

Shabak Women in the Nineveh Plain: The Impact of Intersectional Discrimination on their Daily Lives

Shabak women in Iraq live within a tribal, religious and patriarchal society. Priority is given to men in terms of education, employment, public life, personal freedom and inheritance. This means that, while all Shabak people have suffered from years of conflict and marginalisation as a religious minority group, women and girls face particular forms of intersectional discrimination. Today more Shabak women go to school and university, and participate in political processes, but these developments have not been consistent or comprehensive for all Shabak women.

Key messages

- Over the past 20 years, Shabak communities in the Nineveh Plain have faced increased marginalisation as a minority with a distinct vernacular language and identity.
- Shabak women and men taking part in this study identified a range of issues affecting women's lives and opportunities. All participants prioritised education as the most serious area of concern. After this however, women were more likely to prioritise health and inheritance, while men chose employment opportunities and early marriage.
- Participants' contributions demonstrate the intersectional discrimination and disadvantage experienced by Shabak women. For these women, patriarchal and traditional customs and ideas are combining with experiences of marginalisation as a minority to impact negatively on their experiences in many areas, including education, health, early marriage, work, inheritance, legal remedies, domestic violence, harassment and discrimination.

Context

Around 75 per cent of the Shabak identify as Muslims of the Shiite sect and 25 per cent identify as Sunnis. Shabaks have come to two conclusions about their history. The first identifies Shabak people as coming from the Persian East and having lived since ancient times in Iraq after being displaced. The second is that Shabaks are descendants of the Medes, who seized Nineveh after the battle of 'Bkhuda Da' (meaning God's gift), and ended the Assyrian state in cooperation with the Sumerians. Despite these differing opinions, many agree that the Shabak share their origins with the Kakai, Faili, Hawarman and Zaza minorities.



The Shabak live mainly in the Nineveh Plain, an area of land that forms a separating belt between the Arab Mosul and the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The number of Shabak people in Iraq is currently estimated to range from 350,000 to 400,000.¹ They speak the Shabak language, which is an independent language with its own distinct vocabulary and vernacular pronunciation, although it contains vocabulary shared with other languages, such as Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Hindi and Kurdish.

The population of the Nineveh Plain consists of many different components, religions and sects – the majority being Christians and Yazidis, but also including Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Shabaks, Kakais, Shia and Sunnis. However, after the US occupation of Iraq in 2003, society began to fragment. When Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist gangs invaded in 2014, massacres took place in Shabak villages. Some Shabak girls and young women were kidnapped and Shabak communities are still living with the upheaval and trauma of these years.

Methodology

Focus Group Discussions using participatory ranking

The research was carried out through four focus group discussions (FGDs) with 26 women and 22 men from different areas of the Nineveh Plain. Both women and men were included in the FGDs to gain an understanding of different perceptions within the Shabak community of the challenges and threats Shabak women face. Two FGDs were held for women; one for participants aged 18–35 years, and one for participants aged 36–70. The two men’s focus groups were also split by age. Participants included those who were educated and those who had been unable to complete a formal education, housewives, employees, students, graduates and civil activists. They came from villages, districts and sub-district centres.

All participants were asked the question: “What are the problems and challenges facing the Shabak woman and their effects on her daily life?”. Therefore, while women spoke from their own experiences, men were asked about their perceptions of challenges facing women in their communities as well as broader gender dynamics. Participatory ranking was then used, so that participants themselves could rank the issues they had identified in order of their priority. They also discussed potential solutions to the challenges facing Shabak women. The discussions generated rich qualitative data. This was complemented by participatory ranking to inform analysis.

Researchers from the same community as participants

The research was conducted by an academic and activist who is also a woman from the Shabak minority. She was one of the founders of the Iraqi Minority Council, head of the Shabak Women’s Association, and a member of the Iraqi Minorities Alliance and the Crisis Cell Committee in Hamdaniya District. Her expertise, combined with her own lived experience, means that the researcher has a unique insight into the Shabak community and the problems that Shabak women experience.

Key findings

Fifteen key issues were identified by participants overall and ranked in order of severity, starting from the most severe and widespread. The issue that received the most votes across all four focus groups was education (chosen as a first, second, third or fourth priority by 40 of 48 participants). This was followed by employment opportunities (21 participants), health (21 participants), early marriage (19 participants), customs and traditions (17 participants) and inheritance (17 participants).

However, when the ranking was disaggregated by sex, there were some differences between women's and men's ranking of these priority issues. While both women and men agreed that education was the highest priority issue, women were more likely to prioritise health and inheritance than men. Men more often chose early marriage and employment opportunities. When broken down by sex and age, the data revealed that inheritance was more often prioritised by younger women, while older women were more likely to choose health. The reasons for these differences are discussed below.

Education and employment

Education was prioritised by the majority of FGD participants. They explained that Shabak women and girls – particularly those living in villages rather than city and district centres – face barriers in accessing education due to customs and traditions within the Shabak community. Participants said that many parents prevent their daughters completing their education, due to beliefs that girls should help in the home and prepare for marriage.

Participants discussed the challenges created by a lack of Shabak middle and secondary schools near to villages. This means that girls have to travel long distances to attend schools in district centres. In these schools, Shabak girls may mix with boys and with students of other religions, something that produces more concerns for parents, who may decide instead to keep their daughters at home. FGD participants also noted that families' financial hardship was another reason for girls' education being discontinued.

Shabak women who do complete their secondary school education can face further barriers when it comes to entering university and a profession, as many jobs are seen by the Shabak community as not suitable for women because they involve mixing with men. Women who work outside of the home in government, the private sector and retail, face abuse and harassment, and their work is seen as shameful.

Health

Women FGD participants described incidents of discrimination that they had faced on the grounds of their religion and ethnic identity while attempting to access healthcare. Many of the examples related to maternity care, with women feeling abused and ignored while in labour. Some Shabak women have been prevented from giving birth at hospitals in Al-Hamdaniya district, because doctors feared that giving

babies a birth certificate from that district would result in ‘demographic change’. Customs and traditions within the Shabak community itself also create barriers to healthcare for women and girls. FGD participants explained that, particularly in the villages, families do not allow girls and women to be treated by male doctors, instead preferring to use ‘local treatments’ which are not administered by qualified medical professionals.

Early marriage

The FGDs for men identified early marriage as the second most significant problem facing Shabak women, whereas Shabak women themselves placed it in sixth place. Among the women, early marriage was more likely to be prioritised by older women, who had more direct experiences of it. The men felt that early marriage positively correlated to the significant increase in divorce within the Shabak community, and it was this concern that led them to rate it so highly.

The Nineveh province has the second highest rate of early marriages in Iraq, with three out of ten marriage documents sent to the courts for processing involving girls under the age of 18.² FGD participants attributed early marriage in the Shabak community to several factors. They discussed the impact of misunderstandings about religious teachings that lead to the belief that Islam encourages early marriage. They also explained that social norms within the community viewed girls who were not married by the age of 15 as spinsters, beyond marriageable age. Some participants linked early marriage to wars, immigration and poverty. The situation is exacerbated by a clause in the Law on Personal Affairs, which allows for ‘urgent’ marriages with parental permission to happen from age 15.

Customs and traditions

FGD participants talked about the impact of customs and traditions on Shabak women and girls in all aspects of their lives, including education, health, early marriage, work, inheritance, domestic violence, harassment and discrimination. They discussed the grief in some families when a baby girl is born, and the custom of forcing a girl to marry her cousin.

The women and men taking part in the FGDs expressed their wishes to end negative customs and traditions and resurrect the positive ones that had been lost after the ISIS invasion in 2014. This conversation demonstrated the difficulties facing Shabak people as they attempt to balance the preservation of customs and traditions that many feel are essential to the Shabak identity with the acknowledgement that these are often negative for women.

Inheritance

Inheritance was ranked more highly by the younger women in the FGDs. This is likely to be because they are more familiar with Islamic laws and Sharia, due to their increased education, so are aware that they should have a right to inheritance but are denied this by the customs and traditions within Shabak society. Participants noted that if a woman demands her right to inheritance, she is seen as rebelling

against her family, and this can lead to estrangement for life. For this reason, many Shabak women do not assert their claims for inheritance.

Other issues prioritised by women FGD participants included harassment, domestic violence, personal freedom and discrimination.

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to address the priority issues identified by FGD participants and are guided by their suggestions and the researcher's own knowledge and expertise. They are intended to be culturally appropriate for the Shabak community in the Nineveh, as well as aligned with the spirit of justice, human rights and humanitarian principles.

- Efforts must be made by government, donor agencies and civil society organisations to enhance and strengthen Shabak women's role in society and to break down the negative customs and traditions that force women to give up their right to their inheritance and prevent them from choosing professions and academic specialisations. These efforts should include community awareness campaigns and seminars held on this topic.
- The government must build schools for girls at all levels in the villages of the Nineveh Plain to help remove barriers to girls' education related to travelling outside of their immediate area.
- State institutions must employ more women from the Shabak minority – for example in education, health and other public services – so that a better environment is created for Shabak women and girls using these services, and female role models are available for Shabak girls to aspire to.
- The government and the legislative authority must bring forward laws that combat violence against women and girls, and which protect their right to work, study, and engage in civil and political activity. The government must also eliminate extremist discourses that persecute women and punish them legally and judicially.
- The Iraqi law which sets a minimum age for marriage of 18 years must be upheld, and the clause in the Law on Personal Affairs which allows for marriage at 15 years removed. Iraqi legislators must set and impose a fine or imprisonment penalty on every marriage that takes place outside the court. This should be imprisonment for a period of not less than six months and not exceeding a year, or a fine of not less than three hundred dinars and not more than one thousand dinars, for every man who contracts such a marriage.

Notes

- 1 Office of International Religious Freedom (2019) *Iraq Religious Freedom Report*, Washington DC: U.S. Department of State (accessed 21 September 2022)
- 2 Sattar, S. (2021) 'Child Marriage in Iraq Turning into an Alarming Phenomenon', *BasNews*, 23 October (accessed 21 September 2022)

Further reading

Al-Qaddo, S.M.A. (2022) *Problems and Challenges Facing Shabak Women and its Impact on their Daily Lives*, CREID Intersections, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.018](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.018)

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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

This policy brief draws on the CREID paper 'Problems and challenges facing Shabak women and its impact on their daily lives' by Syria Mahmoud Ahmad Al-Qaddo. It was compiled by Jenny Birchall and edited by Amy Quinn-Graham.

It was produced as part of the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID), a consortium funded by UK Aid from the UK government which provides research evidence and delivers practical programmes which aim to redress the impact of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, tackle poverty and exclusion, and promote people's wellbeing and empowerment.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government.

CREID Policy Briefings are published by the Institute of Development Studies and aim to share key research findings and make practical recommendations for policymakers and donors.

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DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.008](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.008)

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