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**The Lived Experiences of
Marginalised Christian
Chaldean Catholic and
Orthodox Women and Their
Families in Iraq**

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Yohanna Yousef and Nadia Butti

Summary

Christians in Iraq are one of the oldest minority communities in the Middle East, yet their number has dramatically diminished in recent years, from representing 4 per cent of the Iraqi population in 1970 to 0.9 per cent in 2015 (Teule 2018:164–65). Iraqi Christians face an existential threat in Iraq; they have either fled and emigrated to other countries or been killed. This report highlights the lived experience of Christians, who describe in their own words the marginalisation and discrimination they face, with a focus on the experiences of Christian women, who face unique vulnerabilities due to the combination of religious, gender and other identifiers that shape their day-to-day lives.

Through focus group discussions, combined with participatory ranking exercises with 48 male and female Iraqi Christians from Al-Hamdaniya, Bartella and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, this report reveals the security situation to be the most severe and persistent threat facing Christian women and men in Iraq. The lack of safety has forced Christian women to leave their employment, particularly jobs in non-Christian areas, out of fear of increased harassment and threats of kidnapping. They have become confined to their homes, unable to travel, with their autonomy circumscribed and finances affected by lack of economic opportunities.

Recommendations, based on the authors' knowledge and participants' suggestions, include efforts to increase Christian women's representation in political processes and decision-making spaces; changes to the school curricula to ensure minorities such as Christians are represented positively and accurately; amendments to laws for the Christian community, such as the inheritance law, which currently disadvantages women; and increased job opportunities for Christians.

Keywords: Christians; Iraq; Chaldean; Orthodox; marginalisation; religious discrimination; gender inequality.

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Contents

- Summary 1
- Acronyms 4
- 1 Overview 5**
- 2 Introduction 6**
 - 2.1 Background of the Christian community in Iraq 6
 - 2.2 The situation of women in the Iraqi Christian community 8
- 3 Research aims and methodology 10**
 - 3.1 Participant selection 10
 - 3.2 Research process 11
 - 3.3 Limitations, strengths and challenges 12
 - 3.3.1 Strengths of the research 12
 - 3.3.2 Challenges and limitations of the research 12
- 4 Research findings 13**
 - 4.1 Participatory ranking results 13
 - 4.2 Analysis of differing opinions and priorities 17
 - 4.2.1 Security situation 17
 - 4.2.2 Religious, gender-based and other forms of discrimination 21
 - 4.2.3 Harassment and extortion 25
 - 4.2.4 Migration, displacement and demographic change 28
 - 4.2.5 Education 33
 - 4.2.6 Divorce 34
 - 4.2.7 Norms and traditions 35
 - 4.2.8 Violence and bullying 37
 - 4.2.9 Hate speech and pressure to convert (lack of awareness of minorities) 37

5	Conclusions	39
6	Recommendations	41
	References	43
	Annexe 1	45

Tables

Table 1: Demographics of focus groups	10
Table 2: Threats and challenges participants identified (ranked by severity and prevalence)	13
Table 3: Participatory ranking results for women and men (disaggregated by affiliation)	14
Table A1: Christian populations before and after ISIS occupation	45

Acronyms

FGD	focus group discussion
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
US	United States

1 Overview

Christians in Iraq are one of the oldest minority communities in the Middle East, dating back to the first century AD (Hanish 2009), yet their number has dramatically diminished in recent years, from representing 4 per cent of the Iraqi population in 1970 to 0.9 per cent in 2015 (Teule 2018: 164–65). It is highly likely that their numbers have continued to dwindle since 2015. The greatest drop was precipitated by the United States (US)-led invasion of Iraq and its promotion of sectarian policies, enacted and advanced by successive Iraqi governments. Sectarian policies and practices, underpinned by Islamisation and absence of safety, undermine Iraqi Christians' citizenship rights (Tannous 2011). The invasion of Iraq by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 was accompanied by an attempted genocide and extermination of religious minorities such as Christians and Yazidis, thereby increasing internal displacement and migration (Ahmed 2014).

Consequently, Iraqi Christians face an existential threat in Iraq, as they have either fled and emigrated to other countries or been killed. This report highlights the lived experience of Christians, who describe in their own words the marginalisation and discrimination they face, with a focus on the experiences of Christian women who face unique vulnerabilities due to the combination of religious, gender and other identifiers that shape their day-to-day lives.

Through focus group discussions (FGDs) combined with participatory ranking exercises with 48 male and female Iraqi Christians from Al-Hamdaniya, Bartella and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), this report reveals the security situation to be the most severe and persistent threat facing Christian women and men in Iraq. The lack of safety has forced Christian women to leave their employment, particularly jobs in non-Christian areas, out of fear of increased harassment and threats of kidnapping. They have become confined to their homes, unable to travel, with their autonomy circumscribed and finances affected by lack of economic opportunities.

Other threats and challenges the participants identified were lack of access to education for women and girls, unemployment, harassment (particularly of women, whose clothing distinguishes them from the Muslim majority) and fear of demographic change as Christians are pushed out of the areas they have always lived in; and, for Catholic women, increasing rates of divorce. Christian women also shared their experiences of

their fear of human and sex trafficking, based on threats they had either faced themselves or that they knew other Christian women faced.

Recommendations, based on the authors' knowledge and participants' suggestions, include efforts to increase Christian women's representation in political processes and decision-making spaces; changes to the school curricula to ensure minorities such as Christians are represented positively and accurately; amendments to laws that affect the Christian community, such as the inheritance law, which currently disadvantages women; and increased job opportunities for Christians.

2 Introduction

2.1 Background of the Christian community in Iraq

Christians today are spread throughout Iraq in almost all Iraqi governorates, but their presence is concentrated in the capital Baghdad, which hosts the largest Christian population group. In the major cities (Mosul, Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Basra, Al-Amarah, Hilla and Dohuk) and villages of northern Iraq and the Nineveh Plains region, Christians work in the fields of education, engineering, medicine, trade, industry and agriculture.

Iraq's Christians are distributed among churches belonging to several sects that follow different rites. Most of Iraq's Christians are followers of the Chaldean Catholic Church (80 per cent). Other Christian denominations in Iraq include Syriac Catholic and Syriac Orthodox (10 per cent), Assyrian (5 per cent), Armenian (Catholic and Orthodox) (3 per cent) and other sects (2 per cent) (Iraqi Christian Foundation 2019). The other sects include the Old Church of the East, Roman Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Latin Church, Protestant and Evangelical Church, and Coptic Church, which consists of the Egyptian community in Iraq (Reuters 2021). Christians speak the Syriac language, with different dialects, in which they perform their religious rituals, and which has its roots in the ancient Aramaic language.

Iraqi law officially recognises 14 Christian sects. These sects in 2010 established the Council of Heads of Christian Communities (World Council of Churches 2010), where each sect leader is a member of the council; but in recent years the Chaldeans withdrew

from the council due to a disagreement over the mechanism of the council's management (Agenzia Fides 2019).

The number of Christians at the start of the era of independence, which culminated in Iraq gaining independence in 1932, was estimated at 5 per cent of the population of Iraq, which amounted to 5 million. According to the 1977 census, their number was about 1,684,000 people. At the time of the last census conducted by Iraq in 1987, their number had fallen to 1,250,000, although the reasons for this are unclear. However, because of wars and immigration, on the eve of the US-led invasion in 2003, the number of Christians in Iraq had reached about 800,000 people (Office of International Religious Freedom 2022).

This number has diminished since then, due to continuous migration as a result of the security situation and armed groups targeting Christians after the occupation of Iraq by ISIS. Churches were directly targeted and bombed in all regions of Iraq, in addition to clerics and secular Christians being kidnapped and killed because of their religious affiliation and the failure of the state to protect them.

Some Christian families and individuals left the country during the period of the Iran-Iraq war. After the US-led occupation of Iraq and regime change, vast numbers of the Christian population began to migrate to Europe, Australia and the US, enduring the misery and bitterness of waiting in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, where they spend many years until they are approved for asylum after a difficult life in their own country.

The suffering of Christians is a composite: as Iraqis, they have suffered alienation, tyranny, wars, siege and occupation; but since 2003 they have suffered violence, terrorism, corruption and discrimination due to their religious affiliation. Since their arrival in the region, terrorist groups have focused on displacing Christians, separating them from Muslims and emptying the region of them. After 2003, they were particularly targeted by armed terrorist and extremist groups in the name of Islam.

Today, the number of Christians has decreased to around 250,000 people (*ibid*: 3), or perhaps fewer, and is likely to decline significantly more if the state of discrimination, violations of their rights, and the declining economic situation continue. In the opinion of Iraqi Christians, academics and multiple states, the acts of systematic abuse and targeting ISIS committed against Christians amounts to genocide and eradication for

reasons related to faith and religion (House of Commons 2016; Holpuch, Sherwood and Bowcott 2016; Isakhan and Shahab 2022). ISIS gave Christians three options on 17 July 2014: (1) convert to Islam; (2) pay *jizya* (a 'tax' historically levied against non-Muslims); or (3) face execution. When Christians refused to choose between these options, ISIS forcibly expelled them and confiscated their possessions (Human Rights Watch 2014). On 6 August 2014, ISIS took over all the Christians' cities and villages, forcing them to flee to safe areas.

In the period between June and August 2014, the ISIS advance displaced more than 200,000 Christians from Mosul and the towns of the Nineveh Plains to the KRI (Kurdistan Regional Government 2018). Afterwards, Christians started seeking migration routes, travelling to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and France, where there was already a significant Chaldean diaspora. They left a land that had been the centre of Christianity for many centuries. Thus, their numbers dwindled to a record low of 250,000 people, most of them in the Nineveh Plains and Kurdistan.

After the Christian towns and villages were liberated from ISIS, around 35,000 Christians returned (17.5 per cent of the total number displaced) to find everything destroyed or burnt down.¹ Reconstruction and restoration of life in these towns took place with the efforts of churches and citizens; there was no government support for reconstruction. Today, Christians suffer from weak economic activity and business, as well as fear of the presence of ideologically driven militias around them, in addition to marginalisation by the state. This is a warning that migration will continue and the number of Christians will decrease little by little.

2.2 The situation of women in the Iraqi Christian community

The multiple wars and conflict Iraq has suffered in recent years has further ingrained gender inequalities, roles and expectations in Iraqi society. Therefore, Iraqi women from the Muslim majority face many similar issues to Christian women; however, they are more acute for Christian women because of their religious identity (Jackson and Watson

¹ A table outlining the numbers of returnees from different Christian populations is included in Annexe 1, based on figures collected through informal correspondence between the author and the Syriac Catholic Church (via the Mayor of al-Hamdaniya District), the Syriac Council in Bartella, the Chaldean Church in Karmles, the Annunciation Church in Mosul, the Houyathan Organisation (representing the Tel Eskof, Baqofa and Batnaya Christian populations), the Chaldean Church in Tel Eskof and the Syriac Orthodox Church in Bashiqa.

2018). For example, a 2015 report by the Iraqi Women Journalists Forum found that eight in ten women in Iraq had experienced sexual harassment (Al Jazeera 2015). This is compounded for Christian women as they face being deliberately targeted by men from the Muslim majority as a way to humiliate the Christian community and because of their identity as a minority community (Jackson and Watson 2018).

It is also easy for those in the Muslim majority to identify Christian women in public because of the way they dress. Specifically, they do not wear a scarf or hijab to cover their head or face as most women from the Muslim majority do. Because of this, Christian women face intimidation from the majority to wear a veil (Hanish 2009). This threat of harassment restricts Christian women's movements as they become fearful of leaving their homes and travelling in public, especially after dark. Some Christian women have also changed their dress to not be so visible.

Christian women in Iraq therefore face not only this specific religious and gendered threat of harassment, but are also victims of the ongoing security situation Iraqi minorities face. When ISIS invaded Iraq in 2014, the group kidnapped Christian women and sold them into slavery. It has been reported that 45 women from al-Hamdaniya² were captured and only seven have returned (The Week 2018).

This unstable security situation further restricts Christian women's access to public spaces and limits their employment opportunities. Additionally, Christian women face restrictions in accessing job opportunities because of language barriers. ISIS displaced many Christians, such as those displaced from Mosul to Erbil. Typically, Christians speak different languages from other people in these cities' workplaces, so displaced Christian women have found themselves unable to gain employment because of language barriers, as well as fears of harassment and restrictions on their ability to travel and move around freely.

Domestic violence is also a significant threat that Christian women face, compounded by issues of instability such as displacement, migration and lack of job opportunities (Jackson and Watson 2018). This violence is linked to increasing rates of divorce and early marriage. During displacement, young Christian women and girls were uniquely vulnerable as they were often viewed as a burden the family needed to be rid of. They are

² Al-Hamdaniya is part of disputed territory under Kurdish administration.

now vulnerable again in cases of divorce as they have very little financial security, due to the restrictions placed on their freedom and movement.

3 Research aims and methodology

This research was undertaken with Christian men and women to understand the particular challenges they face because of their religion and gender, with a particular focus on the lived experience of Christian women. The research consisted of four FGDs and a participatory ranking exercise.

3.1 Participant selection

The study was undertaken with Catholic and Orthodox participants in Iraq, in both the areas under the jurisdiction of the Government of Iraq, based in Baghdad, and the areas that make up the KRI, under the jurisdiction of the Kurdistan Regional Government (Skelton and Saleem 2019). One focus group was held with Catholic men and another with Catholic women in al Hamdaniya, a disputed territory under Kurdish administration. A third focus group held with Orthodox men in Bartella (also a disputed territory under Kurdish administration). A final focus group was then carried out with Orthodox women in Ankawa (KRI). The research team consisted of one Catholic man from al-Hamdaniya and one Catholic woman originally from Mosul, but who had been displaced to Ankawa by the arrival of ISIS. Table 1 shows the breakdown of participants across the focus groups.

Table 1: Demographics of focus groups

	Focus group 1	Focus group 2	Focus group 3	Focus group 4
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Male
No. of participants	12	12	12	12
Location	Kurdistan Region of Iraq	Al-Hamdaniya	Bartella	Al-Hamdaniya
Christian affiliation	Orthodox	Catholic	Orthodox	Catholic

Source: Authors' own.

Note: All participants were aged 20–70 years and were selected to ensure a diverse range of backgrounds.

3.2 Research process

The FGDs began with the participatory ranking exercise in which participants were invited to compile a list of the key challenges they faced. They were then invited to vote on each of these challenges to ascertain how significant they considered the impact of each challenge to be on their lives. Each participant was encouraged to prioritise six of the challenges. These challenges were then drawn together to identify mutual challenges across all four groups. After the participatory ranking exercise, the participants were asked questions to explore in more depth the priorities they had identified. This took place as an open discussion around these challenges, including examples from the participants' own lives.

Some of the questions covered in the FGDs included:

1. What are the basic roles of women within your community?
2. Are there obstacles to these roles? If there are obstacles, what is their nature?
3. How many opportunities are there for women in your community? Are opportunities differentiated on the basis of religion or belief?
4. Does your community accept religious rituals and rituals for women? And if not, are there examples that can be referred to?
5. What are the main priorities of women in your local community?
6. Do women think that the challenges they face are limited to them or do they include all individuals within the community?
7. Has your community been subjected to displacement? If the answer is yes, how does this affect the situation of women?
8. What do women consider appropriate actions to overcome these challenges, obstacles and elements of discrimination on the basis of gender?
9. What are the challenges Christian women face in their society of the same component?
10. What are the challenges Christian women face in society from people who do not belong to their constituency or who do not belong to their belief?
11. Do these challenges and difficulties on the basis of gender that you face in your societies push you to migrate or think of migrating outside Iraq?

3.3 Limitations, strengths and challenges

3.3.1 Strengths of the research

The focus groups included a diverse range of participants from various backgrounds to present a more comprehensive picture of the challenges and discrimination the Christian community experiences. This, in addition to the specific focus on the challenges Christian women face because of the intersection of their gender and religion makes this research particularly powerful and unique. The opportunity to hear directly from these marginalised individuals about their lived experience gives this research weight and adds depth to the existing literature.

3.3.2 Challenges and limitations of the research

The research was made more challenging by ambiguity surrounding the post-ISIS phase and the fate of Christians in historically Christian areas. This made it more difficult to identify Christians who were willing to speak about their experiences.

Limitations include absence of a vision and lack of a clear plan at national or international levels for recommendations from the research to feed into. Lack of statistics or reliance on inaccurate statistics on the number of Christians, including those who returned to their areas or migrated, had an impact on the report. The picture is unclear about the overall number of Christians and their demographics as they are constantly subject to change within a short period, in light of continuous migration.

In addition, some participants, were embarrassed to talk about details of personal, sensitive and emotive experiences that they had been through, as they did not want to convey their suffering and the violations of their rights they had been exposed to. As well as the shame they felt, this was also out of fear of speaking about such issues in front of others in the group – not wishing to make them public – and panic over follow-up, despite our consideration not to mention names or personal details. We assured them that we would maintain full confidentiality and anonymity, so as not to expose their personal information. We explained that this would not affect the goal of the project, which was to convey the challenges and the suffering of Christians in Iraqi society. Ultimately, this may have impacted on the experiences they shared with the group; however, we were still confident that the FGDs painted a detailed and accurate picture of their lives.

4 Research findings

The following section outlines the results of the research, with a particular focus on the threats and challenges Christian women face because of their gender and their religion.

4.1 Participatory ranking results

Tables 2 and 3 show the results of the participatory ranking exercise carried out in each focus group. The participants in each group identified the threats and challenges most pertinent to them and then ranked them according to their severity and prevalence.

Table 2: Threats and challenges participants identified (ranked by severity and prevalence)

Threat/challenge
Security and safety
Migration and internal displacement
Demographic change
Discrimination on the basis of caste/religious identity and inequality
Unemployment
Harassment and extortion
Weakness of law enforcement
Discrimination in legislation
Economic status
Marginalisation and lack of equal opportunities
Restriction of freedoms according to tradition
Cultural differences and awareness
Compensation
Violence and bullying
Human rights
Lack of education
Divorce/marital status
Partisanship
Lack of confidence

Source: Authors' own.

Table 3 shows more detail about how the different groups of participants ranked these issues. The second and third columns show the overall ranking of threats and challenges the women and men identified. The remaining columns further disaggregate these results by Orthodox and Catholic affiliation.

Table 3: Participatory ranking results for women and men (disaggregated by affiliation)

Rank	Women	Men	Women – Orthodox	Women – Catholic	Men – Orthodox	Men – Catholic
1	Safety	Safety	Safety	Safety and security	Security	Employment
2	Religious discrimination and discrimination	Demographic change	Religious discrimination	Discrimination	Demographic change	Emigration
3	Harassment and extortion	Emigration	Emigration	Employment	Emigration	Demographic change
4	Emigration	Job opportunities	Awareness	Emigration	Absence of laws	Safety and security
5	Unemployment	Discrimination in legislation	Unemployment	Online extortion	Economic situation	Justice and equality
6	Education	Justice and equality	Lack of trust	Divorce	Legislation	Marginalisation
7	Divorce	Lack of implementing laws	Harassment	Demographic change		Compensation
8	Norms and traditions	Marginalisation and equal opportunities	Language	Violence against women		Discrimination in law
9	Violence and bullying	Economic situation	Tradition	Education		Lack of knowledge of minorities
10	Demographic change	Culture and norms		Implementation of laws		Partisanship
11	Awareness	Compensation		Traditions		Weakness in implementation of laws
12	Implementation of laws	Violence and bullying		Health		Displacement
13	Lack of trust	Human rights		Economic		Harassment
14	Language	Partisanship				Discrimination
15						Violence and bullying

Source: Authors' own.

Table 3 shows significant differences between the focus groups. However, it also shows similarities and areas of agreement, such as the significance of safety and security, which over 79 per cent of participants identified as their top priority. This is because there are many military groups and militias operating in Iraq. The militias are a particular problem for Christians as they are ideologically linked and Christians perceive them as seeking to dominate historically Christian areas. They are believed to receive weapons and support from the Iraqi government and Iran, and wish to prevent the Christian community from holding government positions. The Iraqi army and police are not present. This causes a situation of instability and fear among the Christian population.

Many Christian families have left their homes in Mosul and cannot return because it is unsafe and there is no longer trust between communities in Mosul as they are afraid that what occurred under ISIS may happen again. They do not trust that the government will protect them. As a result, they are selling their homes in Mosul and settling in Erbil or seeking to migrate as they do not feel they can trust any party to enable them to live in Mosul safely.

With regards to women, because of the lack of security mothers are afraid to let their daughters go out or travel. This lack of safety and security feeds into all aspects of daily life. It is impossible to go to work as normal or to send daughters to school or college as not wearing scarves makes draws attention to them, which makes them targets of anti-Christian hatred. Among those from Mosul, they feel unable to return as there is no guarantee that women can wear what they wish or move freely; for example, to go to work or church. Even when taking a taxi, women are not free from harassment and community members feel they should be accompanied by a male relative. This has particularly been the case since 2003 but especially post-ISIS. Before 2003, there was more freedom of movement for Christian women.

The women identified harassment as a particular challenge, whereas this was not the case for men. As mentioned above, this is because Christian women are very visible because of their dress, and specifically because they do not wear scarves or hijabs as women from the Muslim majority do. They are not seen to have the same protection as Muslim women and are perceived as easier targets as those harassing them will not be held accountable for their actions. This restricts the way the women dress as they try to blend in and avoid attracting attention. It also means that when they take a taxi they will look to travel with someone else and will not go to some places after dark.

Apart from the Catholic men, all the groups identified safety and security as the highest priority. For the Catholic men, employment was the biggest challenge they faced. This is because they had been displaced from the Nineveh Plains region to Erbil and other cities in Iraq. Now they have returned to villages such as Karakosh. Prior to the ISIS occupation, they worked in Mosul and Baghdad; but post-ISIS they have been unable to travel to and work in these cities. A small village such as Karakosh does not have the economy to provide job opportunities for them. Catholic women also ranked employment high as a concern for similar reasons to the men. Prior to the ISIS occupation, it was common for the women to have jobs outside the home or in Mosul, but now these jobs are very limited and they are unable to travel for work.

The Orthodox women highlighted language as a challenge. This is because they moved from the Nineveh Plains region and Mosul to Ankawa in Erbil. In Mosul, it was more common to speak Arabic. But now in Erbil, if they do not speak Syriac they face discrimination both from within and outside of the Christian community. For example, they might have to pay more in rent or for food. Also, as they do not speak Kurdish this can limit job opportunities or make travelling through checkpoints more challenging. This was not such a challenge for the men, as more men in the community speak Arabic, so they are still able to build relations with other Christian men. However, as Christian women are less likely to know Arabic, this creates a barrier for women from Nineveh to establish relationships with others and to be accepted.

For the Catholic women, divorce and violence against women were highlighted as particular challenges. They are on the rise because of the multiple challenges the community faces in relation to displacement and job opportunities. These frustrations have led to an increase in intra-community violence, particularly domestic violence. This differs from the Orthodox women as the Orthodox community has greater stability and safety, not having faced the same challenges as those who are from the Nineveh Plains region, who lost their homes. Migration has also broken up families within Catholic communities. Early marriage is now more common as families want to be free of the economic burden of having a daughter to provide for at such a difficult time.

Geographical factors also affected the participants' choices, as well as whether they belonged to the Orthodox Church or the Catholic Church. For example, while the men shared the same three top priorities (security situation, forced migration and demographic change), their remaining priorities differed. The Syriac Catholic men

focused on job opportunities, justice and equality and marginalisation, whereas the Syriac Orthodox men focused on the absence of the rule of law, the economic situation, and discrimination in legislation.

Part of the reason for the differing priorities is the specificity of each region. For example, some Syriac Catholic areas are managed by Christian authorities, in addition to the presence of official security forces, alongside the presence of security forces drawn from the city's residents. In contrast, the situation in the Syrian Orthodox city is being managed by security forces representing other social groups, such as Shabaks, a Shi'a Muslim minority. Also, individuals' perceptions of the size and nature of the demographic change, and their priorities, clearly differed between the two groups.

The Catholic and Orthodox women shared more priorities; four in total: security and safety, religious and other forms of discrimination, forced migration and unemployment. However, the Orthodox Syriac women prioritised (lack of) awareness (of minorities) and lack of trust, whereas the Syriac Catholic women focused on electronic extortion and harassment. The disparity between the two groups is because the (Orthodox) Christians in Erbil have been subjected to many violations of their rights and displacement from their areas of origin, so they are always wary of and mistrust their neighbours of other religions, and expect danger all the time. The Catholic women, live among only Catholics and are able to exercise their freedoms with complete peace of mind, in addition to the society in which they live being more aware of women's rights and educated.

4.2 Analysis of differing opinions and priorities

The following sections further explore the differences and similarities between the threats and challenges men and women in the focus groups identified, with a particular interest in the difference between the women's and men's views and experiences. Not all threats and challenges were discussed at length in the FGDs. Some issues, such as unemployment, were subsumed under overarching themes, such as security, as the views and experiences shared touched on both issues (demonstrating the interconnected nature of the threats and challenges identified).

4.2.1 Security situation

The opinions of the participants in the focus group sessions differed, but security was a priority for almost all of them, especially since, according to one of the Catholic men,

'Christians' concerns are now different from before. Neither I nor my son feel secure when going outside al-Hamdaniya. In my neighbourhood, I feel secure, however, security and safety aren't stable in Iraq at present.'

Previously, Christians had no concerns when they went outside of their areas of origin, whether for work, study, recreation or other reasons. However, since 2003, with the rise of violence and terrorism including the targeting of Christians through kidnapping, threats of violence, robbery and murder, trust has diminished. This has had an enormous impact on women, as many of them quit jobs located in non-Christian areas. Women had to change their appearance in order not to be recognised or identified as Christians to avoid such threats. Hence, the situation forced women to stay at home, affecting their competence and impacting the finances of their households.

The reason for this situation is due to the absence of a force to protect Christians as much as the presence of threats. One of the Catholic men emphasised this:

no security force can protect you because any force that has greed [ambitions] in this area will cause tensions. There will be conflict that would affect [the] community. Christian protection won't be [achieved] by replacing the power, but by dissolving the power that threatens them.

The fears of Christians in the Nineveh Plains region, an area under the administration of the central government in Baghdad, may in part be due to the multiplicity of security forces that govern security management in the region. One of the Orthodox men stated that, 'the security forces are infiltrated. Security forces members don't trust each other.' Another of the Orthodox men (57 years old), added that the security forces belong to multiple parties, so there are multiple centres of security decision-making:

Who is responsible for security? It is the state. Actually, there is no state. There are interests and militias. Where is belonging to this country? Where is our army to defend us? Very few of this people have a sense of belonging. We can't say that we have security forces. No, we have militias. Security forces consist of armed forces, federal police and local police... There could be disputes and tensions between the militias which is a big problem... They [are] so close to you. They tell you to leave. They terrify Christians in Bartella.

The fears of Christians may even extend into the Kurdistan region, despite the large Christian presence there. An Orthodox woman mentioned in the FGD that:

we were threatened more than once in the city of Mosul; we were then forced to flee from inside Mosul. We moved first to the Alqosh region, and then to Erbil, then Ankawa region, and even in Erbil our fears persisted, even if the security was largely present. We often suffer from religious and national discrimination because of our lack of knowledge of their language, as well as because of our Christian religion.

Subsequently, the intense preoccupation with security has constituted a major obstacle to women's enjoyment of their rights and their ability to move and work, as they fear they will be subjected to harassment or religious discrimination. For example, one of the Catholic women, who previously worked, recounted the following experience:

I was working in the nineties of the last century in Tal Afar, where there are no Christians, but I felt safe. We are now missing this sense of safety, because of our fears of the collapse of security at any moment, so we remain in a state of anxious waiting when one of the women goes out of the area, whether for work, shopping or other things.

This anticipation is not unfounded. One of the Orthodox women (55 years old), described a threat to her business and her daughter's life. Despite refusing to bow to pressure multiple times, ultimately the threats forced this woman out of her home and city:

I was living in Baghdad. I was an employee there and I had a fitness centre in Baghdad. I worked there. Thank God, my work was flourishing. But, we were subjected to threats. Again, they threatened us with a message and a bullet. They used to call us. My daughter was still in the Al-Mustansiriya University and they said to me: 'Either you close the centre, or we kidnap your daughter, and we know which car she goes and comes in'. Then, I started dropping her off and picking her up by myself. Finally, I made her leave the university and stay home for a while. One morning, when I went to the centre, I saw, 'Death to you' written by them on it. Because I am from the Christian component, they wrote on the door of the centre: 'Death to you' and 'You are infidels'. They wrote these words on the door of the centre. We did not care. I went and got some paint and painted over the writing.

The next day, they put a bullet for us – and this was another threat – under the door. Then, the centre caught fire. This was back in 2006. Then, I rebuilt it, and threats started again. Threats would come to me from the closest people who were working with me. After that, we started to get weary of this. We left and went to Ankawa district in Erbil governorate.

Additionally, another of the Orthodox women described how her sister's husband was kidnapped. The kidnappers came for a ransom and suggested that the nephew sell his mother and sisters for money:

We were suffering a lot in Mosul. They kidnapped my brother-in-law, then, asked for a ransom of US\$250,000. My nephew replied saying, 'Where can we bring you this large sum of money?' They told him that this is not their problem, so he said to them: 'What are we to do? Shall we sell our car and sell our house so you would come and take everything?' They replied saying: 'Yes, sell everything, even your mother and sisters, and give us the money'. Then we gave them US\$30,000 and waited for two or three days so they would release him, but to no avail. We had to go to the hospitals to ask about him, just to find his dead body, as they shot him with three bullets in the head and body. Basically, the kidnappers took the money and killed him. There is no safety in Mosul, particularly as we used to live in the Al Zanjali area. It is an area with a Muslim majority. We Christians have lived there for 38 years. During the month of Ramadan, we Christians had to commit to wearing the hijab, as well as wearing long clothes, as an act of reverence to them. However, they never ever appreciated that.

It is therefore unsurprising that Christian women and girls feel they have no choice but to restrict their movement. Another of the Orthodox women (43 years old) spoke about the impact on Christian women of being confined to their household out of fear of a lack of safety and security. 'We are afraid to go out, we are afraid to go in [to church], due to the lack of security and the loss of safety. Being locked up at home impacts one psychologically. So a lot [of] things impacted us.' In addition to this, one of the Catholic women (27 years old), reflected on how the security situation affects the upbringing of Christian girls:

[One] of the toughest obstacles that we face is the security situation. Unstable security conditions impact women as they can become preoccupied by their

worries about the situation and can find themselves going over their negative experiences in their head, again and again. This impacts their ability to contribute to their communities. Women are half of the society. This also impacts the economic situation. If a woman's family conditions are degraded, this will certainly affect the way she raises her children, which will impact the society in all respects.

Accordingly, security was clearly a priority for all participants in the focus groups; however, due to both their gender and religious affiliation the participants experienced the safety and security situation differently. Nevertheless, concerns about security persisted for all of them and shaped all of their experiences, particularly the women, who are now experiencing increased restrictions on their movement due to these security fears.

4.2.2 Religious, gender-based and other forms of discrimination

The challenge by Christian women ranked second highest was religious discrimination. The men did not mention it in the same way; however, they spoke of discrimination in legislation, and lack of justice and equality, or even positive discrimination for Christians in al-Hamdaniya. One of the Orthodox women (48 years old) shared how her life had been destroyed by religious discrimination:

When I was in the first grade of primary school, a Muslim boy, the teacher's son, pushed me down the stairs. I fell on my head, and I had internal bleeding. I also have a permanent disability in my hands and feet. I suffered greatly in my life and became disabled because of that. If a Christian boy pushes a Muslim girl, what would they do to him, particularly after she becomes disabled like me? They have ruined my life and my future. Currently, I have no future. They caused me to lose everything. This is ever since the first grade of primary school. I suffer from a physical disability. When I used to see children playing, jogging and running while I was standing, I would look at them without being able to do like them. I am sad and have a lot of pain within me.

The women shared how this discrimination seeped into all areas of their lives. For example, another of the Orthodox women described the oppression she faced when trying to renew her passport:

The second point is when I went to the Passports Authority to renew my passport. I entered the hall and sat according to the rules, waiting for my turn according to the number in sequence. I noticed that the officer was admitting Muslims whose turn is later than mine. I was disappointed and deeply saddened by this discrimination. An Arab woman was standing next to me, and she said to the officer: 'Why are you letting people whose numbers are after us jump the queue, while we have been waiting since nine o'clock in the morning until now, which is 12 noon?' He took our documents and tore them up in anger, telling me, 'Go to Mosul, let them handle renewing your passport. We here [in Erbil] are not going to renew your passport. May God reward us for putting up with you and with your living here amongst us in Kurdistan. I was aggravated by this inhumane situation, and I decided to communicate this incident to State representatives from the Christian component. Unfortunately, this was to no avail as they did nothing for me. A person working in the field of human rights told me: 'This is how things have turned out now. What do you expect?'

Almost all of the women had experiences of discrimination to share, from all areas of life, from the marketplace to healthcare settings. For example, one of the Orthodox women (55 years old) described her experience of visiting the market: 'When we go anywhere in the market here in Erbil, and ask the owner of the shop about the price of any goods, he would immediately respond to us saying: "No, no, I am not selling", as he saw me wearing a cross, and because we are Christians.' A Catholic woman (22 years old) shared a similar experience:

When we first got displaced, when we used to go to places or shops where there are Muslims, and we needed to ask them about something or about the price of some merchandise, we would notice that they do not respond to us or talk to us, because they can tell that we are Christians. Thus we can clearly see the strong link between discrimination and the great disintegration of the people among themselves.

Participants observed that Muslim women were not treated in this way.

In terms of health care, one Orthodox woman (27 years old) spoke about visiting a clinic:

[The] Kurdish gynaecologist and the secretary, as well as the Kurdish women sitting in the waiting room, give us strange and belittling looks, as they despise us a lot, since we are Christians. A few days ago, I went to the clinic and I was the only Christian among all the patients. The secretary admitted four to five patients before me and made me wait till the end, knowing that I came before all of them.

Another of the Orthodox women (62 years old), described how she felt that the discrimination she experienced was on account of wearing a cross:

My employment at Salahaddin University³ was being processed, and one of the female employees seated saw the cross that I was wearing on my chest, so I asked her: 'Where do I go to complete my paperwork since the manager asked me to do so?' So, she answered me uptightly, 'Go, go, go, go from here. I don't know anything'. I went to the manager and told her about this, and told her how this employee spoke to me. Frankly, the director called her and rebuked her, saying: 'Finish the process for her employment immediately since this woman came from a far place'. People here deal with us with racism, hatred and religious discrimination. When we were in Mosul, this cross was never seen in public or shown on our chest. We had to wear the veil on our head, and we also had to wear a long skirt when we left the house. This is our great distress as Christians.

Fears of discrimination due to inequality are particularly prominent for women because of their clothing, such as the necklaces with crosses mentioned in the examples above, which makes them more recognisable as non-Muslims. One of the Catholic men explained how:

[a Christian woman] will be subjected to bullying because she is a Christian and it is blatant because of her clothing. Despite the fact that at the present time there is a kind of freedom because there are Muslims and women from other religions without a headscarf, after the development that happened through social media.

He was referring to the viral outcry on social media when women are attacked because of being non-Muslim. This outcry has forced officials to take notice of this bullying and discrimination.

³ A public university based in Erbil, a part of Iraq under Kurdish administration.

For example, one of the Catholic women (21 years old) described how she is treated at university because of wearing her hair down:

When I go to the university, I feel sort of afraid, and this fear within me is regarding the professors. They interfere in my personal matters that have nothing to do with my academic performance, such as whether I tie up my hair or let it loose. They tell me to always tie my hair up. The hair has nothing to do with scholarly work.

She said that she felt that what matters most for these professors is for women to dress modestly.

The same Catholic man also described the discrimination he faced in being prevented from speaking to Muslim girls because of being a Christian:

I was in the university and when I go to girls in order to get the homework, Muslim boys used to tell me that I can't approach Muslim girls directly. I have to ask them first and they by their turn ask girls to give me the homework.' He explained that any Muslim man has the right to approach Christian girls directly while Christian men can't do that. This was the case in Mosul university.

Unfortunately, some of the participants also described discrimination within the Christian community, as they experienced discrimination from other Christians based on denomination and language differences. For example, one of the Orthodox women (52 years old), described being denied health care by another Christian because she originated from Baghdad and did not speak Syriac:

We were displaced from Mosul in 2010 and we went to the governorate of Baghdad, since I was originally born in Baghdad, but I had lived in Mosul based on my husband. In Baghdad, we were threatened and they blew up our house. Accordingly, we were also displaced to Erbil. One day, I had a medical issue and I had to go to the hospital. Since I could not speak Sureth, which means [Syriac], the sonography doctor was irritated and refused to treat me. I said to her: 'How are you a Christian and you do not take into account the circumstances and the situation I am in just because I do not speak Sureth?' Then I left the hospital. One day, over two years later, I went to Kangin Hospital and by chance I saw the same doctor in the lab. I told her: 'Do you know who I am? I am the one who one day needed an ultrasound and you refused to treat me because I do not know or

understand the Sureth language, since I am Iraqi and am originally from Baghdad. All my ancestors are from Baghdad'. She said to me: 'No, I did not mean anything, and I apologise for what had happened on my part'. I told her: 'Do not apologise. Back then, you were supposed to perform your duty, which you were obligated to. It is not for you to talk about language and to discriminate based on that'. Unfortunately, we have reached that level. We Christians, who are of the same religion, practice this racism and discrimination amongst ourselves.

Many of the participants in al-Hamdaniya⁴ – Catholic men and women – felt that because of the absence of Christian representation at the level of local government leaders, discrimination and marginalisation are heavily present within the local government in Nineveh governorate. One of the Catholic men explained it in the following way:

This discrimination is at the level of the local government in Nineveh – the governor has two deputies and five assistants, and there is no Christian deputy, assistant or advisor. There are no Christians in the first line in [the] administration of Nineveh governorate to defend the rights of Christians, the absence of this person leads to the marginalisation of Christians further, as there is no person with the decision maker, especially since the administrative assistant to the Governor of Nineveh is part of the Christians' share.

Another of the Catholic men also linked the continued marginalisation and discrimination of Christians to the educational curricula covered in Iraqi schools: 'The educational curricula must be worked on because today the history of Iraq speaks of only one truth (Islamic) and does not talk about the role of Christians in building Iraq and other civilisations.'

4.2.3 Harassment and extortion

As mentioned in the section on the security situation, Christian women are fearful of leaving their homes because of the lack of safety and security, including the risk of harassment. One of the Orthodox men (60 years old) described how women in his community have experienced harassment so frequently that they choose not to leave the house:

⁴ A disputed territory under Kurdish administration.

Harassment is present [since a] long time ago. When our ancestors used to go to Mosul, they used to hear bad words. They used to tease them. I have seen harassment many times in Bartella where a woman has her hand held or kissed. In our community, we have relations with Shabaks and Muslims. In the surrounding communities, many things take place. When there is harassment, women decide not to go out of their homes because they are afraid of harassment. This is also because of the absence of the rule of law and the different culture... In addition, some think that the openness of Christians is social disintegration.

He also added that there is an impression among Muslims that Christian women are more accessible.

A Catholic man agreed that harassment has always existed, but said that the police ignore its religious driver, invisibilising Catholic men's experience. He described how Christian women, particularly in Bartella,⁵ are subject to 'sextortion',⁶ where they are blackmailed to provide sexual favours. If they do not comply, they are punished by being raped and sexually abused. The man said that this way of thinking has come from rural areas into urban areas and is leading to migration and internal displacement: 'People don't want to come back to Bartella because of these concerns.'

The women discussed how many in the Muslim majority hold the view that Christians are more liberal in their beliefs and practices in a way that they see as contributing to the disintegration of social mores. Christian women are particularly affected by this because men from the majority use it as justification to harass them, believing that Christian women will be more 'open' to sexual and romantic advances. For example, an Orthodox woman (62 years old) described how Christian women are often fired from their jobs if they do not respond positively to their managers' advances:

Many of our Christian daughters would apply for jobs. If they do not permit the manager the desired space, he would fire them immediately. There is a different purpose for the job. They have some perception that Christians are liberal, and that Christian girls are easy-going and would give them more space than Muslim girls would. A well-known organisation official, who is a Kurdish Muslim, once told

⁵ A disputed territory under Kurdish administration.

⁶ The Cambridge Dictionary defines sextortion as 'the practice of forcing someone to do something, particularly to perform sexual acts, by threatening to publish naked pictures of them or sexual information about them'.

me, 'I need you as you are a good activist, and I want you to work with me'. I answered, 'I have no problem, and I will help you with anything you want or need from me at work'. However, day by day, he started talking about private matters outside of the work scope, mentioning how he divorced his wife and talking about her, in an attempt to draw closer to me. I did not allow that and did not give him a chance to talk about private matters, and left him immediately. Harassment is everywhere, even when we were young. This was present and prevalent, particularly for those who know we are from the Christian component. They would exploit us, believing that we are accessible, and that we may respond to their advances and fulfil [their] desires and pleasures.

Similarly, one of the Catholic women (45 years old) highlighted how these situations of harassment often also result in blackmail for Christian women, which has made Christian women more afraid to go out and look for employment:

Currently, after these events that occurred due to displacement and its distresses, women themselves have become afraid to leave their homes, because there is no safety. The exploitation and harassment of women in the workplace has become a widespread phenomenon. For example, managers exploit female employees, blackmail them and bargain with them in terms of moral issues, in return for giving them some privileges, increasing their salaries or facilitating their livelihood. That is why women have become afraid of going to work or looking for a job anywhere.

The women also highlighted the blackmail and harassment that Christian girls are subjected to over social media and the internet. Girls' and women's 'honour' is often tied to their families' and communities' honour, placing them in an increased position of vulnerability when they are harassed or abused. For example, the same Catholic woman continued:

apps have spread recently where personal pictures are placed on different bodies, violating women's honour. Men from other religions blackmail and threaten girls with these pictures, forcing them to pay them money, give of their gold or go with them to special places, or else they would publish these pictures over social media and the internet. This causes girls psychological and physical damage. A girl would lose confidence in herself, and would remain afraid of society, and would even

consider committing suicide for fear of people's gossip. It takes a long time, a lot of effort and work to prove her innocence.

4.2.4 Migration, displacement and demographic change

There is no doubt that the Christian presence in Iraq has been severely diminished due to multiple waves of persecution that have led to migration. This persecution has been both direct, through targeting, and indirect, through denial of Christian identities and histories. Alongside economic decline, many families have been forced to migrate, making it harder for those who remain, so that many more wish to leave should they have the chance. There are, however, some Christians who are committed to remaining in Iraq due to their ancient and historical ties to the land.

An Orthodox woman (62 years old) lamented how displacement and forced migration have split families up across the globe, eroding community and family bonds:

Oh, how immigration has destroyed us and our children. Our children immigrated. Now we remain deprived of our grandchildren, our children, their laughter and their warm embrace. When we hear they are sick, our hearts burn within us. I have a daughter and a son who are migrants. My son is in Canada now, and my daughter is in Sweden. I only have one son who lives with me. I am very sad because I no longer see my children whom I raised, nor do I see my grandchildren, hug them, sit with them or witness their laughter. All of them live abroad, I just see them online. Migration destroyed us and destroyed everything. The family is dispersed; the boy is in one place and the girl is in another.

Participants also discussed how displacement impacted them in other ways, even if they remained in Iraq. For example, one of the Orthodox women (34 years old) described her experience of being displaced and left with nothing:

Yes, we were displaced. We left Mosul with only the clothes that we were wearing. We left everything behind and we came here to Erbil. We suffer a lot because the simplest rights are not available, including housing, as the rents are very expensive and men do not work or have a job. Our children are devastated because they do not go to school. Now things are a little better, but we have gone through many rough circumstances that impacted us and our psychological state.

Another of the Orthodox women (55 years old) agreed, stating that:

we were impacted in all respects, in terms of work, my daughters, school and education, and in terms of losing our jobs. We lost our money, our home, and the workplace caught fire and turned into ashes. We have suffered a lot and we still do.

It was clear that the different locations of the participants affected their experiences of displacement and migration in different ways. However, despite their differing experiences, the women all agreed that displacement had negatively impacted Christian women's ability to move freely around their communities and even to find privacy in their own homes. One of the Catholic women (25 years old) commented that all Christians have been displaced:

the privacy of women changed during the displacement. Women used to be in their home living alone and having a private room. Here, women, whether as girls or as married women, have no privacy, living in a tent or a small caravan. This was very difficult and impacted their psychological state a lot. A woman could not get dressed comfortably or go out freely for fear of the community's view of her.

Additionally, women were the ones whose opportunities to work outside of the home were most significantly – and immediately – destroyed, especially because of the increased mental and emotional burden of caring for their frightened families. As another of the Catholic women (56 years old) stated: 'Yes, we have all been displaced. We Christians and Yazidis left together. This impacted us economically, socially and culturally, specifically women, as they were depleted intellectually, mentally, psychologically and in all respects.'

Another of the Catholic women (21 years old), highlighted how early marriage had increased as a consequence of this displacement: 'We were displaced, and this impacted women financially and economically. We see that most families married their daughters off early to be set free from this difficult situation. This impacted women a lot.'

Sadly, alongside this rise in early marriage, one of the Catholic women (27 years old) highlighted how suicide rates have also increased among Christian women and girls:

The whole community was displaced and people were afraid. There is insecurity and there are cases of suicide. People have reached the point that they are experiencing suicidal ideation within these compounds and camps because of the rough living and economic conditions. The percentage of divorce and harassment cases and that of early marriage have increased in crowded areas.

The male participants discussed how after 2003 Christians were targeted with the specific intention of driving them out of Iraq, to erase their existence as a minority there. For example, one of the Catholic men described this in the following way: 'The targeting of Christians began in Mosul after 2003–04, and that was in order to drive them out of the city, and they had no protection from the state. It was systematic, and religion was a factor in that'. Another of the Catholic men added: 'We must look into the history of Christian existence. Today, existence has ended. If the targeting was not based on religion, the Christians in southern Iraq would have been spared.' He stressed that the targeting is the reason for migration, 'but I will not emigrate'. A third Catholic man added that migration is the main consequence of being subjected to harassment and discrimination on the basis of religion: 'Migration is because of the harassment we are subjected to, that we want to find a better life.'

However, the increase in the proportion of migration is due to the lack of job opportunities and the absence of a future, as the participants called it. For example, one of the Orthodox men (67 years old) shared the perspective of his son on his future:

If I ask my son or your son what is our future in Iraq. He says that no matter how hard he tries, there is no job opportunity, no rights and no security. All these things push people to migrate. If someone expresses his willingness to migrate and you say: Please don't migrate. He says: 'Can you provide me with a job? We can't find work'.

Another of the Orthodox men (57 years old) also highlights how a loss of trust in the government to listen to Christians and meet their needs has led to mass migration: 'The future is unknown. Losing trust in any Iraqi government resulted in migration. If all Christians haven't been forced out of Iraq by now, Iraq will be emptied of us in 10 years.'

Lack of job opportunities is considered a common issue in Iraq in general. However, Christians do not obtain jobs within the public sector due to the control of the dominant

political parties. Moreover, compared to Iraqi citizens in general, and due to their concerns about harassment and discrimination, Christians seek employment within their areas, at a time when their areas cannot accommodate the large number of graduates. Also, the majority of available jobs are within the police and army, and generally Christians do not want to join these institutions, which represent a government that does not respect them or uphold their rights.

Therefore, cases of migration since 2014 and the aggravation of migration as a phenomenon that has clearly changed the features of the region since 2014, explain people's fears that the Christian presence will be gone from the region within 10–20 years. This fear is also bolstered by the government's failure to take general procedural policies that work to reassure Christians in the region, whether to stop the encroachment of demographic change on their areas, to find job opportunities that stabilise their presence, or to dispel their fears of a return of targeting on a religious basis, which previously led to the painful experience of internal displacement. This was particularly highlighted by the participants in Bartella and al-Hamdaniya.

In general, the male participants were determined not to migrate, despite how bleak the situation looked. In contrast, many of the women expressed a deep desire to leave Iraq because of the loss of family connections they have experienced. For example, one of the Orthodox women (48 years old) stated that she has:

no one left here, neither brothers nor sisters. I currently live alone. I also hope to migrate. I am not well psychologically. Perhaps this year I am alive, but who knows, maybe next year something bad will happen to me, or perhaps I will die. I don't know, and that is why I really hope to migrate and be with my family and my brothers and sisters.

Likewise, an Orthodox woman (62 years old) expressed how much she wanted to join her children:

I prefer to migrate, if I will be with my children, meaning I would migrate only for the sake of my children. I love my country and my homeland, but it is for the sake of my children. It is difficult for me to be deprived of them, of seeing them and of enjoying their tenderness. That is why I would love to migrate, because I want to

stay close to my children so that I would spend the rest of my life near my grandchildren.

Comments on demographic change were intertwined with the discussions on migration and displacement, since the area was subjected to a great threat and emptied of the Christian presence during the period of ISIS occupation. Since 2003, the Christian population have felt that their areas have been subjected to systematic demographic change, which dates back to the 1980s. This was asserted by one of the Orthodox men, who stated that ‘the demographic change in the Christian areas began in 1980, when the distribution of lands to the martyrs in the Iran-Iraq [war] began’. The participants believed that this was only the beginning of their lands being taken from them. The same Orthodox Christian man expressed his perception that Christian lands are being given to those from the Shabak minority, who have also experienced displacement, in an effort to push Christians out:

There is an increasing desire to buy the lands of the Christian component in Bartella since after the fall of the regime in 2003 [we have seen] the process of displacing the Shabaks from the city of Mosul and pushing them [in]to our areas, a programmed process that happened in 2005–07. The dominant party in the central government did not put an end to this matter because they are satisfied with the process of the Shabaks’ advance [in]to these areas and with help from the government.

As mentioned by the same Orthodox man, demographic change in Christian areas started in 1980 when Saddam Hussain granted lands to the families of non-Christian martyrs and soldiers during the Iraq-Iran war. Therefore, the number of non-Christians increased in Christian areas. Due to the threats and targeting by ISIS against Shi’a Shabaks in Mosul between 2004 and 2014, the Shabaks started establishing residential compounds in the relatively safe Christian areas.

After 2003, Shabak people started purchasing agricultural land from Christians to build residential compounds. This was encouraged by the local government authorities and Shi’a political parties for political and electoral gain. Focus group participants were concerned that this will continue to contribute to a decrease in Christians in the area, as well as a decrease in the number of Christian representatives for their areas within the administration and at legislative level. Their fear is that it will make it even less likely that

their needs will be represented and accounted for. One of the Catholic men shared how some Christians are tempted to sell their land because it provides them with the money to migrate.

4.2.5 Education

Focus group participants shared many examples of the religious and gender-based discrimination Christian women face in education settings and in trying to obtain an education. One of the first issues highlighted was the comments and criticisms that female Christian students receive in educational settings about the clothing they wear, which distinguishes them from the Muslim majority. For example, one of the Catholic men shared his daughter's experience. 'My daughter, studying in a prominent university, told me that one of the professors used 15 minutes in the lecture to talk about Islamic law and decency. She felt that this was directed at her because of her clothing, and this pushed her to leave the university.' The participant also added that young Christian women are often exposed to sexual harassment in this same university, suggesting that this religious and gendered discrimination is deeply rooted within the culture of the institution.

One of the Orthodox women (62 years old), shared her experience of being rejected from a master's degree, despite being in the top ten applicants, and being told outright that she had been rejected because of her Christian faith:

Because I am a Christian, they will not accept me. When I was in Mosul, I applied for a master's degree, as I was one of the top ten. I applied for a master's degree at the University of Mosul several times. The application was based on my qualifications, since I am a media person, and I have the title of a researcher on my papers and researches. Unfortunately, they removed my name, and accepted another woman in my place, a woman who does not have any qualifications, just because she is a Muslim and I am a Christian. Finally, they sent a message to one of the professors and told him, 'We cannot accept her, because she is Christian', and I was not accepted.

A Catholic woman (61 years old) agreed, sharing her impression of her daughter not being able to get a place on a master's course:

There is a lot of discrimination and I have one example. My daughter applied for a master's degree and was not accepted. Like all Christian girls in the district of al-

Hamdaniya here, not one of them was accepted. The admission was only granted to the children of the deputies.

4.2.6 Divorce

The Catholic women were the only participants in the focus groups to speak about divorce; however, they raised it as a significant issue for them. One of the women (27 years old) attributed the rise in cases of divorce in the Christian community to rushed marriages that were the result of displacement:

An important thing is also the divorce cases, which increased in al-Hamdaniya as a result of the idea of displacement, which caused an increase in cases of hasty marriages. Some families would rush to marry their daughters off in order to be free of their responsibility, so they could travel as soon as possible.

It is clear from this quote that Christian women were uniquely vulnerable during displacement, as they were seen by many as a burden that the family needed to be free from. Now, in cases of divorce the women are vulnerable again as they lose the financial security their husbands provide.

One of the Catholic women (39 years old) shared that:

because I work in the legal field as a lawyer, I see many different reasons for divorce, including violence, customs and traditions, and the economic and social conditions. The cases of divorce and family disintegration within the Christian community have increased.

Another of the Catholic women (45 years old) described how children are also vulnerable in cases of divorce, sometimes having to leave school to work as the family has lost its (male) breadwinner:

There are several problems, such as poverty and neglect, which cause divorce and lead to the disintegration of the family and children, as well as the psychological ailments which cause them [children] to drop out of school, tending to take up a job to support their families.

4.2.7 Norms and traditions

When speaking about norms, customs and traditions, the majority of participants referred to the restrictions placed on Christian women's clothing choices. For example, one of the Catholic men, stated that:

most people don't value [the] Christian woman. I had a doctor friend who works in Tuzkhurmato⁷ and she was forced to wear [the] veil because the wider Iraqi community doesn't accept the woman with her hair.

Due to fears of harassment and even of being kidnapped or killed, the women discussed how they dress in clothing that is more acceptable to the Muslim majority. One of the Orthodox women (60 years old) explained how:

when we were in Mosul, we would not leave the house. Only during special occasions and festivals would we go to church because we are afraid lest some bombings, kidnappings or killings should take place. Our clothes were long, and we would put a cover on our head. Our clothes were all modest and long when we intended to leave the house.

Another of the Orthodox women (48 years old) agreed, reiterating the fear Christian women have of being recognised as Christians:

When we were in Mosul, we used to wear a cover (hijab) and long clothes with cuffs and long sleeves whenever we wanted to leave the house. We also used to hide the cross inside our clothes, because we were afraid to show the cross in public. We were afraid of them and their stares. We were restricted in everything, and were unable to live our daily lives freely and comfortably.

Some of the Catholic women felt that it was more than just their clothing that became more restricted when they were displaced out of their majority Christian communities and forced to adopt new customs and traditions. For example, one of the Catholic women (45 years old) explained how her whole lifestyle had changed in a negative way because of the loss of the customs and traditions she was used to:

⁷ A district located in the Salahaldeen governorate, just north of Baghdad.

We, as Christians, are accustomed to hanging out and going to parties. We enjoy freedom [over] what to wear and how to behave within our Christian community, and these have formerly been our customs and traditions. But what we witness now is that people, who are from outside our regions and our religion, people who are quite different in everything, would interfere in our affairs, taking advantage of these things and trying to use them against us. This hurts us a lot, and does not allow us to be at ease, either in our way of dressing or in our parties or gatherings. This is a restriction of our freedom. They also impose the customs and traditions of a different religion on our daughters. In the universities, for example, they criticise everything about them. They ask them why they do not wear a veil, why they reveal their hair and why they wear short clothes. This is even done by university professors. An evident example is my daughter in her university, where she is criticised for everything. All these things affected us.

In contrast, one of the Orthodox women (32 years old) felt that the situation is improving for Christian women and girls with respect to participation in religious rites and rituals in public:

In the past, we used to practice our religious rituals in secret, among family members and relatives, and not in public. We were afraid of them. [The] same is true for when we went to the market or to church. However, now things have improved and we are able to practice rituals more comfortably.

Nevertheless, it was clear that Christian women are not only restricted by the customs and traditions of the Muslim majority, but also by the traditions of their own community with respect to unequal gender relations. Another Catholic woman (45 years old) disagreed with the extent of the freedoms described above, highlighting that Christian women have always experienced more restrictions than Christian men because of fears within the community of women's and girls' reputations being ruined, impacting their family's reputation negatively:

Regarding women, customs and traditions have generally restricted them a lot, whether in the past or in the present, in terms of going out, moving around, studying, travelling alone, or doing some private business, in addition to mixing with men. A woman is restricted and is unable to move freely in her life, being a woman or a girl.

4.2.8 Violence and bullying

When discussing the violence that takes place within the Christian community, the women highlighted the domestic violence some Christian women endure from their husbands. For example, one of the Catholic women described the problem in the following way:

Currently in society, of the challenges before Christian women [the worst] is the spread of violence, violence against women. At home they are exposed to violence, and this violence is thus transmitted to the children and the people with whom they live. Some divorce cases are due to violence, battering and abuse by husbands, as well as the failure to reach an understanding between them and solve their problems in a cordial manner.

The participant went on to say that this stems from ‘the discrimination between males and females in terms of males being granted the right to do all they want, while females are entitled to nothing. Also harassment, electronic blackmailing and deprivation of rights to education.’ This highlights how Christian women are subjected to gender-based discrimination by others within their own community.

Nevertheless, the women also spoke about the violence they and other Christian women faced at the hands of ISIS. One of the Catholic women (45 years old) described how she knew a woman who was kidnapped by ISIS:

I know a woman who was taken by ISIS and was kidnapped for 15 days. Yes, they even attempted to marry her to their leader, but she refused. They beat her until they left her, where she was greatly injured by the severity of the beatings.

Another Catholic woman (39 years old) agreed, stating that ‘some Christian women were kidnapped and taken by ISIS to Syria and other regions. They had them change their religion, married them, and made them pregnant with children from them.’

4.2.9 Hate speech and pressure to convert (lack of awareness of minorities)

The women in the FGDs felt that lack of awareness of minorities in wider Iraqi society was an obstacle and a challenge to their lives, especially in relation to the religious discrimination they face. One of the Orthodox women (62 years old) emphasised how important it is to educate young people about different religions to reduce discrimination:

'They should become educated about different religions, and how no one should bully another just for having a different religion. Different religions should be respected and bullying other religions is not to be allowed.' She went on to give examples of the impact of this lack of awareness on their lives:

We experienced this a lot with Muslims, particularly in Mosul. They used to tell us, 'You are Christians, you are infidels, because you do not adopt our Islamic religion. Why do you not convert to Islam, embrace the Islamic religion and become Muslims?' We used to experience this a lot with them.

One Catholic woman (61 years old) agreed, sharing her experience of being pressured to convert to Islam:

When we were in Baghdad, I was a teacher. There was a Muslim teacher with me in school, who was trying to impose her religion and talk about Islam in front of me. She would tell me, 'You will get to heaven' and many other things, in the attempt to have me change my faith, abandon Christianity and embrace Islam.

Another of the Catholic women (27 years old) had a similar experience to share; however, she also highlighted how she was particularly vulnerable to this pressure as a young woman:

On one occasion, my friends and I went to Kirkuk governorate because I had an application to be hosted at Tikrit University. I submitted my papers to the secretary of the dean, and completed all the procedures. When he found out that we are Christians, he started talking about Islam and explaining it. He would tell us, 'Join the Islamic religion. We are allowed to marry Christian girls'. He thought that since we are girls, he can deceive us with these words and convince us to abandon our Christian religion, convert to Islam and act on his words. When we heard what he said, we left the place at once.

Women also complained of exposure to hate speech. One of the Catholic women (56 years old) explained how:

several times during the Friday sermons here in Erbil, we would hear some racist and hardline Islamic mosque preachers who hate Christians and talk about them [using] inappropriate words, accusing them of being infidels who drink alcohol.

Accordingly, they incite the rest of the people against them, pushing them to hate them.

5 Conclusions

The relationship of Christians with the state bears within it the seed of discrimination and inequality, which intensified during the last quarter of the last century, in particular, as hundreds of thousands of Christians were forced to emigrate. This forced migration increased in frequency in the years following the US-led occupation of Iraq, when the level of migration was greatest, due to violent operations targeting Christian monuments, churches, monasteries, and Christian personalities and gatherings, especially after the ISIS occupation.

Given the spread of acts of violence and terrorism, Christians in Iraq feel that they are one of the weakest groups in society, especially as they do not constitute a large population bloc. The absence of the state and its institutions, the weakness of citizenship and equality, and the continued erosion of human rights have contributed to the deterioration of their conditions and their having to resort to migration.

Consequently, the importance of this study is in the context of the search for the most significant challenges that Christians face in their historic homeland and how these challenges have led to a significant decrease in their numbers due to their continuous migration.

Overall, participants agreed that discrimination against Christians because of their religious affiliation has become an almost general phenomenon and no region of Iraq is excluded. While the women in the focus groups identified challenges and threats that they face as a religious minority and as women, this was not articulated by the male participants.

Therefore, the key challenges the participants highlighted included significant legal challenges. For example, participants identified how minority rights in the Iraqi constitution are undermined by additions such as Article 26, which states that children of couples where one converts to Islam must also become Muslim (Al-Dabbagh 2021). Additionally, Christians are unable to access positions of authority and employment in government institutions because of religious discrimination. Participants also identified

how this discrimination extended beyond legal boundaries, also restricting their access to positions in a wide range of professions, leading to high unemployment.

Inequalities, and poverty in many cases, discrimination, cultural exclusion, lack of political representation and lack of impartiality of preachers have as great an impact as outright violence. They are equally responsible for the threat to diversity and the migration of Christians.

The formula of a political climate based on religious and sectarian polarisation, and the suffering caused by the fracturing or denial of citizenship as a discriminatory policy, partially or completely on the basis of religion or belief, has severe effects on Christians' enjoyment of all human rights. The obligations of non-discrimination require granting citizenship on the basis of equality for all and this is not currently the case in Iraq. Full equality requires that religious minorities enjoy all their rights on an equal basis with citizens of the majority. This includes holding public office within the state; and access to higher education, political and government leadership, educational institutions and the armed forces (OHCHR 2022).

Christian women were uniquely impacted by some of the challenges both male and female participants identified, such as the security situation, but also faced their own threats. Harassment was the most significant of these, alongside a lack of access to education. The targeting of Christians and general lack of safety has forced Christian women to quit their jobs, especially those in non-Christian areas, to avoid harassment and even threats of kidnapping. This is restricting them to their homes, which is in turn affecting them psychologically.

Additionally, Christian women face a specific risk because of how their clothing and the wearing of religious symbols mark them out to others as members of a minority. Combined with a belief that Christians are more 'liberal' than the Muslim majority, Christian women often face sexualised harassment from Muslim men who approach them in the belief they will be more open than Muslim women to a sexual and/or romantic encounter. As Christian women's and girls' honour is often tied to their communities, the Christian women described also fearing the reaction of their own community if they were to be violated or blackmailed, especially over social media.

Fear and pessimism about the future and the future of their existence due to violence and extremism in religious discourse has led to a significant increase in Christians migrating out of Iraq. To preserve the Christian presence in Iraq, the Iraqi government must put in place a comprehensive plan to reassure Christians of the existence of a real will on the part of the state to defend their rights, protect their existence, and ensure their participation in all state institutions and departments in a manner that guarantees justice and equality.

6 Recommendations

Based on the authors' own knowledge and the solutions suggested by participants in the FGDs, the following recommendations are made to ensure a future free from discrimination, marginalisation and fear for Christians in Iraq, particularly Christian women:

- Prioritise reinstating safety and human security, ensuring that the rule of law is upheld at all times and ending the impunity of rogue security forces. Without basic safety, the full range of rights of women and their families will continue to be compromised and the flow of migration out of the country will continue.
- Ensure that feminist movements, faith leaders, development actors and the various branches of government enable women who belong to religious minorities to take advantage of the 25 per cent quota for women in parliament and actively seek to ensure their representation in local and municipal governorates. This should be complemented by education aimed at equipping and empowering Christian women to take on these positions, and challenging norms, beliefs and traditions within the Christian community that condemn or discourage women's political participation.
- Reform laws that affect Christians' administrative, cultural and educational rights, especially with regard to the personal status law, the national identity card and the inheritance law, which currently discriminate against Christian women. Reform the inheritance law under the Baghdad-administered jurisdiction to ensure that Christians are able to confer equal inheritance in accordance with the principle of gender parity. Generate employment opportunities for women, in particular those who have been displaced, through initiatives that do not jeopardise their safety.

- Name, shame and hold to account actors who condone the harassment of women from religious minority backgrounds, including Christian women, and raise awareness in the police, judiciary and other bodies of measures to mitigate the targeting of women from religious minorities all women in Iraq.
- Speak out against and counter hate speech against religious minorities, in general, and hold to account predators who seek to blackmail women using digital media.
- Reform employment legislation to ensure that Christians have equal opportunities to compete for government jobs according to their experience and efficiency, free from favouritism or discrimination.
- Establish small and medium industrial and agricultural projects, as well as large projects, services and strategic development activities to meet the needs of those living in historically Christian areas.
- Update educational programmes and curricula across the whole of Iraq to ensure a positive and accurate definition of the various religious and ethnic minorities, their history, beliefs and heritage. This should be done in consultation with each of the minority groups.
- Compensate Christian families returning to homes that have been damaged in a transparent and systematic manner within a specified timeframe and taking measures to prevent corruption and theft.

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Annexe 1

Table A1: Christian populations before and after ISIS occupation

Christian population	Before ISIS		Returnees post-ISIS	
	Families	Individuals	Families	Individuals
Qaraqosh^a	13,500	54,000	5,500	23,000–24,000
Bartella^b	–	18,300	1,500	5,000
Karmles^c	800	2,000	325	800
Mosul^d	>3,000	>10,000	60	100
Tel Eskof^e	1,450	8,000	800	3,500 (incl. families displaced from Mosul and other towns and villages)
Baqofa^e	75	400	47	200
Batnaya^e	1,150	5,000	200	650
Tel Keif^f	1,200	4,500	58	147
Bashiqa^g	500	1,500	300	800
Bahzani^g	370	1,250	140	500

Source: Authors' own. Created using information from Syriac Catholic Church, Mayor of al-Hamdaniya District^a; Syriac Council in Bartella^b; Priest of Chaldean Church in Karmles^c; Priest of Annunciation Church in Mosul^d; Houyathan Organization^e; Chaldean Church in Tel Keif^f; Priest of Syriac Orthodox Church in Bashiqa^g.



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