

## KURDISTAN-IRAQ: MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT BRIEFING

### COUNTRY CONTEXT

- **The Kurdish community not only constitutes one of the largest stateless nations in the world, but also one of the largest diaspora communities.** Despite this, there is a lack of statistical data on the Kurdish population in Europe. What data there is, is unreliable due to the way countries register migrants according to their nationality, not their ethnic affiliations. For this reason, Kurds are registered as 'Turkish', 'Iranian', 'Iraqi' and 'Syrian' when they arrive in Europe, imposing upon them an unacceptable national identity.
- **Socio-political dynamics in Kurdistan-Iraq remain unresolved.** Kurdistan-Iraq has endured over 50 years of instability rooted in complex historical and socio-political dynamics, including issues of ethnic identity, control over natural resources and the Kurdish struggle for independence and self-governance. The semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan represented a significant step towards Kurdish self-governance. However, the path to stability has been hindered by internal divisions among Kurdish factions, disputes with the Iraqi central government over territory and oil revenues and external pressures from neighbouring countries concerned about Kurdish separatism. The rise and fall of the Islamic State added another layer of complexity, with Kurdish forces playing a key role in combating the group.
- **Many challenges remain in achieving gender equality and there is increasing backlash towards women's rights and LGBTQI advocates in Kurdistan-Iraq.** In contrast to many parts of Iraq and the surrounding region, there have been important legal reforms in relation to violence against women, family law, and political participation in Kurdistan-Iraq. However, progress has been uneven and faces cultural and institutional barriers and backlashes. Many challenges remain in establishing and sustaining meaningful gender equality, particularly in rural areas, and there has been a significant decline in international funding and attention towards gender equality in the region coupled with increased backlash and attempts to debilitate equality movements.

### OVERVIEW

This brief focuses on both return migration to Kurdistan-Iraq from within the Kurdish community and global migration specifically to the city of Erbil in Kurdistan-Iraq. Little is known about the gendered elements of return migration to conflict-affected contexts, and how this relates to development, gender equality, justice and inclusive peace. Equally, there is work to be done to advance a gender-sensitive understanding of the interaction between economic and socio-cultural drivers of international labour migrations in the Global South, that goes beyond a focus on displaced and refugee women.

This brief contributes to a better understanding of these gaps, as well as the possibilities, challenges and obstacles returnees face in the process of participating in the re-construction of Kurdistan-Iraq. The brief is also a contribution to a better understanding of the global circulation of gendered labour that is occurring, the drivers of this movement, women's rights and agency and how migrant women use and experience urban spaces in Kurdistan-Iraq.



## KEY FINDINGS

- **There are many drivers of migration for both skilled returnees and global migrants.** The experiences and conditions in home/ host countries including living conditions, racism, discrimination lack of opportunities and low income are drivers of migration as well as the desire to pursue career opportunities abroad and marriage. The political, economic and social changes in Kurdistan-Iraq are also important components, as well as individual factors, such as personal relationships, resources and the relevance of their skills to Kurdistan's development priorities and integration policies.
- **Skilled returnees contribute to the labour market and are often able to find skilled work on return.** Skilled returnee migrants, especially women, are comparatively younger, better educated and more able to commute between countries. Most returnees find a job that matches their level of education, for example in public administration, the health sector and social services, and the private sector.
- **Returnees contribute to peace, development and gender equality.** Together with their remittances, knowledge of the host country, and skills and training, returnees are successful in using their human, social and cultural capital to have a positive impact in Kurdistan-Iraq. Although female returnees face discrimination based on their gender, lifestyle, political views, ethnicity and age, they play a crucial role in the fight for gender equality and contribute to peace and development.
- **For global migrant service workers recruitment agencies are central to the migration process.** Recruitment agencies facilitate the global migration of service workers (domestic, care, hospitality and construction) both in countries of origin and destination. In these sectors, migrants pay agencies in their home countries. In Kurdistan-Iraq they are licensed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs with responsibilities for recruitment training, residence and health and safety.
- **There are different work regulations for migrant workers and a lack of overall protection compared to skilled returnees.** Many migrant service workers work under the kafala system\* with a guarantor, while skilled workers have contracts with their employers. Professionals and skilled returnees know their contract and how to raise issues; whereas some migrant service workers do not receive a contract or know how to challenge their working conditions, which oftentimes entails long working hours and hostile and racist attitudes from their employers. In addition to this there is a wage disparity across migrant communities according to nationality with Filipinas receiving the most and African women the least.

- **A number of migrant women find Kurdistan-Iraq to be a safe place; however sexual harassment remains as a major challenge.** A number of women interviewed would recommend Kurdistan-Iraq as a safe place where they experience better treatment than in their home countries. Most are satisfied with their salaries and are able to send back remittances to support families. However, many women migrants complain about sexual harassment in the workplace and on public transport, especially taxis, and other public spaces, limiting their mobility and safety across the city.

\* The kafala system operates as a sponsorship system for migrant workers to live and work in Kurdistan-Iraq. It is also used by most Arab Gulf countries and in Lebanon. Mediated through recruitment agencies, private citizens who employ domestic workers, or companies that employ people in the service sector such as construction, have control over the workers' rights. These rights often do not meet national and international legal standards, and the lack of regulations and protections for migrant workers means they are often exploited.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Regional Government of Kurdistan-Iraq

- **Establish viable and sustainable policies for returnees.** Many post-conflict countries have already established policies to attract their citizens or second generations to return and fill gaps in the labour market. The Kurdistan Regional Government should assess these policies and draw from them to develop sustainable and viable policies with the aim of encouraging highly skilled men and women to return to Kurdistan and contribute to economic development and peace.
- **Enforce legalisation of recruitment agencies engaging migrant workers through the kafala system.** The regional government should have oversight of agencies and employers, making the legislation for recruitment agencies a reality. In addition to this, work rights and social protection (work insurance and medical services) should be extended to migrant service workers under the government's Social Protection Policy, and updates and improvements should be made to the 2015 regulations introduced under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.
- **Engage with the Kurdish diaspora to benefit from the diasporas' ideas, skills and resources.** Engaging with the Kurdish diaspora could support Kurdistan's economic diversification and help build transnational networks, strengthen ties between sending and receiving countries, and directly contribute to development efforts. This can be done through the establishment of a Diaspora Affairs Department to engage with, and benefit from, the human, cultural, social and economic capital of the largest communities of Kurdish diaspora in Western countries. It could identify evidence of labour shortages, build networks of potential returnees and assess their potential contribution to sustainable development.



- **Focus on the rights and contributions of women returnees.**

The regional government should work with non-governmental partners to establish and implement policies to develop positive policies for women and to benefit from the skills of women returnees. These should drive forward diversity and gender equality and remove barriers that prevent returnees, particularly women, from playing an important role in decision-making processes at local and national levels.

**International Actors**

- **Implement gender-inclusive policies and gender sensitive training.** International actors should work with regional and local actors to develop and implement displacement policies that account for gender-specific needs and challenges, with a focus on empowerment and skill acquisition for displaced women and girls who have migrated to Kurdistan-Iraq. In addition to these policies, international actors in collaboration with the regional government should support and facilitate training programmes at the national and local levels to ensure a deep understanding of gender issues in displacement contexts.

**FURTHER READING:**

- M Irwani, J Aghapouri & E Rofman, “[Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration: Kurdistan-Iraq](#)”, (UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub, 2024)
- N Bezwan & J.Y Keles, ‘[Displacement, Diaspora and Statelessness: Framing the Kurdish Case](#)’, in T Mayer & T Tran (eds.), Displacement, Belonging and Migrant Agency in the Face of Power (Routledge: 2022)

