

# CREID INTERSECTIONS SERIES

## Religious Inequalities and Gender

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# Violence and Discrimination against the Assyrian People in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Shivan Toma and Angela Odisho Zaya

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# **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**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Total number</b>
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**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Women aged 18-35</b>	<b>Total no. of votes</b>
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+**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Women aged 35+</b>	<b>Total no. of votes</b>
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+)**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Women (18-35 and 35+)</b>	<b>Total no. of votes</b>
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 Qiryaaqos, 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+**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Men aged 35+</b>	<b>Total no. of votes</b>
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

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
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 25<sup>th</sup>, but there are others who celebrate on January 7<sup>th</sup>. When we stop working on December 25<sup>th</sup>, 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 7<sup>th</sup>, 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 Bakhete 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 Bakhete, 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**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>No. of votes as priority issue</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>No. of votes as priority issue</b>
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 agencies<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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.

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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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