



IRAQ: Compound structural vulnerabilities facing Christian women under pressure for their faith

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Contents

Preface to in-depth series – Rationale and structure	2
Why a special in-depth country series on Women and Persecution dynamics?	2
Spheres of pressure	3
Categories of pressure.....	3
1. Introduction: The situation in Iraq	5
1.1 Broader context for Christians in Iraq	5
1.2 The situation of women in Iraq	7
2. Domestic sphere	8
2.1 Marriage	9
2.2 Domestic Violence.....	10
2.2.1 Throughout Iraq and KRI.....	10
2.2.2 Internally displaced people and refugee camps	11
2.3 Conversion within the family.....	11
3. Societal and cultural sphere	12
3.1 Female Genital Mutilation.....	13
3.2 Abduction, rape and forced marriage	13
3.3 Sexual abuse and harassment	15
3.3.1 Throughout Iraq and KRI.....	15
3.3.2 Internally displaced people and refugees.....	16
3.4 Restricted movement and dress codes	18
3.5 Female-headed households	19
3.6 Access to employment	20
3.7 Mental health and suicide	20
4. State sphere	22
4.1 Healthcare	24
4.2 State education.....	24
4.3 Impunity	25
5. Conclusion	27

Preface to in-depth series – Rationale and structure

Why a special in-depth country series on Women and Persecution dynamics?

Throughout history, women have been targeted in order to destroy whole societies. The means by which they are under pressure for their faith can become such a normalized part of culture and daily discrimination that they may be overlooked as an effective method of slowly, invisibly and sometimes legally undermining an entire community. Whether attacks are through structural inequalities or outright violence, as documented in Open Doors' World Watch List 2018,¹ they almost always occur in a wider context of violence against women and the inferior status of women: The lower the status of women in a society, the worse will be the violence against women in persecuted groups.

Dr Mariz Tadros provides a recent example of these intersecting vulnerabilities in Iraq:

the suffering of women from religious minorities has reached proportions greater than that of the general female population on account of their systematic targeting. It is distinct from the assault on Iraqi women on account of the politics of the intersection of gender with religious identity....

We may choose to see the sexual enslavement of women belonging to religious minorities, whether sold as slaves, detained for ISIS fighters' sexual exploitation, or in forced marriages as part of a broader spectrum of gender based violence.

True, it is. But it also needs to be seen as targeted genocide.²

While each of the reports in this series focuses on the situation of Christian women, this targeting is not unique to them: It happens to women in almost every religious minority, from Hindus and Ahmadis in Pakistan and Yazidi women under Islamic State, to Muslim women in the West. It is also not to say that all attacks or discrimination against minority Christian women are persecutory: Motive is complex and difficult to prove. However, at the core of religious persecution lies the unequal power relationships between people of different faiths: At the core of violence against women lies the unequal power relationships between men and women. For someone who belongs to two minority groups, the compounded vulnerabilities can make life doubly difficult, even deadly.

Global patterns exist in how women are persecuted, primarily focused on their differences to men and what they represent in their community and family. These attacks utilize culturally-enshrined notions of inferiority, purity and honor. Often they are not reported or measured as persecution, especially if they are viewed as normal within the culture or not seen as 'typical' persecution. Underpinning them are deep-rooted societal assumptions regarding women's

¹ "World Watch List 2018." *Open Doors Analytical*, 2018, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-2018/> (password: freedom).

² Tadros, Mariz. "International Women's Day: Solidarity & Iraqi Religious Minority Women." *Institute of Development Studies*, 8 Mar. 2015, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180328132609/https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinion/international-women-s-day-solidarity-and-iraqi-religious-minority-women>.

identity and nature: Crimes committed against women are more likely to engender shame and ostracism than those committed against men, and attackers rely upon this community response. Men are not blamed for being tortured: If a woman is raped she is far more likely to be blamed by both men and other women. Her whole family may be dishonored and fractured by her perceived loss of purity. Her family or community (even her church) may indirectly add to the persecution and trauma she has suffered through their response to her. Shame, coupled with lack of voice and resources, stops many women reporting violence, discrimination or persecution, including to (largely male) church leaders, so even the Church may not hear about persecution which affects women.

Spheres of pressure³

The reports are split into three sections: Domestic, societal and state spheres. However, the complex and interwoven nature of these spheres means that no section or sub-section can be seen outside the context of the others. The complexity will be mapped for each country in a diagram of pressures.

Categories of pressure

The pressures faced by women fall into three broad categories, which are integrated into each of the sections mentioned above:

1. *The direct targeting of Christian women for persecution.* These are not intended by aggressors purely as an attack on an individual woman, but on the men who are supposed to protect her, on the children who rely on her, and on the community of which she is an inextricable part.
2. *A) The areas in which all women within a culture face challenges, but in which Christian women are particularly vulnerable.* Many women may face sexual violence, but Christian converts are more likely to face it. Women's voices may not be listened to in court: Christian women's particularly not, creating complete impunity for attackers. These are areas in which persecution is a matter of the differential between the experience of all women and that of Christian women.

B) The areas in which Christians are discriminated against, but which have a disproportionate effect on women (and thus the whole family). Women disproportionately use public systems and community resources: It is women who collect water and food and

³ Please note that the term "pressure" in this paper is used in a broader sense than in standard WWL methodology and includes violent acts targeting women. In WWL methodology, "pressure" denotes non-violent persecution experienced in all areas of a Christian's life (Private, Family, Community, National and Church life) and "violence" is defined as "the deprivation of physical freedom or as serious bodily or mental harm to Christians or serious damage to their property" (and related incidents), which can potentially occur in all areas of life. For further discussion concerning this distinction, see: WWL Methodology, updated November 2017, pp. 17-21, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WWL-2018-Methodology-LONG-VERSION-November-2017.pdf> (password: freedom).

access medical services either for their children, or, much more than men (and in different ways to men) for themselves during their reproductive years.

3. *The harmful factors all/many women in a country face*, and in which the Church is, sadly, sometimes complicit, but which cannot be seen as persecutory factors in and of themselves (such as child marriage or lack of education). They do, however, create compounded disadvantages which impact women's ability to thrive, as outlined in *Gendered Persecution: World Watch List 2018 Analysis and Implications*.⁴ Exposing half (or more than half, given global statistics) the members of a church to these difficulties means that when persecution does come, the whole Body is less resilient. These issues may not appear to be related to persecution, but they are pressure points which weaken the whole Church. Persecution reinforces the social, cultural and institutional discrimination that women face in their daily lives and vice versa.

The reports focus on the intersecting vulnerabilities of women, however this is not to present them as 'natural victims' nor to reinforce ideas of the inevitability of violence against them. Nor is it to deny their agency – either in their ability to survive, find means to overcome persecution and be contributing members of their churches, or their complicity in perpetuating the hardships suffered by other women. Recognition and reinforcement of women's agency and resilience is key to healing and overcoming the challenges they face.

The distinct nature of how women are put under pressure for their faith ought not to be fatalistically accepted or ignored as inevitable or culturally neutral: Its strategic nature, and the incremental difference between *how* it happens to Christian as opposed to non-Christian women, needs to be taken into account if the whole Church is to tackle the persecution and daily discriminations which undermine women and, by extension, the Church.

Please note:

- 1) The symbol * indicates that names have been changed for the purposes of security.
- 2) WWL is the abbreviation for the annually published Open Doors World Watch List.

⁴ Fisher, Helene and Miller, Elizabeth. "[Gendered persecution: World Watch List 2018 Analysis and Implications](https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Gendered-persecution-WWL-2018-analysis-and-implications.pdf)." *World Watch Monitor*, 2018, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Gendered-persecution-WWL-2018-analysis-and-implications.pdf>.

1. Introduction: The situation in Iraq

Christian women in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI) face compounded vulnerability to persecution at the intersection between cultural and societal inequalities on the one hand and religious persecution on the other. The situation of all women in Iraq is underpinned and exacerbated by the current conflict and insecurity and its aftermath and must be seen through that lens. Despite a context of cultural and structural violence against women, the targeting of women from religious minorities in Iraq cannot simply be written off as part of the general context: Their suffering is distinct both in its severity and its systematic and existential nature. The targeting of Christian women can be deliberately used as a strategy to weaken or even destroy the Church in the short and long term.

The situation of Christian women differs according to many factors and, in the context of instability and the breakdown of infrastructure, concrete information to give the full picture is not available. This profile will, however, outline the situation of both internally displaced Christian women and those who have remained in their homes. Where local organizations have insight, regional differences and similarities, especially those between KRI and Iraq, will also be highlighted.

The program priorities of local organizations further highlight some of the major vulnerabilities and forms of persecution facing Christian women in the context of conflict, such as trauma and the lack of access to employment.

1.1 Broader context for Christians in Iraq⁵

WWL Year ⁶	WWL Points	WWL Position
2018	86	8
2017	86	7
2016	90	2
2015	86	3
2014	78	4

Figure 1: Open Doors World Watch List points and global ranking of Iraq, 2014-2018.

Despite reclamation of much Islamic State-held territory in 2017, the ideology associated with the invading force has seeped into the wider population of Iraq and, as seen in Figure 1, the World Watch List points awarded to Iraq for degrees of pressure on and violence towards Christians have decreased only minimally since 2016 (where Iraq has fallen to 8th position globally on the World Watch List, this is more to do with the increased pressure on Christians in other countries than it is to do with a greatly improved situation in Iraq). Coupled with the breakdown of infrastructure and of the rule of law, this has led to a rise in violence. The Islamic

⁵ "Country Dossier: Iraq." Open Doors Analytical, *Open Doors*, Apr. 2018. All World Watch Research country dossiers are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/country-dossiers/> (password: freedom).

⁶ The reporting period for each "WWL year" is the November to October period directly prior to the year of publication. E.g. for WWL 2017, the research analysis covered 1 November 2015 – 31 October 2016 and was published in January 2017.

State group (IS) have also been joined other violent Islamist groups. Massive displacement – both internal and emigration abroad - continues to be an issue, both as a result of violence and as a contributing factor. For many of those displaced, it remains difficult to return home: Areas are still insecure, property has been destroyed or stolen and employment is difficult to find.

Iraq is split into two culturally and linguistically distinct areas: the majority of the country is governed by the Iraqi Government, and, in the North East, Iraqi Kurdistan/ Kurdistan Region (KRI) by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Much of the Christian population has been caught in the border areas between these two areas, and in addition to their minority status have found themselves trapped between the two sides in the ongoing conflict over land, resources and oil.

Whilst recognizing Islam as the official religion of Iraq, the Constitution upholds the equal rights and status of people of all religions before the law without discrimination, and their right to be free from religious coercion. IS and other militant groups, however, aim to make the country entirely Muslim: in areas they held, no public gatherings were allowed (i.e. no church meetings), churches and monasteries have been demolished or used as weapons stores, mosques, jails and animal stabling. Christians and others have been forced to convert to Sunni Islam. Many fled, some hid or were captured. Many church leaders emigrated due to lethal targeting.

With their loss of territory, many of these fighters have dispersed into the general population, where they spread their ideology and continue to use killings, detention, kidnap/ forced disappearance and the death sentence.

Their influence has also led to increased conservatism and ‘Islamic awareness’ across society, including in areas IS have not held. Senior clerics have stressed the need for jihad/ *jizya* (tax on non-Muslims)/ conversion for Christians, Jews and others. Women have seen more control exerted over their everyday lives and freedom to move about, and the wearing of headscarves has become more usual, including for Christian women in some places. Things have historically been slightly easier in KRI, although there is increased conservatism and anti-Christian feeling there too now.

On top of this, Sharia law forbids conversion away from Islam, and government regulations will make it very difficult for a convert to change the religion on their identity documents. Thus, as their ‘apostasy’ is officially unrecognized, their children are automatically registered as Muslim. Christian children are also forced to be legally identified as Muslim if either parent converts to Islam or if their mother marries a Muslim. The US State Department reports Christian, Yazidi, and Kaka’i community leaders as saying that “forced conversion was the de facto result of the national identity card law”.⁷

Most violence against Christians comes from aggressive Islamist groups or individuals. Christians may also face strong pressure from individuals, society, armed groups and government officials who try to persuade (or coerce) them to emigrate or convert/return to Islam. Additional issues

⁷ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. “[Iraq 2016 International Religious Freedom Report](https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dclid=268892#wrapper).” U.S. Department of State, 2017, p11, available at: <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dclid=268892#wrapper>.

affecting Christians include high levels of corruption, including through ransoms demanded of Christian hostages and theft of property belonging to Christians (especially those who have left the country).

Converts from Islam primarily face pressure from within their (extended) families, by whom they may be disinherited or disowned. A convert’s new faith is seen to bring shame on a Muslim family, so there may be threats, violence and torture. They may also lose the right or means to marry, lose their job, and be placed under pressure from government authorities. Combined with this is the strong element of tribalism and ethno-sectarian violence, which is particularly difficult for Christians with a Muslim tribal background: they face a double loss/ rejection.

All Christians find it very difficult to openly practice their faith in central and southern areas. Even wholly Christian families must be cautious when sharing their faith with their children.

1.2 The situation of women in Iraq

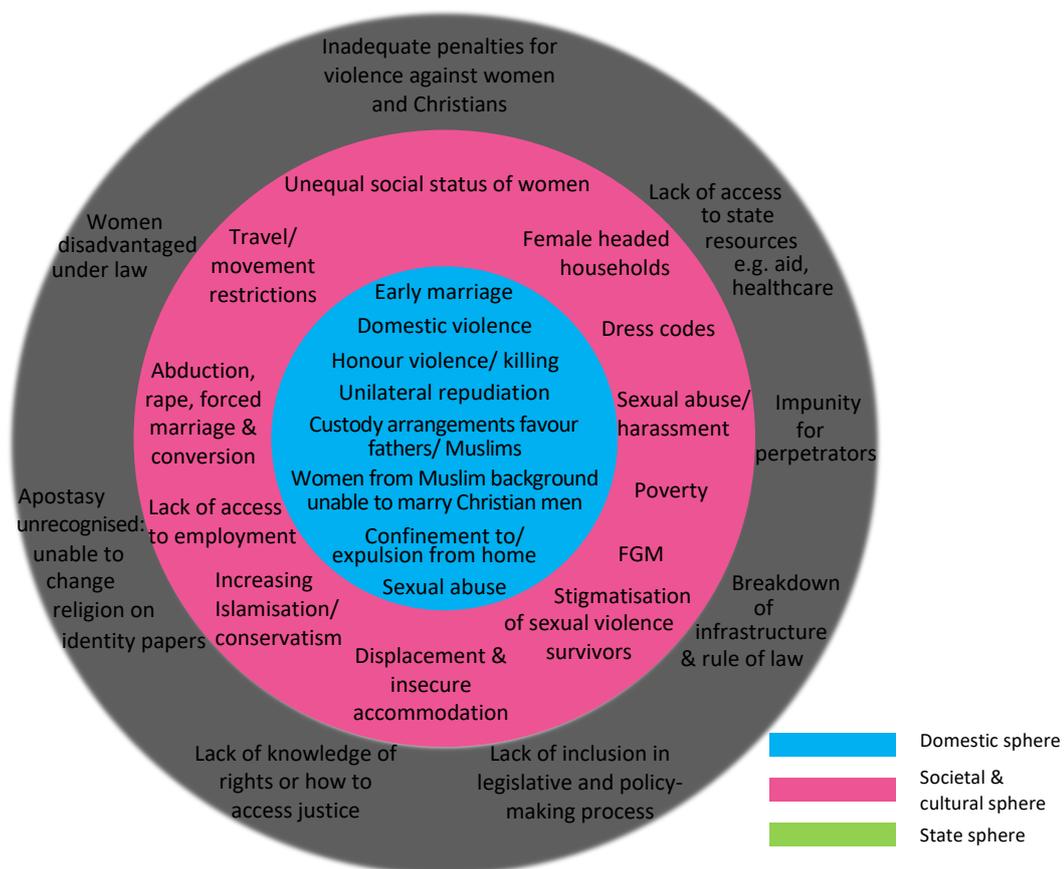


Figure 2.: Areas of pressure faced by Iraqi women in general, and Christian women in particular.

The strongly patriarchal nature of Iraqi culture is reflected in both the public and private spheres. Whilst the severity of this may vary according to region, wealth and educational levels, the pervasive culture is a factor which all Iraqi women will face on a regular basis. This report examines some of the issues which affect Christian women in the domestic, social and cultural

and state spheres, as highlighted in Figure 2. Many of these affect Iraqi women generally but may be exacerbated for Christian women, and for Christian women from a Muslim background in particular. As conservative Islamic ideology seeps further into the culture as a result of instability and radical influences, those who are neither Muslim nor male will inevitably end up at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Much of the context in which Christian women live in Iraq today is set against a backdrop of mass emigration and internal displacement. Approximately 258,000 Christians remain in the country in total.⁸ At the start of 2015, there were believed to be 300,000, but this was already a decline from 1.2 million in the 1990s.⁹ Many have fled to Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.¹⁰

IS is the latest in a long line of reasons for Christians to leave the country. Other factors include the decades of conflict, including the almost complete destruction of some historically Christian towns in the Nineveh plains of northern Iraq, emigration and subsequent loss of community for those left behind, the rate of inflation and loss of employment opportunities, and the lack of educational opportunities. While direct violence, such as the movements of IS in both Iraq and Syria, was the tipping point for displacement, the ultimate decision to leave the countries has been due to an accumulation of factors over time.¹¹

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Iraq points out that those who subsequently find it hardest to return home are the poorest and most vulnerable.¹² While they do not disaggregate this, it is highly likely that this will include both women (particularly unaccompanied women and girls) and religious minorities. A study by the World Council of Churches and Norwegian Church Aid states that sectarian feelings have become ingrained in Iraqi society, well beyond militant Islamist groups, adding to the risks faced by Christian returnees.¹³ Any lack of security always impacts women more than men and in ways distinct from those faced by men.

2. Domestic sphere

Christian women, especially converts, often face the most severe persecution at the hands of non-Christian family and community members who are respectful of the country's apostasy laws and traditions. A series of additional legal impediments and restrictions further trap the women in dangerous situations.

⁸ Open Doors Analytical, 2018, p.5.

⁹ "Freedom of Religion and the Persecution of Christians: The Open Doors Report 2015." *Open Doors*, Jan. 2015, available at: https://www.opendoorsuk.org/about/how-we-help/advocacy/world_watch_report.

¹⁰ Wilkinson, Olivia, and Suzanne Manar. "Understanding Recent Movements of Christians from Syria and Iraq to Other Countries across the Middle East and Europe." *Open Doors, Served and Middle East Concern*, 2017, p.4.

¹¹ Wilkinson and Manar, 2017, p.5.

¹² "UN Migration Agency Publishes Assessment on Displacement and Returns in Iraq." *IOM, Iraq Mission*, 12 Dec. 2017, available at: <http://iomiraq.net/article/un-migration-agency-publishes-assessment-displacement-and-returns-iraq>.

¹³ Cited in "Sorrow Stalks Iraqi Christians in Lebanon." *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*, 10 Jan. 2018, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2018/1/59b990f84.html>.

2.1 Marriage

There is wide regional variation (statistics are far lower in KRI), but across the country, 5% of Iraqi girls are married by the time they are fifteen, and 24% by the time they are eighteen,¹⁴ although UNICEF states that child marriage is underreported because it is known to be illegal.¹⁵ Mass displacement, financial hardship and the breakdown of bureaucratic structures during conflict probably exacerbate this underreporting and make it difficult to gather data. The legal age for marriage is eighteen, but girls (not boys) can marry at fifteen with a judge's consent.

Whilst early marriage is always present, it increases during times of instability:

The reiterated fear of sexual violence by IDPs [internally displaced people] has implications on perpetuating other forms of GBV [gender-based violence], such as child marriage. Child marriage is certainly not only a result of fear and stigma; it increases considerably when families struggle financially. Child marriage is viewed as the ultimate, community-level protection mechanism for preserving a girl's sexual purity.¹⁶

Girls who marry early, and therefore do not complete their studies, are especially impacted by family disintegration during war: they may be separated from their family during displacement if they remain with their husband, reducing their support structures and increasing isolation. A girl may face the risks associated with early childbirth and divorce or widowhood before attaining adulthood. Even in peacetime, early marriage makes girls more vulnerable to domestic violence¹⁷ and less likely to have a source of livelihood that guarantees them and their children a decent life. This is a cycle which is difficult to break as a restrictive view of the role of women and their work has become engrained in society. There are clearly-defined roles among many of those from middle-class and poorer backgrounds, with women expected to be under the authority of their father and brother(s), and subsequently their husband. Women's financial dependence on men makes them more vulnerable to poverty if their husband loses his income or if the family become separated by family breakdown, war and displacement. Lacking education, they become easy targets for exploitation by those who would undermine the Church. In addition, those married underage by imams with the marriage remaining unregistered have no legal protection should the marriage break down: Technically they have engaged in illegal extra-marital sex.

In November 2017, the Iraqi Parliament withdrew a proposed amendment to the existing 1959 Personal Status Law, which would have abandoned a minimum age of marriage for Muslim girls, amongst other changes.¹⁸ The fact that this is the second time since 2014 that this package of

¹⁴ "Child Marriage." *UNICEF*, available at: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>, accessed 23 March 2018.

¹⁵ "A Gendered Perspective: Safety, Dignity and Privacy of Camp and Camp-like Settings in Iraq." *IOM Iraq*, Feb. 2016, p.35, available at: <http://iomiraq.net/reports/gendered-perspective-safety-dignity-and-privacy-camp-and-camp-settings-iraq>.

¹⁶ *IOM Iraq*, 2016, p.35.

¹⁷ "Child Marriage in Kurdistan Region - Iraq." *United Nations Population Fund*, 2016, available at: <https://iraq.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Child%20Marriage%20Broucher%20English%20Final%20covers%206.pdf>.

¹⁸ "Iraq Withdraws Controversial 'Child Marriage Law'." *The New Arab*, 23 Nov. 2017, available at: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/11/23/iraq-withdraws-controversial-child-marriage-law>.

amendments has been proposed by clerics and seriously considered by Parliament reflects the growing conservatism in attitudes towards women and girls. Whilst the amendment would only have applied to Muslim girls, this could also potentially affect any Christian girl registered as Muslim, for instance if her mother had re-married a Muslim man or if either one of her parents had converted to Islam, in which case she would automatically be re-registered as Muslim.¹⁹

2.2 Domestic violence

Whilst always present in any nation, domestic violence increases during emergency situations or conflict, and Iraq is no exception to this: stress, trauma, increased poverty and the normalization of violence are all contributing factors. Those abused in this way face ongoing physical and psychological trauma, including chronic depression and anxiety.

Inequitable gender views which have become established in Iraq, and which perceive the man as the safety, protection and stability of his wife and family, place great pressure on men to be tough and to provide for the family. Single women, divorcees and widows are consequently viewed as weaker and lacking the protection a man would provide. Trauma care staff of the Chaldean Church's Centre for Self in Need in Erbil explain that the attitudes and behavior of Christians are also influenced by non-Christian cultures and their views of women and gender roles.

2.2.1 Throughout Iraq and KRI

Organizations such as IOM have reported a rise in physical, verbal and emotional abuse of wives and by parents of their children across the whole population, linking this to the extreme stress of living with instability, loss of income or property, and displacement.²⁰ For Christians, the additional pressure of persecution only adds to the potential for abusive behavior. Liza Hido and Susan Bella, working with women victims of abuse, reiterate this fact and emphatically underline that domestic violence and rape cases are not confined to IDP camps, but are a widespread problem which is deepening in gravity as conflict endures.^{21, 22} Hido reports that due to the spread of weapons and militias, all women are subjected to violence; and the violence witnessed across the country is linked to endemic violence witnessed inside households.

Bella reiterates that domestic and sexual violence within the home are increasing, and not only depending on displacement or stability. There are situations of violence among stable families in their home areas as well as displaced families. It is also not linked to low economic level or lack of education: domestic and sexual violence towards women and children happens within well-educated and economically comfortable families.

¹⁹ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2017, p.5.

²⁰ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2017, pp.23, 37.

²¹ Watson, Ruth. "Interview with informant Susan Bella, involved in work with women victims of abuse in Iraq." 16 May 2017.

²² Watson, Ruth. "Interview with Liza Hido, President of Baghdad Women's Association." 10 May 2017.

Local Christian organizations have found growing levels of domestic violence and alcoholism among Christian families, reflecting the broader problem throughout Iraq. Trauma center staff in Erbil state that cultural perceptions that men should control women can lead to distortions of the biblical role of both. Some Christian female IDPs helped by the trauma center therefore believe that passages which call upon women to submit to their husbands mean that they must suffer abuse obediently.

The center staff press the need for trauma counselling to tackle such behavior and help people to work through their trauma to prevent it being passed on from generation to generation as children witness and experience abuse.²³ The ripple effect of violence against Christians is perpetuated in this trauma-based abuse: even after the persecution and/or violence from external aggressors has gone, the impact of what has happened continues to be played out in families. Domestic violence in and of itself fractures families, even if they stay together, making them less resilient to pressures and persecution.

2.2.2 Internally displaced people and refugee camps

Where privacy is lacking in displacement camps, this can be very difficult for women in mixed-sex environments. Both men and women face the challenge of running a family in a cramped space, and there have been cases of domestic violence committed by husbands when a wife does not want to have sex in front of children and family. Added to this, for men there is the disempowerment which comes with not being able to provide for the family. The International Organization for Migration found the sense of emasculation and lack of employment opportunities in IDP camps to be a key reason male IDPs gave for acting violently towards their wives. Frustration felt by both men and women can also then lead in some cases to parental abuse of children.²⁴ One reason for the proliferation of the problem is that participation on camp committees for women is very low (91% of committee members were men in 2015)²⁵ and violence by intimate partners within camps is often not tackled.

2.3 Conversion within the family

If Muslim girls or women convert to Christianity, they face extreme danger and may be abused, killed, evicted or forcibly confined to the house by their family (or husband's family), particularly when conversion away from Islam is seen as bringing shame on the whole family. This sense of shame is reinforced by a legal structure previously described in which such conversion is proscribed by apostasy laws. While this is a real danger for all Christians with a Muslim background, women and girls are easier targets for forced confinement. Whilst men can flee and are more mobile, women often do not have a passport, cannot travel unaccompanied, lack financial resources and cannot easily enter employment in a new place. Women are also much more vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking when fleeing, and although there are safe-

²³ "If we do nothing, this trauma will travel from generation to generation." *Open Doors* (internal document), 26 Oct. 2016.

²⁴ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2017, p.37.

²⁵ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2017, p.6.

houses for abused women, those Christians with a Muslim background would potentially face persecution here too. As with men, any woman who converts loses all inheritance rights, and, given the lack of access to resources and to economic life, Christian women with a Muslim background are therefore extremely vulnerable to the familial and societal consequences of conversion.

If they do not try to escape, they may in any case face unilateral repudiation and lose custody of or access to their children. Iraqi law provides for each recognized religion to have its own Personal Status Courts to handle matters such as marriage, divorce and inheritance.²⁶ However, a Christian woman with a Muslim background must still submit to her husband, and/or if her conversion has not been legally recognized on her identity papers, she will have her divorce and custody matters dealt with by a Muslim court, which is highly likely to award custody to her husband and his relatives.

3. Societal and cultural sphere

Attitudes towards the role of women have shifted and changed as conflicts have served at times to increase women's access to education, healthcare and employment, and in other cases to limit the role of women to traditional maternal roles. Many men were conscripted in the Iran-Iraq war, giving women new roles and a larger view of their potential in society. However, sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s led to a reduction in women's access to work, employment and limited wages, according to Yasmin al-Jawaheri's analysis of the gender impact of economic sanctions in Iraq.²⁷ Women are expected to be under the protection and authority of their father or husband, and the current mind-set in many cases sees men as more skilled and possessing greater potential to contribute to society economically and in leadership.

As with household relations, gender attitudes in society are directly impacted by conflict and displacement which increases economic stress, as described above. Iraq's recent history of wars, ongoing conflict and three decades of militarization have ingrained inequalities in gender roles.²⁸ Sectarian and ethnic divisions, along with a growing conservatism, have hindered women's participation in all areas of life. Therefore, while conflicts have seen men die, leaving increasing numbers of female-headed households, women have nevertheless seen access to education and economic life severely hindered and gender-based violence and harassment reach extreme levels.

At a time of increased Islamic conservatism, non-Muslim women find themselves at the very bottom of society's hierarchy, under high pressure through employment discrimination, kidnappings, physical attacks and pressure to comply with dress codes.

²⁶ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2017, p.5.

²⁷ Cited in Twaij, Ahmed. "Iraqi women shackled by cultural constraints." *The Arab Weekly*, 6 Nov. 2016, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/iraqi-women-shackled-cultural-constraints>.

²⁸ *IOM Iraq*, 2016, p.9.

3.1 Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation (FGM) stems from pre-Islamic views about women's purity and sexuality needing to be controlled. It leads to lifelong health problems ranging from blood loss, sepsis (often fatal) and trauma at the time of the procedure through to obstetric fistula, severe tearing during sex and maternal and child mortality. Acute and chronic pain and infection breaks down relationships between girls and their parents (who have paid for the procedure to be performed on their daughters) and between wives and their husbands.

FGM is not widespread in Iraq, but it is present. UNICEF (2013) estimates that 8% of women and girls are cut across the whole of Iraq: German organization Wadi state that this actually occurs exclusively in the North of the country, in the KRI. This means that far more than 8% of women and girls in KRI have been cut. Wadi says that of the women they surveyed in KRI, 44% of adult women had been cut, but, encouragingly, this number was down from 60% in 2004, and only 11% of their daughters had been cut,²⁹ although numbers were up to 57% of fourteen- to nineteen-year olds in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and New Kirkuk.³⁰

However, others, including the World Health Organisation,³¹ say that as very few studies have been done in other areas of the country, and as there is less freedom to discuss FGM outside the KRI, the numbers may be higher elsewhere amongst non-Kurds. There is no data disaggregated by religion: while it is not known to happen amongst Christians, given that it does happen amongst them in other countries, it is possible that this happens in Iraq too.

3.2 Abduction, rape and forced marriage

UN Security Council Resolution 1820 states that:

Civilians account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict; ... women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instil fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group; and that sexual violence perpetrated in this manner may in some instances persist after the cessation of hostilities.³²

Women of minority religions in IS-controlled areas have often been subjected to sexual slavery, trafficking, forced marriage and forced conversion both within and across Iraqi borders. IS justifies this on ideological grounds, but the money involved in selling the women and girls suggests it is also a lucrative financial enterprise.

²⁹ "Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Iraqi-Kurdistan: Still an Unresolved Problem." *Wadi*, 28 Dec. 2017, available at: <https://wadi-online.org/2017/12/28/female-genital-mutilation-fgm-in-iraqi-kurdistan-still-an-unresolved-problem/>.

³⁰ "Questions and Answers on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Iraqi Kurdistan." *Human Rights Watch*, 16 June 2010, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/06/16/questions-and-answers-female-genital-mutilation-fgm-iraqi-kurdistan>.

³¹ *Human Rights Watch*, 2010.

³² *UN Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008) on Women, Peace and Security*, available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/docs/2008/6/un-security-council-resolution-1820>.

In addition to this, the dire economic situation has forced some female heads of households, as well as women who were too late to escape invading Islamist forces, to marry militants because they lacked other solutions to survive. Under IS's rule, women are rarely allowed to leave the house without a male chaperone: No husband means no way to access food, water or other resources.

Very few Christians were among those left behind; many who stayed were elderly or were not in a position to be able to flee and have now been moved to Erbil. IS took some Christian hostages, both young and a few older women. A number of these women were taken into sexual slavery, but this was not on the same scale as the numbers of Yazidis who were taken hostage.³³

Professor Mariz Tadros writes that:

We may choose to see the sexual enslavement of women belonging to religious minorities, whether sold as slaves, detained for ISIS fighters' sexual exploitation, or in forced marriages as part of a broader spectrum of gender based violence.

True, it is. But it also needs to be seen as targeted genocide.³⁴

Of those who survive IS's brutality, the numbers of women and girls who have been raped is likely to be far higher than witness reports suggest: The stigma attached to rape means that it is difficult for many even to admit to having been abducted at all, and the opportunities for reporting and for trauma care are limited. Both IOM Iraq and Human Rights Watch report that women and girls they spoke to will almost never say that they were raped: Instead they report

IS ABDUCTIONS

RANA ESSO, A CHRISTIAN WOMAN FROM QARAQOSH, WAS ABDUCTED IN AUGUST 2014. SHE WAS THEN SOLD 7 TIMES AND ABUSED BY DIFFERENT MEN CONNECTED TO IS. SHE WAS EVENTUALLY FREED, ALONG WITH THREE YAZIDI WOMEN, WHEN MILITARY FORCES LIBERATED TALA'AFAR, WHERE SHE HAD BEEN HELD, IN AUGUST 2017.

RITA HABIB WAS ALSO ABDUCTED IN QARAQOSH IN AUGUST 2014. SHE WAS SOLD TO FOUR DIFFERENT MEN - AN IRAQI, A SYRIAN AND TWO SAUDI ARABIANS - ALL OF WHOM WERE MARRIED WITH CHILDREN AND ALL OF WHOM RAPED AND TORTURED HER AND USED HER AS A DOMESTIC SLAVE, AND SHE WAS FORCED TO HAVE AN ABORTION. SHE SAW GIRLS AS YOUNG AS NINE BEING RAPED AND SOLD. EVENTUALLY MS HABIB AND A YAZIDI WOMAN WITH HER WERE FREED BY THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES IN NOVEMBER 2017.

³³ Boxed stories: Rana Ezzo: "[Christian Woman Released After Three Years in Captivity.](https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/iraq-170830/)" *Open Doors UK*, 29 Aug. 2017 (available at: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/stories/iraq-170830/>). Rita Habib: Spencer, Richard. "[Three Years a Sex Slave: Woman Tells of Suffering under ISIS.](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/three-years-a-sex-slave-woman-tells-of-suffering-under-isis-0mfv3pnhh)" *The Times*, 16 Apr. 2018 (available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/three-years-a-sex-slave-woman-tells-of-suffering-under-isis-0mfv3pnhh>) and "[Iraqi Christian Rita Was Sold Four Times on the IS Sex Slave Market.](https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/iraqi-christian-rita-was-sold-four-times-on-the-is-sex-slave-market/)" *World Watch Monitor*, 19 June 2018 (available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/06/iraqi-christian-rita-was-sold-four-times-on-the-is-sex-slave-market/>).

³⁴ Tadros, Mariz. "[International Women's Day: Solidarity & Iraqi Religious Minority Women.](https://web.archive.org/web/20180328132609/https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinion/international-women-s-day-solidarity-and-iraqi-religious-minority-women)" *Institute of Development Studies*, 8 Mar. 2015, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180328132609/https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinion/international-women-s-day-solidarity-and-iraqi-religious-minority-women>.

successfully fighting off attacks, or of not being attacked themselves but having heard of others who were, or the daily fear of attack.^{35, 36}

IS are not the only perpetrators of abduction and rape. Nadjie Al-Ali contends that “ISIS violence [against religious minorities] is part of complex interlinking configurations of power in which sexualised and gender-based violence are normalised and intrinsic to hyper militarised authoritarianism.”³⁷ Informants report Christian women, particularly of Muslim background, being kidnapped and raped, then shamed by having the rape made public. They are forced into converting to Islam and marrying their attacker, the marriage viewed as already consummated.

Women may have little redress for rape. Iraqi law states that a rapist will not be prosecuted if he marries his victim, ostensibly to protect her honor and that of her family. If a Christian woman marries her attacker, not only will she be marrying into an already violent situation, she will also have no chance of marrying a Christian man and her children will legally be Muslim. However, following the repeal of similar laws in Tunisia, Lebanon and Jordan in 2017, there is now pressure from women in Iraq to persuade the Iraqi Government to change the law in Iraq as well.³⁸

3.3 Sexual abuse and harassment

3.3.1 Throughout Iraq and KRI

Sexual harassment is part of the daily experience of most women in Iraq and KRI. According to a 2015 report by the Iraqi Women’s Journalists Forum, 8 in 10 women experienced sexual harassment,³⁹ and the fear of sexual violence is a major contributor to stress and adaptive behavior (such as not allowing girls to go to school, not participating in collection of aid distributions, and women who were once employed no longer leaving the house, for fear of being attacked on the journey. See discussion of early marriage above on page 7).

Women’s lower social status within a patriarchal culture makes them an easy target for violence which not only causes physical and psychological trauma, but also inflicts humiliation. The stigmatization of victims is a major challenge, and where a family’s honor resides in the perceived sexual behavior of the women, an attack on a woman is seen as an attack on the whole family and even the community. Blaming victims also leads to their silence and isolation out of fear of shame, reprisals and honor violence, with no way to deal with the trauma they have suffered.

³⁵ *IOM Iraq*, 2016. P.14.

³⁶ “Iraq: Forced Marriage, Conversion for Yezidis.” *Human Rights Watch*, 11 Oct. 2014, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/11/iraq-forced-marriage-conversion-yezidis>.

³⁷ Al-Ali, Nadjie. “Sexualized Violence in Iraq: How to Understand and Fight It.” *Open Democracy*, 24 Sep. 2014, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/nadjie-alali/sexualized-violence-in-iraq-how-to-understand-and-fight-it>.

³⁸ Kalso, Heba. “Will Iraq Be next to Abolish Controversial 'Marry Your Rapist' Law?” *Thomson Reuters*, 29 Mar. 2018, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-law-rape/will-iraq-be-next-to-abolish-controversial-marry-your-rapist-law-idUSKBN1H5318>.

³⁹ “Eight out of 10 women sexually harassed in Iraq.” *Al Jazeera*, 21 Oct. 2015, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/iraq-sexual-harassment-151019160003205.html>.

Increased sexual abuse and harassment are also linked to the sectarian conflict and violence, and are used along with killings to intimidate and humiliate rival communities and settle scores. The weakened rule of law and lack of legislation to recognize the problem and punish perpetrators allows it to grow and continue.

Yezidi and Christian women have both fallen victim to this deliberate targeting in Iraq and KRI. For Christian women, the inability to move around safely and to meet in church groups isolates them further at a time when fellowship is at its most necessary (movement restrictions are not only due to security concerns but are also imposed by armed groups and by social norms in some areas). Social exclusion itself is also an added risk factor for sexual abuse and domestic violence and is an added factor in women being unable to access vital resources. For both women and men, the intense fear for women and girls' safety will undermine the time, energy and well-being necessary to be a fully-functioning Christian community.

Whilst women in KRI are targeted for sexual abuse and kidnapping relatively less than in the rest of Iraq and women's activism is very strong, general harassment remains a major issue to tackle.

3.3.2 Internally displaced people and refugees

As widely reported by local and international organizations working in displacement camps, the greatest obstacle faced by refugee and displaced women and girls is the lack of basic dignified living conditions and exposure to harassment and violence by men in camps, especially when using shared latrines, showers and kitchens. Insufficient lighting, over-crowded camps and buildings, lack of doors or door locks and few security patrols around the sites and water points have left many women and girls feeling too unsafe to leave their tents or rooms alone: An estimated 46% of those living in camps and shelters do not have doors on their dwellings.⁴⁰ Many dwellings also lack internal partitions, leading to loss of privacy and increased tension and violence within and between families living together.

IDPs also live in unsafe locations outside camps, especially in Salahedin where they are often subjected to violations committed by the militant Islamist group *heshd al shaabi*.⁴¹ There has been an increase in provision of private cabins which improves the security for toilets and allows for better hygiene. Yet safe-houses for girls often house both young girls and young adults as the threat of harassment continues. Both in and outside camps, women have times been forced to 'pay' for aid distributions with sex, or have gone without aid to which they are entitled.

While harassment and rape are less prevalent in Christian camps, the loss of dignity is a common challenge due to the basic fact of being dependent on others for food handouts, income etc. In particular, local organizations report that rapes occurred in the Christian Ankawa camp, which was later closed due to poor living conditions, with people living in close proximity to one another and without standard protection.

When IDPs arrive in the camps, women are separated from the men of the family, who undergo many security checks (although this is less the case in Christian and Yezidi camps). They are left

⁴⁰ IOM Iraq, 2016, p.29.

⁴¹ Hido, 2017.

alone with the children, sometimes for weeks, without news of the men and not knowing if they have passed the security check. Culturally, it is difficult for women to live in the camps without the men. Whilst waiting, they generally are placed in transit camps where multiple families are living in huge tents together, or halls with a curtain between families. When the men are released and join their families, then they may be given a tent where they can have an increased measure of privacy.

Another serious consequence of the lack of dignified living conditions and difficult access to employment has led to women being forced into prostitution/survival sex, sometimes even in Christian IDP camps in Baghdad and Erbil. Bella, Hido and other local sources all confirm the phenomenon.

Hido and Bella add that prostitution is not a new issue, but that there have been increasing numbers of women among IDPs and refugees who need to generate income and therefore turn to prostitution as a matter of survival for themselves and their families. It may also happen when women seek to escape families and instead turn to individuals who exploit their vulnerability and employ them in prostitution networks with the promise of a safe place to live. A woman may wish to escape forced marriage, violence at the hands of family members or violent reprisals for engaging in sexual relations before marriage.

This is a very sensitive topic as it is highly taboo in Iraq and it is difficult to obtain any concrete information. The Baghdad Women's Association is interested in further investigating the occurrence of prostitution in Baghdad and Erbil among displaced people but are faced with the sensitivity of the topic and the fact that women will refuse to talk for their own security. The Kurdish government also sponsors some women's organizations to tackle the issue and there is quite a strong movement on this. However, long-term engagement by the Church and women's groups will be needed to work with those affected.

In February 2017, SALT Iraq reported to the European Parliament that as Christians returned to check on their homes in Mosul, neighbours had become influenced by radical ideology and some Christians received threats to stay away or face the same treatment that the Yezidi people had faced at the hands of IS, including mass rape of women and torture.⁴² The ideology behind the restrictions on women's freedom of movement and their broader rights under IS, and the sexual abuse of those they captured, especially as a reprisal against religious groups, will require ongoing, concerted action to challenge.

The long-term trauma of sexual violence (including non-physical harassment, which can also be terrifying), regardless of the source or the perpetrator, can have a devastating effect on entire families and communities, and the Church is no exception. When survivors of abuse are shamed and ostracized, rather than integrated and supported, their chances of healing are far lower. Even the threat or fear of sexual violence hampers the ability to function normally on a daily basis. For the Church, this trauma and fear (and potentially victim-shaming) can affect the survival and participation of the Christian community itself, and the extent to which it is able to

⁴² Nishtiman, William. "European Parliament hearing 'What Future for Christians in Iraq and Syria'." *SALT Foundation – Iraq*, 6 June 2017.

heal following conflict and displacement. When this is compounded by other traumas such as those mentioned in this report, it can create an intolerable pressure on individuals, families and the community.

3.4 Restricted movement and dress codes

Freedom of both movement and dress can depend greatly on region and between rural and urban areas. For example, in comparison to the KRI, pressure is greater in Baghdad, and still greater in Basra and the south, for women to adhere to Islamic dress code. Christian women have generally had more freedom within their own communities than some other women have. While the danger for Christian women displaying Christian symbols and not wearing the hijab is extremely high in some areas, with violent reprisals, organizations in Iraq explain that wearing the cross can in fact be viewed positively at many checkpoints in certain areas of Baghdad and KRI. Levels of wealth, parents with higher education and parents who fulfilled non-traditional roles in the family (such as fathers carrying out domestic work) also determine equitable gender attitudes and levels of freedom afforded by the family regarding dress.

Under IS, among the many restrictions on women, several reports described the strict impositions of wearing a double veil and gloves and never being outside the home without a male relative. Those who do not comply have faced beatings and fines. Reports from Mosul suggest that male relatives are beaten for women's non-compliance, in order to force men to ensure dress codes are adhered to in their households, and IOM Iraq states that "Thus, such rulings and restrictions have the capacity to entrench harmful gender relations that may continue to restrict [women] in the future."⁴³ It remains to be seen how deeply rooted the IS ideology has become in the wider Iraqi population.^{44, 45} The US State Department report states that:

Non-Shia Muslim and non-Muslim women felt societal pressure to wear hijabs and all-black clothing during the month of Muharram, particularly during Ashura, to avoid harassment.... According to representatives of Christian NGOs, some Muslims continued to threaten women and girls, regardless of their religious affiliation, for refusing to wear the hijab, for dressing in Western-style clothing, or for not adhering to strict interpretations of Islamic norms governing public behavior. Numerous women, including Christians and Sabaeen-Mandaeans, reported opting to wear the hijab after being harassed.⁴⁶

For those living in IDP camps, as well as lack of safety when moving around the camp, the restrictions often continue inside their temporary homes: they may share tents with multiple families, including men, and strict standards of both dress and behavior are thus adhered to

⁴³ IOM Iraq, 2016, p.17-18.

⁴⁴ Mahmood, Mona. "Double-layered veils and despair... women describe life under ISIS." *The Guardian*, 17 Feb. 2015, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/17/isis-orders-women-iraq-syria-veils-gloves>.

⁴⁵ Callimachi, Rukmini. "For Women under ISIS, a Tyranny of Dress Code and Punishment." *The New York Times*, 12 Dec. 2016, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/12/world/middleeast/islamic-state-mosul-women-dress-code-morality.html>.

⁴⁶ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2017, p.20.

even inside the tent, with some women reportedly being unable to remove veils at any time,⁴⁷ although this is less likely to be the case in Christian camps.

While ideologically-enforced movement restrictions are a factor, they are not the only reason why women are not free to move around: other reasons include fear of violence, lack of safety or of secure transport, loss of documentation, and existing social norms which discourage women from leaving the house without a male chaperone. With the mass displacement of people and the increased violence resulting from conflict, these have become far greater factors in the past few years. All of these inhibit girls' and women's access to resources, education and employment, as well as to social interaction, including, for Christians, church gatherings. Access to these things greatly enhances quality of life and psychological well-being and decrease the likelihood of violence within the home.

3.5 Female-headed households

In early 2011, the International Committee of the Red Cross estimated that there were between one and two million female-headed households in Iraq, or one in ten households.⁴⁸ The number is only likely to have risen since then, given levels of displacement and emigration, deaths (of husbands or male relatives) and the increase in divorce caused by stress and long-term separation. Women may also be caring for a sick or disabled spouse, children and elderly parents. In a culture which expects women to be under the guardianship and authority of a male family member, and not to be the breadwinner or sole earner, this change in role is a very difficult situation.

All issues of physical insecurity amongst women are exponentially worse for female heads of households. When the public sphere is dominated by men, a woman who does not have a male guardian lacks access to basic daily necessities, including water, food and aid distributions, employment, secure housing and healthcare, leaving her vulnerable to exploitation including prostitution and forced marriage. In addition to this, the psychological aspect of stress, trauma, bereavement contributes to the rise in suicides amongst women.

Of the female heads of households interviewed by IOM Iraq, only 2% had regular employment, with 39% relying on relatives or neighbours for financial help and food, and only 18% receiving charitable or governmental aid. Many cannot work due to lack of employment opportunity, the need to care for sick or elderly relatives, restrictions on their movement (either the imposed need for a male guardian or through lack of security) and due to cultural norms about women working.

IOM research into trafficking in northern and central Iraq in 2008 found that more than half the female victims were orphans or were from single-parent families.⁴⁹ It would be reasonable

⁴⁷ *IOM Iraq*, 2016, p.31.

⁴⁸ "[IOM Iraq Special Report: Female Headed Households](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full%20Report_278.pdf)," *IOM Iraq*, 2011, p.1, available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full%20Report_278.pdf (4MB).

⁴⁹ "[Hope for Displaced Iraqi Female-Headed Households](https://www.iom.int/news/hope-displaced-iraqi-female-headed-households)," *IOM*, 10 Jan. 2009, available at: <https://www.iom.int/news/hope-displaced-iraqi-female-headed-households>.

therefore to conclude that many of the girls married early may also be from similarly fractured families.

Lack of finance also contributes to women's inability to return home if displaced, and to restore damaged homes. Without documentation such as ID cards and birth certificates, female-headed households find it even harder to prove any claim to family property.

Women who leave abusive marriages may find themselves with even less safety than they had with their spouse. They often have to fight to be able to see their children, in a legal system which may automatically favour a father when awarding custody, particularly when the father is Muslim and the woman is Christian or from another religious minority.

Christian (and other minority) women who are alone or leading households face not only the severe challenges of other female heads of households, but all of these are made worse by their lower status as Christians. Where women are at risk of poverty due to unemployment and/or lack of access to aid, Christian women are doubly at risk; where women without a male guardian are seen as an easy target for physical or sexual violence, Christian women, with their perceived lower worth, are even more so, compounding fear and trauma and lowering their ability to cope with additional pressures such as those designed to hinder the exercise of her faith.

3.6 Access to employment

The lack of security across the country negatively impacts women who are still restricted from sharing the public space, especially in the center and south of Iraq. In Mosul, many women are from more traditional backgrounds with limited education and limited skills to get jobs,⁵⁰ and cultural expectations may also prevent them from taking up employment, which is particularly difficult when a woman becomes the sole earner.

Even under IS, skilled and educated women working in key positions, such as doctors, were still allowed to work because they were much-needed, but Sharia-based rules exist and restrict their work; for example, they were forbidden to examine male patients and, vice versa, male doctors were forbidden from examining women.

Increasingly, however, there are more small businesses being started up by women in camps. In the Iraqi Kurdistan city of Sulaymaniyah there are garages, carwashes and restaurants run by women. Many women have also found jobs as interpreters for international organizations.

3.7 Mental health and suicide

Both men and women are vulnerable to experiencing depressive symptoms during conflict periods. The difficulty of providing for the family can lead to a loss of hope and diminished sense of self-esteem among men and women. Men who hold the widespread view that their role as a man is to provide for the financial and physical needs of the family can experience a severe

⁵⁰ Hido, 2017.

identity crisis and strain due to the loss of control over provision of basic necessities. For women, violence at the hands of family members, husbands or non-family members (or when forced to prostitute themselves) can lead to depression, and those left as the heads of households face the enormous strain of provision for their remaining family. Displacement places major pressure on all those involved, and particularly for unaccompanied women and girls.

Through their work supporting women, the Baghdad Women Association (BWA) identified increasing mental illness affecting women and girls and a worrying trend of the suicide of women.⁵¹ They carried out further research in Sadr City to investigate.

Whilst the majority of suicide cases globally are amongst adult men,⁵² the majority of suicide cases in Sadr City were of girls and women aged 15-35, and the vast majority were housewives. The BWA analysed this finding that family pressure, eviction, violence at the hands of husbands or family members, depression and being confined to the home were the main reasons, as well as the pressure of living in areas dominated by tribal habits and traditions which stifle the voice of girls and women and impose harsh reprisals for mistakes made. Severe trauma and mental breakdown led to some of the deaths.

The pressures and consequences of conflict are also strongly felt by those who were able to remain in their cities. For example, the New Hope Centre in Alqosh, an area which was not taken over by IS but was just minutes away from the frontline, reports that the constant fear of violence and the pressure of living within ten minutes of the frontline have also resulted in severe levels of trauma.

The research reflects the findings of the IOM, who confirm that IDPs, field staff and psychosocial specialists report the real threat of suicide for many female IDPs as a result of the economic constraints facing female-headed households, the lack of privacy and the stressors of displacement and trauma of conflict. A man in an irregular settlement in Baghdad reported to the IOM that these stressors, particularly confinement and restriction of movement, can exacerbate any pre-existing mental illness or trauma. The phenomenon has arisen and grown since 2006 in western and central Iraq.⁵³ They call for alternatives for creating a sense of normalcy within the dwelling structure in order to protect the mental wellbeing of women, men, boys and girls.⁵⁴

From the experience of local organizations, there have been fewer cases of suicide among Christian women. They have found that, however, in some villages and remote areas of Kurdistan, 'suicide' has been used as a cover for men burning women alive as an honor killing, which may affect Muslim background Christian women in particular. Despite this lower level amongst Christians, it is important for the Church to understand and recognize trauma and mental pressures among women, both Christian members of the Church and non-Christian women they are serving. Close monitoring, documentation and investigation into suicide cases

⁵¹ Abed, Rana H, et al. "Women Suicide in Sadr City." *Baghdad Women Association*, 2016, available at: <http://www.bwa-iraq.org/uploads/Activities%20Bwa/Research/Suicide/Suicide%20En.pdf>.

⁵² "Suicide Rate Estimates, Age-Standardized - Estimates by Country." *World Health Organization*, 4 Apr. 2017, available at: <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.main.MHSUICIDEASDR?lang=en>.

⁵³ *IOM Iraq*, 2016, P. 19.

⁵⁴ *IOM Iraq*, 2016, p. 31.

as modelled by the BWA is also needed to glean the circumstances and motivations and for the Church and Christian organizations to know where and how to act.

Persecution and pressure which pushes women to the point of suicide demonstrates the ripple effect persecution can have: while the aggressor is not directly guilty of killing someone, their victim is dead nonetheless, with the concomitant devastating effects on her family and community.

4. State sphere

Article 14 of Iraq's 2005 Constitution⁵⁵ states that "Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, color, religion, sect, belief or opinion, or economic or social status." However, it Article 2.1 cites Islam as the foundational source of legislation (whilst 2.2 gives religious freedom to officially-recognized religious groups, including Christians), and Article 41 gives each religious group the right to govern their own personal status laws (covering issues such as marriage, divorce, custody, maintenance/ alimony and punishment of some gender-based violence).

Iraq ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in 1986 but entered several reservations, and the Government has not truly fulfilled the legal requirement to amend national laws or tackle practices which discriminate against women or fail to protect them from violence, aside from exceptions such as Act No. 28 (2012) on combating trafficking in persons. Within the last decade in the KRI, laws have been changed or passed to increase punishment of domestic violence, honor killings and FGM (Act No. 8 of 2011), for instance, but so far this has seen very little change on the ground, not least due to prevailing societal attitudes and ongoing instability and conflict.

Zeynep N. Kaya, LSE Middle East Centre Research Fellow, explains that the increase in political power given to tribal leaders since the end of the Ba'ath regime has also led to religiously-justified conservatism in the treatment of women.⁵⁶ While there is hope in the Iraq National Action Plan for the implementation of the UN Security Council's Resolution 1325,⁵⁷ the Plan omits vital elements of the Resolution, such as the prevention of violence against women, and does not apply to contexts of war.⁵⁸ In addition, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women report on Iraq commented that the Plan limits women's

⁵⁵ "Iraq's Constitution of 2005." *Constitute Project*, available at:

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en, accessed March 2018.

⁵⁶ Zeynep N. Kaya. "Women, Peace and Security in Iraq." *LSE Middle East Centre Report*, Aug. 2016, p.10, available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/67347/>.

⁵⁷ Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security "reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Resolution 1325 urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts. It also calls on all parties to conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict." Available at: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>.

⁵⁸ Kaya, Aug. 2016, p.8.

involvement to awareness-raising, and that discriminatory elements remained within the Penal Code.

Despite a long history of strong activism around women's rights at a local level in Iraq and KRI, coupled with international pressure for the inclusion of women in post-conflict resolution, the norm in both Iraq and KRI is that women are disrespected and lack access to education and economic life. According to Kaya, women in KRI fare better than those in the rest of Iraq in participation at decision-making level and in terms of legal reform to end discrimination. However, this is still very limited (even compared to some surrounding countries): government officials prioritize security and stability over the rights of women and economic development, and patriarchal attitudes persist towards participation of women in social, political and public life.⁵⁹ This is despite a clear correlation between women's involvement in decision-making and greater stability, as reflected in Resolution 1325.

Change, Kaya argues, is happening in KRI, in large part incentivized by the positive image and relationship the region has with international actors who are considered as a help in their aspiration to statehood. The hope is that by promoting women's rights to an international standard, this will encourage international actors in turn to promote KRI's own cause. The combination of better laws and awareness amongst women of their rights is leading to increased empowerment at every level.

Local organizations have also seen an influence of returnees in loosening state-related Islamic control over Kurdish women, following the exposure of returned refugees to more liberal environments. However, they report little change to the situation of Christian women.

In the rest of the country, however, the situation is influenced by a shift towards more conservative gender roles, where women are seen as incapable of leading or strategizing, and where, according to Al-Ali, "armed violence, political intimidation, attacks on political opponents as well as rampant corruption are shaping politics". She also asserts that, while there is a quota for female parliamentarians, in reality many are the relatives of male parliamentarians: they are there for quota-filling purposes and will not actually implement change at a national legislative or policy level⁶⁰. Further, if parliamentary position is based on family connection, this must necessarily allow less space to be filled by Christians or those of other religious minorities beyond the allocated quota (five seats are reserved for Christians).

While many parliamentary candidates running in the 2018 elections faced threats and vandalism towards their campaign material, female candidates saw their campaign posters destroyed or defaced (often with beards added) and were also subject to highly sexualized and gender-based online smear campaigns.⁶¹ Existing politicians such as MP Dr Hanan Al-Fatlawi faced threats to their safety and insults directed towards male family members.⁶² It is unlikely that change will

⁵⁹ Kaya, Zeynep N. "Women in Post-conflict Iraqi Kurdistan." *Open Democracy*, 28 Feb. 2016, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/westminster/zeynep-n-kaya/women-in-post-conflict-iraqi-kurdistan>.

⁶⁰ Al-Ali, Nadje. "Iraq: Gendering Authoritarianism." *Open Democracy*, 15 July 2013.

⁶¹ Abdul-Hassan, Ali, and Sinan Salaheddin. "Tough Road for Iraq's Female Candidates in May 12 Elections." *Assyrian International News Agency*, 3 May 2018, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/nadje-al-ali/iraqi-gendering-authoritarianism>.

⁶² "Iraq Election: Shia Rivals of PM Abadi 'Make Gains'." *BBC*, 14 May 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-44104600>.

happen for women at a grassroots or legislative level until more women are able to be involved in policy-making roles, but the dangers of getting involved will understandably put many off, reinforcing entrenched cultural beliefs about their roles and abilities.

4.1 Healthcare

According to UN Iraq, women “seek health care in private clinics (49.9%), primary health care centres (22.3%), and government hospitals (20.9%) Of Iraqi women, 35.4% perceived their health status to be bad or very bad and 47.7% of women reported difficulties in receiving health care from governmental health institutions due to lack of money to pay for services while for 40.6% it was difficult to reach the service.”⁶³

The additional challenge identified by Hido is finding sufficient funding for those providing trauma care for victims of domestic violence, sexual abuse and prostitution. The increase in these forms of gender-based violence during conflict will carry consequences for sexual health, pregnancy and female mortality.

Specific support and investigation will be necessary to ensure that those women who have suffered these forms of violence, or other forms of ill-health, are guaranteed healthcare provision and do not face discrimination on the grounds of their faith or gender. Often such discrimination against Christians comes in the form of unfavorable treatment in healthcare provision and in being the last to receive assistance, or even being denied treatment.⁶⁴ In addition, women may need the permission or accompaniment of a male relative and the service of female medical staff in order to access healthcare.

4.2 State education

The lack of economic empowerment, vocational training and educational access for women in Iraq is a long-standing root cause of inequalities, of increased vulnerability when families break down in conflict times, and for female-headed households and single women. Women who lack education lack economic opportunity, generally have less access to resources such as healthcare and aid, and see worse health outcomes for themselves and their children, including infant mortality rates.

UNICEF estimates that 76% of Iraq’s internally displaced children have missed an average of a year’s schooling,⁶⁵ and as girls often receive less schooling anyway, it is safe to assume that this average is likely to be higher amongst them.

⁶³ “[Women in Iraq Factsheet](http://www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=498:women-in-iraq-factsheet&Itemid=626&lang=en).” *UN Iraq*, Mar. 2013, available at: http://www.uniraq.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=498:women-in-iraq-factsheet&Itemid=626&lang=en.

⁶⁴ Unpublished *Open Doors* Research, 2018.

⁶⁵ *IOM Iraq*, 2016, p.35.

DREAMS LOST IN PERSECUTION

DISPLACEMENT HAS CUT SHORT THE HIGHER EDUCATION FOR MANY GIRLS SUCH AS YASMEEN, WHO WAS THE TOP STUDENT IN HER TEACHER TRAINING COURSE. WHEN SHE WAS DISPLACED DUE TO THE DANGERS FACING CHRISTIANS, SHE LOST THE OPPORTUNITY TO PUT HER TRAINING INTO PRACTICE.

Although in many parts of the country children are taught Islamic education, Kurdistan has recently changed school curricula from Islamic to general religious education and includes all major faiths. In other areas, Christian girls are ridiculed for their faith, coerced to convert to Islam and find their grades are impacted if they openly challenge teaching which contradicts their faith.⁶⁶ Cultural restrictions to education are experienced more in rural villages, where girls' access to university and even to secondary education can be reduced (particularly if this means living away from home).⁶⁷

For Christian women illiteracy means a vast reduction in their access to the Bible and their ability to participate in ministry. In particular at

a time when a woman may be isolated from family and/ or Christian community, under pressure for her faith and facing life-threatening dangers and difficulties, to be unable to take comfort and guidance from scripture removes a significant layer of support.

4.3 Impunity

The breakdown of the rule of law in Iraq has led to far wider impunity than usual, both in terms of protection afforded by police and prosecution by courts and also general lawlessness and the breakdown of social norms and the protection these provide. However, violence against women was not adequately legislated against or prosecuted even before the current situation arose, the law described above, allowing a rapist to escape prosecution by marrying his victim, being a case in point.

A major barrier to seeking legal protection and redress is basic lack of awareness. Many women (and men) simply do not know their rights, or how to exercise them, in critical areas such as divorce and alimony/ spousal maintenance, child custody, inheritance, property recovery and social welfare, and are thus unable to help themselves.⁶⁸

Legal restrictions for women also limit the means and access to justice, protection and support for victims of rape and sexual violence in the country. The IOM identify such restrictions as a key reason for the severe underreporting of sexual violence, alongside the inherent blaming of the female survivor rather than perpetrator. They found that female IDPs would not openly discuss actual incidences of sexual violence but would only make reference to the "fear of what might

⁶⁶ Open Doors Analytical, 2018, p.19.

⁶⁷ Boxed story: "Dreams Lost in Persecution: Yasmeen's Story." *Open Doors*, 13 Oct. 2016, available at: <https://www.opendoors.org.hk/en/2016/10/7956/>.

⁶⁸ IOM, 2009.

happen to women and girls.”⁶⁹ Even where laws do exist to protect women, there is a general understanding that perpetrators are unlikely to be brought to justice:

In addition to the general on-going lawlessness and insecurity, the Iraqi government is failing to counter the increase in gender-based forms of violence, ranging from a high incidence of domestic violence, forced marriages, forced prostitution and trafficking, as well as FGM and honor-based crimes and killings. There is very limited political will to either criminalize gender-based violence, or even more importantly, to implement existing laws.⁷⁰

For Christian women this level of impunity for sexual abuse is compounded by the fact there is general impunity for violations against Christians, be it stolen property, kidnapping, sexual abuse or corruption. The higher connections and higher status of the Muslim perpetrator means they will always win the case, especially under the tribal justice system which can override national justice.

Prosecution of IS supporters is still in its early stages, and will inevitably continue to be difficult. So far, however, prosecutions have been brought for support, assistance or membership of IS, rather than for particular actions, including abduction and rape (even when defendants have admitted using women for sexual slavery). Iraqi prosecutors claim that rape is covered under the same generalized anti-terrorism laws, thus avoiding using the specific law against rape, which carries a penalty of fifteen years.⁷¹ However, Iraq has ratified numerous instruments of international humanitarian law⁷² (some of which are applicable to internal armed conflict) and, under these, has a duty to adequately prosecute gender-based crimes when they meet the relevant criteria.⁷³ This lack of specificity in prosecuting what women and girls suffer has been highlighted in numerous post-conflict domestic and international criminal tribunals in recent decades, and it is well-recognized that not prosecuting rape and other sexual violence, or inadequately prosecuting them by generalizing them alongside other crimes, denies the particularity of what women and girls suffer in war, and undermines the perception of how serious it is and of the strategic, systematic nature of the use of sexual violence against ‘enemy’ women. It remains to be seen if a future international criminal tribunal adequately takes into account the sexual violence faced by women and girls at the hands of Islamist militants.

Societal discrimination against women (including stigmatisation and blaming of those surviving sexual violence), added to their restricted legal status, is a specific vulnerability allowing certain forms of religious persecution perpetrated against women to be legally sanctioned. If Christian women can be attacked with impunity, they are potentially an easy target for those who would attack the Church.

As the international community looks ahead to rebuilding peace and reconciliation, the experiences of Christian, Yezidi and other minority women will need to be central. The extent to

⁶⁹ IOM Iraq, 2016, p.15.

⁷⁰ Al-Ali, 2013.

⁷¹ Wille, Belkis. “Yezidi Girl's Freedom Opens Door to Justice in Iraq.” *Human Rights Watch*, 4 Apr. 2018, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/02/yezidi-girls-freedom-opens-door-justice-iraq>.

⁷² A list of international humanitarian conventions and treaties signed and ratified by Iraq is available here: https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/vwTreatiesByCountrySelected.xsp?xp_countrySelected=IQ.

⁷³ UN Resolution 1820 (2008): “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide”. In addition, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court affirms that this is applicable when the perpetrators are non-state actors.

which the experiences of minority women are addressed will be a critical factor in rebuilding their communities and in rebuilding a cohesive and stable nation.

5. Conclusion

The issues facing Christian women in Iraq are interwoven and impossible to separate from one another, as seen in Figure 3: Each issue is affected by, and in turn intersects with, other factors, creating a complex web which makes the practice of a minority faith difficult for women, often in ways which men simply do not experience.

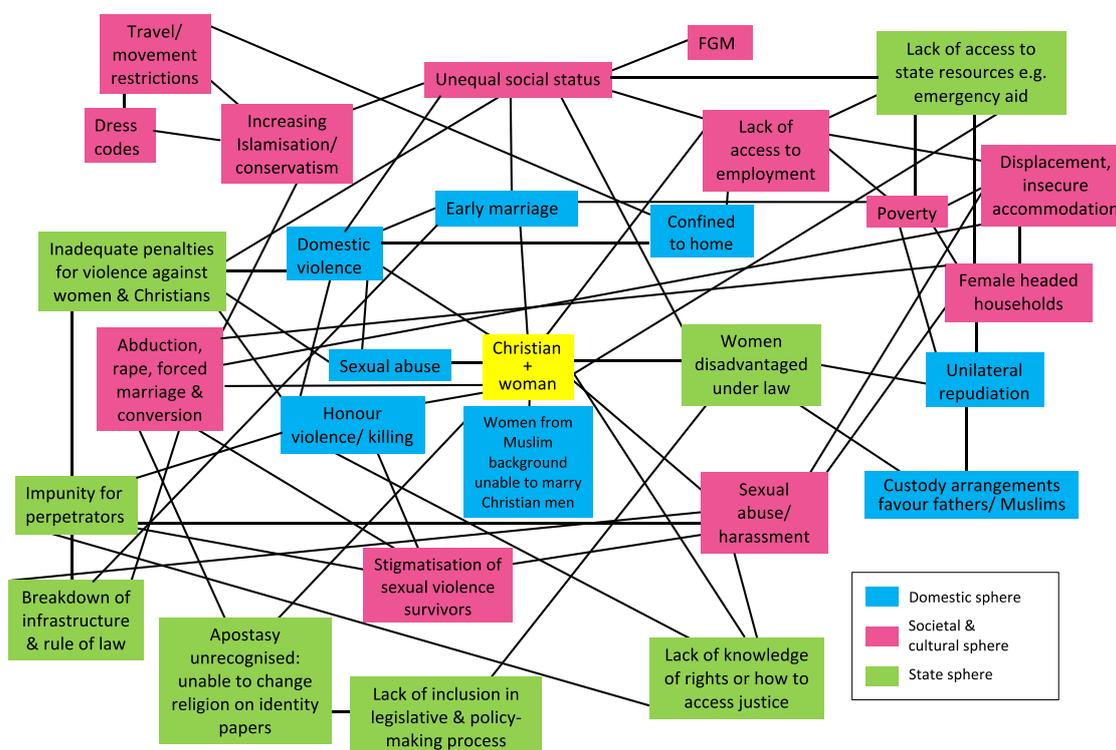


Figure 3: Intersecting vulnerabilities of women, and especially Christian women, in Iraq.

While religion, ethnicity and politics are interwoven in Iraq, making data disaggregated by religion hard to find or to quantify, there is no doubt that the impact of decades of conflict and instability combined with cultural pressures and increasing conservatism have made life extremely difficult for Iraqi women, and Christian women in particular. Tadros writes that:

national Iraqi women’s organizations, international human rights organizations as well as UN sources are all returning with the same evidence: the suffering of women from religious minorities has reached proportions greater than that of the general female population on account of their systematic targeting. It is distinct from the assault on Iraqi women on account of the politics of the intersection of gender with religious identity.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Tadros, 2015.

The Church in Iraq, both amongst men and women who have remained in Iraq (whether displaced or able to remain in their homes) and amongst those who have emigrated and returned, has been subjected to highly traumatizing events, the long-term impact of which still remains to be seen.

Figure 4 provides an example of how the context in which Iraqi Christian women live and the restrictions placed on them might develop and combine in the life of an individual Iraqi Christian girl, leading to extreme physical, psychosocial and spiritual vulnerability.

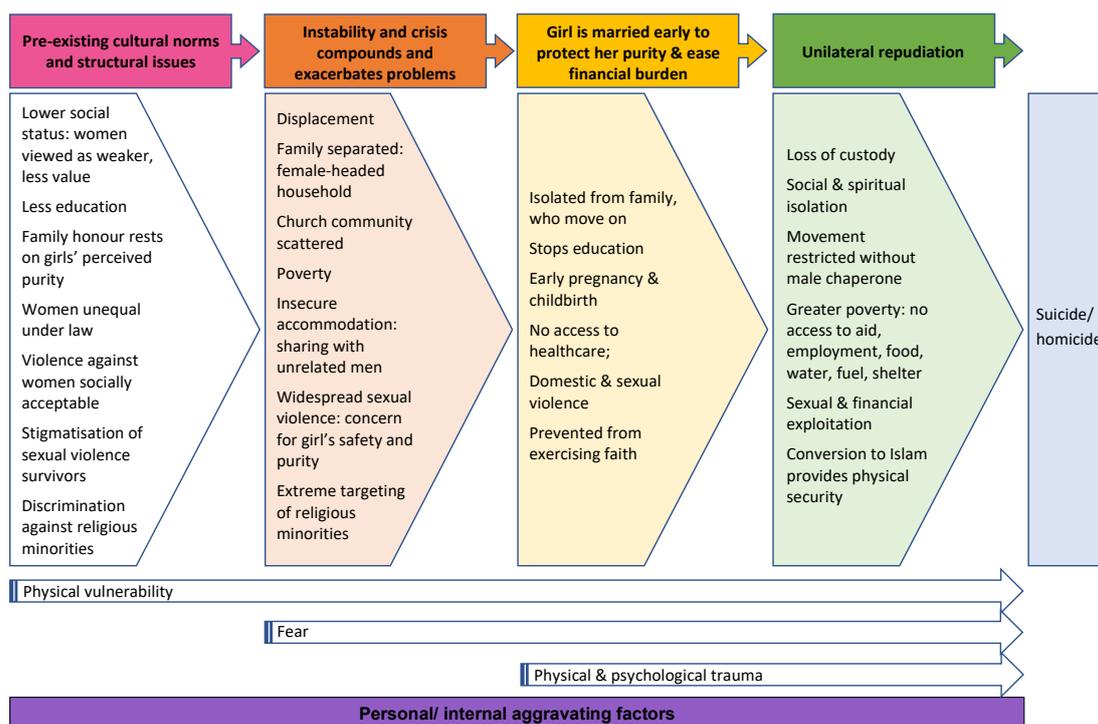


Figure 4: Example of contributing factors and impact of gender-based and religious discrimination against Iraqi Christian girl.

For women, the ongoing and increasing regulation of their activities means they become progressively invisible, their voices silenced, and their ability to contribute economically or to civil society denied. These limitations also create a context of dependence on men (for income, protection, ability to move around and access vital resources and services, and potentially even access to their own children). High dependence means high vulnerability, seen even more starkly at a time when there are fewer men to depend on and higher numbers of female headed households. This is despite the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution on 1325 and Millennium Development Goal 3 stressing the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, in peace-building and in poverty reduction and development.

In addition to the increased restrictions, however, women's very bodies have been weaponized, and the impact will be felt for generations:

At the height of sectarian violence in Iraq in 2006 and 2007, it was clearly apparent that women's bodies and wider gender norms and relations were used by militias to assert control in neighbourhoods, and to mark the boundaries of different religious and ethnic

communities. It was also obvious that there was a link between the militarization of conflict and the increase in gender-based violence. Unfortunately, these trends have become entrenched in today's Iraq, even if in slightly more subtle ways than a few years ago.⁷⁵

While Al-Ali wrote this in 2013, it is perhaps truer than ever today. The targeting of the 'enemy's' women and girls to weaken their whole community has a global history which goes back millennia, and it is an appallingly efficient means of destroying communities.

The impact of fear is almost impossible to quantify, but is in itself an effective means of persecution and control and limits activity, agency and resilience. When all the women in a congregation live with daily fear and trauma, at times within their own homes, the church body itself is limited in activity, agency and resilience.

If Islamist ideologies, gender-based violence and ongoing fear have become entrenched in Iraqi society, then the future is bleak for Iraqi Christian women, who will be a minority within two minorities now more than ever.

⁷⁵ Al-Ali, 2013.