

“There is No Safety”: The Intersectional Experiences of Chaldean Catholic and Orthodox Women in Iraq

Christian communities in Iraq have faced threats and discrimination throughout their history. Their numbers have declined considerably in recent years as more Christians have been displaced or forced to migrate due to war, occupation and persecution. This research, which focuses on the experiences of Chaldean Catholic and Orthodox women and men in Iraq, demonstrates the commonalities among different groups of Christian women and men. However, it also highlights the specific challenges facing Christian women, interlinked with their identities as women who are part of a religious minority and to their geographic location.

Key messages

- Christian communities in Iraq have been fragmented and displaced, particularly since 2003. Huge numbers of Christian Iraqis have been forced to leave their country, with the number of Christians in the Iraqi population falling from 4 per cent in 1970 to 0.9 per cent in 2015. Between June and August 2014 alone, more than 200,000 Christians were displaced from Mosul and the towns of the Nineveh Plain to the Kurdistan Region.
- Both the Christian women and men taking part in this research prioritised safety and security as the top issue impacting on their daily lives. For the women, religious discrimination and harassment were also important, while for the men, migration and demographic change were prioritised.
- There were also some differences in the priorities of Catholic and Orthodox women, with Catholic women voicing concerns about violence against women and divorce, and Orthodox women highlighting a lack of inter-communal trust.

Context

Christians in Iraq are believed to be one of the oldest minority communities in the Middle East, being present in the area since the second century. Their numbers have dramatically diminished in recent years, declining from 4 per cent of the Iraqi population in 1970 to 0.9 per cent in 2015.¹ Today Iraqi Christians live in almost all of Iraq’s governorates, but they reside in the highest numbers in Baghdad, the capital city, as well as in other major cities and the Nineveh Plain region. Around 80 per cent of Iraq’s Christians are followers of the Chaldean



Catholic Church. Other Christian denominations in Iraq include Syriac Catholics and Syriac Orthodox (10 per cent), Assyrians (5 per cent), Armenians (Catholic and Orthodox; 3 per cent) and other sects (2 per cent).² Christians speak and perform their religious rituals in the Syriac language with different dialects, which have their roots in the ancient Aramaic language.

Christians in Iraq have faced a range of threats throughout history, including wars, sieges and occupations. After the American occupation of Iraq in 2003, resulting regime changes and then invasion by Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014, Iraqi Christians suffered additional violence, terrorism, corruption, discrimination and genocide due to their religious affiliation. As a result, vast numbers of Christians have fled from Iraq to Europe, Australia and the United States, often waiting for many years in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey as part of their journeys. Others have relocated from Mosul to Erbil in the Kurdistan region, as they are afraid that what occurred under ISIS may happen again, and do not trust the authorities to protect them. Between June and August 2014 alone, more than 200,000 Christians were displaced in this way.

Methodology

Focus Group Discussions using participatory ranking

The research was carried out through four focus group discussions (FGDs). All participants were Christian, but groups were divided into: Orthodox women, Orthodox men, Catholic women and Catholic men. There were 12 participants in each group, and their ages ranged from 20 to 70 years old. The groups were held in Al Hamdaniya and Bartella (disputed territories under Kurdish administration), as well as Ankawa (in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq). Participants were asked to reflect on and prioritise the challenges they face as a result of their religion and gender, with a particular focus on the lived experiences of Christian women. These challenges were then drawn together to identify mutual challenges across all four groups. The discussions generated rich qualitative data. This was complemented by quantitative data collected through the participatory ranking to inform the analysis.

Researchers from the same community as participants

The research team consisted of a female Catholic researcher originally from Mosul, who had been displaced to Ankawa due to the arrival of ISIS, and a male Catholic researcher from Al Hamdaniya.

Key findings

Nineteen key issues were identified and ranked by participants overall. The top five issues across all FGDs were: safety and security; migration and internal displacement; demographic change; discrimination and inequality on the basis of religious identity; and unemployment.

There were both similarities and differences between the issues prioritised most highly by the women's and men's FGDs. For the majority of the women and the men, safety and security was the

issue of highest priority. However, women chose discrimination and harassment/blackmail as their second and third priorities, while men chose demographic change and migration.

There were also some variations among the different Christian denominations; for Catholic men, employment was ranked the top priority. Catholic women spoke more about violence against women and divorce, as well as the impact of displacement and migration, whereas Orthodox women were more likely to raise concerns about religious discrimination and a lack of inter-communal trust. These differences arose due to geographic and community-specific differences. Many of the Catholic participants had lost their homes, after being displaced from Ninevah to Erbil and other cities, or had families separated due to migration. Orthodox participants, who were interviewed in Ankawa, had not experienced the same extent of community fragmentation, but they had experienced violations from neighbouring communities and lived in a state of wariness and mistrust.

Safety and security

Seventy-nine per cent of FGD participants ranked safety and security as their top priority issue. They discussed how, since 2003, violence and terrorism, including the targeting of Christians through kidnapping, robbery and killing, has increased. Accordingly, participants' trust in the government and the security forces has diminished. This has had an enormous impact on Christian women, many of whom have had to change their appearance in order not to be recognised or identified as Christians. Women working in non-Christian areas had to leave their jobs, and felt forced to stay in their homes. These restrictions on their freedom of movement and employment opportunities negatively impacted on their confidence, wellbeing, status in the family and community, and the finances of their households.

Religious discrimination

Christian women in the FGDs described a range of examples where they had been discriminated against due to their religion. This included discrimination at work, in healthcare, education, in shops and markets, and when attempting to obtain passports and other official documentation. The women also discussed incidents of discriminatory behaviour from within the Christian community itself. Women had been denied healthcare by other Christians because of their particular religious denomination or the language they spoke. Discrimination on the grounds of language was a particular issue for Arabic-speaking Orthodox women who had moved from Mosul to Syriac-speaking Ankawa.

Harassment and blackmail

FGD participants discussed the harassment of Christian women in public spaces and education settings. They felt they were particularly vulnerable to harassment due to their visible difference in terms of dress, as they do not wear a scarf or hijab as most of the women in the Muslim majority do. As a result, the women felt their freedom of movement was significantly curtailed. Participants also noted the problems they faced around their daughters' education; they felt that

allowing their daughters to attend school or colleges would make them a target of anti-Christian hate.

Women in the FGDs also felt that many in the Muslim majority hold the view that Christians are more liberal in their beliefs and practices. They felt that Muslim men use this as justification to harass them, believing that Christian women will be more 'open' to sexual and romantic advances. This was seen as a particular problem in employment, where women could be exploited and blackmailed if they refused the advances of a male colleague. Such blackmail and harassment could also have an online element, with doctored images of women being spread on social media.

Migration, displacement and demographic change

Christian women and men talked about the persecution their communities have faced – both direct, through targeting, and indirect, through a denial of Christian identities and histories – which has led to increased migration and the fragmentation of communities and families. Women who had been internally displaced discussed how they and their families' most basic rights to housing, work and education became unavailable after they fled their homes. Women whose families have emigrated abroad spoke of their sadness at not seeing their grandchildren grow up.

Discussions also revealed the extent to which Christian women felt their everyday lives had been negatively impacted by migration and displacement. Living conditions for displaced women were cramped and lacked privacy, and the insecurity within camps and settlements meant that families feared for the safety of female members going out in public. Participants felt that in these circumstances girls were more likely to be viewed as a burden by their families, and that early marriage had increased as a result. These hastily arranged marriages were seen as leading to a corresponding increase in divorce. Participants also thought that suicide rates among Christian women and girls have increased.

Employment

Concerns around a lack of job opportunities were voiced by both Catholic women and men. Many of these participants had been displaced during the invasion of ISIS. When they returned to their communities, they found they could no longer travel to Mosul and Baghdad for work as they used to due to continuing insecurity and discrimination. Catholic women were finding that their employment opportunities were now extremely restricted.

Violence and harmful norms

Christian women discussed the different forms of violence and abuse that women in their communities face. They discussed examples of Christian women who had been kidnapped, abused and beaten by ISIS, and forced to marry ISIS members. The Catholic women also talked about domestic abuse perpetrated by Christian men in their own communities. The women noted that this abuse stems from unequal gender norms and relations, and they felt it was a factor behind rising rates of divorce.

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are informed by suggestions from FGD participants and the research authors. They are designed to take action to ensure a future free of discrimination, marginalisation and fear for Christians in Iraq, particularly Christian women.

- The government should prioritise safety and human security, promoting and protecting the rule of law and ending the impunity of rogue security forces. Without basic safety, the rights of women and their families are compromised and the flow of migration will continue.
- The government should develop a transparent and fair process to compensate Christian families who have previously been displaced if they choose to return to their homes.
- Action should be taken by law makers, the judiciary and the police to ensure that those who harass women of religious minority backgrounds are held to account. State actors must also speak out against hate speech, and take action against those who use digital media to blackmail and harass women.
- The government, along with feminist movements, faith leaders and development actors, should promote awareness of and support for the 25 per cent quota for women's representation in parliament. They should also encourage women from religious minorities to seek to participate in local and municipal governorates. This should be complemented by work to challenge norms, beliefs and traditions within the Christian community that condemn or discourage women's political participation.
- The government should reform laws that affect Christian women's administrative, cultural and educational rights, especially with regard to the personal status law, the national ID card and the inheritance law which currently discriminate against Christian women. Inheritance law in the Baghdad administered jurisdiction should be reformed to ensure that Christians are able to confer equal inheritance in accordance with the principle of gender parity.
- The government should reform employment legislation to ensure that Christians have equal opportunities to compete for government jobs according to their experience and skills, eliminating favouritism and discrimination.
- The government and development actors should work with businesses to establish small, medium and large industrial and agricultural projects that will help to improve employment opportunities and service provision to meet the needs of those living in historically Christian areas. There should be a particular focus on employment opportunities for women, in particular those who have been displaced, creating training and employment initiatives that do not jeopardise women's safety.
- The government should update the educational programmes and curricula in all of Iraq to ensure a positive and accurate definition of different religious and ethnic minorities, their history, beliefs and heritage. This should be done in consultation with each of the minority groups.

Notes

- 1 Teule, H. (2018) in K. Ross, M. Tadros and T. Johnson (2018) *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 164–76
- 2 Iraqi Christian Foundation (2019) *Brief Summary on Iraqi Christians*, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Further reading

Khuder, W.S. (2022) *Rehabilitating Heritage After ISIS: Economic, Sociocultural, and Historical Considerations in the Case Studies of Al-Nouri Mosque, Al-Hadba Minaret, and Lalish Temple*, CREID Working Paper 15, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.004](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.004)

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)

Yousef, Y. and Butti, N. (2022) *The Lived Experiences of Marginalised Christian Chaldean Catholic and Orthodox Women and Their Families in Iraq*, CREID Intersections, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.023](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.023)


Credits

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