

Women in Iraq's Kakai Minority: the Gender Dimensions of a Struggle for Identity

Members of the Kakai minority have faced discrimination and marginalisation during many different periods of the Iraqi state. Prior to the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, Kakais were deported to other regions as part of a government drive to alter the demographics of Kurdish majority areas. After 2003, the Kakais faced oppression as a minority group during a long period of sectarian fighting. This oppression continued with the Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist attack on Iraq in 2014. The marginalisation of the Kakais is exacerbated by a lack of legal recognition and differing views over their minority status.

Key messages

- Kakais in Iraq face discrimination and inequalities based on their status as a minority group and differing interpretations of the Kakai identity.
- During CREID's research women and men had different views about what they felt were the areas of most concern. While women were unanimous that barriers to education was the most important issue they faced, men felt that giving young men, and ultimately all Kakai young people, a better understanding of their identity as Kakais, took priority.
- Kakai women face additional layers of intersectional oppression. As women from a minority group, they are impacted by a combination of institutional discrimination around legal status and the provision of education and employment, and discrimination caused by gender norms within their own community that create inequalities in education, respect, and freedom of movement.

Context

Little information exists about the origin of the Kakai religion. Some historians consider that Kakaism is an extension of a mystical path established by Amr Ibn Lahab in the eighth century. Others link it to the Shiite sect due to the similarities in beliefs, specifically around the sanctification of Imam Ali. Kakaism has been influenced by other religions, such as Islam, Christianity and the Yazidi religion. It is surrounded by an air of mystery and secrecy; many years of marginalisation within an Muslim majority country have meant the Kakais have been forced to assimilate some customs, ideas and values in order to ensure their religious and social existence. The Kakais have religious books written in the Kurdish language. They also have many shrines, including the Shrine of Sultan Ishaq in Mount Horaman.



In Iraq, the Kakai minority live in Kurdish regions, particularly the governorates of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, Halabja, and a small minority in Dohuk. It is difficult to provide a reliable estimate of the size of the Kakai community in Iraq, as Kakais have not been counted as a separate religious or ethnic group in national censuses; however, one estimate is that they number between 110,000 and 200,000 (Abdulkhaliq, forthcoming). The religion began to emerge around AD 800, although it was not until the thirteenth century that its basic pillars were defined and confirmed by Sultan Sahak. The Kakai are visible by their distinct moustaches. The Kakai identity is not adequately recognised in either the federal laws made by the Iraqi government or the separate laws of the Kurdistan region, and Kakai people are recorded as Muslim on their identity cards.

Methodology

Focus Group Discussions using participatory ranking

The research was carried out through focus group discussions (FGDs) involving 60 people from the Kakai community living in the village of Safiya. Five FGDs were held, with participants split into: 12 women aged 18–34; 12 women aged 35–45; 12 women aged 46–70; 14 men aged 18–40; and 10 men aged 41–58. The perspectives of both women and men were sought to highlight different experiences and views around gender within the Kakai community. Participants of different ages were included to explore how Kakai women experience discrimination and marginalisation throughout their lives.

The FGDs were conducted using open-ended questions and participatory ranking. Participatory ranking enables participants themselves to identify problems and challenges, and rank these in order of their preference/priority. The discussions around the problems and challenges identified generated rich qualitative data. This was complemented by quantitative data collected through the participatory ranking to inform analysis.

Researcher from the same community as participants

The researcher is a member of the Kakai community and a law professor from Salahaddin University in Erbil, Iraq. She is also an activist within civil society organisations. Her lived experience as a woman from a minority group in Iraq, combined with the expertise she has garnered from her profession and civil activism, means that she has a strong understanding of the challenges faced by Kakai women.

Key findings

Twelve key issues were identified by participants overall and ranked in order of severity. Each issue was allocated a score based on the number of participants who ranked it as their first, second, third or fourth priority. When these scores were compared, the issue with the highest score overall was education. This was followed by displacement due to ISIS, gender discrimination and invasion of privacy. However, when these results are disaggregated by gender, it becomes clear that women

and men in the FGDs prioritised different areas. 24 out of 36 women chose education as their highest priority issue, but it was not prioritised at all by men. For men, the issues chosen most frequently as the highest priority were discrimination at work (chosen as highest priority by five out of 24 men), and invasion of privacy (chosen as highest priority by four of 24 men). The men felt they were being prevented from realising and freely living their Kakai identity. Displacement due to ISIS scored highly because 20 of the 60 participants chose it as their second, third or fourth priority. Similarly, gender discrimination was only chosen as a top priority by two of 36 women, but 21 women chose it as their second, third or fourth priority.

Education

Education was by far the most highly prioritised area for women in the FGDs. Some participants in the FGD for women aged 46–68 had not had any opportunities for formal education. They lamented that they had not been offered these opportunities, and regretted their lost dreams of a brighter future. Women in the younger age groups felt that education opportunities for girls had improved, but they described incidences of discrimination towards them as women from a minority in education settings. These examples included Kakai school girls being ridiculed and harassed due to their minority status, being pressured to convert to Islam, and being forced to dress differently.

In all three of the FGDs for women, there were participants who shared that their parents had stopped them from going to school, or cut their education short, because they were girls, while their brothers were allowed to continue. They noted that in families who believe in educating their children, the preference is to educate boys rather than girls. This is particularly the case in families with limited incomes. Some participants in the men's FGDs discussed the idea that an educated girl would be in a position to discuss and argue with her parents or members of her clan on crucial issues.

Gender discrimination

Many of the women felt they had experienced gender discrimination from their parents. They described how they were prevented from studying or working because their parents did not want them to have free movement outside the house, contrary to the wide range of freedoms granted to their brothers. Discrimination towards girls from parents was then reproduced by male relatives such as brothers. Women expressed their frustration about what they saw as a stark difference in the respect afforded to women in comparison to men in Kakai society.

Views on gender discrimination differed between younger and older women. Women in the FGD for ages 18–34 strongly expressed their resentment and anger about the gender inequalities they had experienced. In the FGD for older women however, there was more acceptance of the idea of gender discrimination as a given in family life. In addition to the gendered social norms at work within families, women also discussed gender discrimination in the law and institutions. One example of this was the leniency afforded to men who murder their wives.

Displacement

Participants in all five FGDs had experienced migration and displacement due to the terrorist actions of ISIS in 2014. They described how their heightened vulnerability at this time was due to their membership of a religious minority and/or their Kurdish identity. Women spoke about the fear they felt when they learnt what ISIS had done to Yazidi women, and described how they fled their homes as they knew it could happen to them too. Men in the older age group also discussed their earlier experiences of displacement and deportation: at the hands of the Baathist regime before 2003, and after 2003 during sectarian fighting and unrest.

Discrimination at work

Participants in both of the men's FGDs brought up discrimination at work as an area of concern. It was also discussed among participants in the FGD for younger women. Women in this age group were more likely to have finished their studies at higher education level, and changing customs mean that they are more likely to be employed than women from older age groups. Women highlighted that many areas of work were not open to them as women from a minority. They spoke about the additional barriers and discrimination they faced in the private sector, and they also noted that self-employment was barred to them due to lack of economic capital and discrimination from customers on account of religious discrimination against them as Kakai.

Invasion of privacy

Participants defined 'invasion of privacy' as persistent questions about who the Kakais are, and about their rituals, beliefs and other relevant matters. Participants in both of the FGDs for men expressed annoyance at the misconceptions expressed about the Kakai faith by the broader community in their day-to-day interactions. It is likely that this issue was ranked more highly by men than women because Kakai men are recognised by their distinct moustaches and because women have fewer interactions with members of other religions in the wider community.

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations aim to address the marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion faced by Kakai women in Iraq. They are informed by the issues raised in the FGDs, and by the researcher's professional and lived expertise.

- The government must legislate to make education compulsory for girls and boys, and impose penalties for noncompliance. This could be similar to the law that was in force under the former Baathist regime before 2003, where families were forced to send their daughters to school until the intermediate stage.
- The government must prioritise the creation and support of education institutes within districts and sub-districts that are within safe and easy reach for girls.

- The education curriculum should be modified in a manner consistent with the diversity that exists in Iraq and accordingly, recognise the Kakai as one of its components. It should cover the demographic composition of the Iraqi people in terms of nationality, language, religion, sect, race and ethnicity.
- The government should encourage investment banks to grant low interest loans for small projects for women who live in poor economic conditions. These conditions should be assessed according to the reports and studies of social supervisors in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.
- Funding should be channeled into the establishment of handicraft factories that allow women to work and earn an income for their family without having to travel to cities.
- The government, donor agencies and civil society organisations should provide safe, empowering spaces where Kakai women can speak freely about their experiences and aspirations without being ridiculed and silenced.

Further reading

Abdulkhaliq, Z.S. (forthcoming) *Kakai Religion and the Place of Music and the Tanbur*, CREID Working Paper, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

Kakai, S.M.A. (2022) *The Identity Struggle of the Kakai Minority in Iraq*, CREID Intersections, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.020](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.020)

Tadros, M. (2020) *Invisible Targets of Hatred: Socioeconomically Excluded Women from Religious Minority Backgrounds*, CREID Working Paper 2, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

Tadros, M.; Shahab, S. and Quinn-Graham, A. (2022) *Women of Religious Minority Background in Iraq: Redressing Injustices, Past and Present*, CREID Intersections, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.016](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.016)


Credits

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Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK

T +44 (0) 1273 606261

F +44 (0) 1273 621202

E creid@ids.ac.uk

W www.creid.ac

T @CREID_Dev

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