

PROJECT PROFILE

Transitional Masculinity, Violence and Prevention

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About the Project

Gender inequitable and violence-supportive masculine norms are one of the root causes of violence against women. This project investigates the mechanisms that construct aggressive and controlling masculinity in conflict-affected environments to support the construction of alternative masculinities. Specifically, the research sets out to understand from men themselves how they define masculinity and what 'manhood' is to them in the context of Kurdistan-Iraq. In doing so, the project facilitates critical and creative dialogues with men about the socially constructed boundaries of masculinity that seek to inspire a process of learning and un-learning towards alternative masculinities.

This project took place in the context of increased backlash and retrenchment of women's rights in Kurdistan-Iraq. Whilst there have been important legal reforms in the region in relation to women's protection from violence, family law, and political participation, there is an increasing backlash against the development of gender studies, the visibility of women's rights and increased harassment of activists.

Project Approach

Group conversations are facilitated with men from different backgrounds in Kurdish society, responding to and challenging each other about what manhood and womanhood mean. Specific focus groups were held with Imams and religious leaders, with military personnel from the Peshmerga forces, policemen, lawyers, men from the markets, and men who are employed as manual labourers, including goldsmiths and blacksmiths, with varying levels of income from working class to wealthy.

An arts-based approach is employed throughout the research. Images depicting both activities reinforcing and going against traditional ideas of masculinity were used in the focus groups. For example, there were images of men being violent, men in protector and provider roles, and images of men caring

for children and doing housework. The images also included women as victims of political and domestic violence and in leader, protector, and provider roles. These collective images were used to inspire discussion amongst the participants.

Poetry writing and photo-text workshops were also utilised in the research. Participants were asked to write and 'define the difficult' in what masculinity means. Lastly, violence prevention workshops for couples were also employed. The use of multiple layers of creativity and critical discussion creates space for the participants to strip away some of the misconceptions and assumptions they have about gender and masculinity, not in an academic way, but in a human way.

Key Findings

- **Some men acknowledge that 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are socially constructed and that men are not violent by nature.** However, these voices that challenge masculine norms are in the minority within the focus groups. Most groups believe in intrinsic natural characteristics of men and women and often conflated sex with gender. Some men express that they are burdened with expectations of masculinity, and this is not who they are or what 'manhood' is.
- **There are persistent patriarchal views.** Men's control over and 'ownership' of women is ingrained in the language men use, the cultural norms and proverbs they cite, their practices, and in the arrangements of daily life, marriage, and kinship structures. There is largely the perception that if a woman defies societal expectations, then a man has the right to use violence against her. There are, however, indicators of change and a crevice in the arguments and the discourses of patriarchy. Some of the men express that parts of these customs and traditions require change and that alternative ideas and norms are emerging.
- **There are contradictory responses when examining the impersonal and the personal.** When looking at sets of image-based prompts, men make statements about femininity and masculinity affirming that male and female characteristics are not inherent and that roles do not need to be ascribed. When these are applied to their own lives and family beyond the pictures, they often take a different and contradictory view.

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You are sowing some seeds in the community. You may not see the outcome immediately, but you could see the impact in the long run. Because in this context if you just sow seeds, just leave them like this, some of them may grow. "

DR TWANA ABDWLRAHMAN



Photo Credit: Levi Meir Clancy on Unsplash

- **Stereotypes remain strong.** It is difficult on an emotional and psychological level to change entrenched stereotyped views. There is a group tendency to make exceptions and justifications to rationalise gender inequality. For example, female combatants in Rojava are seen as exceptions because they defended their homeland. So, exceptions are made in certain contexts but not others, such as within their home environments or their communities.
- **Despite the challenge of entrenched social norms about gender roles, some participants show meaningful changes in their understanding of gender, equality and masculinity.** There are noticeable changes in the way some participants are willing to challenge their previously held beliefs. This indicates such gender norms, while powerful within society, may only be held at a surface level for some individuals and that when placed in more gender equality supportive environments, men may be willing and able to change.
- **The women's rights movement faces major obstacles.** There is a lack of genuine will by the Kurdish authorities to improve women's rights; failure of the judiciary system to implement reformed laws, specifically in cases where perpetrators are politically or tribally connected; failure of the education system to promote gender equality; and troubling patterns whereby the media is contributing to discrimination, reproducing gender stereotypes, and siding against the women's movement.
- **Here are increased threats and harassment of women's rights activists.** Directed by sexist and politically motivated social and traditional media, patriarchal and conservative religious norms, or misconceptions of feminism, the backlash and defamation campaigns against feminist activists have become particularly visible whenever there is an incident of gender injustice.



It's very difficult to be hopeful, but I believe if the ideas we share are resonated from other places – from the education system, from the media, from cultural events, art objects, schooling, the mosques – if they are reflected and reiterated and echoed again, they will become very effective. ”

DR CHOMAN HARDI

- **There is a diverse array of perceptions and beliefs towards masculinity and femininity in Kurdish society.** Engagement with diverse groups within Kurdistan shows that there is not a singular Kurdish masculinity, but rather a range of masculinities shaped by diverse perceptions, experiences, and social norms.
- **Despite the many ways it harms them, some women believe and uphold patriarchal norms.** Some women have internalised narratives about gender inequality, accept that inequality is natural, and see their characteristics and social role as different from men's.

Recommendations

All Sectors of Society

- **Coordinate responses.** Achieving gender equality is not the responsibility of NGOs and activists alone, and it will not be possible without the engagement of the larger community. An effective approach necessitates coordinated responses from the government, the NGO sector, funders and donors, the media, and the larger community.

Regional Government of Kurdistan-Iraq

- **Support community programmes and non-violence training.** More support for programmes that focus on engaging men, specifically those in positions of power, is needed to bring about change. Men have an important role to play as allies in addressing and transforming patriarchal norms.
- **Embrace the arts to educate.** This research shows that educating through the arts can be effective in raising empathy and building consensus by fostering a less confrontational learning environment. This encourages the process of un-learning, making space for encounters with new ideas and the reshaping of identities and harmful norms.

Local Communities

- **Community ownership is crucial.** It is important that solutions come from the community rather than external contexts. More community level conversations led by local leaders, Imams, educators, and activists are needed on social norms, the exploration of masculinities and femininities, and community led responses and solutions.

- **Engage men and continuously work with them.** Men are increasingly interested in issues of gender equality and are ready to be engaged. Local communities should support them with outreach and education programmes that can lead to the men not only changing their own views but having a positive impact in their broader social and familial circles.

Formal and Informal Educators

- **Education is the key conduit for social change, especially with younger generations.** Gender equality education is needed in formal and informal spaces including the media, schools, mosques, NGOs, civil society, and the government through training and other capacity building work. It is important to work with the younger generation at university level because they are more open to being challenged and to shift gender norms. Changing youth perceptions and practices on gender norms can support long-term and multi-generational change where education programmes play an essential role in introducing and normalising new ideas about masculinity and gender roles.

Researchers and Academics

- Maintain contact and support with research participants who are eager to continue learning. Continued contact with research participants interested in learning more

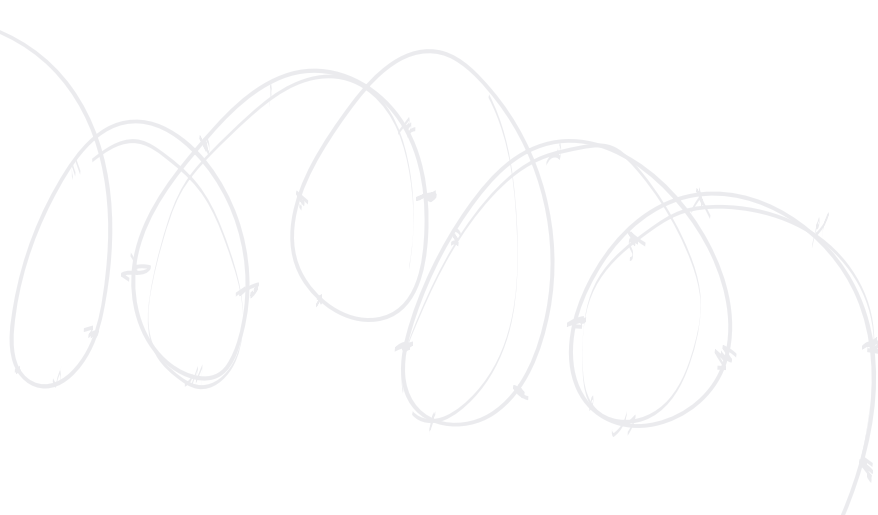


One of the things we have learned from Rojava is the importance of ownership. The importance of coming up with solutions from your own community rather than having somebody else bring this solution to you. ”

DR CHOMAN HARDI

and supporting gender equality can be a powerful way to increase your research's potential impact. Sustained engagement with men is particularly important because once participants leave the supportive context of the research, they may return to social contexts in which there are strong norms against gender equality. These social pressures might lead to decreases or full reversals of the positive gains made during the programme.

- **Practice cultural sensitivity.** Engaging men in gender equality work requires contextual knowledge of the local setting and a sensitivity to the ways issues such as gender and religion intersect. Researchers also do not have to address all issues at once – they can focus on gender and masculinity and be aware and responsive to the impact of religion while not addressing it directly.



To learn more about this research project and read its publications visit:
<https://thegenderhub.com/stories/transitional-masculinity-violence-and-prevention/>



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This Project Profile was first published in the Hub's final report, *Gender, Justice and Security: Structural Challenges, Feminist Innovations and Radical Futures*. Go to www.TheGenderHub.com to read the full report and to learn more about all 38 research projects in the Hub.



This research is part of the UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub. The Hub is an interdisciplinary, transnational research network working with local and global civil society, practitioners, governments and international organisations to advance the delivery of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

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