to identify how Yazidi women are uniquely marginalised.

The participants were identified by selecting the groups who were marginalised and exposed to discriminatory attitudes because they belong to a religious minority, through coordination with organisations in the region, social committees, notable figures, clerics, and women's associations located in Bashiqa, and posting on social networking sites (Facebook). The FGDs were held in a large hall belonging to the Olive Branch Organisation in Al Rabea neighbourhood in Bashiqa, Nineveh. Fifty participants were chosen and split into groups:

- First FGD (23 September 2021): 13 women
- Second FGD (7 December 2021): 13 women
- Third FGD (8 December 2021): 12 men
- Fourth FGD (9 December 2021): 12 men.

The ages of the participants in these focus groups ranged from 18 to 60 years old. Each focus group was formed of participants of different ages so that the younger participants could benefit from the experiences of the older participants. There was also diversity regarding social status as the session included single, married, and widowed women and men.

At the beginning of the session, the participants got to know each other and the researcher provided security and comfort, including through explaining confidentiality, especially in the women's groups, so that participants felt able to talk about their problems with ease and without fear or hesitation. The researcher then introduced the purpose of the study, how the session would take place, and explained how they could feel safe sharing their experiences because no one would hear them or listen to the sound recording, and there would be no pictures. They all agreed to take part. After that, an open discussion was facilitated on the problems and marginalisation that participants had all experienced.

On this basis, the FGDs identified the problems facing Yazidis as a religious minority with neither power nor authority. All of the problems were documented on flipchart paper, and each participant was given a notebook to rank the problems they encountered, from most important to least important, within ten minutes. After completing this participatory ranking exercise, the researcher asked each participant to explain why they chose the

first problem as the principle challenge they face in their daily life, and whether or not they had been through a situation or had a story that they would feel comfortable to share. The researcher also asked participants to explain how the situations and problems had affected them, and for the women, whether they believed that they would have experienced the same situation if they had been men.

2.3 Limitations, strengths, and challenges

One of the strengths of this research was the excellent cooperation between the women and the men, and the participants' very clear freedom of expression. They were strong focus groups, expressing their opinions comfortably and sharing difficult situations they had been through because they were Yazidis. These dialogues instilled great confidence in the women and broke through the barrier of their fear of expressing and speaking in public about the problems that they had faced and are still facing.

2.3.1 Drawbacks of the research

The most significant drawback of the research came from the Covid-19 pandemic, as Covid-19 caused fear for some participants. However, social distancing measures were implemented during the FGDs and health supplies provided to mitigate the impact of this challenge. Another obstacle was the disruption of all working hours due to the Iraqi elections. Otherwise the location for the FGDs was chosen as it was close to communities and easy to access. Therefore, the cost of travel to the location was not prohibitive for the participants, and the attendance was high from the region. Holding the sessions in Bashiqa also allowed women to attend the sessions.

2.3.2 Unique features

The distinguishing characteristics of this research are the sharing of information and the free and comfortable expression of opinions by the participants, which gave the sessions a weight and importance for everyone attending. Also, there is strength in the different views that all of the participants in the FGDs had, which allowed for greater insight into the problems facing the Yazidi community. Participants shed light on problems that the research was previously unaware of and had not previously paid attention to. Every woman who participated in these sessions challenged her fears and also gained confidence. Moreover, through this dialogue, Yazidi women who participated felt they could now demand more of their rights and freedom and express themselves as marginalised women. For example, after the FGD women felt more able to participate in other sessions in which they could express their opinions and raise their voices,

highlighting their problems, how they are different from men's, and working collaboratively on solutions.

2.3.3 Difficulties encountered

This research didn't encounter significant difficulties due to a high level of cooperation, including the social councils and notables of the region. The main challenges were around fear among participants of presenting their stories and ideas at the beginning of the sessions. However, over time participants were made to feel safe and given space to express themselves and speak. There were some additional challenges in finding men to participate because, as most of them are workers, they were not available to participate in the sessions. Subsequently, many of them apologised for not attending the workshop, and the researcher needed to search for more participants.

3 Research findings: the key threats and challenges facing Yazidi women because of their religion and gender

3.1 Summary of participatory ranking results

Table 1: Combined results of the participatory ranking for all four focus groups

Ranking	The problem	Women's results	Men's results	Total score
1	Education	235	124	359
2	Health	200	97	297
3	Safety and security	191	86	277
4	Unemployment	120	114	234
5	Freedom	207		207
6	Legal rights	116	90	206
7	Religious discrimination		175	175
8	Transportation	53	87	140

9	Language	112		112
10	Government role		112	112
11	Verbal harassment	111		111
12	Racism	110		110
13	Military service		86	86
14	Clothing and restraint	84		84
15	Not taking care of orphans	40		40

Source: Author's own.

Table 1 is an overview of the combined results of the participatory ranking for all four focus groups. The first column in this table shows the ranking of the problems listed in the second column. These were identified by the participants as issues facing Yazidi women and men. The participants voted on which problems they felt were most significant and detrimental to them. From these votes the overall priority order of the issues was calculated. The number of votes a problem received as the most important issue was multiplied by the total number of problems. This was then added to the number of votes the problem received as the second most important issue, multiplied by the total number of problems minus one. These figures were added to the number of votes the problem received as the third most important issue multiplied by the total number of problems minus two and so forth, all the way down to the votes for the least important problem multiplied by one, giving that problem a final ranking for those participants². Columns 3 and 4 show how the women and men voted differently on the importance of each of these issues.

² Total = ((number of votes for problem in first place)*(total number of problems))+((number of votes for problem in second place)*(total number of problems minus one))+((number of votes for problem in third place)*(total number of problems minus two)) and so forth. For example, ten women voted for education as the top priority issue, six as the second, one as the third and so forth, which created this equation: $10*12+6*11+1*10+1*9+1*8+2*7+1*4+4*1$, giving education a total weighting of 235. A weighting of 235 was the highest figure to come out of the equations, making education the top issue for women (and for all participants overall).

The priority issue that came out of the four FGDs combined was education. This was the top priority for Yazidi women by far. Yazidi men also felt that they suffered problems with education so it was also high up on their priority list. Ten women chose education as the most significant threat facing them, compared to five men who chose the same.

3.1.1 Prioritisation of issues by Yazidi women

Table 2: Prioritisation of issues by women

Women's ranking	Problem	No. of votes as top priority	Total result
1	Education	10	235
2	Freedom	4	207
3	Health	4	200
4	Safety and security	5	191
5	Unemployment		120
6	Legal rights		116
7	Language		112
8	Verbal harassment	1	111
9	Racism		110

10	Clothing and restraint	1	84
11	Transportation		53
12	Not taking care of orphans	1	40

Source: Author's own.

Table 2 contains 12 problems. These problems were the outcome of two sessions for women, and each session contained 13 participants. This table shows the order these problems were ranked in by the women only. See Appendix 1 for the ages of the women who voted for each issue as their top priority, detail which allowed for a more nuanced analysis. For example, while freedom came out as the second most pertinent issue, this was only voted as the top priority by those aged 36–50.

Some of the problems identified, such as unemployment, legal rights, language, and transportation, were not voted for as the top priority issue; however, they frequently featured lower down on the women's lists.

The table in Appendix 1 contains an additional column showing the equation for each issue, and therefore how the women voted on each issue when it wasn't their top priority.

Table 2 shows that the issues were only ranked in a slightly different order by the women alone when compared to Table 1, which shows the overall ranking. The first six issues are the same – education, freedom, health, safety and security, unemployment, and legal rights – with freedom being the biggest differential between the two (ranked second by the women compared to fifth in the total participant list). This is because 'freedom' was not identified by the men as being an issue facing them.

3.1.2 Prioritisation of issues by Yazidi men

Table 3: Prioritisation of issues by men

Men's ranking	Problem	No. of votes as top priority	Total results
1	Religious discrimination	11	175
2	Education	5	124
3	Unemployment		114
4	Government role	2	112
5	Health	2	97
6	Legal rights		90
7	Mobility/transportation		87
8	Safety and security	2	86
9	Military service	2	86

Source: Author's own.

While Table 3 shows that education still featured highly for the men, and that unemployment, health, and legal rights were also still in the top six, the men felt that the religious discrimination they face, particularly due to the existence of myths and stereotypes about the Yazidi people, and the role of the government in failing to protect them, were important issues they face.

The table in Appendix 2 contains an additional column showing the equation for each issue, and therefore how the men voted on each issue when it wasn't their top priority.

There are some differences in the ranking of issues when comparing the results from both the women's and the men's FGDs. For the men, they selected religious issues as a priority during their military service because they are always asked about their religion. They are also asked if they have tails because of commonly held myths and stereotypes about the Yazidis. Likewise, they may be asked why they don't wash for 40 days or whether they adore the devil. Men also mentioned that Yazidi men who work in other governorates, for example Erbil, Duhok, or Bagdad, are asked about their religion. Men in the FGDs believed that Iraqi people don't know about the Yazidi religion. It is likely that the women didn't mention religious discrimination as a priority because they don't come into contact with the wider Iraqi community to the same extent, due to gender discrimination and beliefs within the Yazidi community that restrict women to the home.

Also, men go to the governmental authorities, whereas women do not. Therefore, Yazidi men are more aware of laws compared with Yazidi women. Up to the present day, Iraqi law is governed by Islamic law. Yazidi men believe that they don't have rights. ISIS wasn't held accountable for any of their deeds. The Survivors Law (Amnesty International 2021) was issued only a year ago, despite the fact that the problems facing the survivors of ISIS are eight years old. In addition, this law isn't enforced.

For women, education is ranking as the principal issue, but for men, education comes in at second place, due to the fact that Yazidi men have more opportunities for education than Yazidi women in all respects. Yazidi men are not afraid to go to Mosul to study, and men have more freedom to move compared to Yazidi women. This is not because the men think that it is safe to move; indeed, many men were killed in Mosul. It is rather because men believe that they have sole responsibility for their families. They have to learn and work, even if they are forced to work in another city. However, Yazidi women are afraid to go to Mosul because of the situation and terrorism targeting Yazidis, and women's journey to study or work is seen as optional by the community. Further, a man can travel alone wherever he wants to complete his studies, but a Yazidi woman cannot travel alone, especially inside Iraq, as she is afraid of Iraqi Muslim men.

Through the FGD sessions, it was found that previously parents preferred young men to study rather than young girls. Today, however, it is true that education has become increasingly available for women and men at almost the same level. However, Yazidi

women still suffer in colleges and universities in several aspects; for example, Yazidi girls are very restricted in their clothes when going to university, and in some cases, it is imposed on them to wear headscarves, which Yazidi women do not wear as part of their religion or culture. Young women are forced to wear headscarves by their families so that they won't be different from others and recognised as being Yazidi. If they were to be recognised as being Yazidi, they would be exposed to marginalisation and verbal harassment. When applying for academic or governmental jobs, even where Yazidis may be among the most intelligent students and among the top of their cohort, because of racism and discrimination they are not able to fully realise their rights and they are not employed by many in universities and colleges. Yazidi women are exposed to this problem more than other women who have no religion.

There is a difference between the choices of women and men in perceptions of clothing as an issue. Men didn't consider clothes as a problem because the clothes that men wear are familiar to non-Yazidis, and men have the right to wear whatever they want. On the other hand, women selected clothes as a problem as they have a lot of restrictions placed on them in this regard. Although they wear multiple layers of clothing, the Muslim majority consider them to be infidels because they do not wear a headscarf. In the marketplace, the Yazidi woman is subjected to verbal harassment because of her traditional clothes, which don't incorporate a headscarf. Some Yazidi women are afraid to go to Mosul without a hijab as they would be exposed to verbal harassment and unkind looks from others. This contributes to the restriction of Yazidi women's freedom, both by themselves and also by their community.

Additionally, Yazidi women can't go out alone at night in Bashiqā, whereas men can go out whenever and wherever they want. Men can go to another town if they want because men are believed to be stronger than women. This may also explain why men are more frequently killed.

3.1.3 Priorities according to age

Table 4: Differences in the ranking of problems and issues based on age groups

Ranking	Discrimination type	No. of votes as top priority	Women	Men	Most common age group for each issue
1	Education	15 votes	10	5	20–35 years
2	Health	7 votes	4	3	35–50 years
3	Safety and security	7 votes	5	2	20–35 years
4	Ignorance in religious matters	5 votes	0	5	35–50 years
5	Freedom	4 votes	4	0	20–35 years
6	Religious issue	4 votes	0	4	20–35 years
7	Hate speech	2 votes	0	2	35–50 years
8	Harassment	1 vote	1	0	35–50 years
9	Clothing	1 vote	1	0	35–50 years
10	Orphan care	1 vote	1	0	35–50 years
11	Military service	1 vote	0	1	35–50 years
12	Government role	1 vote	0	1	35–50 years
13	The return of ISIS families	1 vote	0	1	35–50 years

Source: Author's own.

Table 4 shows the differences in the ranking of problems and issues based upon age groups. For example, health is a priority for those who are older as there are no hospitals nearby in Bashiqa. The nearest hospital is in Mosul. If the patient decided to go to Erbil or Dohuk, they may die before reaching the hospital because these two cities are so far away. Older people didn't mention education as they lost their right to education in the past due to poverty or the fear their families had of sending them to schools. However, people between 20–35 years old don't have jobs after finishing their education. They are jobless. The younger participants chose education as a priority because of their perception of the bad quality of education in the present time. In terms of other problems, namely language, racism, and transportation, these problems are common among all age groups.

3.2 Analysis

The following sections discuss each of the problems identified by the participants in more detail, with the view to capturing their voices and realities. They follow the order of problems identified in Table 1, where the data are aggregated for all participants.

3.2.1 Education

Through the sessions, education was highlighted by both Yazidi women and Yazidi men as a significant problem. It was discovered that there is a difference between women's choices and men's choices for education, and overall, women suffer more than men. Yazidi women face many obstacles to going to school while men, as mentioned previously, have more freedom.

For example, Yazidi women lost their right to education and receiving their graduation certificate for several reasons, including fear of society's view of them, and the views of Yazidi men. Yazidi men unconsciously uphold the customs and traditions imposed by the wider, conservative Iraqi society. This research found a big difference between women and men in terms of attitudes and access to education. Men are not afraid when they go to Mosul to study, and they can also travel wherever they want. However, women cannot travel because of the governing customs and traditions that dictate that women should stay at home.

Participants also gave specific examples of how they had been discriminated against in education because of their Yazidi identity. They felt that there was a clear violation of the rights of minorities, especially the Yazidis, due to the lack of curricula on the history of

the Yazidis. This is due to the government's weakness in amending the Iraqi Constitution, and also weakness in the institution of education.

One of the women, a 28-year-old unemployed university graduate who lives in Bashiqa, told us,

there is a clear violation in the institution of education, as a law student cannot become a judge. The Iraqi law stipulates that the Yazidi, men or women, don't have the right to be judges because Yazidi don't have a holy book to vow on. The Iraqi Constitution didn't formulate any article to handle this issue. This is despite the intensive study that the student undertakes. The reason is because he is a Yazidi, and this thing is very sad and threatens the students' academic life.

It is permitted that only Christian and Muslim women can become judges. Yazidi women are not allowed to become judges.

Another of the women, a 45-year-old housewife from Bahzani, agreed:

In my view, the Yazidi students at the University of Mosul are subjected to great discrimination by their colleagues of other religions. The most prominent of them is not accepting them, staying away from them in many cases, not mixing with them, and not eating Yazidis' food. Yazidi women are more exposed to marginalisation compared to men. Accordingly, marginalisation has more effect on young women. Such words have become very sad for us now that we are in this advanced age, but there are those who marginalise us and do not eat with us.

Language also plays a part in Yazidi discrimination. A 32-year-old woman from Bahzani, who has a university degree but is unemployed, stated that,

in my view, the language is also a problem that we face because we are Yazidis. For example, when we go to colleges and universities in Dohuk and do not speak the Kurdish language, in this case we are exposed to discrimination, or in other regions when we do not speak the same language as them, they do not accept us.

Furthermore, a 28-year-old woman from Bashiqa, a graduate of the Faculty of Sports at the University of Mosul, who is also unemployed, shared her story of facing violence while trying to attend University:

I will talk about a situation that happened during my studies. In 2013, university students were going to Mosul to the university with drivers. They did not know that there was a story of discrimination awaiting them. The Yazidi students were dropped out from cars and buses. After that, five drivers went to the café near the University of Mosul to wait for them until the end of work. They did not know that they were being watched by a terrorist group targeting the Yazidis in Mosul. After they sat in the café, they were targeted with machine guns, shot and killed, and the news spread among the Yazidi students within minutes and terrified them. Those were the ugliest moments the students have gone through. How will they return home and have no drivers? Basically, they did not know if they would return or not because they were being watched. So they all gathered in one place in the university and called their parents to come and get them. The signs of fear were clear on them, as well as the fear of their families. All this just because they are a Yazidi minority.

So we had to leave school in Mosul for a year, and I did not forget that day and the amount of fear and terror that we experienced as Yazidis. As a result, most students were forced to leave their studies at the university in that year, and when we wanted to submit a transfer to the University of Hamdania,³ they did not allow us because the priority was given to Christians, in addition to the unavailability of most of the academic departments at Hamdania University. I also remember at that time that I had finished school and was coming from one stage to another new stage in my life, when I went for the first time in my university life and I was very excited that I would start my university journey, but what happened? They killed the Yazidi drivers in Mosul. I remember that I lived unforgettable moments in my life that almost killed me. I was walking and I was afraid to say that I am a Yazidi so that they would not kill me, and since that day I have been afraid to go to Mosul.

Experiences like this are dangerous for Yazidi women's lives and spirits. They have lost trust in being able to access education.

Many participants shared stories of discrimination while trying to access education, and many of them are unemployed despite having degrees. This shows how Yazidis not only

³ An area where Christians are in the numerical majority.

face discrimination in access to quality education but are also then marginalised in job opportunities. The 28-year-old woman above shared that,

there are many male and female graduates who have not found a job yet. Meaning a person has been studying and tiring for 16 years or more, in addition to the psychological pressures he is exposed to during education and the risks he faces while studying at universities from those that target the Yazidis. Despite all that he is going through, he is resisting the difficult life circumstances in order to obtain a university degree. Then he does not get a job, and the degree remains only ink on paper and remains on the wall. And he goes to work like any working person who does not have a certificate. With all due respect to all workers, the university student suffered a lot to obtain a degree in order to serve his country and to benefit from his experiences, in addition to the fatigue of his family, financially and psychologically, but in the end, there is no employment for us or work.

3.2.2 Health

Women voiced their concerns regarding health because of the discrimination, fear, and marginalisation they face while going to Mosul. They feel a direct threat to them and their newly born children because there is no maternity hall in the area and they fear that their children will be replaced by other children, or not cared for well. For example, one of the women, a 30-year-old housewife, from Bashiqa, shared a situation she faced when she was in labour:

I went to the hospital in Qaraqosh [a predominantly Christian town], the doctor did not allow me to enter and allowed another woman to enter because I did not speak the same language as their city. This situation was very difficult for me.

During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the women felt that the discrimination they experience in health care was further exacerbated. The same woman explained how,

Bashiqa and Bahzani are among the areas that already lack the simplest health centres, so during the Covid-19 crisis, there were only four cans of oxygen, and there was no government support. The area also lacked an ambulance, as well as any protective equipment. The people were afraid to go to the health centres due to the lack of new and good health facilities and supplies. We have learnt

when we went to the health centre to take a corona test swab, the result would take seven days or more, and it also lacked credibility.

The participants shared examples of how they had been discriminated against while trying to access health care because they are Yazidi. One woman shared how she was misdiagnosed by a doctor because they didn't want to give her the necessary treatment:

I was complaining of pain in the abdomen and they took me to the clinic. The doctor who saw me was a Muslim. She said I should have an operation just so she wouldn't have to treat me. Basically, I didn't have an appendix and the cause of the pain was food poisoning only.

She further shared a belief she had heard about Yazidis which she felt contributed to non-Yazidis' reluctance to treat them:

There is a false stereotype of the Yazidis, that we do not wash for 40 days, and this affects the Yazidis. This stereotype comes from an absence of any background knowledge about the Yazidi religion. Some doctors do not like examining the Yazidi person because of this, except for the few doctors who have not heard this stereotype.

The consequences of these Yazidi women not receiving the treatment and care that they need range from the women losing trust in doctors to their very lives being endangered, as described by one of the women, a 50-year-old housewife who lives in Bahzani:

I had a very difficult situation in terms of health. My daughter was in her teens and as a result of certain circumstances, including her failure in a school subject, she took pills and tried to kill herself without our knowledge. We took her to the health clinic. They did not accept to treat her until the police came and investigated the cause of the attempted suicide. They simply watch my daughter's situation and did not treat her until the police came. By this time, I was so devastated that at any moment I might lose my daughter. I tried more than once to have her treated, but they did not agree to that until the doctor came and asked to treat her. Then, an investigation was submitted to the police, and when they prepared to treat her, we discovered that the medical equipment and devices for gastric lavage were not working, and out of work.

They asked to take her to the hospital, and we waited an hour for the ambulance to come. After a long wait, the ambulance came and took her to the hospital.

When the doctor saw her, he was very angry because of negligence, and said she should be kept under observation for 24 hours because you were late in assisting her, and this had endangered her life. The doctor asked me to sit next to her and not let her sleep because if she sleeps even for one minute, she will fall into a coma. The amount of fear of falling apart I experienced that day is never out of my mind. I know that the first reason is due to her taking pills and attempting to kill herself, but the biggest mistake is due to the health staff, who were late in treating her and the shortage of medical devices and equipment has a great impact as well.

Yazidi women have suffered and still suffer in the field of health because of this prejudice and discrimination.

3.2.3 Safety and security

Yazidi women lack security and safety in all respects. They feel insecure and unsafe even in their homes. Home is supposed to be the place where one feels secure, so feeling unsafe at home is the highest level of insecurity. For example, Sinjar's inhabitants were at their homes when they were attacked by ISIS. Therefore, Bashiqa's inhabitants also feel afraid. Yazidi women also feel unsafe when moving around and in terms of practising their rituals with comfort and security. Many Yazidi women lost job opportunities inside the city of Mosul because of their inability to move between Mosul and Bashiqa. Their family members feel afraid that the women may be exposed to harm, so they want to protect them by restricting them to the home. Yazidi women also restrict themselves because they have been raised with a sense of fear. This lack of safety and security affects Yazidi women's and girls' ability to travel to Mosul to access education and medical care.

For example, one of the women, a 27-year-old graduate, shared that she was eagerly waiting to go to university,

but the first day I started work, they killed four drivers from Bashiqa and Bahzani, and for this reason I left my studies for a whole year, the reason for targeting the Yazidis. Knowing that those who were killed were Yazidi men.

Specifically, the participants expressed a particular fear about the danger of the road linking Mosul and Bashiqa. Another of the women, a 30-year-old from Bahzani, explained how this lack of safety and security also restricts Yazidi women's job opportunities, leading to high levels of unemployment:

Most of the time, organisations publish links to apply and work sites are in Mosul. This is difficult for us, as Yazidi women. The lack of security and safety means that we cannot travel to Mosul, and therefore cannot apply for the jobs there. This is one of the reasons for the increase in unemployment.

Additionally, participants explained how even if they were able to obtain employment, the safety and security situation often made it unsafe for them to continue working there, forcing them to leave and become unemployed.

Another 36-year-old female graduate shared how this lack of safety and security wasn't always something Yazidi women faced:

I was born in the eighties and lived in the era of the regime. I lived in a time in which there was some level of safety. Since 2003 until now there is no safety or security.

After 2003, terrorism significantly increased in Iraq in general and in Mosul in particular. Kidnapping, killing, robbery, and explosions have increased. Moreover, racism has also increased.

Participants discussed the importance of safety as a basic prerequisite for living in peace and stability, and the reality of living without it. One of the women described losing her father in a violent attack that targeted Yazidis:

In 2007, there were workers working in a textile factory in Mosul, and one day they were going to work in Mosul to earn a living. They were going by bus, and one day, on their way back to their homes after work, a terrorist group ([looking like] bandits) came out to them carrying weapons and machine guns in Mosul. They stopped the bus and entered it, so the head of this gang spoke to the workers present in the bus and told them who among you belongs to the Christian religion, and who belongs to the Yazidi religion and who belongs to the Muslim religion. Then each group belonging to the different religion was separated from the other, and they also collected Iraqi citizenship cards for the purpose of verifying their religion. After that, Christians and Muslims were taken off the bus and released.

Under the direct threat of weapons, the bus was taken to one of the neighbourhoods of Mosul, and the Yazidi men were disembarked, then handcuffed and told them to lie on the ground; 'you infidel Yazidis, you will die

today because your religion is an infidel religion and you do not deserve to live'. And in the ugliest situation in human history, 24 poor Yazidi workers were gunned down and killed. It is not their fault except that he belongs to a religious minority. Their bodies were left in the streets until the people of Bashiqqa were asked to come and take their bodies, and only one of them survived. In those days, Bashiqqa was grieving for a week over what happened. This incident is considered the biggest direct discrimination incident that ever happened then, where five people from the same family died, and three people from another family died.

Living with this level of fear and insecurity has forced many Yazidi to emigrate, leaving their families in order to obtain a small part of their rights. One of the women, a 40-year-old housewife from Bashiqqa, explained how,

many situations happened to us during the displacement, most notably the refusal of some Muslim families to receive the Yazidis in their homes and provide them with a helping hand and assistance. We left our city and our homes and were forced to leave it because we were Yazidis. When we returned, we returned to empty houses of property. Some of the houses were demolished and burned, and even those who returned to their homes [that] were not demolished or burned, but his house was looted. In addition to the burning of olive trees in the area, which was a source of livelihood for hundreds of families in the area, in addition to the amount of open air that these trees produced. The hard work of all those years in order to build a house and provide a job to take care of our children disappeared overnight and forced us to leave our money, our homes, and our possessions just because we were Yazidis.

The destruction was not only restricted to the individual private property of the Yazidis. One woman, a 52-year-old housewife, also from Bashiqqa, shared how the Yazidi shrines and cemeteries were also demolished. This,

left a shock in all of our hearts. It is very difficult when you see the graves of your parents, relatives or friends destroyed, and some of them have not left any trace. Also, with their criminal actions, not even the dead were spared.

The participants felt that Yazidi women suffered most severely during this period of displacement due to their entry into a new environment completely different from the previous lives they were living. Due to the culture difference, the majority of Yazidi

women didn't go out in Bashiqa. While being displaced, many women mentioned that this was their first time seeing Dohuk or Erbil. They found it difficult to accept the new community. The insecurity had a clear impact on their psychological state and stripped them of confidence.

3.2.4 Unemployment

Unemployment is one of the main problems facing women and men of minorities that were discussed in all focus group discussions. This is a dangerous indicator for the future of young people and future generations. Also, the Iraqi government has been unfair in this field because when the Ministry of Education opened the door for appointments, the ministry allocated an application form in which there was a field for religion, and when looking at this choice, the name of the Yazidi religion was absent. This fact demonstrated a clear and deliberate discrimination, and the women participants said that they could not work in Mosul or the places near Mosul because of the way people look at them and the discrimination they face. Yazidi women don't have the confidence to go out and work due to what Yazidis are exposed to in Mosul. Families don't allow women to go to, or work in, Mosul as they are afraid that they may be exposed to verbal harassment or kidnapped, unlike men who can work in Mosul, Dohuk or even Baghdad.

First and foremost, the participants discussed the lack of work within Bashiqa and the areas where Yazidis live, leading them to seek employment further afield, where they are subjected to discrimination. For example, one of the women, a 52-year-old housewife who lives in Bashiqa, said:

I am creative in handicrafts and can do all forms of handicrafts but I cannot go to another governorate to work, as they [the Muslim majority] may refuse me and refuse my work because I am Yazidi. I also cannot work in Bashiqa because of the weak market, and also I do not have the mechanisms that help my work there.

Some Yazidis do manage to work outside of Bashiqa, however, they may be forced to work in a place where they must not be seen by anyone, so that no one knows that they are Yazidis, and they are stopped from working in the kitchen in some restaurants because it is not permissible to eat the food if it is prepared by Yazidis. One of the participants, a 23-year-old student, said:

If one wants to open a bakery, he must hire a Muslim person so that Muslims come and buy from him. When they [the Muslim majority] know that the owner of the bakery is Yazidi, they take their money and leave.

Tragically, the participants were able to recall specific examples of when Yazidi businesses had been deliberately targeted, defamed, and eventually closed down because of their Yazidi ownership. For example, one of the participants, a 54-year-old from Bahzani, told the group about Muslim workers working in the factory of a Yazidi man:

There is a Yazidi man who had a factory for the manufacture of tahini for 30 years, which was very well known in Iraq. But in the year 2020, this factory was subjected to a campaign of distortion and misrepresentation of the product by workers who were from outside the region and belong to another religion; the workers did that because the owner is Yazidi. They licked the product before the canning process, and this clip was filmed and published on all social media sites, so that this video reached the media channels, where the factory owner was exposed to legal issues and the factory was closed with red wax and the work permit was withdrawn, the owner of the factory was arrested and fines imposed on him.

Another issue that was raised by participants, and which affects the Yazidi youth specifically, is the lack of work opportunities for graduates. This also affects young men and women of the Muslim majority. The difference is that if a Yazidi graduate were to obtain a job, they would be paid less than their Muslim counterpart. There are female graduate students who do not have any work; they have finished their undergraduate studies and now sit at home unemployed because the government today does not have the ability to employ graduates. They are without jobs and are forced to work in shops, restaurants, and cafeterias in Erbil, Dohuk, Baghdad, or Mosul, and as explored previously, when they work in these areas, they are subjected to marginalisation and discrimination.

Having to travel so far from home also opens these young people up to dangerous situations, including unsafe roads in Iraq, particularly when it is known that they are Yazidi, as they may be exposed to kidnapping. Additionally, they may resort to behaviours which are strange to their customs and traditions, such as drinking, drugs, and hashish, and some of them may deviate from their morals and upbringing. This is because of the pressures they face at work from their non-Yazidi colleagues. Therefore, the government must provide job opportunities for minority youth to reduce the pressures of poverty or need, and to ensure that they are able to provide for themselves and their families.

3.2.5 Freedom

Freedom was the first issue not to be mentioned in all focus group discussions, as the women were the only participants to mention freedom as an issue they faced. They expressed freedom as one of the most beautiful things in life, because freedom is general and belongs to everyone. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 2021), there is a complete article related to freedom, which is the second article:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Freedom is again mentioned in Article 3: 'Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person' (*ibid.*). It was for this reason that one of the participants, a 52-year-old housewife from Bashiqā, chose freedom as the top issue facing Yazidi women and girls:

I chose freedom as the first problem facing me because, with freedom, the individual can exercise his/her life and his abilities and in order to be free from injustice and enslavement, and in the absence of freedom, we will become like a dark room, we do not differentiate between right and wrong.

Yazidi women lack freedom in society because Iraqi society does not care about freedom to a large extent. The 52-year-old housewife continued:

Being a Yazidi woman is in itself a situation of losing my freedom.

Participants agreed that a lack of freedom underpins all the other issues they face. One of the women, a 35-year-old housewife from Bashiqā, explained their situation in the following way:

Because I am a Yazidi woman and an orphan, I do not have freedom. If I had complete freedom, I could work outside my area or open my own business, but this is difficult. At the present time, Yazidi women do not have freedom because they experience many restrictions in all fields. Women are always the concern of their families because of the outer community that has its pressures on women,

unlike men. Absence of safety and security is a threat for women and men; however, men are bolder than women. There is also a difference between women and men in terms of freedom in choosing clothes and in travelling, with women being more restricted. However, men are also restricted outside the Bashiqa community to some extent by the lack of safety and security.

The women in the focus groups recognised that they live in an Eastern Iraqi society where people have a negative view of women. This is the reason Yazidi women and girls are more restricted in their freedom than Yazidi men and boys. The 52-year-old woman quoted above explained how this affects her specifically:

We all go through difficult situations in our daily lives. For example, as a Yazidi woman, I like to move around and go out sometimes to the cafeteria or restaurant or go out for entertainment, but we (women) cannot because our freedom is restricted. We live in a community surrounded by people who despise us. The region lacks recreational places only for women, such as libraries, cafeterias, restaurants, and even freedom of expression, as women cannot express their freedom honestly; men, including Yazidi men, must take the opinion of women in decision-making or change, and it is necessary for women to participate in politics.

While Yazidi women participate in entertainment activities in Bashiqa, such as festivals, if these activities are held outside Bashiqa, women are unable to participate.

It was clear from the discussions that it is not only wider Iraqi society that limits the freedom of Yazidi women and girls. While their religious and ethnic identity plays a significant part in the discrimination and marginalisation they face, participants were able to recognise how they themselves, and the Yazidi community, restrict the freedom of Yazidi women and girls. For example, a 42-year-old housewife from Bashiqa, explained that,

when we lose freedom, we lose self-confidence and comfort in the practice of our daily lives. In 2019, my daughter graduated from middle school and wanted to complete her studies at an institute in Mosul. Because of the conditions that the Yazidis had gone through in the city of Mosul in previous years and their exposure to violations and attacks, we refused that our daughter complete her education in Mosul.

Another of the women, a 40-year-old housewife from Bashiqa, described this fear and discomfort in the following way:

We are trapped and bound since childhood and until now, and we know that there are people who watch us and hold us accountable for the smallest mistake.

3.2.6 Legal rights

Legal rights are almost non-existent for the Yazidis in all respects, whether in the decisions of the state, in the parliament of Iraq, or in the laws applied to them. One of the problems facing the people of Bashiqa is the return of the children and families of ISIS, as the Iraqi government decided to bring some of the families of ISIS from the Al-Hol camp in Syria to the south of Mosul, in the Qayyarah camps. There was a negative reaction against this decision by the Yazidi community and other communities that were subjected to genocide and crimes against humanity at the hands of ISIS. The resistance was due to several issues, including:

1. The absence of a transitional justice system for the families of the Yazidi and other victims.
2. The lack of compensation for victims and their families, while the families of ISIS are returning to Iraq on government-subsidised buses.
3. The remains of victims are still being buried while the families of ISIS are passing by on roads from those areas to their new settlements.
4. The fate of the victims and their families has still not been resolved and has not been properly dealt with, while the Iraqi government is rushing to return the families of ISIS.
5. The Iraqi government has resettled the families of victims without addressing the issues of indoctrination and violent extremism in attitudes towards others. Yazidi children were trained in using weapons, killing, and how to say Muslim prayers as part of efforts to strip them of their ethno-religious identity, as well as being taught a hatred of other religions. After being freed from ISIS, the government has integrated them into the community without removing these ideas or offering them psychological intervention.
6. The areas that were subjected to genocide of the Yazidis and others are still afraid of the return of ISIS, while the families of ISIS are received by the government and resettled.
7. The government is deficient in solving the problems of minority and Yazidi communities in terms of the plurality of security forces. There is an absence of

government support for vital projects and in terms of helping members of those areas return from displacement, while the Iraqi government insists on the return of ISIS families.

All of this has created a negative reaction to the Iraqi government's return and reception of ISIS families.

Examples of legal rights that negatively affect Yazidis:

- It is not permissible in Iraqi law to have a Yazidi judge.
- The Personal Status Identity Law in Article 26, second paragraph, is considered a flagrant violation of the rights of the Yazidis, as the law states that if one of the parents converts to Islam, then the children will be registered to the Muslim religion. This will result in all of their original documents being changed.
- It is important to acknowledge that the Iraqi law oppresses Yazidis. When Yazidis want to document their marriage contract, a lot of obstacles are placed in their way. For example, they are expected to get married under Islamic law.

3.2.7 Religious discrimination

In this aspect, women's participation was less compared to men because women in Yazidi society are kept distant from religious affairs and involvement in religious issues. This alone is an example of the gender discrimination that Yazidi women face from their own community, as they want to know more about such issues and have the right to be involved in religious discussions and affairs, but are prevented from being present. Religious discrimination was described by the men in the focus groups as coming from ignorance regarding religion or religious issues and the misconceptions that people from other communities in Iraq have about the Yazidi religion and Yazidi practices. Even though the women did not highlight this as an issue, it does affect women. Women are also asked inflammatory and offensive questions about their religion when they are out in public, but they do not leave the Yazidi community as often as men.

Some common stereotypes and incorrect beliefs about Yazidis that participants shared include the following:

- Yazidis worship Satan. This quote is considered to be normal for the Yazidis because they hear this almost daily, especially in colleges and universities. When Yazidis go to study in colleges and when others know that they are Yazidis, they will often ask: 'Do you worship Satan?'

- The Yazidis have a tail from behind. One of the participating men told us that they were often told while in military service that the Yazidis had a tail, so some would ask them: 'Can you turn around to see your tail?' Thus, some were laughing at the Yazidis and bullying them.
- The Yazidis do not wash for 40 days. The participants in the sessions said that when they went to the doctors for treatment, the doctors used to tell them that they do not treat the Yazidis because they do not wash for 40 days.
- The Yazidis do not have a holy book. However, the Yazidis are a people who have been subjected to 74 campaigns of genocide, the last of which was at the hands of ISIS. It was preceded by 73 other genocides, during which Yazidi holy books were burned, in addition to killing, insulting, and looting. The Yazidis also have a holy book which is the manuscript, the *Black Book Rash* and the *Jelwa Book*, but unfortunately they are not available today; it is said that these are held in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.
- The Yazidis are infidels. One participant said that his friends used to say to him, 'Oh, infidel, come here', and they did not call him by his name.

The men in the focus groups shared many examples of discrimination they had faced because of these stereotypes and myths. One man, a 51-year-old member of the military from Bashiq, explained how members of the majority religion in the military did not mix with the Yazidis. However,

I had a friend from Hilla who was an open and educated person. Years passed and he came to visit me in my house after 15 years, so I hosted him in my house, and when he entered my house and saw the toilet, he said to me, in amazement, 'Do you have toilet?' I talked to him about the matter and I understood from him that one of the Muslims in Bashiq told him that the people of Bashiq do not have bathrooms in their homes. I was astonished by his words, and I told him how they spread such propaganda on us, and I laughed at the topic. But when I took him on a tour inside Bashiq, he was impressed by the level of sophistication and cleanliness in Bashiq.

Unfortunately, not all of the men experienced a positive outcome when they interacted with those who held these incorrect beliefs. One man, a 35-year-old from Bashiq, outlined a situation that happened to him during the period of displacement:

When I was living in Zairin [an area in Erbil], the neighbours would come and visit us, and when he learnt that we are Yazidis, they started moving away from us, as the mullah [Imam] used to say that it is forbidden to deal with the Yazidis in all ways because they are infidels.

Additionally, in recent years, social media has played a role in the spread of hate speech against minorities, especially religious minorities. Most recently, it was particularly noticeable when Pope Francis visited Nineveh Governorate and attended the funeral of the spiritual father of the Yazidi religion (Al Jamil 2021). The participants also noted that this discourse increases during religious holidays and occasions for minorities due to the lack of cultural awareness in the wider Iraqi community, which lives under a strict religious discourse. There is also a lack of accountability by the judicial authorities.

As mentioned above, the participation of women on the topic of religious issues was minimal, or even completely non-existent. This is due to their lack of direct involvement with society as a result of the restrictions placed on them as women. For example, there is not only a lack of Yazidi political participation in the local authority in the governorate of Nineveh and Bashiqa, but also a lack of women. This has resulted in Yazidi women not knowing their rights, their needs, or their suffering. No one conveys Yazidi women's voices. Therefore, while the men felt that addressing the issue of religious discrimination was the main problem facing the Yazidi community, this would only improve the lives of Yazidi women in one respect.

However, the participants felt that this religious discrimination was not only a result of stereotypes and myths. It is also institutionalised. For example, there is a violation by the government and government institutions due to the absence of documented official holidays for minorities, as there are for other religious groups. There is also a weakness in the Iraqi Constitution in that there is no personal status law that guarantees the rights of minorities to facilitate their lives. While there is a law in Kurdistan, it could be argued that Bashiqa is under the control of the Iraqi government.

Lastly, participants expressed concern about the clear demographic change that is happening in the Bashiqa and Bahzani areas that threatens the lives of the existing community. They also expressed their fear of an unknown future, especially regarding the housing associations that have a major role in change.

3.2.8 Transportation

There are restrictions on Yazidi women's movement compared to Yazidi men. Women are not allowed to go out of the home at night, otherwise they will be criticised by the Yazidi community. In addition, women can't travel alone outside their community as they risk being exposed to verbal harassment or exploitation. Women are believed to be weak compared to men. For example, one of the women, a 30-year-old housewife, shared how the absence of women travelling and moving alone from one place to another due to the absence of security exposes her to verbal harassment. Additionally, another housewife stated that they

think that man has more freedom to move compared to girl. Man can go to work in Mosul while girls can't. Girls can't go to Mosul alone. When she goes to a doctor, a male member of her family should accompany her. Man also believes that he can move alone because Yazidi man looks like all other men.

However, one of the men, a 51-year-old from Bashiqa explained how men face discrimination when they travel outside of the Yazidi community too:

We face discrimination at work, education, trade, and moving. If anyone knows that you are Yazidi, they change the way they treat you 180 degrees. They act with racism. They always attack you. This is a normal situation in our daily life.

3.2.9 Language

Language is a problem for both men and women in Bashiqa as their language is different from the language used in north Iraq. Yazidi women selected language as a top priority because language is a problem in universities, markets, and medical centres in north Iraq. They are always told: 'You are Yazidi. You don't know Kurdish.' Yazidi in other villages speak Kurdish; however, they are forced to speak Arabic.

One of the women, a 32-year-old unemployed university graduate from Bahzani explained that,

from my perspective, language is a problem because we are Yazidi. For example, when we went to Duhok, we don't speak Kurdish. In this case we are exposed to discrimination. When we don't talk the same language, they don't accept us because we are Yazidi and we speak Arabic.

Another woman, a 26-year-old housewife from Bahzani agreed:

I went to Duhok and talked in Arabic. The driver asked: 'Do you speak Kurdish?' We said: 'We don't know because our region is near Mosul and we don't know Kurdish.' He kept saying: 'May God forgive me. Get out of my car.' He refused to drive us because we are Yazidi and don't talk Kurdish despite the fact that Kurdish people like the Yazidi.

Discrimination based on language differences severely impact education and job opportunities. For example, one of the women, a 45-year-old widow and housewife from Bahzani explained how

while displaced, my daughter studied in Duhok University. Professors explain in Kurdish. She didn't understand. She asked them to use Arabic or English. They refused because they know that she is Yazidi. She came home crying. This problem lasted four years.

Another of the women, a 50-year-old housewife, agreed:

My son used to work in El Bishmarka. A Kurdish person asked him in his job: 'Why you don't say that you are Kurdish?' My son replied, 'Because I speak Arabic and not Kurdish.' This person asked him: 'Why do you speak Arabic?' My son replied, 'Because of the genocides that we have been exposed to in history. So, I speak Arabic.' Again, the person said: 'You are Yazidi and your religion is written in Kurdish. This is why you should speak Kurdish.' My son said: 'No problem. Our religion is written in Kurdish. Now let me ask you: You are Kurdish and your religion is written in Arabic. Why you don't speak Arabic?' Because of this dialogue my son had a problem with this person.

In the past, the Yazidi people used to speak Kurdish but because of the genocides the Yazidi were forced to change their geographic location, which led to changing their language. The Kurdistan region is full of Yazidi people who were forced to change their religion. They have been forced to leave certain areas. Some of the women in the FGDs were afraid that the Bashiqqa dialect will disappear.

This fear was articulated by one of the women, an unemployed university graduate from Bashiqqa:

Migration and genocide affected our language. For example, after the invasion of ISIS to our areas, many people emigrated outside Iraq. Their children were born abroad. So they learnt the language of the area where they live. By [that] time,

their Bashiqai language isn't known. Even, we don't know some terms that are only known to old people.

3.2.10 The role of the government

The role of the government was the tenth issue identified by participants. However, it was only identified as a problem by the men, as women don't go to the governmental organisations. The government's role in preserving religious and ethnic minorities is almost non-existent, and there is no government cover aimed at protecting religious minorities, including the Yazidis. Also, the Iraqi government is very weak in holding the defaulters to account. The male participants felt that all the other problems they mentioned are due to the government's weakness in supporting duties and responsibilities.

They identified the levels of weakness in legal texts as follows:

1. The system of national legislation is deficient in dealing with minorities, especially in terms of protecting existence and identity.
2. National legislation includes a lot of discrimination when dealing with minorities. For example, in Article 372, the penalty for anyone who assaults a church or place of worship for non-Muslims is reduced, while if a member of a minority group assaults a mosque, the penalty is severe.
3. National policies do not focus on minorities and do not give them a space of protection and guarantees.
4. Social discrimination is prevalent, as minorities are exposed to clear societal discrimination. They feel vulnerable because the government doesn't care for them.

The participants felt that successive Iraqi governments have not paid attention to the issue of minorities in a remarkable way, and did not put guarantees and actions in their government programmes that emphasise them. However, they did highlight the fact that, for the first time in the history of Iraq, political recognition for minorities is achieved through the quota system, which is allocated to each minority: Christians (five national seats), Yazidis (one seat), Shabaks (one seat), Sabeen-Mandaeans (one seat), and finally, Faili Kurds (one seat). This has a negative impact on decision-making while voting in the People's Assembly. In addition, the one seat bears a lot of responsibility and burden. However, while this seat could be, in theory, for a man or woman, in practice it is highly

unlikely to go to a woman due to customs and traditions that restrict women from participating in politics.

Thus, the quota guarantees a specific level of political participation for Yazidis. On the other hand, there are other minorities not mentioned above that were not included in the quota system, such as the Kakais, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, people of brown skin, and Gypsies. Participants also identified how the government is committed to the ratified international legislation, and among those legislations there are many that deal with the protection of religious, national, ethnic, and linguistic minorities. However, participants expressed that the government does not pay attention to minority issues in the state reports submitted to the UN mechanisms, whether in Geneva or New York.

Recently, in March 2021, the Yazidi Survivors Law was issued, which includes all minority women, not just the Yazidis. This legislation is considered a great victory for Iraqi women and for the Yazidi survivors who were subjected to genocide at the hands of ISIS, and this legislation is the only legislation to help redress the grievances of minorities. The Yazidi community looks forward to this law being enforced as soon as possible. Participants expressed hope that the Iraqi government will allocate a budget to implement the articles of this law to ensure equality and justice. The Iraqi government has opened an office for the survivors. The director of this office reported that it is a positive step forward from the side of the Iraqi government. However, the government has yet to allocate a budget for this office in the second year of the issuance of this law. The participants mentioned that they are afraid this law won't be enforced given no budget has been allocated to do so.

For example, one of the participants, a 51-year-old, stated:

The government doesn't give us any attention. Yazidi don't work in prominent positions. This means that the government doesn't recognise the Yazidi. The government marginalise the Yazidi.

Another of the men, a 50-year-old man from Bashiqa, saw the government as central to solving the Yazidi community's problems:

If the government focuses on justice for Yazidi, all the problems will be solved. There will be equality.

3.2.11 Harassment

The women expressed how they deal with harassment issues to a great extent, especially verbal harassment. The women in the FGDs gave the following as some examples of the verbal harassment they experience: 'Can I get your number, pretty girl?', 'What a sexy girl!', 'You are sexy!', 'Could you come to my home, sexy girl?', in addition to words that are full of sexual connotations. The women also recognised harassment as one of the difficult matters non-Yazidi women have to deal with in wider Iraqi society. However, they pointed to the specific harassment that Yazidi women are subjected to because they do not wear the hijab. They felt this was especially the case when they went to the market in Mosul. They are subjected to harassment and disturbance because of clothes that differ from the clothes of Muslim women, and therefore this harassment is unique to Yazidi women.

Also, Yazidi women in universities are subjected to harassment because of their clothes. An absence of a veil or headscarf is considered a sin from the perspective of Muslim women. Muslim women think that Yazidi women should have to cover their hair. They also think that modern clothes and trousers shouldn't be worn. For example, a 22-year-old female student from Bahzani shared how she was,

expelled from the lecture because of the clothes I was wearing and subjected to clear harassment. When I asked what was the reason for my expulsion from the lecture, he told me, 'The reason [is] the clothes being indecent in my opinion'. But I was wearing very modest clothes.

Despite wearing modest clothing, Yazidi women are exposed to constant threats in their daily lives. Participants explained how this difference in clothing identifies them as Yazidis, which has an impact on how they are treated in day-to-day interactions. For example, one of the women talked about a time she went to the market in Mosul:

When we entered one of the stores, the price was changed.

She explained that this was because they knew they were Yazidis through the clothes they were wearing.

The male participants did not identify harassment – verbal or otherwise – as a problem they face.

3.2.12 Racism

Racism, in this context, was understood by the participants as a practice that is based on persecuting and marginalising people and groups because of the colour of their skin, their religion, or their culture. Racism is the origin of many other problems. If this discrimination disappeared, there wouldn't be problems among people who belong to different religions. Yazidi women and men wouldn't be exposed to bullying and killing. The reason behind this destruction is racism.

One of the women, a 52-year-old housewife from Bashiqa, articulated this belief in the following way:

From my perspective, I think that absence of rights is due to the inequality between people. If all are treated as Iraqi regardless of their religion, we would get our rights without discrimination or racism.

She was joined by another woman, a 40-year-old housewife from Bashiqa, who felt that ensuring other people knew of the Yazidi's plight would help them to achieve equality:

We want to deliver our voices to the whole world. The world should know that Yazidi are the people who [were] exposed to oppression, displacement, racism, violence. We want to get our rights like other people.

The Yazidi have rights to freedom, education, and employment. They suffer in employment, in the market, and in medical centres. Wherever there is a Yazidi, there is discrimination and racism because Yazidi are seen by the Muslim majority as infidels and as 'less than' because they don't have a holy book.

3.2.13 Military services

In this aspect, the participation of women was non-existent regarding military service. In the past, Yazidi men were subjected to discrimination while performing military service due to lack of knowledge and awareness of the Yazidi religion. At that time, there was very little awareness of the Yazidi religion, and men were suffering a lot because of harassment. The myth previously mentioned, about Yazidis having tails, was creating a false stereotype of the Yazidi religion. For example, some soldiers had a sensitivity to eating with the Yazidis. They did not agree to sit with the Yazidis because of their religion. They believed that they were infidels, and they called them these names constantly.

The men explained how this discrimination affected the roles they were given and the positions they were distributed in during the war. Yazidi men were given dangerous positions on the battlefield, positions that were considered almost impossible to survive in. Fear controlled them all, which led some men to leave their work in the service. However, they were then subjected to legal proceedings and torture due to their refusal to serve.

3.2.14 Clothing

Yazidi traditional clothing is considered one of the most beautiful kinds of clothing and is famous in the community. In the past, this clothing was also a subject of ridicule, which affected the psyche of Yazidi women, as the ones who wear this traditional clothing. The traditional clothing is part of the Yazidi heritage, and most Yazidi women willingly wear this clothing for Yazidi occasions and feasts. This is why this issue was only highlighted by female participants.

Clothing links heavily to the issue of harassment, as explored earlier in this report. This is because Yazidi women's clothing makes them easily identifiable as Yazidis to non-Yazidi people. For example, one of the women, a housewife aged 52 from Bashiqa, shared how,

women do not have complete freedom in terms of clothing, when we go to Mosul and do not wear the hijab, and our clothes are not like theirs. In this case, we will be subjected to great discrimination and often verbal harassment from women and men of Muslim majority. Muslim men say inappropriate words to us. Women say, 'May God forgive us', when they see the Yazidi women without veil. Just because we are Yazidi women and they impose customs and traditions contrary to ours.

However, the women also discussed how their clothing is a subject of discussion and discrimination within their own community. For example, one of the women, a 38-year-old widow and housewife from Bashiqa, explained how,

our clothes as [Yazidis] were distinctive, but over time the clothes differed for the middle-aged group. When Yazidi society notices that women of middle or above-average age wear clothes that are different from their old clothes, they criticise them. Especially for widowed women as they are observed by the whole community, they are subjected to criticism, and I say this from experience because I am a widowed woman, so I am subjected to criticism.

A Yazidi widow is not allowed to wear coloured clothes after the death of her husband. She doesn't go out alone as she doesn't have a man. If she went out alone, this means that she wants to remarry and this isn't acceptable in the Yazidi community. If she has children, she has to stay with her children forever without a husband. If she wants to get married, the family of her ex-husband would take the children. This is why the widow is oppressed and she can't work.

It is clear from these examples that clothing links strongly to freedom; both the freedom to wear what they want and the freedom to travel and move about safely in public spaces. For example, one woman, a 40-year-old housewife from Bashiqa, shared her experience from two days prior:

We went to Mosul for shopping and because we were wearing the Yazidi dress, although our clothes were modest, but their view of us remains the same as their view of an outcast. In addition to the verbal abuse against us, and because of that, we did not feel safe and comfortable there, only because we are Yazidi women and we have no other place nearby to go and shop. We had to go to Mosul to shop. And there we are exposed to some situations that we face because we are Yazidis, not all of course.

Here we see gender and religious discrimination meet. Nevertheless, despite this marginalisation, many Yazidi women still feel pride in the Yazidi clothing, and see it as an important way to preserve tradition. One of the women, a 22-year-old housewife from Bahzani, explained how,

the Yazidi dress is one of the elements of the Yazidi identity that our mothers wear, and in the recent period, the Yazidi women's wearing of the Yazidi dress has increased on religious occasions in Bashiqa. [Although they can't go out of Bashiqa wearing this dress for risk of harassment. Only the old women can dress in the traditional Yazidi dresses.] The Yazidi costume consists of a dress or skirt with a loose shirt with a fez that resembles a [hat]. In the past, this uniform was exclusively white, which symbolises humanity, coexistence, and tolerance over time. The colour has changed for some women. Here, we say that the Yazidi heritage clothing must be preserved because it reflects a beautiful image of the community, but the type of distinction and verbal harassment that Yazidi women were exposed to because of the clothing was a lot.

3.2.15 Orphan care

Caring for orphans was the last issue identified by the participants, and again, it was one that only the women identified because this issue is the responsibility of women rather than men. When the husband dies, the woman is the one who is responsible for caring for her orphan children. When discussing orphan care, participants were referring to protecting orphans by not allowing them to be exposed to discriminatory and sensitive situations. There is no governmental law that protects orphans or allocates a small amount of money to them. On the contrary, they are subjected to bullying and to the worst types of mistreatment. In the Yazidi context, orphans include those who have lost fathers, not only children who have lost both parents. The Yazidi orphan child is forced to leave school and work to earn his living.

One of the women, a 36-year-old mother, widow, and housewife from Bahzani, shared that she does not have a salary or social care to take care of her orphaned children:

Despite this thing, but I prefer to stay in Iraq among my family and friends, as they did not fail me and always help me. But I do not accept living all my life on charity [zakat]. The only thing I ask for is a monthly salary so that I can take care of my children and provide them with the requirements of life.

The deceased husband's family treats the widow well if they love her. However, there are some exceptions, where the deceased husband's family don't visit or deal with the widow as they don't care for her. Thus, we see that the care given to widows and orphans by Yazidi society is dependent on the feelings and whims of her in-laws.

3.3 Priority needs for the community

Section 3.2 outlined the many threats and challenges Yazidi women face as a result of their religion and gender. These cause problems for the whole Yazidi community and pose a danger in the future. Threats were arranged according to the participants' choice. The needs of the area were addressed; they were many, and all were important points in the interest of the Yazidi community.

The first is education. In the field of education, there is real discrimination among the people of the Bashiqa area, due to the absence of universities and institutes there. It is noted that the closest university to Bashiqa district is the University of Mosul. The University of Mosul is considered to be one of the biggest and most famous universities but, because they are Yazidis, they have many fears in studying at this university. The

Yazidi young man or woman, no matter how successful they are, does not receive sufficient support from the university administration. Rather, the administration would prefer people of another religion over them. They also can't study in Erbil or Dohuk because of language. Therefore, the future is unknown to many students, and this constitutes a threat to their academic life.

Moreover, in the field of school curricula, there is a clear threat that exists among the Yazidi minority due to the failure to include religious curricula that stipulate the customs and traditions of the religion and to present them to all grades up to the preparatory stage. As described by one of the men, a 35-year-old from Bashiqa, when discussing religious issues, there must be

books on the Yazidi religion in order to reduce this false stereotype about the Yazidi religion. Religious speeches should not aim at tearing the social fabric. Therefore, there must be laws that support journalistic work and stress this type of speech, and the media must be highlighted as the fourth authority and a means of pressure on the parties that broadcast hate speeches.

For Yazidi women specifically, young Yazidi women say that some girls who wear the hijab do not talk to them in education settings. They call them infidels and other offensive words. They violate their rights. Some of the young women in the FGDs said that they were also discriminated against by university professors. Young Yazidi women said that they are suffering because they are graduates. They do not find any job opportunities and they cannot go to Mosul and work there because of the fear of terrorism and the lack of security and safety. They are also afraid of the discrimination and racism they are exposed to there. At the same time, poverty is an issue. Families can't send two children at the same time to school because they can't afford it, so they prefer to send males to school and force girls to drop out.

In the field of health, the area also lacks many health services, a private hospital, and even maternity halls for women, and this poses a great threat to the life of this poor class. There is also discrimination by the Iraqi Ministry of Health through not building a hospital in the area. This also affects the budget of the Yazidi citizens, given that the nearest hospital is in Mosul, while Yazidis also fear travelling to Mosul due to the discrimination they face. One of the participants said in the session that she had lost confidence in the treatment that she had taken from the doctor because he had discriminated against her as a Yazidi woman.

In the field of unemployment, the lack of job opportunities poses a great threat to the future of youth and women in the region. Participants were clear that there are people in Bashiqa who won't allow their daughters to go to Mosul to work because of fear. Young Yazidi women cannot go to other cities because the customs and traditions control them and prevent them from being able to travel alone. Therefore, one of the most important needs of the Yazidi girls is to find job opportunities in a place where there is no fear or racism. They need to realise their rights at schools, universities, and in work. They need to feel safe and secure and not be afraid of others.

As for adult women, their chances of working are almost non-existent for several reasons, including that they were unable to complete their studies because of the circumstances they were exposed to. They are controlled by fear that people may talk about them. There is no way to communicate. Yazidi women were raised with fear that others may know that they are Yazidi so they may be exposed to bullying, verbal harassment or sexual assault.

In the area of the return of ISIS families, this matter constitutes a serious and clear threat to the future of the region and to the psychology of the people, and a lack of consideration for their feelings and fairness.

In terms of legislation, within the framework of the Iraqi Constitution, Article 26 (second paragraph) of the new Unified National Card Law, constitutes a major threat to the Yazidi community, which will have influence (HHRO 2022). Additionally, it is necessary to work on legislative reform in Iraq to protect minorities, and to guarantee their full rights.

As for the basic needs of women, which is to provide an appropriate environment in which there is neither discrimination nor racism, young Yazidi women are subjected to verbal harassment whenever they go to Mosul because they do not wear the hijab. Women also said that there is no support from the government or from non-governmental organisations, so they are unable to realise all of their rights.

For the widowed and divorced women in Yazidi society, they have lost all their rights in everything. They cannot work, study, or feel safe and secure. They cannot provide a living for their children. Iraqi and Yazidi society view them as prey and not as women. They are trying hard to get rid of this restriction and 'get out of their shells', but they cannot. Today, widowed and divorced women are only looking for an opportunity to work, but unfortunately there is none because of their circumstances. This is particularly difficult for them when they have orphaned children to provide for. The Iraqi

government must provide means to protect orphans and preserve their future, as well as to allocate them study seats or scholarships for university, as well as schools. There must be allocations for orphans so they are not left without care and social security. Also, the government must protect orphans by granting small projects for them to earn a living or have a livelihood. This study suggests that widowed and divorced women are the women most in need of opportunities to be able to work, study, go shopping, and access their natural rights.

4 Conclusion

It is difficult to live in a society that views women as victims and considers them to be unfit to work in all areas of employment. The Yazidi woman suffers in earning a living, finding work, leaving the home and travelling, so that she is unable to practise her skills and traditions in full freedom and comfort. This research has found that even studying poses a great challenge for Yazidi women compared to women from the Muslim majority. Minority women suffer from not realising their full rights to study because the higher seats are for the women of the majority. Some women even shared their experiences of discrimination in hospitals. In some cases, but not all, other women are preferred over Yazidi women.

Through this research, Yazidi women's fear of realising their rights and expressing their opinions freely and comfortably has been revealed. A Yazidi woman is always subject to misunderstanding and always has to justify her life. Through the FGD sessions conducted for this research, Yazidi women revealed that they lack basic security and safety in Iraqi society.

5 Recommendations

Recommendations to improve these conditions are as follows:

- The provision of a greater number of workshops to strengthen Yazidi women's self-confidence. This would help them to take agency and make the decisions that they want, not what the community wants. A greater number of sessions could be conducted to strengthen their attitudes towards study, work, or travel. This should be accompanied by education for Yazidi men that challenges their perceptions of Yazidi women and the restrictions placed on them.

- Moreover, it is necessary to provide job opportunities for divorced and widowed women, because their chances are nil in life, and they must be strengthened, whether at work or regarding self-reliance. Today, there is no governmental support that provides for them and they must depend on what the people of the area donate or financial provision from the government, which is not enough to even buy vegetables monthly. Therefore, they must rely on themselves.
- Furthermore, job opportunities must be provided within the region because it is very difficult to find a job opportunity outside of Bashiqa, as women cannot travel alone and don't have the courage to live in a house alone. Unemployment today is much higher than it was before.
- The Yazidi women reported that they need medical complexes or hospitals because Bashiqa has many doctors but there is no hospital or medical complex. It is therefore very important to provide a hospital.
- The Yazidi women also said that they need to be better taken care of in all aspects, whether that is in education, health, work, travel or visiting the market. All Yazidi women need to feel comfortable, safe, and secure to be able take a step forwards.

Yazidi women have endured severe suffering. They have lost all their opportunities in all areas of society. It is imperative that they are supported and empowered to realise their rights like all women around the world.

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Annexe 1 – Women’s participatory ranking

Women’s ranking	Problem	Age group	No. of votes as top priority	The equation	Result
1	Education	20–35 years 50 years (one vote) 42 years (one vote)	10	$10*12+6*11+1*10+1*9+1*8+2*7+1*4+4*1$	235
2	Freedom	40–50 years 36 years (one vote)	4	$4*12+4*11+3*10+1*9+3*8+1*7+1*5+3*4+1*3+11*2+3*1$	207

3	Health	40–50 years 21 years (one vote)	4	$4*12+5*11+4*10+2*9+1*8+2*7+1*6+2*4+3*1$	200
4	Safety and security	28–38 years	5	$5*12+3*11+3*10+1*9+4*8+1*7+2*5+1*3+1*2+5*1$	191
5	Unemployment			$1*11+3*10+2*9+1*8+3*6+3*5+2*4+1*3+2*2+5*1$	120
6	Legal rights			$1*11+1*10+1*8+3*7+1*6+4*5+7*4+1*3+3*2+3*1$	116
7	Language			$1*11+2*10+1*9+5*8+1*6+1*5+1*4+3*3+3*2+2*1$	112
8	Verbal harassment	36 years	1	$1*12+1*11+2*9+1*8+2*7+4*6+1*4+2*3+4*2+6*1$	111
9	Racism			$3*10+4*9+1*8+1*6+2*5+4*4+2*2$	110

10	Clothes and restraint	44 years	1	$1*12+2*9+2*7+3*6+3*3+4*2+5*1$	84
11	Transportation			$2*9+2*7+1*5+1*4+2*3+3*2$	53
12	Not taking care of orphans	39 years	1	$1*12+1*7+1*4+2*3+4*2+3*1$	40

Annexe 2 – Men’s participatory ranking

Men’s ranking	Problem	Age group	No. of votes as top priority	The equation	Results
1	Religious discrimination	20–56 years	11	$11*9+3*8+4*7+2*6+2*4+1*3+1*1$	175
2	Education	41–51 years	5	$5*9+3*8+2*7+1*6+2*5+4*4+1*3+6*1$	124
3	Unemployment			$5*8+4*7+3*6+1*5+2*4+3*3+3*2$	114
4	Government role	45 years 28 years	2	$2*9+3*8+2*7+3*6+3*5+3*4+1*3+1*2+6*1$	112
5	Health	22 years 42 years	2	$2*9+2*8+1*7+2*6+3*5+2*4+3*3+4*2+4*1$	97

6	Legal rights			$1*8+2*6+5*5+4*4+7*3+4*2$	90
7	Mobility/ transportation			$3*8+3*7+2*6+3*4+2*3+4*2+4*1$	87
8	Safety and security	20–30 years	2	$2*9+1*8+1*7+3*6+1*5+3*4+2*3+5*2+2*1$	86
9	Military service	22 years 51 years	2	$2*9+2*8+2*7+2*6+2*5+2*3+3*2+4*1$	86

Violence and Discrimination against the Assyrian People in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Shivan Toma and Angela Odisho Zaya

Summary

This research sheds light on the oppression of Assyrians, whose ancestors trace back to the Ancient Assyrians, the native people of Mesopotamia since 6772 BC (Bidmead 2004). They are one of the most widely scattered native peoples and are now a minority group in Iraq. This paper addresses the violence and discrimination against Assyrian women and men as members of a religious minority. It shows the struggles and obstacles that Assyrian people have experienced in their educational and working contexts, specifically how other religious groups treat them, with a focus on the unique experiences of Assyrian women. This research was conducted in Duhok within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with marginalised Assyrian people, using focus group discussions and participatory ranking to collect stories based on their real-life experiences. It highlights the challenges facing Assyrian people in general and Assyrian women in particular. Moreover, the research sets out to identify how these challenges differ from those experienced by other religious minority communities, as well as the religious majority. This research finds that defending and protecting Assyrian people's rights is essential: to reduce the number of Assyrians who emigrate abroad, thereby contributing to the disappearance of this ancient community in Iraq; to provide opportunities for Assyrian women to work without fear of harassment; and to make sure that Assyrian people are able to fully realise their rights to practise their cultural and religious traditions.

Keywords: Assyrians, Iraq, participatory research, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), religious minority, inequalities

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1 Introduction to the Assyrian people

The Assyrians are a Semitic Christian nationalist religious group that resides in northern Mesopotamia, Iraq. Members of this ethnic group belong to various Syriac Christian churches, such as the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Church of the East. They are also distinguished by their mother tongue, Syriac, a northeastern Semitic language that originated as one of the dialects of Aramaic (Minahan 2002).

The Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syriacs are believed to be descended from several ancient civilisations in the Middle East, the most important of which are Assyrian and Aramaic, one of the oldest civilisations in the world, dating back to 2500 BC in ancient Mesopotamia. They are also considered one of the oldest peoples who embraced Christianity, starting from the first century AD. They contributed to the theological development of this religion and its dissemination in the regions of Central Asia, India and China (Oppenheim 1964).

The relationship between majorities and minorities is the main source of various conflicts in the Middle East. Most of the recent armed conflicts in the Middle East have undoubtedly had roots in unsolved minority problems (Maoz 1999). The idea of contemporary Assyrians is highly politicised and controversial. Middle Eastern countries usually consider the treatment of minorities as their internal issue, denying the existence of any discrimination, or denying the existence of any types of minorities in their

territories. Middle Eastern states adopt this attitude because of the belief that this issue could be instrumentalised in foreign policy by Western powers (Kumaraswamy 2003).

Assyrians are the descendants of the ancient Aramean-speaking population of northern Mesopotamia. According to Stafford (2006: 15), Assyrians are,

Semitic people who had migrated from southern Mesopotamia after the fall of Ur... and their power was felt all over the Middle East and Near East... but the heart of their country was the Tigris plain between Nineveh and Assur.

Assyria, which is a kingdom in northern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), began around 1350 BC. The Assyrian empire controlled the Middle East from the Gulf to Egypt (730-650 BC), but it collapsed in 612 BC. The first Assyrian religion was Ashurism, derived from Ashur, the Assyrian supreme god. However, Assyrians were among the first peoples who converted to Christianity in the first century AD as Christianity entered Mesopotamia through the twelve apostles, specifically St. Thomas and his Assyrian disciples: St. Addi, St. Mari, and St. Aki.

It is said that during the Assyrian Orhi kingdom, in Edessa, located northwest of Mesopotamia, the King, Abjar V (Abjar Okama, or the black Abjar), who ruled during 13-50 AD, was sick and did not recover despite the attempts of doctors and sages. Hearing about the miracles of Christ, he sent him several letters asking to be treated. Jesus sent Tadaus to heal the Assyrian king, and after his recovery, the King decided to convert to Christianity with his people. Christianity reached the East through the Assyrians, after St. Thomas, St. Addi, and St. Aki had brought Christianity to Persia, India, China, and Mongolia.

The Assyrians are an ethnically, linguistically, and religiously distinct minority in the Middle East. They are the only Middle Eastern Christian community without their own state. They constitute a minority in Iraq (600,000 Assyrians in the so-called Assyrian triangle in the north of Iraq, and in Baghdad and Mosul), Syria (120,000 Assyrians in Al-Jazeera district), Iran (50,000 Assyrians in the Urmia region and in large cities), and Turkey (20,000 Assyrians in southeastern Vilayet and in Istanbul).

According to Boháč (2010), the Assyrian nation is divided into three religious denominations:

- Nestorians - Assyrians who belong to the Assyrian Church of the East
- Chaldeans - Assyrians who belong to the Chaldean Catholic Church
- Syriacs - Assyrians who belong to the Syriac Orthodox Church (Jacobites) and the Syriac Catholic Church.

The Assyrian language, which is also known as Assyrian Neo-Aramaic, is spoken by three million Assyrian people in parts of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. It is linguistically traced back to Old Aramaic, which was once the lingua franca that dominated the region from the eleventh century BC (Beyer 1986). Assyrians of today are not only scattered all over the world but have also been identified by several terms - religious, as well as ethnic. However, they have preserved their culture, religion and traditions over many years.

1.1 Assyrian women's situation in Iraqi Kurdistan Region

This section discusses the current situation of Assyrian women in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region.

Assyrian women, as is the case with all women in Iraq, suffer greatly regarding family law. Women do more housework than men, such as cleaning, cooking and looking after children. Women also take more care of their relatives, including those of their partners/husbands. The burden of unpaid care is one of the reasons why many women work part-time. Therefore, women often earn less money than men.

In general, the average person in Iraq can distinguish Christian women from non-Christians by the way they dress, although this distinction has become somewhat difficult recently because of the similarity of women's dress in all religions and sects due to increasing globalisation and openness. However, the veil (covering the head) remains the hallmark that distinguishes Muslim women from their Christian counterparts, in addition to the long dress and *abaya* (cloak). Mostly, Christian women are more open to casual wear, for example t-shirts, jeans, sneakers, etc.

At the beginning of their occupation of Mosul, ISIS were targeting women from all non-Sunni minorities, including Christian women. For example, on many occasions ISIS targeted Christian nuns. Being a Christian woman in the land of ISIS would cost you your livelihood, your freedom, or even your life.

From the legal and constitutional point of view, there are equal opportunities for Iraqi men and women with regards to education, work, and political participation, regardless of religion. But the problem lies in societal patterns. The stereotypical image of women within Iraqi society as a whole, and the Assyrians in particular, is not limited to the position of men towards women only, but we also find that the woman herself trusts the performance of the political man and his decisions and does not vote in favour of women. Therefore, despite the fact that the participation of women in political life is one of the most important conditions for democracy, the man is the most fortunate in obtaining electoral votes and having access to the areas where decisions are made within the state. It is true that equality is stipulated in the Iraqi constitution, yet mechanisms are needed to implement it on the ground, with an emphasis on justice.

2 Methodology

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used as a qualitative approach to get an in-depth understanding of social issues affecting the Assyrian people, alongside participatory ranking, which ensured the rich qualitative data was accompanied by quantitative data. This mixed methods approach was used to elicit personal and specific examples from Assyrian participants about the threats and challenges facing them, and the varying levels of importance these issues hold in their lives. It was chosen so that the participants had the opportunity to share their experiences in a relaxed and comfortable environment. While all participants were asked to reflect on their own experiences, there was a particular focus on better understanding the experiences of Assyrian women due to the unique intersection of their gender and religious/ethnic identity.

The FGDs were carried out in Duhok, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), at the College of Languages, University of Duhok. The participants were selected based on convenience and their availability to serve a very specific purpose for this study, which was to find out stories about violence and discrimination against Assyrian people in KRG. Thus, 48 marginalised Assyrian people were asked to participate in the FGDs. They were divided into two groups in terms of gender and age. There were four FGDs, the first two groups were comprised of women aged between 18 and 35, and 35 and older. The second two groups were comprised of men aged between 18 and 35, and 35 and older (see Table 1). The meetings lasted for two days, each day for a specific age, and each FGD lasted for three hours.

The aim of the research, which shows the violence and discrimination against Assyrians as a religious minority in KRG, as well as the specific vulnerabilities facing Assyrian women, was clearly clarified to the participants before the meeting started through a brainstorming exercise. The questions about the obstacles and struggles that Assyrian people have experienced in their educational and working contexts, and how other religious affiliations treat them, were asked by the facilitator and answered by the participants. The participatory ranking exercise was conducted by asking the participants to vote on the most serious or important threat for them, both in terms of impact and recurrence. Thus, a participant was able to raise their hand more than once when the vote was being made for the threats one by one. The issues that were raised by the participants were ranked on the board by the assistants, based on the opinions of the participants, to find out more examples and stories relating to each issue. Each FGD was recorded and transcribed to facilitate the process of the documentation of people's stories.

This research was limited to Assyrian men and women who live inside Duhok. Those living outside Duhok were not able to participate because of issues such as transportation and distance. For example, they couldn't find someone to take them to Duhok and/or they would have been travelling too late in the day. Many stories were not told because of time constraints (two hours was not enough time for up to 12 men/women to talk about their own experiences and those of others).

Table 1: Participants in the FGDs by gender, age, and number

Group	Gender	Age	Total number
Group 1	Female	18-35	13
Group 2	Female	35+	13
Group 3	Male	18-35	13
Group 4	Male	35+	8

Source: Authors' own.

3 Research findings

In this section, we provide some background information and explore the key threats and challenges facing the Assyrian people. The results of the participatory ranking are

presented, followed by an analysis and exploration of the discussion that followed, in the participants' own words. Firstly, the results for the women's FGDs will be presented and analysed, followed by an analysis of the men's FGDs. Finally, the views of the men and the women will be compared and contrasted to better understand the unique vulnerabilities that Assyrian women in Iraqi Kurdistan face because of both their religion, ethnic identity and their gender.

3.1 Participatory ranking results for the women

The group of women aged 18-35 were asked to brainstorm the main threats facing them, and then they were asked to list those threats in order according to their impact through a participatory ranking exercise. Table 2 shows the order of the threats facing women aged 18-35. Some of the women voted for more than one issue, which is why there are more votes in the ranking totals than women in the FGD.

Table 2: Participatory ranking, women aged 18-35

Ranking	Women aged 18-35	Total no. of votes
1	Work (employment and promotion)	5
2	Study/education	4
3	Identity (language, nationality, symbols)	3
4	Celebrating Assyrian traditional occasions	2
5	Religious rituals	1
6	Violence	1
7	Encroachment on property	1
8	Inheritance	1

Source: Authors' own.

The majority of Assyrian women who have recently graduated from college reported that it is hard to find work or get promoted in their work unless they are a member of a political party, such as the PDK (Kurdish Democratic Party). Others agreed that Kurdish language proficiency can be a challenge during the interview process. Assyrian women who live in KRG cannot speak Kurdish fluently as they speak Assyrian at home and study

at Assyrian schools, where they only use Assyrian as a communicative language. Other women who came from the south of Iraq, such as Baghdad and Mosul, where they speak Arabic, can also barely speak Kurdish. Undergraduate students also complained about the unfair treatment by the academic staff because of them being Assyrian, being less proficient in the Kurdish language, and not being part of a political party.

One student who is 21 years old complained about being called '*Kufar*' (infidel) by other majority communities. However, women of this group pointed out that every threat mentioned during the session is related to one's allegiance to particular political parties. A 31-year-old female graduate claimed that,

Instead of having many different Assyrian parties, it would be better to unite and have a strong party that represents Assyrian people in general.

If Assyrian political representatives were united to work towards the aim of protecting Assyrian rights, it would be easier to solve the threats that have been identified. The younger women also linked this lack of effective Assyrian representation in politics to the violence Assyrian people face. One of the women, who is 16 years old, told a sorrowful story about her brother who was murdered by terrorists. These terrifying incidents led to the women discussing why minorities are murdered, kidnapped, and displaced. Some believed that it is because the Assyrian people are a religious minority, while others believed it is because the Assyrian people do not have wise or good political Assyrian representatives to defend their rights.

As for the group of women aged 35+, Table 3 shows the order of threats selected by the participants in the FGD based on the participatory ranking exercise. In a similar fashion to the younger women, some of these women voted for more than one issue, which is why there are more votes in the ranking totals than women in the FGD.

Table 3: Participatory ranking, women aged 35+

Ranking	Women aged 35+	Total no. of votes
1	Work (employment and promotion)	3
2	Harassment and violence	3
3	Identity (language, nationality, symbols)	2

4	Study/education	1
5	Celebrating Assyrian traditional occasions	1
6	Religious rituals	1
7	Encroachment on property	1
8	Inheritance	1
9	Food	1
10	Clothes	1

Source: Authors' own.

This group also agreed on the need to join the Kurdish political party (PDK) in order to find work or get promoted at their work. They also talked extensively about violence. A 41-year-old woman claimed that,

A woman's husband has been murdered by the terrorists and she has been forced to emigrate to another country because she did not find a peaceful life in her country.

Furthermore, Assyrian women expressed their painful feelings towards the challenges they face about their identity, which include using their own language (Assyrian), being called 'Assyrian' as their nationality, and using Assyrian symbols. A 65-year-old housewife shared her regret that even people from other minority communities deny the Assyrian language and the existence of the Assyrian nation as having been in the area for a long time. While these minority communities do recognise that the Assyrian language exists, if they were to acknowledge it, they would be admitting the existence of the Assyrian nation. In conclusion, the women felt that despite the challenges and threats they face in their daily lives, they, as a minority in this community, must unite and be one to overcome these obstacles and never give up trying to find suitable solutions for each problem.

Table 4 outlines the results of the ranking exercises of both groups of women (18-35 and 35+), with the results aggregated to form one priority list for Assyrian women overall.

Table 4: Aggregate participatory ranking for women’s FGDs (18-35 and 35+)

Ranking	Women (18-35 and 35+)	Total no. of votes
1	Work (employment and promotion)	8
2	Identity (language, nationality, symbols)	5
3	Study/education	5
4	Harassment and violence	4
5	Celebrating Assyrian traditional occasions	3
6	Religious rituals	2
7	Encroachment on property	2
8	Inheritance	2
9	Food	1
10	Clothes	1

Source: Authors’ own.

3.2 Analysis of threats and challenges for the women

The following sections explore each of the threats and challenges identified by the women in more detail.

3.2.1 Access to employment and getting promoted

Minorities in general, and Assyrian people in particular, face serious obstacles in accessing employment due to a lack of opportunities in their areas, discrimination on the basis of ethnic and religious identity, and because they lack the required connections to major political parties.

Political party affiliation

Being a member of a party is required for both obtaining work and getting promoted at work. It is widely acknowledged that there is unofficial discrimination in both public and private sector employment, with sensitive posts reserved for Muslims. Assyrian women

claim that it is hard to get a job or get promoted unless they are a member of a political party, such as the PDK.

A 24-year-old Assyrian graduate said,

I graduated from a public university in Duhok and was among the top three students. I have the right to work at universities and study for a master's degree, but unfortunately Assyrian students do not easily get these opportunities because of being Assyrian and not in the Party.

A 23-year-old student added,

I know a woman who is an engineer, she emigrated from Baghdad to live in Kurdistan. Unfortunately, she could not work freely unless she agreed to join PDK [Kurdish Democratic Party]. Finally, she decided to leave her country and travel abroad.

Refusing to join a political party has become a critical issue which leads to many problems, especially for women who generally like to be politically independent due to the dominance of men in politics and a reluctance from women to go against their parents, who wish for them to reject the Kurdish parties (such as PDK) and instead join the Assyrian ones. In the example shared above, emigration was the last solution available for this woman, who suffered a lot as she could not work freely without the interference of the political party.

A 31-year-old woman mentioned that something similar happened with her father:

My father is living in Baghdad while we, his family, are living in Duhok. He stays far away from us as he can't find a suitable work for himself unless he joins [the] PDK and, if he opens an office for himself, there should be a Kurdish partner who shares the work with him.

A 58-year-old female employee demonstrated how a lack of political party affiliation negatively affects progression opportunities:

I have been deceived in my work as I have not been selected to be a manager although I am qualified enough to get this position. When I asked the reason, I was told that because I am not in a party, I have no right to get promoted. I was upset to see myself in this situation, I was always an independent person and believe that an employee should do his/her work without an interfering of political sides. Unfortunately, in my country, Assyrian people have no good opportunities either to work nor to get promoted unless they are a member of a political party.

Religious and racial discrimination

One enthusiastic graduate woman who has applied for many jobs, a 26-year-old, was shocked to know that her CV is being refused as she has written the word 'Assyrian' in it:

During one job interview, I was asked to remove the word 'Assyrian' from my CV otherwise I won't be able to get the job. Also, I have been molested by the interviewer as he thought that because I am Assyrian then it will be easy to do whatever he likes.

Similarly, a 36-year-old woman shared how,

I work in an office. One day the manager told me that he was looking for a new employee, I told him that there is a graduate Assyrian girl who is looking for a job and I gave him her CV. After looking at her CV, he told me that she has a good CV, and he is ready to interview her. After the interview, he told me that he does not want a new employee anymore, after a while I found out that he gave the job to a Muslim lady who has not got as good a CV as my friend.

The racial and religious discrimination in this case is very clear given the less-qualified Muslim woman was recruited over an Assyrian one. A 57-year-old housewife shared a similar example involving her daughter:

My daughter was one of the top ten students at college. Unfortunately, when she graduated, she could not get a job at the university as she is Assyrian. However, my daughter never gave up, she tried to apply for many jobs in Duhok, Kurdistan. The first question they asked her in the interviews was whether she knows Kurdish

or not. She told them that she is displaced, that is why she knows only a little Kurdish. Anyway, she can't find a job in spite of having a good CV.

People who live in southern Iraq do not know Kurdish since they speak Arabic as the official language of the country. However, they have been criticised for being unable to speak Kurdish. This badly affects the ambitions of Assyrian women, as in many cases they don't even have the option to learn Kurdish, either at work or the option to take courses outside of work.

Racial and religious discrimination not only stops Assyrian women from entering the workplace, but also stops women from progressing after they have entered it.

3.2.2 Identity (language, nationality, symbols)

Language can represent an identity of a particular nation. Assyrian people have struggled to use their language throughout the ages. Those in authority have prevented 'Assyrian language' being referred to as a language of Christian people, as otherwise they would have to acknowledge the existence of Assyrian people as an ethno-religious minority. Instead, 'neo-Aramaic,' 'Chaldean,' or 'modern Syriac' have been used. Respondents referred to discrimination, and the denial of their identity, based on the language that they speak. For example, a 65-year-old housewife recalled a time when her identity was denied while travelling with her family:

In 1982, I was with my son, two daughters, and sister-in-law travelling from Kirkuk to Duhok. On the way, my younger daughter felt dizzy, and I asked the driver to stop the car to comfort my daughter. He got angry and told me that he could not understand me as I spoke in Arabic, then he explained that people who speak Kurdish are Kurds and those who speak Arabic are Arabs and because I was speaking Arabic then I was Arab. At that time, I became furious and told him that we are Assyrian, and we have our own language but because you are an ignorant person who knows nothing about the history of Assyrians, you will know nothing about my language. Also, I talked to you in Arabic, which is a language of your Holy Qur'an, because I thought that you know the language of your religion. Something similar happened in recent times, I was living in Duhok at that time, I got a taxi to go to the bazar, and the taxi driver told me that you are Arab because you are speaking Arabic. I told him to stop speaking and asked him, 'Why do you think that whoever speaks Arabic means that he/she is Arab?'

Similarly, a 26-year-old girl explained that,

Whenever I tell people that I am Assyrian, they get angry and ask me to say Christian not Assyrian as if they want me to deny my identity. I keep telling them that Christianity is my religion and Assyrian is my nationality; the same as Arab and Kurd who are both Muslim. However, even though they get my point, they never like to admit the truth. Another thing concerning my language, I have heard many people telling me that you don't have your native language, your language is either Kurdish, Arabic, or English.

In the FGDs women talked about how members of religious majority groups reacted negatively towards religious minority symbols, such as the *Lamassu* (winged bull), *Atta* (Assyrian flag), *Ishtar* (star of Venus), and the cross, which are traditionally worn more frequently and publicly by women than by men.

One woman, a 24-year-old engineer, reflected on her experience of wearing a religious symbol at school:

While I was taking an exam at school, the school principal had a quick tour to observe the exam procedures, she came close to me and asked me about my necklace. I told her that my mother advised me to wear a cross necklace to keep me safe and not to get scared of the exam. The principal got angry at me, she put her hand on my neck, pulled it out, and warned me not to wear it again. What makes me get angrier is that the principal did not react the same to a classmate who was sitting beside me and wearing an infinity necklace.

Treatment like this results in other Assyrians, and those from other minorities, becoming less likely to wear something that reveals their identity and allows them to feel proud of it. Incidents like this also create animosity among the students and an inability to live in a peaceful environment where they can make good friendships with other religious majority students.

Another of the women, a 22-year-old, mentioned her surprise at discovering that people in the workplace still had these attitudes:

My mother works as a nurse at the hospital, she used to tell me that she is getting upset as other Kurdish workers used to tell her that she is Kurdish not

Assyrian. I could not believe that there are still people who think in this retrograde way. However, when I started college, I faced the same situation that shocked me.

Likewise, a 37-year-old female teacher commented that,

I am working in a public school, one day my colleague's uncle passed away, so the academic staff went out to her house to condole her. There was an old woman sitting in the house. She asked all people to pray, at the end of praying she said, 'God bless all Muslim people'. I felt angry and insulted then I told the old women that you, at least, should respect me and respect other minorities and say, 'God bless all people in general.'

The Islamic majority community are used to saying 'God bless all Muslim people' without paying attention to the emotions of Assyrian people. Even when Assyrian people share their religious and cultural occasions or funerals with Muslim people, Muslims use this phrase. This makes minorities angry at not being included in their speech, as it suggests that they deny the existence of religious minority communities.

When discussing this denial of their identity through the rejection of their language, symbols and nationality, it became clear that this was not only an issue in educational facilities and workplaces. The Assyrian identity and language constantly face criticism. This creates an opportunity for Muslims to remove the history of Assyrian people from existence. Discrimination in schools and educational facilities demonstrates how these attitudes are passed down through generations.

3.2.3 Education

The educational curriculum in Iraqi schools has long neglected the history and culture of Iraq's various ethnic and religious minorities in favour of dominant groups. The curriculum is biased towards the Muslim majority.

A 29-year-old Assyrian female mentioned a story about her grandmother:

Our grandmothers told us that their parents did not send them to school because of the retrograde thought among Kurdish society at that time and being scared of harassment or being killed by Muslim men. Despite the fact that Assyria was one of the ancient nations that encourages education, Assyrian women, in a

specific time, could not practise their rights in the field of education because of being surrounded by ignorant people.

In the present day this is less of a challenge, however, when Assyrian girls are able to access an education, they continue to face problems. For example, one of the young women referred to the school curriculum:

In the grade 12 history book, there is mention of a warrior called Simko Shakak who raped and killed Assyrian women years before. In this book he was regarded as a Kurdish hero. Not only are we obliged to read and memorise his story, but we are expected to believe that he is a real hero who came to save us from St. Shimon, who in turn tortured us.

Students are complaining about reading fake historical information which they have to memorise and believe. Many cannot accept this and feel angry, however, there is nothing they can do to counter the curriculum which is set by the government.

The young woman above continued by telling another story:

In my town Nala-Duhok, there is only one Assyrian school and female students can only study until grade 9. This is because they often like to study in scientific departments and there is only a literary department in their school. In this case, they have to go to the city centre to finish their high school. However, some of these students cannot afford to do so and this leads them to either accept their destiny and study in a literary department or marry someone who is living in the city centre, so they can live near the school and be able to finish their study.

This indicates that there is discrimination not only between minorities and majorities but also between minorities of different genders. Assyrian women, especially those who live in villages, not only face challenges in the academic setting but they also face limited choices because they are female. While the male students would also have to pay to travel to study, they may have access to work that enables them to pay for their transportation, or their parents may prioritise giving them the necessary funds, as they believe it is more important for their sons to finish school than their daughters. This example also shows how young Assyrian women risk early marriage because it is the

only way they are able to access the education they desire. For every problem that Assyrians face, Assyrian women are always even further oppressed.

Within school, Assyrian girls face verbal harassment and confrontation. For example, a 25-year-old woman said that when she studied in a Kurdish school she was insulted by her classmates:

One day, my two brothers and I were on our way returning back home from school, when we heard our classmates calling us 'kufar' [infidels] and making fun of us. My brothers got angry and started fighting with them. He told them that we are studying at the same school, and we have been colleagues for years, but you are still using bad words to insult us, what a shame!

Kufar, which means 'infidels', is a term used by Muslims to refer to the Assyrians as they follow Christian doctrine. Children from the Muslim majority, such as those in this anecdote, will have heard this term either from their parents or older people in their community, suggesting again that this discrimination is passed down through generations. It also shows that religious discrimination often starts from childhood.

Racial discrimination among students is a critical issue that many students complain about. It really hurts people to experience this discrimination in an academic setting where human rights are meant to be practised and good values taught. The women discussed how the discrimination older generations faced may have seemed worse, however it is because it is less overt nowadays. They felt that at the current time, religious majority students try to indirectly attack Assyrian students in order to upset them, with the hope that Assyrian people will gradually lose their values and traditions.

A 35-year-old gave an example of how she was threatened into leaving her studies before she had completed them:

I could not finish my study because of being threatened by the terrorists in Baghdad in 2005. The terrorists threw a threatening paper into our garden warning us to leave the place otherwise I will be kidnapped, or we will be murdered. We had to sell our big house in three days and escaped in fear. I was affected psychologically and had no good opportunities to complete my studies.

Other reasons that displaced Assyrian girls could not finish their studies included the lack of schools near their houses, no transportation, and unwillingness to face the majority community because of the discrimination they face.

3.2.4 Harassment and violence

Insecurity and violence remain a challenge for displaced people. Assyrian women, like other minority women, were subjected to acts of violence, such as murder, kidnapping, and internal and external forced displacement.

One of the women, a 21-year-old undergraduate Assyrian student, recalled the story of an 18-year-old Assyrian girl who was murdered:

In Nala town, Duhok, there was a poor Assyrian family living in the town. Their 18-year-old daughter started working as a servant [cleaner] in a rich Kurdish house which was in the same town. Days passed and the Assyrian family heard nothing about their daughter, when they asked about her absence, they found out that their daughter had been killed and thrown into the river by anonymous people. They could not accuse the Kurdish family as they [had] been threatened and bribed for their silence.

Being harassed is one of the hardest challenges Assyrian women face, especially at work. Assyrian women are victims of the majority community, and they stay silent because of fear and the lack of those in authority in politics who they could ask for protection. This threat forms a great danger to their psychological wellbeing and self-confidence, affecting women's ability to realise their rights in various areas of life.

A 41-year-old woman mentioned a story of a young girl who was studying at the faculty of psychology in 2018:

She was pretty and the dean liked her. One day while she was going back home from college in a taxi, the dean stopped the taxi on the way and got in the car and started to prey on her. She defended herself and started to hit him in his face and head and managed to escape. Unfortunately, the dean has political power in that, even when she accused him, no one could dare to defend her. She failed in his subject and even the head of department was sent to another place because he protected her.

This incident demonstrates the terrible phenomena that Assyrian students experience, especially in academic settings. Moreover, this story illustrates that whenever women try to ask for their rights and stand against harassment, they face many additional social and moral challenges.

A 37-year-old woman shared a related story of an Assyrian woman whom she met years ago:

An Assyrian family was living in Mosul around 2006-2007. The father was a pharmacist and working in his own pharmacy. One day, strange people came to his house and knocked on the door, the man went out to see who they were, his wife and his four-year-old daughter followed him. The criminals shot at him, and he fell down on the ground and passed away. His daughter witnessed this horrible scene and experienced shock. His wife was then threatened into selling the pharmacy and leaving Mosul with her two daughters. In spite of starting a new life in a different city, working at university, taking her daughters to gifted schools, they could not feel comfortable. She felt that they have no rights in Iraq and there is always ethnic discrimination. What is worse, her eldest daughter could never forget that horrible moment of her father's death and was psychologically sick. Thus, they emigrated to another country where they hopefully [found] a peaceful life.

Assyrians have always suffered persecution and violence. They were forced to travel abroad because of the threat of kidnapping, killing or displacement. As with this family whose father was killed in front of their eyes, despite not being guilty of anything they were forced to leave their city and made to feel that they had no home in Iraq. Thus, most Assyrians emigrate in search of a better life.

3.2.5 Celebrating Assyrian traditional occasions

Assyrian festivals can be divided into two groups in the Assyrian culture: religious festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, and non-religious ones such as *Akito* (Assyrian New Year on 1st April) and *Premta d'Simele* (Simele Massacres on 7th August). However, these festivals are not recognised by many in the Muslim majority.

One of the women, a 24-year-old engineering graduate, recalled an experience from during her college days:

When I was at college, I noticed that my mark [was] zero in one subject, when I asked the instructor about the reason, he said that you were absent on the exam day, but I told him that I had got permission from the department as it was Easter. He simply answered me, 'Then this is your problem'.

The women discussed how this was particularly a problem with teachers in academic settings. Some instructors refuse to give permission to the students for holidays and insist on them taking exams. Thus, the students get upset and sometimes avoid celebrating so as not to get into trouble. This shows how Assyrian students are forced into denying their religion in order to have access to the same opportunities as those from the Muslim majority.

This discrimination is not limited to Assyrian students. Participants also discussed examples of not being able to take time off work to celebrate important occasions. For example, a 61-year-old employee stated how,

I have noticed that employers have a negative reaction to Assyrian employees who ask for formal permission (leave) not to go to work during their occasions. This incident disturbs me a lot as it is our simple right to celebrate our traditional and religious occasions without asking for formal permission, since it is already a formal holiday from the government to the Assyrian people.

Despite the fact that there are official regulations governing special holidays for Assyrians, employees still struggle to get permission on these occasions. Some Muslim people claim that they have not heard about these regulations, while others neglect these regulations and consider them meaningless.

One of the women, a 30-year-old, described how the freedom to celebrate religious festivals during the Covid-19 pandemic differed for religious minorities:

During the 2021 quarantine, people were not allowed to celebrate any social and traditional occasions together because of Covid-19. On the one hand, the majority of Kurdish people went out to celebrate Newroz [Kurdish New Year on 21st March] and the Adha feast as well. On the other hand, Assyrian people were prohibited from holding Assyrian Mezalta [Assyrian New Year on 1st April] and from going to church on Easter Day.

People around the world, including Assyrians, could not practise their daily routine activities nor celebrate their special occasions due to the Covid-19 quarantine. However, Kurdish people were allowed to celebrate their religious and non-religious occasions. This created animosity between these two communities.

3.2.6 Religious rituals

Religious rituals involve a series of actions performed in a determined order. In other words, a ritual is a way of behaving as per prescribed or established form of religious ceremony. The women described being restricted and prevented from freely practising their religious rituals by those in the majority.

For example, a 54-year-old woman told her sorrowful story about being displaced because of her and her family's desire to pray freely:

I was living with my husband and children in Baghdad in a renting house – the second floor. [On] the first floor, the owner of the house, who was a Shia Muslim woman, was living alone. During Saddam's rule, my friends and I used to gather and pray at home, the owner never got upset. However, after Saddam's fall, the owner started reacting against us, she ordered us either to stop praying or to leave the house because we are disturbing her with our sounds of praying and, as a conservative Muslim woman, she won't any more accept Christian people to practise their religious duties in her house.

However, the women in the FGDs were not only concerned about having the freedom to practise religious rituals, but also about the treatment of their places of worship and sanctified spaces. For example, a 21-year-old undergraduate student explained how,

A year ago, we heard that there was a Kurdish traditional band dancing in a church in Alqosh town, Duhok. No one objected [to] such an offensive action, either because of fear or what is now being called peaceful coexistence. However, as Assyrian and Christian, we deny such insulting behaviour. Church is a place where we practise our religious rituals, not dance.

3.2.7 Encroachment on property

Property and land surveys are an important part of the Assyrian nation. Assyrian lands have been taken by the Kurds in northern Iraq and by Arabs in the Nineveh plains. Nowadays, some Kurdish neighbours are encroaching on Assyrian-owned lands,

especially in Barawar and Nalah districts. For example, a 21-year-old undergraduate student said,

Our lands in Barwar village have been burnt five times and the lands have been occupied by Kurds in Chalik village. We always try to dismiss the Kurds from our land, but they keep coming back and live in our lands illegally.

A 37-year-old woman said,

There are many lands which belong to our ancestors, but they were taken over by the government for the purpose of paving streets. The government promised the Assyrian people full compensation, but it went for nothing.

The women explained that this form of persecution against the Assyrian people often results in Assyrian people emigrating, as they feel they have nothing left in their country.

3.2.8 Inheritance

The application of Islamic law in the distribution of inheritance and shares has become a matter imposed on Assyrians in Iraq. Islamic law gives men a share twice as large as women. However, Assyrians tend to carry out a consensual division according to the principles of Christian Sharia, with equality between men and women in inheritance. Nevertheless, the provisions of Islamic Sharia have been accepted by a large segment of Assyrian men, because it gives them twice as much.

A 21-year-old undergraduate student explained how Assyrian women are stuck in a difficult situation when the men in their community choose to follow the principles of Islamic Sharia:

In general, Assyrian people follow the public law which follows Islamic Sharia. Because of being a minority, we don't have a special rule that calls for equality between men and women. Thus, we have to follow these rules otherwise we get nothing.

Another 60-year-old woman said,

Even Assyrian people are following Sharia in the case of inheritance because there is no specific rule in the government which separates Assyrians' rights from other

majority religious rights. That is why we all are expected to follow the rules of government which is applying Islamic Sharia.

This is an example of another challenge that Assyrian women face not only with religious majorities, but also from within their own religious minority group.

3.2.9 Food

Assyrians are famous for their delicious meals and for sharing food with other people on their special occasions. However, some people do not eat Assyrian food because they consider them *Kufar* (infidels) who never say 'In the name of God' when they cook. Moreover, other people believe that Assyrian dishes contain alcohol, such as wine, or pork, both of which are forbidden to Muslims.

For example, one of the women, a 46-year-old, mentioned a story about her neighbours refusing her food:

I used to share food with my neighbours in Baghdad. Most of my neighbours were Assyrian, and the rest were Muslims and Yazidi. One day, I gave one of my Muslim neighbours 'Kuba'. She asked me about the reason behind distributing food to all neighbours, I told her that today is a memorial of Saint Qiryagos, and we celebrate this day by sharing food as an act of charity. She returned the food and told me that they can't accept it because they are Muslim who fast and pray so they never eat Assyrian food.

This behaviour negatively impacts peaceful coexistence between religious majority and minority communities.

3.2.10 Clothes

In general, Assyrians wear formal clothes for work and dress casually for their daily activities, as other religious majority people do. The only difference between Assyrian and Muslim women's clothing is wearing the hijab. Most Muslim women wear a hijab (covering their head with a veil) while Assyrian women only cover their head during attendance at church. However, Assyrian women sometimes suffer from discrimination by religious majority people from not wearing a hijab.

For example, a 57-year-old housewife shared her daughter's experience studying at the University of Mosul:

My daughter was studying at the college of translation in the University of Mosul. Her colleagues and instructors asked her to wear a long skirt and shirt as other Muslims girls; she was obliged to follow their instructions otherwise she could not finish her studies. After ten days, she noticed that Muslim girls wear whatever they like. When she told her instructors this, they answered that, 'They are wearing a scarf [hijab] unlike you, that is why you should at least wear modest clothes.'

Assyrian women have always been criticised for their clothes, although they always respect the traditions of the country and wear suitable clothes that go with the cultural background of the Islamic society. However, in the case of wearing the hijab, Muslims usually insult Assyrian women by asking them to wear one, and this negatively affects Assyrian women's psychological wellbeing.

3.3 Participatory ranking results for the men

The challenges facing women are different from the men's challenges. Below, challenges facing men are discussed. The threats listed in Table 5 were identified by men aged 18-35. These men were asked to list the threats in order of impact and to explain why they had ranked the threats accordingly. Some of the men voted for more than one issue, which is why there are more votes in the ranking totals than men in the FGD.

Table 5: Participatory ranking, men aged 18-35

Ranking	Men aged 18-35	Total no. of votes
1	Political representation	6
2	Encroachment on property	4
3	Work (employment)	2
4	Transport	2
5	Community services	2
6	Verbal racism	1

7	Mother tongue	1
8	Religious difference	1
9	Study/education	1
10	Distortion of Assyrian monuments and archaeology	1
11	Impact of Covid-19 (quarantine)	1

Source: Authors' own.

Table 5 shows political representation to be the most significant issue facing Assyrian men. Regarding the rationale behind listing the threats in this way, a 24-year-old man stated,

For me political representation is the biggest threat to us because all the other problems are related to political representation. If we were politically represented well, there would be solutions to all the other problems.

Likewise, a 30-year-old man argued that political representation is the most dangerous threat to the Assyrians, because if it was controlled, it would be easier for them to address all the other points they mentioned. If their political representation is good, they would be able to obtain their rights.

A 22-year-old man also chose political representation as the most important threat because it is seen that people whose political representation was good in the government have progressed, unlike the Assyrians; 'we stayed in our place,' he concluded. However, a 28-year-old Assyrian man sees that solving the problem of racism is no less important than the threat of the poor political representation of the Assyrians.

On the other hand, a 20-year-old man pointed out that, even if Assyrians are well represented politically – that is, they get more seats in Parliament – it is required that the people who will represent Assyrians be honest people and not work for their personal interests. Conversely, a 27-year-old participant disagreed that Assyrians do not have good political representation. He stated that there is a deeper problem, which is the policy of 'divide and rule' that is being practised against Assyrians. The problem is that Assyrians are not united, and their problem does not lie in being a minority, but in their internal problems that divide them.

Most participants agreed that there is racism against Assyrians, and this is a fact that cannot be denied. However, the biggest problem, according to a 30-year-old participant, is that since Assyrians are a minority, they must unite and be one hand; but everyone who goes to represent the Assyrians in the government works for his personal interests and does not work to find solutions to the problems that Assyrians suffer from:

As a result, we see encroachment on our lands and our property. As it is said, 'your land is your honour', that is, it is our all being that we are supposed to sacrifice our lives to preserve. And I see that this problem exists because we do not have wise and good political representation. We have Rayan al-Kildani who represents us in the central government, but as it is known he is loyal to the Shiite parties, and we are not confident that he will do anything for us. As we can see, our lands are occupied by others, and we are persecuted.

As for the group of men aged 35+, the threats shown in Table 6 were identified. Again, some of these older men voted for more than one issue, which is why there are more votes in the ranking totals than men in the FGD.

Table 6: Participatory ranking, men aged 35+

Ranking	Men aged 35+	Total no. of votes
1	Cultural marginalisation	4
2	Work (employment)	3
3	Political representation	3
4	Marginalisation and denial by the government	2
5	Legal issues	2
6	Freedom of worship	1
7	Community services	1
8	Freedom of expression	1
9	Use of the mother tongue	1
10	Study/education	1

11	Transport	1
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Source: Authors' own.

The group of men whose ages were over 35 years old gave the argument below for their choices. A 37-year-old man stated,

In my opinion, all the problems mentioned are easy and their solution is not impossible, with the exception of cultural marginalisation, which I see as a disaster in all respects. This is because the members of the mainstream religion and nation are trying to erase us and our Chaldean, Syriac and Assyrian culture. Yes, legal problems are also important, but it is possible to amend laws. As well as for community services, I admit that they do not exist in our Assyrian and Christian villages, but it is possible that an honest person in the municipality will come and provide these services for us, or a non-governmental organisation will come and help us. As for the cultural marginalisation that I am focusing on here, it erases our being, our existence, our clothes, our language, and everything that concerns us, and this is a great disaster.

Likewise, a 38-year-old man affirmed that cultural marginalisation is a serious threat:

If we are marginalised, then we will be treated as a minority, and even less than a minority.

However, a 36-year-old man said,

In my opinion, legal problems are a big problem for us because it is true that the constitution states that there are many good things for us as Christians, but there is no law enforcement on the ground. Even the mother tongue and its being an official language, is just ink on paper and without application. As well as there is no compensation and no jobs.

Table 7 shows the aggregated rankings of both age groups of men.

Table 7: Aggregate participatory ranking for men's FGDs (18-35 and 35+)

Ranking	Men (aged 18-35 and 35+)	Total no. of votes
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1	Political representation	9
2	Legal issues (encroachment on property)	6
3	Cultural marginalisation (distortion of Assyrian monuments and archaeology)	5
4	Work	5
5	Transport	3
6	Community services	3
7	Freedom of worship	2
8	Study/education	2
9	Use of the mother tongue	2
10	Marginalisation and denial by the government	2
11	Freedom of expression	1
12	Health (Impact of Covid-19 – quarantine)	1
13	Verbal racism	1

Source: Authors' own.

3.4 Analysis of threats and challenges for the men

3.4.1 Political representation

Overall, political representation was considered the most serious threat facing Assyrians according to the men of both age groups. All electoral processes are under the domination of the major political parties. Assyrians hope that these parties will at least protect them in the House of Representatives, in which minorities are allocated 3 per cent of the total parliamentary seats, as organised according to the quota principle. However, this rarely happens, and the rights of Assyrians are not observed in any way in Parliament. Instead, the majority decide on behalf of the Assyrians, and impose their decisions and laws on them.

A 22-year-old man stated,

It is very difficult to live in Iraq when you belong to a minority as a nation. If you do not have acquaintances and connections in the government, you will suffer a lot. As we know, our political representation as Assyrians is very weak and we face serious difficulties until we get one seat in Parliament.

A 43-year-old man agreed:

I see that our political representation is not at the required level. In 1992 we took five seats here in the Christian quota, but the next morning we woke up, someone (I don't want to mention his name) separated from us, so we became four. And when the Iraqi elections came before the current parliament, we were scheduled to have a Christian list alone, and in several sessions, this was cancelled. For example, the Popular Mobilization Forces, Hadi al-Amiri and Rayan al-Kildani's group – for these all it is not in their interest for Christians to have a list on their own, because they will take seats from them. We have a quota problem. Parliament seats were taken from us, whether in the Iraqi government or in the Kurdistan Regional Government.

A 36-year-old man summarised the political problems, saying,

We have a problem with the quota, especially when elections have taken place, meaning that now there is a female candidate for us that we do not know, and we do not know where [she is from]. Therefore, if in the future a Christian faces a problem, he will not know who to send his complaint to, and this is just an example. Secondly, we have a problem in not allocating important job grades to Christians. In the entire government, there is only one department, which is the Department of Endowments for Christian Affairs, run by a Christian. As for the rest of the departments, there is no Christian director at all.

According to this participant, even though something positive has happened (the election of a female MP to represent Christians), it is not as simple as it seems. He claimed that the woman has been imposed by the ruling party on the Christian community and she does not belong to any Christian or Assyrian parties, so he does not trust that she will represent the Christian community in a good manner. However, the other men who discussed this did not have an issue with the fact that this representative is female.

3.4.2 Work

Employment, especially in the governmental sector, has been scarce for everyone in Iraq and Kurdistan. Minorities are the ones who suffer the most in this regard, though. Participants outlined various aspects of their working life that lead to them being discriminated against because they are Assyrian.

Political party affiliation

The first of these, as discussed in the women's section, is the custom in Kurdistan that stipulates the necessity of belonging to the ruling party in order to obtain good jobs, bonuses and promotions. People also have to be affiliated with the ruling party in order to be entrusted with sensitive and administrative positions in all government departments. It is worth mentioning that in Erbil and Duhok there is a specific ruling party, and in Sulaymaniyah there is a different ruling party. Thus, Assyrians find themselves hanging between the balance, forced to affiliate themselves with one of the two parties to get a job.

A 30-year-old man reiterated the link between finding a decent job and having political affiliations:

Regarding work and job rank, this is related to the quota, and it depends on which party you belong to in order to get a job in the government. I am also a graduate with distinction, and I was among the top students in my department when I finished accounting. After graduation, I applied for a job at a private university in order to work there. Unfortunately, the job was given to my colleagues, who graduated with great difficulty and with very low grades, but because of nepotism and favouritism, they got the job, and I was left without work. The reason is known. Someone told me that in order to get a job, I must get an identity card from a certain party that shows that I belong to that party, otherwise I must have a magic lantern in order to be able to get a job in this country because I am an Assyrian.

A 35-year-old man agreed, sharing a similar example:

One of my close relatives had obtained a major degree from a reputable university outside the country. When he returned from abroad, a private university called him and asked him to head one of the departments in one of the colleges

affiliated with this university. They asked him some questions related to his specialisation and so on, but then they asked him about his political party affiliation. And here was the shock for them when this person answered them saying that he is independent and does not belong to any party. Accordingly, they refused to give him the position of head of the department, although he was the most suitable person for this position, but he did not belong to their political party.

It is important to explain that the private sector in Iraq is very weak and it rarely provides jobs for young people when they graduate from university. Therefore, everyone's ambition is to get a job in the governmental sector. However, as is clear from the quotes of the participants, political affiliation is strongly taken into consideration when appointing people into government departments. Further, the government is not providing as many jobs as it was a decade ago due to a lack of vacancies.

This was outlined by one of the men, a 28-year-old, who stated that,

We face many obstacles and problems in this regard. Many of us have graduated from school and it takes many years to find an appointment or a job in the government. Finding jobs in government departments is very difficult.

A 37-year-old described how discrimination is obvious in government departments:

You will not see five per cent of the Assyrians appointed as directors, and we only see a Christian dean at the college of engineering and as the Director of the Christian Endowment. Is it conceivable that Duhok, whose percentage of Christians is five per cent, has only two directors in its government departments?

Even when an Assyrian person is appointed to a sensitive post and becomes a director, that Assyrian person must have been filtered politically and he/she should be either directly affiliated to the ruling political party or at least loyal to that party.

However, a 38-year-old man described how political party affiliations aren't necessarily as big an issue for middle-class Christians, suggesting that lower- and working-class Assyrians face an additional vulnerability because of their class:

As for work problems, in general, middle-class Christians do not suffer from any problems, but a person who owns a large company or a large business will suffer obvious persecution regarding obstruction of his work and he must belong to their political party, but as an independent Assyrian they do not give him the opportunity to work. As for the middle-class, they are comfortable in this respect and things are not that bad. [As] an example of what I said, my friend, who is very close to me, wanted to open a company for alcoholic beverages, but government officials stood against him and obstructed his work because he refused to comply with their illegal demands.

The main reason behind the problem highlighted above is that the community leaders from the Muslim majority do not wish for Assyrian people to gain authority and to be owners of big businesses. Therefore, they put many obstacles in the way of Assyrian businessmen.

Religious holidays, rituals and traditions

Participants described how they have to change their behaviour at work to fit in with the religious holidays, rituals and traditions of the Muslim majority. For example, one of the men, a 28-year-old, described how,

I was working in Carrefour during Ramadan and our shifts were three shifts in order to help our Muslim colleagues because they were fasting. The only shift from 2pm to 6pm was my shift of work together with three other Christians. During this period, we were working, and the rest of co-workers would go to rest and eat, and we had to stay there in Carrefour because our religion is different, and we were not fasting. I used to see that as a compulsory thing imposed on me, and if I did not comply, they would fire me from work.

Likewise, in relation to Assyrian religious holidays and traditions, a 30-year-old man shared how,

One of the work problems that we face as Christians is the one related to the Christmas holiday period. The majority of Christians here celebrate Christmas on December 25th, but there are others who celebrate on January 7th. When we stop working on December 25th, we are like the others, because the majority have an official holiday. As for me, because I belong to the sect that celebrates [on]

January 7th, when I take a break, I receive many criticisms and grumblings because of my two breaks because of Christmas.

In Kurdistan, there is no fixed calendar for the official holidays and off days throughout the year. This can cause troubles and confusion for expected working days at the governmental departments.

Language

In addition to religious holidays and traditions, one of the men, a 43-year-old, explained how language differences is an issue that leads to discrimination for Assyrians:

The other problem lies in the appointments [employment], especially the issue of Syriac studies. There should be special appointments for us because as you know the Syriac language cadres are very few and many schools are closed, especially in places like Mangesh subdistrict and other places, and the reason is the lack of Syriac Christian cadres. This is because the government has marginalised us. There is a marginalisation of us in all respects and you must belong to them politically in order to be taken into consideration.

As mentioned earlier, governmental appointments have decreased in recent times. On top of that, Syriac language graduates have been especially marginalised.

3.4.3 Legal issues

Assyrians suffer from many legal issues in Iraq and Kurdistan, mainly because Islamic law is followed and adopted by the state. The first of these relates to land and property ownership.

Land and property ownership

As a result of being a poorly represented minority in the government, a lot of Assyrian land and properties are encroached upon. Prominent Assyrians who specialise in the affairs of the Kurdistan Region stress that the government must address the issue of encroachment on Christian lands to no avail.

In this regard, a 30-year-old man said,

One of the big threats to us today is related to the taking of our villages and the encroachment that is taking place on our lands. We are from Bakhitme village.

The Kurdish, Yazidi and Arab villages that had previously been taken by the Ba'ath regime during the days of Saddam Hussein, were compensated by giving them lands and the lands that had been allocated for military camps were returned to their original inhabitants. As for us, so far in our village, we have a vast plot of land, more than 2000 dunams [acres], that is not yet registered in our name. Our village was registered in the real estate in the name of the former Iraqi Ministry of the Interior. Even after the fall of the previous regime, it was registered in the name of the Ministry of Interior of Kurdistan. There are many other villages that have been restored to their original inhabitants and there are many examples of this. But there are villages that have been seized claiming to be under the name of Saddam's government and then transferred under the name of the Ministry of the Interior of Kurdistan.

On this point, a 28-year-old man said,

Regarding the encroachment on our property, I would like to mention what happened in the village of Garma. The village was taken over from the Christians by the majority community, and it was seized by them after they issued official papers to that effect. So, some organisations gathered donations in order to return and buy this village, knowing that it was their village of origin.

Based on the discussions in the FGD, it was clear that Assyrians experience threats to their property from groups of different backgrounds. For instance, a 30-year-old man said,

I would like to give an example of when we were still in Baghdad in 2007. We were unable to sell our house after we left it and moved to the Kurdistan Region because a Muslim Arab family lived in it, and they refused to leave the house. We suffered a lot until we were able to get them out of our house through a clan sheikh who mediated for us. So far, there are Christian families whose homes in Baghdad were taken by Arab families, and they lost their homes.

On the other hand, another of the men, an 18-year-old, said,

For us, we did not have any problems as long as we lived in our house, but it happened that we gave our house to a Muslim family in Kurdistan for rent. We suffered a lot because this family did not pay the monthly rent and they exploited us because we are Christians.

Inheritance

The second legal issue the participants discussed was inheritance. As already discussed in the women's analysis, the law in Iraqi Kurdistan is complicated and does not easily allow equality between women and men. There are two regulations forming the rules over Assyrians in Iraq – the central and the regional – and in the Iraqi government Islamic Sharia is followed.

A 28-year-old man described how his family attempted to have their inheritance split equally between the men and women, however because this does not follow the Islamic Sharia it was a long and complicated process:

A case happened in our extended family that we hired a lawyer, and he performed the legitimate allotment, and all the male brothers signed so that the house would be divided equally between males and females, with the follow-up of the court. But these are long procedures and may not be done without informing the government because government departments will not allow your transaction to proceed if you do not inform them.

A 52-year-old explained that in Iraq and Kurdistan, the Jaafari law is followed, which stipulates that men be given twice the share of women. 'We are obligated by law,' he stated. A 36-year-old man agreed, but outlined how he stood up against the implementation of this law in his family:

There is an example that happened to me. My father decided to register the house in my name because I was the only one in the family unmarried, but I refused, saying that I had brothers and sisters. This thing depends on conventions and conscience. If the division of the property takes place in our family, I want the division to be done equally for males and females.

Another of the men, a 47-year-old, explained how,

There were attempts to enact a civil law regarding inheritance, but the attempts were unsuccessful because the mentality of the ultra-religious people was ossified, and they did not accept this thing.

Interestingly, none of the men in the FGDs described agreeing with the Islamic Sharia law regarding inheritance, despite the women outlining how many Assyrian men follow this law as it grants them an increased share.

Personal Status Law

The third legal issue the participants identified was related to the Personal Status Law, a set of legal rules that regulate the relationship of individuals among themselves in terms of kinship, marriage, intermarriage, birth, guardianship, custody, reciprocal rights and duties, and any dissolution that may result in alimony, custody, inheritance rights and the will.

Participants discussed how the law discriminates against them by forcing them, and their children, to convert to Islam in a wide range of situations. For example, one of the men, a 47-year-old, explained how the Personal Status Law is applied to children when their father converts to Islam, even if they stay in the custody of the mother:

There is a case of a family displaced from Baghdad to Duhok of a woman whose husband had previously converted to Islam, and she separated from him, and they have two children. The husband remained in Baghdad, while the wife and two children were displaced to Duhok. On one occasion, the husband came to demand that his two children be registered as Muslims. But something very beautiful happened from a Kurdish person who is a very honourable and noble man, because he was the one who stood in his face and did not accept that. And I intervened and told the woman and her two children to persevere and if necessary, I would bring this issue to human rights and to the United Nations. But in the end, this woman emigrated to Europe with her two children in order to get rid of this whole mess.

A 52-year-old shared a similar story with the gender roles reversed, suggesting that the pressure to convert children and spouses to Islam is present regardless of which individual is Muslim:

For example, if an Assyrian youth inadvertently slept with a Muslim woman, against his will, he must be converted to Islam, and against him, all his children must be converted to Islam, and if he was previously married and had children, they too must be converted to Islam. Worse still, even after you decide to divorce your Muslim wife in the event of a marriage, the children remain registered as

Muslims even if this is against their will. This means that the immediate and future results are predetermined [according to] the Personal Status Law.

A 30-year-old man agreed, presenting another example:

If a Christian couple separated, but not through the court as divorce, but separated from each other and they had children, if one of the spouses changes their religion to Islam, automatically all previous children of the spouses will become Muslims according to the Personal Status Law.

Unified National Card Law

In a similar vein to the Personal Status Law, the fourth legal issue that participants discussed was related to the new Unified National Card Law, specifically Article 26. One of the men, a 47-year-old, summed up the problem:

In the previous parliamentary round, we discussed it [Article 26] in an American organisation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Erbil, in the presence of the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Judge Rahim Al-Ugaili and representatives of minorities. This article relates to the Islamisation of minors. This article is very dangerous because it states that if a person converts to Islam, all his/her minor children become Muslims automatically, whether one of the parents who converted to Islam is a man or a woman. Even if a girl suffers from mental illness and becomes Muslim, all her children must be Muslims. We discussed this in the session that took place and discussed the extent of the injustice of this law to Christians and non-Muslims in general. It turns out that the reason for this is that the law in Iraq should not deviate from Islamic law, and this is a great calamity in itself.

Another of the men, a 36-year-old, added the following assessment, outlining how Assyrians are prevented from claiming their nationality:

The other problem with the new law for the unified national card is that in the national identity field, there are only two options, 'Kurdish' and 'other', meaning that Chaldeans, Assyrians, Yazidis, etc. are all marginalised under an unknown name represented by 'other'.

This marginalisation into one homogenous category has a negative psychological impact on the Assyrian people, whether they are men or women, because it leads to them feeling that they are rejected.

Assyrian names

A fifth legal issue identified by participants was the struggles of trying to use an Assyrian name, or even the word 'Assyrian', when opening up a business. For example, one of the men, a 24-year-old, shared how,

One of my relatives opened a shop in the village of Bakhetme and faced a problem with the name he chose for the shop. The government rejected the name because it was an Assyrian name.

Likewise, another of the men, a 23-year-old, shared a similar example:

I had a men's barber shop and I am known among many young people in my area, but as soon as I said I would name my shop 'Assyrian', they told me in one of the government departments that I have to pay \$600 for it, knowing that the price of buying the usual name is \$50 in the tax department. However, as soon as the employee heard the name of 'Assyrian', he demanded \$600 in order to obstruct the process of naming my shop with this name because it is an Assyrian name.

This problem of Assyrian names being rejected is not only limited to private businesses. Another of the men, a 28-year-old, described how non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also experience rejection based on their choice of name,

On the subject of names, we as a non-governmental organisation also had our name rejected by the government because it was an Assyrian name. They asked us to change the name we chose, and we had to do that in order to register our organisation in the province.

Bias in legal proceedings

Finally, participants discussed how the legal system is also enacted with bias against Assyrians. For example, a 37-year-old man described the following case:

In terms of law and community services, I'd like to relate this to a case in Duhok. A Christian girl filed a lawsuit against a Muslim person, without mentioning their name, and it was found in the official documents and the investigation that the person at fault is this Muslim man, but the court has procrastinated a lot and, so far, has not issued a verdict against this person and in favour of this Christian girl. Thus, automatically, we feel that there is injustice against Christians, because what

happened in this story is a clear marginalisation against this girl, because after a year and a half of filing the lawsuit, she did not receive any court decision in her favour. In my opinion, this is among the most important threats that we as Assyrians are facing.

3.4.4 Cultural marginalisation

Assyrians nowadays experience living within a number of cultures, but they feel that they are integrated into none of them. Specifically, participants described having feelings of passive betweenness as they exist between two different cultures (Kurdish and Arabic), and they do not yet perceive themselves as centrally belonging to either one. Assyrians are threatened with the loss of their cultural identity due to many causes, the main being marginalisation. Consequently, Assyrians resort to emigration, which in turn worsens the preservation of the Assyrian identity.

The men from both age groups agreed that there is serious cultural marginalisation of Assyrians, especially in terms of the destruction of Assyrian monuments and archaeology. In this regard, a 24-year-old man said,

Apart from the encroachment on our lands, there is another problem represented in the distortion of our Assyrian monuments, including the ruins of the Khinnis region. I visited it in 2016 at first and then in 2019 and noticed the sabotage and the huge difference that happened, as it was neglected and not taken care of at all. In addition, there are also antiquities here in Duhok in the Zawa Mountain, and our Assyrian monuments have also been distorted by drawing strange shapes on them and vandalising them, in addition to other examples also, all of which serve the purpose of distorting history.

Another of the men, a 43-year-old, provided a historical overview of the challenges and threats that Assyrians have gone through, and continue to go through:

In the previous regime, we had national problems, and we did not suffer from religious problems because we are Christians. Now, we have both problems, i.e. religious problems and national problems. In Saddam Hussein's defunct regime, we actually had a national problem, and there were many problems from a political point of view. Now our problems are deeper, as you can see in Baghdad and the rest of the provinces, the Assyrians and Christians in general were sitting

in their homes, but their homes were taken from them and sold. As for here in the Kurdistan Region, we do not have the problems of taking our homes by force, but our problems here are of a different kind. Our problems here lie in cultural marginalisation. The simplest example is that I am one of the founders of the Assyrian Cultural Center in the 1990s, but until 2016 we did not have a licence. We had a licence from the central government, but the regional government did not give us a licence. We only got the licence a few years ago. Their argument for not granting the licence was flimsy, such as the necessity of changing the name of the centre and so on.

One of the men, a 37-year-old, described two incidences of marginalisation towards the Assyrian people – the first clearly intentional, and the second potentially unintentional but still painful:

The first thing is related to the visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kazemi to the region, where he visited many important places, but with the exception of the Sumail massacre, he did not visit it, and this was a public marginalisation at the time. I wrote about it [on Facebook] immediately, and after two or three days of that, some parties began publishing posts on their pages denouncing this marginalisation. This is persecution, frankly. I mean, imagine the Prime Minister of Iraq, who visited Anfal and many other places, and did not visit the Sumail massacre.

The second point is related to something that happened in the Kurdistan Region, and this marginalisation I do not know if it was intentional or not, or whether it was a unilateral act. The story is as follows: my wife and I went to Erbil and by chance entered a museum. There was a section for traditional clothing for all the ethnic and religious groups of Iraq. The problem is when my wife's family asked about the place of the Assyrian clothes. We asked the girl in charge of the clothing department about the place of the Assyrian heritage clothing, and she indicated to us a specific place that was the place of the Assyrian clothing, but I was surprised when I discovered that it was not Assyrian clothing, and I told her that these were not Assyrian clothing, but she insisted that it is Assyrian. And the saddest thing is that they had written 'Kurdish Christians in the south of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq' and here I was very shocked, so I told her I have a question, please, and I asked her: 'Are you the one who wrote this thing?' She did not respond and remained silent. I asked her what is meant by this, as I thought

that they might mean Christians from a Muslim background in Kurdistan, and they wore these clothes. She said, 'No, no, this belongs to the Christians who live in the region.' She said they are Assyrians who speak Syriac. I was very sad hearing that even though I was calm in my argument with her. And I explained to her that this written thing is not true because we are the Assyrians who live in the region, we are not Kurds, but we are older than the Kurds. It is with great regret that we, the sons and daughters of Nineveh, the original owners of this country, have been marginalised this way.

Finally, participants pointed out that Assyrians and their families experience threats to their property in many different ways because of this cultural marginalisation. For example, a 35-year-old man shared how Christian land has historically been stolen from Christians with no compensation:

Ainkawa in Erbil is a very old Christian city. Unfortunately, it was robbed of its property from the Christians in order to build the airport there, without compensating its owners. One affected by this is my close friend who is a Chaldean. One of the Christians posted about this thing, denouncing it. But on the second day this person was killed by an unknown person.

Interestingly, unlike the women, the male participants didn't identify property and land encroachment as a standalone issue, despite sharing the example above and mentioning it within other discussions.

3.4.5 Transport

When discussing the problems related to transport, the participants referred to both public and private transportation. The men began by discussing private transport, specifically their own cars, in relation to religious discrimination.

One of the men, a 47-year-old, shared how,

My personal car had a cross, and it was scratched while parked in front of the door of my house, and I tried a lot to repair it, but the damage was severe, and it was not repaired.

Another of the men, a 36-year-old, shared a very similar experience:

I went to Shiladze district when I was working in the mobile phone company there. I had to go to an area inhabited only by Muslims and park my car there. My car has the sign of the cross and an inscription in Syriac that says, 'God exists'. There, my car sustained a lot of damage, including a broken rear window, in addition to scratches on the bonnet.

Shared taxis are the most common form of public transport in Iraq, especially in major cities like Baghdad, and across Kurdistan. All other forms of public transport are rare as most drivers prefer to stay within the city limits. Some taxis go as far as Kirkuk and Mosul, though fares are often expensive. Buses are not very common anymore in Kurdistan. Taxi journeys are filled with apprehension for Assyrian people. For example, one of the men, a 36-year-old, explained how drivers often play the Qur'an while they're in the car:

As for the transport, of course when we sit with the taxi driver when he plays the Qur'an, we respect him. We do not object, but when he knows that I am a Christian, for example, he raises the volume even more and he starts teasing me.

Another of the men, a 47-year-old, argued that Assyrian passengers shouldn't have to listen to the Qur'an while in taxis:

Regarding transport, whenever I sit in a taxi, I put two terms and conditions for the driver, namely that he does not play the Qur'an and that he does not smoke, or else I will not get in the car with him. And my Muslim friends all know this thing about me. Because frankly, there are a lot of drivers who harass Christians with this.

Interestingly, one of the men, a 37-year-old, highlighted a positive point about being Christian in relation to transport:

With regard to transport, there are positive points, for example, when we pass through checkpoints and they know that we are Christians, they say go ahead without asking any questions or searching the car, which means that we are peaceful and do not cause problems. But if we look closely at this issue, it has a kind of negativity, which is that we are distinguished from the rest of the non-Christian citizens. It is true that we are good and do not cause trouble, but the law must apply to us as well as other citizens.

While the men acknowledged that there were benefits to being seen as peaceful people, and therefore not being searched, they also interpreted this perception of Christians in a negative light. They discussed how they are seen as peaceful because they are viewed as weak cowards.

3.4.6 Community services

While the problem of lack of community services seems to be a general problem even for majorities, Assyrian and Christian regions and villages suffer particularly badly from a lack of services. For example, a 36-year-old man said,

As for community services, there are two examples of two Assyrian villages that suffer from a lack of services, namely Bakhetme and Shiyoz. In the former village, the road leading to the village is unpaved and our tyres often explode when we go there. In the village of Shiyoz, the street [is] paved until you reach the central market, but from there until you reach the village, the street is in a miserable condition.

A 52-year-old agreed, explaining how it is rare to find community services in Assyrian villages:

With regard to community services, for Assyrians [they] are almost non-existent, and it is rare to find community services in a Christian village. Even if they provide a service, it is for their own personal interest or because they need something from you in return. I see with my own eyes and compare the Assyrian villages and the Kurdish villages and note the differences in the services: the Kurdish villages have all amenities, unlike the Assyrian villages, which suffer from a lack of the simplest services, knowing that the villages are close to each other.

Additionally, a 47-year-old man pointed out that some villages have been waiting for community service repairs and amenities for a long time, to no avail:

In fact, there are places like Nala village... it has been around 20 years [the government have been saying] that they will repair and pave the streets, but they are all false promises unfortunately. The same applies to the village of Bakhetme, where it was talked about a lot, even by the clergy, but to no avail. The situation in the village of Shiyoz is not better, as there were problems and protests due to

the lack of services, the most important of which is the lack of proper streets and electricity. There are many other Christian villages where there are no services at all.

3.4.7 Freedom of worship

Among all the problems and threats mentioned in this study, the men stated that the most positive thing is the complete freedom of worship for Christians in the Kurdistan Region. This is in contrast to the women, who stated that they have problems praying in their own homes and cannot wear religious symbols. This suggests that the men are blind to at least one aspect of the experiences of the women in their communities. However, the men did state that their perceived freedom to worship does not prevent the existence of some problems based on religious difference, even if it is from individuals and not organised groups.

It is also important to mention that the freedom to preach the Gospel is strictly prohibited by the government, as described by one of the men, a 52-year-old, who had been imprisoned for handing out Christian literature:

It is forbidden to make attempts to convey the word of God to others, and if you do that, they will persecute you and even imprison you. This happened to me not once or twice but many times when I was distributing Christian books to homes. I was imprisoned at least four times for this reason.

The participants identified and discussed various issues and challenges related to religious differences, particularly in regard to having a different religion to the majority.

Religious intolerance

When discussing religious differences, one of the men, a 25-year-old, jumped straight to the consequences of religious intolerance:

There is another thing that is very necessary, which is the emigration that is happening to our Christian youth. The reason for that is our lack of acceptance. They [the majority] despise us and our worship and claim that we drink wine and practise immorality during our worship in the church. These things bother me personally.

Another of the men, a 25-year-old, agreed about this intolerance. He emphasised that, on the surface, Christians can worship freely, but this is met with derision. Additionally, a 24-year-old man was very specific about where the freedom begins and ends, highlighting the ethnic element of the discrimination they face:

I see that we as Christians have freedom, but as Assyrians we do not have freedom. This is how I see it. Our problem as Assyrians is in terms of rights, which are non-existent. The simplest thing is, let's say, in the celebrations of the Assyrian New Year [1 April] we see many annoyances. There are many pages on social media that criticise us and claim that we shouldn't be immersed in celebration and dance when the Peshmerga, the Kurdistan military forces [representing the region where the Assyrians live], are out fighting.

An aspect of religious intolerance that many of the participants agreed on was related to the Christian ritual of giving food or meat as charitable works to others. The men discussed to what extent these gifts are received. For example, a 28-year-old stated that it depends on the person:

Well, this depends on the person receiving the gift and how religiously strict the people are. I can't say that people accept our gifts 100 per cent but if this person is open-minded, he will accept. And I say 70 per cent of the people here are religious extremists. There are those who will first ask about the person who did the slaughter. If the person who slaughtered the sacrifice is a Muslim, they accept the gift. Otherwise, they will not accept.

A 52-year-old estimated that even fewer people accept their gifts:

And when we distribute food or meat as a kind of charitable work, only 20 per cent of non-Christians accept our gifts and offers and 80 per cent do not accept gifts from us and consider us unbelievers and unclean and consider us worshippers of idols, and Christ whom I worship is just an idol for them according to their mentality. If I offer them something in the name of Christ or one of the saints, they will not accept it because I am walking in the path of atheists according to their thinking. The evidence for my words is that my cousin opened a restaurant, but no Muslim customers came to his restaurant, not because the food was bad or dirty, but for religious reasons and from the point of view of impurity. And 20 per cent of those who deal with Christians and accept their food

are people who are open-minded, but religious hardliners find it very difficult to accept our food.

This man was not the only one who had an experience of a restaurant not being visited because it was run by an Assyrian. A 28-year-old man explained how one of his relatives opened a restaurant in Duhok:

He brought in an Assyrian chef, but no customers came to this restaurant because it is a Christian's restaurant and they do not eat from Christians. But after the manager appointed a Muslim to cook, his business began to develop, and customers came to him frequently. This shows us the impact of religious differences.

Misconceptions about Assyrians

While the men believe they have the freedom to worship, the participants discussed the misconceptions that those from the Muslim majority hold about them that affect their ability to feel free in their worship. For example, a 36-year-old man recalled an incident that took place earlier in his career:

For a while I was working as a writer in a school. One day, before I started my work, I said: 'Oh God'. Suddenly one of my colleagues said, 'Do you believe in God?' She said it in an insulting tone, as if we do not worship God and that we are infidels. I was really offended by this. Likewise, after I finished eating once, I said, 'God bless the hands that prepared this food', as a kind of gratitude. And again, I was insulted by a Muslim when he said: 'But you are infidels, so how do you mention the name of God?'

Forced religious customs and conversion

When out in public, participants discussed how there are some religious customs that Assyrian men have to observe that are not a part of their religion. For instance, a 24-year-old man said,

During Ramadan, on the one hand, we respect ourselves by not eating anything in public, and on the other hand, I see it as mandatory that we are not allowed to eat or drink anything in public.

When the participants were asked whether there are attempts – direct or indirect – to convert Assyrians to Islam, a 20-year-old man said,

Personally, when I am in the taxi, when the driver knows that I am a Christian, he tries to harass me by talking about religion in an attempt to persuade me to change my religion.

Many of the men agreed that there are constant attempts to convert them when Muslims discover they are Assyrian. For example, another of the men, a 23-year-old, shared how,

Many people tell me that you are an Assyrian, so why don't you become a Muslim? I mean they are forcing the person with these annoying issues.

A 28-year-old man outlined some of the incentives the majority present them with to encourage them to convert:

I say 90 per cent of these attempts exist, and even there are those among them who are ready to give you a wife in exchange for your conversion to Islam, in addition to other temptations, such as a car, a house, and so on.

Another of the men, a 47-year-old, agreed, describing how he had been offered a Muslim wife:

I'm not married. Muslims tell me just embrace Islam and we will find a Muslim wife for you. Believe me, they say it publicly and they try to convince me in various ways to change my religion. But I answer them, saying, 'I do not want to marry a Muslim woman and I am satisfied with my religion.'

One of the men, a 52-year-old, outlined how this pressure to convert also comes from friends:

Many of my friends and other people when they saw my lifestyle, they used to tell me to become a Muslim because 'it is better for you because you live a good life, and you have no mistakes in your life and you are a peaceful and good person'.

3.4.8 Study/education

There is currently an attempt to 'Kurdify' the school curricula in the Kurdistan Region. This is something that is met with widespread popular rejection by the Assyrians. In particular, some Assyrians express their rejection of certain curricula that are imposed on schools, including history and civic education, in which Kurdish personalities are glorified, knowing that these are people who practised violence and murder against Christians and Assyrians in the past.

A 28-year-old man described the situation from his point of view of seeing Assyrians as being made invisible in school curricula:

I see that we do not have a subject that represents us in the scientific curricula, not only for us as Christians, but for others of other nationalities, whether they are Kurds, Arabs, Yazidis or Armenians. There is no such thing, and therefore it is implanted in the minds of the children that we are all one nationality, but our religions are different, I mean that there is no national recognition that there are many minority ethnic and religious groups. Another thing is that there are many things that are considered an insult to us and our history, but they are mentioned in the curriculum that is studied, especially in the history subject in the grade 6 of high school. Some personalities and names are studied who have carried out many heinous crimes, murders and bloodshed against the Assyrians, including Simko Shakak, but he is portrayed as one of the historical heroes!

Elaborating on this, a 27-year-old man said,

In my opinion, this is related to politics as well, and not only to education, because one thing is related to the other. We read about the Iraqi constitution, which contains many things about the Assyrians, but it is false information [falsification of Assyrian history so as not to show Assyrians as the original owners of the homeland], because we are a minority, and this is due to the weakness of our political representation.

Beyond issues related to the contents of curricula, the men did not feel there were other challenges related to education.

3.4.9 Use of the mother tongue

In the Kurdish region the Syriac language is one of the official languages in the constitution. Unfortunately, the implementation of this aspect of the constitution is weak, and in day-to-day life, the language of the Assyrians is abused, usually by extremist individuals. Participants agreed that their mother tongue is the essence of their identity.

The participants argued that there are issues related to the use of their mother language. For instance, a 30-year-old man said,

You cannot use your mother tongue unless everyone present is Assyrian. If there is a Kurdish person, we must speak the language of that person so that he understands us. Even among our Chaldean brothers, there are people who do not understand our dialect because they did not mix with us a lot, so we have to speak with them in Arabic or Kurdish in order for them to understand us sometimes.

Another of the men, a 25-year-old, agreed that this was particularly a problem when there are gatherings of people:

We also face a language problem when there happened to be a gathering of several people, including two or three Assyrians, and the others from another religion. In that situation we have to speak the language of others so that they do not assume that we are talking about them, and therefore we are forced to use a language other than our own in order not to be misunderstood and this affects us negatively.

A 52-year-old man emphasised that there is a religious aspect to the refusal of others to engage with them in their mother tongue:

As for the use of the mother tongue, I will talk based on my experience that I go through constantly because I do not speak Kurdish well. As far as the people in Amadiyah are concerned, they are considered educated. When I speak to them in Syriac, they usually accept that, especially the people of Barwari area, and they speak to me in Syriac. However, there are deviations, and therefore we cannot generalise the matter to everyone, and as I said before, the problem is religiosity; I mean, there are people who, as soon as they know that I am a Christian or an

Assyrian, they turn away from me and not only with Christians, because I witnessed this with Yazidis as well; a Yazidi person who was with me as well, and the others were disgusted and said, 'God forgive me', and this hurt my Yazidi friend's feelings a lot. In such cases, in my opinion, the societal culture is non-existent and religious extremism is dominant, and therefore they do not respect those who are different from their religion.

Additionally, a 47-year-old man outlined how the implementation of the Syriac language as an official language is particularly stymied in the education system by a lack of teaching staff who speak Syriac. This is partially because of the discrimination Assyrians experience in trying to obtain work, and partially because there is no interest in developing the Syriac language through libraries, etc.:

As for the mother tongue, it is very good that the Iraqi constitution has established that the Syriac language is an official language in the areas where Christians are present, such as Chaldeans, Syriacs and Assyrians. This is an excellent thing, but the problem with the mother tongue teaching at schools is the lack of cadres, and for this we need appointments because there are a large number of Syriac schools, but the number of cadres who are fluent in the Syriac language is few, and this is due to the suspension of job appointments. For example, there are many female teachers who sit at home without being appointed. Likewise, my nephew graduated three years ago, but is sitting at home without work.

3.4.10 Marginalisation and denial by the government

The Iraqi government marginalises Assyrians by calling on the regional Kurdistan government to respond to Assyrian demands for equality and justice, rather than doing so itself, on the basis that they are the second nation in the region. The role of the Assyrians in government institutions in the Kurdistan Region should not be marginalised, and they should not be dealt with on the basis that they are a minority but that they are the second nation.

Many participants in the FGDs affirmed that the government practises marginalisation against Assyrians. For example, a 30-year-old man said,

There is a point about the pre-planned methodology of government departments and in other government places. For example, we want the right to employment, but they link that to saying who are you, and when answering that I am a Chaldean or an Assyrian, they say no, you are a Kurd or an Arab. But I am neither a Kurd nor an Arab, rather I am older than them all, and my history goes back thousands of years before the prophets, so how can you relate me to yourself when you ask where I came from whereas I am the owner of this country. Then he would say no, it is not like that, like it or not. This is not something new. Rather, it existed even in the days of the previous regime as well – it has existed since 1975 and until now this scenario is going on. They are trying to link us, the people of an ancient nation, with another nation.

A 28-year-old man, on the other hand, stated that there is no discrimination in government departments against the Assyrians as a minority, but he also said that this depends a lot on favouritism. A 27-year-old highlighted the covert discrimination that takes place against Assyrians:

Legally, there is no distinction between religions, but it is possible for the department official to discriminate and differentiate based on a person's religion and nationality. If he is an Assyrian, the official will obstruct his work, but if he is a Kurd, his transactions will be dealt with easier.

Some of the participants had personal experiences of the government denying them their rights. For example, one of the men, a 28-year-old, described the problem he is currently facing with the government:

Since 2016, five of our lands have been signed into a government project, and the government is supposed to pay us a compensation of 44 million dinars, but so far, we have continued to demand this amount, but to no avail, although we obtained a cheque from the bank, but the amount is not disbursed due to obstruction in a government department. This is explained by the clear discrimination practised against the Assyrians.

Likewise, a 30-year-old man shared his experience, which was only resolved through extreme perseverance beyond the necessary channels:

I had a problem in 2015 where a member of the Muslim majority assaulted me by raising a weapon. I took a picture of his car and went to report the incident to the police and filed a complaint against him, but it turned out that he was the son of one of the important sheikhs in the area. The police were unable to arrest him. As for me, I did not remain silent, and through Parliament, I brought the case to the governor and the Provincial Council, and everybody in Duhok started [to know] about this issue. Then the director of the police department in Domiz asked to see me and mediated that the matter be resolved without resorting to the judiciary, and then the father of the person who assaulted me came and begged me and the matter was settled.

3.4.11 Freedom of expression

The legal framework in the Kurdistan Region provides for the protection of human rights with the existence of explicit provisions that include the right to freedom of expression. The Kurdistan Regional Government periodically issues public statements acknowledging its commitment to these legal standards, but the facts that are currently monitored on the ground indicate an increasingly repressive pattern of restriction for freedom of expression.

The men described how some international reports dealing with human rights and public freedoms have warned of the decline in freedom of expression and opinion in the Kurdistan Region in recent years, and this is openly recognised by some parts of the regional government. However, the KRG attributes it to the sensitive conditions that Kurdistan experienced after the ISIS invasion in 2014.

Undoubtedly, Assyrians have shouldered a large share of the suppression of freedom of expression. Freedom of expression, or freedom of speech, was therefore among the threats that men recognised to be significant. For example, a 47-year-old journalist gave the following testimony:

What I am going to say is applicable [to] legal issues and in particular it is against freedom of expression. Although I am a journalist and I have an ID to prove that, I was arrested by the Asayish [Kurdish security forces] in Duhok three times because of what I published about the violations that are taking place against our Assyrian monuments and archeological sites. Twice they interrogated me and released me after several hours, but the third time I was imprisoned for three

days and nights only because I posted a live video on my Facebook page condemning the acts of vandalism being carried out on our Assyrian monuments in Khinnis. This indicates that we never have the freedom to express our opinions, even when we tell the truth.

A 27-year-old, described how those in the majority use social media to attack Assyrians as they express their culture and religion:

On social media, there is more criticism of the Assyrian New Year celebrations than on the ground. Two years ago, I remember well one of the Kurdish pages on Facebook posted a picture of the Assyrian New Year celebrations and put an 'X' on it, and all the comments were a hurtful criticism of us as Assyrians. [They said] that we do not stand in solidarity with them as the Kurds gave martyrs in order to protect the homeland and we Christians are busy with the celebration. This matter caused great annoyance for the Assyrian people at the time.

One of the men, a 30-year-old, spoke about how Assyrian women in particular suffer during their celebrations as they are targeted with harassment:

According to what I personally saw, on the occasion of the Assyrian New Year [1 April], we get a lot of harassment when we start marching and walking in the streets. There are cases of harassment against our girls and women by people standing on the side and trying to harass, knowing that there is control, police, security men and organisers of the march. But, thank God, these problems do not escalate much and are easily controlled. But this does not prevent that there is verbal harassment against our women, as well as throwing things at us while we march, because not everyone accepts this from the mainstream religion in the region.

3.4.12 Impact of Covid-19 (quarantine)

In the health sector in Kurdistan, there is no form of discrimination on the basis of nationality among all members of the region in terms of policy. But in practice there are doctors and nurses who are religious fanatics, who sometimes discriminate against and abuse the Assyrians. Even in relation to Covid-19 regulations and the quarantine, participants discussed how there were differences in the treatment of Kurdish and Muslim occasions, and Christian and Assyrian events.

For example, within health care, a 24-year-old man identified discrimination in the administration, which he was only able to avoid because of personal contacts:

As for matters related to the health service, frankly, the doctor is doing his duty to the fullest and is acting as a human being away from racial discrimination, but there is a problem with the doctor's secretary or people who work in administrative affairs. For example, I went to Azadi Hospital, which is a government hospital. I had a friend there. He helped me a lot to make my appointment with the doctor go smoothly and quickly, otherwise I would have to wait in a very long queue. This means that there is nepotism, friendships and connections as a form of corruption in the health sector.

A 28-year-old highlighted the religious differences that took place during the pandemic in relation to places of worship:

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was decided that all places should be closed, including churches, mosques and religious shrines. But with the advent of Christmas, the request of Christians to open the doors of the churches in order to hold the mass was accepted by government. But this matter met with sharp objection from Muslims, and they complained, saying how can churches be opened to Christians and not mosques to Muslims, and things escalated a lot because of that.

3.4.13 Verbal racism/harassment

The men described language that is directed at Assyrians that causes them harm, typically in an emotional or psychological sense. For instance, calling a person a name, making him or her feel useless, or otherwise diminishing a person's self-worth; all forms of verbal harassment that are practised against Assyrians.

Offensive words and phrases

To start with, a 30-year-old man said,

There is an example of sarcasm and contempt against the Assyrians and their language. There is a well-known Kurdish song that came out recently in which some Assyrian words are mentioned lightly on the grounds that the singer is in love with a Christian girl, and the story of the song is also annoying and ridiculous.

Various participants highlighted the word '*fala*' (which means rural people) as being offensive. For example, a 27-year-old man stated that,

We hear the word 'fala' from everyone or 'the heavy burden Assyrians' as well as 'the minority'.

Another of the men, a 47-year-old, explained how '*fala*' is offensive:

The word 'fala' is considered offensive and is used by Kurds to refer to Assyrians and Christians in general. It is better for them to use the word 'Christian', but many of them use the word 'fala', not out of [intending to insult] us, but out of their ignorance of the meaning of this word. This word means the uncivilised peasant and useless person.

A 29-year-old described how the word '*khoni*' (brother in Syriac) is used in an offensive manner in order to differentiate Assyrians from others:

We hear the word 'khoni' as a kind of discrimination. For example, when I am in a council, no one knows my religion or my nationality because I speak Arabic or Kurdish fluently, and suddenly someone calls me khoni or qasha [priest in Syriac] and thus tries to distinguish me from the rest of the group, and this is often a key to opening the door to the topic of religious and national discrimination.

Another of the men, a 20-year-old, highlighted the use of the word '*kafir*' (infidel):

We also hear the word 'kafir'... on one occasion, I was in the car going to college, and suddenly we saw a young man and woman together. The driver said, 'These are infidels [Christians], so they are walking together', and he started talking badly about Christians in general. I was sitting in the back, but I didn't say a word because I didn't want to get into an argument.

Violence against Assyrian women and girls

The participants were asked whether there are particular forms of violence or harassment that Assyrian women experience more or differently from other women. They stated that the perpetrators are mostly people in the mainstream religious group. An example of this was given by a 30-year-old man:

In one of the monasteries, St. George Church, where Christians go on a picnic and visit the church on the occasion of the saint in a certain village, my female cousin faced verbal harassment by a group of Kurdish young men.

A 37-year-old, described another case of harassment:

There are some cases of harassment that occur against Assyrian women. I remember when I was in college there was a professor who molested a Christian girl because she was good-looking, but these are individual cases and not general.

Unfortunately, despite the female participants claiming differently, this man saw these cases as isolated instances, and this case in particular taking place because the girl was good-looking, rather than her religious and ethnic identity playing a part.

A 47-year-old man highlighted a historic case that shows the impunity those in the majority face when it comes to committing violence against Assyrian women and girls:

The case was in 1990 when Azad Barwari, one of the senior party leaders, raped a Christian girl from Nirwa clan, but he was not prosecuted. Even worse, this person went to Erbil and assumed an important position in the government. So far, these cases continue.

When discussing how they respond to cases of violence against Assyrian women and girls, some of the men demonstrated victim-blaming attitudes by holding Assyrian women and girls responsible for the harassment they experience. For example, a 27-year-old man explained how, in his opinion, there are some cases of harassment against Assyrian women and girls that don't require intervention because the girls are partly to blame:

There are situations that require intervention, but there are other situations that do not. There are times when our daughters are to be blamed because they exaggerate in their dress and make-up, which opens the way for harassment. There are situations in which harassment occurred against our daughters, and we intervened as men, and the police, the court, and the legal procedures intervened. But as I said sometimes, our girls are wrong for overdressing.

Nevertheless, generally the men described intervening in such situations, as not doing so would be dishonourable. For example, a 28-year-old man mentioned how the clans would not accept a girl from their family being harassed:

Of course, as is the case with all members of the clans, no one accepts it upon himself that the daughters of his clan are subjected to harassment by others. Certainly, there is interference from us in such situations.

Similarly, a 52-year-old shared an example of how he intervened in harassment despite not knowing the girl:

I had in front of me cases of harassment of a Christian girl at a party, knowing that the girl was not one of my relatives, but I did not shut up and intervened and quarrelled hands with the offender because I considered this to be an honourable thing.

These examples demonstrate how women and girls in minority communities are considered to hold the community's honour, so when they are violated, the whole community is violated and dishonoured.

Offensive words for Assyrian women and girls

As for the words the men hear that are used to describe women from their religious group, a 27-year-old man said,

Men from the mainstream religion talk about Assyrian women and say that they are beautiful only when they are young and when they grow old, they become ugly, unlike Muslim women. Likewise, they say to our women, 'Why don't you embrace Islam and why don't you marry Muslims, since you are beautiful?'

A 30-year-old described hearing words related to Assyrian women not wearing the hijab:

We also hear the word 'safirat', meaning non-hijab wearing women, that they call the Assyrian girls.

Another man recounted how Assyrian women are called 'dirty and immoral'. Conversely, one of the men, a 52-year-old, stated that he hadn't heard any negative words or phrases being used about or against Assyrian women.

3.5 A comparison of the priority issues facing men and women

Having explored Assyrian women and men’s experiences in more detail, in their own words, Table 8 below shows the priorities for both alongside each other, highlighting similarities and differences.

Table 8: Comparison of participatory ranking exercise for men and women

Ranking	Women	No. of votes as priority issue	Men	No. of votes as priority issue
1	Work (employment and promotion)	8	Political representation	9
2	Identity (language, nationality, symbols)	5	Legal issues (encroachment on property)	6
3	Study/education	5	Cultural marginalisation (distortion of Assyrian monuments and archaeology)	5
4	Harassment and violence	4	Work	5
5	Celebrating Assyrian traditional occasions	3	Transport	3
6	Religious rituals	2	Community services	3
7	Encroachment on property	2	Freedom of worship	2
8	Inheritance	2	Study/education	2
9	Food	1	Use of the mother tongue	2
10	Clothes	1	Marginalisation and denial by the government	2
11			Freedom of expression	1

12			Health (impact of Covid-19 – quarantine)	1
13			Verbal racism	1

Source: Authors' own.

The aim of the research was to uncover the challenges Assyrians face in their lives as a religious minority, how other religious affiliations treat them, and how women's experiences in particular are different because of the intersection of their multiple identities (religious, ethnic, and gender). The stories that were collected from women in their FGDs were similar in many ways to the men's stories, however the rankings of these issues were very different according to the genders. For example, while the men mentioned work and employment issues in their top five concerns, it was the top priority for women, because of gender discrimination and difficulties compounding the religious discrimination they face.

Additionally, the top risk for Assyrian men was political representation. The male participants claimed that this is because men usually think more long-term, analysing the problems and searching for the root causes. This is because they have broader horizons than women due to having been able to access the world outside of their community more frequently. Whether or not it is true that men are more likely to have this long-term perspective, it is clear that women's restricted freedom and engagement with society outside of their community prevents them from being able to involve themselves in, and be as concerned with, politics as their male counterparts.

According to the findings on work challenges, women and men experience the same problems, as they both find it difficult to get jobs or attain promotions at work due to language barriers and political party affiliation. People fear job interviews because they are not confident in Kurdish and they are politically independent. This was particularly the case for the women in the FGDs, who prioritised remaining politically independent in order to avoid harassment. Women also tend to be less fluent in Kurdish than men due to the fact that men communicate more than women with Kurds outside the home. Additionally, and significantly, women reported experiencing gendered harassment in their workplace. Thus, this challenge is considered to be a greater risk for women than for men.

Concerning the threat to the mother tongue, Assyrian women suffer and are criticised much more than men in using their native language, which represents their identity. This might be because Assyrian women tend to speak Assyrian with each other even when they are outside, unlike Assyrian men, who mostly tend to speak Kurdish or Arabic with each other when they are outside. As a result, this challenge threatens women more than men and affects women's feelings of shame and lack of self-confidence while practising their language.

Assyrian women suffer more in educational settings than men. They find it difficult to finish their studies because of the risk of being kidnapped or harassed by the religious majority if they travel outside their area to study. A good example of this was in the Nalah district, where Assyrian women could not study in the scientific department because there was no such department in their school, whereas men were able to travel to another school outside their village to study the sciences. Women are restricted in this case because they are not permitted, by their community, to travel alone.

In addition, they are subjected to harassment and violence by those in the Muslim majority, which affects their psychological wellbeing and reduces their self-confidence. Subsequently, they avoid getting close to and trusting people, especially when they find the ruling authorities never support them in such matters. Unfortunately, they also experience victim-blaming attitudes from some men in their own community, who expressed the belief that it is not always necessary to intervene when they see an Assyrian woman or girl being harassed as they may be partially to blame.

As for inheritance, women are at greater risk than men as the Iraqi law, which follows Islamic Sharia, is biased towards men's rights, in which it gives males twice the share of females. While the male participants claimed that, as much as possible, they follow the Assyrian principle and belief that inheritance should be shared equally between men and women, the female participants mentioned that some Assyrian men take advantage of having to follow Islamic Sharia law. This is a clear example of the gender discrimination that Assyrian women experience within their own community.

Regarding encroachment on Assyrian property, women find it less threatening as the lands are owned by men. However, they expressed their sorrow to find their families' lands being occupied by the Muslim majority.

Clothes and food were another issue that concerned the women in the FGDs. Assyrian women are more likely to be criticised for the way they dress and cook, particularly because they are the ones expected to carry out household tasks such as cooking.

Therefore, women prefer to stay away from making strong relations with religious majority people. Unfortunately, this further isolates them from public life, reiterating their presence in the home and confirming their restricted freedom and choices. The most significant issue related to clothing is being forced to wear the hijab, despite it not being part of Assyrian clothing. This is unique to women, and when they choose not to wear it, they immediately identify themselves as Assyrian, which increases the discrimination and challenges they face.

In summary, it is clear that Assyrian people are living with racial and religious discrimination that must be eliminated. Assyrians' rights should be preserved. Moreover, it is important to recognise that there are certain aspects of life that Assyrian men and women experience differently to each other, with women also having to navigate gender discrimination from both within and outside their community.

4 Conclusions

This study outlines the violence and discrimination against Assyrian people as a religious minority in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It also identifies the greatest threats in scale and depth facing Assyrian men and women from their own perspectives, with a specific focus on the unique vulnerabilities facing Assyrian women.

Firstly, it is clear that Assyrian women have suffered a lot in the area of work and education due to a lack of opportunities in these areas, discrimination on the basis of ethnic, religious and gender identity, and the lack of the required connections to major political parties. Unlike men, they also face limited choices because they are female and therefore restricted in their ability to travel safely and access a wide range of jobs and educational opportunities. In some cases, they even consider early marriage in order to move closer to cities to be able to access a wider range of opportunities.

Women's rights have also been unprotected, fulfilled neither by the people in authority nor the Assyrian political representatives. They are called '*kufar*' (infidels) by Muslims as they follow the beliefs of Christianity, and are insulted because of their identity, for example through the use of their language and the Assyrian symbols. They face challenges in practising their cultural and religious traditions and occasions, including obtaining formal leave at work and in educational settings.

Assyrian women are impacted negatively by the fact that they, and their community, have to follow Islamic rules (Sharia) regarding inheritance, as they are living in an Islamic

majority community. This has unfortunately led to men within their own community not allowing women to have what is rightfully theirs.

As for the men, there were similarities and differences in the problems and challenges facing them as a minority in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The main threats facing the group of men (aged 18-35) are related to the areas of political representation, encroachment on property, work, transport, community services, verbal racism, use of their mother tongue, freedom of worship, study/education, distortion of the historical and cultural significance of Assyrian monuments and archaeology, and health care. As for the group of men (aged 35+), their most significant threats were listed as cultural marginalisation, work, political representation, marginalisation and denial by the government, legal issues, freedom of worship, community services, freedom of expression, use of mother tongue, study/education, and transport.

5 Recommendations

Inspired by the thoughts and discussions that took place in the four FGDs, the following points are listed as recommendations to improve the conditions that Assyrian women and men face:

1. First of all, there was a limitation on time and most women and men who participated in the FGDs had many more stories to tell. Therefore, it is suggested that more in-depth individual interviews be conducted to collect more information on the problems facing the Assyrian community.
2. There must be united political Assyrian representation so that political appointees protect Assyrians' rights, rather than working for personal interests and for the interests of other (non-Assyrian) agendas.
3. The government must respect and promote minorities' rights in general, and Assyrians in particular, especially in relation to the Iraqi constitution.
4. Amendments must be made to the Iraqi Personal Status Law, which is unjust in terms of converting children to Islam unwillingly and automatically when one of the spouses converts to Islam.
5. Citizens should be able to freely practise the inheritance distribution without being obliged to follow the Islamic Sharia law, which does not allow for an equal distribution to happen between men and women.

6. An official letter should be issued and generalised to all the government departments regarding the official religious and national holidays of Christians to avoid confusion and problems in this regard throughout the year.
7. It is recommended that Christian lands be registered in their names in the official records to put an end to the abuses that occur by the mainstream community members and agencies¹.
8. There should be an allocation of special job grades (such as directors of government departments) to a greater percentage of Christians without asking for recommendations from the ruling party.
9. There should be greater employment opportunities for people who cannot speak the Kurdish language, while giving them the opportunity to learn the language at work.
10. Imposing respect for other religions in terms of practising their religious and cultural traditions and avoiding the use of the word 'infidels' as a label for Christians.
11. Protecting and renovating Assyrian archaeological sites so that they are not desecrated, destroyed, misused, or exploited.
12. Recognising the Assyrian people as a people with an ancient history and civilisation, and the Assyrian language as one of the main languages in the region.
13. The application of justice and the law for everyone without discrimination, prejudice or favouritism, with particular attention to protecting the rights of vulnerable minorities, and especially women.

¹ Related to land and property encroachment specifically, participants had the following recommendations:

1. Stopping the operations of appropriating and extinguishing agricultural lands and transforming them into residential lands in the Christian areas of Nineveh Plain, Duhok, Ankawa and others.
2. Lifting the abuses and changes that occurred in the Nineveh Plain areas in accordance with the operative article 140 and those that occurred in the Kurdistan Region, especially in Duhok and Ankawa.
3. Staying away from any measure intended to change the demographic population of Christian areas and other components, as well as staying away from building mosques in those areas.

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The Lived Experiences of Marginalised Christian Chaldean Catholic and Orthodox Women and Their Families in Iraq

Yohanna Yousef and Nadia Butti

Summary

Christians in Iraq are one of the oldest minority communities in the Middle East, yet their number has dramatically diminished in recent years, from representing 4 per cent of the Iraqi population in 1970 to 0.9 per cent in 2015 (Teule 2018:164–65). Iraqi Christians face an existential threat in Iraq; they have either fled and emigrated to other countries or been killed. This report highlights the lived experience of Christians, who describe in their own words the marginalisation and discrimination they face, with a focus on the experiences of Christian women, who face unique vulnerabilities due to the combination of religious, gender and other identifiers that shape their day-to-day lives.

Through focus group discussions, combined with participatory ranking exercises with 48 male and female Iraqi Christians from Al-Hamdaniya, Bartella and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, this report reveals the security situation to be the most severe and persistent threat facing Christian women and men in Iraq. The lack of safety has forced Christian women to leave their employment, particularly jobs in non-Christian areas, out of fear of increased harassment and threats of kidnapping. They have become confined to their homes, unable to travel, with their autonomy circumscribed and finances affected by lack of economic opportunities.

Recommendations, based on the authors' knowledge and participants' suggestions, include efforts to increase Christian women's representation in political processes and decision-making spaces; changes to the school curricula to ensure minorities such as Christians are represented positively and accurately; amendments to laws for the Christian community, such as the inheritance law, which currently disadvantages women; and increased job opportunities for Christians.

Keywords: Christians; Iraq; Chaldean; Orthodox; marginalisation; religious discrimination; gender inequality.

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Acronyms

FGD	focus group discussion
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
US	United States

1 Overview

Christians in Iraq are one of the oldest minority communities in the Middle East, dating back to the first century AD (Hanish 2009), yet their number has dramatically diminished in recent years, from representing 4 per cent of the Iraqi population in 1970 to 0.9 per cent in 2015 (Teule 2018: 164–65). It is highly likely that their numbers have continued to dwindle since 2015. The greatest drop was precipitated by the United States (US)-led invasion of Iraq and its promotion of sectarian policies, enacted and advanced by successive Iraqi governments. Sectarian policies and practices, underpinned by Islamisation and absence of safety, undermine Iraqi Christians' citizenship rights (Tannous 2011). The invasion of Iraq by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 was accompanied by an attempted genocide and extermination of religious minorities such as Christians and Yazidis, thereby increasing internal displacement and migration (Ahmed 2014).

Consequently, Iraqi Christians face an existential threat in Iraq, as they have either fled and emigrated to other countries or been killed. This report highlights the lived experience of Christians, who describe in their own words the marginalisation and discrimination they face, with a focus on the experiences of Christian women who face unique vulnerabilities due to the combination of religious, gender and other identifiers that shape their day-to-day lives.

Through focus group discussions (FGDs) combined with participatory ranking exercises with 48 male and female Iraqi Christians from Al-Hamdaniya, Bartella and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), this report reveals the security situation to be the most severe and persistent threat facing Christian women and men in Iraq. The lack of safety has forced Christian women to leave their employment, particularly jobs in non-Christian areas, out of fear of increased harassment and threats of kidnapping. They have become confined to their homes, unable to travel, with their autonomy circumscribed and finances affected by lack of economic opportunities.

Other threats and challenges the participants identified were lack of access to education for women and girls, unemployment, harassment (particularly of women, whose clothing distinguishes them from the Muslim majority) and fear of demographic change as Christians are pushed out of the areas they have always lived in; and, for Catholic women, increasing rates of divorce. Christian women also shared their experiences of

their fear of human and sex trafficking, based on threats they had either faced themselves or that they knew other Christian women faced.

Recommendations, based on the authors' knowledge and participants' suggestions, include efforts to increase Christian women's representation in political processes and decision-making spaces; changes to the school curricula to ensure minorities such as Christians are represented positively and accurately; amendments to laws that affect the Christian community, such as the inheritance law, which currently disadvantages women; and increased job opportunities for Christians.

2 Introduction

2.1 Background of the Christian community in Iraq

Christians today are spread throughout Iraq in almost all Iraqi governorates, but their presence is concentrated in the capital Baghdad, which hosts the largest Christian population group. In the major cities (Mosul, Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Basra, Al-Amarah, Hilla and Dohuk) and villages of northern Iraq and the Nineveh Plains region, Christians work in the fields of education, engineering, medicine, trade, industry and agriculture.

Iraq's Christians are distributed among churches belonging to several sects that follow different rites. Most of Iraq's Christians are followers of the Chaldean Catholic Church (80 per cent). Other Christian denominations in Iraq include Syriac Catholic and Syriac Orthodox (10 per cent), Assyrian (5 per cent), Armenian (Catholic and Orthodox) (3 per cent) and other sects (2 per cent) (Iraqi Christian Foundation 2019). The other sects include the Old Church of the East, Roman Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Latin Church, Protestant and Evangelical Church, and Coptic Church, which consists of the Egyptian community in Iraq (Reuters 2021). Christians speak the Syriac language, with different dialects, in which they perform their religious rituals, and which has its roots in the ancient Aramaic language.

Iraqi law officially recognises 14 Christian sects. These sects in 2010 established the Council of Heads of Christian Communities (World Council of Churches 2010), where each sect leader is a member of the council; but in recent years the Chaldeans withdrew

from the council due to a disagreement over the mechanism of the council's management (Agenzia Fides 2019).

The number of Christians at the start of the era of independence, which culminated in Iraq gaining independence in 1932, was estimated at 5 per cent of the population of Iraq, which amounted to 5 million. According to the 1977 census, their number was about 1,684,000 people. At the time of the last census conducted by Iraq in 1987, their number had fallen to 1,250,000, although the reasons for this are unclear. However, because of wars and immigration, on the eve of the US-led invasion in 2003, the number of Christians in Iraq had reached about 800,000 people (Office of International Religious Freedom 2022).

This number has diminished since then, due to continuous migration as a result of the security situation and armed groups targeting Christians after the occupation of Iraq by ISIS. Churches were directly targeted and bombed in all regions of Iraq, in addition to clerics and secular Christians being kidnapped and killed because of their religious affiliation and the failure of the state to protect them.

Some Christian families and individuals left the country during the period of the Iran-Iraq war. After the US-led occupation of Iraq and regime change, vast numbers of the Christian population began to migrate to Europe, Australia and the US, enduring the misery and bitterness of waiting in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, where they spend many years until they are approved for asylum after a difficult life in their own country.

The suffering of Christians is a composite: as Iraqis, they have suffered alienation, tyranny, wars, siege and occupation; but since 2003 they have suffered violence, terrorism, corruption and discrimination due to their religious affiliation. Since their arrival in the region, terrorist groups have focused on displacing Christians, separating them from Muslims and emptying the region of them. After 2003, they were particularly targeted by armed terrorist and extremist groups in the name of Islam.

Today, the number of Christians has decreased to around 250,000 people (*ibid*: 3), or perhaps fewer, and is likely to decline significantly more if the state of discrimination, violations of their rights, and the declining economic situation continue. In the opinion of Iraqi Christians, academics and multiple states, the acts of systematic abuse and targeting ISIS committed against Christians amounts to genocide and eradication for

reasons related to faith and religion (House of Commons 2016; Holpuch, Sherwood and Bowcott 2016; Isakhan and Shahab 2022). ISIS gave Christians three options on 17 July 2014: (1) convert to Islam; (2) pay *jizya* (a 'tax' historically levied against non-Muslims); or (3) face execution. When Christians refused to choose between these options, ISIS forcibly expelled them and confiscated their possessions (Human Rights Watch 2014). On 6 August 2014, ISIS took over all the Christians' cities and villages, forcing them to flee to safe areas.

In the period between June and August 2014, the ISIS advance displaced more than 200,000 Christians from Mosul and the towns of the Nineveh Plains to the KRI (Kurdistan Regional Government 2018). Afterwards, Christians started seeking migration routes, travelling to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and France, where there was already a significant Chaldean diaspora. They left a land that had been the centre of Christianity for many centuries. Thus, their numbers dwindled to a record low of 250,000 people, most of them in the Nineveh Plains and Kurdistan.

After the Christian towns and villages were liberated from ISIS, around 35,000 Christians returned (17.5 per cent of the total number displaced) to find everything destroyed or burnt down.¹ Reconstruction and restoration of life in these towns took place with the efforts of churches and citizens; there was no government support for reconstruction. Today, Christians suffer from weak economic activity and business, as well as fear of the presence of ideologically driven militias around them, in addition to marginalisation by the state. This is a warning that migration will continue and the number of Christians will decrease little by little.

2.2 The situation of women in the Iraqi Christian community

The multiple wars and conflict Iraq has suffered in recent years has further ingrained gender inequalities, roles and expectations in Iraqi society. Therefore, Iraqi women from the Muslim majority face many similar issues to Christian women; however, they are more acute for Christian women because of their religious identity (Jackson and Watson

¹ A table outlining the numbers of returnees from different Christian populations is included in Annexe 1, based on figures collected through informal correspondence between the author and the Syriac Catholic Church (via the Mayor of al-Hamdaniya District), the Syriac Council in Bartella, the Chaldean Church in Karmles, the Annunciation Church in Mosul, the Houyathan Organisation (representing the Tel Eskof, Baqofa and Batnaya Christian populations), the Chaldean Church in Tel Eskof and the Syriac Orthodox Church in Bashiqa.

2018). For example, a 2015 report by the Iraqi Women Journalists Forum found that eight in ten women in Iraq had experienced sexual harassment (Al Jazeera 2015). This is compounded for Christian women as they face being deliberately targeted by men from the Muslim majority as a way to humiliate the Christian community and because of their identity as a minority community (Jackson and Watson 2018).

It is also easy for those in the Muslim majority to identify Christian women in public because of the way they dress. Specifically, they do not wear a scarf or hijab to cover their head or face as most women from the Muslim majority do. Because of this, Christian women face intimidation from the majority to wear a veil (Hanish 2009). This threat of harassment restricts Christian women's movements as they become fearful of leaving their homes and travelling in public, especially after dark. Some Christian women have also changed their dress to not be so visible.

Christian women in Iraq therefore face not only this specific religious and gendered threat of harassment, but are also victims of the ongoing security situation Iraqi minorities face. When ISIS invaded Iraq in 2014, the group kidnapped Christian women and sold them into slavery. It has been reported that 45 women from al-Hamdaniya² were captured and only seven have returned (The Week 2018).

This unstable security situation further restricts Christian women's access to public spaces and limits their employment opportunities. Additionally, Christian women face restrictions in accessing job opportunities because of language barriers. ISIS displaced many Christians, such as those displaced from Mosul to Erbil. Typically, Christians speak different languages from other people in these cities' workplaces, so displaced Christian women have found themselves unable to gain employment because of language barriers, as well as fears of harassment and restrictions on their ability to travel and move around freely.

Domestic violence is also a significant threat that Christian women face, compounded by issues of instability such as displacement, migration and lack of job opportunities (Jackson and Watson 2018). This violence is linked to increasing rates of divorce and early marriage. During displacement, young Christian women and girls were uniquely vulnerable as they were often viewed as a burden the family needed to be rid of. They are

² Al-Hamdaniya is part of disputed territory under Kurdish administration.

now vulnerable again in cases of divorce as they have very little financial security, due to the restrictions placed on their freedom and movement.

3 Research aims and methodology

This research was undertaken with Christian men and women to understand the particular challenges they face because of their religion and gender, with a particular focus on the lived experience of Christian women. The research consisted of four FGDs and a participatory ranking exercise.

3.1 Participant selection

The study was undertaken with Catholic and Orthodox participants in Iraq, in both the areas under the jurisdiction of the Government of Iraq, based in Baghdad, and the areas that make up the KRI, under the jurisdiction of the Kurdistan Regional Government (Skelton and Saleem 2019). One focus group was held with Catholic men and another with Catholic women in al Hamdaniya, a disputed territory under Kurdish administration. A third focus group held with Orthodox men in Bartella (also a disputed territory under Kurdish administration). A final focus group was then carried out with Orthodox women in Ankawa (KRI). The research team consisted of one Catholic man from al-Hamdaniya and one Catholic woman originally from Mosul, but who had been displaced to Ankawa by the arrival of ISIS. Table 1 shows the breakdown of participants across the focus groups.

Table 1: Demographics of focus groups

	Focus group 1	Focus group 2	Focus group 3	Focus group 4
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male
No. of participants	12	12	12	12
Location	Kurdistan Region of Iraq	Al-Hamdaniya	Bartella	Al-Hamdaniya
Christian affiliation	Orthodox	Catholic	Orthodox	Catholic

Source: Authors' own.

Note: All participants were aged 20–70 years and were selected to ensure a diverse range of backgrounds.

3.2 Research process

The FGDs began with the participatory ranking exercise in which participants were invited to compile a list of the key challenges they faced. They were then invited to vote on each of these challenges to ascertain how significant they considered the impact of each challenge to be on their lives. Each participant was encouraged to prioritise six of the challenges. These challenges were then drawn together to identify mutual challenges across all four groups. After the participatory ranking exercise, the participants were asked questions to explore in more depth the priorities they had identified. This took place as an open discussion around these challenges, including examples from the participants' own lives.

Some of the questions covered in the FGDs included:

1. What are the basic roles of women within your community?
2. Are there obstacles to these roles? If there are obstacles, what is their nature?
3. How many opportunities are there for women in your community? Are opportunities differentiated on the basis of religion or belief?
4. Does your community accept religious rituals and rituals for women? And if not, are there examples that can be referred to?
5. What are the main priorities of women in your local community?
6. Do women think that the challenges they face are limited to them or do they include all individuals within the community?
7. Has your community been subjected to displacement? If the answer is yes, how does this affect the situation of women?
8. What do women consider appropriate actions to overcome these challenges, obstacles and elements of discrimination on the basis of gender?
9. What are the challenges Christian women face in their society of the same component?
10. What are the challenges Christian women face in society from people who do not belong to their constituency or who do not belong to their belief?
11. Do these challenges and difficulties on the basis of gender that you face in your societies push you to migrate or think of migrating outside Iraq?

3.3 Limitations, strengths and challenges

3.3.1 Strengths of the research

The focus groups included a diverse range of participants from various backgrounds to present a more comprehensive picture of the challenges and discrimination the Christian community experiences. This, in addition to the specific focus on the challenges Christian women face because of the intersection of their gender and religion makes this research particularly powerful and unique. The opportunity to hear directly from these marginalised individuals about their lived experience gives this research weight and adds depth to the existing literature.

3.3.2 Challenges and limitations of the research

The research was made more challenging by ambiguity surrounding the post-ISIS phase and the fate of Christians in historically Christian areas. This made it more difficult to identify Christians who were willing to speak about their experiences.

Limitations include absence of a vision and lack of a clear plan at national or international levels for recommendations from the research to feed into. Lack of statistics or reliance on inaccurate statistics on the number of Christians, including those who returned to their areas or migrated, had an impact on the report. The picture is unclear about the overall number of Christians and their demographics as they are constantly subject to change within a short period, in light of continuous migration.

In addition, some participants, were embarrassed to talk about details of personal, sensitive and emotive experiences that they had been through, as they did not want to convey their suffering and the violations of their rights they had been exposed to. As well as the shame they felt, this was also out of fear of speaking about such issues in front of others in the group – not wishing to make them public – and panic over follow-up, despite our consideration not to mention names or personal details. We assured them that we would maintain full confidentiality and anonymity, so as not to expose their personal information. We explained that this would not affect the goal of the project, which was to convey the challenges and the suffering of Christians in Iraqi society. Ultimately, this may have impacted on the experiences they shared with the group; however, we were still confident that the FGDs painted a detailed and accurate picture of their lives.

4 Research findings

The following section outlines the results of the research, with a particular focus on the threats and challenges Christian women face because of their gender and their religion.

4.1 Participatory ranking results

Tables 2 and 3 show the results of the participatory ranking exercise carried out in each focus group. The participants in each group identified the threats and challenges most pertinent to them and then ranked them according to their severity and prevalence.

Table 2: Threats and challenges participants identified (ranked by severity and prevalence)

Threat/challenge
Security and safety
Migration and internal displacement
Demographic change
Discrimination on the basis of caste/religious identity and inequality
Unemployment
Harassment and extortion
Weakness of law enforcement
Discrimination in legislation
Economic status
Marginalisation and lack of equal opportunities
Restriction of freedoms according to tradition
Cultural differences and awareness
Compensation
Violence and bullying
Human rights
Lack of education
Divorce/marital status
Partisanship
Lack of confidence

Source: Authors' own.

Table 3 shows more detail about how the different groups of participants ranked these issues. The second and third columns show the overall ranking of threats and challenges the women and men identified. The remaining columns further disaggregate these results by Orthodox and Catholic affiliation.

Table 3: Participatory ranking results for women and men (disaggregated by affiliation)

Rank	Women	Men	Women – Orthodox	Women – Catholic	Men – Orthodox	Men – Catholic
1	Safety	Safety	Safety	Safety and security	Security	Employment
2	Religious discrimination and discrimination	Demographic change	Religious discrimination	Discrimination	Demographic change	Emigration
3	Harassment and extortion	Emigration	Emigration	Employment	Emigration	Demographic change
4	Emigration	Job opportunities	Awareness	Emigration	Absence of laws	Safety and security
5	Unemployment	Discrimination in legislation	Unemployment	Online extortion	Economic situation	Justice and equality
6	Education	Justice and equality	Lack of trust	Divorce	Legislation	Marginalisation
7	Divorce	Lack of implementing laws	Harassment	Demographic change		Compensation
8	Norms and traditions	Marginalisation and equal opportunities	Language	Violence against women		Discrimination in law
9	Violence and bullying	Economic situation	Tradition	Education		Lack of knowledge of minorities
10	Demographic change	Culture and norms		Implementation of laws		Partisanship
11	Awareness	Compensation		Traditions		Weakness in implementation of laws
12	Implementation of laws	Violence and bullying		Health		Displacement
13	Lack of trust	Human rights		Economic		Harassment
14	Language	Partisanship				Discrimination
15						Violence and bullying

Source: Authors' own.

Table 3 shows significant differences between the focus groups. However, it also shows similarities and areas of agreement, such as the significance of safety and security, which over 79 per cent of participants identified as their top priority. This is because there are many military groups and militias operating in Iraq. The militias are a particular problem for Christians as they are ideologically linked and Christians perceive them as seeking to dominate historically Christian areas. They are believed to receive weapons and support from the Iraqi government and Iran, and wish to prevent the Christian community from holding government positions. The Iraqi army and police are not present. This causes a situation of instability and fear among the Christian population.

Many Christian families have left their homes in Mosul and cannot return because it is unsafe and there is no longer trust between communities in Mosul as they are afraid that what occurred under ISIS may happen again. They do not trust that the government will protect them. As a result, they are selling their homes in Mosul and settling in Erbil or seeking to migrate as they do not feel they can trust any party to enable them to live in Mosul safely.

With regards to women, because of the lack of security mothers are afraid to let their daughters go out or travel. This lack of safety and security feeds into all aspects of daily life. It is impossible to go to work as normal or to send daughters to school or college as not wearing scarves makes draws attention to them, which makes them targets of anti-Christian hatred. Among those from Mosul, they feel unable to return as there is no guarantee that women can wear what they wish or move freely; for example, to go to work or church. Even when taking a taxi, women are not free from harassment and community members feel they should be accompanied by a male relative. This has particularly been the case since 2003 but especially post-ISIS. Before 2003, there was more freedom of movement for Christian women.

The women identified harassment as a particular challenge, whereas this was not the case for men. As mentioned above, this is because Christian women are very visible because of their dress, and specifically because they do not wear scarves or hijabs as women from the Muslim majority do. They are not seen to have the same protection as Muslim women and are perceived as easier targets as those harassing them will not be held accountable for their actions. This restricts the way the women dress as they try to blend in and avoid attracting attention. It also means that when they take a taxi they will look to travel with someone else and will not go to some places after dark.

Apart from the Catholic men, all the groups identified safety and security as the highest priority. For the Catholic men, employment was the biggest challenge they faced. This is because they had been displaced from the Nineveh Plains region to Erbil and other cities in Iraq. Now they have returned to villages such as Karakosh. Prior to the ISIS occupation, they worked in Mosul and Baghdad; but post-ISIS they have been unable to travel to and work in these cities. A small village such as Karakosh does not have the economy to provide job opportunities for them. Catholic women also ranked employment high as a concern for similar reasons to the men. Prior to the ISIS occupation, it was common for the women to have jobs outside the home or in Mosul, but now these jobs are very limited and they are unable to travel for work.

The Orthodox women highlighted language as a challenge. This is because they moved from the Nineveh Plains region and Mosul to Ankawa in Erbil. In Mosul, it was more common to speak Arabic. But now in Erbil, if they do not speak Syriac they face discrimination both from within and outside of the Christian community. For example, they might have to pay more in rent or for food. Also, as they do not speak Kurdish this can limit job opportunities or make travelling through checkpoints more challenging. This was not such a challenge for the men, as more men in the community speak Arabic, so they are still able to build relations with other Christian men. However, as Christian women are less likely to know Arabic, this creates a barrier for women from Nineveh to establish relationships with others and to be accepted.

For the Catholic women, divorce and violence against women were highlighted as particular challenges. They are on the rise because of the multiple challenges the community faces in relation to displacement and job opportunities. These frustrations have led to an increase in intra-community violence, particularly domestic violence. This differs from the Orthodox women as the Orthodox community has greater stability and safety, not having faced the same challenges as those who are from the Nineveh Plains region, who lost their homes. Migration has also broken up families within Catholic communities. Early marriage is now more common as families want to be free of the economic burden of having a daughter to provide for at such a difficult time.

Geographical factors also affected the participants' choices, as well as whether they belonged to the Orthodox Church or the Catholic Church. For example, while the men shared the same three top priorities (security situation, forced migration and demographic change), their remaining priorities differed. The Syriac Catholic men

focused on job opportunities, justice and equality and marginalisation, whereas the Syriac Orthodox men focused on the absence of the rule of law, the economic situation, and discrimination in legislation.

Part of the reason for the differing priorities is the specificity of each region. For example, some Syriac Catholic areas are managed by Christian authorities, in addition to the presence of official security forces, alongside the presence of security forces drawn from the city's residents. In contrast, the situation in the Syrian Orthodox city is being managed by security forces representing other social groups, such as Shabaks, a Shi'a Muslim minority. Also, individuals' perceptions of the size and nature of the demographic change, and their priorities, clearly differed between the two groups.

The Catholic and Orthodox women shared more priorities; four in total: security and safety, religious and other forms of discrimination, forced migration and unemployment. However, the Orthodox Syriac women prioritised (lack of) awareness (of minorities) and lack of trust, whereas the Syriac Catholic women focused on electronic extortion and harassment. The disparity between the two groups is because the (Orthodox) Christians in Erbil have been subjected to many violations of their rights and displacement from their areas of origin, so they are always wary of and mistrust their neighbours of other religions, and expect danger all the time. The Catholic women, live among only Catholics and are able to exercise their freedoms with complete peace of mind, in addition to the society in which they live being more aware of women's rights and educated.

4.2 Analysis of differing opinions and priorities

The following sections further explore the differences and similarities between the threats and challenges men and women in the focus groups identified, with a particular interest in the difference between the women's and men's views and experiences. Not all threats and challenges were discussed at length in the FGDs. Some issues, such as unemployment, were subsumed under overarching themes, such as security, as the views and experiences shared touched on both issues (demonstrating the interconnected nature of the threats and challenges identified).

4.2.1 Security situation

The opinions of the participants in the focus group sessions differed, but security was a priority for almost all of them, especially since, according to one of the Catholic men,

'Christians' concerns are now different from before. Neither I nor my son feel secure when going outside al-Hamdaniya. In my neighbourhood, I feel secure, however, security and safety aren't stable in Iraq at present.'

Previously, Christians had no concerns when they went outside of their areas of origin, whether for work, study, recreation or other reasons. However, since 2003, with the rise of violence and terrorism including the targeting of Christians through kidnapping, threats of violence, robbery and murder, trust has diminished. This has had an enormous impact on women, as many of them quit jobs located in non-Christian areas. Women had to change their appearance in order not to be recognised or identified as Christians to avoid such threats. Hence, the situation forced women to stay at home, affecting their competence and impacting the finances of their households.

The reason for this situation is due to the absence of a force to protect Christians as much as the presence of threats. One of the Catholic men emphasised this:

no security force can protect you because any force that has greed [ambitions] in this area will cause tensions. There will be conflict that would affect [the] community. Christian protection won't be [achieved] by replacing the power, but by dissolving the power that threatens them.

The fears of Christians in the Nineveh Plains region, an area under the administration of the central government in Baghdad, may in part be due to the multiplicity of security forces that govern security management in the region. One of the Orthodox men stated that, 'the security forces are infiltrated. Security forces members don't trust each other.' Another of the Orthodox men (57 years old), added that the security forces belong to multiple parties, so there are multiple centres of security decision-making:

Who is responsible for security? It is the state. Actually, there is no state. There are interests and militias. Where is belonging to this country? Where is our army to defend us? Very few of this people have a sense of belonging. We can't say that we have security forces. No, we have militias. Security forces consist of armed forces, federal police and local police... There could be disputes and tensions between the militias which is a big problem... They [are] so close to you. They tell you to leave. They terrify Christians in Bartella.

The fears of Christians may even extend into the Kurdistan region, despite the large Christian presence there. An Orthodox woman mentioned in the FGD that:

we were threatened more than once in the city of Mosul; we were then forced to flee from inside Mosul. We moved first to the Alqosh region, and then to Erbil, then Ankawa region, and even in Erbil our fears persisted, even if the security was largely present. We often suffer from religious and national discrimination because of our lack of knowledge of their language, as well as because of our Christian religion.

Subsequently, the intense preoccupation with security has constituted a major obstacle to women's enjoyment of their rights and their ability to move and work, as they fear they will be subjected to harassment or religious discrimination. For example, one of the Catholic women, who previously worked, recounted the following experience:

I was working in the nineties of the last century in Tal Afar, where there are no Christians, but I felt safe. We are now missing this sense of safety, because of our fears of the collapse of security at any moment, so we remain in a state of anxious waiting when one of the women goes out of the area, whether for work, shopping or other things.

This anticipation is not unfounded. One of the Orthodox women (55 years old), described a threat to her business and her daughter's life. Despite refusing to bow to pressure multiple times, ultimately the threats forced this woman out of her home and city:

I was living in Baghdad. I was an employee there and I had a fitness centre in Baghdad. I worked there. Thank God, my work was flourishing. But, we were subjected to threats. Again, they threatened us with a message and a bullet. They used to call us. My daughter was still in the Al-Mustansiriya University and they said to me: 'Either you close the centre, or we kidnap your daughter, and we know which car she goes and comes in'. Then, I started dropping her off and picking her up by myself. Finally, I made her leave the university and stay home for a while. One morning, when I went to the centre, I saw, 'Death to you' written by them on it. Because I am from the Christian component, they wrote on the door of the centre: 'Death to you' and 'You are infidels'. They wrote these words on the door of the centre. We did not care. I went and got some paint and painted over the writing.

The next day, they put a bullet for us – and this was another threat – under the door. Then, the centre caught fire. This was back in 2006. Then, I rebuilt it, and threats started again. Threats would come to me from the closest people who were working with me. After that, we started to get weary of this. We left and went to Ankawa district in Erbil governorate.

Additionally, another of the Orthodox women described how her sister's husband was kidnapped. The kidnappers came for a ransom and suggested that the nephew sell his mother and sisters for money:

We were suffering a lot in Mosul. They kidnapped my brother-in-law, then, asked for a ransom of US\$250,000. My nephew replied saying, 'Where can we bring you this large sum of money?' They told him that this is not their problem, so he said to them: 'What are we to do? Shall we sell our car and sell our house so you would come and take everything?' They replied saying: 'Yes, sell everything, even your mother and sisters, and give us the money'. Then we gave them US\$30,000 and waited for two or three days so they would release him, but to no avail. We had to go to the hospitals to ask about him, just to find his dead body, as they shot him with three bullets in the head and body. Basically, the kidnappers took the money and killed him. There is no safety in Mosul, particularly as we used to live in the Al Zanjali area. It is an area with a Muslim majority. We Christians have lived there for 38 years. During the month of Ramadan, we Christians had to commit to wearing the hijab, as well as wearing long clothes, as an act of reverence to them. However, they never ever appreciated that.

It is therefore unsurprising that Christian women and girls feel they have no choice but to restrict their movement. Another of the Orthodox women (43 years old) spoke about the impact on Christian women of being confined to their household out of fear of a lack of safety and security. 'We are afraid to go out, we are afraid to go in [to church], due to the lack of security and the loss of safety. Being locked up at home impacts one psychologically. So a lot [of] things impacted us.' In addition to this, one of the Catholic women (27 years old), reflected on how the security situation affects the upbringing of Christian girls:

[One] of the toughest obstacles that we face is the security situation. Unstable security conditions impact women as they can become preoccupied by their

worries about the situation and can find themselves going over their negative experiences in their head, again and again. This impacts their ability to contribute to their communities. Women are half of the society. This also impacts the economic situation. If a woman's family conditions are degraded, this will certainly affect the way she raises her children, which will impact the society in all respects.

Accordingly, security was clearly a priority for all participants in the focus groups; however, due to both their gender and religious affiliation the participants experienced the safety and security situation differently. Nevertheless, concerns about security persisted for all of them and shaped all of their experiences, particularly the women, who are now experiencing increased restrictions on their movement due to these security fears.

4.2.2 Religious, gender-based and other forms of discrimination

The challenge by Christian women ranked second highest was religious discrimination. The men did not mention it in the same way; however, they spoke of discrimination in legislation, and lack of justice and equality, or even positive discrimination for Christians in al-Hamdaniya. One of the Orthodox women (48 years old) shared how her life had been destroyed by religious discrimination:

When I was in the first grade of primary school, a Muslim boy, the teacher's son, pushed me down the stairs. I fell on my head, and I had internal bleeding. I also have a permanent disability in my hands and feet. I suffered greatly in my life and became disabled because of that. If a Christian boy pushes a Muslim girl, what would they do to him, particularly after she becomes disabled like me? They have ruined my life and my future. Currently, I have no future. They caused me to lose everything. This is ever since the first grade of primary school. I suffer from a physical disability. When I used to see children playing, jogging and running while I was standing, I would look at them without being able to do like them. I am sad and have a lot of pain within me.

The women shared how this discrimination seeped into all areas of their lives. For example, another of the Orthodox women described the oppression she faced when trying to renew her passport:

The second point is when I went to the Passports Authority to renew my passport. I entered the hall and sat according to the rules, waiting for my turn according to the number in sequence. I noticed that the officer was admitting Muslims whose turn is later than mine. I was disappointed and deeply saddened by this discrimination. An Arab woman was standing next to me, and she said to the officer: 'Why are you letting people whose numbers are after us jump the queue, while we have been waiting since nine o'clock in the morning until now, which is 12 noon?' He took our documents and tore them up in anger, telling me, 'Go to Mosul, let them handle renewing your passport. We here [in Erbil] are not going to renew your passport. May God reward us for putting up with you and with your living here amongst us in Kurdistan. I was aggravated by this inhumane situation, and I decided to communicate this incident to State representatives from the Christian component. Unfortunately, this was to no avail as they did nothing for me. A person working in the field of human rights told me: 'This is how things have turned out now. What do you expect?'

Almost all of the women had experiences of discrimination to share, from all areas of life, from the marketplace to healthcare settings. For example, one of the Orthodox women (55 years old) described her experience of visiting the market: 'When we go anywhere in the market here in Erbil, and ask the owner of the shop about the price of any goods, he would immediately respond to us saying: "No, no, I am not selling", as he saw me wearing a cross, and because we are Christians.' A Catholic woman (22 years old) shared a similar experience:

When we first got displaced, when we used to go to places or shops where there are Muslims, and we needed to ask them about something or about the price of some merchandise, we would notice that they do not respond to us or talk to us, because they can tell that we are Christians. Thus we can clearly see the strong link between discrimination and the great disintegration of the people among themselves.

Participants observed that Muslim women were not treated in this way.

In terms of health care, one Orthodox woman (27 years old) spoke about visiting a clinic:

[The] Kurdish gynaecologist and the secretary, as well as the Kurdish women sitting in the waiting room, give us strange and belittling looks, as they despise us a lot, since we are Christians. A few days ago, I went to the clinic and I was the only Christian among all the patients. The secretary admitted four to five patients before me and made me wait till the end, knowing that I came before all of them.

Another of the Orthodox women (62 years old), described how she felt that the discrimination she experienced was on account of wearing a cross:

My employment at Salahaddin University³ was being processed, and one of the female employees seated saw the cross that I was wearing on my chest, so I asked her: 'Where do I go to complete my paperwork since the manager asked me to do so?' So, she answered me uptightly, 'Go, go, go, go from here. I don't know anything'. I went to the manager and told her about this, and told her how this employee spoke to me. Frankly, the director called her and rebuked her, saying: 'Finish the process for her employment immediately since this woman came from a far place'. People here deal with us with racism, hatred and religious discrimination. When we were in Mosul, this cross was never seen in public or shown on our chest. We had to wear the veil on our head, and we also had to wear a long skirt when we left the house. This is our great distress as Christians.

Fears of discrimination due to inequality are particularly prominent for women because of their clothing, such as the necklaces with crosses mentioned in the examples above, which makes them more recognisable as non-Muslims. One of the Catholic men explained how:

[a Christian woman] will be subjected to bullying because she is a Christian and it is blatant because of her clothing. Despite the fact that at the present time there is a kind of freedom because there are Muslims and women from other religions without a headscarf, after the development that happened through social media.

He was referring to the viral outcry on social media when women are attacked because of being non-Muslim. This outcry has forced officials to take notice of this bullying and discrimination.

³ A public university based in Erbil, a part of Iraq under Kurdish administration.

For example, one of the Catholic women (21 years old) described how she is treated at university because of wearing her hair down:

When I go to the university, I feel sort of afraid, and this fear within me is regarding the professors. They interfere in my personal matters that have nothing to do with my academic performance, such as whether I tie up my hair or let it loose. They tell me to always tie my hair up. The hair has nothing to do with scholarly work.

She said that she felt that what matters most for these professors is for women to dress modestly.

The same Catholic man also described the discrimination he faced in being prevented from speaking to Muslim girls because of being a Christian:

I was in the university and when I go to girls in order to get the homework, Muslim boys used to tell me that I can't approach Muslim girls directly. I have to ask them first and they by their turn ask girls to give me the homework.' He explained that any Muslim man has the right to approach Christian girls directly while Christian men can't do that. This was the case in Mosul university.

Unfortunately, some of the participants also described discrimination within the Christian community, as they experienced discrimination from other Christians based on denomination and language differences. For example, one of the Orthodox women (52 years old), described being denied health care by another Christian because she originated from Baghdad and did not speak Syriac:

We were displaced from Mosul in 2010 and we went to the governorate of Baghdad, since I was originally born in Baghdad, but I had lived in Mosul based on my husband. In Baghdad, we were threatened and they blew up our house. Accordingly, we were also displaced to Erbil. One day, I had a medical issue and I had to go to the hospital. Since I could not speak Sureth, which means [Syriac], the sonography doctor was irritated and refused to treat me. I said to her: 'How are you a Christian and you do not take into account the circumstances and the situation I am in just because I do not speak Sureth?' Then I left the hospital. One day, over two years later, I went to Kangin Hospital and by chance I saw the same doctor in the lab. I told her: 'Do you know who I am? I am the one who one day needed an ultrasound and you refused to treat me because I do not know or

understand the Sureth language, since I am Iraqi and am originally from Baghdad. All my ancestors are from Baghdad'. She said to me: 'No, I did not mean anything, and I apologise for what had happened on my part'. I told her: 'Do not apologise. Back then, you were supposed to perform your duty, which you were obligated to. It is not for you to talk about language and to discriminate based on that'. Unfortunately, we have reached that level. We Christians, who are of the same religion, practice this racism and discrimination amongst ourselves.

Many of the participants in al-Hamdaniya⁴ – Catholic men and women – felt that because of the absence of Christian representation at the level of local government leaders, discrimination and marginalisation are heavily present within the local government in Nineveh governorate. One of the Catholic men explained it in the following way:

This discrimination is at the level of the local government in Nineveh – the governor has two deputies and five assistants, and there is no Christian deputy, assistant or advisor. There are no Christians in the first line in [the] administration of Nineveh governorate to defend the rights of Christians, the absence of this person leads to the marginalisation of Christians further, as there is no person with the decision maker, especially since the administrative assistant to the Governor of Nineveh is part of the Christians' share.

Another of the Catholic men also linked the continued marginalisation and discrimination of Christians to the educational curricula covered in Iraqi schools: 'The educational curricula must be worked on because today the history of Iraq speaks of only one truth (Islamic) and does not talk about the role of Christians in building Iraq and other civilisations.'

4.2.3 Harassment and extortion

As mentioned in the section on the security situation, Christian women are fearful of leaving their homes because of the lack of safety and security, including the risk of harassment. One of the Orthodox men (60 years old) described how women in his community have experienced harassment so frequently that they choose not to leave the house:

⁴ A disputed territory under Kurdish administration.

Harassment is present [since a] long time ago. When our ancestors used to go to Mosul, they used to hear bad words. They used to tease them. I have seen harassment many times in Bartella where a woman has her hand held or kissed. In our community, we have relations with Shabaks and Muslims. In the surrounding communities, many things take place. When there is harassment, women decide not to go out of their homes because they are afraid of harassment. This is also because of the absence of the rule of law and the different culture... In addition, some think that the openness of Christians is social disintegration.

He also added that there is an impression among Muslims that Christian women are more accessible.

A Catholic man agreed that harassment has always existed, but said that the police ignore its religious driver, invisibilising Catholic men's experience. He described how Christian women, particularly in Bartella,⁵ are subject to 'sextortion',⁶ where they are blackmailed to provide sexual favours. If they do not comply, they are punished by being raped and sexually abused. The man said that this way of thinking has come from rural areas into urban areas and is leading to migration and internal displacement: 'People don't want to come back to Bartella because of these concerns.'

The women discussed how many in the Muslim majority hold the view that Christians are more liberal in their beliefs and practices in a way that they see as contributing to the disintegration of social mores. Christian women are particularly affected by this because men from the majority use it as justification to harass them, believing that Christian women will be more 'open' to sexual and romantic advances. For example, an Orthodox woman (62 years old) described how Christian women are often fired from their jobs if they do not respond positively to their managers' advances:

Many of our Christian daughters would apply for jobs. If they do not permit the manager the desired space, he would fire them immediately. There is a different purpose for the job. They have some perception that Christians are liberal, and that Christian girls are easy-going and would give them more space than Muslim girls would. A well-known organisation official, who is a Kurdish Muslim, once told

⁵ A disputed territory under Kurdish administration.

⁶ The Cambridge Dictionary defines sextortion as 'the practice of forcing someone to do something, particularly to perform sexual acts, by threatening to publish naked pictures of them or sexual information about them'.

me, 'I need you as you are a good activist, and I want you to work with me'. I answered, 'I have no problem, and I will help you with anything you want or need from me at work'. However, day by day, he started talking about private matters outside of the work scope, mentioning how he divorced his wife and talking about her, in an attempt to draw closer to me. I did not allow that and did not give him a chance to talk about private matters, and left him immediately. Harassment is everywhere, even when we were young. This was present and prevalent, particularly for those who know we are from the Christian component. They would exploit us, believing that we are accessible, and that we may respond to their advances and fulfil [their] desires and pleasures.

Similarly, one of the Catholic women (45 years old) highlighted how these situations of harassment often also result in blackmail for Christian women, which has made Christian women more afraid to go out and look for employment:

Currently, after these events that occurred due to displacement and its distresses, women themselves have become afraid to leave their homes, because there is no safety. The exploitation and harassment of women in the workplace has become a widespread phenomenon. For example, managers exploit female employees, blackmail them and bargain with them in terms of moral issues, in return for giving them some privileges, increasing their salaries or facilitating their livelihood. That is why women have become afraid of going to work or looking for a job anywhere.

The women also highlighted the blackmail and harassment that Christian girls are subjected to over social media and the internet. Girls' and women's 'honour' is often tied to their families' and communities' honour, placing them in an increased position of vulnerability when they are harassed or abused. For example, the same Catholic woman continued:

apps have spread recently where personal pictures are placed on different bodies, violating women's honour. Men from other religions blackmail and threaten girls with these pictures, forcing them to pay them money, give of their gold or go with them to special places, or else they would publish these pictures over social media and the internet. This causes girls psychological and physical damage. A girl would lose confidence in herself, and would remain afraid of society, and would even

consider committing suicide for fear of people's gossip. It takes a long time, a lot of effort and work to prove her innocence.

4.2.4 Migration, displacement and demographic change

There is no doubt that the Christian presence in Iraq has been severely diminished due to multiple waves of persecution that have led to migration. This persecution has been both direct, through targeting, and indirect, through denial of Christian identities and histories. Alongside economic decline, many families have been forced to migrate, making it harder for those who remain, so that many more wish to leave should they have the chance. There are, however, some Christians who are committed to remaining in Iraq due to their ancient and historical ties to the land.

An Orthodox woman (62 years old) lamented how displacement and forced migration have split families up across the globe, eroding community and family bonds:

Oh, how immigration has destroyed us and our children. Our children immigrated. Now we remain deprived of our grandchildren, our children, their laughter and their warm embrace. When we hear they are sick, our hearts burn within us. I have a daughter and a son who are migrants. My son is in Canada now, and my daughter is in Sweden. I only have one son who lives with me. I am very sad because I no longer see my children whom I raised, nor do I see my grandchildren, hug them, sit with them or witness their laughter. All of them live abroad, I just see them online. Migration destroyed us and destroyed everything. The family is dispersed; the boy is in one place and the girl is in another.

Participants also discussed how displacement impacted them in other ways, even if they remained in Iraq. For example, one of the Orthodox women (34 years old) described her experience of being displaced and left with nothing:

Yes, we were displaced. We left Mosul with only the clothes that we were wearing. We left everything behind and we came here to Erbil. We suffer a lot because the simplest rights are not available, including housing, as the rents are very expensive and men do not work or have a job. Our children are devastated because they do not go to school. Now things are a little better, but we have gone through many rough circumstances that impacted us and our psychological state.

Another of the Orthodox women (55 years old) agreed, stating that:

we were impacted in all respects, in terms of work, my daughters, school and education, and in terms of losing our jobs. We lost our money, our home, and the workplace caught fire and turned into ashes. We have suffered a lot and we still do.

It was clear that the different locations of the participants affected their experiences of displacement and migration in different ways. However, despite their differing experiences, the women all agreed that displacement had negatively impacted Christian women's ability to move freely around their communities and even to find privacy in their own homes. One of the Catholic women (25 years old) commented that all Christians have been displaced:

the privacy of women changed during the displacement. Women used to be in their home living alone and having a private room. Here, women, whether as girls or as married women, have no privacy, living in a tent or a small caravan. This was very difficult and impacted their psychological state a lot. A woman could not get dressed comfortably or go out freely for fear of the community's view of her.

Additionally, women were the ones whose opportunities to work outside of the home were most significantly – and immediately – destroyed, especially because of the increased mental and emotional burden of caring for their frightened families. As another of the Catholic women (56 years old) stated: 'Yes, we have all been displaced. We Christians and Yazidis left together. This impacted us economically, socially and culturally, specifically women, as they were depleted intellectually, mentally, psychologically and in all respects.'

Another of the Catholic women (21 years old), highlighted how early marriage had increased as a consequence of this displacement: 'We were displaced, and this impacted women financially and economically. We see that most families married their daughters off early to be set free from this difficult situation. This impacted women a lot.'

Sadly, alongside this rise in early marriage, one of the Catholic women (27 years old) highlighted how suicide rates have also increased among Christian women and girls:

The whole community was displaced and people were afraid. There is insecurity and there are cases of suicide. People have reached the point that they are experiencing suicidal ideation within these compounds and camps because of the rough living and economic conditions. The percentage of divorce and harassment cases and that of early marriage have increased in crowded areas.

The male participants discussed how after 2003 Christians were targeted with the specific intention of driving them out of Iraq, to erase their existence as a minority there. For example, one of the Catholic men described this in the following way: 'The targeting of Christians began in Mosul after 2003–04, and that was in order to drive them out of the city, and they had no protection from the state. It was systematic, and religion was a factor in that'. Another of the Catholic men added: 'We must look into the history of Christian existence. Today, existence has ended. If the targeting was not based on religion, the Christians in southern Iraq would have been spared.' He stressed that the targeting is the reason for migration, 'but I will not emigrate'. A third Catholic man added that migration is the main consequence of being subjected to harassment and discrimination on the basis of religion: 'Migration is because of the harassment we are subjected to, that we want to find a better life.'

However, the increase in the proportion of migration is due to the lack of job opportunities and the absence of a future, as the participants called it. For example, one of the Orthodox men (67 years old) shared the perspective of his son on his future:

If I ask my son or your son what is our future in Iraq. He says that no matter how hard he tries, there is no job opportunity, no rights and no security. All these things push people to migrate. If someone expresses his willingness to migrate and you say: Please don't migrate. He says: 'Can you provide me with a job? We can't find work'.

Another of the Orthodox men (57 years old) also highlights how a loss of trust in the government to listen to Christians and meet their needs has led to mass migration: 'The future is unknown. Losing trust in any Iraqi government resulted in migration. If all Christians haven't been forced out of Iraq by now, Iraq will be emptied of us in 10 years.'

Lack of job opportunities is considered a common issue in Iraq in general. However, Christians do not obtain jobs within the public sector due to the control of the dominant

political parties. Moreover, compared to Iraqi citizens in general, and due to their concerns about harassment and discrimination, Christians seek employment within their areas, at a time when their areas cannot accommodate the large number of graduates. Also, the majority of available jobs are within the police and army, and generally Christians do not want to join these institutions, which represent a government that does not respect them or uphold their rights.

Therefore, cases of migration since 2014 and the aggravation of migration as a phenomenon that has clearly changed the features of the region since 2014, explain people's fears that the Christian presence will be gone from the region within 10–20 years. This fear is also bolstered by the government's failure to take general procedural policies that work to reassure Christians in the region, whether to stop the encroachment of demographic change on their areas, to find job opportunities that stabilise their presence, or to dispel their fears of a return of targeting on a religious basis, which previously led to the painful experience of internal displacement. This was particularly highlighted by the participants in Bartella and al-Hamdaniya.

In general, the male participants were determined not to migrate, despite how bleak the situation looked. In contrast, many of the women expressed a deep desire to leave Iraq because of the loss of family connections they have experienced. For example, one of the Orthodox women (48 years old) stated that she has:

no one left here, neither brothers nor sisters. I currently live alone. I also hope to migrate. I am not well psychologically. Perhaps this year I am alive, but who knows, maybe next year something bad will happen to me, or perhaps I will die. I don't know, and that is why I really hope to migrate and be with my family and my brothers and sisters.

Likewise, an Orthodox woman (62 years old) expressed how much she wanted to join her children:

I prefer to migrate, if I will be with my children, meaning I would migrate only for the sake of my children. I love my country and my homeland, but it is for the sake of my children. It is difficult for me to be deprived of them, of seeing them and of enjoying their tenderness. That is why I would love to migrate, because I want to

stay close to my children so that I would spend the rest of my life near my grandchildren.

Comments on demographic change were intertwined with the discussions on migration and displacement, since the area was subjected to a great threat and emptied of the Christian presence during the period of ISIS occupation. Since 2003, the Christian population have felt that their areas have been subjected to systematic demographic change, which dates back to the 1980s. This was asserted by one of the Orthodox men, who stated that ‘the demographic change in the Christian areas began in 1980, when the distribution of lands to the martyrs in the Iran-Iraq [war] began’. The participants believed that this was only the beginning of their lands being taken from them. The same Orthodox Christian man expressed his perception that Christian lands are being given to those from the Shabak minority, who have also experienced displacement, in an effort to push Christians out:

There is an increasing desire to buy the lands of the Christian component in Bartella since after the fall of the regime in 2003 [we have seen] the process of displacing the Shabaks from the city of Mosul and pushing them [in]to our areas, a programmed process that happened in 2005–07. The dominant party in the central government did not put an end to this matter because they are satisfied with the process of the Shabaks’ advance [in]to these areas and with help from the government.

As mentioned by the same Orthodox man, demographic change in Christian areas started in 1980 when Saddam Hussain granted lands to the families of non-Christian martyrs and soldiers during the Iraq-Iran war. Therefore, the number of non-Christians increased in Christian areas. Due to the threats and targeting by ISIS against Shi’a Shabaks in Mosul between 2004 and 2014, the Shabaks started establishing residential compounds in the relatively safe Christian areas.

After 2003, Shabak people started purchasing agricultural land from Christians to build residential compounds. This was encouraged by the local government authorities and Shi’a political parties for political and electoral gain. Focus group participants were concerned that this will continue to contribute to a decrease in Christians in the area, as well as a decrease in the number of Christian representatives for their areas within the administration and at legislative level. Their fear is that it will make it even less likely that

their needs will be represented and accounted for. One of the Catholic men shared how some Christians are tempted to sell their land because it provides them with the money to migrate.

4.2.5 Education

Focus group participants shared many examples of the religious and gender-based discrimination Christian women face in education settings and in trying to obtain an education. One of the first issues highlighted was the comments and criticisms that female Christian students receive in educational settings about the clothing they wear, which distinguishes them from the Muslim majority. For example, one of the Catholic men shared his daughter's experience. 'My daughter, studying in a prominent university, told me that one of the professors used 15 minutes in the lecture to talk about Islamic law and decency. She felt that this was directed at her because of her clothing, and this pushed her to leave the university.' The participant also added that young Christian women are often exposed to sexual harassment in this same university, suggesting that this religious and gendered discrimination is deeply rooted within the culture of the institution.

One of the Orthodox women (62 years old), shared her experience of being rejected from a master's degree, despite being in the top ten applicants, and being told outright that she had been rejected because of her Christian faith:

Because I am a Christian, they will not accept me. When I was in Mosul, I applied for a master's degree, as I was one of the top ten. I applied for a master's degree at the University of Mosul several times. The application was based on my qualifications, since I am a media person, and I have the title of a researcher on my papers and researches. Unfortunately, they removed my name, and accepted another woman in my place, a woman who does not have any qualifications, just because she is a Muslim and I am a Christian. Finally, they sent a message to one of the professors and told him, 'We cannot accept her, because she is Christian', and I was not accepted.

A Catholic woman (61 years old) agreed, sharing her impression of her daughter not being able to get a place on a master's course:

There is a lot of discrimination and I have one example. My daughter applied for a master's degree and was not accepted. Like all Christian girls in the district of al-

Hamdaniya here, not one of them was accepted. The admission was only granted to the children of the deputies.

4.2.6 Divorce

The Catholic women were the only participants in the focus groups to speak about divorce; however, they raised it as a significant issue for them. One of the women (27 years old) attributed the rise in cases of divorce in the Christian community to rushed marriages that were the result of displacement:

An important thing is also the divorce cases, which increased in al-Hamdaniya as a result of the idea of displacement, which caused an increase in cases of hasty marriages. Some families would rush to marry their daughters off in order to be free of their responsibility, so they could travel as soon as possible.

It is clear from this quote that Christian women were uniquely vulnerable during displacement, as they were seen by many as a burden that the family needed to be free from. Now, in cases of divorce the women are vulnerable again as they lose the financial security their husbands provide.

One of the Catholic women (39 years old) shared that:

because I work in the legal field as a lawyer, I see many different reasons for divorce, including violence, customs and traditions, and the economic and social conditions. The cases of divorce and family disintegration within the Christian community have increased.

Another of the Catholic women (45 years old) described how children are also vulnerable in cases of divorce, sometimes having to leave school to work as the family has lost its (male) breadwinner:

There are several problems, such as poverty and neglect, which cause divorce and lead to the disintegration of the family and children, as well as the psychological ailments which cause them [children] to drop out of school, tending to take up a job to support their families.

4.2.7 Norms and traditions

When speaking about norms, customs and traditions, the majority of participants referred to the restrictions placed on Christian women's clothing choices. For example, one of the Catholic men, stated that:

most people don't value [the] Christian woman. I had a doctor friend who works in Tuzkhurmato⁷ and she was forced to wear [the] veil because the wider Iraqi community doesn't accept the woman with her hair.

Due to fears of harassment and even of being kidnapped or killed, the women discussed how they dress in clothing that is more acceptable to the Muslim majority. One of the Orthodox women (60 years old) explained how:

when we were in Mosul, we would not leave the house. Only during special occasions and festivals would we go to church because we are afraid lest some bombings, kidnappings or killings should take place. Our clothes were long, and we would put a cover on our head. Our clothes were all modest and long when we intended to leave the house.

Another of the Orthodox women (48 years old) agreed, reiterating the fear Christian women have of being recognised as Christians:

When we were in Mosul, we used to wear a cover (hijab) and long clothes with cuffs and long sleeves whenever we wanted to leave the house. We also used to hide the cross inside our clothes, because we were afraid to show the cross in public. We were afraid of them and their stares. We were restricted in everything, and were unable to live our daily lives freely and comfortably.

Some of the Catholic women felt that it was more than just their clothing that became more restricted when they were displaced out of their majority Christian communities and forced to adopt new customs and traditions. For example, one of the Catholic women (45 years old) explained how her whole lifestyle had changed in a negative way because of the loss of the customs and traditions she was used to:

⁷ A district located in the Salahaldeen governorate, just north of Baghdad.

We, as Christians, are accustomed to hanging out and going to parties. We enjoy freedom [over] what to wear and how to behave within our Christian community, and these have formerly been our customs and traditions. But what we witness now is that people, who are from outside our regions and our religion, people who are quite different in everything, would interfere in our affairs, taking advantage of these things and trying to use them against us. This hurts us a lot, and does not allow us to be at ease, either in our way of dressing or in our parties or gatherings. This is a restriction of our freedom. They also impose the customs and traditions of a different religion on our daughters. In the universities, for example, they criticise everything about them. They ask them why they do not wear a veil, why they reveal their hair and why they wear short clothes. This is even done by university professors. An evident example is my daughter in her university, where she is criticised for everything. All these things affected us.

In contrast, one of the Orthodox women (32 years old) felt that the situation is improving for Christian women and girls with respect to participation in religious rites and rituals in public:

In the past, we used to practice our religious rituals in secret, among family members and relatives, and not in public. We were afraid of them. [The] same is true for when we went to the market or to church. However, now things have improved and we are able to practice rituals more comfortably.

Nevertheless, it was clear that Christian women are not only restricted by the customs and traditions of the Muslim majority, but also by the traditions of their own community with respect to unequal gender relations. Another Catholic woman (45 years old) disagreed with the extent of the freedoms described above, highlighting that Christian women have always experienced more restrictions than Christian men because of fears within the community of women's and girls' reputations being ruined, impacting their family's reputation negatively:

Regarding women, customs and traditions have generally restricted them a lot, whether in the past or in the present, in terms of going out, moving around, studying, travelling alone, or doing some private business, in addition to mixing with men. A woman is restricted and is unable to move freely in her life, being a woman or a girl.

4.2.8 Violence and bullying

When discussing the violence that takes place within the Christian community, the women highlighted the domestic violence some Christian women endure from their husbands. For example, one of the Catholic women described the problem in the following way:

Currently in society, of the challenges before Christian women [the worst] is the spread of violence, violence against women. At home they are exposed to violence, and this violence is thus transmitted to the children and the people with whom they live. Some divorce cases are due to violence, battering and abuse by husbands, as well as the failure to reach an understanding between them and solve their problems in a cordial manner.

The participant went on to say that this stems from ‘the discrimination between males and females in terms of males being granted the right to do all they want, while females are entitled to nothing. Also harassment, electronic blackmailing and deprivation of rights to education.’ This highlights how Christian women are subjected to gender-based discrimination by others within their own community.

Nevertheless, the women also spoke about the violence they and other Christian women faced at the hands of ISIS. One of the Catholic women (45 years old) described how she knew a woman who was kidnapped by ISIS:

I know a woman who was taken by ISIS and was kidnapped for 15 days. Yes, they even attempted to marry her to their leader, but she refused. They beat her until they left her, where she was greatly injured by the severity of the beatings.

Another Catholic woman (39 years old) agreed, stating that ‘some Christian women were kidnapped and taken by ISIS to Syria and other regions. They had them change their religion, married them, and made them pregnant with children from them.’

4.2.9 Hate speech and pressure to convert (lack of awareness of minorities)

The women in the FGDs felt that lack of awareness of minorities in wider Iraqi society was an obstacle and a challenge to their lives, especially in relation to the religious discrimination they face. One of the Orthodox women (62 years old) emphasised how important it is to educate young people about different religions to reduce discrimination:

'They should become educated about different religions, and how no one should bully another just for having a different religion. Different religions should be respected and bullying other religions is not to be allowed.' She went on to give examples of the impact of this lack of awareness on their lives:

We experienced this a lot with Muslims, particularly in Mosul. They used to tell us, 'You are Christians, you are infidels, because you do not adopt our Islamic religion. Why do you not convert to Islam, embrace the Islamic religion and become Muslims?' We used to experience this a lot with them.

One Catholic woman (61 years old) agreed, sharing her experience of being pressured to convert to Islam:

When we were in Baghdad, I was a teacher. There was a Muslim teacher with me in school, who was trying to impose her religion and talk about Islam in front of me. She would tell me, 'You will get to heaven' and many other things, in the attempt to have me change my faith, abandon Christianity and embrace Islam.

Another of the Catholic women (27 years old) had a similar experience to share; however, she also highlighted how she was particularly vulnerable to this pressure as a young woman:

On one occasion, my friends and I went to Kirkuk governorate because I had an application to be hosted at Tikrit University. I submitted my papers to the secretary of the dean, and completed all the procedures. When he found out that we are Christians, he started talking about Islam and explaining it. He would tell us, 'Join the Islamic religion. We are allowed to marry Christian girls'. He thought that since we are girls, he can deceive us with these words and convince us to abandon our Christian religion, convert to Islam and act on his words. When we heard what he said, we left the place at once.

Women also complained of exposure to hate speech. One of the Catholic women (56 years old) explained how:

several times during the Friday sermons here in Erbil, we would hear some racist and hardline Islamic mosque preachers who hate Christians and talk about them [using] inappropriate words, accusing them of being infidels who drink alcohol.

Accordingly, they incite the rest of the people against them, pushing them to hate them.

5 Conclusions

The relationship of Christians with the state bears within it the seed of discrimination and inequality, which intensified during the last quarter of the last century, in particular, as hundreds of thousands of Christians were forced to emigrate. This forced migration increased in frequency in the years following the US-led occupation of Iraq, when the level of migration was greatest, due to violent operations targeting Christian monuments, churches, monasteries, and Christian personalities and gatherings, especially after the ISIS occupation.

Given the spread of acts of violence and terrorism, Christians in Iraq feel that they are one of the weakest groups in society, especially as they do not constitute a large population bloc. The absence of the state and its institutions, the weakness of citizenship and equality, and the continued erosion of human rights have contributed to the deterioration of their conditions and their having to resort to migration.

Consequently, the importance of this study is in the context of the search for the most significant challenges that Christians face in their historic homeland and how these challenges have led to a significant decrease in their numbers due to their continuous migration.

Overall, participants agreed that discrimination against Christians because of their religious affiliation has become an almost general phenomenon and no region of Iraq is excluded. While the women in the focus groups identified challenges and threats that they face as a religious minority and as women, this was not articulated by the male participants.

Therefore, the key challenges the participants highlighted included significant legal challenges. For example, participants identified how minority rights in the Iraqi constitution are undermined by additions such as Article 26, which states that children of couples where one converts to Islam must also become Muslim (Al-Dabbagh 2021). Additionally, Christians are unable to access positions of authority and employment in government institutions because of religious discrimination. Participants also identified

how this discrimination extended beyond legal boundaries, also restricting their access to positions in a wide range of professions, leading to high unemployment.

Inequalities, and poverty in many cases, discrimination, cultural exclusion, lack of political representation and lack of impartiality of preachers have as great an impact as outright violence. They are equally responsible for the threat to diversity and the migration of Christians.

The formula of a political climate based on religious and sectarian polarisation, and the suffering caused by the fracturing or denial of citizenship as a discriminatory policy, partially or completely on the basis of religion or belief, has severe effects on Christians' enjoyment of all human rights. The obligations of non-discrimination require granting citizenship on the basis of equality for all and this is not currently the case in Iraq. Full equality requires that religious minorities enjoy all their rights on an equal basis with citizens of the majority. This includes holding public office within the state; and access to higher education, political and government leadership, educational institutions and the armed forces (OHCHR 2022).

Christian women were uniquely impacted by some of the challenges both male and female participants identified, such as the security situation, but also faced their own threats. Harassment was the most significant of these, alongside a lack of access to education. The targeting of Christians and general lack of safety has forced Christian women to quit their jobs, especially those in non-Christian areas, to avoid harassment and even threats of kidnapping. This is restricting them to their homes, which is in turn affecting them psychologically.

Additionally, Christian women face a specific risk because of how their clothing and the wearing of religious symbols mark them out to others as members of a minority. Combined with a belief that Christians are more 'liberal' than the Muslim majority, Christian women often face sexualised harassment from Muslim men who approach them in the belief they will be more open than Muslim women to a sexual and/or romantic encounter. As Christian women's and girls' honour is often tied to their communities, the Christian women described also fearing the reaction of their own community if they were to be violated or blackmailed, especially over social media.

Fear and pessimism about the future and the future of their existence due to violence and extremism in religious discourse has led to a significant increase in Christians migrating out of Iraq. To preserve the Christian presence in Iraq, the Iraqi government must put in place a comprehensive plan to reassure Christians of the existence of a real will on the part of the state to defend their rights, protect their existence, and ensure their participation in all state institutions and departments in a manner that guarantees justice and equality.

6 Recommendations

Based on the authors' own knowledge and the solutions suggested by participants in the FGDs, the following recommendations are made to ensure a future free from discrimination, marginalisation and fear for Christians in Iraq, particularly Christian women:

- Prioritise reinstating safety and human security, ensuring that the rule of law is upheld at all times and ending the impunity of rogue security forces. Without basic safety, the full range of rights of women and their families will continue to be compromised and the flow of migration out of the country will continue.
- Ensure that feminist movements, faith leaders, development actors and the various branches of government enable women who belong to religious minorities to take advantage of the 25 per cent quota for women in parliament and actively seek to ensure their representation in local and municipal governorates. This should be complemented by education aimed at equipping and empowering Christian women to take on these positions, and challenging norms, beliefs and traditions within the Christian community that condemn or discourage women's political participation.
- Reform laws that affect Christians' administrative, cultural and educational rights, especially with regard to the personal status law, the national identity card and the inheritance law, which currently discriminate against Christian women. Reform the inheritance law under the Baghdad-administered jurisdiction to ensure that Christians are able to confer equal inheritance in accordance with the principle of gender parity. Generate employment opportunities for women, in particular those who have been displaced, through initiatives that do not jeopardise their safety.

- Name, shame and hold to account actors who condone the harassment of women from religious minority backgrounds, including Christian women, and raise awareness in the police, judiciary and other bodies of measures to mitigate the targeting of women from religious minorities all women in Iraq.
- Speak out against and counter hate speech against religious minorities, in general, and hold to account predators who seek to blackmail women using digital media.
- Reform employment legislation to ensure that Christians have equal opportunities to compete for government jobs according to their experience and efficiency, free from favouritism or discrimination.
- Establish small and medium industrial and agricultural projects, as well as large projects, services and strategic development activities to meet the needs of those living in historically Christian areas.
- Update educational programmes and curricula across the whole of Iraq to ensure a positive and accurate definition of the various religious and ethnic minorities, their history, beliefs and heritage. This should be done in consultation with each of the minority groups.
- Compensate Christian families returning to homes that have been damaged in a transparent and systematic manner within a specified timeframe and taking measures to prevent corruption and theft.

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Annexe 1

Table A1: Christian populations before and after ISIS occupation

Christian population	Before ISIS		Returnees post-ISIS	
	Families	Individuals	Families	Individuals
Qaraqosh^a	13,500	54,000	5,500	23,000–24,000
Bartella^b	–	18,300	1,500	5,000
Karmles^c	800	2,000	325	800
Mosul^d	>3,000	>10,000	60	100
Tel Eskof^e	1,450	8,000	800	3,500 (incl. families displaced from Mosul and other towns and villages)
Baqofa^e	75	400	47	200
Batnaya^e	1,150	5,000	200	650
Tel Keif^f	1,200	4,500	58	147
Bashiqa^g	500	1,500	300	800
Bahzani^g	370	1,250	140	500

Source: Authors' own. Created using information from Syriac Catholic Church, Mayor of al-Hamdaniya District^a; Syriac Council in Bartella^b; Priest of Chaldean Church in Karmles^c; Priest of Annunciation Church in Mosul^d; Houyathan Organization^e; Chaldean Church in Tel Keif^f; Priest of Syriac Orthodox Church in Bashiqa^g.



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