

# Navigating Tradition and Transformation: A Comprehensive Analysis of Gender Relations in Kurdish Society

## I. Introduction: The Complex Tapestry of Kurdish Gender Relations

Kurdish gender relations present a multifaceted and dynamic field of study, characterized by a persistent interplay between deeply rooted historical patriarchal structures and vibrant contemporary movements striving for equality. These relations are not uniform but are profoundly shaped by diverse regional contexts spanning Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, as well as the global Kurdish diaspora. Political struggles, socio-economic factors, and varying cultural interpretations further contribute to this complexity. Traditionally, Kurdish culture, while predominantly patriarchal, has historically afforded women a degree of rights and public visibility that distinguished them from women in some neighboring societies within the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> This included documented instances of women assuming leadership positions and participating in military endeavors.<sup>1</sup> However, this historical backdrop exists in a paradoxical relationship with contemporary realities. Despite significant progress in the 21st century, driven by progressive movements and heightened political activism among women, persistent issues such as gender inequality, forced marriages, honor killings, and, in regions like Iraqi Kurdistan, female genital mutilation (FGM), continue to pose serious challenges.<sup>1</sup>

This report aims to provide a nuanced, multi-faceted analysis of these complex gender dynamics. It will explore the historical foundations of gender roles, the rise and impact of women's political activism and feminist movements like Jineology, the legal frameworks governing gender relations, pressing human rights concerns including gender-based violence, and the socio-economic realities impacting education, health, and economic participation. Furthermore, the report will examine the evolving landscape of Kurdish masculinities, the emerging visibility and challenges of LGBTQ+ communities, and the representation of gender in Kurdish culture and academia. The profound impact of ongoing conflict, displacement, and the diaspora experience on gender relations will also be a key focus. Throughout this analysis, a decolonial feminist perspective will be incorporated to critically examine power structures, representation, and resistance, particularly concerning the production of knowledge about Kurdish women and their struggles.<sup>4</sup>

A central theme that emerges is the enduring paradox of Kurdish women's agency coexisting with their subordination. Historical accounts detail female rulers and warriors<sup>1</sup>, a legacy that finds contemporary echoes in women leading political and military movements, such as the

Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and the intellectual force of Jineology.<sup>6</sup> Yet, this remarkable agency is starkly contrasted by the persistence of severe forms of patriarchal oppression, including gender-based violence, honor killings, and FGM.<sup>1</sup> This situation does not represent a simple, linear progression from a "traditional" past to a "modern" future. Instead, it suggests a complex social fabric where different elements of Kurdish society are evolving at disparate paces. Progressive movements often arise in direct response to, and in constant tension with, deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Conflict, while devastating, can paradoxically create spaces for female empowerment, such as expanded military roles for women, even as it simultaneously exacerbates their vulnerability to gender-based violence. This highlights the non-uniform impact of social change and the intricate ways in which women navigate, resist, and reshape patriarchal structures. Understanding this fundamental paradox is crucial for appreciating the complexities of Kurdish gender relations and for informing any efforts aimed at supporting women's rights and fostering genuine gender equality, as it underscores that solutions must be highly context-specific, addressing both overarching structural inequalities and deeply ingrained cultural norms.

## **II. Historical and Traditional Foundations of Gender Roles**

The historical and traditional foundations of gender roles within Kurdish society are deeply embedded in its social organization, kinship systems, economic practices, and cultural narratives. These elements have collectively shaped the distinct, yet often subordinate, positions of women and the dominant roles of men.

### **A. Patrilineal Kinship, Family Structures, and Inheritance**

The foundational social organization of Kurdish society has historically been patrilineal, a system that inherently positions men as central to social structure, property ownership, and authority, thereby forming the bedrock of patriarchal power. Kin groups are traditionally based on patrilineal descent, with lineage, clan, and tribal affiliations traced exclusively through the male line.<sup>9</sup> The typical Kurdish household historically consisted of a man, his wife (or wives), their children, and eventually their sons' wives and grandchildren.<sup>9</sup> While appearing nuclear, the traditional Kurdish family often functions as an integral part of a larger patrilineal extended family and kinship network.<sup>10</sup>

Marriage customs further reflect and reinforce this patrilineal and patriarchal structure. Marriages have traditionally been arranged between families, with negotiations often initiated by the women of the respective families but finalized by the men through a marriage settlement that details the bride-wealth.<sup>9</sup> A strong preference for lineage endogamy, specifically marrying one's father's brother's daughter (FBD), has been a notable feature. This practice, prevalent in the 1960s, was believed to "keep the family together" and consolidate lineage resources and power.<sup>9</sup> Polygyny, permissible under Islamic law for men who could support multiple wives equally, was practiced, though historically, economic constraints limited the number of men who could afford more than one wife.<sup>9</sup> Childlessness was a

common justification for a man taking a second wife or seeking a divorce.<sup>9</sup> In polygynous households, each wife might maintain her own section of the house, operating with a degree of independence within that space.<sup>9</sup> The payment of bride-wealth was a critical component of the marriage agreement; its non-payment or the husband's failure to adequately support his wife according to her family's standards could serve as grounds for divorce initiated by the bride.<sup>9</sup> However, divorce was generally easier for men, who could traditionally renounce their wives, while women's options were more restricted, often contingent upon repaying the bride-wealth or other specific, limited circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

Inheritance patterns have been a significant factor in the economic standing of men and women. Traditionally, inheritance from the father is divided equally among his sons, while daughters typically do not inherit property or land.<sup>9</sup> This systematic exclusion from property inheritance has historically disempowered women economically, rendering them dependent on male relatives—fathers, husbands, and sons—and reinforcing their subordinate status within both the family and the broader society. The legacy of this economic disenfranchisement likely contributes to contemporary challenges in achieving women's economic empowerment, even in contexts where legal reforms have been introduced. The preference for FBD marriage, while aimed at consolidating resources and power within a lineage, presents a nuanced dynamic. While intended to "keep the family together" <sup>9</sup>, such lineage endogamy can also "weaken the ties between lineages, thus increasing the likelihood of conflict".<sup>9</sup> By concentrating marital alliances within the immediate patriline, it limits the creation of broader social and political networks that could serve to mediate disputes between different lineage groups. This internal cohesion, therefore, could paradoxically foster external fragmentation and rivalry, as lineages become more self-contained and potentially competitive entities. This reveals an inherent tension in traditional strategies for social solidarity, with potential implications for larger political unity and conflict resolution within Kurdish society, particularly in areas where tribal structures retain significant influence.

## **B. Traditional Division of Labor**

The traditional Kurdish economy, whether based on nomadic pastoralism or settled agriculture, was characterized by a clear and distinct division of labor based on gender.<sup>9</sup> While most Kurds are settled today, these traditional roles have had a lasting impact.<sup>9</sup>

Women were primarily responsible for a wide array of domestic duties. These included preparing food, maintaining the household, and caring for children. Their tasks extended to milking livestock, processing dairy products like butter and cultured milk, collecting firewood and manure for fuel, fetching water, cleaning grain, spinning wool, and weaving textiles and carpets.<sup>9</sup> In agricultural communities, women might also assist with tasks such as harvesting tobacco and, at times, even plowing.<sup>9</sup>

Men's roles were predominantly focused on tasks outside the immediate domestic sphere. These included plowing the fields, sowing crops, and harvesting. Men were also responsible for transporting surplus grain and other products to town markets for sale or trade, and for making necessary purchases for the household at these markets.<sup>9</sup> In pastoral communities,

while women handled milking and dairy, men were typically responsible for herding the flocks, although sometimes a shepherd was employed for the entire village.<sup>9</sup>

A distinction also existed based on social class. Aristocratic women, while overseeing domestic tasks within their homes, often had servants to perform labor-intensive work outside the home, such as milking or fetching fuel and water.<sup>9</sup> This division of labor, by assigning distinct spheres of activity and responsibility, reinforced gendered domains of influence and power, with men largely controlling the public and economic spheres beyond the household.

### **C. Early Ethnographic Perspectives**

The study of Kurdish gender relations has been informed by several foundational ethnographic works that provide crucial historical and social context. These early perspectives, while products of their time, offer valuable insights into the traditional structures shaping male and female roles.

Fredrik Barth's 1953 publication, *Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan*, stands as a key early text detailing the social structures of Kurdish communities in that region.<sup>13</sup> Barth's broader anthropological contributions emphasized that ethnicity is not a primordial given but is socially constructed through ongoing interactions and the maintenance of boundaries between groups.<sup>13</sup> His structural understanding of Kurdish social organization is vital for analyzing the context within which gender roles were enacted and negotiated.

Henny Harald Hansen's 1961 monograph, *The Kurdish Woman's Life*, based on her fieldwork in Iraq in 1957, offered a significant counter-narrative to prevailing ethnocentric and male-centric views on the status of Kurdish women.<sup>15</sup> Hansen argued against viewing Kurdish women as a homogenous group, instead delineating four subgroups: village aristocrats, peasant women, educated urban women, and uneducated urban women. Her work analyzed the latent and negative functions of women's activities and considered psychological factors, providing a more nuanced, woman-centered perspective and highlighting the diversity of female experiences.<sup>15</sup>

Edmund Leach's *Social and Economic Organisation of the Rowanduz Kurds*, published in 1940, was based on brief fieldwork conducted in the Rowanduz region of Iraq in 1938.<sup>18</sup> Despite the short duration of his stay, Leach provided a cultural resume that managed to include considerable factual information and offer insights into the functional workings of that specific Kurdish society.<sup>19</sup>

Glenn M. Fleming Jr.'s ethnographic study, though a synthesis of previously published works rather than primary fieldwork, offered a comprehensive overview of Kurdish culture. It covered aspects such as ecology, economy, the tribal-feudal dichotomy in land tenure and political organization, social structures (including the town of Rowanduz), marriage customs, family life, and male-female relationships, drawing on the work of earlier ethnographers.<sup>11</sup>

These early ethnographic accounts, while requiring critical engagement, laid the groundwork for subsequent research on Kurdish society and gender, providing invaluable data on traditional social structures, economic roles, and the varied lives of Kurdish women and men.

### **D. Gender in Kurdish Folklore and Language**

Cultural narratives and language are powerful forces in shaping and perpetuating gender ideologies. In the Kurdish context, both folklore and linguistic structures reveal deeply embedded patriarchal notions.

Sociological analyses of Kurdish legends indicate a prevailing gender bias. While a small number of these traditional stories may present women in a positive light, the dominant narrative within Kurdish folklore tends to reflect gender misconceptions, often involving the humiliation, discrimination, and underestimation of women.<sup>21</sup> Folklore acts as a crucial repository and transmitter of cultural values; its gendered nature, therefore, points to deeply ingrained societal biases against women, contributing to the naturalization of their subordinate roles.

The Kurdish language itself is not neutral in matters of gender. Studies have shown that it contains male-dominated, biased, and sexist elements, which are reflected in everyday words, personal names, proverbs, and even curses.<sup>22</sup> For instance, the Kurdish word for "man" (*piaw*) can be used synonymously with "virtue" or "goodness," implying that desirable human qualities are inherently masculine. Naming conventions also often reflect these biases: female names frequently connote softness, beauty, or emotionality (e.g., Nask meaning soft, Sharmin meaning shamefaced), while male names tend to evoke strength, power, or success (e.g., Sardar meaning master, Dler meaning courageous, Sherzad related to lion).<sup>22</sup> Proverbs such as "be a mother of boys" or "your first child must be male" further underscore a preference for male offspring and reinforce patriarchal values.<sup>22</sup>

The power of language and folklore in perpetuating patriarchy lies in their ability to shape thought and perception from a very young age. By consistently portraying women in subordinate or negative lights and embedding male superiority in the very fabric of everyday language, these cultural forms contribute to the internalization of patriarchal norms, making them appear "natural" or "inevitable." Consequently, efforts to achieve genuine gender equality must extend beyond legal and political reforms to address these cultural and linguistic dimensions, promoting alternative narratives and language practices that affirm the value, agency, and equality of all genders.

### **III. Women's Political Participation, Activism, and Feminist Movements**

Kurdish women's engagement in the political sphere and their organized activism represent a dynamic and transformative aspect of contemporary Kurdish society. This participation is built upon certain historical precedents but has gained unprecedented momentum in recent decades, particularly through innovative feminist ideologies and movements that challenge both traditional patriarchy and external oppression.

#### **A. Historical Precedents: Women in Leadership and Combat**

Contrary to a monolithic view of women's roles in Middle Eastern societies, Kurdish history offers notable examples of women assuming positions of leadership and participating in combat, distinguishing them from women in some other Islamic social and political systems.<sup>1</sup>

European travelers in past centuries occasionally documented the presence of female rulers among Kurdish tribes.<sup>1</sup> The 16th-century Kurdish historian Sharaf ad-Din Bitlisi, in his *Sharafnama*, mentioned three Kurdish women who assumed power in Kurdish principalities after the deaths of their husbands, ruling until their sons reached adulthood. While Bitlisi's language often reflected prevailing patriarchal attitudes, he also extolled the ability of these women to rule "in the manner of males," even referring to one as a "lioness".<sup>1</sup> A more recent historical figure is Lady Adela Khanum of the Jaff tribe, who was a powerful and respected female chief in the Halabja region in the early 20th century, encountered by British officials and travelers like Vladimir Minorsky.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in tribal, nomadic, and rural communities, when tribes faced attacks, women often took part in warfare alongside men.<sup>1</sup> These historical instances, while perhaps exceptional rather than normative, provide a significant cultural backdrop for the contemporary roles of Kurdish women in political and military activism, suggesting that such participation, though often challenging traditional norms, is not entirely without precedent in Kurdish historical memory.

## **B. The Rise of Jineology and its Impact in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan)**

Perhaps the most internationally recognized and theoretically innovative expression of Kurdish feminism is Jineology (*Jineoloji*), which has become a cornerstone of the socio-political transformation in Rojava, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Derived from the Kurdish word *jîn* (woman) and *logos* (science), Jineology translates to "the science of women".<sup>6</sup> This feminist philosophy, heavily influenced by the political thought of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)<sup>24</sup>, posits that the liberation of society as a whole is fundamentally impossible without the liberation of women.<sup>6</sup> Jineology seeks to reclaim and centralize women's role in society, history, and knowledge production, offering a radical departure from both traditional patriarchal gender roles and what its proponents critique as the limitations of Western liberal feminism.<sup>6</sup> In Rojava, Jineology has not remained an abstract theory but has been translated into concrete governance structures and social practices. A defining policy is the **co-chair system**, which mandates that every leadership position at all levels of administration, from local councils to higher governing bodies, must be shared by one man and one woman.<sup>6</sup> This system aims to ensure gender parity in decision-making processes, moving beyond symbolic representation to substantive power-sharing. Women actively serve in all echelons of political leadership.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, women in Rojava have spearheaded significant **legal reforms** aimed at dismantling patriarchal laws. These include the banning of forced marriages, child marriages, and polygamy, and the criminalization of honor killings and domestic violence.<sup>6</sup> New laws have granted women rights to divorce, equal inheritance with men, and the ability to retain custody of their children and homes in cases of marital breakup.<sup>24</sup> Provisions in Sharia law that previously gave a woman's court testimony only half the weight of a man's have also been removed.<sup>24</sup>

Complementing these political and legal changes are grassroots initiatives such as the

establishment of **Women's Houses** (*Mala Jin*). These centers function as vital community hubs for education, mediation in family disputes, and support for survivors of violence.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, **economic cooperatives** have been established by women to promote their economic independence and collective self-sufficiency.<sup>6</sup>

The **Women's Protection Units (YPJ)**, the all-female military wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), embody another critical aspect of this transformation. For the women of the YPJ, armed resistance is not merely about territorial defense but is viewed as an extension of their feminist ideology—a struggle for broader liberation from patriarchy, authoritarianism, and all forms of oppression.<sup>6</sup>

The Jineology-inspired model in Rojava represents a profound attempt to construct an alternative society based on principles of gender equality, direct democracy, and ecological sustainability. It is not merely an ideology but a lived praxis that seeks to build alternative social and political structures from the ground up, rooted in the local experiences of Kurdish women. Its critique of Western feminism aligns with decolonial thought by rejecting a universalized, often Eurocentric, model of women's liberation, instead proposing a framework that directly addresses the specific intersections of gender, ethnic identity, and anti-authoritarian struggle within the Kurdish context. The co-chair system and women's houses are tangible manifestations of this approach, aiming to dismantle patriarchal power at both institutional and community levels. As such, Jineology offers a significant contribution to global feminist discourses, providing a compelling model of grassroots, transformative feminist politics deeply intertwined with broader struggles for self-determination and social justice.

### **C. Women's Activism in Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI) and Turkey**

While Rojava presents a unique revolutionary context, Kurdish women in Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI) and Turkey have also been at the forefront of struggles for gender equality, albeit through different pathways and facing distinct challenges.

In **Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)**, women have increasingly emerged as activists, politicians, and advocates, actively challenging entrenched cultural norms and pushing for significant legal and social reforms.<sup>6</sup> Organizations such as the Kurdistan Women's Union and the Kurdistan Women's Rights Organization have been instrumental in campaigning against gender-based violence (GBV), child marriage, and female genital mutilation (FGM).<sup>6</sup> These efforts have contributed to important legal victories, including the criminalization of honor killings and the establishment of shelters for survivors of domestic violence.<sup>6</sup> The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has also taken institutional steps, such as establishing the Directorate of Combatting Violence Against Women and Families (DCVAW) in 2007 and the High Council of Women's Affairs in 2010.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the KRI election law mandates that women's participation in all elected institutions, including the parliament, should not be less than 30%, a quota higher than the one for Iraq as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Currently, women hold 27% of parliamentary seats, and the Speaker of the Kurdistan Parliament is a woman.<sup>2</sup> However, this progress remains fragile. Traditional norms and political instability continue to pose significant challenges.<sup>6</sup> Women participating in politics often face targeted harassment, particularly via

social media, and there is a perception that many women in political positions serve a 'token' role, needing to remain highly loyal to their party's often conservative agenda on gender issues to maintain their positions.<sup>2</sup>

In **Turkey**, pro-feminist values began gaining significant weight among politically active Kurds during the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Kurdish women have been active in various political movements and organizations. For instance, Komala, an Iranian Kurdish leftist organization with influence in the broader Kurdish political sphere, recruited hundreds of women into its military and political ranks in the late 1970s and 1980s, even abolishing gender segregation within its own camps and involving women in combat and military training.<sup>1</sup> More recently, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey has adopted a co-chairperson system at all levels of its organization, with one male and one female co-chair, and its program includes promises for a dedicated women's ministry to address gendercide and gender discrimination.<sup>1</sup>

The activism in KRI and Turkey, while operating within different state structures and political constraints than Rojava, demonstrates a persistent and evolving struggle for women's rights and representation.

## **D. The "Woman-Life-Freedom" (Jin, Jiyan, Azadî) Movement**

The slogan "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" (Woman, Life, Freedom) has become a powerful global symbol of resistance against oppression, with its roots deeply embedded in the Kurdish women's freedom movement. Originating from the Kurdish struggle, particularly within the context of Rojhelat (Iranian Kurdistan), this chant gained international prominence following the death of Jina Mahsa Amini in Iranian state custody in September 2022, sparking widespread protests across Iran and in the diaspora.<sup>26</sup> The movement it galvanized became a potent grassroots response to systemic repression in Iran, particularly targeting the state's control over women's bodies and lives.<sup>26</sup> The transnational resonance of "Woman, Life, Freedom" highlights the interconnectedness of struggles against gender-based oppression and authoritarianism, and underscores the leading role Kurdish women have played in articulating and mobilizing around these critical issues. This slogan encapsulates an intersectional understanding of freedom, where the liberation of women is seen as integral to the liberation of society as a whole.

## **E. Kurdish Women's Movements within the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party)**

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has undergone a significant ideological transformation regarding gender, moving towards a stated commitment to gender equality. This shift has been heavily influenced by the writings of its founder, Abdullah Öcalan, particularly his development of Jineology, and by the decades-long struggles and activism of Kurdish female militants and political activists within the movement.<sup>27</sup> The PKK's ideology now often frames its struggle not just as one for national liberation but for a "radical democracy" with gender equality at its very core.<sup>27</sup>

Women have played prominent roles within the PKK, including in its armed units. The demands and sacrifices of these women have been crucial in pushing for greater gender consciousness



and institutional changes within the organization. However, analyses also point to existing gaps between the movement's ideological pronouncements on gender equality and the everyday practices and power dynamics within its ranks.<sup>27</sup> Kurdish women activists continue to challenge male hegemony and patriarchal norms that may persist even within revolutionary structures. The intense commitment required by active participation in the PKK, particularly for those in its armed wings, often leaves little room for traditional gender roles or marriage, further reshaping personal lives and relationships for its members.<sup>24</sup>

The experience of women within the PKK illustrates the "activist-combatant" nexus, where political activism and armed struggle are deeply intertwined. This dual role undeniably challenges traditional gender norms that confine women to the private sphere and has provided avenues for agency and visibility. However, it also raises complex questions about whether participation in armed conflict inherently leads to broader, sustainable gender equality, or if it can sometimes reinforce certain militarized forms of masculinity and nationalism. While women gain significant agency and visibility, the exigencies of conflict and the hierarchical nature of military organizations might also lead to the subordination of specific feminist goals to overarching political or military objectives. The documented gap between ideology and practice within the PKK points to these ongoing tensions and the continuous struggle for genuine gender transformation even within movements that champion women's liberation.

## **F. Transnational Feminist Solidarities**

Kurdish women's movements have not operated in isolation. They have actively forged transnational solidarities, collaborating with feminist organizations and activists across the globe to amplify their message, share experiences, and build broader support for their struggles.<sup>6</sup> These connections are vital for raising international awareness about the specific challenges Kurdish women face, including state repression, patriarchal violence, and the impacts of conflict.

Through these transnational engagements, Kurdish feminists have contributed to global feminist discourses by emphasizing the indivisibility of women's rights from broader issues of economic justice, ecological sustainability, and ethnic self-determination.<sup>6</sup> Their work challenges Western feminist frameworks that may not adequately account for the complexities of gender oppression in contexts of statelessness, colonialism, and armed conflict. These collaborations highlight a feminism that is inherently intersectional, recognizing the multiple layers of oppression women face and advocating for holistic approaches to liberation.

The political gains and activism of Kurdish women, while inspiring, are characterized by both remarkable achievements and significant fragility, with notable disparities across the different regions of Kurdistan. In Rojava, the legal and political advancements for women, driven by Jineology, are profound, establishing unique structures of gender-parallel governance.<sup>6</sup> In the KRI, formal mechanisms like parliamentary quotas and dedicated governmental bodies for women's affairs represent progress, yet the substantive power of women in politics can be constrained by party loyalties and persistent patriarchal societal norms, with female

politicians sometimes facing harassment or being perceived as 'token' figures.<sup>2</sup> In Iran, the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, with Kurdish women at its forefront, has demonstrated immense courage but faces brutal state repression.<sup>26</sup> This uneven landscape demonstrates that formal representation or legal changes do not automatically translate into genuine, consolidated power for women. Their political gains are constantly contested by traditionalist forces, political instability, and state oppression, underscoring the ongoing and arduous nature of their struggle for equality and meaningful participation. This reality necessitates multi-pronged strategies that extend beyond formal political inclusion to address systemic patriarchal structures, support autonomous women's organizations, and ensure the safety and security of women activists.

## IV. Legal Frameworks, Human Rights, and Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

The legal status of Kurdish women and their protection from gender-based violence (GBV) vary significantly across the regions they inhabit, reflecting the diverse legal systems of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, as well as the de facto laws in autonomous or conflict-affected areas like Rojava. A persistent theme is the often wide chasm between de jure rights, where they exist, and the de facto realities faced by women, complicated by customary laws, weak enforcement, and patriarchal social norms.

### A. Comparative Legal Status of Women (Marriage, Divorce, Custody, Inheritance)

An examination of legal frameworks concerning marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance reveals a complex and often contradictory landscape for Kurdish women.

Feature	Turkey	Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)	Iran	Rojava (AANES, Syria)
<b>Minimum Marriage Age</b>	18 (civil code). <sup>28</sup> Customary early marriage persists. <sup>28</sup>	18 (legal age), but 16 with judge's permission & parental consent. <sup>2</sup>	13 for girls (or younger with judge & guardian consent). <sup>29</sup>	Child marriage banned. <sup>6</sup>
<b>Marriage Consent</b>	Required from both parties (civil code). <sup>28</sup> Forced marriage occurs customarily. <sup>28</sup>	Forced marriage prohibited by law, but occurs. <sup>2</sup>	Women require father's/paternal grandfather's permission; court can override. <sup>29</sup>	Forced marriage banned. <sup>6</sup>
<b>Polygyny</b>	Abolished by Civil Code. <sup>28</sup> Persists customarily/religiously. <sup>28</sup>	Legal under Iraqi personal status law (influenced by Sharia), but KRG's	Legal for men (up to four wives).	Banned. <sup>6</sup>

		Family Law (2011) places restrictions.		
<b>Women's Right to Initiate Divorce</b>	Equal rights in divorce (civil code). <sup>28</sup> Practically difficult for many.	Possible under specific conditions, but generally harder than for men. Women face social/legal discrimination in family law. <sup>2</sup>	Extremely difficult; onerous conditions, judge's discretion; often lose financial maintenance/custody. <sup>29</sup> Men can divorce unilaterally. <sup>29</sup>	Granted; women have rights to divorce. <sup>24</sup>
<b>Child Custody</b>	Equal rights (civil code). <sup>28</sup> Customary practices may differ.	Influenced by Sharia principles; often favors father, especially for older children.	Father/paternal male relatives get custody of children over 7; mothers remarrying may lose custody. <sup>29</sup>	Women can retain children and home in marital breakups. <sup>24</sup>
<b>Inheritance</b>	Equal rights (civil code). <sup>28</sup>	Generally follows Islamic law (sons inherit more than daughters).	Discriminatory; sons inherit twice as much as daughters; husbands inherit more than wives. <sup>29</sup>	Equal inheritance with men. <sup>24</sup>
<b>Specific GBV/FGM Protections</b>	Laws against violence exist. Honor crimes addressed in penal code.	Law against Domestic Violence (2011) <sup>2</sup> ; Family Law (2011) protects against GBV, including FGM. <sup>7</sup> DCVAW established. <sup>2</sup>	Lack of laws/policies to protect women from domestic violence. <sup>29</sup> Lenient penal code articles for honor killings. <sup>1</sup>	Laws rewritten against forced marriage, honor killings, domestic violence; FGM banned. <sup>6</sup> Women's Houses (Mala Jin) for support. <sup>6</sup>

In **Turkey**, the 1926 Turkish Civil Code formally established gender equality in family law, abolishing polygyny and granting women equal rights in divorce, child custody, and inheritance.<sup>28</sup> However, these progressive laws often clash with persistent customary practices, especially in eastern regions predominantly inhabited by Kurds. Early and forced marriages, bride price, and so-called honor crimes continue, with Kurdish women often facing barriers such as language and socio-economic status in accessing the formal legal system.<sup>28</sup>

In **Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)**, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has enacted specific legislation, such as the Law against Domestic Violence (No. 8 of 2011) and the Family Law

(2011), which offer statutory protection against gender-based violence, including female genital mutilation (FGM).<sup>2</sup> The Iraqi constitution also formally grants equal access to education and work.<sup>2</sup> Despite these measures, women encounter widespread social and legal discrimination, particularly in matters of civil status and family law.<sup>2</sup> Significant enforcement gaps and legal loopholes remain; for example, provisions that permit husbands to "discipline" their wives or allow rapists to avoid prosecution by marrying their victims persist in broader Iraqi law, impacting the KRI.<sup>7</sup> Child marriage, though the legal age is 18, is permissible for 16-year-olds with judicial and parental consent.<sup>2</sup>

**Iran** presents a system of deeply entrenched legal discrimination against women, severely restricting their rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody.<sup>29</sup> Men possess a unilateral right to divorce, while women face extraordinary difficulties in seeking dissolution of marriage, often under onerous conditions and at the discretion of judges, frequently resulting in the loss of financial maintenance and child custody.<sup>29</sup> Child marriage is legally sanctioned for girls as young as 13, or even younger with the consent of a judge and male guardian.<sup>29</sup> The system of male guardianship is pervasive, controlling many aspects of a woman's life.<sup>29</sup> Discriminatory family laws and articles in the Criminal Code that show leniency towards perpetrators of honor killings contribute to their prevalence, particularly among tribal minority groups such as the Kurds.<sup>1</sup>

In **Syria**, the legal situation is fragmented. In Rojava, under the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), radical legal reforms have been implemented. These include the banning of polygamy, child marriage, and forced marriage, alongside granting women rights to divorce, equal inheritance with men, and custody of children.<sup>6</sup> Notably, Sharia-based provisions that gave a woman's court testimony only half the weight of a man's have been abrogated in AANES-controlled areas.<sup>24</sup> In broader Syria, personal status laws are typically based on the religion or community of the spouses. Historically, these laws permitted underage marriage, although the legal age was amended to 18 in regime-controlled areas in 2019.<sup>31</sup> Prior to the conflict and outside AANES, Syrian laws were widely recognized as discriminatory against women regarding equality before the law, protection from violence, inheritance, property rights, family rights including child custody, and the conferral of nationality to children.<sup>32</sup>

This comparative overview underscores a significant chasm between de jure rights and de facto realities across several Kurdish regions. Legal reform, while a crucial and necessary step, often proves insufficient on its own to dismantle deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and practices. Factors such as the weakness of state institutions in certain areas, the pervasive influence of customary or tribal law, a lack of awareness among women of their legal rights, socio-economic barriers that prevent access to justice, and prevailing patriarchal attitudes within communities and even among law enforcement personnel contribute significantly to this gap. Consequently, effective strategies for achieving gender equality must necessarily combine legal advocacy with robust grassroots efforts aimed at transforming social norms, empowering women to claim their rights, and ensuring that accountability mechanisms are not only in place but are also accessible and effective for all.

## B. Prevalence and Nature of Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Gender-based violence remains a pervasive issue across Kurdish communities, manifesting in various forms, often exacerbated by conflict, conservative social norms, and inadequate legal protections.

**Domestic Violence** is reported as common, particularly within the conservative societal structures of regions like the KRI.<sup>1</sup> The Directorate of Combatting Violence Against Women and Families (DCVAW) in the KRI is tasked with addressing such cases.<sup>2</sup> While laws against domestic violence exist, their effective implementation is a persistent challenge.<sup>2</sup> Reports indicate that nearly half of all women in Iraq have experienced physical violence at home, with many cases likely going unreported.<sup>2</sup>

**Honor Killings** are a particularly brutal form of GBV reported across various Kurdish regions. They occur with notable frequency in Iran, especially among tribal minorities including Kurds<sup>1</sup>, and remain a serious concern in the KRI.<sup>1</sup> Although the KRI amended its penal code in 2002 to remove "honor" as a mitigating circumstance for reduced sentences in such killings, impunity for perpetrators often persists.<sup>2</sup> NGOs like the SEED Foundation have reported a dramatic rise in honor killings in the KRI, emphasizing that these acts are rarely sudden but typically follow a long history of violence against the woman and systemic failures in protection by family, community, and government institutions.<sup>8</sup> The concept of "honor" (*namus*) itself functions as a pervasive mechanism of patriarchal control. This culturally embedded ideology frames women's sexuality and behavior as central to male, family, or tribal reputation, effectively turning women into repositories of collective honor. This ideology is used to justify extreme violence, including murder, to "cleanse" perceived dishonor. It creates immense pressure on women to conform to restrictive codes of conduct and silences victims, discouraging reporting, as bringing "shame" upon the family can have lethal consequences.<sup>28</sup>

**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)** is a documented problem, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>1</sup> Despite being banned by KRG law, the practice persists, especially in rural areas of Erbil and Sulaimani governorates.<sup>8</sup>

**Forced and Child Marriages** continue to occur despite legal prohibitions or established minimum age limits in some areas.<sup>1</sup> In the KRI, an estimated 24% of girls are married before the age of 18.<sup>2</sup> In Iran, official statistics show tens of thousands of registered marriages involving girls under the age of 15 annually.<sup>29</sup> These practices severely curtail girls' educational and personal development opportunities and expose them to significant health risks and violence.

## C. Access to Justice, Protection Services, and NGO Reporting

Access to justice and adequate protection services for survivors of GBV is fraught with challenges across Kurdish regions.

In the **KRI**, while institutions like the DCVAW and women's shelters exist, they are often difficult for survivors to access, are frequently under-resourced, and may not be survivor-centered in their approach.<sup>2</sup> For instance, a court order is typically required for a

woman to both enter and leave a government-run shelter.<sup>2</sup> Investigations into GBV cases are often not properly conducted, and the process of reporting can be re-traumatizing for survivors due to a lack of sensitivity from police, government, or judicial personnel.<sup>2</sup> Deep-seated stigma and shame surrounding GBV prevent many incidents from being reported. Families may opt for local, tribal, or traditional methods of dispute resolution, which can tragically result in the survivor being killed to remove perceived family shame, with the woman's voice and desire for safety and justice completely ignored.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, perpetrators with powerful political connections may evade investigation, trial, or punishment, undermining faith in the justice system.<sup>2</sup> The SEED Foundation actively calls for more robust legal frameworks and truly survivor-centered approaches to protection and justice.<sup>8</sup> In **Iran**, state authorities have been widely criticized for failing to protect women from gender-based violence.<sup>29</sup> International human rights organizations like Amnesty International and the US State Department have documented systemic discrimination and violence against women, including those from ethnic minorities such as Kurds [<sup>65</sup> (content unavailable), <sup>48</sup>]. The Kurdistan Human Rights Network (KHRN) regularly reports on femicides and other human rights violations targeting Kurdish women and the broader Kurdish population in Iran.<sup>33</sup> In **Syria**, the protracted conflict has led to a dramatic increase in GBV, with an estimated 7.3 million individuals, overwhelmingly women and girls, in need of GBV-related services.<sup>32</sup> Pre-existing patterns of discrimination against women and girls have significantly worsened due to the conflict.<sup>32</sup> Reports also indicate abuses, including sexual violence, by Turkey-backed armed opposition groups against Kurdish and Yezidi women in northern Syria.<sup>34</sup>

The compounding effect of ethnic or minority status on gender inequality is a critical factor. Kurdish women often face a double or even triple burden of discrimination: as women within often patriarchal Kurdish communities, as Kurds within nation-states that may be hostile or discriminatory towards their ethnic group, and sometimes as members of other marginalized religious or social groups.<sup>1</sup> State neglect or active discrimination against Kurdish communities can translate into reduced access to education, economic opportunities, and essential state protection services. This heightened vulnerability can make women more susceptible to traditional harmful practices and less able to seek redress or protection through formal legal systems. Addressing gender inequality for Kurdish women therefore necessitates an intersectional approach that acknowledges and actively tackles both internal patriarchal dynamics within Kurdish society and external discrimination and marginalization perpetuated by state actors and policies.

## **V. Socio-economic Realities: Education, Health, and Economic Participation**

The socio-economic well-being of Kurdish women and men, particularly concerning access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, is marked by significant gender disparities, although progress has been noted in certain areas. These realities are shaped by a

combination of regional policies, cultural norms, and economic conditions.

## **A. Access to Education for Women and Girls: Disparities and Progress**

Access to education is a critical determinant of empowerment, yet Kurdish girls and women often face more significant barriers than their male counterparts.

In **Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)**, while the Iraqi Constitution formally grants equal access to education for both genders<sup>2</sup>, substantial disparities persist. Illiteracy rates are notably higher among women and girls aged 12 and older (26%) compared to men and boys in the same age group (14%).<sup>2</sup> Girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school or be withdrawn by their families prematurely. Key factors contributing to this include early marriage, concerns about girls' safety when traveling to school or within educational environments, and the expectation that girls will contribute to household responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> The shift to online schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately negatively impacted girls' education due to factors like less access to technology and increased caregiving duties.<sup>2</sup>

In **Turkey**, the implementation of compulsory education has led to increased school enrollment for both girls and boys. However, gender gaps in educational attainment persist, particularly when compared to countries with high Human Development Index (HDI) levels.<sup>35</sup> In 2019, the female-to-male education index ratio in Turkey was 0.887, indicating that women still lagged behind men in overall educational achievement.<sup>35</sup> Literary representations of Kurdish women in Turkish novels often highlight educational deprivation as a significant issue, linking it to patriarchal beliefs that devalue female education, a lack of accessible school facilities in rural Kurdish areas, pervasive poverty, and experiences of discrimination and racism against Kurdish students within the Turkish education system.<sup>36</sup>

More broadly across the **Middle East**, there has been commendable progress in women's educational attainment, with some nations now reporting more female university graduates than male.<sup>37</sup> However, a critical issue is that these educational gains do not consistently translate into equal job opportunities or career advancement for women.<sup>37</sup>

This phenomenon of a "leaky pipeline"—where educational achievements for women do not proportionally convert into workforce participation and advancement—is evident. While more women are becoming educated, factors beyond educational qualifications significantly hinder their professional trajectories. Deeply ingrained social norms regarding gender roles, the immense burden of unpaid care work, the lack of supportive infrastructure such as affordable and accessible childcare, discriminatory practices within the labor market, and restrictive expectations from within their own households all act as formidable barriers.<sup>35</sup> The persistence of male guardianship ideologies and the widespread belief that a woman's primary role is domestic effectively place a ceiling on women's professional aspirations, irrespective of their educational qualifications.<sup>38</sup> This indicates that policies aimed at boosting women's economic empowerment must adopt a holistic approach, moving beyond simply increasing educational access to tackle these multifaceted structural and cultural impediments in both the labor market and the private sphere of the household.

## B. Healthcare Access, including Reproductive Health

Access to adequate healthcare, including essential reproductive health services, is another area where Kurdish women can face particular challenges, often exacerbated by conflict and societal norms.

In **Syria**, systematic attacks on healthcare facilities throughout the protracted conflict have severely impacted the general population's access to medical care, with particularly devastating consequences for women and girls, including their access to reproductive health services.<sup>32</sup>

A study focusing on **pharmacy practice in the broader Middle East** reveals that despite a significant number of women working in the pharmacy sector, their representation in top leadership and decision-making positions remains very low.<sup>37</sup> Female pharmacists often earn less than their male counterparts and may be subjected to conditions of unpaid healthcare work, as was reportedly the case in Lebanon following its financial crisis.<sup>37</sup> Key barriers identified include restrictions on women's mobility, deeply gendered social roles that limit their professional engagement, and discrimination within the workplace.<sup>37</sup>

Representations in **Kurdish novels** sometimes depict a preference for home births attended by traditional midwives rather than hospital deliveries.<sup>36</sup> This preference is often attributed to physical barriers (long distances to facilities, poor roads), socio-economic factors (lack of money for transport or hospital fees), and negative attitudes towards or experiences with (often non-Kurdish) doctors in state-run facilities, who may be perceived as culturally insensitive or discriminatory. Such practices, often coupled with a lack of education and awareness about potential delivery complications, can lead to poor maternal and infant health outcomes.<sup>36</sup>

## C. Women's Labor Force Participation: Barriers and Opportunities

Female labor force participation (FLFP) in Kurdish regions is generally low, with numerous social, cultural, and economic barriers hindering women's entry and sustained presence in the workforce.

In **Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)**, FLFP is strikingly low, estimated at around 14-15%, in stark contrast to approximately 70% for men.<sup>38</sup> Traditional gender role expectations, which assign women primary responsibility for the home and family, are a major impediment. The beliefs and attitudes of other household members, particularly male heads of household (husbands, fathers, brothers), exert significant influence over a woman's decision to work outside the home.<sup>38</sup> It is common for women, even those with higher education and professional qualifications, to exit the labor force during their prime childbearing years (typically 25-29 years old in the KRI).<sup>39</sup> While a majority (around 70%) of both women and men in the KRI reportedly support women's participation in the private sector, significant challenges persist. These include a lack of comprehensive information about private sector opportunities, as well as perceived risks related to workplace safety, harassment, discrimination (with a preference often shown for male employees), and difficulties with transportation.<sup>38</sup> The private sector itself is a contested space for women. While there is nominal support for their entry,



underlying anxieties about women's safety, their exposure in mixed-gender environments, and the potential for exploitation are prevalent. Much of the private sector work available to women tends to be in the informal economy, suggesting precarious employment conditions with fewer protections and benefits.<sup>38</sup> This creates a tension between the perceived economic necessity or opportunity of private sector employment and traditional patriarchal concerns focused on controlling women's mobility and social interactions.

In **Turkey**, FLFP is also remarkably low at 34%, significantly below the average rates observed in countries with high (54%) and very high (52%) human development indices.<sup>35</sup> This low participation rate is a major contributor to the substantial gender gap in income, with the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita for females being less than half that of males.<sup>35</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic further deepened these economic inequalities, leading to a decrease in women's labor market participation and a significant increase in their burden of unpaid care work.<sup>5</sup>

Across the broader **Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region**, deeply rooted social norms and cultural beliefs are consistently identified as persistent barriers to female employment.<sup>38</sup> Familial obligations, particularly the expectation that women are primarily responsible for childcare and household management, are central to women's decision-making processes regarding work.<sup>38</sup> The disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work placed upon women is a fundamental structural barrier to their equal participation in all other spheres of life – economic, political, and social. In Turkey, for example, women reportedly spend four times more time on unpaid housework than men.<sup>35</sup> This unequal division of labor, rooted in traditional gender roles, severely limits women's time, energy, and availability for paid work, further education, and civic engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly exacerbated this existing imbalance, further highlighting its detrimental impact on women's economic and social standing.<sup>35</sup> Achieving genuine gender equality therefore necessitates a fundamental redistribution of care responsibilities within households and society at large, supported by public policies such as affordable childcare, equitable parental leave, and flexible work arrangements, alongside concerted efforts to shift cultural norms surrounding men's active involvement in caregiving.

## **D. Economic Empowerment Initiatives**

Despite the numerous barriers, various initiatives aim to enhance Kurdish women's economic empowerment. In **Rojava**, as part of the broader socio-political transformation, women have taken the lead in establishing economic cooperatives designed to promote their financial independence and collective self-sufficiency.<sup>6</sup>

In other parts of **Kurdistan**, programs such as "Stronger Women, Stronger Nations" have been implemented to support vulnerable women, including refugees and internally displaced persons. These initiatives typically offer vocational training, financial literacy education, and entrepreneurship support, with the goal of enabling women to secure stable incomes and reduce their economic dependence on male family members, thereby increasing their autonomy and social mobility.<sup>7</sup>

However, the success and reach of these empowerment programs are often constrained by

persistent societal expectations, limited access for women to higher education and specialized skills training, and broader economic policies that do not consistently prioritize or facilitate female employment and entrepreneurship.<sup>7</sup>

The following table provides a snapshot of key gender inequality indicators where data is available, illustrating the socio-economic disparities:

#### Key Statistics on Gender Inequality Indicators in Kurdish Regions (Illustrative)

Region/Country	Indicator	Female	Male	Year/Source
Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)	Illiteracy Rate (12+ yrs)	26%	14%	<sup>2</sup> (data for Iraq, incl. KRI)
	Labor Force Participation	~14%	~70%	<sup>38</sup>
Turkey	Female-to-Male Education Index Ratio	0.887	(1.0)	2019 <sup>35</sup>
	Labor Force Participation	34%	~70%+	<sup>35</sup> (Male rate implied higher)
	GNI per capita (Female vs. Male)	<50%	100%	<sup>35</sup> (Relative to male)
Broader Middle East	University Graduates (some nations)	>Male		<sup>37</sup>
	Pharmacy Leadership Representation	Low	High	<sup>37</sup>

*Note: Data availability is limited and varies by region. This table is illustrative based on provided snippets.*

## VI. The Shifting Landscape of Kurdish Masculinities

The understanding and performance of masculinity within Kurdish society are neither static nor monolithic. They are shaped by a complex interplay of traditional expectations, historical experiences of conflict and oppression, the impacts of displacement and diaspora, and emerging engagements with concepts of gender equality and feminism.

### A. Traditional Male Roles: Provider, Protector, Tribal Authority

Historically, Kurdish men were ascribed specific roles that established their dominance in public, economic, and political spheres. They were primarily expected to be providers for their families, protectors of their communities and honor, and, in many contexts, figures of tribal or local authority.<sup>24</sup> The traditional division of labor saw men primarily engaged in agriculture, trade, and market activities. In village settings, the *agha* (village or lineage leader) often held a significant position, responsible for maintaining a guest house for visitors, which also served

as a communal space where village men met to discuss recent events and community affairs.<sup>9</sup> Kurdish tribal organization, fundamentally based on patrilineal descent, further solidified male authority, with clan and lineage leaders often functioning as feudal lords or key intermediaries.<sup>9</sup> For instance, in Turkey, following the transition to electoral democracy from 1950 onwards, tribal elites often constituted the dominant Kurdish political actors, mediating between the state and the broader Kurdish population.<sup>41</sup> These traditional roles, while varying in their expression across different Kurdish communities and over time, generally reinforced a patriarchal social order where men held primary decision-making power and public influence.

## **B. Hegemonic and Hyper-Masculinity in Contexts of Conflict and Oppression**

The persistent experiences of conflict, state oppression, and political instability in many Kurdish regions have profoundly impacted the construction and performance of Kurdish masculinities. R.W. Connell's concept of **hegemonic masculinity**—referring to the culturally dominant ideals of manhood that are reproduced by patriarchal societal structures and often equate masculinity with reason, ability, control, and dominance—is relevant here.<sup>42</sup> In analyses of Kurdish novels, such hegemonic masculine ideals are often found to be intricately linked to traditional tribal structures and patriarchal social positions.<sup>42</sup>

In contexts of severe oppression or marginalization, where traditional avenues for asserting masculine status (e.g., economic provision, political autonomy) are curtailed,

**hyper-masculinity** can emerge as a compensatory response. Hyper-masculinity is characterized by an exaggerated, often aggressive, and intensely visible performance of manhood, frequently adopted to restore or recover what are perceived as "wounded masculinities".<sup>43</sup> For Kurdish men, prolonged exposure to state persecution, armed conflict, and discrimination could contribute to such performances, manifesting as an emphasis on martial valor, toughness, or rigid adherence to patriarchal codes of honor.<sup>43</sup>

Ongoing conflicts have often capitalized on the traditional norm of men as protectors to incite them to fight, thereby reinforcing militarized aspects of masculinity.<sup>2</sup> Figures like the Kurdish Peshmerga (literally "those who face death") have historically been viewed as potent symbols of a hegemonic military masculinity, embodying ideals of decisiveness, power, valor, and self-sacrifice for the nation or community.<sup>43</sup> Participation in armed struggle has, for many Kurdish men, been a significant way to assert their identity and recuperate "harmed masculinities" in the face of external threats and subjugation.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, state violence and systematic discrimination, by undermining men's ability to protect their families, provide economically, or exercise political agency, can lead to profound feelings of powerlessness and being "less of a man," further complicating masculine identity.<sup>43</sup>

## **C. Impact of Displacement and Diaspora on Men's Roles and Identities**

Migration, displacement, and the diaspora experience introduce new variables that challenge and reshape traditional Kurdish masculinities. The uprooting from homeland contexts often compels a renegotiation of identity frameworks.<sup>26</sup> Studies of Kurdish men in diaspora, for

example in Greece, indicate that removal from the immediate pressures of conflict and oppressive circumstances in their countries of origin can lead to changes in how they shape and perform their masculinities.<sup>43</sup> Some men report feeling freer to express their Kurdish identity, speak their language without fear, and interact more openly with diverse communities.<sup>43</sup> This exposure to different cultural norms and legal frameworks in host countries can create space for introspection and a move away from more rigid or defensive expressions of masculinity.

However, the diaspora experience is not without its own challenges to masculine identity. For instance, difficulties in obtaining legal status, securing stable employment, and fulfilling the traditional role of economic provider for their families can lead to feelings of frustration, embarrassment, and emasculation for some Kurdish men in diaspora.<sup>43</sup>

Kurdish diaspora communities have also become significant sites of political activism. Over time, there has been a discernible shift in the approach of some diaspora groups, moving from primarily street-level protests to more institutionalized forms of engagement within the political structures and civil society organizations of their host societies. This involves representing their local constituencies while also acting as advocates for their compatriots in the homeland.<sup>45</sup> This evolving political engagement also reflects a transformation in how Kurdish men in diaspora may enact their roles as community members and political actors.

## **D. Emergence of Pro-Feminist Masculinities and Men's Engagement with Gender Equality**

Amidst the predominantly patriarchal landscape, there are emerging discussions and, in some quarters, a nascent development of pro-feminist masculinities among Kurdish men. There is a compelling argument that Kurdish men, having themselves experienced various forms of discrimination (ethnic, cultural, religious), may be more receptive to understanding and adopting pro-feminist stances.<sup>44</sup> This shared experience of oppression, it is suggested, could foster empathy and a willingness to challenge other forms of domination, including patriarchy. A pro-feminist men's movement is increasingly seen as a necessary component for achieving genuine gender equality within Kurdish society. Such a movement would aim to create meaningful dialogue about the construction of patriarchy, men's implication (both direct and indirect) in the oppression of women, and the moral imperative to address these injustices.<sup>44</sup> Even small-scale activism by men who are dissatisfied with the existing gender regime—a regime often created by an interplay of state structures, societal norms, economic opportunities, and violence—can challenge patriarchal norms and lead to tangible changes at the micro-level, impacting individual lives within their immediate circles.<sup>46</sup>

The democratic expansion of the Kurdish freedom movement, particularly the ideological shifts seen in Rojava and within parts of the PKK, has created new spaces for redefining gender roles and has explicitly called for men's participation in dismantling patriarchy.<sup>44</sup> Raising awareness among men about socially constructed gender roles and positions is considered key to reshaping attitudes and behaviors towards women and dismantling misrepresentations and gendered divisions.<sup>44</sup>

The landscape of Kurdish masculinities is clearly a site of ongoing contestation and adaptation. Traditional roles as providers and protectors coexist with, and are often challenged by, experiences of oppression that can lead to hyper-masculine responses or, conversely, to pro-feminist awakenings. The interplay between ethnic oppression and gendered identities is particularly significant; the denial of Kurdish men's ability to fulfill traditional masculine roles due to state discrimination can create a "wounded masculinity," but it can also, for some, foster an understanding of shared disempowerment that bridges the gap towards feminist solidarity. The diaspora experience further acts as a catalyst, offering new contexts for reconfiguring masculine identities away from the immediate pressures of homeland conflicts and traditional expectations. Understanding these shifting dynamics is crucial for engaging men not just as upholders of patriarchy but as potential allies and active participants in the journey towards gender equality. This involves creating interventions that acknowledge men's own experiences of oppression while simultaneously challenging the patriarchal norms they may consciously or unconsciously perpetuate.

## VII. LGBTQ+ Communities: Rights, Challenges, and Visibility

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals within Kurdish communities face a complex and often perilous environment, marked by severe legal restrictions, pervasive social stigma, violence, and discrimination. While some progressive Kurdish political movements and diaspora activists are beginning to address LGBTQ+ rights, the overall situation remains challenging, with significant variations across the different regions of Kurdistan.

### A. Legal Status and Societal Attitudes across Kurdish Regions

The legal framework governing LGBTQ+ individuals in Kurdish-inhabited areas is largely repressive, reflecting the laws of the nation-states they reside in, although some internal Kurdish political discourse offers glimmers of alternative perspectives.

#### Legal Status of LGBTQ+ Individuals in Kurdish Regions

Feature	Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)	Turkish Kurdistan	Iranian Kurdistan	Rojava (AANES, Syria) / Broader Syria
Legality of Same-Sex Acts	Illegal (imprisonment as punishment) under Iraqi federal law (April 2024). <sup>47</sup> Previously, ambiguous "immodest acts"	Same-sex acts not explicitly illegal in Turkey, but public morality/obscenity laws can be used. Crackdowns on LGBTQ+ events.	Illegal; punishable by flogging or death. <sup>48</sup>	Ba'athist Syria: Article 520 (1949) prohibited "carnal relations against order of nature" (up to 3 years prison) <sup>49</sup> ; current applicability

	laws used. <sup>47</sup>			post-Assad unclear. AANES: No specific information on new legal codes regarding same-sex acts, but general progressive stance.
<b>Marriage/Civil Unions</b>	Banned (marriage defined as between a man and a woman). <sup>47</sup>	Not recognized.	Not recognized.	Not recognized.
<b>Gender Identity Recognition</b>	Illegal to change legal gender (April 2024); gender-affirming care banned; non-binary not recognized. <sup>47</sup>	Possible with medical/legal process, but can be difficult.	Not clearly recognized; pressure for gender reassignment surgery in some cases to avoid punishment for homosexuality. <sup>48</sup>	No specific information on AANES.
<b>Anti-Discrimination Laws</b>	No protections. <sup>3</sup>	No comprehensive anti-discrimination laws covering sexual orientation or gender identity.	No protections; systemic discrimination [ <sup>65</sup> (unavailable), <sup>48</sup> ].	No specific information on AANES.
<b>Freedom of Assembly/Association for LGBTQ+ groups</b>	Registration of LGBT-dedicated NGOs illegal. <sup>3</sup> Proposed bill to penalize promotion of homosexuality. <sup>3</sup>	Pride parades and events frequently banned or met with police violence in Turkey.	Heavily suppressed; activists face severe risks.	AANES generally promotes civil society, but specific LGBTQ+ group status unclear. TQILA (queer anarchist group) fought with SDF. <sup>50</sup>

In **Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)**, recent Iraqi federal legislation passed in April 2024 explicitly criminalizes same-sex relationships with severe penalties, including imprisonment.<sup>47</sup> Prior to this, while Iraq's penal code did not explicitly mention homosexuality, vague articles such as Article 401 (criminalizing "immodest acts" in public) were sometimes used against the LGBT community.<sup>47</sup> Same-sex marriage is banned <sup>47</sup>, and censorship of LGBT issues can lead to

imprisonment, with Iraq officially banning media from using the term "homosexuality" and mandating "sexual deviance" instead.<sup>47</sup> As of April 2024, changing legal gender became illegal, and gender-affirming care was banned; non-binary gender identities are not legally recognized.<sup>47</sup> There are no legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>3</sup> The KRG's Directorate of Non-Governmental Organizations has denied registration to organizations solely dedicated to LGBT rights, citing the Iraqi Penal Code.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, a bill was proposed in the KRI parliament (reportedly with support among members) to penalize individuals, organizations, and media outlets that "promote homosexuality" with imprisonment and fines, and to revoke the licenses of civil society organizations and media companies that do so.<sup>3</sup> Experts have noted that a significant problem for the LGBTQ+ community is the lack of any clear legal definition or recognition in either Iraqi law or the specific legal changes within the Kurdistan Region.<sup>50</sup>

In **Turkish Kurdistan**, while Turkish law does not explicitly criminalize private, consensual same-sex acts between adults, the situation for LGBTQ+ individuals is precarious. Public morality and obscenity laws are often used to restrict LGBTQ+ expression and assembly. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), a major pro-Kurdish political force, has announced its support for all ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities and has condemned discrimination against LGBTI people in its election manifestos.<sup>50</sup> However, this stance is not shared by all Kurdish political or social groups; Islamist parties like HûdaPar and associated militant groups are known to be hostile and dangerous to the LGBTI community.<sup>50</sup>

In **Iranian Kurdistan**, the legal situation is extremely severe. Iranian law, based on Sharia, criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual conduct with punishments that can include flogging and the death penalty.<sup>48</sup> Systemic discrimination and state-sanctioned violence against LGBTQ+ individuals are widely reported [<sup>65</sup> (content unavailable), <sup>48</sup>]. The Kurdistan Human Rights Network (KHRN) attempts to document rights violations against LGBTQ+ individuals in the region, despite the immense risks [<sup>60</sup> (content unavailable), <sup>33</sup>].

In **Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava/AANES)** and broader Syria, the legal landscape is also complex. Under Ba'athist Syrian rule, Article 520 of the 1949 penal code prohibited "carnal relations against the order of nature," punishable by up to three years in prison; its current applicability following the fall of the Assad regime is uncertain.<sup>49</sup> Within the AANES, while the general political orientation is progressive and emphasizes rights for minorities, specific legal frameworks concerning LGBTQ+ rights are not clearly detailed in the available information. However, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the dominant military force in AANES, officially denied having an integrated LGBT military unit (referring to TQILA, an international volunteer group) but simultaneously emphasized their deep respect for human rights, including the rights of homosexuals.<sup>51</sup> During its period of control, the Islamic State (ISIS) brutally persecuted and executed individuals accused of homosexuality in areas of Syria and Iraq.<sup>49</sup> This overview reveals a significant paradox: while some Kurdish political movements, particularly those with leftist or secular-progressive orientations like the HDP in Turkey or elements within the AANES/SDF milieu in Syria, espouse broad ideologies of inclusivity and support for minority rights<sup>50</sup>, this often does not fully translate into legal protection or social

acceptance for LGBTQ+ individuals in practice. In many Kurdish-inhabited areas, LGBTQ+ people face severe legal persecution (as in KRI under Iraqi law, and in Iran) and violent attacks, sometimes even from nationalist Kurdish groups (as seen in Turkish Kurdistan).<sup>3</sup> This contradiction may stem from various factors: a perceived need to cater to socially conservative sentiments within the broader population, making LGBTQ+ rights politically risky; the prioritization of ethno-nationalist goals over the rights of sexual and gender minorities; the pervasive influence of religious conservatism across Kurdish society; or internal ideological inconsistencies within these movements themselves. The violent attacks on LGBTQ+ individuals and their allies during Newroz celebrations by groups identifying as "Kurdên Nasyonalist"<sup>50</sup> serve as a stark illustration of this internal conflict and hostility.

## **B. Violence, Discrimination, and Social Stigma**

Beyond legal frameworks, LGBTQ+ Kurds face widespread discrimination, social stigma, and violence. This occurs both at the hands of state authorities and within their own communities. In **Turkish Kurdistan**, as noted, the LGBT community and their supporters have been subjected to physical attacks and harassment, particularly during public events like Newroz celebrations, by nationalist and far-right Kurdish groups.<sup>50</sup> Victims have reported being beaten, harassed, and threatened, with perpetrators explicitly stating that there is "no place for [them] in Kurdistan".<sup>50</sup>

In **Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)**, arrests of individuals perceived to be homosexual occurred in Sulaymaniyah in April 2021, although the government claimed these operations were targeting prostitution rather than specifically the LGBTQ+ community.<sup>3</sup> LGBTQ+ activists in the KRI report facing pervasive discrimination and social stigma, with religious conservative figures often employing narratives like the story of the "people of Lot" to fuel public disapproval.<sup>3</sup> Hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals are also a serious concern.<sup>3</sup>

In **Iranian Kurdistan**, queer individuals endure multifaceted oppression, stemming not only from the state's repressive laws and actions but also from societal pressures. They experience discrimination based on their national identity (as Kurds), religion (if not adhering to state-sanctioned interpretations), class, and compounded by their sexual orientation or gender identity [<sup>60</sup> (content unavailable)]. The tragic suicide of Hanar, a young trans person in Iranian Kurdistan, was highlighted by KHRN as indicative of the dire situation and extreme pressures faced by trans individuals in the region [<sup>60</sup> (content unavailable)].

The instrumentalization and erasure of LGBTQ+ identities are common in conflict zones. Extremist groups like ISIS have used extreme violence against gay men and others perceived as LGBTQ+ to enforce their brutal ideology and terrorize populations.<sup>49</sup> Conversely, the emergence of groups like TQILA, even if not officially integrated into larger military structures, can be used symbolically to project an image of a progressive, inclusive struggle by associated forces, although the broader reality of acceptance and rights may be far more complex.<sup>50</sup> Simultaneously, state authorities often erase specific targeting of LGBTQ+ individuals by resorting to vague "public morality" laws or other pretexts for arrests and persecution, thereby denying the specific nature of the human rights violations they endure.<sup>3</sup>



This dual threat of hyper-visibility for persecution or propaganda, and erasure by state denial, renders LGBTQ+ individuals exceptionally vulnerable in conflict situations, making it exceedingly difficult to address their specific protection needs and advocate for their human rights.

### **C. Activism, Artistic Expression, and Emerging Visibility**

Despite the severe challenges, there are signs of emerging visibility, activism, and artistic expression by and for LGBTQ+ Kurds.

Support from some political quarters, such as the **HDP in Turkey**, provides a degree of political platform for LGBTQ+ rights within the Kurdish political discourse.<sup>50</sup>

**Artistic expression** has become a vital avenue for challenging norms and increasing visibility. Even within a generally conservative societal milieu, some Kurdish artists are openly expressing their sexual orientation, and this is becoming part of their artistic identity and a means of provoking discussion.<sup>50</sup> The case of Semyanî Perîzade, a bisexual artist whose work sparked significant gender discussions within Kurdish music and art circles, is a notable example.<sup>50</sup>

The **Kurdish diaspora** has become a particularly important space for queer Kurdish voice and identity formation. Given the severe repression and lack of legal and social space in most parts of Kurdistan, the diaspora often offers a relatively safer environment for queer Kurds to articulate their experiences, build communities, engage in activism, and create art that explores their intersecting identities as Kurdish, queer, and migrant individuals. Artistic and activist projects like "Queerdistan" by Ciwan Veysel in Austria explicitly focus on the racist, homophobic, and transphobic experiences of Kurdish LGBTQIA+ individuals in the diaspora and their struggles for visibility.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the "JÎN\* in Diaspora" project explores the multi-layered oppression faced by queer Kurdish women and non-binary individuals in Vienna.<sup>52</sup> Academic research, such as that conducted by Dr. Emrah Karakuş on the lived experiences of queer and trans Kurds, particularly focusing on notions of debt, rights, and repayment in conflict zones in Kurdish and Turkish contexts, often emerges from or focuses on diaspora communities.<sup>53</sup> These diasporic expressions and scholarly inquiries can then feed back into homeland discussions and contribute to building transnational solidarity networks. Supporting and amplifying these queer Kurdish voices in the diaspora is therefore vital for the broader Kurdish LGBTQ+ rights movement.

Within the context of **armed struggle**, the formation of TQILA (The Queer Insurrection and Liberation Army), an avowedly LGBT anarchist military unit composed of international volunteers fighting alongside the SDF/YPG against ISIS, garnered significant international attention.<sup>50</sup> While the SDF officially denied that TQILA was an integrated part of their forces, they acknowledged the group's presence and reiterated their general support for human rights.<sup>51</sup> This episode highlighted the complex intersections of queer identity, anti-fascist struggle, and Kurdish-led military efforts.

In the **KRI**, despite the illegality of formal registration, organizations like IraQueer, Rasan, and Yeksani (formerly the Lava Foundation) have been active in advocating for LGBT rights, primarily through awareness campaigns and providing support services.<sup>3</sup> However, these

groups operate under immense pressure and have faced legal challenges, including lawsuits filed by Islamist Members of Parliament aiming to shut down their activities.<sup>3</sup>

The journey towards recognition, rights, and safety for LGBTQ+ Kurds is clearly an arduous one, involving navigating not only oppressive state laws and hostile societal attitudes but also complex internal dynamics within Kurdish political and social landscapes.

## **VIII. Gender Representation in Kurdish Culture and Academia**

The representation of gender in Kurdish cultural production—spanning literature, cinema, and visual arts—as well as in academic discourse, serves as both a reflection of prevailing societal norms and a site of contestation and potential transformation. These representations often reveal underlying patriarchal structures, but also showcase emerging critical perspectives and efforts to reclaim narratives.

### **A. Portrayal of Women and Men in Kurdish Literature, Cinema, and Art**

Literature:

Kurdish traditional literature, including folklore and legends, often carries the imprint of patriarchal values. Analyses suggest that while a few legends may portray women positively, a significant portion expresses themes of humiliation, gender discrimination, and an underestimation of women's capabilities and worth.<sup>21</sup> This reflects how cultural narratives can reinforce gendered societal biases.

In contemporary literature, particularly Turkish novels that feature Kurdish characters, the representation of Kurdish women is complex and varied. Some works depict Kurdish women as being molded by restrictive patriarchal practices, traditions, and customs, often portrayed as submissive, ignorant, and victims of their society.<sup>36</sup> Novelists like Elif Shafak, Ayşe Kulin, and Yashar Kemal have explored these themes, touching upon issues such as stringent honor codes, educational deprivation for girls, and the double oppression Kurdish women face due to both their gender and their ethnicity.<sup>36</sup> However, these same authors, or others, may also challenge such stereotypes by presenting Kurdish female characters who exhibit strength, resilience, and resistance against patriarchal norms.<sup>36</sup> The discourse of hegemonic masculinity is also evident in Kurdish novels. For example, an analysis of Shirzad Hassan's novel *My Father's Fence and Dogs* reveals how it reflects traditional patriarchal positions by identifying masculinity with reason, ability, and dominance, often linked to the tribal structure of society.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the Kurdish language itself has been identified as containing sexist elements in its vocabulary, naming conventions, proverbs, and curses, thereby reflecting and reinforcing a patriarchal worldview.<sup>22</sup>

Cinema:

Modern Kurdish cinema has faced criticism regarding its representation of female characters. Some analyses point to an almost complete absence of women in central roles, or their relegation to marginal, decorative figures who often lack voice and agency, frequently viewed through a "male gaze".<sup>54</sup> This was an observation made at the Duhok International Film

Festival, where many local films seemed to perpetuate this pattern.<sup>54</sup> However, a notable contrast is often found in films made by Kurdish female directors, particularly those based in Europe. These filmmakers, such as Soleen Yusef and Binevsa Berivan, tend to place women as protagonists, exploring their complex emotional lives and struggles with greater depth and nuance.<sup>54</sup> Despite the general trend, festivals like Duhok IFF also aim to promote gender equality and have programmed films that tackle the female agenda within patriarchal society, indicating a slow but evolving landscape.<sup>54</sup>

Art:

In the visual arts, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in the post-ISIS era, a new generation of young artists has emerged who are using their work to problematize issues surrounding gender-based violence, rising religious conservatism, systemic corruption, and patriarchy [64 (abstract only), 55]. They employ powerful visual and literary languages to address misogyny and the impact of conflict on women's sense of space, identity, and body politics [64 (abstract only)]. Historically, women artists in South Kurdistan have navigated significant socio-political ruptures, using their art to convey the injustices they endured due to both their gender and their Kurdish ethnicity, even if they did not always explicitly frame their work in feminist terms.<sup>55</sup> Public performances by women artists from the mid-2000s onwards began to directly address themes like freedom, the plight of female political prisoners, poverty, and the male gaze.<sup>55</sup> The art produced by the post-2014 generation often reflects feelings of anxiety, isolation, and muted suffering.<sup>55</sup> However, creating and exhibiting art remains challenging for many, especially women, due to conservative backlashes, inadequate art education, a severe lack of funding, and a cultural sector often dependent on political affiliations or limited international donor support.<sup>55</sup>

This overview of cultural production suggests it is a battleground for gender narratives. The prevalence of patriarchal tropes alongside emerging counter-narratives of female strength and resistance indicates an ongoing cultural struggle. The challenges faced by female artists, in particular, underscore that cultural production is a domain of power, where dominant gender ideologies are both defended and actively challenged. Supporting and promoting diverse voices, especially those of women and other marginalized groups, within Kurdish cultural spheres is therefore crucial for fostering more equitable gender representations and for challenging deeply ingrained patriarchal norms.

## **B. The Kurdish Gender Studies Network (KGSN) and Decolonial Feminist Approaches**

The academic study of Kurdish gender relations is also an evolving field, with significant contributions being made by scholars who adopt critical theoretical perspectives, notably decolonial feminism. The Kurdish Gender Studies Network (KGSN), established in 2020, exemplifies this trend. KGSN is an online epistemic community that brings together activists and scholars dedicated to advancing knowledge in Kurdish gender and sexuality studies.<sup>4</sup>

A core feature of KGSN's approach is its explicit employment of **decolonial feminist theories and methodologies**. This involves a critical engagement with, and often a critique of, Western liberal feminism, particularly its perceived nationalist, racist, and colonial dimensions when

applied to non-Western contexts.<sup>4</sup> The network aims to reclaim epistemic agency for Kurdish scholars and activists, centering Kurdish women's lived experiences and histories, and challenging the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge production systems.<sup>4</sup> This approach recognizes that the field of Kurdish women's studies is inherently politicized, as it must reckon with the often marginal positionality of Kurdish women within intersecting power relations dominated by capitalism, colonialism, nationalism, and patriarchy.<sup>56</sup> Shahrzad Mojab is a leading scholar in this area, whose work has been foundational in establishing "Kurdish women" as a recognizable subject within English-speaking feminist scholarship.<sup>56</sup>

The KGSN is rooted in the decades-long struggles of Kurdish women who have grappled with the dual challenge of resisting external colonial forces while simultaneously confronting internal patriarchal dynamics within their own communities, public spheres, and even academic realms.<sup>4</sup> Scholars like Nazira Üstündağ have contributed to this decolonial feminist analysis by examining anti-Kurdish racism as a form of colonialism, using interdisciplinary approaches (feminism, psychoanalysis, Black Studies) to explore its effects on the body, subconscious, and subjectivity of both the colonized (Kurds) and the colonizer. Üstündağ's work highlights figures such as the mother, the politician, and the guerilla as embodying resistance to the colonization of Kurdish imagination and subjectivity.<sup>57</sup>

The "triple marginalization" of many Kurdish women—as Kurds within often oppressive nation-states, as women within deeply patriarchal societies, and as individuals whose plight is frequently overlooked by the global system<sup>6</sup>—necessitates a theoretical framework capable of adequately addressing these intersecting oppressions. Decolonial feminism, by centering the experiences of colonized and marginalized women and by critiquing Eurocentric knowledge systems, provides such a lens. It allows scholars and activists to analyze how gender dynamics in Kurdistan are co-constituted by local patriarchal structures and larger geopolitical forces, and to develop resistance strategies and theoretical understandings (like Jineology) that are rooted in local contexts and experiences. The development of Kurdish Gender Studies through this decolonial feminist lens is therefore not merely an academic exercise; it is a political act of reclaiming narrative power and contributing to a more effective, nuanced, and contextually relevant feminist praxis. This also brings to the forefront the politics of representation: who tells the story of Kurdish women (and men) profoundly matters.

Mainstream or male-dominated narratives risk perpetuating stereotypes or silencing marginalized experiences. The push for Kurdish women to articulate their own stories, and for scholars to adopt critical perspectives like decolonial feminism, represents an attempt to shift this power dynamic. The very act of researching and writing about Kurdish gender relations is thus imbued with political significance, highlighting the ethical responsibilities of researchers and cultural producers to be mindful of power dynamics in representation and to actively seek out and amplify marginalized voices.

## **IX. Impact of Conflict, Displacement, and Diaspora on Gender Relations**

The Kurdish people have endured generations of conflict, political instability, forced

displacement, and life in diaspora. These experiences have profoundly and differentially impacted gender relations, creating both acute vulnerabilities and, paradoxically, new avenues for agency and social transformation.

## **A. Differential Impact of Conflict on Women, Men, and LGBTQ+ Individuals**

Conflict does not affect all members of a society equally; its impact is heavily gendered and varies based on other intersecting identities.

**General Impact:** Ongoing conflict fundamentally shapes gender dynamics within Kurdish society, leading to distinct experiences for women, men, boys, and girls.<sup>2</sup> The disruption of law and social order often increases vulnerability to various forms of violence and reduces access to protection mechanisms.<sup>2</sup>

**Women and Girls:** In conflict situations, women and girls face heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence, including rape, sexual enslavement (as horrifically demonstrated during the ISIS attacks on Yazidi and other communities), and forced displacement.<sup>2</sup> Conflict often leads to a high number of female-headed households, as men are killed, detained, or go missing. These households frequently lack proper documentation, face extreme poverty, and struggle to access basic necessities.<sup>2</sup> Women and girls are disproportionately affected by violence and exploitation during displacement, facing specific risks in camps and host societies.<sup>26</sup>

**Men and Boys:** Men and boys also suffer acutely from conflict, often experiencing disproportionately high rates of death as combatants or as civilian casualties of indiscriminate violence.<sup>2</sup> They too are victims of gender-based violence, including physical and sexual abuse by family members, security forces, or militias, though such experiences are rarely reported due to stigma and societal expectations of masculine stoicism.<sup>2</sup> The trauma experienced by men in conflict—whether from combat, injury, torture, or the inability to fulfill traditional roles as protectors and providers—can have severe psychological consequences. This distress can sometimes manifest as increased domestic violence, as men may attempt to assert a sense of masculinity or control in the only sphere available to them.<sup>2</sup> However, dissatisfaction with the existing gender regime, often exacerbated by state violence and structural inequalities, can also motivate some men to engage in small-scale activism challenging these norms.<sup>46</sup>

**LGBTQ+ Individuals:** Conflict situations create extreme vulnerability for LGBTQ+ individuals. They are often targeted by extremist groups, such as ISIS, which have brutally persecuted and murdered individuals accused of same-sex relations.<sup>49</sup> They also face risks from state actors and societal discrimination, which can be amplified in the chaos and lawlessness of conflict zones.

**Women as Combatants:** A distinctive feature of some Kurdish conflicts has been the significant and often near-equal role of women alongside men in armed struggle.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly visible in the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in Syria and within the ranks of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>6</sup> This participation directly challenges traditional gender roles that confine women to the private sphere and has provided women with new forms of agency,

leadership experience, and public visibility.

Conflict, therefore, acts as a complex catalyst. While undeniably heightening risks and suffering, especially for women and other marginalized groups, it can also disrupt pre-existing power structures and social norms, inadvertently creating openings for new forms of agency and social roles. The breakdown of traditional societal order can compel women to enter public roles previously denied them, such as becoming heads of household out of necessity or taking up arms. Men, too, find their traditional roles profoundly challenged, which can lead to crises of masculinity but also, for some, to a re-evaluation of gender norms and engagement in pro-feminist or peace-building activities. Post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building efforts must be acutely gender-sensitive, recognizing both the specific vulnerabilities engendered by conflict and the potential for leveraging the new forms of agency—especially women's agency—that may have emerged. A simple aim to "return to normal" risks reverting to pre-conflict patriarchal structures and overlooking these transformative potentials.

## **B. Gender Dynamics in Displacement and Refugee Contexts**

Mass displacement, a common consequence of conflict in Kurdish regions, further reshapes gender dynamics and creates specific challenges and opportunities in refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) contexts. Displacement often intensifies a collective sense of Kurdish identity but simultaneously challenges traditional social and familial frameworks.<sup>26</sup>

**Vulnerabilities:** Displaced women and girls face acute vulnerabilities, including increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence, forced or early marriages (sometimes seen as a coping mechanism or for "protection"), and exclusion from decision-making processes within camps and host communities.<sup>26</sup> The experiences of Yazidi women who survived captivity and sexual enslavement by ISIS are a particularly harrowing example; upon escape or liberation, they face not only profound trauma but also significant societal stigma, making their reintegration into their communities exceptionally challenging.<sup>26</sup>

**Women as Agents of Change:** Despite these immense challenges, displaced women frequently demonstrate remarkable resilience and agency. They often take the lead in organizing grassroots initiatives within camps or host communities, advocating for their rights and the needs of their families, and actively challenging patriarchal norms that may be reinforced or newly imposed in displacement settings.<sup>26</sup> Their efforts highlight the critical need for gender-sensitive approaches in all humanitarian aid and policy responses.

**Challenges in Host Countries:** Integration into host countries or communities presents numerous difficulties for displaced Kurds. These include economic marginalization (often relegated to precarious, low-paying informal work), cultural differences, and strained access to resources such as housing, healthcare, and education, which can lead to tensions with host populations.<sup>26</sup> Social media plays a dual role in these contexts: it can be a vital tool for preserving cultural identity, maintaining connections with the homeland, and fostering diaspora solidarity, but it can also, at times, deepen exclusion if online narratives clash with local perceptions in the host society.<sup>26</sup>

## **C. Diaspora: Renegotiating Gender Roles and Identities**

The Kurdish diaspora, spread across Europe, North America, and other parts of the world, has become a significant arena for the renegotiation of gender roles and identities. Digital platforms, including social media, are crucial tools for fostering a transnational sense of Kurdish solidarity, allowing individuals to collectively reimagine Kurdishness in ways that can be more decentralized and inclusive, sometimes transcending traditional internal divisions related to dialects, tribal affiliations, or religion.<sup>26</sup>

The experience of living in diaspora can lead to notable changes in how Kurdish men perform and understand their masculinities, often involving a distancing from the oppressive circumstances of their homelands and an embrace of the relative freedoms found in host societies.<sup>43</sup> Diaspora communities are also vibrant centers of political activism, with individuals and groups engaging with the political systems of their host countries to advocate for Kurdish rights and influence international policy.<sup>45</sup>

The generational aspect is also crucial in the diaspora. Second-generation Kurds, born or raised outside the homeland, often inherit collective memories of conflict and trauma but reinterpret these legacies through the lens of their own lived experiences in different cultural contexts. They assert their own agency in shaping diasporic memory and identity, and their approaches to activism and community engagement may differ from those of earlier generations.<sup>58</sup>

Due to widespread displacement and migration, Kurdish gender politics are increasingly transnational. Diaspora communities are not merely passive recipients of homeland narratives; they actively shape and contribute to feminist discourses, LGBTQ+ activism, and broader political movements. Digital technologies facilitate these connections, allowing for the rapid spread of ideas (such as Jineology or the "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" slogan) and the mobilization of support across borders. Consequently, any comprehensive analysis of Kurdish gender relations must consider this vital transnational dimension. Developments in one part of Kurdistan or within a specific diaspora community can have ripple effects elsewhere, creating a complex, interconnected global web of activism, identity formation, and evolving gender norms. Understanding these generational dynamics and the evolving forms of activism is key to supporting sustainable and relevant movements for social justice and gender equality within Kurdish communities worldwide.

## **X. Conclusion: Navigating Challenges and Pathways to Gender Equality**

The landscape of gender relations within Kurdish societies is a complex mosaic, characterized by a profound and often paradoxical interplay of deeply entrenched patriarchal traditions and dynamic, transformative movements striving for equality and justice. This report has traced the historical roots of gender roles, the surge of women's political activism epitomized by philosophies like Jineology and movements such as "Woman-Life-Freedom," the varied legal frameworks and persistent human rights challenges including pervasive gender-based

violence, the socio-economic realities that shape access to education and economic participation, the shifting contours of Kurdish masculinities, the severe struggles and emerging visibility of LGBTQ+ communities, and the critical role of cultural representation and academic inquiry in shaping and contesting gender narratives. The overarching influence of regional diversity—spanning Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran, Syria, and the global diaspora—along with the profound impacts of conflict and displacement, underscores that there is no single "Kurdish gender experience."

#### Persistent Challenges:

Despite notable progress in certain areas, formidable challenges to achieving full gender equality persist across Kurdish communities. These include:

- The enduring strength of patriarchal norms and customary laws, which often supersede or undermine formal legal reforms aimed at protecting women's rights.
- Ongoing political instability, armed conflict, and militarization in several key Kurdish regions, which disproportionately endanger women and LGBTQ+ individuals and can roll back previous gains.
- Significant economic hardship and limited opportunities for sustainable livelihoods, which particularly affect women's economic independence and increase their vulnerability.
- The existence of overtly discriminatory state laws and policies in countries like Iran, which systematically subjugate women and criminalize LGBTQ+ identities.
- A widespread lack of effective enforcement of existing protective laws and inadequate access to justice and support services for survivors of gender-based violence.
- The powerful influence of conservative social and religious forces that actively oppose gender equality, women's autonomy, and LGBTQ+ rights.

#### Positive Developments and Agents of Change:

Juxtaposed with these challenges are significant positive developments and the tireless efforts of numerous agents of change:

- Vibrant, resilient, and ideologically diverse feminist movements, including the transformative vision of Jineology in Rojava, the global resonance of the "Woman-Life-Freedom" slogan, and countless grassroots activist initiatives.
- Important legal and political reforms achieved in specific contexts, such as the gender-parallel governance structures and progressive family laws in Rojava, and parliamentary quotas for women in the KRI.
- An observable increase in educational attainment for women across many Kurdish regions, although this progress is often hampered by a "leaky pipeline" that limits their translation into equitable workforce participation.
- The growth of transnational solidarity networks and the increasingly influential role of diaspora activism in shaping global awareness and advocating for change.
- The emergence of critical discourses on traditional masculinity and the beginnings of some Kurdish men's engagement with pro-feminist ideas and practices.
- The courageous, albeit often perilous, increase in visibility and advocacy by and for LGBTQ+ Kurds, particularly in diaspora and artistic spaces.
- The crucial contributions of Kurdish Gender Studies and decolonial feminist scholarship



in providing critical analyses, amplifying marginalized voices, and shaping more nuanced understandings and contextually relevant praxis.

Pathways and Considerations for Fostering Gender Equality:

The journey towards comprehensive gender equality in Kurdish societies is complex and requires sustained, multi-level efforts that are sensitive to local contexts while upholding universal human rights principles. Key considerations include:

1. **Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Ensuring Robust Enforcement:** Continued advocacy for the adoption, ratification (e.g., CEDAW without reservations<sup>30</sup>), and, crucially, the full and effective implementation of laws that protect women's and LGBTQ+ rights is paramount. This includes ensuring that justice mechanisms are accessible, survivor-centered, and capable of holding perpetrators of GBV accountable, irrespective of customary claims or political influence.
2. **Supporting Autonomous Women's and LGBTQ+ Organizations:** Providing sustainable resources, political space, and security for grassroots women's and LGBTQ+ organizations is essential. These groups are often at the forefront of social change, possess invaluable local knowledge, and are best positioned to address the specific needs of their communities.<sup>3</sup>
3. **Promoting Education and Comprehensive Economic Empowerment:** Efforts must continue to eliminate barriers to girls' education and ensure women's equitable access to all levels of schooling. Beyond education, strategies must address the "leaky pipeline" by promoting women's labor force participation through measures like affordable childcare, challenging discriminatory hiring and workplace practices, supporting women's entrepreneurship, and ensuring equal pay and opportunities for advancement.<sup>2</sup>
4. **Challenging Patriarchal Norms and Harmful Cultural Practices:** Long-term change requires transforming deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes. This involves supporting cultural initiatives, media campaigns, and educational programs that promote gender equality, deconstruct harmful stereotypes (including those embedded in language and folklore), and explicitly challenge ideologies like "honor" that underpin violence.<sup>21</sup>
5. **Engaging Men and Boys as Allies:** Fostering critical discussions about masculinity, power, and privilege is vital. Supporting pro-feminist men's initiatives and educational programs can encourage men and boys to become active allies in challenging patriarchy and sharing responsibility for creating a gender-equal society.<sup>44</sup>
6. **Addressing Intersectional Discrimination:** An intersectional lens is crucial for recognizing and tackling the compounded discrimination faced by many Kurdish women and LGBTQ+ individuals due to their ethnicity, religion, class, displacement status, or other identities. Policies and community interventions must be designed to address these overlapping vulnerabilities.<sup>1</sup>
7. **Amplifying Decolonial Feminist Voices and Localized Knowledge:** Continued support for Kurdish scholars, activists, and artists in developing and disseminating knowledge, theories, and cultural expressions rooted in local experiences and critical of universalizing or colonial feminist frameworks is essential for contextually relevant and

empowering change.<sup>4</sup>

8. **Prioritizing Gender in Conflict Resolution, Peace-building, and Post-Conflict Reconstruction:** Ensuring women's meaningful participation at all levels of peace processes and decision-making is critical. Post-conflict reconstruction efforts must be gender-transformative, addressing the specific needs of women, men, and LGBTQ+ individuals affected by violence, and actively promoting gender equality to avoid the re-entrenchment of pre-conflict patriarchal structures.

In final reflection, the path towards genuine and sustainable gender equality within Kurdish societies is an ongoing and arduous struggle. It is a journey marked by profound contradictions, significant regional variations, and the constant negotiation between tradition and transformation. However, it is also a journey characterized by the remarkable resilience, courage, and innovative agency of Kurdish women, men, and LGBTQ+ individuals who continue to challenge oppression and envision a more just and equitable future for all. Their struggles and achievements offer vital lessons and inspiration for broader global movements for gender justice and human rights.

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