

# Sabean-Mandaean Women's Experiences: The Intersectional Impact of Religious and Ideological Conflict in Iraqi Society

Within the Sabean-Mandaean community, women are traditionally seen to have great value. Inheritance is split equally between women and men, and children have a religious name as well as a lay name that traces the lineage of their mother. However, Sabean-Mandaean women in Iraq today face a range of inequalities and discrimination based on the intersection of their religious identity and gender.

The US occupation of Iraq in 2003, the following sectarian wars, and the 2014 ISIS invasion had a profound impact on the lives of all Sabean-Mandaean people in Iraq. As a religious minority, Sabean-Mandaean continue to find themselves subject to oppression, discrimination and exile. Many were killed as a result of the wars and invasion, and many of those who survived faced a choice between persecution and violence or abandoning their homes and emigrating to maintain their Mandaean identity. In the increasing number of families where men are absent, women have had to take on the role of breadwinner, while negotiating societal norms and practices that place women firmly within the home and require them to dress according to the majority religion. Many women could not complete their education and many remain unmarried as wars and migration have skewed the gender balance among the Sabean-Mandaean community.

## Key messages

- Sabean-Mandaean in Iraq face a range of discrimination and inequalities, and fear for the survival of their ancient community and beliefs. However, the situations and priorities of the women and men taking part in this study varied according to their geographical location, economic situation and gender.
- Sabean-Mandaean women in Baghdad identified security as the top priority for action, while women in Erbil ranked religious discrimination as the area of most concern.
- Sabean-Mandaean men in Baghdad also ranked security as their number one issue, while men in Erbil prioritised their economic situation.
- Sabean-Mandaean women face additional layers of intersectional discrimination and inequality. In their position as women and as members of a religious minority, they are harassed in public spaces and denied employment and education opportunities. They are also subject to restrictions within their



own community, particularly around the Mandaean traditional profession of gold and silver smith work. As a result of fears around their safety, Sabeian-Mandaean women's freedoms and opportunities are further restricted.

## Context

Mandaism is a religious belief with its own thought, rituals and language. Sabeian-Mandaeans see the ancient land of Mesopotamia as the origin of their worship. The word Sabeian is derived from the Aramaic verb Saba, which means 'to baptize or immerse in water,' while the word Mandaean is derived from the Aramaic word Manda, meaning 'knowledge' or 'science'. Sabeian-Mandaean therefore means: 'those who are baptized and who know the true religion'. Sabeian-Mandaeans uphold Adam's law and consider him their first prophet. The last of their prophets is Yahya bin Zakaria, who is believed to have resurrected the ancient religion and established the baptism act, to which Sabeian-Mandaeans are committed.

The Mandaean language is an Aramaic dialect, similar to Syriac and Hebrew. In recent history the Sabeian-Mandaean lived mainly in Iraq (the majority in Baghdad) and Iran. However, between 1991 and 2012, many migrated away from Iraq. Forced migration, persecution, religious discrimination and ineffective law enforcement has meant that the number of Sabeian-Mandaeans in Iraq has shrunk from 50,000–70,000 pre-2003 to less than 5,000 today.

It is necessary to be born into the Sabeian-Mandaean religion, and individuals are not permitted to marry outside of it. Members of the Sabeian-Mandaean community have played an important role in the field of science, literature, art, and knowledge over the centuries. Traditionally, men practised the art of gold and silver craftsmanship, as well as enamel art. Sons inherited their fathers' and grandfathers' professions, passing down the principles of craftsmanship from generation to generation, but in general the profession has not been open to Sabeian-Mandaean women.

## Methodology

### Focus Group Discussions using participatory ranking

The research was carried out through focus group discussions (FGDs); two in Erbil and two in Baghdad. 45 participants were involved in the FGDs (22 women and 23 men). The perspectives of both women and men were sought to highlight different experiences and views around gender within the Sabeian-Mandaean community. In each location, separate FGDs were held for women and men. Participants had varying levels of education and were both employed and unemployed. They ranged in age from 18 to 70.

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. Participants were also encouraged to create recommendations on how their living conditions could be improved.

### Researcher from the same community as participants

The lead researcher is a Sabean-Mandaean Iraqi activist. She is also Vice President of the Mandaean Culture Association, a member of the Sabean-Mandaean Affairs Council in Erbil, and a Member of the Board of Directors of the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities Network.

### Key findings

Twenty-seven key issues were identified by participants overall and ranked in order of severity, starting from the most severe and widespread. There was variation between women and men, and across the two locations, around the issues chosen as top priority. For both women and men in Baghdad, the security situation was ranked most highly (the highest ranking issue for four of the 13 women from Baghdad and six of the 13 men from Baghdad). While security was ranked highly among women in Erbil, the highest priority issue for them was religious discrimination (prioritised by four of 11 women). Meanwhile men in Erbil ranked the economic situation as the biggest challenge (the highest ranking issue for seven of 11 men).

### The security situation

Safety and security issues affect all aspects of Sabean-Mandaean women's and men's lives, particularly in Baghdad, where the rule of law, and protection for religious minorities, is weaker. Sabean-Mandaean communities live under threat of discrimination, intimidation, robbery and violence, which has led to increasing emigration away from the area, especially for men. Women in the focus groups described how, when male members of their families were threatened, kidnapped or forced to emigrate, they themselves had to leave school, marry early, or avoid leaving the house in order to seek safety.

### Religious discrimination

All members of Sabean-Mandaean communities have experienced religious discrimination, and in some cases, forced conversion to Islam. For men – and women who are employed – religious discrimination can restrict employment and business opportunities. Children also experience discrimination in education, being excluded from classes reserved for the majority religious faith, or not allowed to express their religious identity at school. The experiences of women in the focus groups demonstrate how their gender and religious identity intersect in their experiences of discrimination. Unlike the majority Sunni or Shia Muslim populations, Sabean-Mandaean women do not wear a veil. This means they are easily identifiable as members of the Sabean-Mandaean religion, making them vulnerable to intimidation and sexual harassment in public spaces. The result is that women's public lives, education and economic opportunities have become much more restricted.

### The economic situation and employment

Sabean-Mandaean men taking part in the FGDs discussed the difficult economic situation in terms of their decreasing opportunities to practice the art of gold and silver smith work, as well as religious discrimination when they try to engage in other types of employment, and thereby support their families. Women in the FGDs did not rank the economic situation as highly as men participants, but they did prioritise employment. Jobs outside of the gold and silver work profession are most commonly given to men from the majority religion in Iraq, but if Sabean-Mandaean are employed, priority will be given to men. Even if work is available for Sabean-Mandaean women, their own community may discourage their engagement due to fears of harassment and ill-treatment, which they have often experienced. Sabean-Mandaean women therefore face additional layers of gender and religious discrimination that impact strongly on their economic security and freedom. This impact is more acutely felt for single women or those who are supporting families alone due to the challenging conditions that have led to the emigration of male family members.

### Access to services and education

Access to services such as healthcare was an area highly prioritised by women in the FGDs. As the members of the Sabean-Mandaean community with primary responsibilities for the care of others, discrimination in service provision hits women particularly hard. Some women described being denied medical treatment because of their religious identity, and others who were caring for disabled family members, often alone due to other members of the family having emigrated, described a lack of social care services and support for the Sabean-Mandaean community. Barriers around girls' education were also discussed, with these barriers, along with families' fears for girls' safety, culminating in early and child marriage.

## Policy recommendations

The following recommendations aim to address the marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion faced by Sabean-Mandaean women in Iraq. They are drawn from suggestions made by FGD participants, and by the researcher's knowledge and expertise as a Sabean-Mandaean woman with strong relationships and connections with the Sabean-Mandaean community.

### General recommendations:

- The government in Iraq must end the discrimination and exclusion faced by the Sabean-Mandaean community, by promoting equality and non-discrimination in law and in society. This should be done by a renewed commitment to international human rights law and its integration into domestic legislation, policy and practice.
- The government in Iraq must make efforts to protect the existence and survival of minorities. This should include the physical protection of people belonging to minorities, especially in situations of conflict, and protection from violence and its consequences.

- The government in Iraq should take positive discrimination in relation to the Sabeen-Mandaean community to ensure that past discrimination and injustice is addressed and remedied.
- Education curriculums should include minorities' history and civilisation, and religious studies should not focus only on the majority religion, but also include the religious diversity that exists in Iraq and across the world.
- The media in Iraq should do more to promote religious equality and awareness of minority religions.
- Article 26 of the Civil Status Law on the Islamisation of Minors, which requires a child to convert to Islam after the conversion of one of their parents, should be repealed.

#### Recommendations to address the discrimination faced by Sabeen-Mandaean women:

- The government in Iraq must create new laws to guarantee, activate and defend the rights of women and girls. This should include legislation to protect all women and girls from harassment based on their gender and/or religious identity, and to punish the perpetrators.
- Measures should be introduced to address discrimination against women in employment so that they can fulfil their potential, serve their communities, and engage actively in all fields.
- The rules prohibiting child marriage should be enforced more strictly, and the government should take action to ensure that alternative opportunities for young women and girls, for example in education and employment, are available without discrimination or threat of victimisation and harassment.
- The government in Iraq should provide social security and health support measures for older women and those caring for disabled children or other family members.
- Support and care should also be provided for divorced and widowed women and their children.

## Further reading

Sarhan, F. (2022) *Sabeen-Mandaean Women and Religious and Ideological Conflict in Iraqi Society*, CREID Intersections, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.019](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.019)

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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