

# The Impact of Gender Violence on the US-Kurdish Alliance

by [Ruwayda Mustafah \(/experts/ruwayda-mustafah\)](#)

May 27, 2021

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/athr-alnf-aljnsany-ly-alhalf-byn-alwlayat-almthdt-walakrad\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ruwayda Mustafah \(/experts/ruwayda-mustafah\)](#)

Ruwayda Mustafah is a prominent British-Kurdish activist and the founder of the Kurdish Policy Board, a grassroots movement aiming to increase British-Kurdish political representation in the United Kingdom. Mustafah is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

## Violence against women and other social issues in the KRI require multifaceted, international solutions, and the United States stands to benefit from supporting these solutions.

The semiautonomous Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) may only be a small player in the wider context of Middle Eastern politics, but its importance to Western states and coalition forces is disproportionately significant. Bordered by Iran, Syria, and Turkey, the KRI exists in a region that is generally hostile to Western interests, and it is undoubtedly the most politically pro-Western area in its corner of the Middle East. For the United States, this pro-Western stance makes the Iraqi Kurds an ally worth protecting, and a strong KRI is beneficial for U.S. policy in the region generally.

Furthermore, although the KRI may only have weak international ties at this time—even as it is pushing for greater international engagement—it has leveraged its semiautonomous status to solidify its position as a hub for investment, prosperity, and shared values with Western allies. With proper support and protection, the KRI could therefore become the kind of partner the United States has always wanted in the Arab Middle East.

Nonetheless, as with any state, the degree to which the KRI can serve as a dependable ally largely depends on its own political and social stability. At present, the KRI's serious internal socio-political problems threaten to undermine its position as a genuine partner to coalition forces. It is therefore within the United States' best interests to support programs that protect women, children, and journalists in the KRI.

### Threats to Women, Children, and Journalists in the KRI

The socio-political issues in the KRI are deep-rooted and numerous. Both their causes and their potential solutions remain poorly understood among experts and activists. What is clear, however, is that the some of the most serious and quickly growing issues plaguing Kurdish society are violence against women, child marriage, and the persecution of journalists.

Violence against women is a widespread phenomenon in the KRI. Although the [2005 Iraqi Constitution](#) ([https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq\\_2005.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en)) prohibits all forms of violence and abuse within family and society, armed conflict, terrorism, extremism, and tribal customs have meant that gender-based violence continues unabated. In 2019, [120 women were killed](#) ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/975221/Iraq - Honour Crimes - CPIN - v2.0 - March 2021 - EXT.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975221/Iraq_-_Honour_Crimes_-_CPIN_-_v2.0_-_March_2021_-_EXT.pdf)) in the KRI as a result of gender-based violence. In late 2020, [three men were arrested](#) (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/23112020>) on suspicion of hanging their sisters in so-called 'honor killings'. In the last several weeks alone, one domestic abuse victim has committed suicide, another has been shot dead by her husband, and another killed by her father.

While these incidents may shock audiences in the West, they are relatively common across the KRI, and women have been especially vulnerable over the past year. A United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) November 2020 [report](#) (<https://iraq.unfpa.org/en/publications/covid-19-unfpa-best-practices-and-lessons-learned-humanitarian-operations-arab-region-3>) found that women across Iraq, including the KRI, were at a heightened risk of domestic and gender-based violence as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A support line for victims of gender-based violence in the KRI has also reported that they are [receiving more calls](#) (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/210420211>) in 2021 than in previous years.

Reports, however, only portray a fraction of the actual scale of violence against women in the KRI. Many women are too fearful of losing their reputation or inciting further violence from their partner to ever report acts of violence against them.

Moreover, lawmakers' failure to truly understand the origins and causes of this violence have compounded the issue of growing domestic and gender-based violence. Even in the face of murder, the government has no clear strategy in place to tackle endemic violence against women.

One reason Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) lawmakers are unable to grasp the causes and extent of gender-based violence is that the KRI lacks any kind of robust mechanisms for collecting data on violence against women. The only reliable figures available pertain specifically to the cyber bullying of women. Unsurprisingly, these figures show this specific form of gender-based aggression is [increasing at an alarming rate](#) (<https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/en/content/covid-19-gender-and-cyber-violence-kurdistan-region>). More substantial research and information is required to address this issue.

Another deeply concerning social issue in the KRI is the prevalence of child marriages. Though technically illegal, child marriages continue to occur in large numbers throughout the KRI. As with gender-based violence, the research in this area is scarce, but [the data that is available](#) (<https://iraq.unfpa.org/en/publications/estimating-cost-child-marriage-arab-region-0>) shows that over 20 percent of girls in the KRI were married before they

turned 18 (child marriage also affects boys, but not nearly to the degree that it affects girls (<https://iraq.unfpa.org/en/publications/child-marriage-kurdistan-region-iraq>)). As such, Iraq has one of the **highest rates** (<https://iraq.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Child%2520Marriage%2520Broucher%2520English%2520Final%2520covers%25206.pdf>) of underage marriage in the world, and the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria has exacerbated the problem.

Poverty, economic insecurity, and social and cultural traditions all contribute to the practice of child marriage, and marrying young girls within low-income households might often be perceived as a means of protecting a family's 'honor'. This perception ignores the deep physical and psychological damage that child marriage almost invariably exhibits on young girls.

The ability to openly and freely report on the issues that plague Kurdish society—such as gender-based violence and child marriage—would help to shine a greater spotlight on these issues, improve awareness and education, and help hold lawmakers and those in power to account. Increasingly, however, amid a recent crackdown, journalists are having to risk their lives to uncover and report the truth.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) still claims the region has a free and independent press, but this notion has become little more than a fantasy. Journalists investigating gender-based violence and child marriage, along with those investigating protests, corruption, and the conduct of regional figures, can face harassment, abduction, arrest, physical assault, **torture** (<https://www.voanews.com/press-freedom/iraqi-kurdistan-court-convicts-journalists-spying%23--:text=IRBIL%252C%2520IRAQ%2520%252D%2520An%2520Iraqi%2520Kurdistan.and%2520physically%2520while%2520under%2520investigation>), and threats to their lives.

Together, systemic societal problems like gender-based violence, child marriage, corruption, and media intimidation only serve to undermine and weaken the fabric of Kurdish society. In turn, this social decay creates disharmony and instability at every level, damaging economic prosperity, political cohesion, and, ultimately, the KRI's ability to be a strong and consistent ally.

### **A Multifaceted Approach to Social and Political Problems**

Failure to address the scourge of gender-based violence and other social issues means the decay of Kurdish society will only accelerate. The numbers of gender-based violent acts, forced marriages, and arrests of journalists is increasing, and it is no exaggeration to suggest that failure to address these social issues, coupled with ongoing political frustration and corruption, could lead the KRI into a fractured political state, potentially even inducing widescale demonstrations.

The solutions to such deeply embedded issues are not simple; political, social, economic, and cultural factors all have a role to play in maintaining these problems. As such, these issues require a multi-faceted approach that involves international partners, NGOs, activists, government institutions, and wider Iraqi society.

Empowerment of women, their families, and their children must be the starting point. Financially empowering women through building marketable skills, for example, enables them to escape poverty. A degree of financial security allows women to be less reliant on abusive men, and it also means children are seen as less of an economic burden, which in turn reduces the need to marry them off at a young age.

Furthermore, while the primary beneficiaries of skills-training are the women themselves, such training is of considerable benefit to the KRG as well. Skills-training for women helps drive social and economic empowerment while building a more agile workforce.

In fact, these kinds of training programs have already seen success in other parts of the world. In The Gambia, for instance, **it has been proven** ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339171719\\_Adult\\_Literacy\\_and\\_Skill\\_Acquisition\\_Programmes\\_as\\_Correlates\\_of\\_Women\\_Empowerment\\_and\\_Self-Reliance\\_in\\_The\\_Gambia](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339171719_Adult_Literacy_and_Skill_Acquisition_Programmes_as_Correlates_of_Women_Empowerment_and_Self-Reliance_in_The_Gambia)) that those women who undertook adult literacy and skills acquisition programs became significantly more empowered and self-reliant. Most of the participants affirmed that they became self-reliant, employable, or self-employed after graduating from the course.

In addition to skills acquisition, the implementation of an Iraqi domestic violence law is equally important for those women suffering at the hands of abusive men. Such a law would raise awareness of domestic violence on a national scale, improving access to shelter houses and improving legal aid so that women can use the courts in their own defense.

Thus far, legislators have consistently thwarted efforts to pass a draft law against domestic violence in the Iraqi parliament, and there is very little shelter infrastructure for women who experience abuse in rural towns and villages. There also remain considerable shortcomings in legal aid provisions and processes.

Beyond simple laws, however, female empowerment programs and the improvement of infrastructure also require funding. Now more than ever, as Iraq continues to experience the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that innovative and multifaceted programs that drive behavior change get the international support and funding they need—including from allies of the KRI, such as the United States.

As the U.S. Department of State and USAID acknowledged in their 2009 **Strategic Plan** (<https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/d/rm/rls/dosstrat/2004/23504.htm>): "Our own security is best guaranteed when our friends and neighbors are secure, free, and prosperous, and when they respect human rights and the rule of law." The United States should therefore see the inherent benefit in supporting programs designed to empower and protect women in the KRI.

Such an effort would even fit President Biden's personal agenda—the president has made tackling gender-based violence a personal and political priority throughout his career. In 1994 he sponsored the **Violence Against Women Act**, (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/1is2many/about>) a landmark piece of legislation that saw rates of domestic violence in the United States cut in half. He has also made the protection of women **a key agenda** (<https://joebiden.com/vawa/>) in his new administration. As such, the administration would not have to stretch far to make the issue of gender-based violence a priority beyond the United States itself.

Across the KRI, empowering women and improving women's prospects is one of the keys to strengthening regional stability. Through his policies and his track record, President Biden has demonstrated his commitment to ending violence against women, and it is vital that he now ensures that allies such as the KRI are doing their part to enforce shared values and guarantee the safety of women. A healthy society in the KRI means a stronger ally for the United States, and the Biden administration should take note. ❖



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

♦  
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



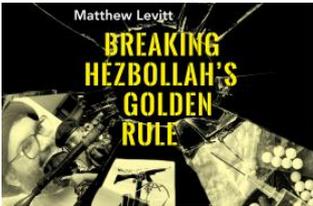
BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

♦  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

♦  
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)