



## UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice & Security Hub: Migration & Displacement Stream

### Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration in

#### Kurdistan Region - Iraq

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#### Introduction

**South-South migration** had received less attention since the 1990s unlike South-North migration which focused on the transfer of labour from poorer countries to affluent households in high income countries to fill the gap in social reproduction of families. Whilst female migrants tend to migrate to a greater extent to high income countries than men (IOM 2020), there has also been considerable intra-regional migration within the South, especially to upper-middle income countries, such as Argentina, South Africa and Turkey. In fact, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the demand for domestic and care workers also grew enormously in middle- and upper-class households in Asia, the Middle East and Central and Latin America. For wealthier urban households, employing a migrant worker not only helped to provide household services (cooking, cleaning, care), but was also seen as a symbol of social status. As with the studies of gendered migration to the North, attention has focused on domestic and care work in particular

with relatively little on gendered skilled migration in the South. Yet sectoral studies indicate a range of employment undertaken by women moving independently. International schools have expanded in recent years, especially in Asia though less in the Middle East, and employing staff from Europe and North America in particular. Humanitarian organisations are also significant employers. Others work in business and management and administration. In addition, studies have highlighted the presence of skilled workers in the labour market who have entered through other routes such as education, marriage, family reunification and refugees.

This study is part of a larger multi-country research project '*Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration*' involving four countries Lebanon, Pakistan Turkey and KRI with the aim of highlighting the diversity of migrants in relation to sectors of employment, educational and skill levels and countries of origin. Little research on gendered migration in KRI except for displaced and refugee women.

## Objectives

- To contribute to analyses of the global North-to-South and South-to-South female labour migration from a gender perspective reflecting a need for a more complex and embedded production of knowledge and recognising the heterogeneity of the Global South;
- To examine the gendered dynamics of international labour migration in relation to the drivers and processes of migration, including discriminatory institutions and practices in countries of origin, and the role of agents in facilitating migration;
- To examine experiences of home, work, socialising and their agency and coping strategies and access and use of urban space in countries of destination;
- To Improve policy making to reflect the realities of gendered migration and labour rights and social protection.

The research team interviewed a diverse group of female migrant workers, especially those working in the household, cleaning, education, NGOs and business services who originated from neighbouring countries, other countries of the Global South and the North. The report is based on fieldwork conducted largely in Erbil in 2021 with 24 participants during a period of the re-emergence Covid-19 pandemic.

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## Participants

Countries of Origin: Canada, Denmark, France, Ghana (5), Indonesia (2), Iran (4 of whom 3 Kurdish), Ireland, Pakistan, Philippines (2), South Africa, Syria (3 of whom 1 Kurdish).

Age: 27-42 years

Marital Status: Single (8); single parents (2); Married (11); Divorced (3)

Education: Low (1), middle (7) and high (16).

Sectors: Household workers (6), cleaning in businesses and households (3), waitressing (1), business services and HR (4), beauty salons (2), NGOs (2), international schools (4), university (1), hotel administration (1).

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**Key Drivers of Migration:** Economic failure in the home country; Lack of opportunities; Low income; Support for family through remittances, especially children left behind; Discriminatory practices in family- harassment, prevented from working. Getting overseas experience and pursuing career opportunities; Marriage; Political conflict and instability (for refugees from Iran and Syria).

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## Context of Labour Migration

- Granting Self-rule Status and Federalism since 2005; economic boom in 2007; Growth of Service (Household labour and Hospitality) Sectors;

Advent of International NGOs, Education Institutions and Companies.

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**Recruitment Agencies** facilitate global migration of service workers (domestic and care, hospitality, construction) both in countries of origin and destination. In these sectors, migrants paid agencies in their home countries. In KRI they are licensed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs with

responsibilities for recruitment training, residence, health and safety, and departure.

Since 2007, 163 companies formally permitted. 32 of them active and working in Erbil, Suleimani, and Duhok. 57 companies ceased to work because they have not put down their assurance money, 11 blacklisted.

## Key Issues Less Skilled

Diversity of experiences in relation to households and other employers. Some respected and assisted their workers and provided them with transportation. A number would recommend KRI as a safe place and better treatment than in GCC countries. Most were satisfied with their salaries and were able to send back remittances to support their families. However many had no health insurance.

Many leave poor employers for better ones doing this through their agencies or may shift type of employment eg. domestic to waitressing. Some employers forced them to work long hours without days off, had racist attitudes towards them and in some instances prevented them from practising their religion. They often did not know their rights under the contract they were issued in Arabic and Kurdish.

There is a lack of any policy to protect foreign workers in KRI, even though some regulations exist to deal with foreign workers. One of the very few working laws in Kurdistan Region in relation to domestic/household workers is a decree issued by The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) of the Kurdistan Regional Government (Regulation number 2, Year 2015, Foreign Workers).

Gap between regulations on paper and reality on the ground of what recruitment agents should be doing and employers treating workers. Some don't have contracts.

KRI not being a state, no bilateral agreements, workers may be deceived where they are going to and can't sign ILO Convention 189. Leads to trafficking.

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## Skilled

- Generally happy with conditions of work and salary.
- Had a contract and knew their rights and what to do if a problem arises.
- Managed Covid-19 OK, either by teaching online or paid by NGOs. Exception business owner who had to shut and hotel administrator who lost her salary.

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## Sexual Harassment in Workplaces and Public Urban Spaces

- Sexual harassment at work, in transport and public spaces, especially in evening, though some felt safe in the city at night. Taxis had to be negotiated both in relation to drivers and other passengers.
- An issue that most of the participants mentioned is the way that men tried to flirt or start a relationship with foreign female workers regardless of their position, race, or ethnicity.
- When complaints were raised by worker, the employer did take it seriously, although an attempted rape by one household worker simply led to worker leaving.

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**Impact of Covid-19:** The community of foreign workers in Kurdistan Region, as almost everywhere in the world, were impacted noticeably by COVID-19. However, female domestic workers largely kept their jobs and were not impacted as other service or hospitality sectors.

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## Cultural Challenges and Perceptions by Locals:

Language, religion, nationality, race and gender might be different from the employers or the people they are interacting with. Therefore, their different worldviews and perspectives affect the social interactions and relationships

with members of the Kurdistan Region society. This situation has left apparent effects on the living conditions and the rate of integration with the local society. The perception of locals may differ based on the migrants' ethnicity. Many Iranian Kurdish female migrants are facing an

identity crisis in KRI too; on one hand, they expect to be treated as Kurds and consider themselves as members of the wider Kurdish

nation, on the other hand, they are still considered Iranians in terms of their legal documents and nationality.

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### Recommendations

- Explore fully the diversity of gendered labour migration in KRI by migrants and refugees from neighbouring countries.
- Have more regular supervisions by the government of agencies and employers, making the legislation for recruitment agencies a reality
- Update and improve the instruction and regulations of 2015 by the Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs.
- Extend work rights and social protection (work insurance, medical services) to household workers
- Include WDM in the Kurdistan Region's Social Protection Policy such as work insurance and medical services
- Further include and activate Labour Unions in issues related to women domestic workers.

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