

CREID INTERSECTIONS SERIES

Religious Inequalities and Gender

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

Faiza Diab Sarhan

December 2022

*Part of the CREID Intersection Series Collection on
Violence and Discrimination Against Women of Reli-
gious Minority Backgrounds in Iraq*

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Suggested citation:

Sarhan, F.D. (2022) *Sabeian-Mandaean Women and Religious and Ideological Conflict in Iraqi Society*, CREID Intersections, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies,

DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.019](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.019)

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ISBN: 978-1-80470-064-8

DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.019](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.019)



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IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England.

Charity Registration Number 306371

Charitable Company Number 877338

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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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the ladies and gentlemen who took part in the focus group discussions and contributed to the research by sharing their own life experiences, which form the core of this report. I would also like to express my gratitude to all of the ladies and gentlemen in charge of the sect's institutions in Erbil and Baghdad for their support, and to give special thanks to the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and all individuals in charge of it, as well as other relevant institutions who have shown interest in doing this research and have provided knowledge and material support to help achieve the report's goal.

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.

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

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'.

The five pillars of Mandaeanism 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.

Mandaeanism'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 Sabeian-Mandaean community for work or economic reasons and may need to migrate. This has meant that there are many Sabeian-Mandaean women who are not married, as there are few men left within their communities. It is necessary to be born into the Sabeian-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 Sabeian-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 Sabeen-Mandaeans 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 Sabeen-Mandaean women and one with Sabeen-Mandaean men) and two in Baghdad (one with Sabeen-Mandaean women and one with Sabeen-Mandaean men):

Table 1: Locations and dates of FGDs

Location	Gender	Date of FGD
Erbil	Women	19 Nov 2021
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 Sabeen-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 Sabeen-Mandaeen women face that the men in their community don’t.

<p>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.</p>	<p>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 Sabeian-Mandaean people's repeated disappointments and sense of hopelessness.</p>
<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 Sabeian-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 Sabean-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.

Sabean-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-Mandaeen 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-Mandaeen 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 Sabean-Mandaeans face is strongly linked to the loss of opportunities for Sabean-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 Sabean-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 Sabean-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 Sabean-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. Sabeian-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 Sabeian-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 Sabeian-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 Sabeian-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 Sabeian-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 Sabeians 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 Sabeian-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 Sabeen-Mandaeen 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 Sabeen-Mandaeen population has declined significantly, from 70,000 people in 2003 to about 5,000 people today (Minority Rights, 2017). The spread of Sabeen-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 Sabean-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 Madaeans 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 Sabean-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 Sabean-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 Sabean-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 Sabean-Mandaean 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 Sabean-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-Mandaean 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-Mandaean women considered to be past marriageable age who missed out on marriage opportunities due to limited choice. Sabean-Mandaean 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-Mandaean 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.

References

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