

The Fertile Crescent Unveiled: Analyzing the State of Gender Politics in Iraqi Kurdistan

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This paper explores the current state of women's rights and gender politics in Iraqi Kurdistan and gauge its success in the backdrop of the projected goal of democracy. In doing so, it shows that the successes on the women's rights front in Iraqi Kurdistan vis-à-vis Baghdad are due to an underlying cultural divide between the Kurdish and Iraqi Arab identity, and that the Kurdish Regional Government's penchant for modernization and democratization has espoused an unprecedented commitment to the integration of gender issues in social and public policy. Setbacks in the enactment of pro-women's legislation and civil reforms are the result of amenable institutional inefficiencies and anti-government opposition rather than traditionalist political dogma. The paper is divided into five main sections: an overview of the history of women's rights in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan beginning in the 20th century, an analysis of the legislative and civil movements on women's rights within Kurdistan since 1991, the current issues for women's rights and politics, an evaluation of the current setbacks for reformists and a proposal of solutions consistent with the profile of a democratic polity.

A HISTORY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN CENTRAL IRAQ AND IRAQI KURDISTAN

The history of women in Iraqi Kurdistan is distinct from that of women central and southern Iraq and is defined in general by greater involvement and liberties. The distinction lies in differing ethnic and historical narratives and thus different social frameworks and value systems. However, providing a backdrop of women's rights in the whole of Iraq is an obligatory undertaking when attempting to analyze the development of the status of Kurdish women. Moreover, while Kurdistan as a region has been traditionally separated from central and southern Iraq, political and social developments in Baghdad nonetheless engendered crucial transformations in Kurdistan and altogether serve as a basis of societal comparison.

Iraq as a country is not unaccustomed to the movement for women's equality. As early as the country's founding in 1920, Iraqi women enjoyed far more freedom than women living in many countries in the area. Throughout the 1930s,

Iraqi women were critical in the effort for gaining independence from Britain, collecting donations, providing food for soldiers and petitioning for the release of Iraqi soldiers. Thus, as early as the mid-20th century, at least a preliminary infrastructure for women's participation in society had already come into existence, and at this time a number of independent women's groups were established. Established in 1952, the League for the Defense of Women's Rights, a subsidiary of the Iraqi Communist Party, became particularly influential.ⁱ

These women's groups staged massive protests for their civil rights, specifically against abuses at the hands of the British, and by 1959 they claimed to have a membership of 25,000 Iraqi nationals.ⁱⁱ

Additionally, the introduction of the Personal Status Law of 1959—which removed judiciary power regarding issues of divorce, inheritance and child custody from the 'ulama and placed them within the realm of civil administration—was greatly influenced by women in the General Federation of Iraqi Women and the Iraqi Women's League.ⁱⁱⁱ This law marked a great step forward for reformists from the Islamic conservative hegemony of the 'ulama in Iraq that had previously dominated civil affairs from religious courts.

When the Ba'ath Party seized power in 1968, certain gains for the women's front were overturned, but new liberties were also granted. Moreover, while a girl's inheritance was limited to half that of a boy's, women were admitted into universities, government and public sectors to an unprecedented extent, and the prosperous years of the 1970s and the 1980s saw efforts toward eradicating illiteracy among women in order allow them to support the war-time labor force.^{iv} At one point in Saddam's 24-year reign, the percentage of women in the civil service even reached 40 percent.^v This attempt to eradicate illiteracy by making education compulsory significantly abridged the education gap between men and women in Iraq, and in 1980, one year after Saddam Hussein's ascension to the presidency, women were also given the right to vote and hold office.

Following the establishment of a *de facto* Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq in October 1991, the history of Iraqi women diverges from that of Kurdish women. There were, however, a few prior developments specific to the Kurdistan Region that contributed to the state of women's affairs. Women in Iraqi Kurdistan have experienced a certain amount of freedom as early as 1910, and this liberty led to the publication of women's journals such as *Kadinlar Dunyast*, or "Women's World," through 1921.^{vi} At a time when Kurds were experiencing great difficulties under the Ottoman Empire, the first Kurdish women's organization, known as the Society for the Advancement of Kurdish Women, was established in Istanbul in 1919 with the objective of advocating Kurdish rights and pushing forward the interests of women.^{vii} Separate from the reforms in Baghdad, the Women's

Union of Kurdistan was established in the Kurdish province of Sulaimaniyah in 1997 with a mandate to educate women about their rights through media campaigns and to provide leadership training for women.^{viii} The group has been active in organizing panel discussions, holding seminars on violence against women and collecting signatures against problems such as honor killings.^{ix} In a memorandum to the Masoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the group demanded the eradication of tribal family relations, a social system unique to the Kurds in Iraq that treats women as property, and the prohibition of violence against women by bringing murderers to trial.^x Historically, Kurdish women also played an active role in the Kurdish struggle for independence, fighting in the guerilla *peshmerga* forces or supporting male fighters as nurses. When hostilities ceased, women benefited from political and social benefits granted to them for service, and their tacit subservience under previous regimes gave rise to a new sense of entitlement.

Thus, the Kurdistan region dealt with women's issues separately from those of central Iraq as early as the beginning of the 20th century, and these divides in social programs were largely the result of deep-rooted cultural and ethnic divides between Kurds and Arabs. Stark ethnic divides have resulted in feelings of separation and superiority on the women's rights front, and Lucy Brown and David Romano report in *Women in Post-Saddam Iraq: One Step Forward or Two Steps Back?* that many Arab women refuse to listen to their Kurdish counterparts, viewing them as inferior and revisiting the notion that they are far more experienced in the organization women's movements.^{xi} It should be noted however that the divide in practice is not due to relative levels of "modernity" or "progressiveness," and any conclusions drawn from an analysis on this basis would be counter-productive. Moreover, while the tribal social system and gender-integrated guerilla history of the Kurdistan Region might suggest the potential for more social freedoms and political involvement for women, there exist certain gender-oppressive traditions in Kurdistan that have been the target of much international outcry that do not exist among the urban Arab populations of central Iraq. The stress should instead be placed on the existence of fundamentally separate Kurdish and Arab linguistic, political and social systems, and the fact that that these differences have espoused a different set of societal attitudes and interests with respect to the issue. The following discussion will investigate these paradoxical disparities in a legislative framework.

ANALYSIS OF LEGISLATIVE AND CIVIL WOMEN'S RIGHTS EFFORTS

Since the inauguration of an autonomous Kurdistan Region under the authority of the KRG in 1991 and the subsequent drafting of a distinct Kurdistan

Constitution, women in Kurdistan have enjoyed more liberties and legal protection than their counterparts in Baghdad. That is, the KRG has been more generous in granting these progressive rights and security measures in accord with expanding institutional democratization.

In the summer of 1992, a group of Kurdish women presented a petition signed by 30,000 women calling for the KRG to implement reforms on the Personal Status Law and the Iraqi Penal Code; however, the government was effectively paralyzed at the time due to the fratricidal civil war.^{xii} Following the relative reestablishment of security, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) was the first to begin the reform process specifically in relation to honor killings, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) followed suit by enacting several reforms including Law No. 14 of 2002 which reads: “Crimes against women with the pretext of ‘honorable motivation’ will not be legally liable for lenient punishment and Articles 128, 130, and 131 of the Iraqi Penal Code will not be implemented.”^{xiii} Following the U.S. invasion in 2003, there has been a marked increase in the volume and scope of laws pertaining to women enacted by the parliament, which culminated in the ratification of a particularly liberal and inclusive draft constitution in 2009.

According to Dr. Mishkat Al Moumin, an Iraqi Lawyer and founder and CEO of the Women and the Environment Organization (WATEO) that operates in Iraq, the Iraqi Constitution drafted in 2005, while guaranteeing basic human rights to Iraqi women for the first time, has three potential pitfalls that threaten to render it obsolete.^{xiv} She defines these shortcomings as vagueness, discrimination and promotion of sectarianism. Vagueness constitutes the wording of the Constitution, including phrases such as “We the people of Iraq...are determined...to... pay attention to women and their rights.”^{xv} The phrase “pay attention to” does not obligate the government to advance and guarantee women’s rights. Contrarily, Article 19 of the Kurdistan draft constitution of 2009 definitively states that “men and women shall be equal before the law.” The Constitution includes other provisions relating to specific women’s issues, including Article 27, which guarantees the establishment of special homes to protect women who have lost their “family security” for social reasons. The second issue, discrimination, touches upon the issue of Islam as the official religion of the state and the “basic source of legislation” in Article 2, which is problematic not only because there is much dispute by Islamic scholars over the interpretation of doctrine, but likewise because the population of the country consists of Christians, Jews, Mandaeans, as well as Yezidis.^{xvi} This issue is avoided in the Kurdistan Constitution, which counterweights the role of Shari’a by the principles of democracy and the freedoms stipulated in the Constitution and likewise acknowledges the ethnic identities of Kurds, Turkmens, Arabs, Chaldo-Assyrian-Syriacs, Armenians and “others” in Article 5. The last obstacle of promoting sectarianism has plagued Iraqi politics since the drafting of the new

constitution, and it prescribes personal and familial status based on religion and sect.^{xvii} This is not the case in the Kurdistan Constitution, which views all ethnic and religious groups equally. It is thus evident that constitutionally, the Iraqi Constitution and Kurdistan Constitution present different attitudes with regard to the issue of women and minorities, and several pitfalls in the Iraqi Constitution have been amended in the Kurdish version.

The Kurdistan Region's Constitution has likewise been more liberal in granting political and social amenities to women. Moreover, while the Iraqi Constitution designates 25 percent of parliamentary seats to women, the Kurdistan Region's constitution calls for a quota of 30 percent. As of January 2011, there were 111 male MPs and 41 women MPs, translating to 36 percent representation by women, which is even more than that guaranteed by the Constitution. Additionally, three women have been appointed to the KRG cabinet out of forty-two ministers. Until recently, the KRG had a Human Rights Minister to monitor human rights, as well as a Women's Affairs Minister. In a move to reduce the number of ministries, these two ministers were removed with the formation of the sixth cabinet in summer 2009. The KRG established the Directorate for Combating Violence against Women within the Ministry of the Interior in 2008. The Ministry of Social Affairs currently runs three shelters for victims of domestic abuse or women threatened with honor crimes.

The Kurdistan National Assembly ratified Law No. 15 and so reformed Article 188 of the Iraqi Personal Status Code in 2008. Moreover, the law was altered in order to legally restrict polygamy.^{xviii} A husband may take a second wife only if the first wife agrees, is ill or is infertile. The KRG has likewise been active in promoting awareness related to women's issues in the regions and has designated November 25 as "the day of ending violence against women," and February 6 as "Female Genital Mutilation Awareness Day." This legislation is not only indicative of a government that is willing to confront women's issues directly, but also one that is attempting to reform the problem from its social and psychological groundwork.

There is evidence to believe that these social reforms have indeed been successful thus far, however marginally, in tailoring social attitudes in favor of women. For example, in 2000, before the invasion, it was socially unacceptable for a woman to drive on the motorway.^{xix} However, according to the manager of traffic headquarters in Duhok, Ali Salhaddin, over 26,000 women obtained driver's licenses in 2006 and 2007, and Nawzad Hadi, the governor of Erbil, asserts that as of 2011 34,000 women drive motor vehicles in Erbil.^{xx}

Women's rights activists, lawyers, government officials and media representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government gathered on 25 November 2010 for the international day to combat violence against women and for the launch

of research findings to combat honor-based violence in the region.^{xxi} The final 150-page action plan “marks an important step” according to the UK Minister to the Middle East Alistair Burt, “and the recommendations offer a roadmap to combating honor-based killing in Iraqi Kurdistan.”^{xxii} Moreover, despite the 2008 amendment of a law that had justified honor killing to a new one that regards it as “murder,” the lack of law enforcement in Kurdistan remains a serious problem as murderers of women have often remained unpunished due to the dominance of tribal solutions in many rural areas.^{xxiii} All of those present admitted that honor killing and female genital mutilation were two negative parts of Iraqi Kurdish culture that needed to be uprooted. To conclude the meeting, the KRG announced two projects aimed at improving these problems, including a 16-day campaign to raise awareness of women’s rights and KRG- funded academic research on honor killings in Kurdistan to be carried out by two British universities.^{xxiv} Thus, it seems that the KRG is actively working to supplant lingering religious influences, such as the writings of Mollah Bayezidi, in forwarding the women’s rights agenda.

THE SALIENT ISSUES CONCERNING WOMEN

In fact, throughout the American-led invasion of Iraq, President George W. Bush consistently used women’s issues as part of his political agenda to legitimize the invasion.^{xxv} Despite the efforts by the KRG and NGOs to improve the political and social rights of women, there still exist a number of issues contributing to gender oppression in Iraqi Kurdistan. The current issues are broad in scope and cannot be categorized by a sweeping statement. On a political level, while groundbreaking advancements have been made on the legislative front as a result of the KRG’s commitment to addressing gender issues, political bodies in general suffer from underrepresentation by women as a result of Saddam-era politics and the lack of an infrastructure in place for women’s integration. Accordingly, women are often elected on the basis of familial prestige rather than verified or previously demonstrated political capability. On a societal and familial level, pro-women’s interests are being averted by traditionalist cultural attitudes, leading to underrepresentation in the work force, and the practices of female genital mutilation (FGM) and honor-based crime (HBC) are persisting realities among certain groups of women in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Perhaps the most apparent symptom of traditional gender oppression in Iraqi Kurdistan today is the shortage of women in the work force. This disparity stems from deep-rooted social precedents of gender roles within the Middle East. According to a report by the Iraqi Family Health Survey in 2006-07, 43.3 percent of women in Iraqi Kurdistan are illiterate, compared to 19.6 percent of men.^{xxvi} This

disparity in education leaves many women unprepared and incapable of seeking out careers that would contribute significantly to the family income, which would afford them more power in familial affairs and decision-making. In fact, many women in Iraqi Kurdistan are hardly given a chance to further their education and enhance their skills from a school-going age, for many women are married by their late teenage years and take on the roles of housewives and mothers. According to a World Health Organization report covering 2006-07, over 26 percent of women between the ages of 20-49 years were married before they reached 18, and ten percent of women and girls between 15 and 19 are married.^{xxvii}

Women are also visible and well represented in the work of NGOs. There are estimated to be 60 women's organizations run by women. Many are involved in campaigns to combat violence against women (VAW) and attend local and international public forums, conferences and seminars, both as speakers and delegates. Even so, it remains the case that women are alarmingly underrepresented in employment.

The international community has elevated its attention to the practice of FGM in Iraqi Kurdistan in recent years, and research on this issue has increased in both depth and volume. In a survey by the Ministry of Human Rights in 2009, over 40 percent of women and girls aged 11-24 years are victims of FGM. A study conducted by a German NGO known as WADI (Association for Crisis Assistance and Development Co-operation) found that over 60 percent of the women interviewed in a village south of Sulaimaniyah had undergone the procedure.^{xxviii} WADI pegged the percentage in some districts at 70 percent. The women insisted that the practice was mandated by Islam, even though liberal clerics in Sulaimaniyah denounce the practice and declared a fatwa on it in 2001. The practice involves the cutting out of the clitoris of girls aged three to twelve and is usually administered by midwives or female relatives using an unsterilized razor blade. According to Human Rights Watch, FGM is a continuing practice among certain contemporary Kurdish communities because it is linked to Kurdish cultural identity, female subordination and religious imperatives based on the traditional gender role projected onto women. Moreover, the notion that uncircumcised girls are less "pure" than their circumcised counterparts is derived from the social stigma that female sexuality is dangerous and shameful, a stereotype which is encouraged by religious rhetoric. Within the communities where FGM continues to be practiced, the authority of religion and tradition seems to outweigh the influence of NGOs and government-sponsored programs.

Thus, while there has been progress, there is still a long way for improvement. The under-representation of women in political institutions, as well as in other key institutions of society, undermines access to resources and decision-making.

ing processes with regard to these issues, contributing to continued discrimination and disadvantage.

OBSTACLES FACED BY WOMEN

The social and political obstacles facing women's progress within Kurdistan are endemic social circumstances, mutually unrelated and coexisting in the current societal framework. The first, lack of enthusiasm and interest in reform among women, is largely due to recent historical events that have propagated sentiments of pessimism. A branch of this lack of belief is due in turn to conservative attitudes among women about their rights and capacities. The second, administrative corruption and logistical shortcomings, is not exclusive to Kurdistan but has developed specifically with respect to Kurdish culture and politics. The third and perhaps most outspoken obstacle retarding reform efforts is public outcry instigated by traditionalists and political Islamists in the form of protests, loaded speeches delivered at Friday prayer services and dilatory political harassment.

The women of Kurdistan are perhaps psychologically deterred from progressive reform due to, as the Director of the Kurdistan Women's Union Dr. Vian Selman Haji asserts, a history of suffering and struggle. Saddam Hussein's regime, the Anfal campaigns and the wars of the last few decades have scarred the Kurdish conscience and have left a negative psychology and attitude with the people. Many women in Iraqi Kurdistan today have an immediate family member or acquaintance who disappeared during Saddam Hussein's regime, and the victims' remains are currently being exhumed from the mass graves in southern Iraq. The KRG has not provided an exact statistic for the number of Anfal widows, but current suggestions stand at approximately 50,000.^{xxix} A combination of the previous regime's propensity for committing genocide and the very real results of that process have been and continue to be realized among the sisters, mothers and widows of the victims. Dr. Haji argues that while this national sentiment of victimology is both legitimate and culturally engrained, it ultimately serves as a counter-productive force in the awareness of gender-oppressive phenomena and the spreading of new ideas throughout Kurdistan. Moreover, lack of enthusiasm and widespread civil movement by Kurdish women is largely due to looming grief and lack of closure with respect to several historical events that have jeopardized the integrity of women and their families.

The most significant psychological setback which continues to forestall the advancements efforts of Kurdish civil society resides in the popular mindset—that is, the patriarchal traditions and societal outlook—of much of the population.^{xxx} Moreover, there exist national feelings of inferiority and helplessness dating

back to the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the sanctions period and now the American occupation. Perhaps Iraqi men feel not only that by restricting freedom they provide protection for women as the “weaker” sex, but also that they provide a sense of security and moral order in a country that has seen little of either in the past few decades.^{xxxii} However, complete separation of the patriarchy through legislation has proven to be a difficult task for the government, and according to the Women’s Information and Cultural Centre, there are currently an estimated 18,000 girls who were promised in marriage when they were children.^{xxxiii} The studies also note that marriage is not an individual choice, but rather a collective affair.

The persistence of tribal structures in Kurdistan manifests itself in the *komelayati*, a structure run by elderly, religious, political and tribal representatives that assumes the responsibility for hearing disputes and passing judgment in order to achieve reconciliation, or *solh*, between families or groups. In the past, laws had been administered by the tribal elders, *rishpî* (“white beards”), and the tribal head’s words were taken for law.

Critique of women’s quietude can be directed towards extant social attitudes that discourage them from forwarding their social and political interests. Moreover, social attitudes regarding the traditional role of Kurdish women have discouraged women’s empowerment and involvement in employment and politics, especially in rural areas. Alongside these engrained social attitudes lies the social stigma of seeking help. Moreover, it is not a part of Kurdish culture to approach people with whom you are unfamiliar to profess inner psychological turmoil and discuss family affairs. This stigma is related to the integrity of family in Kurdish culture, especially with regard to preserving honor and high standing in the face of society. Thus women often do not take initiative to seek help for themselves, despite the outreach efforts of NGOs and support from the government. In this manner women in Kurdistan are in a sense double victims, firstly of a patriarchal, male-dominant culture and secondly of a social stigma against seeking help from NGOs and public institutions. This obstacle cannot be surmounted without the reform of these traditional stigmas and attitudes.

Institutional Deficiencies, Bureaucracy and Corruption

The second major obstacle opposing women’s progress stems from institutional deficiencies. But, due to the firm commitment of the KRG to a pro-women’s rights agenda and the relative political stability in Kurdistan, this issue is mostly limited to the Kirkuk region. A combination of logistical shortcomings, lack of security and administrative corruption plagues the progress of civil society-based NGOs working for gender issues within Kirkuk. Firstly, issues of oil revenues, fed-

eralism and the status of disputed territories often take precedence over the calls for gender-based social reform from civil society. Women's rights NGOs thus suffer from a lack of political and financial attention, which composes an integral shortcoming of the movement.

But beyond the lack of public spotlight, Dr. Asma Amin, the Coordinator of the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), notes several institutional shortcomings that hinder the influence of foreign-sponsored NGOs. While most NGO operations in Iraq are contracted and funded by international organizations, the individual NGO sites are managed and monitored by Iraqi citizens, most of whom have assumed the position as a supplement to their careers. The effective leadership of many NGOs is resultantly afflicted by inexperience and a fundamental lack of commitment and investment in the project. That is, in the case that local NGO coordinators do have a grasp of the problem and a vision for results, their work can be further trumped by unfamiliarity with the implementation process.

Dr. Amin asserts that the lack of programs for capacity building—that is, instructing coordinators on how to write and deal with projects—exacerbates the situation. Poor leadership has given rise to several other areas of institutional inefficiency—notably, a high degree of corruption, including dealing with friends, nepotism and the use of budgeted for money for non-contracted, entertainment purposes. Contrary to international standards, NGOs often fail to provide a complete update and evaluation of the implementation process, which ultimately leads to a discrepancy between the established goals of the international contractor and the end results as propagated by the on-site NGOs. Sometimes these NGOs use the lack of security in certain regions as an excuse for corrupt implementation, and this phenomenon serves as a major setback for NGOs involved in disseminating information on women's rights because the message fails to reach its target audience.

In Kirkuk, a hotly-contested oil-rich city which remains severely under-budgeted by the central government due to continuing forestallment of an updated census, partisan politics continues to present the most serious obstacle to the growth and development of NGOs there. Dr. Amin asserts that the main problem in Kirkuk is the lack of an established, formal system of political organization between all of the constituent groups in the city. Party loyalties to the KDP and PUK as well as membership to the four local ethnic groups in the absence of an established municipal system detracts from the city's ability to address the salient issues of corruption and efficiency. It likewise discourages new, energetic NGOs and youth groups from assuming active roles in the movement. For example, there is a tendency for Kurdish-run NGOs to work for the benefit of the Kurdish community of Kirkuk upon being granted funding, rather than working for the whole of the city. Another issue is the fact that there are too many NGOs operating in Kirkuk, so

there is often widespread inefficiency in project implementation.

These partisan setbacks to project implementation are in turn the result of contending policies of the two overseeing organizations, the UN and USAID, the US Agency for International Development. Contrary to the policy of USAID, a project proposal will not be approved by the UN if it only benefits one group within Kirkuk. Because the criteria for UN approval are so stringent, the unification of interests of the various constituents of the city is encouraged. Conversely, because USAID does not have these guidelines, the interests of individual groups are being forwarded vis-à-vis the others, which contributes to partisan tensions and long-term inefficiencies. The current system of contracting proposals in the Kirkuk region is thus in dire need of consolidation in order for NGOs to maintain a visible effect over the area. In light of these shortcomings, the KRG has provided stipends and services to active NGOs in Kirkuk because political stability in the KRG-controlled regions has given rise to better monitoring and media coverage of the salient issues.

Conservative Islam and the Elite

The third and perhaps most socially apparent mechanism of opposition to the forwarding of gender issues is the rising influence of political Islamists. Recent advancements in women's issues by the KRG have created a point of dissent around which the predominantly Islamic and traditionalist opposition has gathered.

Some of the more conservative and politically-active members of the Sunni 'ulama in the region have recently grown in favor of oppressing the progressive policies of the KRG. In Sulaimaniyah, a disagreement between the allied Gorran party and the PUK led to a power vacuum in the region which was filled by conservative mullahs and Islamic political parties. Moreover, these groups have capitalized on political confusion in the region and are continuing to secure support by presenting more fundamental and "traditional" political agendas. There are also latent suspicions among politicians that there exists a connection between religious revival in Sulaimaniyah and the influence of proxies of the region's closest neighbor, Iran. While Governor Nawzad Hadi of Erbil asserts that this phenomenon of increasing religiosity is not the case in KDP-controlled Erbil, he points to conservative religious authorities for stirring up recent unrest regarding the wording of a referendum in support of gender equality. Moreover, mullahs have condemned the use of the word "gender" in legislation, claiming that the word refers to the legalization of gay marriage, and these religious figures have consistently used Friday prayer as a platform for voicing their grievances and galvanizing the population in their favor.

Despite the support of liberals, including liberal ‘ulama, another confounding force in the advancement of women’s rights in Kurdistan may be the adamantly misogynistic elite in the region. For example, the Shi’ite Turkmen Director of the Iraqi Institute for Human Rights in Kirkuk expressed deep concern regarding the new “Western policies” imposed on women and their fundamental disagreement with traditional Islamic doctrine:

“Also they are imposing the example of women’s rights to impose Western ideas on us. How can an Iraqi man be a prisoner of the women! Islam has guaranteed many rights for women. They are planting the seeds of conflict between men and women.”^{xxxiii}

Thus, there seems to exist a pervasively conservative attitude amongst a majority of the intelligentsia in northern Iraq, and according to a recent poll about the equal rights of all Iraqis (e.g., to work, vote, and attend university), 54.3 percent of respondents conceded that the constitution grants too many rights and liberties in this regard.^{xxxiv} While radical Wahhabi groups such as Ansar al-Islam suffered major defeats by spring 2003, moderate Islamist groups are still gaining popularity in Iraqi Kurdistan.^{xxxv} The Islamic Union of Kurdistan (IUK), for example, has publicly professed a great friendship with the extremely conservative Islamic group of Ali Bapir and defended their position that men have more responsibilities in Qur’anic law and thus women must receive a fraction of the inheritance allotted to men.^{xxxvi} It has also been reported that groups like these have offered money to families of women who subject their daughters to female genital mutilation. These “moderate” Islamic groups also often act as a stepping stone for young men on their membership to more hard-line groups and are thus a retarding force in the face of women’s progression in society.

In spite of the radical transformation of Kurdish society from largely rural social formations to a predominantly urban and transnational community, the practice of honor killing connects the old with the new and the homeland with the diaspora.^{xxxvii} Moreover, in Kurdistan, the culture of honor killing has outlived the demise of feudal-tribal relations. Today’s examples of honor killings clearly follow the pattern established by tradition in past centuries, first exposed by the learned Kurdish mullah, Mehmud Bayezidi.^{xxxviii} He wrote that Kurds were strongly against killing and did not kill people who were taken prisoner during conflicts like war or robbery, but he continues to proclaim that the killing of women is an entirely separate faculty from the killing of men:

“But of course they do kill men who commit bad deeds. They even kill their own wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters. And to [punish] such bad deeds, women also kill; for instance, mothers strangle their daughters in the night or poison and kill them, and mothers-in-law do it to their daughters-in-law, and sisters to sisters. No chief and no village elder asks why you have killed this [woman].”^{xxxix}

Here, Bayezidi uses the words “bad deeds” to refer to premarital or extramarital sexual intercourse or eloping by women. He argues that a woman is the carrier or embodiment of the honor of her husband, and through him, that of the family and the whole community. He wrote about honor killing as a component of “Kurdish customs and manners,” and argued that there is inherently no tolerance for the loss of honor.^{xi}

ANALYSIS OF POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Modernization is now introducing economic, social and cultural changes, both negative and positive, to Iraqi Kurdistan, and initiatives to change harmful cultural practices are part of this effort, to which research is currently being committed. Several such research initiatives have been financed and supported by the KRG and have proved to be fruitful in providing understanding on the nature and basis of social problems. These research reports are crucial not only for providing the KRG with data and analysis of extant issues within its domain, but likewise for broadening the knowledge base of the international community on the depth and pertinence of such issues.

While the situation for women in Iraqi Kurdistan is improving with the support of the KRG and both international and domestic NGOs, the desired long-term social changes will come after decades of implementation and adaption. Legislation and quotas are, however, expedited solutions and provide a downstream approach to solving the underlying societal issues. More governmental attention should be directed towards preventive solutions, which include education and capacity-building initiatives, in order to bring about social change from the components of society itself.

The most fundamental sector of social change is with the youth, and the education system provides a crucial mechanism whereby new social attitudes can be diffused to this population. Schools are important channels for distributing information and educating young people about gender issues. Public education campaigns would be expected to extend to the general public and to include factual information about the issues. In the instance of honor killings, these programs should include information about what honor killings are, common motives for these crimes, illustrations of how to identify girls and women who may be at risk and discussions of the concept of culture and the role it plays in honor-based violence.^{xli} Dr. Vian Haji, Director of the Kurdistan Women’s Union, asserts that the old system of education broadcasts tribal and traditional attitudes to children, as evidenced by picture books with images of mothers and daughters playing submissive roles at the benefit of the fathers and sons. She also notes the prevalence of

weapon references within elementary school books and stressed that the first step to reforming oppressive social attitudes is the eradication of gender segregation and violence portrayed to children.^{xlii} Education is one project that Dr. Haji's organization is undertaking, and they were successful in campaigning for the minimum level of compulsory education to change from sixth grade to ninth grade. This is a two-pronged solution in that increased education better engrains progressive attitudes towards women among male students and simultaneously provides rural women with more education on average, thus expanding their capacities as contributors to society. Dr. Haji's group is likewise working on educating clerics on the origins and consequences of female genital mutilation by sending them delegations of doctors, lawyers and psychologists equipped with necessary information.

Alongside the education of youth and clerics, efforts must be dedicated to capacity building among Kurdish women of all ages as to broaden their capabilities and exercising of power in society. Moreover, President Masoud Barzani concedes that there exist a number of social problems within Iraqi Kurdistan and that the key to solving these issues is educating people on how to exercise their democratic freedoms.^{xliii} Civil society must understand how to interpret and make use of the democratic and progressive legislation brought about by the KRG in order to reap the benefits of such a system.

Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, the KRG's High Representative to the United Kingdom and Chairman of the Kurdistan Development Corporation, believes that a portion of these capacity-building efforts needs to be directed towards integrating women into politics. Undoubtedly, increased representation of women in politics will lead to a more accurate representation of their interests within Kurdistan. However, confidence is a major issue with women's progress in this respect. Providing for and nurturing prospective female politicians with leadership-building opportunities via social programs such as public speaking initiatives can build the skills necessary for active political participation. Had this policy been forwarded earlier within the government of Kurdistan, women may have had the means available to reach political position on their own, rendering the parliamentary and political parties' quotas obsolete. However, the current state of affairs with respect to this issue involves the existence of quotas, but implementing these capacity-building initiatives can still encourage women to reach their political goals and eliminate the need for quotas in the long-run.

The obstacles for NGOs in forwarding the women's rights agenda are institutional inefficiencies, some of which are the result of security and political problems in Iraq, and others of which stem from small-scale sectarian rivalries and incompetence in administration. The latter is more readily rectifiable and should not prevent the forwarding of the women's agenda. To begin addressing these weak-

nesses, the Ministry of Women's Affairs must coordinate the efforts of all women's NGOs to develop a unified set of demands and must seek the support of U.N. agencies as opposed to USAID, for reasons discussed above.

In the long term, efforts must be made to limit and control the influence of *shari'a* in determining socially acceptable legislation. In order for legislation on women's rights to remain the product of political deliberation rather than a method of perpetuating engrained religious and social values, there needs to be a greater separation between religion and the state. The efforts of the KRG with respect to women's rights are laudable by international standards and should not be undermined by anti-government movements and religious naysayers.

In conclusion, the current women's rights situation in Iraqi Kurdistan is a result of the uniqueness of the Kurdish people and their history, the government's liberal outlook on issues that would normally fall under the jurisdiction of Islam and thus the region's penchant for modernization. While some of the modernizing programs are undoubtedly linked with the desire to appear favorably on the world stage, especially with the Western countries, the people of Kurdistan are experiencing of a wave of liberalism as a result of the American presence in Iraq. Moreover, this has created a political infrastructure in Iraqi Kurdistan wherein more attention is given to salient issues regarding women's rights, and they are thus more capable of reform via legislature. The government has outwardly expressed its interest in modernizing the standards and status of the women of Kurdistan, which has included an increase in women's education and political participation. There are, however, still several fronts that the women's rights movement can continue to make improvements, especially with regards to traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and honor killings that are supported by local religious figures but viewed as repressive by the modern standard for human rights. The prospects for the future are auspicious given the unwavering support of the KRG and NGOs. Iraqi Kurdistan has the potential to serve as a bastion of women's rights within the region and perhaps set an example for the rest of Iraq.

ⁱ Lucy Brown and David Romano. "Women in Post-Saddam Iraq: One Step Forward or Two Steps Back?" *Feminist Formations*. Indiana University Press: Fall 2006. vol. 18, #3, p. 52.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 52.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 52.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p. 54.

^v Annia Ciezadlo. "Iraqi Women Raise Voices – For Quotas." *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 Dec, 2003, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1217/p01s02-woiq.html>.

^{vi} Maamoon Alsayid Mohammed. *Combating Physical Violence Against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan: The Contribution of Local Women's Organization*. Center for Peace Studies. University of Tromsø Press: 2009, p. 24.

^{vii} *Ibid*, p. 25.

- viii Shahrzad Mojab. "Kurdish Women in the Zone of Genocide and Gendercide". *Al-Radia*. Fall 2003. vol. 103, p. 24.
- ix *Ibid*, p. 24.
- x *Ibid*, p. 25.
- xi Brown, p. 59.
- xii Sarah Hossein and Lynn Welchman. *Honor Crimes, Paradigms, and Violence against Women*. Zed Books, 2005, p. 215.
- xiii Hossein, p. 216.
- xiv Mishkat Al Moumin. "Constitutional and Legal Rights of Iraq Women." The Middle East Institute: Policy Brief. October 2007, #1, p. 1.
- xv "Text of the Iraqi Draft Constitution", as cited in Al Moumin, 2.
- xvi *Ibid*, 3.
- xvii *Ibid*, 4.
- xviii *Ibid*, 4.
- xix Mohammed, p. 26.
- xx *Ibid*, p. 26.
- xxi "Kurdistan Takes Measures Against Gender-Based Violence." Rudaw. 27 November 2010. <<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurds/3318.html>>.
- xxii *Ibid*.
- xxiii *Ibid*.
- xxiv *Ibid*.
- xxv Mojab, p. 24.
- xxvi Brown, p. 56.
- xxvii *Ibid*, p. 57.
- xxviii *Ibid*, p. 47.
- xxix Nazand Begikhani, Aisha Gill, Hague Gill and Kawther Ibraheem. *Final Report: Honor-based Violence (HBV) and Honor-based Killings in Iraqi Kurdistan and in the Kurdish Diaspora in the UK*. Begikhani, Gill & Hague, 2010.
- xxx Brown, p. 53.
- xxxi *Ibid*, p. 53.
- xxxii *Ibid*, p. 53.
- xxxiii *Ibid*, p. 58.
- xxxiv *Ibid*, p. 58.
- xxxv *Ibid*, p. 58.
- xxxvi *Ibid*, p. 58.
- xxxvii Shahrzad Mojab. "No Safe Haven: Violence Against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan". *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*. University of California Press: 2004, p. 112.
- xxxviii Mojab, p. 113.
- xxxix Mela Mehmud Bayezid, as cited in *Ibid*, p. 112.
- xl Mojab, p. 113.
- xli Begikhani et al, p. 136.
- xlii Vian Selman Haji. In discussion with the author. January 2011.
- xliii Masoud Barzani. In discussion with the author. January 2011.