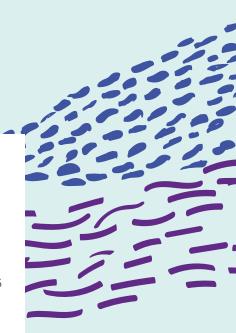**COUNTRY BRIEFING**

Kurdistan-Iraq

About the Gender, Justice and Security Hub

The Gender, Justice and Security Hub brings together researchers, practitioners and activists through a collection of research projects to advance gender justice and inclusive peace in conflict-affected societies. The Hub works across seven countries: Afghanistan, Colombia, Kurdistan-Iraq, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Uganda with projects in 17 additional countries across Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia.

Spanning from gendered migration, masculinities and sexualities to land rights and transformative justice, each project amplifies the voices of women and marginalised groups. The Hub aims to advance Sustainable Development (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

Kurdistan-Iraq

This country brief draws on the following projects: Transitional Masculinity, Violence and Prevention; Return, Reintegration and Political Restructuring; Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration and Gender and Forced Displacement.

Regional Context

Unresolved Tensions in Kurdistan-Iraq: Kurdistan-Iraq has endured over fifty years of instability, marked by conflicts between Kurdish groups, the Iraqi government and neighbouring countries. These disputes are rooted in complex historical and socio-political dynamics, including issues of ethnic identity, control over natural resources and the Kurdish struggle for independence and self-governance.

Efforts for Peace and Autonomy: The semiautonomous region of Kurdistan was established in 1992, one year after the end of the Gulf War (1990-1991), representing a significant step towards Kurdish self-governance. However, the path to stability has been hindered by internal divisions among Kurdish factions, disputes with the Iraqi central government over territory and oil revenues, and external pressures from neighbouring countries concerned about Kurdish separatism. The rise and fall of the Islamic State added another layer of complexity, with Kurdish forces playing a key role in combating the group.

Continuing Security and Political Challenges: The security situation in Kurdistan-Iraq remains fragile, with ongoing tensions with Iraqi central authorities and threats from various armed groups, including remnants of the Islamic State and Kurdish militant factions. Efforts to maintain stability and extend governmental control throughout the region continue amidst a challenging political landscape. The situation is particularly complex for minority communities within Kurdistan, who must strike a difficult balance between Kurdish nationalism and their own cultural and political rights. International organisations and regional powers are involved in various capacities, seeking to support stability and autonomy in Kurdistan while maintaining broader geopolitical interests.

Gender Equality and Social Development: In contrast to many parts of Iraq and the surrounding region, Kurdistan-Iraq made notable advances in promoting women's rights and participation in public life. The Kurdish government has implemented policies aimed at enhancing women's rights and representation, but progress has been uneven and faces cultural and institutional barriers and backlashes. Many challenges remain in establishing and sustaining meaningful gender equality, particularly in rural areas.

The Hub in Kurdistan-Iraq

Gender, Justice and Security Hub projects in Kurdistan-Iraq explore complex social issues centred around gender dynamics, labour and human rights in a challenging environment, particularly in the context of ongoing conflict and displacement. Together these projects aim to better understand how gender roles and identities influence and are influenced by societal, economic and political factors in the region.

Through arts-based methods and ethnographic studies, complemented by extensive literature reviews and comparative analyses, the Hub's projects offer a rich, diverse, and contextually relevant understanding of gender, justice and security issues in the region. This multi-method and interdisciplinary approach not only captures a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives but also actively engages local communities and a wide range of stakeholders in the research process.
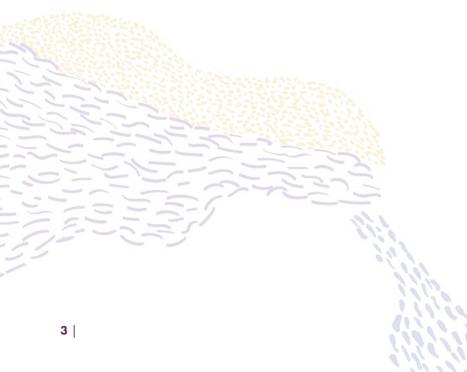
The Hub's projects highlight the interconnectedness of local experiences with global trends and issues. They contribute to engendering meaningful change by challenging gender norms and fostering critical discussions on gender, rights and labour issues, while also influencing policy and practice to improve the lives of those impacted by conflict and displacement in Kurdistan-Iraq.

The Challenges

Gender Backlash: There have been important legal reforms in relation to violence against women, family law, and political participation in Kurdistan-Iraq. However, there is simultaneously a growing backlash against the advancement of gender studies and women's rights discourse accompanied by harassment of activists across the region.

Gender Disparities in Health and Education: In Kurdistan-Iraq, women had previously achieved higher levels of education, but displacement has caused considerable losses in human and social capital, with women and girls disproportionately affected, especially in education. Displacement has also severely impacted access to healthcare, clean water, and reproductive health for women and girls in Kurdistan-Iraq.

Lack of Funding for Women's Rights: There has been a significant decline in international funding and attention towards women's rights, empowerment, and gender equality. This decline, alongside the emergence of other global challenges, has intensified the challenges faced by initiatives focused on women's rights.

Return Migration: Research on return migration generally focusses on return to politically and economically stable countries. However, we know far less about the gendered experience of return migration to contexts that continue to endure conflict, like Kurdistan-Iraq, and how this relates to development, gender rights, justice and peace.

Key Findings

Barriers to Progress for Women

There is a lack of genuine will by the Kurdish authorities to improve women's rights; failure of the judiciary system to implement reformed laws, specifically in cases where perpetrators are politically or tribally connected; failure of the education system to promote gender equality; with the media contributing to discrimination, reproducing gender stereotypes and siding against the women's movement.

Persistent Patriarchal Views and Gender Backlash

There remains a deep-rooted belief in men's right to control and 'own' women, which is reflected in language, cultural norms, practices and social structures. Alongside the gender backlash, there has been a noticeable resurgence of patriarchal views. Many factors contribute to this, but gender-focused aid programs have at times inadvertently reinforced patriarchal norms.

Harassment of Women's Rights Activists

Driven by sexist and politically motivated social media, patriarchal and conservative religious norms, or misconceptions of feminism, the backlash and defamation campaigns against feminist activists become particularly visible whenever there is an incident of gender injustice.

Displacement Discourse Misalignment

There is a significant gap between global discourse on displacement and the ground realities in regions like Kurdistan-Iraq. International policies often are not reflected in local laws, policies and actual conditions faced by displaced persons, leading to ineffective or misaligned interventions.

Complex Influences of Return Migration

Return becomes feasible, profitable or both for multiple intersecting reasons. On the one hand, there are experiences or conditions in host countries including living conditions, racism and discrimination. On the other, there are conditions in the origin county, such as political, economic and social changes. There are also individual factors, such as personal relationships, resources and the relevance of their acquired skills to the host country or Kurdistan's development priorities and integration policies.

Returnees Contribute to the Labour Market

Skilled returning migrants, especially women, are comparatively younger, better educated and more able to commute between countries. Most returnees find a job that matches their level of education, including in public administration, the health sector, social services and the private sector.

Returnees Contribute to Peace, Development and Gender Equality

Together with their remittances, knowledge of the host country and skills and training, returnees are successful in using their human, social and cultural capital to have a positive impact in Kurdistan-Iraq. Although female returnees face discrimination based on their gender, lifestyle, political views, ethnicity and age, they play a crucial role in the fight for gender equality and contribute to peace and development.

Recommendations

Regional Government of Kurdistan-Iraq

- **Engaging Men and Challenging Patriarchal Norms:** Increase funding and resources for local initiatives that focus on engaging men, specifically regarding those in positions of power, to challenge patriarchal norms and resist the growing gender backlash.

- **Viable and Sustainable Policies for Returnees:** Many post-conflict countries have already established policies to attract their citizens or second generations to return and fill gaps in the labour market. The Kurdistan Regional Government should assess these policies and draw from them to develop sustainable and viable policies with the aim of encouraging highly skilled men and women to return to Kurdistan and contribute to economic development and peace.

- **Engaging with Diaspora:** Establish a Diaspora Affairs Department to engage with and benefit from the human, cultural, social and economic capital of the largest communities of Kurdish diaspora in Western countries; identify evidence of labour shortages; build networks of potential returnees and assess their potential contribution to sustainable development.

- **Focusing on the Rights and Contributions of Women Returnees:** Work with non-governmental partners to establish and implement positive policies for women and to benefit from the skills of women returnees. These should drive forward diversity and gender equality and remove barriers that prevent returnees, particularly women, from playing an important role in decision-making processes at local and national levels.

International Actors

- **Implement Gender-Inclusive Policies:** Work with regional and local actors to develop and implement displacement policies that account for gender-specific needs and challenges, with a focus on empowerment and skill acquisition for displaced women and girls.

- **Gender Sensitive Training on Forced Displacement:** Support and facilitate training programmes at the national and local levels to ensure a deep understanding of gender issues in displacement contexts, aiding in the creation of more effective support systems.

Local Communities and Educators

- **Community-Led Solutions:** Empower local leaders and educators to spearhead discussions on gender norms and establish community-driven responses to address these issues effectively.

- **Education as a Tool for Change:** Integrate comprehensive gender equality education into curriculums at schools, mosques and other learning platforms. Focus on engaging younger generations to shape future societal norms and engaging men to highlight the positive role they can play as gender equality allies within the community.

- **Arts-Based Approaches:** Implement creative and arts-based methods in educational settings to foster empathy, challenge established gender norms and promote a re-evaluation of gender identities.

Media, Funders and the General Public

- **Coordinated Multi-Actor Approaches:** Achieving gender equality is not the responsibility of NGOs and activists alone, and it will not be possible without the engagement of the larger community. An effective approach necessitates coordinated responses from the government, the NGO sector, funders and donors, the media and the larger community.

Researchers and Academics

- **Ongoing Engagement with Participants:** Maintain continuous interaction with research participants, particularly men, to reinforce positive changes in perspectives on gender equality.

- **Cultural Sensitivity in Research:** Approach research with a deep understanding of the local context, addressing the intersections of gender, religion and cultural norms sensitively and effectively.

- **Valuing the Research Process:** Emphasise the importance of the research process, focusing on building relationships that redistribute power and value the complex experiences of research subjects, including their traumas and aspirations.

To learn more about Hub research in Kurdistan-Iraq visit:
https://thegenderhub.com/publications/country-briefing-kurdistan-iraq/

This Country Briefing was first published in the Hub's final report, *Gender, Justice and Security: Structural Challenges, Feminist Innovations and Radical Futures*. Go to **www.TheGenderHub.com** to read the full report and to learn more about all 38 research projects in the Hub.