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# NO.1 CWS POLICY INSIGHTS

SEPTEMBER 2024  
NO. 1



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## PROTECTING WOMEN'S AGENCY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Interventions and Reforms  
to Ensure Women's Rights

Dr Shilan Fuad Hussain

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**PROTECTING WOMEN'S AGENCY IN THE MIDDLE EAST**  
Interventions and Reforms to Ensure Women's  
Rights

Dr Shilan Fuad Hussain



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CWS Policy Insights

September 2024



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### **Funding**

This research was funded by UKRI, Grant Number: EP/X024857/1, carried out by Shilan Fuad Hussain at the Department of Law and Social Science, Middlesex University, United Kingdom.

### **How to cite this document**

Shilan Fuad Hussain. (2024). *Protecting Women's Agency in the Middle East: Interventions and Reforms to Ensure Women's Rights*. CWS Policy Insights No. 1. Odense: Center for War Studies.

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## **Abstract**

Gender-based violence (GBV) against women and girls can take many forms globally, from the absence of personal agency to sexual violence and domestic abuse. To better understand how GBV affects women in the Middle East in particular, this policy brief addresses various instances of GBV against Kurdish and Arab women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). A particular focus is given to forced/arranged marriages, honour-based violence, and female genital mutilation, which form a 'patriarchal trifecta' of oppression: a phenomenon that the author has identified and researched extensively. The policy recommendations informed by this research are relevant to decision-makers in the KRI and other states, among them, Western and European Union countries that have the dealt with troubling cases of violence against women in immigrant communities and face similar challenges to women's rights. Such violations against women are of particular relevance for the Middle East, or other societies and communities where patriarchal values and norms produce a social milieu where the main justification for violence is the protection of a social construction of honour. In such strongly patriarchal societies, young women and girls merely shift from being the property of their father's household to being the property of their husband's family, without acquiring any economic voice, and with no independent agency as an individual. As a result, many women remain shut out from public life and are made to suffer these inflictions in silence.

This policy brief is informed by fieldwork conducted by the author in the KRI, including 55 qualitative interviews with policymakers, United Nations (UN) officials, attorneys, academics, activists, civil society members, plus women and male survivors and perpetrators of GBV. In addition, a quantitative survey was conducted among 200 respondents, both women and men, to gauge opinions on the multi-faceted phenomenon of GBV. The author engaged in a thematic study based on a mixed methods approach, which allowed performing in-depth research and filling a substantial gap in the literature on violence against women. The goal of this policy brief is to give the public institutions responsible for monitoring women's welfare a better picture of the challenges to equality that women still face and offer ways forward in terms of addressing these challenges.

## 1. Introduction

Women and girls experience numerous forms of gender-based violence (GBV) on a global scale. This policy brief examines specific cases of GBV against Kurdish and Arab women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) to shed light on the unique impact of GBV on Middle Eastern women. During my research, I observed, defined, and examined a trinity of oppression, which I have coined the ‘patriarchal trifecta’. This trio includes forced/arranged marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM), and so-called ‘honour killings’/honour-based violence (HBV): phenomena which I believe operate symbiotically and merit special attention from a public policy standpoint.<sup>1</sup>

The findings and recommendations of this policy brief are based on research conducted between 2022 and 2024. In 2023, I carried out fieldwork in the cities of Erbil, Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, Kelar, and Khanaqin, conducting interviews with 55 women and men that have been either survivors or perpetrators of GBV, policymakers, United Nations (UN) officials, attorneys, academics, activists, and civil society members. I also conducted a quantitative survey with 200 randomly selected women and men, as a control variable to ascertain their views on the different phenomena examined in this policy brief.

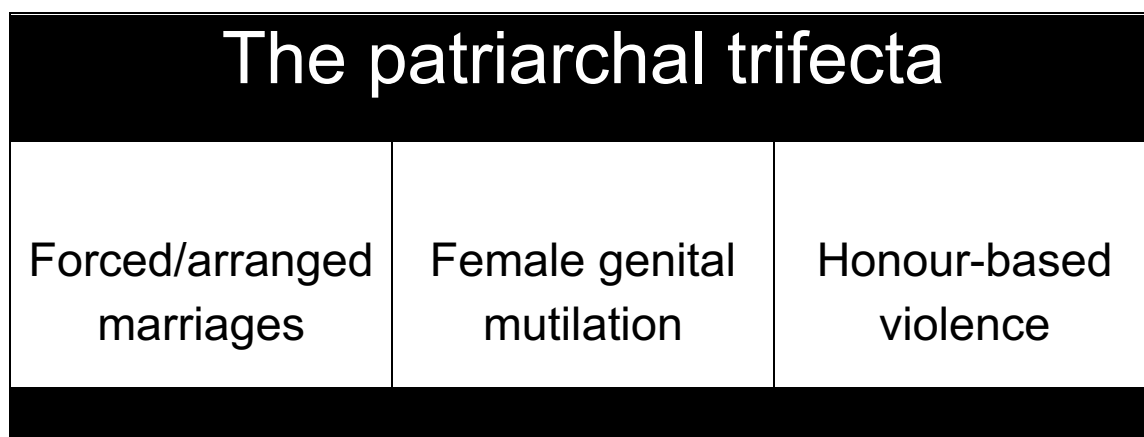
This policy brief takes on added significance beyond the KRI because the wider Middle East region faces comparable obstacles to women’s equality. As a result, the policy brief includes seven recommendations that address these human rights violations against women. This issue gains particular prescience in diasporic communities because of the growing tension between conservative, traditionalist understandings of Islam in the Middle

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about these phenomena, see: Joanne Payton, *Honor and the Political Economy of Marriage: Violence against Women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (Rutgers University Press, 2019); Nazand Begikhani, Aisha K. Gill, and Gill Hague, *Honour-Based Violence: Experiences and Counter-Strategies in Iraqi Kurdistan and the UK Kurdish Diaspora* (Routledge, 2015); Geoffrey L.J. Haig and Ergin Öpengin, “Gender in Kurdish: Structural and Socio-Cultural Dimensions,” in *Gender Across Languages* 4, ed. Marlis Hellinger and Heiko Motschenbacher (John Benjamins, 2015), 247–276, <https://doi.org/10.1075/impact.36.10hai>; Ruba Salih, “Transnational Public Spheres from ‘Above’ and from ‘Below’: Feminist Networks across the Middle East and Europe,” *Anthropology of the Middle East* 5, no. 1 (2010): 53–70, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ame.2010.050105>; Lucy Brown and David Romano, “Women in Post-Saddam Iraq: One Step Forward or Two Steps Back?” *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 3 (2006): 51–70, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/nwsa.2006.0046>; Kameel Ahmady, “The Politics of Culture-Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting in Iran,” *Swift Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity* 4, no. 1 (2018): 011–022; Hilary Burrage, *Female Mutilation: The Truth Behind the Horrifying Global Practice of Female Genital Mutilation* (New Holland Publishers, 2016); Hazel R. Barrett, Nafisa Bedri, and Nishan Krishnapalan, “The Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) - Migration Matrix: The Case of the Arab League Region,” *Health Care Women Int.* 42, no. 2 (2021): 186–212, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2020.1789642>.

East and liberal modernist ‘Western’ views of women’s rights enshrined in European legislation. Such an ideological environment in the KRI and diasporas in Western states means that many women survivors are ostracised from society and forced to endure these injustices in silence. In particular, this dynamic is exacerbated when minority communities have their patriarchal worldviews challenged by differing views on ‘appropriate’ gender roles in the societies they live in. Given these shared challenges, this policy brief includes seven general recommendations that contribute to addressing violations of women’s rights happening around the world.

This policy brief aims to offer governmental agencies that are responsible for tracking women’s well-being further insights on how to better guarantee women’s equality in society through putting forward cohesive strategies. Lastly, the recommendations of this policy brief align closely with global efforts towards implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and the SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, as I support the UN’s efforts to promote women’s empowerment.<sup>2</sup>



**Fig.1** The ‘patriarchal trifecta’ explored in this policy brief

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<sup>2</sup> The United Nations have put forward multiple documents on the elimination of violence against women. See, for example: Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) published by CEDAW – UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, *Shadow Report on Iraq submitted by Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) to the Committee of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women 74th Session; 21 October – 8 November 2019; Geneva, Switzerland (2019)*; United Nations Population Fund, UN Children’s Fund, and UN Women, “Protecting Girls in Iraq from Female Genital Mutilation,” February 6, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/protecting-girls-iraq-female-genital-mutilation-enarku>; The 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (UN Doc. A/Res/48/104); United Nations Statistics Division, “United Nations Global SDG Database,” data retrieved July 2022, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal>.



## 2. Why understanding these issues is important

Human rights that advance society must include gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women by guaranteeing them an environment with social support where they can thrive free of violence and abuse. Both women and men are confined by patriarchal structures which attempt to limit their horizons. The chain burdens both the wearer and the one forced to hold it as a leash. Therefore, as gender equality increases, every individual's life is enhanced.<sup>3</sup> Because gender equality is essential for an equitable society, the need to advance parity has increased in recent years. However, multiple estimates put the time needed to eliminate global gender differences at more than 300 years.<sup>4</sup>

While achieving numerical parity within legislative bodies or pay equity remain benchmarks for women's equality in some Western societies, places in the Middle East such as the KRI have yet to eradicate social phenomena which are far more insidious, including the three factors that I deem to comprise the 'patriarchal trifecta'. Based on these observations, I set out to understand the underlying reasons that forced or arranged marriages, FGM, and HBV persist, despite many other societal advancements for women. As there is very limited social data from the KRI, my research started with a data collection exercise to serve as the empirical basis for a successful public policy strategy.

My research found that the stability and resilience of family and societal institutions are especially susceptible in conflict-affected and fragile states such as the KRI. So, I set out to first understand the social self-diagnoses of everyday Kurdish and Arab women who have survived forced/arranged marriages, FGM, or HBV, and subsequently supplement their lived realities with the analysis of those actively engaged with the public policies which were supposed to have protected women in the first place.

In this policy brief, I first present the results of my fieldwork and research in each area of what I call 'the patriarchal trifecta' (forced/arranged marriages, FGM, and HBV) and

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office, and United Nations Development Programme, *Women and Natural Resources: Unlocking the Peacebuilding Potential* (November 2013), [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2013/11/UNEP\\_UN-Women\\_PBSO\\_UNDP\\_gender\\_NRM\\_peacebuilding\\_report%20pdf.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2013/11/UNEP_UN-Women_PBSO_UNDP_gender_NRM_peacebuilding_report%20pdf.pdf); Itzá Castañeda Camey, Laura Sabater, Cate Owren and A. Emmett Boyer, *Gender-Based Violence and Environment Linkages*, ed. Jamie Wen (IUCN, 2020), <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2020-002-En.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2022," <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/gender-snapshot/2022/GenderSnapshot-References.pdf>.

then include concrete recommendations for policymakers in the KRI and beyond to address these challenges.

### 3. Forced and arranged marriages

My data collection revealed that amongst young girls who married between the ages of 14-17 and 18-24, the forced marriage rate was 20%. The occurrences of child marriages and forced marriages are caused by various factors, including tribal and patriarchal norms, cultural standards, harmful gender customs and practices, the lack of formal education, power imbalances in the household, and harmful masculinity values related to how men are expected to behave.<sup>5</sup> My research showed that child and early marriages usually occur in rural areas governed by tribal and patriarchal norms, in violation of the state's laws which these communities do not recognize.

With regards to such child marriages in the KRI, the exact number of girls who are subject to the practice is unknown, but a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) survey showed that the percentage of women currently aged 20-24 who married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday was 20.53% in the Kurdistan region and 23.02% in wider Iraq, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Some of the factors that contribute to such arranged/forced marriages include outdated customs, familial poverty, or low levels of education, which in turn expose girls and women to exploitive arrangements due to a lack of economic opportunities and financial independence.<sup>7</sup> Men can also be adversely affected, as when they are married young, they can be expected to support a household without an established career or income.

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<sup>5</sup> Anisur Rahman Khan, Kopano Ratele, and Najwa Arendse, "Men, Suicide, and Covid-19: Critical Masculinity Analyses and Interventions," *Postdigit Sci Educ* 2 (2020): 651–656, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00152-1>; Alvina Erman, Sophie Anne De Vries Robbé, Stephan Fabian Thies, Kayenat Kabir, and Mirai Maruo, *Gender Dimensions of Disaster Risk and Resilience* (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, 2021), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/80f2e78e-f04f-5a59-86a6-9cfe6bcd7b87/content>.

<sup>6</sup> UNFPA Iraq, *Child Marriage in Kurdistan Region-Iraq* (2016), <https://iraq.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Child%20Marriage%20Broucher%20English%20Final%20covers%206.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> UN Secretary General, *Women's Full and Effective Participation and Decision-Making in Public Life, as Well as the Elimination of Violence, for Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of All Women and Girls: Report for the Secretary-General* (UN Women, 2019), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3898140?ln=en>; UN

With regards to arranged or forced marriages, one of the phenomena observed was the practice where a brother marries a girl and in return, he forcibly marries off his sister to his wife's brother. This bartering system is one of the causes of many divorces. However, because the two families are then supposedly bound together, the wives often will put up with abuse for a fear of harming the cohesion of both families.

Moreover, my research revealed that as a result of the economic situation and declining standards of living following the emergence of Islamic State in 2014, violence against women in the KRI has increased. Girls are frequently compelled to leave school, are wed at a young age due to lack of financial resources for themselves or their families, family pressure to marry, or are forced to work in environments where they are sexually exploited or subjected to sexual harassment.

In such cases, the 'arrangement' of placing a young girl into a marital state is often viewed by her parents and families as 'protecting' her from even worse potential dangers, despite protests from the girl or young woman on how well her new husband treats her. Even in cases of physical abuse, my interviewees recounted how their parents' perceived cruelty or abuse by the husband as 'normal' aspects of married life and far preferable to their daughter being 'unclaimed' and susceptible to worse mistreatments by many men instead of only one.

In these calculations, it is the structure of society itself that the families believed they were up against. They perceived an arranged marriage as a protective opportunity for potential social mobility for their daughter. This can be thought of as a sort of calculation that the patriarchy itself could be weaponized in their daughter's favour, allowing her to increase her standard of living and material prospects through 'collaboration' rather than 'resistance'. However, the absence of genuine love, friendship, and empathy in the marriage often becomes an obstacle, as it resembles more of an employment arrangement, where the man views the woman as his personal property or servant—and the wife becomes isolated and confined to the household.

An added complication was the unavailability of precise statistics on the prevalence of forced marriage in the KRI. This is because forced marriages in the region take place outside of formal legal proceedings, as both family and strangers would face harsh penalties

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Women, "Facts and figures: Economic empowerment," n.d., <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>; Nadeen ElAshmaway, Norhan Muhab, and Adam Osman, "Improving female labor force participation in MENA," The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), November 2, 2020, <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/blog/11-2-20/improving-female-labor-force-participation-mena>.

for coercing another person into marriage against their will. The formal judicial penalty is a minimum of two years and a maximum of five years in jail, with the maximum penalty being imposed for first-degree relatives. However, there is a minimum of three years and a maximum of ten years in prison if the offender is not related to the victim. These differences show that the KRI state recognizes the familial and cultural role of such practices, which can be hard to eradicate.

My findings also revealed a dramatic difference between rural and urban communities. In rural and tribal regions, there was a hyper male dominance of all aspects of life, where the men often held religious beliefs and a self-perceived piousness, which they perceived as more enlightened as it was 'divinely derived', as opposed to 'secular' man-made laws protecting women, which they viewed as outside influences corrupting their culture or values. In these situations, girls and young women's obedience was seen as the highest moral value, and defying a father's or even a mother's wishes on who to marry was viewed as sacrilegious and dishonourable. Ultimately, my research revealed that practices of force marriage came down to culture, with one social worker I interviewed stating that,

*Forced marriage in Kurdistan is deeply rooted in cultural norms and societal expectations. It is important to understand the underlying reasons behind this practice in order to develop effective strategies for prevention and intervention. Education and awareness programs can play a crucial role in challenging traditional beliefs and promoting gender equality. Additionally, providing support services for victims of forced marriage, such as counselling and legal assistance, is essential.*

## 4. Violence based on perceived dishonour

Honour-based violence is still widespread in the KRI, putting girls and women at risk for various reasons tied to patriarchal and tribal rules, in addition to social and cultural perceptions with respect to a woman's 'proper' role. Official statistics reveal that in 2022 there were at least 44 women killed for 'honour', and 30 in 2023.<sup>8</sup> In addition, a high number of women supposedly committed suicide (coerced suicide) under suspicious conditions by burning themselves, with many observers theorizing that these acts could be honour killings staged to resemble suicides. As one non-governmental organisation (NGO) representative in Sulaymaniyah described to me, *"it is very easy for a woman to be victim of honour killing by family members in the KRI or Iraq and [for them to] get away with it"*.

Having sexual relations before marriage, being a victim of rape, refusing to marry a man chosen by the family, trying to marry someone the family does not approve of, and many other reasons can lead to honour killings. Although murder is the most common kind of violence in these situations, other types of abuse, such as mutilation and facial disfigurement to render the women 'undesirable', are also included.

Of note, honour killing murders are specifically addressed in the Iraqi Penal Code. However, Iraq still operates under laws that provide for reduced punishments for honour-based crimes, essentially viewing such violence as a lesser degree of the offense, similar to how many states delineate between first and second-degree murder. To their credit, the KRI authorities discontinued the laws codifying these differences in 2000. Unfortunately, the result is that in wider Iraq, sentences for so-called 'honour crimes' can net a punishment as low as six months, whereas the typical sentence might be life imprisonment or even the death penalty for a non-honour related murder.<sup>9</sup> This creates an atmosphere which de facto condones such honour killings as 'natural' reactions to attacks on one's 'family dignity', whereby fathers, sons, brothers, and sometimes even women relatives assist in assassinating the offending girl or woman for supposedly bringing irreparable shame upon all of them. As one social worker said in an interview:

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<sup>8</sup> Amnesty International, "Iraq: Kurdistan Region's Authorities Failing Survivors of Domestic Violence," July 3, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/iraq-kurdistan-regions-authorities-failing-survivors-of-domestic-violence/>.

<sup>9</sup> Basma AlKhateeb, "Persistent Gender-Based Violence as an Obstacle to Development and Peace," *Social Watch Report* (2010), <https://www.socialwatch.org/node/12087>.

*Honour killing happen in the KRI due to traditional idioms and beliefs which are rooted in the religious and affected communities' norms. Women can be killed for demanding their rights to their husbands or any arbitrary reason, as many men are gun owners who will not hesitate to shoot their wives if they feel disrespected by them. The law must do more to protect women and not view these as private family matters, but issues of governmental public policy.*

Whereas forced or arranged marriages had a correlating class component, my research showed that HBV spread across all socioeconomic backgrounds equally. An added nuance was also the perceptions of women and how many of them have internalized patriarchal norms which directly endanger them, perceiving that they will only be applied to other 'more deserving' women and not themselves. For instance, a UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) survey found that 59% of women between the ages of 15-59 think it is acceptable for a husband to physically abuse his wife.<sup>10</sup> This aligns with my interviews, which showed that mothers and aunts often viewed honour killings as justified for certain 'grave' moral indignities, primarily related to what they deemed to be 'shameful' sexual promiscuity, which in their eyes tarnished the entire family.

## **5. Female genital mutilation**

My multi-site data collection in the KRI revealed that 20% of girls and women between the ages of 18-40 were subject to FGM. Between the ages of 50-65, the percentage was between 60-70%, with higher percentages being found in the rural periphery compared to cities. This data displayed a significant reduction in FGM numbers, following campaigns by UN agencies, NGOs, governmental institutions, and international/humanitarian organizations to raise awareness about this harmful practice and informing the society about its physical and mental health consequences.

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<sup>10</sup> UN Children's Fund, *Progress for Children: A World Fit for Children Statistical Review Number 6* (December 2007), [https://www.unicef.org/media/86506/file/Progress\\_for\\_Children\\_No\\_6\\_revised.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/86506/file/Progress_for_Children_No_6_revised.pdf); Basma AlKhateeb, "Persistent Gender-Based Violence as an Obstacle to Development and Peace".

In the KRI, the Family Violence Law passed in 2011 includes several provisions to eradicate FGM, however there is no law on the books in the rest of Iraq. Yet, despite such legislation in the KRI, there is a lack of resources to enforce the law prohibiting such procedures. My research reveals that the driving motivations for FGM were a combination of cultural customs, misinformation about supposed health and sanitary benefits, the idea that it was essentially the same as circumcising a male, and the perception that a non-mutilated woman would possess an insatiable sexual appetite, which only the mutilations could curtail.

Older men and women also tend to believe that not mutilating one's daughter would cause her to be less desirable to a potential future husband or cast their family in a bad light, as if possessing 'lower morals'. Amongst older women and men, many of these beliefs persist, showing that they were embedded within the previous social fabric. However, due to UN campaigns alongside the tireless work of NGOs and humanitarian organizations, the middle and younger generations are both becoming increasingly aware of the reality of how damaging FGM can be both physically and psychologically to women victims.

## **6. Addressing inequalities for women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and beyond: Policy recommendations**

The 'patriarchal trifecta' (forced/arranged marriages; honour-based violence, and female genital mutilation) explored in this policy brief is a complex problem which requires a series of holistic solutions. To curtail these three sets of abuses against women, the Kurdistan Regional Government must therefore establish a comprehensive regional strategy. Although there have been positive developments, in particular with regard to the decrease of FGM, the magnitude of the three phenomena in the KRI remains immense and their repercussions are catastrophic for women, families, and whole communities.

Based on my research, I recommend the following potential solutions to lessen the prevalence of these obstacles to women's equality in the KRI. First, there must be a systematic effort to deal with these issues culturally on an ideological level. Public awareness campaigns must be funded and resourced as legislative punishments are not enough to dismantle harmful traditions which have long become embedded into societal norms.

Moreover, because many Kurds and Arabs in the KRI incorrectly view some or all these three practices as intrinsic to their ethnic and national identity, they are more susceptible to cling to them. My analysis has shown that practicing these limitations against women becomes a consolation prize for men who feel disenfranchised and lack political agency because of Kurdistan's stateless nature. As a result, it must be made clear to men how they too would benefit from eradicating these practices. This should be done via public awareness campaigns and educational resources funded by the state. Encouraging respected male leaders from the community to speak out against these practices could also have a positive impact on wider society.

Second, several policy proposals exist on the institutional front. These include increasing the number of state-funded GBV response services—including health services, psychological care, housing assistance, and legal protections for women fleeing these attacks on their bodies and minds. There should be a policy working towards eliminating sexist rules and practices that prevent women from having equal access to the workplace and control over the resources they need to be active members of their families, communities, and the economy.<sup>11</sup> Such economic agency will give women increased options, so that an arranged marriage is not their only choice in life and that they do not face a potential honour killing for defying that arrangement.<sup>12</sup>

Specifically, I recommend focusing on the following seven objectives:

1. **Implementing structural interventions** to enhance the development, execution, and reinforcement of legislation to change detrimental gender norms and beliefs.
2. **Decreasing the acceptability of GBV** by encouraging the adoption of more gender-equitable norms at individual, household, community, and institutional levels.
3. **Collaborating with local women-led organisations, NGOs, humanitarian organizations, women's rights groups, and the community** to bring about significant change.

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<sup>11</sup> See Georgina Waylen, "A Seat at the Table—Is it Enough? Gender, Multiparty Negotiations, and Institutional Design in South Africa and Northern Ireland," *Politics & Gender* 10, no. 4 (2014): 495–523, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X14000397>; Jennifer Piscopo, *The Impact of Women's Leadership in Public Life and Political Decision-making* (Prepared for UN Women's Expert Group Meeting for the 65th Session of the Committee on the Status of Women, New York: UN Women, October 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks, "Revenge of the Patriarchs: Why Autocrats Fear Women," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2022), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-02-08/women-rights-revenge-patriarchs>.



4. **Emphasising the importance of health-related laws, regulations, and accountability measures** to reduce violence and promote gender equality in communities and institutions.
5. **Enhancing women's opportunities to acquire skills and training for economic participation**, secure formal employment, access labour and social rights, and receive necessary support to compete and work in a safe environment.
6. **Supporting inclusive growth by investing in firms that prioritise women's career development**, particularly in leadership and entrepreneurship to increase their economic independence.<sup>13</sup>
7. **Collaborating across sectors to provide comprehensive support for adolescent females and males** by addressing issues such as child and forced marriages, FGM, and HBV.

Structurally, the Kurdistan Regional Government can adopt many of these measures, for example by integrating them into the schooling system. Authorities could offer comprehensive education in schools to give accurate information about the dangers of forced marriage, honour killing and FGM, ensure equal access to public mandatory education until the age of 18,<sup>14</sup> and make food available at schools for children to cut down on economic desperation.<sup>15</sup> Solutions also include having female school administrators and faculty to help young girls with their unique challenges, and having female nurses available to answer personal questions that young girls may have about their bodies and threats from men.

Third, legislative solutions should be implemented. There is a need for a law making it illegal for clerics to register marriages outside of the formal court system and recognise such arrangements as legally binding. Legal solutions must create stricter punishments for HBV and FGM nationwide in Iraq and the KRI, with a specific unit to investigate such offenses. It

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<sup>13</sup> UN Women, "Facts and Figures: Leadership and Political Participation," last updated June 12, 2024, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>.

<sup>14</sup> For more information on the biggest barriers to girls' education and the most effective interventions to address them, see Stephanie Psaki, Nicole Haberland, Meredith L. Kozak, and Lauren Woyczynski, *Girls' Education Roadmap: 2021 Report* (EGER Reports, Population Council, 2021), [https://knowledgecommons.popcouncil.org/departments\\_sbsr-pgy/1221/](https://knowledgecommons.popcouncil.org/departments_sbsr-pgy/1221/).

<sup>15</sup> World Food Program USA, "Top 6 Reasons Women Are Hungrier Than Men Today," March 8, 2022, <https://www.wfpusa.org/articles/women-in-crisis-top-ways-women-are-hungrier/>.

should also be easier for women in abusive marriages to be granted a divorce and receive state assistance while transitioning away from their marital home.

In closing, I am reminded that when I asked a young woman working in an NGO what could be done in an ideal world to eliminate these problems, she simply replied: “*We need men to feel the urgency to do so*”. And that is perhaps the irony: dismantling the ‘patriarchal trifecta’ requires the participation of those it was designed to serve.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, this policy brief’s insights and the recommendations they spawned have relevance beyond the KRI and throughout the wider diaspora, including in many Western and European states. Addressing these challenges to women’s rights is a fundamental requirement to reach the UN’s SDGs and a major step towards sustainable peace and equality around the world.<sup>17</sup>

The limitations on women explored in this policy brief are all intertwined. Untangling this Gordian knot requires a holistic remedy which appreciates how these issues reinforce one another and why the remedies that public policy proscribes as treatment, often do not treat the ‘disease’ but mask its ‘symptoms’.

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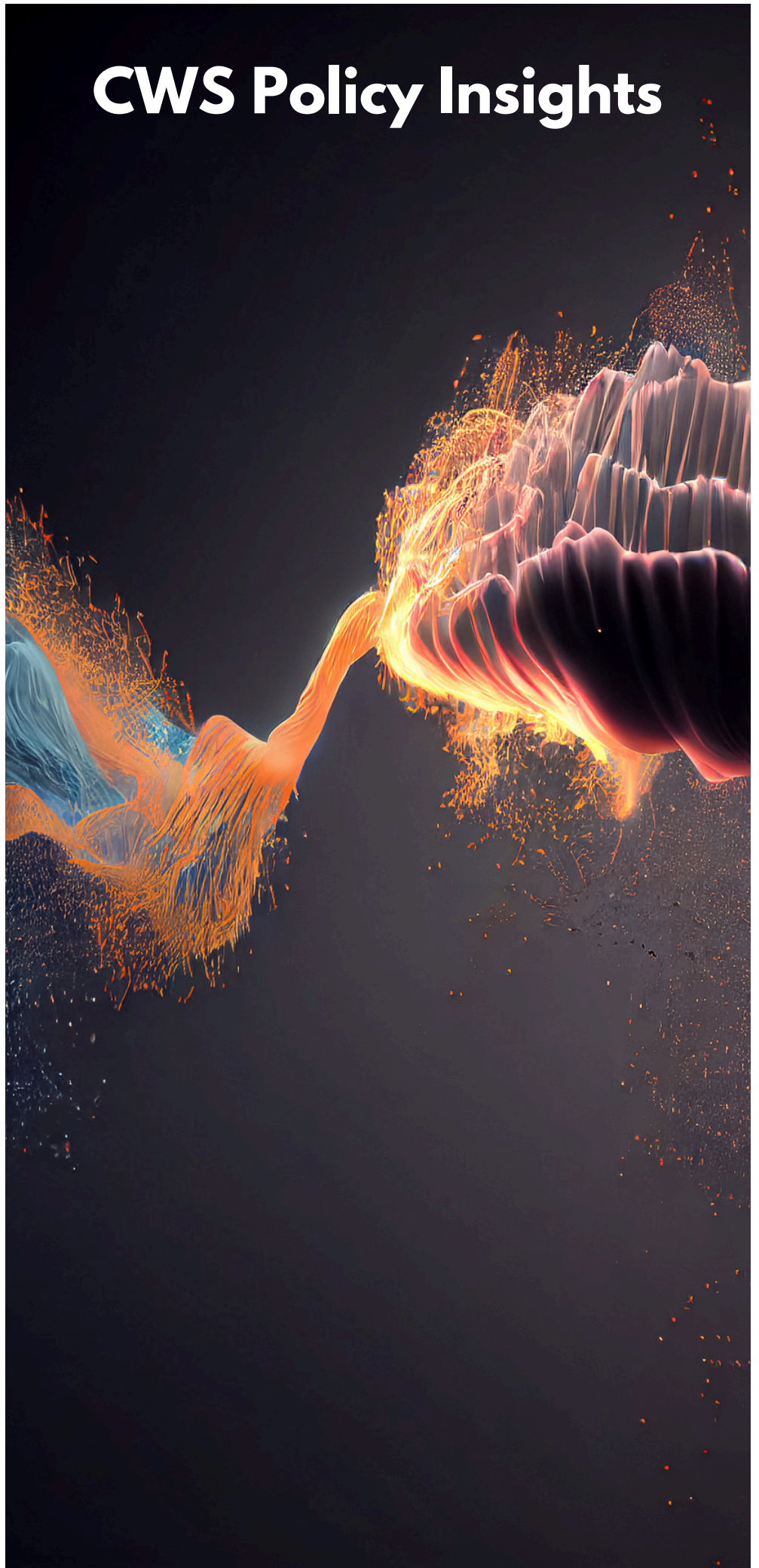
<sup>16</sup> See Ruti Levitov, Nikki van der Gaag, Margaret Greene, Michael Kaufman, and Gary Barker, *State of the World's Fathers: A MenCare Advocacy Publication* (Promundo, Rutgers, Save the Children, Sonke Gender Justice, and the MenEngage Alliance, 2015), [https://www.fatherhood.gov/sites/default/files/resource\\_files/e000003287.pdf](https://www.fatherhood.gov/sites/default/files/resource_files/e000003287.pdf); Era Dabla-Norris and Kalpana Kochhar, “Closing the Gender Gap,” *International Monetary Fund* (March 2019), <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2019/03/pdf/closing-the-gender-gap-dabla.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> United Nations, “Sustainable Development Goals: Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,” n.d., <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.



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