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POLICY PAPER

Violence Against Women: Towards a Policy Understanding of the Patriarchy

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Abstract

Violence Against Women (VAW) and girls can take many forms globally, from the absence of personal agency to sexual violence and domestic abuse. To better understand how VAW affects women in the Middle East in particular, this policy brief addresses various instances of violence against Kurdish women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). A particular focus is given to forced/arranged marriages, honour-based violence, and female genital mutilation, which form a 'patriarchal trifecta' of oppression: a phenomenon that the author has identified and researched extensively. The policy brief recommendations informed by this research are relevant to policymakers both in the KRI and beyond, including European Union member states that have dealt with troubling cases of violence against women in immigrant communities and are facing similar challenges to women's rights. Examining violations against women is relevant for many parts of the Middle East, and more broadly societies and communities where patriarchal values and norms produce a social milieu where the main justification for VAW is the protection of a social construct of honour. This policy brief is informed by fieldwork conducted in the KRI; 55 qualitative interviews with policymakers, United Nations officials, attorneys, academics, activists, civil society members, plus women and male survivors and perpetrators of VAW; and a quantitative survey conducted among 200 women and men to gauge their opinions on this multi-faceted phenomenon. The goal of this policy brief is to give the public institutions responsible for monitoring women's welfare a better picture of the challenges to equality that women still face and offer ways forward in terms of addressing these challenges.

Introduction

Women and girls experience numerous forms of gender-based violence (GBV) on a global scale. This policy brief examines specific cases of GBV against Kurdish women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) to shed light on the unique impact of GBV on Middle Eastern women. During my research I observed, defined, and examined a trinity of oppression, which I have coined the 'patriarchal trifecta' (Hussain, 2024). This trio includes forced/arranged marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM), and so-called 'honour killings'/honour-based violence (HBV); phenomena which I believe operate symbiotically and merit special attention from a public policy standpoint (Payton, 2019; Beghikhani, 2015; Haig et al., 2015; Ruba, 2010; Brown & Romano, 2016; Ahmady, 2018; Burrage, 2016; Barrett et al., 2021).

The findings and recommendations of this policy brief are based on research conducted between 2022 and 2024. In 2023, I carried out fieldwork in the cities of Erbil, Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, Kelar, and Xanaqin, conducting interviews with 55 women and men that have been either survivors or perpetrators of GBV, policymakers, United Nations (UN) officials, attorneys, academics, activists, and civil society members. I also conducted a quantitative survey with 200 randomly selected women and men, as a control variable to ascertain their views on the different phenomena examined in this policy brief.

This policy brief is significant beyond the KRI because the wider Middle East region faces comparable obstacles to women's equality. This issue also gains prescience in diasporic communities because of the growing tension between conservative, traditionalist understandings of Islam in the Middle East and liberal modernist 'Anglo-European' views of women's rights enshrined in EU legislation. Such an ideological environment shared by the KRI and diasporas in Western European states means that many women survivors are ostracised from society and forced to endure these injustices in silence. Given these challenges, this policy brief includes seven general recommendations that address violations of women's rights.

The policy brief aims to offer governmental agencies that are responsible for tracking women's well-being further insights on how to better guarantee women's equality in society through putting forward cohesive strategies. The recommendations of this policy brief align closely with UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and the SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

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Forced and Arranged Marriages

My data collection in the KRI revealed that the forced marriage rate among girls who married at ages 14-17 and 18-24 was 20% for both groups. Child and forced marriages stem from various factors, including tribal and patriarchal norms, cultural practices, lack of formal education, household power imbalances, and harmful masculine expectations (Khan, 2020; Erman et al., 2021). These marriages often occur in rural areas governed by customs that disregard state laws.

The prevalence of child marriage in the KRI is difficult to quantify, but a UNFPA survey found that 20.53% of women aged 20-24 in the Kurdistan region and 23.02% in wider Iraq were married before age 18 (UNFPA, 2016). Contributing factors include outdated customs, poverty, and low education levels, which leave girls vulnerable to exploitation and economic dependence (UN Women, 2018; 2019; El Ashmawy et al., 2020). Men are also affected, as young husbands often face the pressure of supporting households without stable careers or incomes (Hussain, 2024).

Following the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014, economic hardship and declining living standards in the KRI led to increased violence against women. Many girls were forced to leave school and marry young due to financial strain, family pressure, or forced labour environments where they faced sexual exploitation and harassment.

Families often viewed early marriage as a way to "protect" daughters from greater harm, despite objections from the girls. Physical abuse within marriages was normalized by parents as a better alternative to their daughters being "unclaimed" and potentially vulnerable to multiple abuses. Arranged marriages were perceived as opportunities for social mobility, leveraging patriarchal structures to improve a daughter's material prospects. However, such unions often lacked love and empathy, reducing marriages to transactional arrangements where women were treated as property or servants, leading to isolation and confinement.

²Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ), published by CEDAW – UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 'Shadow Report on Iraq submitted by Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) to the Committee of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; 74th Session; 21 October – 8 November 2019; Geneva, Switzerland', 10 October 2019. United Nations Population Fund, UN Children's Fund, UN Women, 'Protecting Girls in Iraq from Female Genital Mutilation', 6 February 2019, from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/protecting-girls-iraq-female-genital-mutilation-enarku>. The United Nations have put forward multiple documents on the elimination of violence against women, including forced marriages, e.g., the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (UN Doc. A/Res/48/104). United Nations Statistics Division. United Nations Global SDG Database. Data retrieved July 2022. From: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal>.

In rural and tribal regions, male dominance shaped all aspects of life. Men often justified their control through religious beliefs, rejecting secular laws protecting women as corrupting influences. Obedience from girls and women was seen as a moral imperative, and defiance of parental choices in marriage was considered dishonourable. Ultimately, my research highlighted that forced marriage practices were deeply rooted in cultural norms.

Violence Based on Perceived Dishonour

Honour-based violence (HBV) remains prevalent in the KRI, rooted in patriarchal and tribal norms as well as cultural perceptions of women's 'proper' roles. Official data shows that 44 women were killed for 'honour' in 2022. Many others allegedly committed suicide under suspicious circumstances, often by self-immolation, with speculation that some were honour killings staged as suicides. As one NGO representative in Sulaymania explained, "it is very easy for a woman to be a victim of honour killing by family members in the KRI or Iraq and get away with it."

Triggers for honour killings include premarital sexual relations, being a victim of rape, refusing an arranged marriage, or marrying someone disapproved of by the family. While murder is the most severe form, other abuses, such as mutilation and facial disfigurement, are also inflicted to render women 'undesirable.'

Iraqi law addresses honour killings but allows reduced sentences for such crimes, often treating them as lesser offenses. In wider Iraq, sentences can be as low as six months, compared to life imprisonment or death for non-honour-related murders (AlKhateeb, 2010). This leniency perpetuates the idea that honour killings are ‘natural’ reactions to perceived family shame. In contrast, KRI authorities abolished laws allowing such reduced sentences in 2000.

Unlike forced marriages, HBV cuts across socioeconomic backgrounds. A UNICEF survey revealed that 59% of women aged 15-59 found physical abuse by husbands acceptable (AlKhateeb, 2010). Many women internalise patriarchal norms, perceiving these dangers as relevant only to ‘others.’ Interviews highlighted how older women, including mothers and aunts, often viewed honour killings as justified for ‘grave’ moral transgressions like perceived sexual promiscuity, believing such actions tarnish family honour.

Policy Recommendations

The ‘patriarchal trifecta’—forced/arranged marriages (Hussain, 2024), honour-based violence (HBV), and female genital mutilation (FGM)—is a complex issue requiring holistic solutions. To address these abuses, the KRI government must implement a comprehensive national strategy. While progress, such as a decline in FGM, has been noted, these phenomena continue to have catastrophic consequences for women, families, and communities.

On an institutional level, policy proposals include expanding state-funded gender-based violence (GBV) response services, such as healthcare, psychological support, housing assistance, and legal protections (Waylen, 2014; Piscopo, 2020). Eliminating sexist practices that limit women’s access to the workplace and resources is critical to enhancing their economic agency, offering alternatives to arranged marriages, and reducing the risk of honour killings (Chenoweth & Zoe, 2022; Hussain, 2024).

Key objectives to achieve these aims include:

1. Strengthening legislation to challenge harmful gender norms and beliefs.
2. Reducing societal acceptance of violence against women (VAW) by promoting gender-equitable norms.
3. Collaborating with women-led organisations, NGOs, and community leaders to drive meaningful change.
4. Prioritising health-related laws and accountability measures to mitigate violence and foster gender equality.
5. Enhancing women’s access to skills training, formal employment, and labour rights to improve their economic opportunities.
6. Encouraging inclusive economic growth by supporting firms that prioritise women’s leadership and entrepreneurship.
7. Coordinating cross-sectoral efforts to support adolescents in addressing child marriages, FGM, and HBV.

Structural reforms should include integrating these measures into the education system. Comprehensive reproductive health education can inform young people about the dangers of FGM, while ensuring equal access to mandatory education until 18 can combat economic desperation (EGER, 2021). Schools could also employ female administrators and nurses to address girls’ unique challenges and provide guidance on personal and safety concerns (World Food Program USA, 2022).

Legislative action is essential. Clerics must be prohibited from registering marriages outside formal courts, and HBV and FGM should incur stricter penalties. Special units should investigate such offences, and divorce processes for abused women must be simplified, with state assistance provided during their transition. As one young woman in the KRI stated, “We need men to feel the urgency to do so.” Dismantling the ‘patriarchal trifecta’ (Hussain, 2024) requires participation from those it benefits (Levtov et al., 2015; Dabla-Norris & Kochhar, 2019). The limitations on women’s rights are interconnected, demanding holistic solutions that address root causes rather than merely alleviating symptoms. These insights and recommendations hold relevance far beyond the KRI, extending to global contexts.

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