

A K U R D I S T A N F O R A L L



THE RISE OF  
WOMEN



# A KURDISTAN FOR ALL THE RISE OF WOMEN

From the efforts of the leadership to further strengthen women's rights to the challenges that women still face today — this handbook sheds light on the story of women's empowerment in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

We would like to express our gratitude to the Office of the President, especially Mr. Ahmed Oathman, for their support in preparing this publication.

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Kurdistan Region Presidency

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A K U R D I S T A N F O R A L L

# THE RISE OF WOMEN



This book is dedicated to the 'Anfal Women' whose courage and resilience in the face of hardship are an inspiration for the future generations of Kurdistan.



A portrait of Nechirvan Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. He is a middle-aged man with dark hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a blue patterned tie. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

**NECHIRVAN BARZANI**

President  
Kurdistan Region of Iraq

## FOREWORD

Our Kurdistan heritage has long featured the strength of our women's influence in the home, in our communities, and on the battlefield. Our history tells us of women leaders who participated in governance, including security. Without the strength and active support of our women, the progressive situation we enjoy today would not have been possible.

Thirty years ago, the formation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the Kurdistan Parliament (KP), and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) enabled self-governance that expands opportunities within our diverse society for women to express themselves.

While our homeland faces persistent threats, we have continued to strengthen opportunities for our girls and women to participate in all aspects of everyday life – socially, academically, politically, commercially, and militarily. Notable achievements have occurred as we continue to promote progress with respect for, and sensitivity to, our Kurdistan culture.

We aim to expand opportunities for our girls and women to express themselves more fully in a globalized world. We pursue this aim in ways compatible with our cultural values, the evolution of our society, and with full commitment to universal women's rights.

Along with men, women have equal responsibility to develop a peaceful and progressive society that enables them to pursue their aspirations without hindrance. We have enacted legal and administrative reforms that open more ways for women to participate in social, political, and economic life.

We continue to build on achievements by removing barriers women face in social and business life. We address outdated, deeply ingrained traditional gender perspectives. We work to introduce structural changes to support societal shifts and urge both women and men to take responsibility for our future.

Access to education is fundamental to real gender equality. Narrowing the gender gap in school enrollment rates is key. Literacy rates have increased. Today, girls account for half of the students in primary and secondary schools. In high schools, there are more girls than boys. More women have been graduating from institutes and universities, and academies that train women for police and military service.

If women do not feel safe at home and in public, they cannot feel free to live their lives with confidence to pursue their aspirations. Violence against women is morally intolerable, an

unacceptable affront to women's rights, and an obstacle to full equality and empowerment. We take a "zero tolerance" approach towards violence against women with efforts to minimize, if not eliminate, this social scourge.

We support campaigns to educate women on their rights and assist them in freeing themselves from violence. Our 'National Plan to Combat Violence Against Women' includes the establishment of the KRG Directorate for Combatting Violence Against Women. Laws and regulations have been enacted to hold abusers accountable. To promote protection of women, special domestic violence courts and women's shelters have been established.

Our vision of a healthy, functioning democracy is one where women participate equally and fully in all aspects of life, including politics, safely and with confidence. We have introduced laws promoting women's participation in public service. Today, women serve as members of parliament, cabinet ministers, and staff and senior officials of government organizations, including our Peshmerga and other security services.

Social equality means full participation in our economy. For our economy to sustainably grow, we support opportunities that enable women to apply their interests and skills. We have developed and implement action plans aimed at boosting women's participation in our workforce. Today, more than ever, women of all ages play stronger roles in enterprises traditionally dominated by men.

Since the formation of the KRG, we have seen the Kurdistan Region develop from a place where women were marginalized into one where they are increasingly represented in politics, government, business, education, media, and the arts. This growing role of women is a distinctive feature of our Kurdistan society. Today, it is pleasing to observe the self-confidence of our young women as they pursue their aspirations and leave their mark.

As we continue to pursue gender equality and empowerment, the stories within these pages will inspire our women to become more involved in all spheres of Kurdistan life. Our future will be built more and more on the strengths and achievements our women will make in the years to come.





**MASROUR BARZANI**

Prime Minister  
Kurdistan Regional Government

## PARTICIPATION. INCLUSION. EMPOWERMENT. WOMEN ARE AT THE HEART OF OUR FUTURE

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I firmly believe that the government has an obligation to foster a healthy environment within which women can thrive equally with men: socially, economically and politically.

”

I look to the future of the Kurdistan Region with unbridled optimism. Whenever I spend time with Kurdistan youth, I feel the energy they radiate and their deeply rooted determination to build a stronger Kurdistan. I have felt, firsthand, the passion of girls and women across the Kurdistan Region when they speak about their goals in life. I recall meeting with Bushra Shingali, the resilient Yazidi refugee who founded a successful bakery in Duhok, giving many from her own community a chance for a better, decent life. I have listened to Rezhna Dehaty give thousands of her followers on social media a window into her lifestyle in the countryside, and our rich agriculture. During a recent visit to Five One Labs in Sulaymaniyah, I was delighted to see a vibrant group of business leaders and entrepreneurs building our private sector. I recently visited the world class data center in the Department of Information Technology, and saw highly skilled women putting their footprint on the cabinet's digitalization and reform agenda. I know we have a bright future because I have witnessed it, felt it, and heard it myself.

When women in the 19th century were denied education and literacy, a young Kurdish girl was born in 1805

who would mark her place in history as the first female historian in the region. Mastoureh Ardalan continues to be an example of ground-breaking Kurdish women through history - taking on roles that were denied to women in most parts of the world. The nationalist leader Hapsa Khan dedicated a significant portion of her life to ensuring women and girls had access to education. Leyla Qasim paid the ultimate sacrifice as she vehemently advocated for Kurdish emancipation under Iraq's brutal tyranny. There are countless instances of women in Kurdistan taking on political and military leadership within their communities. But while Kurdish women have enjoyed far more freedoms than their counterparts elsewhere in the Middle East, there is still much more to be done.

The strength of Kurdistan must be measured not only by how many successful programs the government delivers, but by how equal the opportunities are for all Kurdistanis. I firmly believe that the government has an obligation to foster a healthy environment within which women can thrive equally with men: socially, economically and politically. Change takes time, but this must not be an

excuse for inaction. The government must work to drive changes to attitudes. We have seen many examples of how this can work. I am proud that within my own office there are as many female employees as male.

And we are making progress. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, we have active female participation in all three branches of state: executive, legislative and judicial. Female enrollment in schools and universities is at the highest level ever recorded. Women today enjoy wide participation in the workforce, far beyond the traditional roles open to them in the past. Female architects are bringing their visions to life. Female doctors are saving lives. Female engineers are delivering strategic projects. Female writers are publishing books. Female programmers are delivering breakthroughs in services to the public. And female entrepreneurs are driving growth in the private sector. My government will continue to support this, working with partners in Kurdistan and harnessing international support to remove barriers to women and girls so that they can live the lives they want to live and achieve their full potential. The future of Kurdistan depends on it.



**DR. REWAZ FAEQ HUSSEIN**

Speaker of the Kurdistan Parliament

## THREE DECADES OF CHANGE

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Compared to other parliaments in the Middle East, the Kurdistan Parliament has taken very constructive steps to enshrine fundamental women's rights in our laws despite being only three decades old.

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The Kurdistan Parliament was established 30 years ago. Since then, it has been rendered dysfunctional many times, partly due to the civil conflict in 1990s, political instability, and the tragic events of 2015-2017. Despite this eventful history, the parliament has prioritized an appropriate legislative environment to help constitutional institutions thrive following the Kurdish uprising in 1991, after which we had to rebuild our institutions from scratch.

The Kurdistan Parliament has proudly taken the initiative to advance women's rights and protect gender equality. Compared to other parliaments in the Middle East, the Kurdistan Parliament has taken very constructive steps to enshrine fundamental women's rights in our laws despite being only three decades old. For example, in its amended election law (No.1) of 1992, the Kurdistan Parliament introduced an electoral gender quota system allocating

30 percent of parliament seats to women. The same quota system has also been enshrined in our provincial council laws. These laws allow for meaningful representation of women across the political spectrum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The Kurdistan Parliament is currently engaged in amending the Domestic Violence Prevention Law of 2011 to address the loopholes that had developed and shortcomings that had been raised since its implementation. Meanwhile, there's a motion by female political leaders in coordination with the Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights to prepare a bill to set a quota system for female representation in the executive branch of the government. This move requires more political pressure and lobbying, but we welcome the initiative wholeheartedly.

Kurdish women are capable, smart, and resilient. No matter how difficult the road gets, they should never give up. I encourage them to believe in themselves and persevere. They can overcome obstacles and be role models for others by focusing on their education and professional career. So, they should take the path of education to enter leadership roles in both the public and private sectors. The decisions they make can have a positive impact on other people's lives. Therefore, they should make their voices heard for the sake of their communities.



# WOMEN IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ IN 2022

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has made significant progress since its founding in 1991, if not always steady or linear, towards gender equality in part thanks to amendments made to the KRI's laws, which aim to empower women in all sectors, increase public awareness of women's rights, and provide concrete measures to support women's advancement.

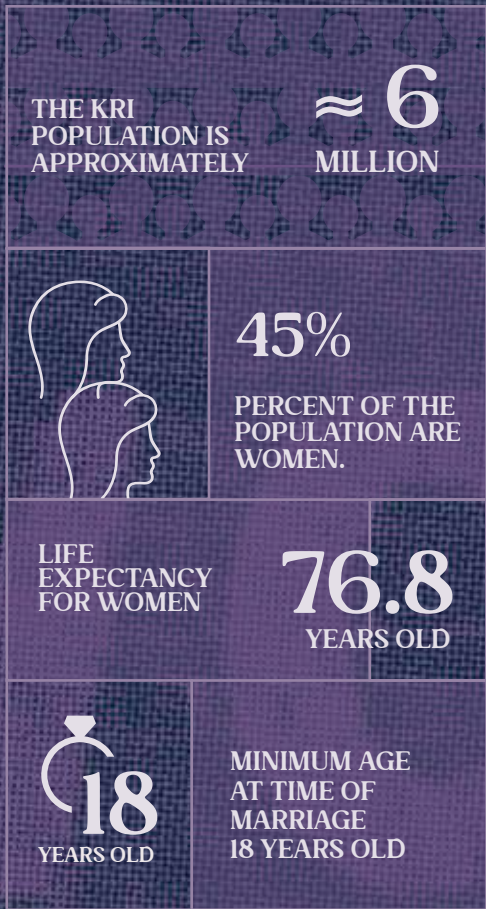
## WOMEN IN DIPLOMACY



## EDUCATION



## POPULATION



## WOMEN IN ECONOMY



## WOMEN IN JUDICIARY



## WOMEN IN ARMED FORCES



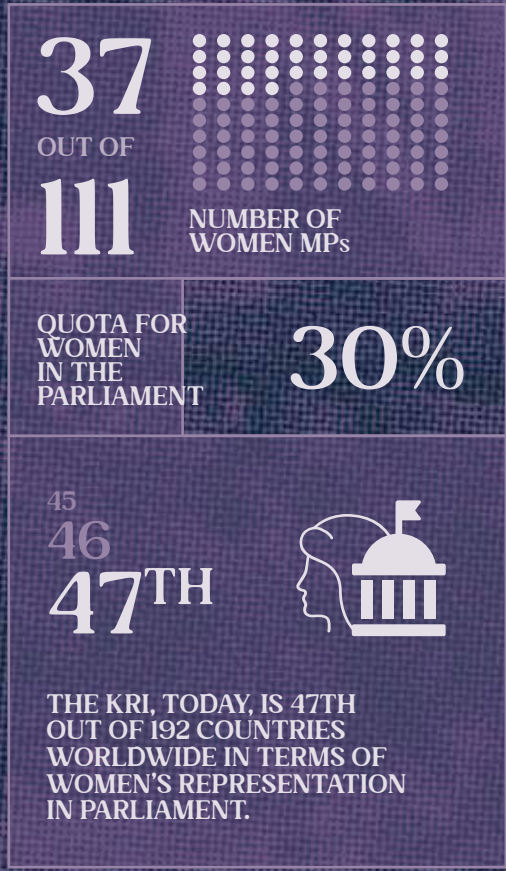
## WOMEN NGOS



## WOMEN IN GOVERNMENT



## WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT





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# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN KURDISTAN'S HISTORY

## THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ HAS SEEN MANY CHARISMATIC WOMEN IN ITS HISTORY. THESE WOMEN WERE FEARLESS IN THEIR PURSUITS AND INSPIRED GENERATIONS OF WOMEN AFTER THEM TO BREAK BARRIERS, BECOMING HEROINES TO MANY.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) differs in the wider region in terms of its legacy of female leadership. Kurdish history has seen numerous women succeed in breaking the barriers they faced and take on leadership roles. These charismatic women leaders played an undeniably important role in the history of Kurdistan.

Kurdish women took on powerful leadership roles long before this became a norm in international society. They wielded influence in almost every aspect of life over the course of the history of Kurdistan. Women reached the highest political

positions of their day, ruled the biggest tribes, shaped social life, led armies and became respected figures. Kurdish women's historical role in social, religious, political and even military circles sets the KRI apart in the wider region. Kurdish women and girls today are living the legacy and struggle of these powerful women.

The achievements of Kurdish women that we have seen in recent years represent a revival of the historical role of women in Kurdish society.



# WOMEN IN POLITICAL & MILITARY LEADERSHIP

Though women’s voices have historically been underrepresented in political life in the Middle East, Kurdistan women’s influence in political leadership is not entirely new. Two charismatic women, Khanzad Miri Soran (early 17th century) and Adela Jaff (1847-1924), forged new paths in social and political life in Kurdistan, and gained a great amount of respect in Kurdistan society.



*Khanzad Miri Soran*

Princess Khanzad is one of the most famous political and military leaders in Kurdistan’s history. She was the ruler of the Emirate of Soran in the early 17th century. During her seven-year reign, she ruled over the two Kurdish districts of Harir and Soran, today part of Erbil Governorate. Khanzad commanded a 50,000-strong army. Her castle, located 22 km outside of Erbil, still stands today.



*Adela Jaff*

Adela Jaff is one of the most famous women leaders in Kurdistan’s history. She was head of the Jaff tribe, based in Halabja, between 1909 and 1924. She was famous for her effective governance, and she restored law and order in the Halabja region. During her rule, she built the court of justice over which she herself presided. She also established a marketplace and a prison in the area. Adela was known for saving the lives of many British army officers during the First World War, and was awarded the honorary title of ‘Princess of the Brave’ by the British.

# WOMEN LEAD RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Religious institutions are inherently patriarchal. Even today, it is hard for women to reach leadership positions in religious institutions. However, two powerful Kurdistan women, Asenath Barzani (1590–1670) and Mir Meyan Khatun (1874–1958) were appointed to two of the most high-profile religious positions. While Asenath Barzani was the head of a Yeshiva in Mosul, Mir Meyan Khatun was the leader of the Yezidi Emirate of Sheikhan.



Asenath Barzani

Born in Mosul in 1590, Asenath Barzani is believed to be the first and only female rabbi in premodern Jewish history. Asenath was the daughter of prominent Mosul rabbi, Samuel ben Nethanel HaLevi Barzani, who was head of the yeshivah (an all-male Jewish religious school). Her supportive father allowed her access to education, and she went on to be recognized as a scholar in her own right. By an early age, she had mastered Hebrew, as well as the Torah, Talmud, Midrash, and Kabbalah. The surviving writings attributed to her attest to her abilities. Asenath wrote in several languages which she also spoke fluently. Her works also include ambitious poems written in Kurdish, such as Ga’agua L’Zion (Longing for Zion). After her death in 1670 she was laid to rest in Amedi in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



Mir Meyan Khatun

Mir Meyan Khatun was born into a prominent Yezidi family in Sinjar in 1874. At the age of 18 she was married to Ali Beg, who later became the Emir of the Yezidis. Mir Meyan Khatun became the leader of the Yezidi Emirate of Sheikhan in 1913. Her rule lasted until her death in 1957. She was known among the Yezidis for her strong personality and wise leadership.



# WOMEN IN LITERATURE & ART

Historically speaking, women have been overlooked in writing and in art in other male-dominated societies in the Middle East. However, Kurdish female writers and artists have produced important works since the 19th century. Mestureh Ardalan (1805-1848), Leila Beder Khan (1903-1986), Nahida Sheikh Salam (1922-2006), and Pakiza Rafiq Hilmi (1924-2003) were champions in the development and promotion of Kurdish literature and cultural heritage.



Photo courtesy of Levi Meir Clancy

Mastureh Ardalan

Mastureh Ardalan was a famous Kurdish poet, historian, and calligrapher. She was born to an aristocratic family in the town of Ardalan in 1805. Her father played a central role in Mastureh's education, and he helped her to study Kurdish, Arabic, and Persian. She wrote extensively on literature, history, poetry, and Islamic jurisprudence in the Hawrami dialect of Kurdish, as well as Persian. By end of the 19th century Mastureh was considered the first woman historiographer in the Middle East thanks to her famous book on the history of the Kurdish Ardalan dynasty. She is also known as the first woman to have written about Islamic jurisprudence. She died in Slemani in 1848.



Leila Beder Khan

Leila Beder Khan was the first internationally renowned Kurdish ballet dancer. Her artistic flare transcended borders and gained attention in Europe. Leila rose to fame first in Italy and then in France, earning her the nickname, "The Kurdish Dancer". In 1932, Leyla performed at the opera house La Scala in Milan for the premiere of Belkis, the Queen of Sheba, which was considered the most important ballet in the history of La Scala. She also performed at the Centre Marcelin Berthelot and La Grande Salle in Paris in 1935. With her performances of Dilan (a Kurdish dance), the Kurdish Warrior, and many others, she played a significant role in bringing Kurdish cultural heritage to the international scene.



Photo Courtesy of Shawes Family

### Nahida Sheikh Salam

Born in Slemani in 1922, Nahida Sheikh Salam was a writer, poet, political icon, and staunch advocate for women's rights. As well as being the first female writer at Galawezh magazine during the 1940s, she was also the first woman to open a kindergarten in Slemani. She became a founding member of the Kurdistan Women's Union in 1952. Nahida played a significant role in the establishment of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and in 1960 was the first woman to be appointed to the party's central committee. She died in 2006 and laid to rest in Slemani.



### Pakiza Rafiq Hilmi

Born in Slemani in 1924, Pakiza Rafiq Hilmi is largely recognized as the first Kurdish woman admitted to Harvard University's Near Eastern Languages Department, where she obtained her master's degree in Semitic and Persian languages in 1951. She moved to the University of London for her PhD. Upon her return to Iraq in 1958, she was appointed head of the Kurdish Department at Baghdad University's College of Arts. From 1967 to 1978, she taught Kurdish and Arabic at the University of Berlin, before teaching as a visiting lecturer at the University of Amman between 1978 and 1986. Pakiza has published various articles about Kurdish language and history, as well as a book about modern Kurdish grammar and a collection of poems on Kurdish issues. She died in 2003.



# THE FOUNDER OF THE KURDISH WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

The powerful women within the Kurdish women’s rights movement played an important role in the history of Kurdistan, such as Hapsa Khan, who lived between 1881-1953 in Slemani. Hapsa Khan is known as one of the first Kurdish feminists and the founder of the women’s movement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



Hapsa Khan

Born in 1891, Hapsa Khan is known as one of the first Kurdish feminists and the founder of the women’s movement in Kurdistan. She was also an outspoken advocate for improving the quality and availability of education for girls. Hapsa Khan founded the Kurdish Women’s Association and the first school for girls in Slemani in 1926. Unwavering in her conviction that girls should have the same rights to education as boys, Hapsa and her colleagues went from house to house in Slemani to enroll as many girls as possible. She also educated parents about the need to send their daughters to school. Hapsa also played a crucial role in the Kurdish nationalist movement and spearheaded the push for Kurdish rights on the international stage in a letter to the League of Nations in 1930.

# WOMEN IN KURDISH UPRISINGS

Women have been an integral part of the Kurdish national movement since the 1960s. Once the Kurdish rebellion broke out in 1961 against the Baath regime, Kurdish women were active participants in every part of the uprising. Thousands of Kurdish women were involved in the Kurdish resistance movement and acted with great courage. They fearlessly took up arms against the Baath regime and campaigned for securing Kurdish rights and preserving Kurdish identity against the regime’s oppressive policies. The rapidly developing crises between the Kurdish nation and the Baath regime from 1961 to 1991 had various effects on the people of Kurdistan in general and particularly on the status of Kurdish women. Fueled by several catastrophic events, those turbulent decades were arguably the worst era for Kurdish women in Iraq. They faced genocidal campaigns, mass murder, human rights violations, and oppression.



Hero Ibrahim Ahmed

Hero Ibrahim Ahmed is one of the prominent female leaders in the recent history of Kurdistan. She devoted her youth to the Kurdish cause by joining the Kurdish resistance movement against Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime. As a staunch advocate for women’s rights and gender equality, Hero Ibrahim tirelessly worked on women’s empowerment in Kurdistan from the late 1980s. As the co-founder of the PUK Women’s Union, she has supported a variety of projects on women’s rights led by the union since its establishment in 1989. She has also been heavily involved in humanitarian work since the early 1990s. In 1991, she founded Kurdistan Save the Children (KSC). As the oldest local NGO in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, KSC provides medical, educational, social, and economic support for children regardless of their ethnicity, gender, and religious affiliation. Hero Ibrahim has also played a vital role in the transformation of the Kurdish media landscape from the 1990s. She has overseen the running of various Kurdish newspapers and magazines, and launched KHAK TV in 1997, and KurdSat in 2000. Hero Ibrahim has been one of the key figures in promoting Kurdistan’s cultural heritage by supporting Kurdish artists working on poetry, paintings, and literature. As a role model, her work on human rights, democracy, culture, peaceful coexistence, and women’s empowerment has inspired generations of women to break barriers not only in Kurdistan but across the Middle East.



*Margaret George Shello*

Margaret George Shello, an Assyrian Christian, was the first female commander of the Peshmerga forces. She was born in 1942 in the village of Dura in modern-day Duhok Governorate. After joining the ranks of the Peshmerga at the age of 20, Margaret quickly asserted herself, rising up through the ranks, above her male comrades.

She became famous after successfully commanding her all-male Peshmerga unit in the battle of Zawita Valley against Baathist forces, and inspired other women to join the fight against the Baathist regime.



*Leyla Qasim*

Leyla Qasim was a staunch activist for Kurdish political and cultural rights in Iraq. Born in 1952 in the Khanaqin district of Iraq's Diyala Province, Leyla joined the Kurdistan Students' Union and Kurdistan Democratic Party at the age of 20, while studying sociology at the University of Baghdad. Fearless in her stance against the Baathist regime, she quickly became one of the most active members of the Kurdish Student Movement. She was arrested by the regime for her role in the Kurdish nationalist movement in 1974. Leyla and four of her comrades were executed that same year, becoming the first woman in Iraqi history to face the death penalty. Following her execution, Leyla became a martyr for Kurdistan and a symbol of Iraqi Kurdish resilience.

She inspired a generation of women to join the Kurdish national movement.





*Khaja Bawa*

Born in Erbil in 1945, Khaja Bawa became a symbol of the resistance by encouraging the people to stand up for their rights during the Erbil uprising of 1991. On March 10, 1991, Bawa's family held a funeral for her brother, Daham, who was killed by the Baathist regime. The next day, she led a crowd of people through Erbil's Setaqan neighborhood to the center of the city, where they joined in the struggle against the regime forces. Khaja was shot dead before Erbil was liberated from the Baathist forces.



*Bahya Maroof Barzanji*

Born in Slemani in 1924, Bahya Ma'roof Ahmad Barzanji entered politics at the age of 14. After studying at Teachers' College in Baghdad, she started working as a teacher in Halabja in 1943. Bahya was one of the founders of the Kurdistan Women's Union and was chosen as its first secretary in 1963. As a powerful advocate of women's education, she opened a school to address illiteracy among Kurdish women. Bahya played a significant role in collecting aid for the Peshmerga forces during the Aylul Revolution. She also played a major role in the Kurdish uprising of 1991. She passed away in 2007.



# ANFAL WOMEN

Between February and September 1988, the Baath regime conducted a genocidal military operation called Anfal against Kurdish populated areas in the northern Iraq. Thousands of Kurdish villages were destroyed, and some 182,000 people were murdered during the Anfal campaign. To this date, about 300 mass grave sites have been found throughout Iraq.

During the Anfal Campaign, thousands of Kurdish women and children were separated from their families and kept in different transit camps. Women and girls ended up in prisons where they were held for months in humiliating conditions. Sexual violence and rape were used as a form of punishment in prisons and segregation camps.

The Anfal Campaign upended every aspect of life for Kurdish women. They lost their families, relatives, homes, and villages. Those distressing series of events created deep psychological trauma for Kurdish women and girls.

Nevertheless, Anfal women kept their hope alive and demonstrated time and again that they had the capacity to persevere. Throughout the years, Anfal women survivors have stuck together to cope with and recover from their traumatic experiences, helped each other and raised their children without male support.

Anfal women's courage and resilience in the face of extreme circumstances set a precedent for the determination and strength of future generations of Kurdistan.

## MASS GRAVE

THE EARTH HAS STOOD UP AGAIN  
IT STOOD UP AS A DESERT  
WITH ITS FACE COVERED IN RED  
HOLDING A SKULL IN ITS HANDS

THE EARTH STOOD UP  
TO SPEAK OF A CHILD SMILING  
WHILE SHOT TO DEATH

THE EARTH STOOD UP  
TO SPEAK OF THE SCREAMS OF A GIRL  
ABOUT TO BE RAPED

THE EARTH STOOD UP  
TO SPEAK OF THE PRAYERS OF AN OLD MAN  
BEING SCORCHED

THE EARTH STOOD UP  
TO SPEAK THE WORDS OF A POET  
WHILE HE WAS BEING BURIED ALIVE

THE EARTH STOOD UP ONCE AGAIN  
IT STOOD UP TO BREAK THE SILENCE  
AROUND THE BURNING BODY OF KURDISTAN

By Nazand Begikhani



Saeda Omar Rasul

In early May 1988, everyone in Askar, a village located 50km west of Slemani, had fled to the mountains. I couldn’t go because I was pregnant. I had already lost a baby while fleeing the bombardment, so I stayed at home. Planes were circling overhead. We knew that we would soon be attacked with gas. We ran to the local mosque to shelter with the other women and children. When we entered the door, people were already vomiting. A donkey had collapsed, birds were falling out of the sky, and cats were frantically running around before dying.

I had lost many of my extended family in 1988. My two-month-old son died during an air raid. My pregnant sister-in-law was killed in a gas attack with her two children, as was my husband, my brother, and our mother. My two brothers-in-law and my sister-in-law were captured by the Iraqi army and are presumed dead. They haven’t been seen since.

Source: Kurdistan Memory Programme  
/ Anfal Stories

Thana AlBassam

I was seven years old around that time. I was asleep with my grandparents and my little sister. I woke up during the night and saw huge, masked men wearing Baathist security uniforms and holding guns. One of them pointed to me and to my sister and shouted at my auntie. He asked her, ‘[Do] these girls belong to you?’ And she replied, ‘No, they belong to our neighbors.’ And she came to me and said, ‘Don’t worry, just go back to sleep.’

When I woke up in the morning, I didn’t find anyone in the house except my father. He was sitting, his eyes full of tears. I just felt I wasn’t going to see my aunts, my uncles, or my grandparents again. From that moment, I lost my childhood.

Youth and men between the ages of 18 to 45 were thrown into prisons. Women and young children were placed on pickup trucks and thrown to the Iraq-Iran border where they roamed aimlessly for days in the harsh environment and amid minefields. Some of them were raped and murdered, their husbands and older sons detained in prisons, their assets seized, their properties confiscated, and their names wiped off the civil records. Their hometowns and villages were wiped out. In my family alone, we lost 22 young men.

Source: Echoes of Genocide,  
KRG US Representation

Asmar Mohammed Jabar

In April 1988, the Iraqi army had already started to attack our area, east of Kirkuk, and everyone feared that they might experience another Halabja – a massive chemical assault – so we fled for our lives. I was nine months pregnant when I fled Mahabaram on a tractor, which were carrying women and children from the village. We headed for towns nearby to find a safer place. But we were soon stopped by an army checkpoint near the village of Qara Timor and made to disembark. In great pain, I went into labor. Soldiers refused to let my brother fetch blankets and clothes from the tractor. To shield me, women from the village formed a circle around me and watched over me for the next 15 or 16 hours as I delivered. When the baby was born, we had nothing to cut the umbilical cord with. My brother used a razor he found in his pocket. He was worried the baby might get an infection, but we had no choice.

We were moved to Topzawa prison camp near Kirkuk, where the men and older boys were separated from the women and younger children. We never saw them again. I dreamed for many years of my husband’s return. I have not been happy since then.

Source: Kurdistan Memory Programme  
/ Anfal Stories

Raghda Sleman Shakir

In February 1980, the government decided to relocate the Barzanis from displacement camps in southern Iraq to Qushtapa. On the morning of July 31, 1983, I saw a military truck driving around the camp, calling on all the men to come outside and threatening to shoot anyone found inside their homes. I rushed back home in a panic and told my husband, father-in-law, and brother-in-law to get ready and stand in front of the house.

All the men were loaded onto buses. Our loved ones were taken from us. We were completely broken and in despair. It was by far the darkest day in my life.

Shortly after the men and teenagers were taken, the government discontinued our monthly food rations. Water and electricity were cut off. The school and hospital at the camp were also shut down. They even destroyed the wells that provided water for the camp.

After a few months, I began trading home appliances for food. At night, we knitted socks and sweaters, hoping to sell them and provide food for our families. Sometimes we had to carry cement and bricks to construction sites just to make ends meet. Several women lost their lives at the construction sites. There were no young men left in the camp to help us bury the dead.

Source: Echoes of Genocide,  
KRG US Representation

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Source: Echoes of Genocide,  
KRG US Representation

2

PURSUIING  
A WOMEN'S  
RIGHTS  
AGENDA



## WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY HAVE BEEN EXTENSIVELY INCORPORATED INTO THE LAWS OF THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ SINCE 1992.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) grants, by law, full rights to all people of the KRI, regardless of their gender, religion, or race. In line with this principle, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has developed over the last two decades an unwavering strategy for strengthening gender equality through legal reform. Through the introduction of various laws and regulations on women's issues, the KRG has demonstrated its commitment to a public policy that supports gender equality and women's empowerment.

The KRI has made significant progress in recent decades, if sadly not always steady or linear, towards gender equality in part thanks to amendments made to the KRI's laws, which aim to empower women, increase public awareness of women's rights, deter those that would violate these rights, and provide concrete measures to support women's advancement.

In addition, the KRG has amended aspects of the KRI's laws that were discriminatory towards women and enacted new laws that comply with international norms on women's rights, as set out by the CEDAW (The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security (WPS agenda). These steps have provided a supportive base for the KRI's important achievements in the area of women's rights.

### Some of the most significant legal developments for the advancement of women:

#### A. Personal Status Law

The Kurdistan Parliament passed Personal Status Law (No.15) in 2008 which confers rights to women in marriage and divorce.

#### Polygamy

Law No.15 stipulates that "marrying more than one woman is not allowed unless authorized by a judge". The law limits the circumstances under which a man may have more than one wife, permitting him to take a second wife, and no more as stipulated by the Shari'a (Islamic law), only when his first wife is unable to have children or suffers from a serious disease. It also mandates that a man cannot have a second wife if he has pledged in his first marriage contract never to take another wife.

#### Divorce

Article 3 of Kurdistan's Law No.15 gives women the right to make the right to divorce a condition within a marriage contract. Moreover, a woman may also file for divorce if her husband abandons her, if he has not taken care of her needs, or sought to harm her. Disobedience shall also be considered grounds for divorce under Article 10 of Law No.15, which reads: "If the husband is disobedient, he has to pay his wife's alimony throughout the time of his disobedience. And in the case of separation, he has to pay the post-dowry and waiting period alimony, and payable compensations if required".

#### Forced Marriage

Law No.15, Article 6 forbids forcing a person to marry without their consent and sets out the punishment for perpetrators as imprisonment. The amended law reads: "The contract of a forced marriage is considered void if the marriage is not yet consummated.

Even if the marriage is consummated, the contract shall be suspended".

A first degree relative who breaches the provisions of Article 6 shall be sentenced to two to five years. If the person who breaches the provision is not a first degree relative, he shall be sentenced to a minimum of three years up to a maximum of ten years imprisonment.

#### B. Misuse of New Information Technologies

In 2008, the Kurdistan Parliament passed Law No.6 on "Preventing the Misuse of New Information Technologies" with the aim of preventing digital violence, protecting victims and holding perpetrators accountable.

#### C. Combating Domestic Violence

In order to bring Kurdistan's legal practices in line with international standards on violence against women, the Kurdistan Parliament took a major legal initiative in 2011 in passing "Combating Domestic Violence, Law No.8".

The law provides provisions for a specialized court, and empowers police units, the health, social affairs, and education ministries, and women's shelters to tackle gender-based violence with a holistic approach.

#### D. Representation of Women in the Judiciary

The Kurdistan Parliament passed Law No.7 establishing "the Kurdistan Region of Iraq Judicial Institute" in 2009. The law paved the way for women to become judges in the KRI.

#### E. Enhancing the Representation of Women

The KRG affirms that the participation of women in all institutions is essential for any democratic society. In line with this policy, the legal minimum quota of female parliamentarians was increased from 25 to 30 percent of the legislature in 2009.

#### F. Honor Crimes

In 2002, the Kurdistan Parliament passed Law No.14, relating to honor crimes. The amended law removed the provision for 'lenient punishments' for the offense and provides that killings carried out under the pretext of honor should be considered as murder. Law No.14 reads: "Crimes against women with the pretext of 'honorable motivation' will not be legally liable for lenient punishment".

## KURDISH LAW TREATS HONOR KILLINGS IN THE SAME WAY AS ANY OTHER MURDER.

# INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Over the last two decades, the KRG has established several new official bodies to advance women’s rights. Some of the most significant developments for institutionalizing gender equality:

1. The Gender Equality Unit was established within the Council of Ministers in 2005.

2. Since 2007, in order to create awareness of women’s issues among the general public, the KRG in coordination with NGOs and UN agencies has held a campaign every year to celebrate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the KRI.

3. The KRG established women’s protection shelters in Erbil, Duhok, and Slemani in 2007, and in the Garbiyan area in 2013.

4. In order to protect women against violence, the Ministry of Interior set up 14 toll-free telephone hotlines for women to seek support in 2007.

5. A High Commission was set up to tackle and monitor violence against women in 2008. The commission meets four times a year and brings together all the related ministries along with senior health, police and justice professionals with the aim of addressing violence against women with a holistic approach.

6. The Special Directory to combat violence against women was established in all three governorates: Erbil, Slemani, and Duhok in 2008.

7. The High Council for Women and Development was established in 2010 with the aim of enhancing the status of women by advising the government on gender mainstreaming policies and developing appropriate strategies.

8. Special domestic violence courts were established in all three governorates: Erbil, Slemani, and Duhok in 2012.

9. In 2012, the Women’s Rights Monitoring Board was established and tasked with monitoring the effectiveness of mechanisms put in place to protect women’s rights and the progress of the implementation of the new laws and policies.

10. The KRG launched an Action Plan to implement the UN Women Peace and Security agenda in 2014. The KRG is one of the first governments in the Middle East with such an action plan.

# KRI DRAFT CONSTITUTION ARTICLES ON WOMEN’S RIGHTS

THE DRAFT CONSTITUTION OF THE KRI DECLARES MEN AND WOMEN EQUAL UNDER THE LAW, AND SETS OUT A LEGAL FRAMEWORK TO PREVENT DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN.

## ARTICLE 20

Men and women shall be equal before the law. The KRG must seek to remove all obstacles hindering equality in all spheres of life, and in civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights. The KRG guarantees that all shall enjoy their rights, as stipulated in this Constitution and the international charters signed by the State of Iraq.

## ARTICLE 27

The KRG shall guarantee the establishment of special homes to protect and care for women who have, for social reasons, lost their family security.

All forms of discrimination, violence and abuse in society, school, and in the family shall be forbidden.

## ARTICLE 41

Fair representation of all geographic localities, ethnic and religious groups shall be taken into consideration when organizing a system for electing members, as well as guaranteeing that no less than 30% of the seats in the parliament of Iraqi Kurdistan be reserved for women representatives.

## ARTICLE 106

The electoral law for local and municipal councils must aim to ensure that at least (30%) of the councils’ members are women.



# REMOVING BARRIERS

## ADVANCING WOMEN’S RIGHTS

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Without women’s involvement, neither political nor social progress are possible in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Women must be empowered, and their rights must be guaranteed by laws. Change will not happen overnight. It will take time. But we must start today.

Nechirvan Barzani on August 23, 2008

Nechirvan Barzani has been a catalyst for the women’s rights movement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). During his tenure as Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), he made gender equality a priority for his government and set aspirational goals to protect the rights of women.

Some of the most groundbreaking developments for the advancement of women’s rights during Nechirvan Barzani’s premiership included the integration of gender equality principles into government policies, the establishment of several gender institutions, the amendment of the Personal Status Law of 1959, and the adaptation of new legislation on combatting violence against women.

### GENDER MAINSTREAMING

The KRG announced its first national gender agenda on March 8, 2005 during the International Women’s Day. In line with the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the gender agenda laid out the government’s commitment to combating violence against women, tackling various forms of inequality, increasing women’s participation in decision-making roles, and elevating women’s status in family and society.

To implement these principles, the “Gender Equality Unit” was established in 2005, and Ms. Mahabad Qaradaghi, a prominent writer and activist, was appointed as a special advisor in the Council of Ministers on issues of equality.

### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In 2007, then Prime Minister Barzani announced the KRG’s first action plan on “Preventing Violence Against Women” in a meeting with women’s rights organizations and ministries.

Following this meeting, a High Commission was set up to bring together all the related ministries with the aim of addressing violence against women in the KRI. At the first meeting of the High Commission, Nechirvan Barzani decided to establish Directorate of Combatting Violence Against Women, tasked with combatting violence against women in all three governorates: Erbil, Slemani, and Duhok.

During this period, the work of non-governmental organizations and civil society flourished. Women organizations became actively involved in campaigning for the prevention of violence and abuse. Organizations also started collecting information about the many challenges facing women in the region and began robust advocacy for necessary changes.

In 2007, the KRG announced the establishment of Women’s Protection Shelters in Erbil, Duhok, and Slemani with the aim of providing protection for women at risk. These shelters also offered legal advice, social services, and crisis intervention with family members to settle disputes. In the same year, the KRG’s Ministry of Interior set up fourteen toll-free telephone hotlines for women expressing distress and abuse.

In order to increase public awareness of women’s issues, the KRG in 2007 started an annual campaign to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The campaign aims to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls around the world, calling for global action to increase awareness, promote advocacy and create opportunities for discussion on challenges and solutions.

Prime Minister Barzani also led the government’s discussions with various stakeholders and community leaders. Considering the influence of religious institutions in preventing violence against women, Nechirvan Barzani attended the Congress of Islamic

Thought on July 11, 2007, to seek the support of religious institutions and Imams. He asked religious leaders to preach respect, understanding, and justice for women during Friday sermons.

Another noteworthy development in addressing gender-based violence in the KRI during Nechirvan Barzani’s premiership was the adaptation of a five-year “National Plan to Combat Violence Against Women.” The National Plan provided a strategic vision and support for the better implementation of laws and regulations aimed at ending domestic violence and bringing the government’s legal practices in line with international standards on violence against women.

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Killing women is nothing but a cause for shame. Confronting this crime is a collective responsibility on the shoulders of every individual in society. We must change the laws to end this crime. However, legislation alone is not enough. We have to confront traditional social codes to transform people’s mindset.

Nechirvan Barzani

“It is the time to talk openly about the challenges women face in our society. We should not let fear or shame stop us from talking about problems such as the ‘honor killings’, and we must work to find appropriate solutions.”

Nechirvan Barzani

CHALLENGING THE TRADITIONAL SOCIAL CODES

Nechirvan Barzani led the implementation of one of the most ambitious legal reform programs in the Kurdistan Region, modernizing women’s right through legal means.

In the early years of the KRI, the legal system allowed the practice of polygamy. There was also no obligation to attend a civil ceremony to be married; it was common practice to get married through a religious ceremony alone. The legal marriage age was very low, especially for girls, and neither a person’s physical nor mental eligibility for marriage was taken into account. The right to divorce was a privilege granted only to men. The wife could be abandoned without any financial security at her husband’s will.

To address these injustices, the KRG was determined to challenge traditional social codes and amend the Personal Status Law of 1959.

On August 5, 2007, Nechirvan Barzani appointed well-known religious scholar Professor Mustafa Zalmi as a Legal Affairs Advisor in the Council of Ministers. Following this appointment, a Special Committee headed by Professor Zalmi and consisting of five women and five men, was established to amend the Iraqi Personal Status Law.

In the eleven months that followed, the committee meticulously worked on drafting a new bill that gave much needed protection to women while upholding the principals of the Holy Qur’an and Islamic Shariah.

The draft bill was presented to the Prime Minister by Professor Zalmi on July 16, 2008. During a press conference announcing the draft law, Professor Zalmi said “The draft Personal Status Law is a crucial step to improve women’s rights in the KRI. We hope that in the future it will serve as an example for other Muslim countries, which might benefit from the work of this Committee.”

However, on the very day the amended draft was announced to the press, severe backlash grew among some Islamic scholars in the region who strongly opposed the amendments.

Following rounds of meetings with Islamic scholars, all the parties agreed that the new draft bill did not go against the Holy Quran and Islamic Shariah. The consensus of Islamic scholars on the law paved the way for the enactment of the new Personal Status Law by a majority vote in the Kurdistan Parliament on November 13, 2008.

Dr. Mohammed Sharif, President of the Kurdistan Islamic Forum, who was a member of the Committee, said: “Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani paid close attention to the amendment of the Personal Status Law and personally followed its progress. He knew that it would have been difficult to amend the law without Islamic scholars because the issue required complete expertise in Islamic jurisprudence. Some of the clerics were strongly opposing. They were dissatisfied with

the improvements that were made in the amended law. However, our work was compatible with Islamic Sharia. Even when we sat with them in the Parliament, they could not defend their claims.”

Well-known woman activist and former parliamentarian Mrs. Pakhshan Zangana said, “Mr. Nechirvan Barzani pointed out that the quest for women’s rights would be an ongoing struggle, and this was the first step towards major social changes, especially in the field of women’s rights in the KRI. Therefore, although the amended law did not meet all our demands, we accepted the bill. It was a huge stride for women’s rights.”

Mr. Zana Rostayi, a former Parliamentarian from the Kurdistan Justice Group, said “Even though we did not agree with all the changes in the Personal Status Law, we voted in favor of it. I strongly defended the views of Professor Mustafa Zalmi.”

Dr. Bashir Haddad, the former Deputy Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament and a prominent Islamic figure, said in an interview: “The amended Personal Status Law was historical. It is very different from the laws of neighboring countries where laws are not that liberal because the leaders were afraid of the reaction of the religious scholars and the public. Nevertheless, we, fortunately, overcame all the obstacles, and Mr. Nechirvan Barzani was able to create consensus among all different groups.”

Efforts to amend the law created a consensus on various issues such as polygamy, divorce, and forced marriages. It was a substantial win for women’s rights in the Kurdistan Region.

Amending the Personal Status Law is still considered one of the most notable accomplishments of women’s rights in the past few decades and one of Barzani’s proudest achievements.

“Awareness should be raised among our people through educational and religious institutions. Violence against women must be eradicated and all those who commit this cruel act against women must be punished.”

Nechirvan Barzani





THROUGH THE INTRODUCTION OF  
VARIOUS LAWS AND REGULATIONS  
ON WOMEN'S ISSUES, THE KRG HAS  
DEMONSTRATED ITS COMMITMENT  
TO A PUBLIC POLICY THAT SUPPORTS  
GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT.



# THE HIGH COUNCIL FOR WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

THE HIGH COUNCIL FOR WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT WAS ESTABLISHED IN 2010 BY THEN PM NECHIRVAN BARZANI WITH THE AIM OF ADVANCING THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ (KRI) BY ADVISING THE GOVERNMENT ON GENDER MAINSTREAMING POLICIES.

The High Council for Women and Development (HCWD) has advisory and monitoring powers and submits proposals to the government for policies aimed at advancing the status of women, promoting gender equality, eliminating discrimination against women, and preventing domestic violence and other forms of violence against women. The HCWD is actively involved in enhancing the work of relevant governmental agencies and offers support to NGOs.

The goals and functions of the High Council for Women and Development include:

1. Enhancing women’s participation in the public and private sectors and ensuring their access to decision-making positions.

1.1 Developing women’s leadership skills and abilities and encouraging their participation in every area and at every level.

1.2 Increasing the participation of women in leading positions in all authorities, bodies, and councils, in both the public and private sectors.
2. Integrating gender equality principles into national laws, policies, plans, programs and budgets.

2.1 Providing input to laws and regulations to make these consistent with the principles of local laws, international and regional treaties, and conventions on human rights, in order to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.

2.2 Developing national plans to promote gender equality in all areas; the HCWD has a budget for the implementation of these plans.
3. Promoting a supportive environment for women’s economic, social and cultural empowerment and development.

3.1 Monitoring and supporting the implementation of the action plans of the National Strategy for the Development of the Status of Women: 2016-2026

3.2 Monitoring and supporting the implementation of the action plans of the National Strategy to Combat Violence Against Women in Kurdistan: 2017-2027.

3.3 Monitoring and supporting the implementation of the National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security.

3.4 Working on eliminating negative stereotypes of women and girls, and promoting positive images of their role in society.
4. Strengthening institutional support for the HCWD, and all structures and organizations working in the area of the empowerment and protection of women and girls.

4.1 Ensuring the continued strength of the HCWD and developing its institutional, administrative and financial capacities.

4.2 Supporting gender equality units in all ministries and governorates of the KRI, as well as helping to develop and maintain robust centers for gender studies in all universities of the region.

Dr. Khanzad Ahmed

SECRETARY GENERAL, HIGH COUNCIL FOR WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT (HCWD), KURDISTAN REGIONAL GOVERNMENT



Dr. Khanzad Ahmed talks about the achievement of the HCWD and the challenges that need to be tackled to improve gender equality in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

What have been the most significant achievements of the HCWD since you took office?

In the last two years, we have successfully achieved the following goals:

- Introduced internal institutional reforms and adopted new regulations
- Strengthened cross-sectoral coordination within the government institutions to deliver a unified approach
- Introduced a law to regulate small arms and light weapons
- Prepared a new law for combating violence against women
- Introduced of the implementation of the Kurdistan Women, Peace and Security plan
- Identified challenges that impacts women’s participation to the workforce in partnership with the World Bank

What are the major challenges that need to be tackled to improve gender equality in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq?

Despite the improvements over the last two decades, we still have a long journey to achieving gender equality in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. We need to reform the education curriculum to make it gender neutral, to introduce new programs especially in the rural areas to increase the number of women in our workforce, to introduce policies to prevent sexual abuse and harassment in public and private sectors, to foster internal coordination on gender issues within the relevant ministries, and to introduce a gender-responsive budget to promote equal opportunities and address gender discrimination.

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Despite the improvements over the last two decades, we still have a long journey to achieving gender equality in the KRI.



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**WOMEN  
GAIN POWER  
IN PUBLIC  
SECTOR**

AS OF 2022, THE TWO HIGHEST POSITIONS IN THE KURDISTAN PARLIAMENT (PARLIAMENT SPEAKER AND DEPUTY SPEAKER) ARE HELD BY WOMEN, AND THERE ARE 37 FEMALE MPS IN THE 111-SEAT KURDISTAN PARLIAMENT.

Introduction

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has come a long way in terms of women’s political empowerment in the last three decades, although it is still at the beginning of its journey. In the early years of the KRI, the political scene was largely dominated by men. There were barely any women parliamentarians in the first Kurdistan Parliament in 1992. However, as of 2022, the two highest positions in the Kurdistan Parliament (Parliament Speaker and Deputy Speaker) are held by women, and there are 37 female MPs in the 111-seat Kurdistan Parliament. Today, women in the KRI serve as members of parliament, cabinet ministers, mayors, ministry director generals, and diplomats playing a much stronger role in public life.

Demanding Greater Political Rights

The KRI has seen a clear trend of a gradual increase towards the greater representation of women in politics. This is in part thanks to the growing levels of education and financial independence of women in the KRI. Conflicts between the Baath regime and the people of Kurdistan, and the forced displacement of Kurdish communities until the 1990s, as well as inter-factional fighting between Kurdish parties in the mid-1990s prevented the majority of the female population from accessing education. Since the reconciliation agreement reached between the Kurdish parties in 2005, which resulted in the merging of the KRI’s two administrative units under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the level of female education has risen steeply. In the last two de-

acades, the rapid increase in the level of women’s education has helped increase women’s participation in the labor force and helped women find employment in jobs with higher status. These more educated and financially independent women have begun to demand greater political rights and representation.

Fundamental Socio-Cultural Changes

The improvement in the level of women’s education has occurred in parallel with similar improvements in women’s status in other segments of the society. The KRI has undergone fundamental socio-cultural changes in the last three decades. Previously, there was a clear division between progressive and conservative groups in Kurdish society with respect to women’s participation in public life. The division between these groups is reflected in the KRI’s political structure. Previously, among Kurdish conservative circles, the role of women was restricted to matters related to childcare and the family. However, this perspective has begun to gradually shift in the last two decades. Today, the presence of women in the political arena is seen as natural and is expected even by conservative segments of Kurdish society.

The Role of Political Parties

The stance of the KRI’s leading political parties has been another important factor with regard to the rapid transformation of the role of women in politics in the region. Twenty years ago, political parties to some extent refrained from placing women on their candidate lists, but today women receive significant support from Kurdish political elites. Today, almost all the KRI’s political parties see the participation of women in politics as an important democratic principle.

New Laws and Regulations

The changes in the KRI’s political culture have led to the start of a new era in the KRI in which women’s participation in politics and the public sphere are guaranteed by law. New laws and regulations have fostered women’s overall engagement in political life. The most important legal change, which took place in 2009, was the introduction of the gender quota law. A minimum legal quota was adopted to ensure that at least 30% of the seats in the Kurdistan Parliament and Municipal Councils are held by women. In the last elections in 2018, 37 women were elected to the Kurdistan Parliament, the highest number of women since the establishment of the Parliament in 1992. The KRI, today, is 47th out of 192 countries worldwide in terms of women’s representation in parliament.

The Challenge

The presence of women in politics has increased in a largely linear and steady fashion in the last three decades, but the KRI still has a long way to go in terms of women’s political representation. The presence of women in positions of political leadership is a new phenomenon in the KRI. Since the KRI was established in 1991, no political party represented in the Kurdistan Parliament has been headed by a woman, and no woman has ever served as Prime Minister or President.

In addition, the representation of women is lower in the cabinet than in parliament. There are only two women cabinet ministers and one minister of state in the current KRG. The low representation of women in the cabinet places the KRI far behind many countries and is in contrast to the global trend of an increasing number of women in cabinets. However, considering women’s outstanding achievements as legislators in the KRI, it will not be surprising if more women are able to hold positions in the leadership and decision-making bodies of the KRG in the near future.

THE KRI, TODAY, IS 47<sup>TH</sup> OUT OF 192 COUNTRIES WORLDWIDE IN TERMS OF WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT.

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The number of women MPs increased to a record of 37 in the 111-seat Kurdistan Parliament after the 2018 elections, compared to only six in the first Parliamentary elections which took place in 1992.



# Begard Talabani

## MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE

Begard Talabani talks about the achievements that Kurdish women have made in the last two decades.

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**In the previous two parliamentary elections, many women candidates were elected without the need for a quota system. Opinions polls show that female political leaders are perceived as being at least as capable as their male counterparts.**

### How did your childhood influence your decision to enter politics?

I come from a revolutionary family. My father and grandfather were deeply involved in the Kurdish uprisings. As the daughter of a Peshmerga fighter, I witnessed the struggles that our people have endured firsthand. We have faced bombardment and attacks. Witnessing all these hardships made me think about the Kurdish cause and inspired me to contribute to the advancement of Kurdish people at an early age.

### What has been the greatest achievement of Kurdish women in the last two decades?

The greatest achievement is the massive transformation in society’s assumptions about women’s role in the family. Equality in the home is gradually being accepted by the public.

Today, it is a common view that a woman’s role should not be confined only household duties. In the past, the responsibility for providing for the family fell to men, but in recent years we have seen more women working and contributing family incomes. Another important achievement is that women have proved that they can fill leadership positions in public life. I believe late president Jalal Talabani opened the door to women’s empowerment in Kurdistan. He played a significant role in legislative reforms and laws related to women’s issues. In the previous two parliamentary elections, many women candidates were elected without the need for a quota system. Today, women play an important role in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government in Kurdistan. Opinions polls show that female political leaders are perceived as being at least as capable as their male counterparts.



### What advice you would give to a young woman who wants to start a political career?

Every woman should be brave enough to stand her ground and refuse to allow a man to violate her rights or interfere in her decisions. Young women should also be aware that pursuing a political career is not simple. There are many difficulties to overcome. They have to work hard and never give up. They must focus on their education and should believe that they can achieve their objectives and become the leaders of tomorrow.

### Was your family supportive of your desire to pursue a career in politics?

I received a lot of support from my father in building my political career. He endorsed me when I joined the PUK and the Student Association in 1992. However, my mother was more apprehensive about my desire to enter politics. I was the only girl in my district to join demonstrations and uprisings, sometimes wearing men’s clothes and a Kurdish jamana (scarf) around my neck, which was quite unusual for a girl. My mother was not happy with my activist side. But I always told her that I would become a very well-known figure in Kurdistan one day if she supported me. Today, I am a minister, and she is proud of me.

# Kwestan Mohamad Abdulla Maarouf

## MINISTER OF LABOR AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

Kwestan Mohamad Abdulla Maarouf talks about her Ministry’s gender-equal policies.



### How would you characterize women’s role in your Ministry?

I can proudly say that our ministry is led by women. The Deputy Minister, the Deputy Director General, the Director of Legal Affairs, the Director of Administrative Affairs, the Director of the Gender Unit, and the Director of Public Relations are women. So, women are very well represented in the leadership and decision-making positions in our ministry. In addition, the gender unit operating under our ministry is ranked the best out of all gender units of other ministries by the Kurdistan Regional Government’s High Council for Women’s Affairs.

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**We prepared a labor bill that enshrines women’s rights and provides equal job opportunities for women. Furthermore, the bill aims to integrate gender-perspective into policies and to bring gender balance to the workplace.**

### What is the Ministry’s role in increasing the number of women in the workforce?

Women’s participation in the workforce is still weak in the KRI. We prepared a labor bill that enshrines women’s rights and provides equal job opportunities for women. Furthermore, the bill aims to integrate gender-perspective into policies and to bring gender balance to the workplace. When the bill is passed by Kurdistan Parliament, I believe it will be a huge step towards boosting the number of women in the workforce.

### What place does women’s capacity building hold in the Ministry’s strategy?

We have eight professional training centers across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). It is in our strategy to always maintain gender balance in training centers. I personally visit these centers and to make sure that our gender-neutral policies are properly implemented.

### What do you believe should be the main priorities for women’s political empowerment over the next decade?

Remarkable successes have been achieved in the political representation of women in the KRI in the last two decades. In the Kurdistan Parliament, 30% of MPs are women, as are the Parliamentary Speaker and Deputy Speaker. We have three female ministers in the current cabinet. But despite this progress, women’s empowerment still has a long way to go in the KRI. We need to remove all barriers to achieving full gender equality in government institutions and to accommodate more women in leadership positions in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.



# Dr. Vala Fareed Ibrahim

## MINISTER OF STATE, KURDISTAN REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

Dr. Vala Fareed Ibrahim talks about the resilience of Kurdish women and being a female politician in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



### What is it like being a female politician?

It is not easy being a woman in politics. Unfortunately, gender inequality has been entrenched in public attitudes for many years and still exists in society today. Since we have a patriarchal society, politics, traditionally, has been regarded as a field exclusively for men. Women have to work harder than men and be very assertive in order to establish themselves in this field. However, since its early days, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has adopted a progressive policy on women’s political empowerment. Thus, women are gradually gaining more respect from society, and have begun to play a much greater role in political life in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

### What mindset do women need in order to thrive in politics?

They should work hard and avoid an approach of trying to get the best results with the least amount of effort. Success does not come easy. They should start by focusing on their education and choose a field of expertise in which they can prove to others that they are capable of serving in that field better than anyone else. They also need strong networking abilities in order to build friendships and working relationships.

### Is it difficult to balance a political and family life?

It’s very difficult to balance a political career with your family responsibilities. Working in public service is your passion and so you put the public first, as your priority. It’s an all-encompassing job. It’s 24/7. We need to attend late meetings in parliament or in our political party. Women often hesitate to invest in their careers in politics due to their family responsibilities especially when they have children. We need a gender-sensitive approach to create a more favorable environment for women to participate in politics and public life.

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Kurdish women have developed a sense of hope and the ability to turn disadvantage into advantage and transcend adversities in their lives.

### What are Kurdish women’s greatest strengths?

Our greatest strength is our resilience. Unfortunately, we have discovered our strengths through painful experiences. Kurdish women have experienced traumatic events in their lives. They have witnessed the most horrific crimes against humanity, including chemical bombing and genocide. Their homes have been destroyed, and their families executed. The most recent crime against Kurdistan women was the genocidal rape and sexual violence perpetrated by ISIS against the Yezidis. However, Kurdish women have been able to recover from these traumatic experiences which have had profound effects on their lives.

TODAY, ALMOST ALL THE POLITICAL PARTIES SEE THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS AS AN IMPORTANT DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLE IN THE KRI.



# Nigar Ahmad Mohammad

## JUDGE

Nigar Ahmad Mohammad talks about her achievements and why more women are needed in the judiciary in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



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The entry of women into the judiciary is a positive step towards making judicial bodies more transparent, inclusive, trusted, and effective.

### What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishment?

I’ve always believed that women are no less capable than men and can become successful judges. For that reason, I decided to break the glass ceiling and took the examination to become a judge. I translated my dream into reality when I was appointed as the first female judge in Erbil in 2010. My appointment reversed stereotypes about women in the judiciary and inspired other women to take the challenge. Today there are 48 female judges in the KRI. I became the first female judge in the Court of Appeal in Erbil in 2018 and became the first female member of Erbil Criminal Court in 2021.

### Why do you think we need more women in higher ranks of the judiciary?

At a time when the world is moving towards involving more women in decision-making positions, the judicial system must be free of gender discrimination to stay relevant and respected. Female judges strengthen the judiciary and help win the public’s trust. Indeed, citizens find it difficult to accept the judiciary as a guarantor of law and rights if the judges themselves act in a discriminatory manner. Therefore, the presence of women is necessary for the legitimacy of the judiciary. The entry of women into the judiciary is a positive step towards making judicial bodies more transparent, inclusive, trusted, and effective. Our aim should be to achieve gender equality at all levels of the judiciary.

### Could you offer some advice for young female Kurdish law students?

Aim high and work hard. Be ambitious, determined, and confident. Never let anyone stop you from achieving your goals.

# Tarza Salar Othman

## JUDGE

Tarza Salar Othman talks about the role of women in the judiciary in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



### What has been the most important step that has boosted women’s role in the judiciary in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)?

The most significant achievement for women in judiciary has been the establishment of the KRI Judicial Institute. In 2009, the Kurdistan Parliament passed Law No.7 which paved the way for the establishment of the Judicial Institute, and allowed women to become judges in the KRI. The Judicial Institute codified the process of becoming a judge or a general prosecutor. The structured process did not allow for discrimination between men and women. Thanks to the establishment of the Judicial Institute, the number of female judges and general prosecutors has gradually been rising in the KRI.

### What are the challenges for women in the judiciary in the KRI?

We need to improve diversity in the composition of the judiciary in the KRI. There are few women in the upper ranks of the judiciary in the KRI. Gender stereotypes, family responsibilities, cultural and social barriers result in the underrepresentation of women in the judiciary. A gender quota could be considered as a way to encourage more women to enter the judicial system and to help to narrow the gender gap in higher ranking positions. However, any gender quota must not let us disregard qualifications and must not weaken the quality of the bench.

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A gender quota could be considered as a way to encourage more women to enter the judicial system and help to narrow the gender gap in higher ranking positions. However, any gender quota must not let us disregard qualifications and must not weaken the quality of the bench.

### How do you relate to social norms as a judge, especially in terms of violence against women?

Conservative social norms and patriarchal customs around gender roles are the biggest hurdles we need to tackle. Women and girls are oppressed in the family, excluded in social spheres, and murdered under the pretext of honor because of these outdated and unacceptable norms. Greater domestic legal protections must be granted for women against violence to challenge these deeply seated patriarchal customs. We should also raise social and educational awareness campaigns to eradicate these norms.

Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman

KRG HIGH REPRESENTATIVE TO THE U.S.

Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman talks about women’s role in diplomacy, and the future of gender equality in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



What can be done to increase the number of female representatives in Kurdish foreign policy?

In the KRI, we should aim for at least 30% female representatives, which would bring it up to par with our parliament’s female quota. I believe there are many talented women who can fulfill this role, and diversity in our diplomatic corps is necessary in order to reflect the diverse makeup of our society. Like other countries, there are institutional barriers to women in our foreign and social services. Our leadership is progressive and believes in promoting equal opportunities for women in the KRI. We need to draw up a roadmap that includes mentoring, positive discrimination to help women get on the diplomatic-career ladder, and more role models.

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I am optimistic about the future of women in the KRI because we have come too far to go back now. This doesn’t mean that gender equality is guaranteed; it means that the drive for equality is here to stay.

What are the greatest hurdles you have overcome in your career?

Like every profession, it can be uncomfortable if you are the only woman in a professional meeting or the only woman at the negotiating table. But you learn to overcome those concerns and to be assertive, remembering that you aren’t there in a personal capacity but representing your government and your people’s best interests. While the leadership in the KRI is supportive and wants women to succeed, that isn’t always true of the lower ranks whose chauvinism comes through when they question a woman’s leadership or challenge her decisions in a way that they would not do with a man. But again, you learn to be assertive because of your role, to stand your ground, and, with the support of senior colleagues, overcome these challenges. I have been very fortunate not to have had many negative experiences and have enjoyed a great deal of support in my diplomatic career. I hope I can mentor and support younger women in their diplomatic careers.

Are you optimistic about the future of women’s rights in the KRI?

Women have played an essential and critical role in the Kurdish struggle and many of the achievements that we have today in the KRI were built on the shoulders of those women who came before us. They sacrificed a peaceful and stable family life to fight for our freedom, to support men in their families who took up arms against the dictatorship, and often led their families alone in their absence.

These achievements and sacrifices are recognized and celebrated by our leadership, and their example is important. What is missing is making this history known and celebrated by younger generations, especially in schools and among the general public. For example, we could start by dedicating a month every year to celebrating the positive role of Kurdish women in our history and society, and make this part of our education curriculum.

When the historic role of women is recognized more widely, it will help to make it easier for women to work not only in the public sector, but also in the private sector. I am optimistic about the future of women in the KRI because we have come too far to go back now. This doesn’t mean that gender equality is guaranteed; it means that the drive for equality is here to stay.

Rezan Kader

KRG REPRESENTATIVE TO ITALY AND THE HOLY SEE

Rezan Kader talks about why more women are needed in diplomacy and the hurdles women face.



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The Kurdistan Regional Government has achieved many of its goals in terms of women’s representation in the public sector. However, a great deal remains to be done. I am confident that the KRG will take further steps to empower women in diplomacy.

Why are more women necessary in diplomacy?

We live in an interconnected world with complex problems that require urgent solutions. Considering the global challenges in poverty, healthcare, education and security, it is no longer sustainable for diplomacy to be dominated by men. We need women’s insights and perspectives to tackle these issues. I strongly believe that the advancement of women in diplomacy will bring practical solutions to these global problems. Furthermore, societies cannot be represented fully if women are excluded from diplomacy. Thus, women’s participation in diplomacy is a must for a more democratic, modern and progressive world.

What are the greatest hurdles for women working in diplomacy?

Gender stereotypes, and patriarchal social norms and traditions have not yet disappeared. Diplomacy, unfortunately, is still perceived as a man’s field. This enduring patriarchal mentality is hampering the advancement of women in diplomacy. Women are seen as less authoritative or assertive by their male counterparts.

Balancing a diplomatic career with a family life is also a big hurdle for women in diplomacy. Our working hours are not limited to a standard eight hours. A workday goes from morning until late evening. Sometimes we have to attend multiple events and receptions every evening of the week.

Do you think we will see more women in Kurdish diplomacy in the future?

I am very optimistic about the future of gender equality and women’s empowerment in Kurdish diplomacy. Gender equality in diplomacy is fundamental for all democratic and progressive governments.



# Nuxsha Naseh

## MAYOR OF HALABJA

Nuxsha Naseh talks about women’s role in the city of Halabja.



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**Women make up 61 percent of Halabja Municipality’s workforce. In line with our vision and commitment, we are working to anchor the principles of gender equality in the city and act as a role model for the rest of the KRI.**

**How would you summarize Halabja in terms of the women’s participation in decision making?**

Women are very well represented in decision-making roles in Halabja. But this is not something new here. Gender has always been less of an issue in Halabja compared to other cities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Historically, women have always held leadership roles in Halabja. The most famous example is Adela Jaff, who was famous for her effective governance in the Halabja region a century ago. Halabja is a role model for women’s participation in leadership roles not only for the KRI but for all Iraq.

**How important is gender equality for the Halabja Municipality’s leadership?**

Gender equality is the central pillar of an inclusive and representative democratic society. It is also an engine of prosperity. We, as the leadership of Halabja Municipality, are highly committed to gender parity. Women make up 61 percent of Halabja Municipality’s workforce. Alongside our general director, many directorates are run by women. There is no gender wage gap. In line with our vision and commitment, we are working to anchor the principles of gender equality in the city and act as a role model for the rest of the KRI.

**What have been your priorities in terms of gender equality since you took office in 2016?**

Strengthening our efforts to make equal the number of women and men in decision-making bodies at all levels, integrating a gender perspective in our programs and activities, and raising the level of knowledge and awareness of gender relations among management and other staff have been our main priorities. We believe that instilling the value of gender equality from an early age is vital, so we have launched awareness campaigns to further women’s empowerment in public and private life.

# Kwestan Ahmed

## MAYOR OF KHABAT DISTRICT

Kwestan Ahmed talks about her personal experiences and the women’s issues that need to be addressed in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



**What inspired you to enter politics?**

My inspiration comes from my family. My father and family members were Peshmerga who participated in the Kurdish revolutions against the Baathist regime. My interest in politics began with my father at an early age. The Kurdish nation’s struggle and sacrifices made me feel that I had a responsibility to my society. I wanted to promote change and contribute to the development of our nation. So, I decided to enter politics and dedicated myself to serving the public.

**Which initiatives are you taking to promote women’s economic empowerment in the Khabat district?**

We attribute vital importance to women’s economic empowerment. Together with our local and international partners, we regularly organize vocational training courses, which aim to stimulate employment opportunities among women and improve their socio-economic status. In addition, we conduct workshops to develop gender-sensitive capacities of private sector companies in the Khabat District. We are also working on projects to strengthen access to finance for women-owned small businesses.

**What are the top women’s issues that need to be addressed?**

There are many issues, but specifically two areas require urgent action. First, preventing domestic violence must be a priority. Violence against women, which is one of the most pressing human rights issues, is still prevalent in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Second, women’s equal access to employment opportunities needs to be ensured. We should remove all the barriers that hinder women’s economic opportunities. We still have a long way to go, but considering the Kurdistan Regional Government’s commitment to advancing the women’s rights agenda, I strongly believe that Kurdistan will make great progress in the years to come.

**Did you receive support from your family when you entered politics?**

I have been fully supported by my family. Their support made me more enthusiastic about my work. My family not only encouraged me to enter politics, but they also pushed me to aim high in my career choices.

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**Together with our local and international partners, we regularly organize vocational training courses, which aim to stimulate employment opportunities among women and improve their socio-economic status.**

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**PREVENTING  
VIOLENCE  
AGAINST  
WOMEN**



In 2007, then PM Nechirvan Barzani, who made the advancement of women one of the pillars of his premiership, ordered his cabinet to launch the Kurdistan Region of Iraq’s (KRI) first region-wide campaign with the aim of creating awareness of domestic violence. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in cooperation with local and international NGOs prepared a week-long campaign entitled “The Elimination of Violence Against Women” across the KRI.

At the launch conference of the campaign, Nechirvan Barzani gave a challenging speech to address gender-based violence in the KRI.

**“...WE MUST ADMIT THAT MANY INJUSTICES ARE COMMITTED AGAINST WOMEN IN THE NAME OF RELIGION OR WITH THE EXCUSE OF CULTURAL OR TRADITIONAL PRACTICES. WE FEEL THAT EVERYONE IN SOCIETY HAS A DUTY TO COMBAT VIOLATIONS AGAINST WOMEN. WHAT WE ASK FOR IS EQUALITY, JUSTICE AND RESPECT FOR ALL HUMAN BEINGS. [...] THE ONE-WEEK CAMPAIGN OF THE ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS A STEP WE INITIATED IN THE REGION BECAUSE WE KNOW WE HAVE A PROBLEM. THIS PROBLEM HAS MANY FACETS: CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL, HEALTH, EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL. [...] WE DO NOT CALL FOR ABANDONING OUR OLD TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS. WE DO NOT CALL FOR ABANDONING OUR RELIGION OR OUR HERITAGE, WHICH IS A SOURCE OF PRIDE. BUT WE HAVE TO KNOW THAT CERTAIN ISSUES RELEVANT TO WOMEN’S RIGHTS MUST CHANGE, AND WE HAVE TO ACHIEVE THIS AND MAKE PROGRESS IN ORDER TO FIND A PLACE IN THE MODERN WORLD...”**

—  
THEN PRIME MINISTER  
NECHIRVAN BARZANI IN 2007

Following this campaign, the KRG decisively stepped up its efforts to tackle violence against women.

**Women’s Shelters**

The KRG’s first concrete step was the establishment of shelters for female victims of domestic violence and their children in Erbil, Duhok, and Slemani in 2007. Today, the KRG operates four shelters, in Erbil, Slemani, Duhok and Garmian, which provide short- and long-term protection for women at risk. Staff at women’s shelters offer legal support to victims, including appointing lawyers, accompanying women to court hearings and health centers, and coordinating cases with the criminal investigation office. According to official data, approximately one-thousand women use the services provided by the shelters every year.

**National Domestic Violence Hotline**

In 2008, the KRG launched campaigns to educate women about their rights and encourage them to free themselves from cycles of violence. Alongside these campaigns, the KRG set up a domestic violence hotline under the Ministry of Interior the same year. According to official data,

the national hotline in 2021 received more than 11,000 complaints of violence against women. In addition to the hotline, the KRG in 2021 in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) funded a free mobile app, SafeYou, to tackle gender-based violence and improve the safety of women and girls.

**Directorate for Combatting Violence Against Women**

Another groundbreaking development in the KRG’s efforts to tackle violence against women was the establishment of the Directorate for Combatting Violence Against Women. In 2008, then PM Nechirvan Barzani set up a High Commission which brought together all related ministries along with senior health, police and justice professionals with the aim of tackling and monitoring violence against women. At the first meeting of the High Commission, the Directorate for Combatting Violence Against Women was established in three governorates: Erbil, Slemani, and Duhok.

**THE KRG HAS A ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICY TOWARDS PERPETRATORS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE.**

Law on Combating Domestic Violence

The most important legal milestone in terms of preventing violence against women in the KRI was the enactment of “Law No.8 on Combating Domestic Violence” in 2011.

The Law prohibits any person from committing an act of domestic violence, including physical, sexual, and psychological violence within the family, and considers the acts mentioned below as examples of domestic violence:

- 1. Forced marriage
- 2. Marriage of minors
- 3. Marriage in exchange for ransom (blood money)
- 4. Female Genital Mutilation
- 5. Forced Divorce
- 6. Cutting off kinship relationship and disowning members of family
- 7. Husband forcing wife to engage in prostitution
- 8. Forcing family members to work or quit their jobs without their willingness
- 9. Forcing children to work or beg and drop out from school
- 10. Suicide due to domestic violence
- 11. Abortion due to domestic violence
- 12. Beating children or other family members for any reason
- 13. Assaulting, insulting and using foul language towards family members, making them feel inferior, hurting them, putting psychological pressure on them, violating their rights, and forcing a wife to engage in sexual intercourse.

Law No.8 holds perpetrators accountable for their actions. As Article 7 reads: “Whoever commits domestic violence is imprisoned for no less than 6 months and no more than 3 years and fined no less than 1 million Iraqi dinars and no more than 5 million Iraqi dinars (approximately \$700 and \$3,400) or shall be punished by one of these two penalties”.

The Law on Combating Domestic Violence provides provisions for a specialized court, and empowers police units, the health, social affairs, and education ministries, and women’s shelters to tackle gender-based violence with a holistic approach. It also offers protection services for the victims of domestic violence through legal support, and healthcare and rehabilitation services.

Special Domestic Violence Courts

Following the enactment in 2012 of Law No.8, the KRG established special domestic violence courts in all three governorates: Erbil, Slemani, and Duhok.

COMBATING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LAW

Female Genital Mutilation

The Law on Combating Domestic Violence of 2011 led to a breakthrough in combating female genital mutilation (FGM) in the KRI. Article 2 of the law defines FGM as a violation of women’s and girls’ rights.

Article 6 sets out the penalties for performing and aiding FGM. Some of these punishments include that anybody who performs or engages in FGM on any person is liable to a term of imprisonment not exceeding 6 months or to a fine no less than 2 million Iraqi dinars and no more than 5 million Iraqi dinars (approximately \$1,400 and \$3,400) or shall be punished by one of these two penalties.

The sentence is more severe for perpetrators of FGM on minors. Anybody who is found guilty of performing or engaging in FGM on minors will be imprisoned for no less than 1 year or no more than 3 years and fined no less than 5 million Iraqi dinars and no more than 10 million Iraqi dinars (approximately \$3,400 and \$6,800) or shall be punished by one of these two penalties.

The KRI law considers FGM as an aggravated crime. If the perpetrator is a doctor, pharmacist, chemist, midwife or one of their assistants, the court shall ban this person from practicing his/her career for a duration of no more than three years.

Even though the prevalence of FGM has decreased remarkably in the last decade, the practice of FGM continues, particularly in rural areas of the KRI. The research done by local and international NGOs show that FGM mainly persists in the Erbil and Slemani governorates of the KRI. The prevalence of FGM is very low in the governorate of Duhok and Halabja governorate is free of FGM. The KRG announced a new action plan in 2019 which aims to eradicate entirely the practice of FGM in the KRI by 2028.

National Plan

Another noteworthy development in addressing gender-based violence in the KRI was the ratification of a five year “National Plan to Combat Violence Against Women” prepared by the the High Council for Women and Development in 2012. The plan was endorsed by the KRG for the period 2012-2017, and extended in 2017 for the period of 2017-2027.

The National Plan provides strategic vision and operational directions for the better implementation of laws and regulations aimed at ending domestic violence and to bring the KRI’s legal practices in line with international standards on violence against women. The endorsement of the National Plan has created greater awareness, not only of violence against women, but also of the goal of a more egalitarian society.

EVEN THOUGH THE PREVALENCE OF FGM HAS DECREASED REMARKABLY IN THE LAST DECADE, THE PRACTICE OF FGM CONTINUES, PARTICULARLY IN RURAL AREAS OF THE KRI.



WE WILL NOT TOLERATE THE KILLING OF  
WOMEN – UNDER ANY PRETEXT. THOSE  
PERPETUATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN  
WILL FACE THE FULL FORCE OF THE LAW.

“  
March 8 is not a day just for celebrating women,  
but for us, as men, to reflect on the extent to  
which we respect the rights and freedoms of  
women around us.  
”

**QUBAD TALABANI**

Deputy Prime Minister  
Kurdistan Regional Government



Lanja Dizayee

MEMBER OF KURDISTAN PARLIAMENT

Lanja Dizayee, Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Protection of Women’s Rights, talks about the remits of the committee and its priorities.



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I believe that, in order to make true progress in dismantling the barriers that women face, we must spend more effort on reforming and implementing laws and regulations.

What are the top priorities of the committee?

Our top priority is to concentrate our efforts on amending the Act of Combating Domestic Violence (Law No. 8 of 2011). The new anti-domestic violence bill’s first and second readings have already been held in the Kurdistan Parliament. The amended law will further protect women from all forms of violence.

The Kurdistan Parliament has enacted several essential and applicable pieces of legislation in regard to women’s rights in the last two decades. Unfortunately, however, there have been obstacles to the practical implementation of some articles of the laws. Promoting the implementation of this legislation is also our priority.

What are the main barriers to legislation being implemented?

Unfortunately, despite all the legal improvements over the last two decades, we have not been able to break patriarchal social norms, which hinder our progress. I believe that, in order to make true progress in dismantling the barriers that women face, we must spend more effort on reforming and implementing laws and regulations. Most of the committees in the Kurdistan Parliament have eleven members, except the Committee on Protection of Women’s Rights, which has only seven. This lack of quorum has also been a barrier of doing our work and meeting our goals.

What are the key remits of the Parliamentary Committee on Protection of Women’s Rights?

We examine bills tabled by the government and legislators on matters pertaining to women’s rights. In the framework of exercising parliamentary scrutiny, the committee reviews and makes legislative proposals with respect to women’s issues, improves current legislation, and monitors legal developments. We also propose changes required to bring national legislation on gender issues into compliance with provisions in international treaties.

What are the top women’s issues needs to be addressed?

In cooperation with all related parties, we should develop a comprehensive national strategy to boost women’s participation to the workforce and to prevent violence against women. Another critically important issue that needs to be addressed is to ensure more women have a seat at the decision-making table in both public and private sectors.

Pakhshan Zangana

FORMER SECRETARY GENERAL, HIGH COUNCIL FOR WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT, KURDISTAN REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

Pakhshan Zangana talks about violence against women and gender equality in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



What have been the major accomplishments in terms of women’s rights in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)?

The amendment of the Personal Status Law of 2008 - which restricted polygamy, gave women the right to initiate a divorce, and forbids forced marriage - and the enactments of the Combating Domestic Violence Law of 2011 - which holds perpetrators accountable for their actions - have been the two most important legal improvements with respect to women’s rights in the KRI in the last two decades.

What is the main obstacle today in terms of women’s rights in the KRI?

The foremost challenge that requires urgent action is violence against women in the KRI. We have many laws which protect women against violence on paper. Unfortunately, the implementation of these laws is weak. Gender-based violence is a result of the gender inequality which is deeply entrenched in our society. Social change is seldom easy. I believe we can only achieve gender equality by using a tailor-made model which fits our society, not by borrowing an approach from elsewhere. We need to look at our own history and implement solutions our own way. Violence against women will only be prevented when we embrace true gender equality and a new approach.


What is the greatest strength of Kurdistan women?

Our history shows us how resilient our women are. Kurdistan women have been through every kind of struggle as mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. Despite all the challenges and hardships, Kurdistan women find strength to fight in their own way. Even in the most difficult circumstances, they have shown resilience and strength. Today, women and girls are taking charge of their futures in the KRI. Their level of education has skyrocketed in the last two decades. They are in a much better position now compared to before. They are more empowered to demand their rights. The new generation of women and girls must continue to boldly push for change and should assert their rights.

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Violence against women will only be prevented when we embrace true gender equality and a new approach.





VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IS NOT  
CONFINED TO ANY PARTICULAR  
COUNTRY, CULTURE OR RELIGION. IT IS A  
WORLDWIDE PROBLEM.

THE KRG HAS BEEN WORKING  
TIRELESSLY TO CREATE NEW NORMS  
IN ALL AREAS OF SOCIETY THROUGH  
ENACTING A COMPREHENSIVE SET  
OF LEGISLATION AND CONDUCTING  
EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGNS TO END  
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE.



Dr. Abdulla Mala Saeed

PRESIDENT, UNION OF ISLAMIC SCHOLARS

Dr. Abdulla Mala Saeed talks about the role of the Union of Islamic Scholars in preventing violence against women and promoting gender equality in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



What role does the Islamic Scholars Union play in supporting the advancement of women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)?

Islam regards women as the foundation of the family. Islam commands that women’s dignity be preserved and that their status in family and in society be upheld. We, as the Union of Islamic Scholars, work closely with imams, religious leaders, academics in Islamic Studies, and women’s organizations in order to promote women’s role in the society and to spread awareness of the rights for women that are laid out in Islam.

What is the Union of Islamic Scholars’ stance on women’s economic empowerment?

Men and women are equal in terms of their rights and responsibilities. It is not Islam, but rather social norms and tribal codes that have dictated that women should not work outside the home. Because Kurdish society is tribal, women working outside the home sometimes causes family disputes. We have 18 fatwa committees throughout the KRI to solve family disputes in such cases. We support women’s equal participation in public and private life. I believe we play a crucial role in this matter.

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Throughout history, Kurdish imams have sought to address this crime and educate our people that there is no such thing as honor killings in Islam. We, as the Union of Islamic Scholars, supported the Law 14 which ended immunity for those committing honor crimes.

What role does the Union of Islamic Scholars play to prevent honor killings in the KRI?

Throughout history, Kurdish imams have sought to address this crime and educate our people that there is no such thing as honor killings in Islam. We, as the Union of Islamic Scholars, supported the Law 14 which ended immunity for those committing honor crimes. We are working with the Kurdistan Parliament, the Kurdistan Region Presidency, and the Council of Ministers to prevent this crime. Alongside educating our imams, we raise awareness through our booklets, congregational prayers, and other publications to educate the public against honor killings and all sorts of violence against women.

What is the Union of Islamic Scholars’ stance on education for girls?

Islam does not forbid or restrict women from being educated. On the contrary, Islam commands all Muslims, both men and women, to seek knowledge. Throughout our history, Kurdish imams have urged women and girls to study and advise parents to send their daughters to schools. For example, in 1940, the Grand Mulla of Koya District was the first to enroll his daughter in school to set an example and encourage other people to follow. Today, most Kurdish imams’ daughters study at universities and pursue careers in the public or private sectors. We fully support and encourage the education of women and girls.

Shokhan Ahmad

DIRECTOR, WOMEN’S LEGAL ASSISTANCE ORGANIZATION

Shokhan Ahmad talks about violence against women and the obstacles to implementing laws on women’s rights in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



Which laws need to be amended to boost women’s rights in the KRI?

The Iraqi penal codes on women were enacted in the 1960s and 1970s, and almost all of them need to be amended. Although we have amended some of the articles, more changes are still required. The judges believe that these laws are still relevant but need to acknowledge that crime and violence have changed over the years. Take the current personal status law, specifically on the marriage contract. When a woman gets divorced, she is deprived of all her rights. In the KRI, it is not yet the norm for women to hold property titles or car registration. We have a case where a woman has worked as a teacher since 1998 and has given all of her salary to her husband to build a house, the deed of which is under his name. The husband has just divorced her, and she has been left with nothing.

A new domestic violence bill is currently being discussed and debated in the Kurdistan parliament, but we would prefer that the old law be amended because people are more familiar with it. Amending the laws is important. But we should also ensure that these amendments are implemented properly by the courts.

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Thanks to the efforts of the KRI authorities, there has been a notable transformation of women’s roles in the executive and legislative branches of governance.

Which challenges do you observe in the KRI’s criminal justice system against violence against women?

A shortage of judges and court personnel, ignorance of the law on crimes against women, and long court processes are the main challenges in the KRI’s criminal justice system.

We want the authorities to expedite trial in cases of violence against women. According to the legislation, it should not take more than 20 days between two court sessions to resolve a case, but it often takes much longer, and sometimes up to four months. In the first two months of 2022, nine women were killed, but nobody has been sentenced for their murders. I have a case in which a woman was murdered three years ago, but the case has yet to be resolved since the judge is overworked. We want to launch a campaign to push the authorities to establish a family court across the KRI.

Domestic violence cases that take too long cause women to lose faith in the courts, and will be discouraged from bringing their own cases.

Is there a gap in implementation of women related laws?

Implementation is a challenge. The courts do not implement the law amendments properly in the KRI. For example, according to the new amendment, men and women are equal in testimony, but judges have often deemed a woman’s testimony to be worth half that of a man. We are trying to persuade judges to implement international treaties like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which was already ratified by Iraq and the KRI. There should be a mechanism to follow up on the implementation of laws and policies.



WE REMEMBER  
 REMEMBER WE  
 WE REMEMBER  
 REMEMBER WE  
 WE REMEMBER  
 REMEMBER WE

## HONOR KILLINGS IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ

The most unfortunate incidents of violence against women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have been a series of honor killings seen in recent years. Honor killings are perpetrated due to the belief that women bring shame upon their families by being the victim of rape, getting divorced, engaging in adultery, or refusing forced marriages.

The most significant legal developments in tackling the honor killings in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) was the enactment of Law No.14 in 2002, which ended immunity for those committing honor crimes. Law No.14 removed the provision for 'lenient punishments' for the offense and provides that killings carried out under the pretext of honor should be considered as murder.

In an effort to address the issue, then PM Nechirvan Barzani in 2008 commissioned the KRI's first ever qualitative study on honor-based violence. The study, "Roadmap to Combatting Honor-Based Violence", was conducted by the University of Bristol between 2008 and 2010 and provided the KRG with an Action Plan.

Local and international women's organizations in the last two decades have launched various information campaigns across the KRI in order to raise awareness about such crimes and to suggest stronger penalties to put an end to these murders.

Despite the KRG's and women's organizations' two decades-old efforts to tackle honor killings, the KRI still suffers today from violence against women with the most extreme cases being the murder of women by their partners or relatives under the pretext of honor killing.

**24 WOMEN WERE KILLED OR FORCED TO COMMIT SUICIDE IN THE KRI IN THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF 2022. THE NUMBER WAS 45 IN 2021, 25 IN 2020, 120 IN 2019, 91 IN 2018 AND 50 IN 2017. HOWEVER, ACCORDING TO LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION, THESE NUMBERS ARE LIKELY MUCH HIGHER BECAUSE OF UNDERREPORTING.**

According to data by the KRG's Directorate of Combatting Violence Against Women, 45 women were killed or forced to commit suicide in the KRI in 2021. The number was 25 in 2020, 120 in 2019, 91 in 2018 and 50 in 2017. In the first two months of 2022 alone, 11 women were murdered under the pretext of honor in the KRI. However, according to local and international women's organization, these numbers are likely much higher because of underreporting.

The struggle to end honor killings is not related to a lack of legislation in the KRI or the KRG's commitments. Honor killings can, to some extent, be prevented through legislative reforms and better implementation of the laws. However, the issue must also be tackled by confronting a deeply seated tribal honor-code in order to change social and cultural norms.



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# WOMEN AS ECONOMIC ACTORS



# WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN THE ECONOMY IS SLOWLY BECOMING THE NEW NORM AS A RESULT OF A STEADY RISE IN THE EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF WOMEN, ALONG WITH ECONOMIC CHANGES IN THE KRI IN THE LAST DECADE.

## The Impact of Modernization

Social norms have traditionally shaped women’s and men’s roles in the household, as well as their roles in society at large, including the workforce. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), cultural codes have effectively kept women’s activities confined to housework and childcare until the last decade. It was a common perception in the society that women having a professional activity would have negative effects on her marriage and family life. For that reason, for many, woman being employed outside of the home was unacceptable. However, cultural barriers have been overcome to some extent in recent years, with traditional social norms gradually being balanced out by the forces of modernization in the KRI. Today, conservative families are less reluctant to allow female members of the family to work outside of the home. Women’s participation in the economy is slowly becoming the new norm as a result of a steady rise in the educational level of women, along with economic changes in the KRI in the last decade.

## Investing in Education

Before 2005, employment opportunities for women in the KRI were very limited due to long-running conflicts in the region that had prevented economic growth. However, since 2005, the KRI has integrated itself into the wider regional economy at a startling pace. This rapid economic development has enabled the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to heavily invest in education. The total number of public primary and secondary schools increased from 1,459 in 2005 to 5,801 in 2022. In addition, a total of 193 private primary and secondary schools were established in the KRI between 2005 and 2022. With respect to higher education, the KRG has opened nineteen new universities in the last 15 years. This level of commitment to investing in its human capital has improved the level of education not only of men, but of women too in the KRI. Through expanded educational opportunities, women’s quantitative input into the economy has slowly increased in the last decade.

## Public Awareness Campaigns

Over the last decade, the KRG’s commitment to addressing gender inequality in all areas of society and supporting women’s inclusion in the workforce at all levels cannot be doubted. Not wanting to let the skills and potential of its female population go to waste, the KRG has launched various public awareness campaigns and training programs to encourage women’s participation in the workforce. Many political leaders have spoken out in support of women’s involvement in the workforce and the importance of women’s economic empowerment for the future of the KRI. In partnership with international organizations, the KRG has also developed action plans which set out policies to boost women’s participation in the workforce, to expand business opportunities for women, and to ensure equal opportunity under the law.

## Women in Public Sector

To date, the most notable advancement in women’s inclusion in the workforce has been in the public sector in the KRI. Almost 75% of women in employment work in the public sector. The popularity and high demand for public service employment stem from the greater benefits

and incentives that government institutions offer. Pensions, working hours and leave are better regulated in the public sector than in the private sector. Women are treated equally with men with regard to wages, working hours, sick leave, holiday leave, weekly days off, and reasons for dismissal in public sector.

## Women in Private Sector

Although the majority of women still prefer to work in the public sector, the KRI’s burgeoning private sector has opened up to women to a certain extent in recent years. Over the last two decades, women have been financially better-off working in the public sector, for example as civil servants, teachers, doctors, nurses and social workers. However, salaries in the public sector have decreased in recent years. As such, emerging private sector companies offer higher salaries for newly graduated women. The other reason for the greater involvement of women in the private sector has been a steady increase in their access to higher education. Newly established universities have allowed young women to gain degrees in various fields. In the KRI, women are now employed in the banking, energy, IT, tourism, marketing, and service sectors. While women’s representation in the private sector has been gaining momentum,

gender diversity in the workplace is still not a top priority for the majority of companies in the KRI. Women still remain a minority in leadership positions in the private sector.

## The Prospect

Despite the persistent challenges and the lengths that the KRI has yet to go in terms of women’s economic empowerment, it has notched up some successes in this area. Compared to the decade just past, today more women of all age groups participate in the workforce. Moreover, the desire among women to join the workforce has exhibited greater stability in recent years in the KRI. The gender gap in education has been narrowed and women have been able to develop more business skills. As their skills have increased, women have begun to play a greater role in traditionally male-dominated professions in the KRI. The strong prospects for higher levels of female participation in the KRI’s workforce are clear. For the leadership of the KRI, tapping into the potential of its female talent base and preparing its female workforce for the future is indispensable to achieving the sustainable development goals that the KRI aims to achieve as a region.

FOR THE LEADERSHIP OF THE KRI, TAPPING INTO THE POTENTIAL OF ITS FEMALE TALENT BASE AND PREPARING ITS FEMALE WORKFORCE FOR THE FUTURE IS INDISPENSABLE TO ACHIEVING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS THAT THE KRI AIMS TO ACHIEVE AS A REGION.

Bnar Salah

HEAD OF THE CSR AND THE STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT, GENEL ENERGY

Bnar Salah talks about her work, gender-based discrimination, and women’s involvement in the private sector.



How did your childhood experiences influence your career?

Education has always been a top priority for my parents. My dad and all his siblings are university graduates and speak foreign languages. Many of them hold Ph.D. degrees. This was the environment in which I was raised. I owe where I am today to my father. He always encouraged me to develop new skills and push my limits. He instilled in me and my siblings an identity of self-awareness, confidence, and determination. His liberal-minded approach made me a global citizen and greatly influenced my character and career.

What do you see as your primary role in the company?

I have been working for Genel Energy since 2003. I’ve worked in the administration, HR, and finance departments. Currently, I am the head of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and stakeholder management for Genel Energy in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). My primary responsibility is to uphold the company’s rights and image, understand the local community’s needs and challenges, and to allocate a specific budget for community development initiatives.

My dream has always been to contribute to the development of our society. With the establishment of Genel Energy’s CSR department, I had the opportunity to serve the local community and to be the voice of the underserved. I am advocating for people’s interests and needs. I am very happy to be able to bring about change and touch the people’s lives.

Have you ever faced gender-based discrimination?

My experience was a very lonely one in the early years of my career because I was the first local woman engaged in the oil industry in the KRI. I had to meet with many officials when I became the department leader, and the meeting rooms were always full of men. I felt that people did not take me seriously at the beginning because of my gender. Therefore, I always felt the responsibility to break through a glass ceiling. I’ve learned how to deal with these people in a professional way.

How do you see young women’s engagements in the private sector in the KRI today?

I can proudly say that young women are on the rise in the KRI. There has been incremental improvement in terms of women’s involvement in

business in the KRI in the past ten years. You can see women in almost all sectors today. It is not just because of changes in social and cultural norms, but also because of improvements in education. The curriculum in higher education is designed for the needs of the job market. You can find far more qualified and more confident female applicants in the job market today compared with a decade ago.

Should the Kurdistan Regional Government introduce gender-quotas for private sector?

It is true that women are underrepresented in private sector especially in decision-making positions in the KRI. Nevertheless, I am not sure that gender quotas would be the answer. In Europe, companies began to introduce gender quotas for boards of directors. However, these countries are ahead of us in gender equality and women’s rights. I believe we still have a long way to go to reach that level. Instead of the gender quotas, we must first focus on improving the level of education and skills of our women and girls. We cannot fill the positions just because of their gender. Women should not take the job opportunities for granted. They need to improve themselves.

Naz Bajger

VICE GENERAL MANAGER, CIHAN BANK

Naz Bajger talks about women’s rising role in the banking sector of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



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The number of our female employees has significantly increased in recent years. A career in the banking sector has become one of the most popular professions for women in the KRI. Today, women make up around half of our employees.

Can you share a little bit about yourself?

After completing my BSc in computer engineering, I was accepted by Kingston University London for my MA degree in international business management. Since joining Cihan Bank in 2009, I’ve worked in different departments and today I am the vice general manager of the bank.

Has there been an increase in the number of woman employees at Cihan Bank in recent years?

The number of our female employees has significantly increased in recent years. A career in the banking sector has become one of the most popular professions for women in the KRI. Today, women make up around half of our employees.

Why do you think a career in banking is so popular among women?

Women choose banks as a place of employment because the banking sector is better regulated and provides a more stable working environment for them. Working at a bank also helps develop a range of skills that come from interacting with customers from various industries. They see banking as a prestigious sector for their career development. Furthermore, a career in banking means shorter working hours, which helps them to find a work-life balance, which is important for raising children and doesn’t force them to choose between family and career.

What has been the biggest change in terms of women’s economic empowerment in the KRI?

Social norms limited women’s participation in the KRI’s economy until a decade ago. Since then, however, the KRI has undergone significant transformation driven by socio-economic development in the region, which has massively changed the role of women in both the public and private sectors. Today many women are becoming decision makers in various fields. These role models serve as a source of inspiration to the younger generation of women.

How would you define Cihan Bank’s gender culture?

Cihan Bank is a firm believer in the importance of gender equality. We are working to create a workplace that allows both women and men to fulfil their potential. We encourage them to develop their managerial abilities and to thrive at work.



# Sara Salahaddin Mustafa

## CEO, VISION EDUCATION

Sara Salahaddin Mustafa talks about Vision Education’s social objectives and professional barriers to women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



### How would you define Vision Education’s gender policy?

We have created a working environment in which men and women are treated equally and both thrive. We believe that the KRI needs women’s involvement in decision making. At Vision Education, the proportion of women in senior management roles stands at 78%, demonstrating our commitment to women’s leadership in the workplace. We train young female graduates to improve their skills and offer them self-development tools to help them overcome challenges that they face in the workplace.

### What are the key challenges women face in the workplace in the KRI?

Unfortunately, cultural and social misconceptions hold women back from advancement in the workplace. Stereotypes against women are still alive in the workplace. Because of

cultural norms, male employees are seen as more productive and have better prospects than females. Therefore, women are not granted equal career opportunities to men, and they often unconsciously prefer to stay out of the spotlight since their contributions are not sufficiently valued. Another cultural barrier is men’s refusal to take instruction from female colleagues. Thus, women are marginalized in lower positions in the workplace even if they are equally qualified.

### What needs to be done to bring more women into decision-making positions?

Both men and women rise to decision-making positions through a promotion process. This process needs to be equipped with systems that support women stepping into management roles. We also need to build skills of our female workforce. Obtaining a

degree does not guarantee reaching a management position, because a degree does not necessarily translate to having the skills desired. Critical soft skills, required for senior executive roles, should be learned and developed.

Another important step is recruiting more women in a wider range of professions and fields of expertise. We need to create a supportive workplace environment for women to progress in their careers, by making them feel heard and valued. Their contribution should be recognized, which will foster loyalty and a sense of belonging, as well as the confidence to make decisions. Recognition is the key!

### What advice would you give to female graduates who want to reach their full potential?

Earning a degree is a milestone in your life, but it is not everything. Your career path will be full of twists and turns. You should brace yourself for disappointments. Be prepared to fail, to be judged, and to be ignored. What is important is to keep trying. Stay determined and continue doing the right thing and have the courage to say no when it is necessary.

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We need to create a supportive workplace environment for women to progress in their careers, by making them feel heard and valued.

# Kavin Awara

## GENERAL MANAGER, DLBA DAIRY

Kavin Awara talks about the challenges she faced taking over Dlba Dairy and her own plans for the future.



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Nevertheless, the business culture is gradually changing here. Men are becoming more accustomed to hearing women’s ideas and perspectives.

### How did your business journey start?

After completing my bachelor’s degree in accounting, I started working for my father at Dlba Dairy Factory. After my father passed away in 2020, I was at a crossroads and had to decide how to move forward in my business career. I would either to sell the factory or keep it and expand the business. I have always been the number-one choice in my father’s succession plans. He told everyone in the family and his employees that I was the only one who could manage this factory. I didn’t want to see my dad’s legacy vanish, so I decided to take the challenge and have been running the company in the two years since then.

### What’s been the biggest challenge in taking over the company?

Because I am young and business is dominated by men in our culture, everyone around me advised to sell the factory and focus on something else. I was told that there has to be a man by my side to be taken seriously. However, I was very determined to make it happen. So, I disregarded what people said and went back to work at the factory the same week I lost my father.

### How many people do you employ?

Currently, we employ close to 100 people in our company in Erbil. We also have one poultry company in Izmir, Turkey.

### What lessons have you learned since you’ve taken over the company?

Being the only woman in the meeting room can be tough. Men usually underestimate women’s knowledge and management skills. They also don’t like being corrected by a woman. At the beginning, they treat me as if I don’t know what I am doing. I’ve learned to be persistent and stand my ground. Nevertheless, the business culture is gradually changing here. Men are becoming more accustomed to hearing women’s ideas and perspectives.

Rivan Bazzaz

OPERATION DIRECTOR, .KRD

Rivan Bazzaz is working at the KRG’s IT Department as the director of Kurdistan’s top-level domain (.krd).



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We need to create incentives for more girls to study IT and technical fields, especially given the importance of these areas.

Can you share a little bit about yourself?

I hold a bachelor’s degree in software engineering and a master’s degree in IT and strategic innovation. I have been working for the KRG’s IT department since 2007. Currently, I am the Director of Kurdistan’s top-level domain.

What is the main challenge for women in IT in the KRI?

Men are dominant not only in IT but across in all sectors here in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. There is a deep-seated misconception in the public that men are more capable than women in technical occupations. Thus, men do not usually accept a woman to become their supervisors in IT or tech-related fields. This no doubt contributes to the lack of women at higher rungs. There are various initiatives that bring women into IT for entry-level positions. However, it is challenging for women to climbing up the career ladder to the C-suite positions in IT sector.

What is the main reason of the gender gap in IT sector?

The underrepresentation of women in the IT sector, especially in decision-making positions, stems from girls’ lack of interests in studying IT or other technical fields. Compared to boys, fewer girls are interested in computer software engineering. There is also a misconception of the IT sector and its opportunities. Girls think that they have to study software engineering, whereas there are a lot of other roles and skills needed within the industry. We need to create incentives for more girls to study IT and technical fields, especially given the importance of these areas.

Shahla Abdullah

HEAD OF QUALITY ASSURANCE UNIT, KRG IT DEPARTMENT

Shahla Abdullah is the head of Quality Assurance Unit of the KRG’s IT department.



Can you share a little bit about yourself?

After completing my bachelor’s degree in software engineering, I applied master’s in management information systems. Since 2008, I have been working for the KRG’s IT department. Currently, I am the head of quality assurance and digital delivery.

Was your family supportive when you started working in IT?

They were not very supportive at the beginning. I had many opportunities after I completed my bachelors. However, my family wanted me to choose a job where I would work between 8 am and 1 pm, which would have made it impossible to improve my skills. So, I was jobless for almost eight months. I convinced my family that I needed to find a job to build my career and improve myself. Now they are supportive.

How do you characterize being a woman in the IT sector?

As a woman in the IT sector, you have to work twice as hard. I believe men are uncomfortable working with women, especially in supervisory roles. Young female supervisors are not very acceptable to them and they do not

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All my female team members are talented IT professionals. They test and improve software products and make them ready for use. They are also training the end-users to use the applications. My unit is the best proof of the capabilities of young female leaders in IT when they are given a platform.

like to take orders from a woman. For instance, we have to use a very soft tone when we assign them work. They accept that their male supervisors can be authoritative and give orders and be tough on them. But female supervisors must use a softer tone and lots of “please”.

Do women in the IT industry feel that their gender affects the way that they are treated?

My first responsibility in my job was to take calls from supervisors. After work hours, I was working to develop software at home without any support. I prepared my first project and showed it to the management. They were very surprised. I don’t think they expected

that level of work from a young woman. My project was successfully applied in three governorates for five years, but it was not easy to get there.

Most of the staff in my unit are female. Many people told me not to hire only women, but I wanted to support, encourage, and develop them. All my female team members are talented IT professionals. They test and improve software products and make them ready for use. They are also training the end-users to use the applications. My unit is the best proof of the capabilities of young female leaders in IT when they are given a platform.





OVER THE LAST DECADE, THE KRG'S  
COMMITMENT TO ADDRESSING GENDER  
INEQUALITY IN ALL AREAS OF SOCIETY  
AND SUPPORTING WOMEN'S INCLUSION  
IN THE WORKFORCE AT ALL  
LEVELS CANNOT BE DOUBTED.



Vazhin Tayeb

SOFTWARE DEVELOPER, KRG IT DEPARTMENT

Vazhin Tayeb is a software developer working for the Kurdistan Regional Government’s IT Department.



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To succeed in increasing diversity in the IT sector, we should start empowering women and building their confidence. More female role models and leaders are needed within the industry.

How did you start working in the IT sector?

I studied software development at the IT Institute. At the beginning I didn’t have much knowledge of IT but the more I started learning, the more I loved it. I joined an intensive boot camp for five months, which helped me to get hired by the KRG’s IT department as a software developer.

Do you see women becoming more interested in IT?

There is definitely more interest among women in IT employment opportunities today. More women are entering and growing within the industry in recent years and change is underway.

Do you feel any gender-based discrimination in the workplace?

IT is a male-dominated sector. I am the only female software developer in my department alongside 12 male members. I personally have been fortunate enough not to deal with any sort of gender-based discrimination in my job.

Nevertheless, local cultural norms do not favor women’s roles in the private sector here in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Therefore, women suppress their emotions and hide their problems at work to prove that they are strong and capable. When I talk to female colleagues from the industry, they feel a lot of pressure to fit in.

What is the key challenge that women face in the IT sector?

One of the biggest challenges is an embedded misconception that women are not as technically minded as men. I believe this leads to women’s under-representation in IT and tech-focused jobs. Adding women to leadership positions is crucial. To succeed in increasing diversity in the IT sector, we should start empowering women and building their confidence. More female role models and leaders are needed within the industry.

Basima Abdulrahman

FOUNDER & CEO, KESK

Basima Abdulrahman talks about her work in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



How did you start your career in sustainable construction?

I have always had a passion for the environment. After graduating from structural engineering, I went to the U.S. to get training in the green building concept. I got the U.S. Green Building Council accreditation for LEED, and environmental design rating systems. When I came back to Erbil, I started my company in green building consultation and pivoted towards green and renewable solutions.

Isn’t it hard to convince people to invest in environmentally friendly construction in the KRI?

The green building concept has become more important in recent years because of climate change. When I started the business, I knew that there would be some resistance, and this concept would be too advanced for the KRI. Nevertheless, some people do believe in its financial and environmental benefits. My dream is to apply green building concepts to the whole of Iraq. We are currently promoting immediate solutions, such as solar-powered air conditioners and PV systems, and other smart solar energy products. We help our clients understand these solutions’ benefits and return on investment.

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Women tend to focus on underlying factors of larger problems. When you look at female politicians or activists around the world, they are striving to bring practical solutions to global challenges like poverty, healthcare, education, and the environment.

How responsive are male executives to you as a woman?

When I meet a new male client or a stakeholder, they see me as a young woman who might not be as capable as my male counterparts. But once we start talking about technical details, I see their attitude change. So, there is no open credit for women. We need to prove that we are knowledgeable on our field.

Do you feel understanding of environmental protection differs between genders?

Women tend to focus on underlying factors of larger problems. When you look at female politicians or activists around the world, they are striving to

bring practical solutions to global challenges like poverty, healthcare, education, and the environment. Women care more about the environment and protecting the future of their families, rather than trying to compete or fight for power, which is not who we are.

What changes do you hope to see in the KRI?

We face serious environmental challenges here. I’d love to see high-level policy changes and reforms that favor sustainable solutions and practices. We need to incentivize green policies to make it attractive to consumers to go green and observe sustainable building standards.



# Vala Sarchil Mardan

## SALES AND MARKETING MANAGER, DIVAN ERBIL HOTEL

Vala Sarchil Mardan talks about women in the hospitality sector in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



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Despite persistent challenges, women’s participation in Kurdistan’s hospitality industry is growing.

### How did you start working in the hospitality sector?

In 2012 I started my hospitality career at an international hotel chain in Slemani, after completing my degree in statistics at the University of Slemani. I worked in different departments, including finance, front-office, executive office, and sales. Since 2017, I have been working at Divan Erbil Hotel, where I am currently the Sales and Marketing Manager.

### How supportive was your family when you decided to work in hospitality?

When I entered the industry, there were very few women working in the local hospitality sector. There was a misconception that hotels were not suitable workplaces for women, given the high-pressure environment and long work hours, especially in sales. Nevertheless, my parents gave me the freedom to build my career in hospitality, although my relatives were not supportive at all.

### Do you think more women have entered the hospitality sector recently?

In recent years, there has been significant social change that has broken taboos around women’s participation in the hospitality sector in the KRI. I can see this positive trend in my close relatives and friends. Despite persistent challenges, women’s participation in Kurdistan’s hospitality industry is growing. When I started my career, I was the only local girl working in the sales department. Today, more local female colleagues are engaged in hospitality industry in different departments and are studying at the Tourism Institute. Many girls approach me to show their interest in working in hotels and to ask how and where to start their careers.

# Kani Abbasi

## OWNER, BUS CAFÉ

Kani Abbasi talks about how she converted a bus to a sleek coffee shop in Erbil.



### What is unique about your business?

In 2018, we remodeled a bus into a coffee shop and launched our business from it. At the time, people were not sure what to make of it, but we quickly attracted attention with our original design. It is so unique that people come regardless of how small the interior is. They are still able to sit comfortably at our four tables.

### What’s the most memorable experience of your business journey?

When I was in the process of getting approval to open the bus café on Ghazali Street, a gentleman in charge of the paperwork kept asking who would want to drink coffee in a bus. He became our customer just ten days later. After we got approval to open the bus café, other businesses also started to set up on Ghazali Street, which soon became a new hub for small, innovative businesses. Seeing this thriving business community on Ghazali Street makes me happy and proud.

### Do you have any business expansion plan?

When I first opened the bus café, my initial plan was to move it regularly to different districts in Erbil. However, due to government approval issues, we had to permanently base ourselves on Ghazali Street. But we still plan to expand and to establish bus cafés in different areas all around the city.

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When I was in the process of getting approval to open the bus café on Ghazali Street, a gentleman in charge of the paperwork kept asking who would want to drink coffee in a bus. He became our customer just ten days later.



# Rezhna Hussain Qadr

## ENTREPRENEUR

Rezhna Hussain Qadr talks about her journey in the local organic food business in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



How did you decide to start producing local organic products?

When I was studying at university, I realized that our farmers were producing great local organic products but lacked proper marketing for them. For instance, they were producing organic honey, but the demand was very low because people were unaware of the quality of the product. At that time, local organic products were not available in supermarkets, and all organic products were imports. After finishing my degree in computer science in 2018, I took management and marketing courses. Later on, I began reading up on beekeeping and organic agriculture production and entered this industry with the aim of boosting the share of local organic food in the market.

What was the biggest challenge you faced when you started your business?

The main hurdle was gaining the trust of the farmers and retailers. It was a challenge to convince the farmers to use innovative techniques and to benefit from efforts to market their products. Regarding the retailers, because local organic products are new to the market, they did not want to take any risks. So, it was a challenge to gain trust from the players in the market.

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Women face a wide range of challenges in business. Social barriers are the biggest one.

What about challenges specific to being a woman in business?

Women face a wide range of challenges in business. Social barriers are the biggest one. Women in business must defy social expectations. In the eyes of the public, business or trade is a man’s field. Women or girls do not get enough support when entering the world of business. Failure is a possibility in any business venture. However, when a man fails in business, society accepts it. But when a woman fails, she does not stand a chance of starting something new. So, failure is not an option for us.

What should be done to empower women in rural areas in the KRI?

Because of the poor infrastructure and lack of services, people move to the cities from the villages. In my village, there are only common cold medicines in the health centers. If there is a medical emergency, you need to go to the city. However, it takes so long to get to the cities because of the poor road infrastructure. Most of the girls in the villages get married before moving to a city. Villages are also being empty because of a lack of schools, especially high schools. Without proper infrastructure, schools, and health services, we cannot empower women in rural areas.

# Fakhria Ilya Hannah

## WINEMAKER

Fakhria Ilya Hannah talks about how she started out in the winemaking business.



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This year we have been able to produce about 3,000 bottles, but are working to increase our production to 10,000 bottles annually.

When did you start producing wine?

I am 77 years old and I have been making wine for more than 50 years. I used to make wine and liquor for my family, but then gradually started to increase production and sales, especially during the 1990s, when there was an economic blockade on Kurdistan Region and Iraq. And when I saw that our vineyards were not making money, I decided to produce more wine, using new equipment and my own bottles. We designed a logo and branded our product Shaqlawa Wine, which I registered with the Erbil Chamber of Commerce.

Where do you get your grapes?

We use our own grapes and have our own vineyard of more than 3.7 acres. Sometimes I buy other farmers’ grapes, as long as I know that they have not been exposed to chemical fertilizers or pesticides.

How many bottles of wine do you produce yearly and who are your main customers?

I increase my production annually. The popularity of my wine is raising demanded inside and outside the region, which allows me to continuously expand my business. We have a sales outlet in Shaqlawa and we often deliver to other places. Foreigners sometimes come by to try our products and they are always pleasantly surprised by what they find. Moreover, numerous foreign delegations and journalists have visited us. This year we have been able to produce about 3,000 bottles, but are working to increase our production to 10,000 bottles annually.

What advice would you give to young Kurdish female entrepreneurs?

I advise young people to try to find their own jobs and start their own businesses instead of waiting for employment or help from the government. I don’t get any salary from the government, but I was able to support my family and children through agriculture, and all of them have university degrees now.

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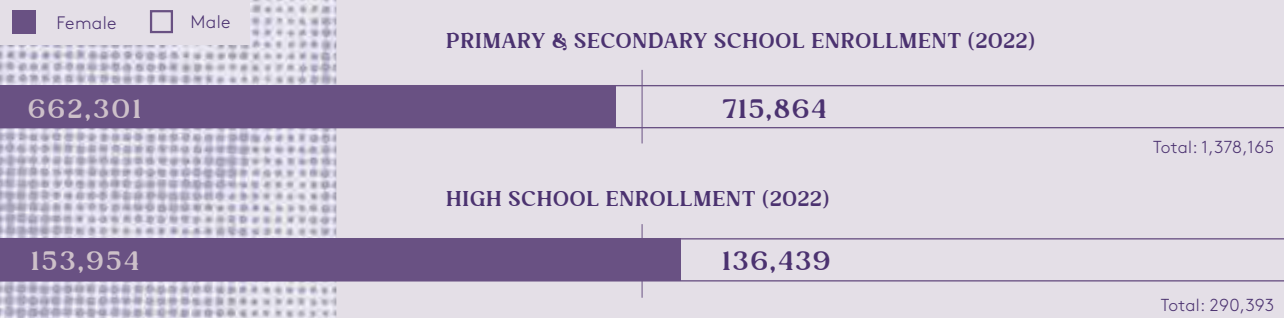
EMPOWERING  
WOMEN  
THROUGH  
EDUCATION



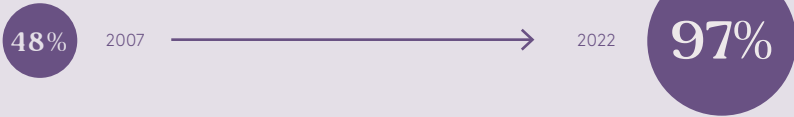
IN 2022, 48% OF STUDENTS IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE KRI ARE FEMALE. IN ADDITION, THERE ARE MORE FEMALE STUDENTS THAN MALE STUDENTS IN HIGH SCHOOLS IN THE KRI TODAY.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has embarked on sweeping reforms of its education sector to eliminate gender-based inequalities, with a focus on ensuring girls have equal access to education and the support they need to succeed. The KRG has successfully implemented several projects to increase the awareness of the importance of ensuring women have access to education. The KRG has also invested heavily in education. These steps have been the main driving factors behind the rapid progress in women’s access to education.



FEMALE ENROLLMENT RATE



Awareness Campaigns

In the early days of the KRI, the proportion of girls in education was far behind that of boys. Infrastructure deficiencies, entailing long journey times to schools, and families’ indifference towards girls’ education, posed great obstacles to providing access to education to girls. To reverse this trend, the KRG has since 2005 launched various awareness campaigns to encourage families to enroll their daughters in school. Thanks to these social awareness projects, a significant increase has been observed in the rate of girls’ enrollment in education over the past 20 years. In 2022, 48% of students in primary and secondary schools in the KRI are female. In addition, there are more female students than male students in high schools in the KRI today. The dropout rate for girls at the primary and secondary level has declined dramatically during the same period. Girls having access to education has become the norm in the KRI. Today, it is no longer common for parents to refuse to send their daughters to schools, especially in urban communities.

Investing in Education

The education sector in the KRI has largely been developed from scratch since the early 2000s. The KRG has invested over \$800 million in its education sector and the proportion of the region’s budget allocated to education has expanded dramatically in the last 15 years. The total number of public primary and secondary schools increased from 1,459 in 2005 to 5,801 in 2022. In addition, 193 new private primary and secondary schools have been established in the KRI since 2005. The total number of primary and secondary school students in the KRI increased to 1.3 million in 2022 from 843,000 in 2005. As for higher education, the KRG has opened nineteen new universities in the last 15 years. Heavy investment in education has ensured greater opportunities for girls to access education both in rural areas and in cities.

EDUCATION IS COMPULSORY FOR GIRLS UNTIL THE AGE OF 15 IN THE KRI.

Education Legislation

Amendments to education legislation have also been important in tackling gender inequalities in education. In 2008, the government extended the compulsory minimum age at which girls and boys could finish education from 12 to 15. In addition, the government has introduced a new curriculum aimed at inculcating values of gender equality over the entire span of students’ education.

Female Enrollment in Higher Education

As for higher education, the female enrollment rate has increased year on year over the last decade. The number of female graduates reached 21,343 in the academic year 2020/2021 compared to 16,265 male students in the same year. In 2006/2007 academic year, female students made up below 40% of the total number of students in higher education. Today, the female university enrollment rate stands at over 50%. This is evidence of the KRG’s rigorous approach to encouraging women to pursue higher education.

The Prospects

Education increases women’s opportunities for social and economic advancement and paves the way for their participation in the workforce. The KRI’s leaders have factored the importance of female education into their long-term national development plans. They have taken proactive efforts to increase the level of education among women. Despite the challenges that persist, the gender inequality gap has been narrowed dramatically in the KRI’s education in the last decade. The biggest winners of all these efforts will be the KRI’s youth.



Female Illiteracy

Overall levels of female illiteracy in the KRI have declined significantly in the last two decades. Today, the female illiteracy rate in the KRI stands at 16% according to the Ministry of Education.

# Shelan Khalil Junaid

## DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Shelan Khalil Junaid talks about gender equality policy at the Ministry of Education.



How would you characterize gender-equal education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)?

Our leadership is committed to gender equality in education to ensure all girls and boys enjoy equal education opportunities and have the chance to learn and thrive. Nevertheless, gender-equal education is about more than equal schooling. We take a multifaceted approach towards reducing gender inequality in our education system. To achieve gender equality in education, we closely monitor all the sectors of education planning, from access and to learning materials to curricula and administration.

Which steps are being taken to further gender equality in education?

Our Ministry designs gender-responsive strategies for girls’ education, awareness campaigns, and gender training for teachers. Our commitment to reduce gender inequalities has been supported by the establishment of the Gender Unit under the Ministry of Education. The Gender Unit reports to the Minister about how to integrate a strong gender dimension in education. We aim to strengthen all the stakeholders involved in the education sector to advance gender equality in education. The Gender Unit has an important role in this process as the lead in supporting the Ministry.

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Nevertheless, gender-equal education is about more than equal schooling. To achieve gender equality in education we closely monitor all the sectors of education planning, from access and to learning materials to curricula and administration.

Do Kurdish textbooks promote gender equality?

Our education system is based on promoting the core values and principles of democracy and human rights. Instilling the values of equality and non-discrimination in the next generation is crucial for the future we want to build in the KRI. We have an inclusive and gender-sensitive education curriculum in primary and secondary schools. Our textbooks do not convey stereotypes or biases towards any gender, religion, or race.

Is there a gender-based wage gap between male and female teachers?

No gender discrimination of any kind between male and female teachers or any other employees of the Ministry of Education. Therefore, gender-based wage gaps do not exist in the KRI.

How well are female teachers represented in the KRI’s education sector?

Female teachers are well represented in our education system. The proportion of female teachers are higher than their male colleagues. We believe female teachers are vital because of their positive impact on girls’ enrollment, we value their perspective in teaching and learning outcomes.

# Shatha Shamil

## TEACHER

Shatha Shamil shares her insights on education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



What excites you most about being a teacher?

Making a real difference in the lives of the children is what motivates me. Being a teacher means that you play a significant role in shaping future generations. Besides teaching core subjects, we teach “life” lessons and prepare them for whatever life throws at them.

Why are female teachers important in early education?

I believe that female teachers have a motherly instinct that allows them to connect better with young students. Furthermore, female teachers’ attitudes towards girls have a positive impact on their academic performance.

What is the role of education in addressing gender inequality?

We have students from various backgrounds in the same classrooms, and they often have a range of different views on gender. At the primary level, it’s crucial that students acquire basic social etiquette, such as respecting people regardless of

their gender, following the rules, and showing love and respect to their home country. We teach our students to respect all their classmates regardless of their gender, ethnic, or religious background.

How important is it to educate students about gender equality and women’s rights at an early age?

The knowledge these students acquire at primary-school level stays with them for a lifetime. I believe the rights of an individual should be respected regardless of gender and background.

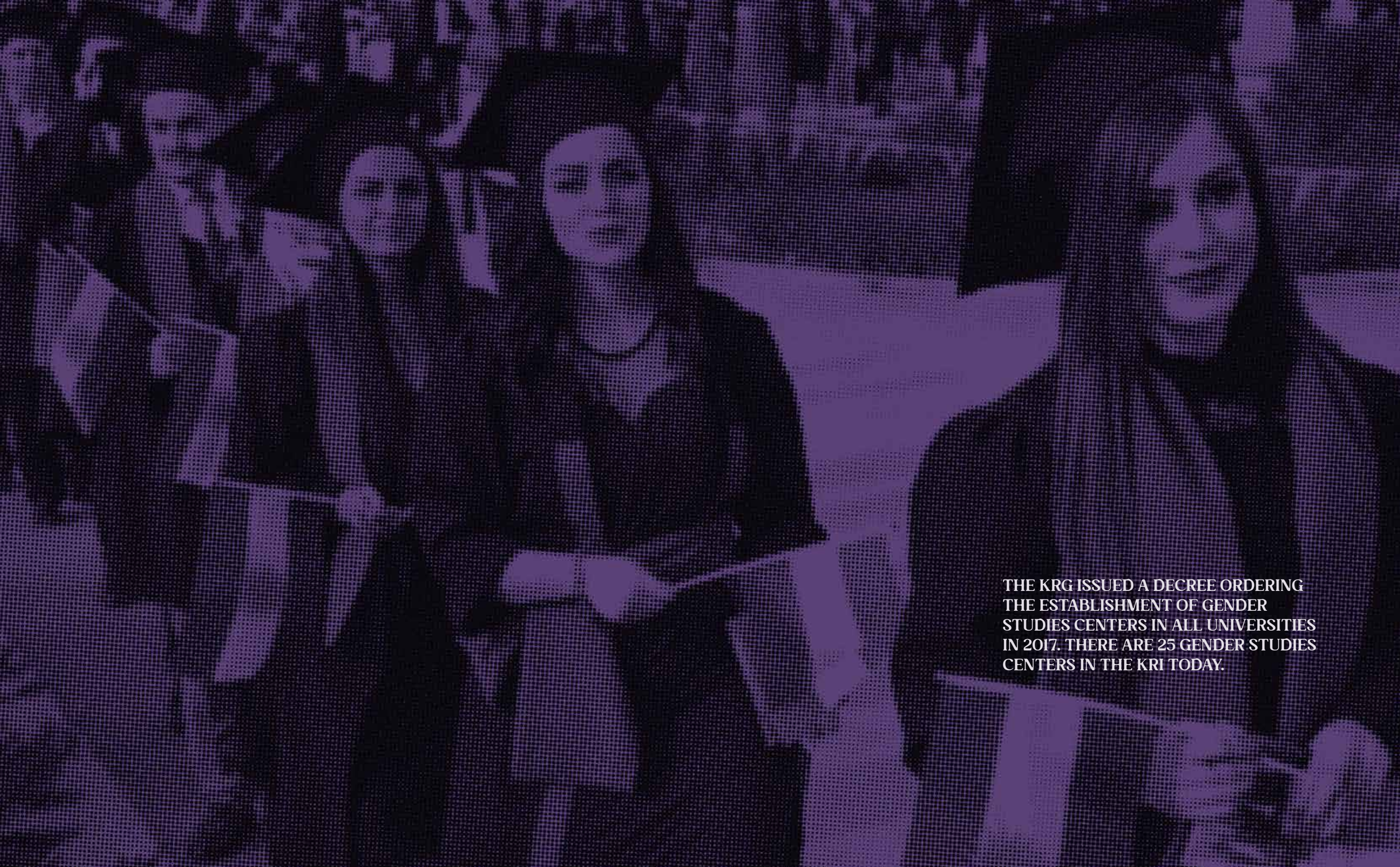
What changes do you want to see in the coming years in the education sector?

In my opinion, the curriculum should be diversified. We should provide our students with a wide range of opportunities, from sports to performing arts. Furthermore, the curriculum should be tailored according global market trends to prepare students to thrive in their careers and shape their future.

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At the primary level, it’s crucial that students acquire basic social etiquette, such as respecting people regardless of their gender, following the rules, and showing love and respect to their home country.





THE KRG ISSUED A DECREE ORDERING  
THE ESTABLISHMENT OF GENDER  
STUDIES CENTERS IN ALL UNIVERSITIES  
IN 2017. THERE ARE 25 GENDER STUDIES  
CENTERS IN THE KRI TODAY.



Prof. Mahabad Kamil Abdullah

PRESIDENT OF HALABJA UNIVERSITY

Prof. Mahabad Kamil Abdullah talks about barriers for women in academia and raising girls’ enrollment in universities.



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Today, female students are outpacing male students at our university. And this trend is accelerating year on year.

As the first female president in Halabja University’s history, what is the significance of this for you?

When I applied to this position, many people were surprised and not very supportive. I am happy that I have managed to defy the odds and move forward. It is a great honor for anyone to be appointed as President of Halabja University, and I am certainly proud to be its first female president. I like to believe my appointment is meaningful to our female students and graduates.

What challenges do female academics face in achieving their goals in Kurdish universities?

Gender inequalities persist in academia, even though today more women than ever are building their careers in academic disciplines in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). There are various challenges in climbing the ladder in higher academic positions. Gender stereotypes are the biggest barrier for women to achieve their goals, not only in the academic field but across all sectors. There is common misconception in the public that men are result-oriented and decisive in leadership positions, while women are emotional. These stereotypes are holding women back from reaching their full potential in higher positions. Today, only three university presidents are female out of thirty across the KRI.

Regarding the enrollment of female students in higher education, have you noticed any increase in recent years?

Definitely. In previous decades, higher education was reserved mainly for male students. Girls’ enrollment rates were very low. However, over the last decade we have seen a reverse of this trend. Today, female students are outpacing male students at our university. And this trend is accelerating year on year. Contributing factors to the rise in girls’ enrollment in universities are the KRI’s rapid socio-economic transformation and the establishment of new universities across the region in the past two decades.

Prof. Shukria Rasul Ibrahim

ACADEMIC

Prof. Shukria Rasul Ibrahim talks about the role of women in higher education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I graduated from the Kurdish Language Department of Baghdad University in 1972, and completed my doctoral studies in Moscow. I was appointed as the head of the Kurdish Studies department in 1982, and the director of master’s and doctoral program in Salahaddin University in 1998. In 2001, I became the first female professor in the KRI. I was elected as member of the Kurdistan Parliament between 2005 and 2009. I have written and translated 47 books throughout my career.

How would you characterize the role of women in Kurdish academia today?

Women have made great strides in higher education over the last two decades in the KRI. I am very proud that many senior positions in various higher education institutions in the KRI are today filled by women, with many of them serving as presidents, heads of departments, and deans of academic institutions. Furthermore, the number of girls is now outpacing boys in higher education enrollment. I am very happy to see this trend and that the gender gap in Kurdish academia is gradually narrowing.

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I am very proud that many senior positions in various higher education institutions in the KRI are today filled by women, with many of them serving as presidents, heads of departments, and deans of academic institutions.

What has been the biggest motivation in your career?

My biggest motivation was my parents. I received full support and encouragement from my family throughout my career. Helping my students succeed in their own careers and having an impact on their lives is also something that has given me hope and satisfaction.

What advice would you give to young female academics?

Be determined about what subjects you research, and always pursue your dreams. Never allow negative comments or challenges you face affect your career objectives. Believe in yourself and move forward, without looking back.



7

# WOMEN IN THE NEWS MEDIA



## WE ARE SEEING AN INCREASE IN EMERGENCE OF CONFIDENT AND CAPABLE FEMALE MEDIA PROFESSIONALS IN THE KRI.

### Women's Participation in News Media

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) news media landscape has transformed considerably in recent years, with many of the current television channels, radio stations, and magazines established only in the last decade. With establishment of these news outlets, we are starting to see the emergence of confident and capable female media professionals in the KRI. Many of the women working as reporters and presenters have reached prominence in the KRI's news media in recent years.

### The Role of News Media on Women's Issues

News media organizations in the KRI play a constructive role in drawing attention to women's rights and the challenges they face, as well as in shaping cultural norms. The media tends to approach women's rights from the perspective of the public good and engages in responsible journalism in this regard.

Gender-oriented debate is now commonplace in the KRI's news media. More and more women are standing up to claim their rights and voice their demands for equality through the existing media platforms.

### News Content on Women

With regard to content on women issues, there have been some positive trends in the KRI's news media in recent years. The Kurdish media outlets generally refrain from taking sexist perspectives or using language that is derogatory towards women in news reporting on issues concerning women. Content is fairly balanced across gender lines and stereotypical gender portrayals are generally avoided in the coverage of women's issues.

Women's growing influence in journalism has implications for media content concerning women. Female reporters and presenters challenge gender stereotypes and bring a gender perspective to their news stories. They also encourage women to share their perspectives and concerns on issues related to women. As a result, more content for and about women has been produced in the KRI's media in recent years.

### The Challenge

There is still a notable disparity between male and female media worker with respect to their areas of focus. Female media professionals are mostly assigned subjects such as family, lifestyle, and culture. Security, economy and politics are still regarded as areas of male expertise. Therefore, women are largely missing from reporting on these issues in the KRI's news media.

Despite more women gaining access to news media jobs, the KRI's media has a long way to go yet to ensuring gender equality in leadership roles. The percentage of women in top leadership positions in the KRI's media corporations is still low. Women are mostly represented at entry-level positions or mid-level editorial roles.

## DESPITE MORE WOMEN GAINING ACCESS TO NEWS MEDIA JOBS, THE KRI'S MEDIA HAS A LONG WAY TO GO YET TO ENSURING GENDER EQUALITY IN LEADERSHIP ROLES.

# Shahyan Tahseen

## NEWS ANCHOR & PRESENTER

Shahyan Tahseen talks about her experience of being a woman working in the media in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



How have you ended up in the media sector?

I’ve had a passion for media ever since I was a kid. I began my media career as a children’s TV presenter when I was 11 years old. Although I have a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering, I could not ignore my passion for media and I decided to pursue a career in this sector.

Which subjects do you mostly cover on your TV program?

I mostly cover social issues with the aim of making people’s voices heard and drawing the attention of government authorities to the everyday challenges of life in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

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Today, girls are more interested in media careers than before. We have many talented girls that can be successful in the media if they are supported or given a platform.

Do you raise awareness of women’s issues?

I cover women’s rights issues and the challenges women face in public and private life. In my TV program, I regularly host female guests from all walks of life to give them a platform to convey their problems and concerns.

Do you see a growing interest among female graduates to build their career in media?

In previous years, media was seen as a man’s field. Thankfully, this mindset is changing rapidly. Today, girls are more interested in media careers than before. We have many talented girls that can be successful in the media if they are supported or given a platform.

What are the challenges of being a woman in the news media?

The number of women working in the news media is quite low in the KRI. The number of women in senior managers and decision-making roles is almost zero, which is reflected in the contents of the news. Very few women are assigned to cover “hard news” areas such as politics, business, and security. Women either appear as moderators on all-male talk shows or in “soft news” programs covering matters like health, art, culture, and entertainment.

What is your message to young female media students?

You have to love your work, and you have to take it seriously. Learn how to do your job well, and make sure you know your subject matter. Be curious and learn extra skills. Arm yourself with as much knowledge about as many things as possible. Never stop learning.

# Avan Jaff

## JOURNALIST

Avan Jaff talks about the challenges for women in media industry in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



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None of the media sources here are owned or led by women, and there are no women in decision-making roles or high editorial positions, so, there is no diversity in the newsroom.

As a journalist, what are your main areas of professional interest?

As a women’s rights activist and journalist, I cover women’s issues in my stories in detail. My journalistic stories are about violence against women, women’s success stories, and social perceptions of women’s rights and gender equality.

What’s it like to be a woman in the media in the KRI?

Being a woman working in Kurdish media is a big struggle. Female journalists are fighting for respect in journalism, which is a very male-dominated sector in the KRI. None of the media sources here are owned or led by women, and there are no women in decision-making roles or high editorial positions, so, there is no diversity in the newsroom. Consequently, the local media is not sensitive to gender-related issues, which receive little or no coverage. I believe achieving true gender equality in the media is going to take a lot of time.

How would you assess social media’s role in promoting women’s rights in the KRI?

The younger generation is very active in social media in the KRI. It is an important platform to disseminate information for creating awareness of women’s rights and gender equality. I use social media to engage audiences and to challenge social norms on this subject. However, social media has become a toxic environment for women in recent years. Hate speech against women is very common in Kurdish social media, and we constantly receive threats and abuse. But I am very committed to what I am doing, so I will not bow to threats or intimidation. A new law to stop hate speech against women on digital platforms is needed in the KRI.





GENDER-ORIENTED DEBATE IS NOW COMMONPLACE IN THE KRI'S NEWS MEDIA. MORE AND MORE WOMEN ARE STANDING UP TO CLAIM THEIR RIGHTS AND VOICE THEIR DEMANDS FOR EQUALITY THROUGH THE EXISTING MEDIA PLATFORMS.





Shifa Gardi

(1986–2017)

When she was 31 years old, Shifa Gardi was killed by a roadside bomb while covering the Iraqi army’s offensive against ISIS in Mosul in 2017. Shifa was a well-known reporter and anchor working for the Kurdish media network Rudaw.

Shifa Gardi was born a refugee in Iran in 1986. She started her media career in 2006 after completing her bachelor’s degree in media studies from Salahaddin University in Erbil.

During the war against ISIS, Shifa presented a daily news program called ‘Focus Mosul’ and often reported from the frontline. She excelled in reporting human stories from Mosul during ISIS brutality. Shifa Gardi’s acclaimed reporting during the Mosul offensive demonstrated women journalists’ skill and courage in war reporting, a male-dominated media landscape.

A week after her death, Rudaw established the Shifa Gardi International Award in her honor and as a tribute to all female war correspondents who have died in the line of duty and who continue to put themselves in danger while reporting. The Shifa Gardi International Award was won in 2019 by Jinan Mousa, in 2020 by Arwa Damon, in 2021 by Alex Crawford, and in 2022 by Lyse Doucet.



While reporting from the frontline, Shifa Gardi encountered an injured rabbit in the village of Albu Saif in Mosul. She brought it back to Erbil with her for treatment and then gave it to an animal protection agency in Erbil.



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# MAKING WOMEN'S VOICES HEARD



## A BROAD RANGE OF WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS HAVE BEEN ESTABLISHED WITH THE AIM OF ADDRESSING THE NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF WOMEN IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ SINCE 2005.

### Breakthrough and Setback

The Kurdish women's rights movement gained momentum following the establishment of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in 1992. The newly established Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) granted full political rights to women, and the number of women's organizations steadily increased in the KRI from 1992. Those new women's rights organizations went on to achieve full civil rights for women through the reforming of the Iraqi Penal Code and Personal Status Law.

However, the outbreak of the inter-factional fighting between two major Kurdish parties in 1994 interrupted the improvement of women's rights movement in the KRI. Women's rights organizations from Slemani and Erbil had marched, petitioned and campaigned for an end to the violence. To inspire their husbands, fathers, and brothers, women took to the streets to protest against the civil war in 1994. Unfortunately, the civil war lasted three years, and policy steps towards advancing women's rights saw little progress in the Kurdistan Parliament during the 1990s.

### Revival of Women's Movements

Legal reforms to advance women's rights have fostered a revival of civil society activity and particularly women's movements in the KRI since the reconciliation agreement reached between the Kurdish parties in 2005, which resulted in the merging of the KRI's two administrative units under the KRG. With the legal developments, a broad range of women's organizations have been established with the aim of addressing the needs and interests of women in the KRI since 2005. Today, hundreds of activists are working in a variety of areas to empower women in the KRI. This includes working on the economic and educational empowerment of women, providing training and legal support, and preventing gender-based violence.

### Progressive Social Change

Women's organizations have been serving as a catalyst for the transformation of public discourse on multiple issues of concern to women in a way that has led to progressive social change in the KRI. In order to make women's voices heard, they have tirelessly campaigned to educate women on their rights. Furthermore, women's activists are effectively using social media to change public discourse and challenge the public on issues considered taboo in traditional communities. It is clear that more women are claiming their rights and seeking gender equality in all aspects of life in the KRI today. In addition, awareness of women's rights among the Kurdish public has increased and female empowerment has become part of mainstream discourse.

### A Stronger Voice for Women

The significant increase in the number of women's organizations has paved the way for women to develop a stronger collective voice with which to influence policy changes and drive women's economic and educational empowerment in the KRI. Over the past decade, Kurdish women's organizations' engagement with their international partners has created opportunities for training, capacity building, and career advancement for women.

### Applying a Gender Lens

Women's organizations collaborate with public authorities to address the challenges women face in the KRI. They have successfully been applying pressure on the KRG to enact new laws and policies, to provide an essential foundation on which to build equality, prohibit violence and discrimination, and empower women in the public and private spheres. Thanks to their work, there has been a growing interest in applying a 'gender lens' to policymaking in the KRI. They also serve as women's rights watchdogs to ensure that relevant laws are properly implemented.

### The Challenge

Kurdish women's organizations have a very fragmented voice which prevents them from mobilizing larger numbers of activists for their projects and pressuring policymakers into supporting their objectives. By overcoming their fragmentation, women's organizations will be able to build a strong civil society with women at its center advancing social change in the KRI.

**WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS HAVE SUCCESSFULLY BEEN APPLYING PRESSURE ON THE KRG TO ENACT NEW LAWS AND POLICIES, TO PROVIDE AN ESSENTIAL FOUNDATION ON WHICH TO BUILD EQUALITY, PROHIBIT VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION, AND EMPOWER WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES.**



Bahar Ali

DIRECTOR, EMMA ORGANIZATION

Bahar Ali talks about the transformation of women’s rights, and the challenges that women’s organizations face in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



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We want to contribute and be involved in the decision-making process in regard to improving women’s rights. Collaboration with the government can ensure that we meet the needs of women and girls in the KRI.

As a feminist organization, which fields does EMMA focus on in the KRI?

We focus on rehabilitating survivors of sexual violence, providing psychosocial and legal support to Yazidi genocide survivors, raising awareness on gender-based violence, and capacity-building training for government employees. We also promote women’s participation in peacebuilding and decision-making processes, and training young feminist activists in women’s rights advocacy.

Over the years, what sort of impact have women’s organizations had on raising awareness of domestic violence in the KRI?

Women in the KRI still experience a high rate of domestic violence, both physical and psychological. Numerous women’s organizations have been actively involved in various anti-violence campaigns and have made their perspectives heard. Women’s organizations educate women about their rights and help victims of domestic violence. Thankfully, more Kurdish women are aware of their rights today, and they are no longer silent about domestic violence.

What is the main challenge for feminist organizations in the KRI?

Conservative groups are the biggest challenge for us. They have a big misconception about our work. They accuse us of threatening local culture or rising divorce rates in the KRI. Some of our staff comes from conservative families. They cannot tell their families or communities that they work for a women’s organization because they believe women’s organizations are dangerous, encourage divorces, and destroy local culture. We need time to break this traditional mindset.

How do you expect government institutions to address the challenges women face in the KRI?

Women’s organizations are the most neglected organizations in the KRI. Apart from the High Council for Women and Development, women’s organizations do not get enough support from the government. We are the voices of women and we want to be supported. I am not talking only about financial support. We want to contribute and be involved in the decision-making process in regard to improving women’s rights. Collaboration with the government can ensure that we meet the needs of women and girls in the KRI.

What have been the biggest accomplishments for women organizations over the last two decades in the KRI?

Kurdish women’s rights movements have fought hard for their rights and to address gender inequality over the last three decades. I lived outside of the KRI for 14 years. When I came back, I saw massive changes in terms of women’s empowerment. This may not have been recognizable to people who were living here, but there has been a big transformation at every level of society in terms of women’s rights. The key driving forces of this change are the undaunted efforts of the Kurdish feminist movement. Women’s rights advocacy campaigns in the KRI have paid off over the last two decades, during which many women’s rights-related laws have been amended.

Gender units have been established in most of the government institutions. We have a 30% gender quota in the parliament, and female ministers, advisors, and directors serve in government institutions. The education level of girls and women has skyrocketed, while women’s participation in the labor force has increased. To give you an example, women’s organizations launched the Women’s Alliance to advocate for gender equality and women’s rights in the KRI in December 2021. We submitted a proposal about which laws need to be amended and passed to the Kurdistan Parliament. This proposal addresses legalizing abortion, giving women equal inheritance rights, and many other important issues. It was impossible to talk about these changes just a decade ago. These are revolutionary changes for the KRI. We still have a lot to do, but these positive steps give us the hope we need to push forward.

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Kurdish women’s rights movements have fought hard for their rights and to address gender inequality over the last three decades. I lived outside of the KRI for 14 years. When I came back, I saw massive changes in terms of women’s empowerment.



Taban Shores

FOUNDER, THE LOTUS FLOWER

Taban Shores talks about how she decided to create a safe social space for vulnerable women and her charity's work in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



How did you decide to start The Lotus Flower?

I am a genocide survivor from Saddam Hussein's era. At the age of six I arrived in the UK as a refugee with my family. We had narrowly survived death, and the experience showed me the importance of NGOs and their work.

When ISIS attacked the KRI in August 2014, I left my career in London and returned to the region to work for Rwanda Foundation. I worked on the front lines for 15 months, which made me realize that I should be doing more for women and girls who found themselves in the same situation that my mother and I had.

I decided to set up The Lotus Flower from my living room – but at the time had no funding. I managed to raise some money in the UK to kick things off, and from that point on, the organization just grew and grew. Since 2016, we have helped over 40,000 vulnerable women, girls and community members impacted by conflict and displacement.

What are the The Lotus Flower's main areas of work?

We have three core pillars: Education and Livelihoods, Health and Safety, and Peacebuilding and Human Rights.

Our Women's Business Incubator program is implemented inside refugee camps to help women start their own businesses. We ask women and girls what type of start-up they would like to launch. By providing vocational training, women improve their practical skills so that they can generate income and set up their businesses. We teach them how to meet local needs and give them a small grant.

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Since 2016, we have helped over 40,000 vulnerable women, girls and community members impacted by conflict and displacement.

Businesses that the women have successfully set up include cafés, food markets, bakeries, hair and beauty salons and clothing shops.

We also conduct an adult literacy program. A lot of these women come from rural communities and never went to school, but are very keen to learn. The classes are very popular and attendance rates are high.

How would you characterize the role of women in peacebuilding?

Women and girls can play key roles in peacebuilding in their communities. We started a program called Peace Sisters, through which we train women and girls as peace mediators and local leaders. As part of the project, they go on to run their own peace-related initiatives within their communities – such as self-defense classes and awareness-raising on gender-based violence. We hope this spread across the region, especially in conflict zones and post-conflict zones, where we need more of these initiatives.

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We provide psychological services at our centers and do outreach work. We see great improvement in the women that we have supported, and also in men and boys, who have recently been receiving mental health therapy as part of our male trauma project.

How do you define The Lotus Flower's approach to violence against women?

We approach violence against women through capacity-building and awareness sessions with women and girls, as well as with the men and boys. Domestic violence is culturally engrained in the KRI, so it is something that girls grow up with and consider normal. We cannot change that overnight. It is a slow process of unlearning. Therefore, we must educate women and girls to explain how men should treat women.

We've involved religious leaders to convey that message through holy scripture. They all say that there is nothing in the holy texts that permits the treatment of women in this way. We need to get that message out to the wider community. I do believe in working on projects with younger boys, especially adolescents, as that is when they develop their attitudes towards women. It is about shifting the mindset of the whole community to figure out how best to provide support.

Do refugees or IDPs face challenges to receiving mental health support in the KRI?

More work needs to be done to destigmatize mental health issues and services in the KRI. For instance, the Yezidi community has faced unbelievable brutality under ISIS's rule, which caused deep psychological trauma in the community. We need to invest in mental health services because we cannot rebuild a community without rebuilding their emotional wellbeing. We provide psychological services at our centers and do outreach work. We see great improvement in the women that we have supported, and also in men and boys, who have recently been receiving mental health therapy as part of our male trauma project.





OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES,  
AWARENESS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS  
AMONG THE KURDISH PUBLIC HAS  
INCREASED AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT  
HAS BECOME PART OF MAINSTREAM  
DISCOURSE THANKS TO THE UNYIELDING  
WORK OF WOMEN ORGANIZATIONS.



Tanya Gilly Khailany

CO-FOUNDER AND VICE PRESIDENT, SEED FOUNDATION

Tanya Gilly Khailany talks about the SEED Foundation’s projects on education, violence against women, and mental health support services in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



How does SEED addresses gender-based violence (GBV) against women in the KRI?

At SEED, we use a multifaceted approach to prevent and respond to GBV, including systemic change through advocacy and policy efforts at an institutional level, building the protection capacity of front-line service providers, and providing trauma-informed, comprehensive care to survivors of violence and those at risk. However, despite our best efforts, we still face hurdles to the delivery of services and the changing of attitudes and behaviors.

While there are exceptions, the ‘honor’ code governing women and girls’ ability to speak out or access help when subjected to the GBV, is pervasive. In many cases, women live with the threat of violence or ‘honor killings’ for large periods in their lives. The ‘honor’ code has also resulted in the gross under-reporting or misreporting of GBV in the KRI, making the scale and the scope of the issue difficult to monitor and address.

SEED has trained over 400 government personnel on survivor-centered approaches to GBV and protection, including representatives from the

Department of Combating Violence Against Women and Families (DCVAW) and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA). The domestic violence hotline and shelters for vulnerable women remain severely underfunded and understaffed, with a need for ongoing training and capacity-building support.

At the same time, the existing law, the Act of Combating Domestic Violence in the KRI (Law No. 8 of 2011), has been limited in scope and effectiveness. SEED completed an in-depth analysis of the law and recommended amendments to parliament, including expanding its scope to protect every individual against all forms of GBV, both within and beyond the family; to adopt a survivor-centered approach guaranteeing safety, confidentiality, respect, and non-discrimination for all survivors; and to support the law with sufficient resources, as well as actionable and comprehensive implementing regulations.

While these challenges have existed for many decades, we are also seeing a rise in technology-facilitated GBV. As a result of increased internet access and social media penetration, we

are seeing GBV manifest in new and alarming ways, and efforts to monitor and respond are limited by the speed of technological advancement. Women are now vulnerable online too, facing various forms of online violence, and local laws are not yet sufficient to protect survivors or effectively prosecute perpetrators.

However, if we work together to challenge patriarchal social norms, advocate for the prosecution of perpetrators, strengthen the KRI Law to Combat Domestic Violence, and work to ensure a more robust, survivor-centered approach to addressing all forms of GBV against all women and girls in society, we can eliminate GBV in the KRI.

How does SEED approach the issue of online GBV?

In 2022, SEED launched the first dedicated training to combat Technology Facilitated GBV (TFGBV) for NGOs in Iraq.

TFGBV is a worsening issue in the KRI and Iraq, with a 2021 survey conducted by UN Women reporting

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In 2022, SEED launched the first dedicated training to combat Technology Facilitated GBV (TFGBV) for NGOs in Iraq.

that 70% of female respondents across Iraq had experienced TFGBV in the preceding year. TFGBV can manifest in many ways, but image-based abuse (involving the doctoring or editing of images for public dissemination or blackmail) is the prominent form of TFGBV affecting the KRI.

The continuous, rapid advancement of technology and the sudden shift of people’s lives to online spaces during COVID-19 has exacerbated TFGBV. The ‘honor’ system puts survivors in a particularly dangerous situation and at high risk of experiencing violence as it shifts from online to offline, as well as facing severe community stigma.

SEED recognizes the danger that TFGBV poses to communities across the KRI, and is taking a comprehensive approach to tackling TFGBV and supporting survivors of violence, including:

Founding and leading the Iraq TFGBV Task Force, the first of its kind in the world, which aims to convene key stakeholders and streamline understanding, response and prevention efforts

- Training government first responders such as DCVAW and MOLSA on TFGBV
- Working to help strengthen legislation to criminalize TFGBV and provide legal protection for survivors
- Conducting research to strengthen the understanding of how TFGBV manifests in Iraq and how it is responded to
- Developing Standard Operating Procedures for front-line service providers
- Carrying out awareness campaigns
- Developing and implementing a curriculum for adolescents and their parents on TFGBV and online safety measures through SEED Girls

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SEED has trained over 400 government personnel on survivor-centered approaches to GBV and protection, including representatives from the Department of Combating Violence Against Women and Families (DCVAW) and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA).



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By providing immediate access to support services, SEED simultaneously works to strengthen skills for a better tomorrow. Our training and education programs increase the skills of frontline responders, ensuring they are equipped to serve their communities, both now and in the future.

Could you tell us about the mental health support services that SEED provides for the victims, survivors, and communities that you serve?

SEED’s mission is to protect, empower, and support the recovery of survivors of violence and others at risk from GBV, child abuse, and human trafficking.

We uphold this mission by

1. Delivering transformational, comprehensive care to survivors, including case management, mental health, psychosocial, and legal services, cash assistance, and shelter,
2. Strengthening the capacity of government workers and service providers through education, training, and capacity building programs,
3. Promoting policy, institutional, and social change to strengthen the rights of and protections for vulnerable communities.

In urgent cases, our service delivery staff work collaboratively with clients to assess needs, implement care plans, and make referrals to other organizations, as needed. Following assessment, our psychologists evaluate each client using a structured clinical assessment to better understand potential vulnerabilities, resilience,

resources, and motivation for recovery. They then deliver mental health support using an array of survivor-centered and trauma-informed mental health interventions and techniques. Increasingly, and in line with growing internal capacity, SEED is complimenting individual and group therapy with family therapy, helping strengthen support systems and increase their capacity to support family members with complex trauma.

Mental health support is supplemented by psychosocial support activities that provide skill-building and recreational activities to connect participants with others in their community, explain how to cope with challenging situations, educate them about mental health, GBV, and parenting, and arrange support groups in which participants can share their experiences and provide support to others.

By providing immediate access to support services, SEED simultaneously works to strengthen skills for a better tomorrow. Our training and education programs increase the skills of frontline responders, ensuring they are equipped to serve their communities, both now and in the future. And through our advocacy efforts, we pursue positive changes in law, policy, practices, and attitude. SEED is committed to delivering holistic programs that address GBV, child protection, people

trafficking, and mental health, while also ensuring that relevant institutions are also making progress on all these fronts.

Can you tell us about SEED’s education and training projects for women and girls?

In 2021, SEED launched the SEED Girls Program aimed at providing adolescent girls (ages 12 to 17) from displaced communities in the KRI a continuum of care to address their emotional, intellectual, and health development needs. This innovative and unique program will work with participants through a range of safe and dignity-affirming activities, including training, awareness-raising activities, and workshops.

SEED Girls aims to respond to a lack of programming services to meet the many needs of young girls in the KRI, addressing their vulnerabilities, child marriage, limited access to sexual and reproductive health services, and impediments to quality and continuing education. The program aims to inspire and support adolescent girls to build supportive networks with their peers, value and prioritize their education, strengthen their critical thinking skills, and give them confidence in their potential to improve their lives, communities, and the world.

SEED works with the girls’ parents too, as SEED believes when adolescent girls are supported and encouraged by caring and understanding adults, they thrive in unimaginable ways, becoming resourceful and contributing members of their families and communities.

Sozan Safar Ismail

PRESIDENT, DAK ORGANIZATION FOR YEZIDI WOMEN DEVELOPMENT

Sozan Safar Ismail talks about Dak Organization’s activities and the challenges faced by the Yezidi community.



How did Dak Organization start?

As a group of Yezidi women volunteers, we started Dak Organization in 2014 with the aim of helping and supporting survivors of ISIS genocide. Officially registered in the KRI in 2015, Dak Organization offers protection, education, and livelihood support for women and children. We also conduct peacebuilding projects. As of today, we’ve implemented some 28 projects.

What are your current priorities?

We are encouraging the Iraqi Federal Government to implement the Yezidi Survivors Law, which is set to provide a reparations framework for survivors of ISIS crimes including special provisions for women and girls.

Another focus is to educate Yezidi women about their rights and the best course of action in seeking justice, as well as providing women and girls who have experienced physical or psychological violence with mental health services.

We believe women should play a role as decision-makers in our community, especially in Sinjar. Thus, we aim to further boost our women’s capacity-development program to shore up women’s participation in conflict prevention, crisis response, and peacebuilding.

What is the biggest challenge facing the Yezidi community?

Around 70% of Yezidis live in camps today, and mostly in dire conditions. The failure to implement the Sinjar Agreement, signed between the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), is one of the biggest challenges facing the Yezidi community, particularly women and children. The agreement proposes the safe return of displaced Yezidis to their homeland. However, because the agreement has not been implemented, Yezidis who fled Sinjar cannot return home. Instead, they remain in camps, living in tents, without access to basic services. We believe the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement is the only way that Yezidi women and children can feel safe enough to return to their homes.

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We aim to further boost our women’s capacity-development program to shore up women’s participation in conflict prevention, crisis response, and peacebuilding.



Hewan Omer

DIRECTOR, FREE YEZIDI FOUNDATION

Hewan Omer talks about Enterprise and Training Center of the Free Yezidi Foundation (FYF) and its activities.



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Since 2014, FYF has provided humanitarian services for Yezidi survivors, with a special focus on women and children, trauma recovery and psychological services, economic empowerment, community reintegration, and education, as well as pursuing justice and accountability on behalf of all Yezidis affected by ISIS crimes.

Can give us an introduction to FYF?

FYF is one of the leading civil society organizations providing humanitarian and human rights support to Yezidi civilians. Since 2014, FYF has provided humanitarian services for Yezidi survivors, with a special focus on women and children, trauma recovery and psychological services, economic empowerment, community reintegration, and education, as well as pursuing justice and accountability on behalf of all Yezidis affected by ISIS crimes. FYF advances international awareness of the plight of the Yezidis and advises on how to ethically address their concerns, playing an important role in promoting better and broader humanitarian and human rights support to Yezidis.

Which key projects does the FYF pursue in building entrepreneurial capacity for Yezidi women?

Our Enterprise and Training Center focuses on women's economic empowerment on several fronts and through various projects. Its programs are designed to help women gain new skills and generate income for their families. One example is our bakery and café.

We created the Sugar Is Sweet Bakery and café in our center, staffed by Yezidi women. Our beneficiaries were all from camps and the Yezidi host community. The 96 women learned modern skills about baking and product development, as well as on finance, accounting, logistics, and business

administration. These skills can help them in the future, whether they return to Sinjar or live elsewhere. As the bakery became more popular, we hired some of the trainees as employees. Today Sugar Is Sweet is the only bakery making fresh cakes in Khanke, and we have begun selling products in Duhok as well. Our doors are open to everyone in Iraq who come in peace, as we want to foster understanding and acceptance of the Yezidi community. But most of our customers are Yezidis, and we regularly host engagements and birthday parties to bring some happiness to the community.

We also have a project to support Yezidi artisans in making hand-crafted products such as rugs, carpets, stuffed animals, and other woven or knitted

items. Some of the artisans are now role models for other women in the community, and their success helps bring much-needed income to their families. They now work to choose color schemes and designs to increase sales. This is a success for our organization, for them as individuals, and for the wider Yezidi community. We see this as an example of more sustainable development since these business skills provide direct income to beneficiaries.

How has women's involvement in your projects changed over the years, and how has it affected their families' views?

In earlier years, the number of women participating in our projects was lower. Because of this, FYF made a concerted effort to speak with entire families and emphasize the value and importance of women's education and economic empowerment. Since we operate within the community, families understand that we are seeking to support them. In many cases, men and women in the family have supported women and girls to

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participate in courses and income-generating activities, which have generally improved their families' living standards. We are seeing positive developments.

Today, more Yezidi women are getting involved in the world of work, and that includes coming forward and participating in our programs. In the past, women in our community and probably other communities in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region were hesitant to engage in economic activity, which is often done by men. We built our women's economic empowerment programs in a grassroots way, striving to work not only with women but with their families in trying to improve entire communities. I do believe that we have succeeded in delivering the message that women can be successful at work, and we see women and families in general are happier with the results.

FYF is a foundation led by women at every level, including decision-making, project management, finance, and accounting. Our staff

help to provide for their families, which helps to further promote women's empowerment, responsibility, and inspiration to other women in the community. It is often a global perception, specifically in the Middle East, that women should stay at home and take care of children rather than work. The FYF, like some other organizations in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, is striving to empower women in the community, help them understand their rights, and build their personal and professional confidence.



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# WOMEN IN THE PESHMERGA FORCES

**AS OF 2022, THERE ARE ABOUT 1,700 WOMEN SERVING IN COMBAT ROLES WITHIN THE PESHMERGA FORCES. THEY ARE GIVEN THE SAME OPPORTUNITIES AS THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS. VERY FEW REPORTED THAT THEY HAD FACED GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION DURING THEIR SERVICE.**

#### Introduction

Women have played a key role in the Peshmerga, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) official military force, to protect their homeland, since its foundation. Women have held notable roles in the Peshmerga throughout its history. However, although women have been integral to the history of the Peshmerga, reaching back to the 1960s, they were only officially recognized as members of the forces in 1996.

#### Women's Role in Peshmerga

As of 2022, there are about 1,700 women serving in combat roles within the Peshmerga forces. They are given the same opportunities as their male counterparts. Very few reported that they had faced gender-based discrimination during their service.

The Peshmerga puts its female units through their paces with physical and mental training courses. They go through basic military training, as well as specialized combat training. Women take part in combat operations, protect the KRI's borders and provide medical, technical and communication services.

#### Women in Higher Ranks

While women are well represented in lower ranking officer positions, few have succeeded in advancing beyond the post of Colonel in the Peshmerga forces. The Peshmerga Ministry is working on bringing more women into its senior ranks and giving them authority throughout the chain of command.

#### Women in Combat Situation

In most of the military establishments around the world, entrenched cultural norms around physical strength and experience in combat prevent women from actively taking part in combat operations. Even though the Peshmerga forces' combat units have a male dominated structure, the Peshmerga Ministry has created a structure in which women are able to proudly display their combat skills.

*Lilo Majeed*

#### PESHMERGA OFFICER

Lilo Majeed talks about her career and why more female officers are needed in the higher ranks in the Peshmerga forces.



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**Throughout our history, female members of the Peshmerga forces have played critical roles in defending our homeland. As such, we've earned respect from our male peers, and proved to ourselves that we should be accorded the same rights as our male soldiers.**

#### Can you share a little bit about yourself?

After completing my bachelor's degree in civil engineering from the American University Iraq Sulaimani, I started working for the Peshmerga forces as an engineer, and supervised one of their biggest projects in Qalachwala. In 2021, I was accepted as the second female cadet from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq by the British Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. I was awarded the King Hussain Award for the title of 'most improved international cadet' after my graduation from Sandhurst.

#### Why did you decide to join the Peshmerga forces?

I grew up in a family that has served in the Peshmerga over 50 years. My family's history was a great influence on my decision to join the Peshmerga and I wanted to follow in my family's footsteps. I always felt it was my duty to serve our people and our homeland. Serving in the Peshmerga forces was the most honorable job I could do.

#### What is the biggest barrier against women in the Peshmerga forces?

There is a common misconception that women are emotional and physically weaker than men, and as such are not suitable for combat situations. Thankfully, brave female Peshmerga have proved that is not true, most recently fighting against ISIS. Moreover, many female Peshmerga trainees prove that they are mentally strong and capable of the same level of physical fitness as their male peers.

Women should not be held back from different positions because of their gender. Throughout our history, female members of the Peshmerga forces have played critical roles in defending our homeland. As such, we've earned respect from our male peers, and proved to ourselves that we should be accorded the same rights as our male soldiers. Female Peshmerga should not only serve in reserve units. Considering their capabilities and strength, more women should join the higher ranks in the Peshmerga forces.







# Midya Masti

## PESHMERGA OFFICER

Midya Masti talks about her experience of serving in the Peshmerga forces.



Can you share a little bit about yourself?

I am a medical doctor working in a military hospital for the Peshmerga forces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. I graduated from the College of Medicine at the University of Kirkuk. I currently specialize in plastic and reconstructive surgery. Since 2018, I have been serving in the Peshmerga forces. In 2021, I became the first woman from the KRI to graduate from the British Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst.

How did you decide to join the Peshmerga forces?

I have always admired the bravery of our Peshmerga forces and their rich history of accomplishments in serving the Kurdish nation. My family’s background in the Peshmerga also had a great impact on my decision to join their ranks as a doctor.

What has been the most important experience you have had in the Peshmerga forces?

Peshmerga forces’ robust dedication to their duty, selfless commitment to their mission, and absolute loyalty to the people of Kurdistan have been the qualities that have impressed me the most since I joined the Peshmerga.

How would you characterize the Peshmerga forces’ gender perspective?

Men still dominate the defense sector and so it is sadly unsurprising that it is a sector marked by gender inequality. This is the case not only in the Peshmerga but in armed forces across the world. It is often easier for men to get promoted for example even though they have less experience and qualifications than their female colleagues. As a consequence, there are fewer women at officer level in modern armies. This fact means that it will take a long time to change the perception that a career in the armed forces is only for men. Since the revolt broke out against the Baath regime during 1960s, a lot of women have defended the Kurdistan Region of Iraq with pride and honor. I strongly believe that female Peshmerga have proved themselves the equal of their fellow male soldiers, and that they can contribute to the armed forces in various areas.

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# Kochar Saleh Haji

## LIEUTENANT, PESHMERGA FORCES

Lt. Kochar Saleh Haji talks about women’s combat roles and the barriers they face in the Peshmerga forces.



Do you think the Peshmerga forces would benefit from more women in their ranks?

A woman’s perspective is vital, especially in conflict prevention and resolution, and peace keeping. I strongly believe that we need more women in different ranks of the Peshmerga. During the fight against ISIS, female Peshmerga fulfilled significant roles, not only in fighting on the front lines, but also in providing first aid and helping refugees and IDPs.

There is also a motivating factor in combat situations. When men see a female Peshmerga fighting alongside them, it gives them strength on the frontline. If a male Peshmerga is reluctant to go to a critical location on the front line, they will be motivated to go there if they see females are volunteering to serve in that location.

What is the biggest barrier to women in the Peshmerga forces?

The biggest barrier is society’s perception about women’s role in a male-dominated environment such as the armed forces. Society believes that it is not appropriate for women to join the security forces in the KRI. When I was waiting for the bus to pick me up for training in my uniform, I received strange stares and negative comments. If I had listened to them, I would not be here.

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I regularly deliver lectures to hundreds of men on the use of heavy weaponry. Women Peshmerga have proven themselves in combat roles. We should open more combat positions to women with no exception.

How did you feel when you received UNESCO’s Global Hope Coalition award?

I was awarded for my role in protecting ethnic and religious minorities from ISIS terrorism and brutality. I received the award in memory of Layla Qasm, Dayka Hamayl, President Masoud Barzani’s mother, and thousands of Kurdistan women who have lost their lives and families in the defense of our homeland. It was a great honor.

Do women have the same promotion prospects as men?

Unfortunately, we don’t get promoted as much as we should, which is unfair. My colleagues and I have held the same rank for a long time, due to the financial difficulties facing the government. I hope that our authorities will continue their support to pave the way for women to climb the ladder and take higher positions in the Peshmerga.

Do you think women are capable of serving in combat roles?

Women are capable in frontline combat situations. I am a company commander on the front line. My duty is not administrative. In the Peshmerga men and women receive the same training. We all wake up at the same time, eat the same food, and get the same fitness and weapons training. I regularly deliver lectures to hundreds of men on the use of heavy weaponry. Women Peshmerga have proven themselves in combat roles. We should open more combat positions to women with no exception.



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KURDISTANI  
WOMEN  
THROUGH  
THE LENS OF  
DIPLOMATS



Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert

UN SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE TO IRAQ

Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert on gender equality and women empowerment in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



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On the policy and legislative side, a lot has been done in the KRI in recent years, from institutionalizing gender issues to all kinds of legal reforms, such as the one addressing polygamy and violence against women.

As a woman who blazed a political trail in my home country, I know how important it is for young women and girls to have role models to look up to as they aspire to positions of leadership, including in politics. Female politicians have played a pioneering role in the KRI and have long led the region in terms of the quantity and quality of political representation. I truly believe that today’s women in public office in the KRI are the role models for tomorrow’s generation of leaders.

On the policy and legislative side, a lot has been done in the KRI in recent years, from institutionalizing gender issues to all kinds of legal reforms, such as the one addressing polygamy and violence against women. While Iraqi women and girls suffering from physical and mental abuse and are still waiting for the Anti-Domestic Violence Law to be enacted, the KRI has comparatively advanced status of legislation. Therefore, the KRI’s legal reforms on violence against women must be recognized and commended on this matter.

However, past and present experiences on the ground tell us that lots of work lies ahead of us. Not only to ensure the elimination of all existing barriers for women to realize their political rights, but also to work towards gender balance in decision-making positions.

Today women face a challenging environment across the globe, including in the KRI. When we speak about a challenging environment or gender-based intimidation and violence, we often immediately think of the use of physical force, and understandably so. But on many occasions gender-based intimidation and violence take more subtle forms. There are the overt and explicit threats, but also implicit threats of, for instance, social exclusion and family rejection, all with the intention of degrading or demoralizing women. It happens at home, in the community, in public, and online. Such acts do deter women from considering running for office or pursuing positions of leadership.

I have a message to all ambitious women out there: do not feel discouraged by the generation of men that currently holds the reins of power. True, their old boys’ network could be seen as a globe-spanning cartel. And yes, many of these men could truly use some humility, integrity, and self-awareness. I also agree that gender too often seems more important than talent or merit. But the era of men telling us, “We know what is good for you, woman”, needs to be ended by ourselves. Therefore, I can only urge each and every woman to speak up. Wear your heart on your sleeve. Openly aspire to leadership roles. Go where no woman has gone before. Have no fear. And I can only underline the importance of taking pride in those women and girls stepping up to claim their rightful place in society.

The fact is that men and women have different capacities, means that both bring different qualities and solutions to the table. They can and must complement each other. It is therefore high time to overcome dusty notions of leadership. It is time for both the public and private sector to restructure to attract, retain, and empower competent women. I tell you in all certainty that this can be done. We can advance this cause with resolve, determination, and solidarity.

Irvin Hicks, Jr.

U.S. CONSUL GENERAL IN ERBIL

Irvin Hicks, Jr. on women’s empowerment in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.



The U.S. Consulate General in Erbil would like to recognize the Office of the Presidency of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and his excellency President Nechirvan Barzani for preparing this book about the history of women’s empowerment since the establishment of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. The book highlights the key contributions that women have made to society and culture within the region and how these influential women have changed the course of Kurdish history. Women like Mir Khanzad, the legendary 17th century warrior queen; Hapsa Khan, a pioneer who called for the education of women and girls; and the modern example of Hero Ibrahim Ahmed (Talabani), a leader in the struggle against the regime of Saddam Hussein who contributed greatly to the creation of the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan Region and served as the First Lady of Iraq from 2005 to 2014.

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In many ways, the gains made in women’s empowerment within the Iraqi Kurdistan Region since its establishment serve as an example in the region. Yet there is still so much room for progress.

As President Joe Biden remarked on International Women’s Day on March 8, 2022, “Every person deserves the chance to live up to their full God-given potential, without regard for gender or other factors. Ensuring that every woman and girl has that chance isn’t just the right thing to do — it’s also a strategic imperative that advances the prosperity, stability, and security of our nation and the world... Improving the status of women and girls strengthens economies, democracies, and societies across the board.” In many ways, the gains made in women’s empowerment within the Iraqi Kurdistan Region since its establishment serve as an example in the region. Yet there is still so much room for progress. As President Biden said, “...too often, in too many places, women and girls face obstacles that limit their possibilities and undermine their participation in economic,

political, and social life. These barriers have been exposed and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected women’s labor force participation, elevated the burden on both paid and unpaid caregivers, and increased the incidence of gender-based violence.”

By remembering the accomplishments of the women pioneers who came before, we can gain strength and steel our resolve to address the difficult issues that remain, such as gender-based violence. As the history of the United States of America has shown, a country cannot prosper when significant portions of the population cannot achieve their God-given potential. But our history has also shown that when this potential is unleashed, all of society will prosper. The Kurdish proverb, “Har Mallek Yak grtu bet hamisha sar kawtu dabet,” which means “A house united shall always prosper,” should remind us that we are better off as a society if we are united in values that allow all members of society to reach their full potential.

David Hunt

BRITISH CONSUL GENERAL IN ERBIL

David Hunt talks about women’s empowerment and gender equality in the KRI.

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I engage with female entrepreneurs, business leaders, and leading figures in civil society and politics. Many of the activists championing change and progress in the KRI are women.

What has been your experience in terms of women’s representation in the public and private sectors in the KRI?

Promoting gender equality, and women and girls’ empowerment more specifically is a priority of the UK Government. This prioritisation will remain under the new Prime Minister and new Foreign Secretary. A core part of my role is to meet leaders from across the economic and social spectrum and it’s a privilege to get to know and work with a number of women leaders and decision makers as British Consul General. I engage with female entrepreneurs, business leaders, and leading figures in civil society and politics. Many of the activists championing change and progress in the KRI are women. We celebrated their success on International Women’s Day and will continue to champion their work and leadership. I am surrounded by brilliant female colleagues in the Consulate, who work tirelessly to make sure we have impact and influence here.

How do you assess the overall situation of women in the KRI?

Women play a crucial role in the KRI, the fact that women make up 30% of the current government is testament to the progress that has been made in recent years. It also demonstrates the potential for the KRI to lead the way in the wider region.

It is important to recognise the progress made in recent years; but there is still a lot of work to be done in the KRI to increase women’s rights, visibility and empowerment. We believe that for any society to prosper, investment in women is needed across all sectors. The British Consulate General Erbil supports the creation of a more equal society in Iraq, by embedding gender into policies, programmes and working culture. Men play an important role in efforts to promote gender equality and tackle harmful gender stereotypes, which can negatively affect both men and women. A more gender equal society benefits everyone, not just women but their families and communities too.



Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and honor killings remain an issue in the KRI. The issue is multi-faceted and must be addressed at government, community and individual levels. We are supporting the KRG to implement the Human Rights Action Plan through our regular human rights dialogue in which we share UK expertise on various topics such as women, peace, and security, women’s economic empowerment, GBV, disability rights and girls’ education.

What are some key women empowerment initiatives your mission has undertaken so far in the KRI?

I’m proud that we are investing in the female leaders of the future in the KRI. We’ve recently sent two female Peshmerga officers to the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst in the UK. This year, all of our students going to the UK to study for a master’s degrees as part of our Chevening scholarship scheme are female, ten in total. We actively promote International Women’s Day and the sixteen days of activism against gender-based violence; we launched a project called ‘Women’s Voices First’ – which supports a range of women-led groups to help address gender issues in Iraq in partnership with Cordaid. We have had capacity building training for KRI judges on the domestic violence law and its implementation, and funded different national NGOs to champion GBV awareness. Recently we contributed to a program for supporting the mental health of female Yazidi survivors.

Sven Mossler

GERMAN DEPUTY CONSUL GENERAL IN ERBIL

Sven Mossler talks about women’s empowerment and gender equality in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Germany’s foreign policy is a feminist foreign policy. Ensuring equal rights, equal participation, and resources for women, girls, and marginalised groups while supporting diversity is a key element of Germany’s foreign policy. The German Federal Foreign Office is currently in the process of elaborating guidelines for this feminist foreign policy, detailing our principles, instruments and actions. Throughout this process, Germany is looking to include perspectives, ideas, and best practices from all of our partners. In this respect, the brave fight of Kurdish women against ISIL is one of the hallmark examples of strong female action in conflicts.

With several laws and institutional bodies, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has made concrete efforts to strengthen women’s roles as political and economic actors. The 30% quota in the Kurdistan Regional Parliament and a number of women holding important positions in government and in parliament are important steps on the ladder to gender equality.

Yet, many challenges remain:

- Politics and society at large thrive when women can participate equally. Yet, one obstacle is that women often experience harassment, which is an evident obstacle discouraging women from participating in politics and society.

- Science demonstrates that women play a strong role in peace, reconstruction and reconciliation processes, especially in the wake of conflict and displacement. Yet, the implementation of the UN Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security in KRI is hindered by budget restraints.
- Female participation in the workforce is among the lowest in the world. Their roles in the private sector remain limited as most companies lack policies and procedures that provide a safe and secure working environment.
- Despite the existence of laws against gender-based violence (GBV), cases of GBV and femicides increased significantly in recent months, making GBV against women one of the most pressing challenges to women’s empowerment and gender equality in Iraq. In the first half of 2022, at least 24 women and girls were killed and many more suffered from sexual assault and GBV. Prevalent social norms and the lack of access to legal counsel often prevent women from reporting violence, despite existing legislation.

The German government supports women’s empowerment initiatives in the KRI. In the framework of the program, Strengthening the participation of Women in the Rehabilitation and Peace Process in



Iraq, a significant number of initiatives have been implemented:

- Through protection and GBV trainings, government employees are equipped with the necessary tools to work with victims of GBV.
- Through our support to the SEED Girls initiative, girls in the KRI are empowered as they navigate gender and social barriers, risks, and the challenges they face during adolescence. So far, 380 girls have participated in the initiatives that provide courses on girls’ rights, health, GBV, safety (on- and offline), and leadership skills. The initiative also involves parents in order to foster change on a larger scale.
- Digital solutions can also lead to economic empowerment and tackle GBV. In a hackathon, the Women’s Empowerment App was developed to report GBV, post job offers, and present a social media platform for girls and women to share their experiences. The app is ready for use and is in the process of being submitted to the Kurdistan Regional Government for a launch.

We encourage joint efforts from the government, parliament, civil society, activists, women’s rights organizations, and international partners to foster positive change for women and girls in the KRI.



Dr. Stavros Kyrimis

GREEK CONSUL GENERAL IN ERBIL

Dr. Stavros Kyrimis talks about women’s empowerment and gender equality in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



How would you characterize women’s representation in the public and private sectors in the KRI?

In my 1.5 years of service in Erbil, I have been privileged to have met many people in various settings, politically, economically, and socially. The Kurdish people have a history and culture that dates back several centuries. But it is evident that the traditional roles of women in the Kurdish society are not compatible with the “modern” KRI of today, of which the diaspora is an integral part and therefore not compatible with high political, economic, and social opportunities for women.

Fortunately, the legal framework does exist in the KRI to help minimize barriers to women reaching higher positions but my observations of the current bureaucracy suggest that the reality is somewhat difficult. Keeping this in mind, there is evidence within the KRI that there is some progress being made towards empowering women. Positive changes have

happened in recent years, such as the law that the parliament must consist of at least 30% female representatives. These changes are small steps in the right direction for the empowerment of women in the KRI.

What are some key women’s empowerment initiatives your mission has undertaken in the KRI?

Women’s empowerment is an important issue internationally for the future of mankind. Initiatives and ideas for the empowerment of women are promoted by all EU member states and the international community, under the leadership of the UN. Moreover, women in power are part of the wider issue that many Erbil-based colleagues and I take care about, especially within vulnerable communities. Education, training, and academic bridges are priorities for me and within this framework I always take special care that women’s representation is as strong as possible. For example, I recently collaborated with the Aristotle University Faculty of Journalism and

Media for eight female civil servants to attend its media summer school in Thessaloniki, to become familiar with journalism, media, and matters related to freedom of speech. Yezidi women is another domain that I devote a lot of time to, and I am confident that fruitful dialogue on this issue will produce progress in the coming months.

How do you assess the overall situation of women in the KRI?

Tourism, agriculture, and arts are domains in which I work very hard to create a strong relationship between the KRI and Greece. I believe that through more active involvement of women in these three areas, their advancement will open more opportunities for more women. I am confident that if the KRI implements a multi-dimensional tourism strategy and establishes a constructive dialogue with the Kurdish diaspora, which will be an important driving force for women’s empowerment in the KRI.

The KRI as an administrative entity that is only a few decades old. If we compare it with the wider Middle East, it is true that the situation for women in the KRI is relatively good. But if we compare it with international standards, a lot of work still needs to be done.

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There is evidence within the KRI that there is some progress being made towards empowering women.

Maaïke Keizer

FORMER DUTCH DEPUTY CONSUL GENERAL IN ERBIL

Maaïke Keizer talks about women’s empowerment and gender equality in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



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I’ve met many successful, strong women in the KRI. However, there is still a long way to go in the sense that women could play a bigger role in more fields.

What has been your experience of women’s representation in the public and private sectors in the KRI?

In the past three years working in the KRI, I have met many amazing women in various fields, governmental organizations, NGOs, and business. Unfortunately, the balance between men and women is definitely not equal in terms of representation. In most of my meetings with governmental organizations I was one of the only women participating. I believe Kurdish women have all the ability to succeed in their careers but should be better supported, accepted, and encouraged, and women need to be courageous in pursuing their aspirations. This could be achieved through women joining the workforce to enhance their intellectual capital, as well as more material motivations.

What are some key women empowerment initiatives your mission has undertaken so far in the KRI?

As the Netherlands Consulate General in Erbil, we support Kurdish women through several programs. We have female leadership and entrepreneurship programs, such as the Orange Corners program, as well as funding programs for combating gender-based violence.

How do you assess the overall situation of women in the KRI?

I’ve met many successful, strong women in the KRI. However, there is still a long way to go in the sense that women could play a bigger role in more fields. There is a noticeable absence of women in high-ranking positions.

Kurdish society, particularly tribal communities, should provide equal treatment to men and women. In fact, families should encourage women and girls to follow their dreams. It is important that women experience equality at home. Women and girls should experience equal treatment, be able to make their own choices, and have the same freedoms as men. Women’s rights are developed only when society allows women follow their own paths on their own terms. I am optimistic that change will come, and that more positive prospects await women in the KRI, at the domestic, community, and political levels.

# Michele Camerota

## ITALIAN CONSUL GENERAL IN ERBIL

Michele Camerota talks about women’s empowerment and gender equality in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



**What has been your experience in terms of women’s representation in the KRI?**

I believe that the contribution of women to all aspects of society is crucial to achieving sustainable development in the KRI and elsewhere, and that the debate on women’s empowerment should be centered on rights. Improving the legal framework to embed universal standards, whilst promoting a continuous debate within society about customs and traditions that prevent women from achieving their full potential is key to the Region’s efforts to reach a prosperous and peaceful future. I had the opportunity to meet many skilled women representing a range of fields who are making an outstanding contribution to the advancement of the KRI. Their commitment to the development agenda and their understanding of the strategic role that women can play in support of such a vision is indeed remarkable, especially considering the many hurdles that face women as they strive to maintain their authority.

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**I had the opportunity to meet many skilled women representing a range of fields who are making an outstanding contribution to the advancement of the KRI.**

**What are some key women’s empowerment initiatives your mission has undertaken so far in the KRI?**

Gender equality and women’s empowerment are high on Italy’s agenda and its development cooperation strategy. Coherently and with the help of international and local partners, we are supporting relevant institutions in the KRI to foster the thorough implementation of the law on domestic violence, contributing also to the Action Plan for the UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women’s Peace and Security. Italy has confirmed a substantial grant to UN Women and to two Italian NGOs (CESVI and INTERSOS) in support of institutional capacity and of the government shelters protecting victims of violence. Moreover, an event on the role of women in peacebuilding in the Middle East, funded by the Italian MFA, will soon take place in Erbil. We are also planning to renew our full commitment, adapting to changing contexts, sharing best practices, and exploring innovative solutions based on different experiences.

**How do you assess the overall situation of women in the KRI?**

We acknowledge that in recent years the government has undertaken significant steps in advancing laws in accordance with internationally recognized standards on the protection of women from gender-based violence and prevention of discrimination. Moreover, some of the gaps in the current legislation are being identified and I hope they will be addressed in the future. Nonetheless, we cannot deny there are still cultural and social barriers that will take a long time to dismantle. To this end, education is a decisive tool. I am impressed with the investment that the Region has made in higher education in previous decades, thus equipping the new generation to face the social, political, and economic challenges of the future. I met many students during my first year in the KRI and their ambition and hope for the future is palpable. Girls and young women are no exception; rather, they are an asset. They are eager to be part of the change and to reap its benefits. They want to have a say on their present and their future. How this will play out it is difficult to predict but we must bear in mind that there is no substantial development without real participation of women in all sectors of the society. I particularly like the quote, “if you can run a family, you can run a country”.

# Yves Duval

## FORMER HEAD, CANADIAN EMBASSY OFFICE IN ERBIL

Yves Duval talks about women’s empowerment and gender equality in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).



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**Nowadays, many women are found in decision making positions in the KRI.**

**What has been your experience of women’s representation in political and economic decision making in the KRI?**

Traditionally, women have played an important role in Kurdish society, even taking part in the defense of the Kurdish people. Nowadays, many women are found in decision making positions in the KRI. For instance, several women have been elected as members of the KRI Parliament. Moreover, having a woman as Speaker is a distinctive feature of the current KRI Parliament. Women are also represented in the KRG cabinet, in some governorates and municipalities. In September 2021, I had the opportunity to attend an event featuring young women entrepreneurs and I was impressed by their energy and creativity. Kurdish women are also particularly active in civil society, which represents an important factor of change in the society.

Unfortunately, women remain underrepresented in the political and economic fields in most part of the world. That is why more efforts

need to be done. In this regard, I salute the hard work and leadership of the High Council for Women’s Affairs in developing and promoting the implementation of an action plan to empower women across the KRG.

Through my meetings with university students, I have noticed that women are not only well represented, but also very engaged and eager to impact changes in their community. That makes me feel optimistic about the future of women in the KRI.

**What are some key women’s empowerment initiatives your mission has undertaken in the KRI?**

Canada adopted a Feminist International Assistance Policy, which translates in several initiatives to empower women in Iraq, including the KRI. Since 2016, Canada has spent over 60 million Canadian dollars in Iraq for projects focusing on inclusive governance, gender equality, the inclusion of women in decision-making processes, and the economic empowerment of women and girls. An initiative entitled Future Forward

aims at strengthening women’s leadership and their ability to secure their economic rights. This initiative increases women’s participation in decision making by providing support for female legislators within their constituencies, reducing inequalities between women and men in access to and control over resources, and allowing women to contest issues related to inheritance and land titles, and other resources such as credit.

Canada also funds an initiative to encourage greater use of integrated sexual and reproductive health services by women and girls. It also promotes awareness of the need to prevent and respond to gender-based violence and other harmful practices through advocacy campaigns inside and outside government.

Another initiative, in collaboration of ministries and organizations, provides information to women on their rights in the workplace and gives them the resources to ensure that they are respected and encouraged to stay in the workforce. It also includes the establishment of a monitoring and liaison body to prevent gender discrimination and harassment in the workplace. Canada has also supported the establishment of women advisory boards to transform the way local councils interact with women, and to improve local councils’ responsiveness to key issues identified by women.



11

# THE VOICES OF WOMEN

A TRUE MERITOCRACY, WITHOUT GENDER BIAS, IS KEY TO THE SUCCESS OF ANY COUNTRY.

KURDISH WOMEN ARE SLOWLY BUT SURELY MAKING THEIR VOICES HEARD IN MANY MALE-DOMINATED FIELDS. THEIR SUCCESS SHOWS THAT THEY CAN CONTRIBUTE TO DRIVING FORWARD GENDER EQUALITY IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ, AS WELL FURTHERING ITS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.

SOME SUCCESSFUL KURDISH WOMEN HAVE SHARED THEIR EXPERIENCES AND PASSIONS WITH US.



Gaziza Omer Ali  
Playwright

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It is true that women’s rights have profoundly improved since 1991 in all aspects of life in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The most notable changes have happened in women’s and girls’ ability to further demand their rights and express themselves. In recent years, new opportunities for girls and women have opened up. Art is one of them. Hopefully art is going to continue getting more inclusive for women.

Kurdish women have been recognized as resilient. We need to use a louder voice for our rights and gender equality, and we have a duty to speak up for our rights. A louder voice for women is much needed.

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Dr. Vian Jaf  
Advisor, Council of Ministers

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Women have long played an important role in the health sector in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. There is almost an equal number of male and female students enrolling in medical colleges, with female students occasionally outnumbering males, particularly in dentistry, pharmacy, and nursery. But, although there are many female health department heads, unit heads, and maternity hospital directors, women still face challenges reaching decision-making positions in the health sector.

I have been General Director of Planning at the Ministry of Health for 15 years, and I believe the biggest challenge for women in higher positions is the patriarchal culture. Men do not like taking instructions from their female managers.

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Oshin Mahsin  
Weightlifter

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Our late father encouraged me and my sisters to start weightlifting when we were very young. People were critical when we first started, questioning how girls could lift weights. But we were determined and didn’t care what anyone thought. In 2021, three of us won a total of 12 medals at an international competition held in Erbil.

People think that men are more athletic. But I believe women can be as good at any sport as their male counterparts. I’d like to inspire more girls to start weightlifting, as well as show everyone how strong women are.

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Dr. Dilman Azad Khoshnaw

Forensic Scientist

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Forensic science plays a crucial role in any law-enforcement community, even though we work in a behind-the-scenes capacity. Currently, I’m also a lecturer in a medical college. I encourage my female students to pursue forensic science and I help them to understand the importance of what we are doing.

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Sara Kamal

Artist

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I have been into art and drawing since I was five years old. I participated various art exhibitions when I was studying. After graduating from college, I took a different direction to be able to express myself through digital art. My art focuses on the challenges and struggles that women and girls are going through. To support the cause of women’s right and attain the place we deserve in all walks of life, we need more social awareness and a stronger voice. Art is an amazing opportunity for learning. I still have a long way to go.

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Sanna Jamal Younis

Athlete, Akad Sport Club

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What encourages me to continue playing is the team spirit. I am also a physical education teacher at SABIS School, where I train a young ladies’ team. Women in sports are transcending more boundaries than ever before. Women are constantly improving in my sport and breaking gender norms. My aim is to become professional and to play for a foreign team.

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Zerrin Jaff

Contemporary Digital Artist

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Art has a tremendous power to make people comfortable or uncomfortable, happy or sad. My viewers sometimes seem dazed by my artwork because my art does not always project beauty or comfort, and often highlights darkness and difficulties we all face. I want them to see, think, and feel the reality and complexities of the point in history that we inhabit. Hence, I feel that I have a responsibility to use my art to raise awareness of important social issues and the challenges our society faces. This is the ultimate aim of my work.

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Ranw Shaho Jaff  
Helicopter Pilot

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I always dreamed of being a pilot. After obtaining a BA in business information management, I was accepted to study at Slemani Aviation Training Center. After successfully completing my training, I became Kurdistan’s first female helicopter pilot, and the first female aircraft maintenance engineer with an AME license. I hope to see more women working in all parts of Kurdistan’s aviation sector to break another glass ceiling for Kurdish women.

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Buzha Akhir Jamall  
Member, Erbil Provincial Council

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Women make up 30% of the Provincial Councils in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq according to Law of No. 3 of 2009. Progress without women is not possible. It is important to hear women’s points of view on socio-economic issues. At the Provincial Council we identify challenges and priority areas, and strive to help women influence government decisions and improve their rights.

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**A KURDISTAN FOR ALL**  
**THE RISE OF WOMEN**