

Identity, Nationality, Religion and Gender: The Different Experiences of Assyrian Women and Men in Duhok, Iraq

Members of the Assyrian minority in northern Iraq experience discrimination and marginalisation due to their minority status. As this research demonstrated, however, Assyrian women and men face different challenges and barriers due to the gender roles and norms within their own community and in wider Iraqi society. Assyrian women's daily lives are shaped by intersectional discrimination on the grounds of their gender, religion, language and national identity. Targeted action is needed to address the specific inequalities they face.

Key messages

- The Assyrian minority in northern Iraq face a range of marginalisation and discrimination as members of a minority religion on account of distinct religious, linguistic, cultural identities.
- The Assyrian women and men taking part in this study experienced this marginalisation and discrimination differently, according to the gender norms and inequalities that shape their daily lives.
- The women prioritised barriers they experienced in accessing education, employment, and pressures undermining their ability to express their identity openly in public space. Meanwhile men prioritised political representation and participation, along with the legal issues they saw as allowing members of the majority religion to encroach on their property.

Context

The Assyrians are believed to be descended from several ancient civilisations in the Middle East, dating back to 2500 BC in ancient Mesopotamia. They are considered one of the oldest peoples that embraced Christianity, having established one of the earliest indigenous churches in the Middle East in the first century AD. Today Assyrians are scattered all over the world, but the majority reside in Syria, Iran, Turkey and northern Iraq. Around 600,000 Assyrians live in the "Assyrian triangle" in the north of Iraq, and in Baghdad and Mosul. They belong to various Syriac Christian churches, such as the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Church of the East. They are distinguished by their mother tongue Syriac, a northeastern semitic language that originated as one of the dialects of Aramaic,



and is spoken by around three million people. Throughout history the Assyrians have faced discrimination and persecution, including the Sevo and Sumeil massacres in the early twentieth century. Most recently the invasion of the Islamic State (ISIS) led to acts of violence and mass displacement of Assyrian communities.

Methodology

Focus Group Discussions using participatory ranking

The research was carried out through four focus group discussions (FGDs) with 26 women and 21 men who live in the city of Duhok. Participants were asked to reflect on their own experiences, but there was a particular focus on better understanding the experiences of Assyrian women and the unique intersection of their gender and religious/ethnic identity.

Two FGDs were held for women, one for participants aged 18–35 and one for women over 35. The two men’s focus groups were also split by age. The discussions generated rich qualitative data. This was complemented by quantitative data collected through the participatory ranking to inform analysis.

About the researchers

The lead researcher is an academic at the University of Duhok, where he is a faculty coordinator supervising the work of 25 Assyrian heritage gatherers. The assistant researcher is an English teacher and lecturer who has worked with the Assyrian League Union in Duhok.

Key findings

Twenty key issues were identified by participants overall. FGD members then voted on which they felt were the most serious or important issues, both in terms of impact and recurrence. Participants were allowed to vote for more than one area, and the total number of votes for each were counted. Different issues were prioritised by the women’s and men’s FGDs, reflecting the fact that participants in each group were asked to reflect on their own experiences. The area that received the most votes from women was work (chosen by eight of 26 women). This was followed by education and identity (each receiving five votes). Men prioritised political representation (chosen by nine of 21 men), followed by legal issues around property (six votes), and cultural marginalisation and work (each receiving five votes). The areas most highly prioritised by women participants are discussed below, along with the reasons why they are different from those chosen by the men.

Work and employment

Participants in the FGDs for both older and younger women spoke about the problems they faced in gaining employment. In particular, they reported finding it difficult to access jobs and promotions without being a member of the PDK (Kurdish) political party. Participants

noted that refusing to join a political party was a critical issue for women who wanted to be politically independent, mainly because of the fear of harassment within political parties. These women face conflicting pressures from the patriarchal context of political processes, in which they are expected not to challenge the men who dominate these processes, and from their families and communities, who want them to reject the Kurdish parties and join the Assyrian ones.

Women also felt that there was religious and ethnic discrimination in public and private sector employment, with sensitive posts reserved for members of the Muslim majority religion. Participants described incidents in which job applications were unsuccessful because their CVs stated they were Assyrian. Others related incidents of male interviewers sexually harassing them when they found out about their religion and identity.

Education

Barriers to education were particularly prioritised by younger women FGD participants. They explained that in the past, Assyrian parents felt unable to send their daughters to schools for fear of harassment or kidnapping by religious majorities. While this fear was no longer as strong, Assyrian girls and young women still face challenges around education. Participants discussed the problems facing Assyrian girls in villages, who must travel long distances to school due to a lack of appropriate local education provision. In these cases, parents may prioritise sons' education over daughters', and girls become at risk of early marriage.

When Assyrian girls and young women are able to access education, they face further problems. They can face religious discrimination, being harassed and called 'Kufar' (infidels) by students from the majority religion. There are problems with the curriculum, which celebrates Kurdish 'heroes' who raped and persecuted Assyrian women, and Assyrian pupils are sometimes obliged to attend Islamic religion classes. Assyrian pupils can also face discrimination from teachers and pupils if they do not speak Kurdish, the language in which most lessons and lectures are taught.

Identity

Women FGD participants spoke about threats to their identity as Assyrian women. This was articulated through feelings of restricted freedom to speak their own language, express their own nationality, and display symbols demonstrating their faith and beliefs. Examples included Assyrian girls not being allowed to wear religious symbols and jewellery at school, while students of other religions were permitted to do this. Participants discussed times when they had been marginalised or harassed because they spoke Arabic rather than Kurdish, or did not define their nationality as either Arab or Kurd, as expected by the majority. Women also gave examples where they had been penalised in education or employment settings for taking time off to celebrate Assyrian traditional occasions and religious rituals. They described how the way they dressed (without the hijab) or the ways they cooked and prepared food prompted criticism, marginalisation and accusations of 'Kufar' by members of other religions.

Other issues prioritised by women FGD participants included harassment and violence, legal issues and inheritance.

Why did women and men prioritise different issues?

The reasons behind the different prioritisation of issues by women and men in the FGDs is due to Assyrian women and men's different experiences and positions, both in their own communities and wider Iraqi society. Due to gender norms and inequalities, Assyrian men are more likely than women to mix with members of the majority religion and to be able to speak Kurdish or Arabic. They may receive less criticism if they join the ruling political party. These differences mean that Assyrian men's priorities tended to focus on politics and public life and the religious discrimination faced by Assyrian people in these areas, whereas Assyrian women's priorities centred around access to employment and education, as well as identity.

The threat of violence against women and girls means that Assyrian women are more likely than Assyrian men to have their education and employment opportunities restricted due to fears of kidnapping and harassment by members of other religions. Unequal gender power relations combine with religious discrimination to make Assyrian women at risk of sexual abuse and harassment in employment and education settings. Patriarchal norms within the Assyrian community itself mean that women and girls who experience violence and abuse can be subject to victim blaming from within their own communities. Some contributions from participants in the men's FGDs illustrated beliefs that women and girls in Assyrian communities are considered to hold the community's honour, meaning that when they are violated, the whole community is violated and dishonoured.

Participants in the men's FGDs were more likely to raise legal issues around property as a key priority, due to the fact that land is more likely to be owned by men. Some of the women discussed legal issues around inheritance. Iraqi law is applied to non-Muslims such as the Assyrians. While participants in the men's FGDs claimed that, as much as possible, they follow the Assyrian principle and belief that inheritance should be shared equally between men and women, those in the women's FGDs noted that some Assyrian men take advantage of having to follow Sharia law by taking double the inheritance afforded to women.

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to address some of the priority issues identified by FGD participants, and are guided by the participants' suggestions and the researchers' own knowledge and expertise.

- The government must prioritise the rights of minorities, and enshrine these rights into the Iraqi constitution. Harassment and crimes against vulnerable minorities, and especially against women, must be prohibited without prejudice or favouritism.

- Citizens should be able to freely practice inheritance distribution without being obliged to follow Islamic law which does not allow for an equal distribution between men and women.
- Amendments must be made to the Iraqi personal status law which requires the converting of children to Islam automatically when one of their parents converts.
- The government and employers should take action to improve employment opportunities for Assyrian people. This could include introducing affirmative action, without asking for recommendation from the ruling party. It could also include initiatives to employ people who cannot speak the Kurdish language, and giving them the opportunity to learn at work.
- The government should promote recognition of Assyrians as a people with an ancient history and civilisation, and recognise the Assyrian language as one of the main languages in the region. Action should be taken to discourage Assyrians being described as “infidels” because they follow the Christian religion. The official religious and national holidays of Christians should be respected, and Assyrian archaeological sites should be protected and renovated.

Further reading

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Credits

This policy brief draws on the CREID paper 'Violence and Discrimination against the Assyrian People in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq' by Dr Shivan Shlaymoon Toma. 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.2022.013](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.013)

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