



seed foundation
Social Educational Economic Development



Fostering Healthy Families in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq:



Formative Research Brief - September 2022

1. Introduction and Context

SEED Foundation, in partnership with Equipundo Center for Masculinities and Social Justice, is designing an intervention to reduce intergenerational violence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Working with adolescent boys aged 14 to 19 and their fathers, the project aims to reduce gender-based violence (GBV) by promoting healthy masculinities and engaging men and boys in gender equity. Equipundo has adapted its Program P and Program H group education curricula with an understanding of the local cultural context. SEED Foundation will lead the intervention's implementation in 2022–2023.

To inform the development of the curricula content and approach, SEED Foundation and Equipundo conducted formative qualitative research to explore attitudes, values, and interest in the approach with host community members, Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs), and Syrian refugees in the KRI. This research, conducted in and around Erbil, was made possible by the generous support of the United States Government.

For this investigation, the research team developed tools for focus group discussions (FGDs) and then conducted FGDs with fathers, mothers, and older adolescents. They also conducted in-depth interviews with individual mothers and fathers and held key informant interviews with faith leaders, teachers, and protection workers. The researchers approached the formative research findings using a pro-feminist lens.



This research brief explores the formative research's key findings, its implications, and recommendations for future research, programming, and advocacy efforts in the KRI.

This program aims to complement ongoing efforts by civil society and government actors in the KRI to address gender inequity and GBV. Although service provision and awareness raising among women and girls is an essential strategy in promoting gender equity, the inclusion of men and boys in programs must be treated as an equally important priority. In Iraq, the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) is among the highest in the world – with a reported 45 percent of women having suffered some form of violence from their partner in the past year¹. In the first half of 2022, at least 24 women were killed throughout the KRI as a result of GBV (commonly known as “honor killings”) – a statistic that has been on the rise in recent years.²

In the KRI, high levels of IPV and other forms of GBV are linked to high gender inequity – exacerbated by hypermasculine social norms and the destructive impacts of prolonged conflict and exposure to violence. The findings of this formative research demonstrate that men (and to a lesser extent, boys) in the KRI hold traditional, patriarchal attitudes about the distinct roles of men and women in society. This leads to power imbalances and inequitable gender norms at the household and community levels that have widespread consequences for the health, safety, and personal autonomy of women and children.

1 Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security & Peace Research Institute Oslo. (2021). Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/22: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>

2 SEED Foundation. (2022). Combating Domestic Violence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. <https://www.seedkurdistan.org/combating-domestic-violence-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq/>

2. Research Findings

2.1. General Attitudes Toward Gender Equity

Overall, men and boys are aware of their societal privilege and authority and have a near-unanimous desire to maintain the unequal status quo. Conversely, women and girls voiced a resounding desire for more independence and autonomy, but they acknowledged the structural, community, and interpersonal barriers to reaching gender equity.

Overall, fathers held more conservative viewpoints than the women or youth interviewed. In one FGD with Kurdish men from the host community, some fathers said the qualities they appreciate most about being men are the traditional roles that grant them authority and dominance over women. They also agreed that leadership is a more natural role for men.

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Men are men, and women are women.

- Father in the host community FGD

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Men who are Syrian refugees and Iraqi IDPs held slightly more progressive attitudes, acknowledging existing social norms but not justifying them as a “natural” entitlement. However, when interviewers pressed beyond the initial responses, men tended to revert to restrictive ideas of gender roles. Additionally, data triangulation demonstrates a gap between what men say and what they do. This may be due to a social desirability bias since the men had already participated in gender programming and were aware of more progressive opinions.

Women who are Syrian refugees, Iraqi IDPs, and host community members presented similar values, although female IDPs and refugees were more outspoken about the difficulties they face and their wish for their daughters and themselves to have more independence and autonomy. There were dissenting voices among women who believe in a strict division of roles.

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Men have a more important role in the community than women.

- Mothers in the Syrian refugee FGD

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Women are not fit to make decisions in public life.

- Mothers in the Syrian refugee FGD

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The youth interviewed, especially girls, presented more open and progressive attitudes. Boys’ attitudes differed by community: Boys who are IDPs held the most conservative views, and boys from the host communities showed more progressive attitudes. This could be the result of their upbringing – youth who are IDPs grew up experiencing persistent hardship and trauma, whereas host community youth may have had a more stable life with access to progressive ideas through media and education.

In other contexts, research has found that inequitable views on gender are usually reinforced by explicit religious beliefs. However, participants did not explicitly mention religion when talking about gender equity or about traditional roles and norms.

2.2. Attitudes Toward House and Care Work

There is a clear traditional role distribution in the family across demographic groups – men are providers and authority figures, and women are caregivers and hold domestic roles. While men claimed their advantage and male superiority rely on their ability and strength, women overall showed more progressive and critical attitudes about the status quo – with a small minority expressing support for traditional roles.

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I wish that my husband would contribute more in the everyday life and upbringing of our children.

- Mother in the host community FGD

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Youth presented inconsistencies in their answers: Boys in host and refugee communities insisted they participate in housework, while their sisters challenged that idea. Conversely, boys who are IDPs demonstrated a strong intergenerational transfer of patriarchal gender roles.

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Work outside the house is for men only.

- Boys in the IDP FGD

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I only help my mother in carrying heavy stuff from outside the house.

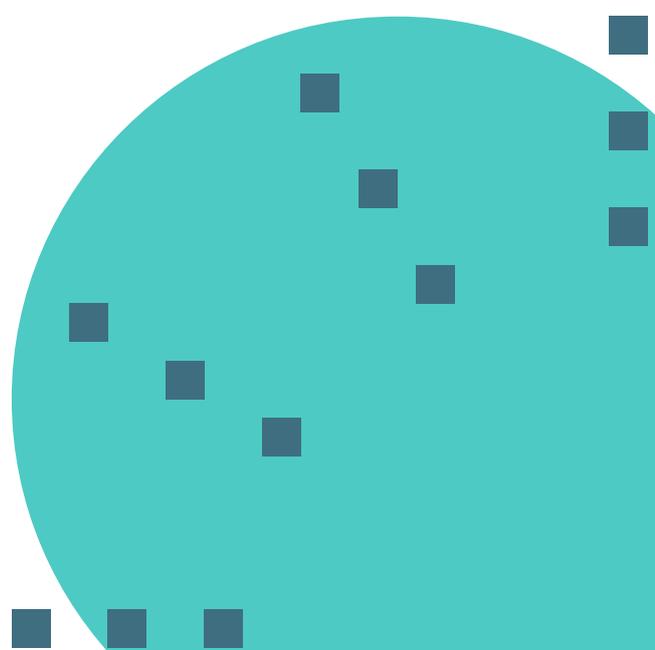
- Boys in the IDP FGD

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Only men can do physical work.

- Boys in the IDP FGD

In terms of decision-making, men have the last word when it comes to essential matters, such as the marriage of children, where to live, and finances, while women have more autonomy in decisions around the household and children.



2.3. Attitudes Toward Parenting and Violence Against Children

Across the board, one thing is clear: Men do not shy away from expressing their love and affection for their children, especially their daughters. Those who restrict their daughters and wives believe this comes from love and the need to protect. All three groups presented clear, gendered differences in the way they treat their daughters and sons, especially as they grow older.

Parents spoke more affectionately of their daughters but described being stricter with them. They consider discipline and restrictive behavior necessary, as they perceive girls as weaker and in need of protection. Girls are seen as holders of honor whose mistakes affect the whole family.

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There is a big difference between disciplining boys and girls. If a boy makes a mistake, they say it's normal, but girls are not allowed to make mistakes.

- Mother in the host community FGD

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In terms of aspirations, fathers expect their daughters to get married and adopt the traditional family role of caregivers, and so daughters do housework from an early age. Fathers have the last word on marriage, and the girl's consent is not a precondition, though he may decide to consult the family. Boys gain more independence and freedom of movement in their teenage years and spend most of their time outdoors, which ends up distancing them from their parents even more. Boys enjoy more freedom when it comes to their life choices, too.

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Boys and girls are distinctly different, with different feelings and aspirations; that's why parents should treat them differently. Mothers should particularly pay attention to girls, as they need more guidance and advice.

- Boy in the host community FGD

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In terms of violence against children, fathers are more likely to use harsh physical punishment than mothers are, which often leads to mothers hiding their children's mistakes from the patriarch. But parents don't acknowledge this use of physical violence for discipline, as one community worker highlighted. Additionally, despite the high prevalence of honor killings across the KRI, these were not explicitly mentioned by research participants.

2.4. Attitudes Toward Women's Participation in Public Life

While both men and women attributed gendered role distribution to men's exposure to challenges and experience in public affairs, women understood that such exposure and experience are not inherent but rather imposed by restrictive traditional norms.



An educated woman with a job forces the world to need her rather than her needing the world.

- Mother in the IDP FGD



When asked about the right to education, work, independence, and decision-making, men and boys' answers varied but leaned toward favoring the status quo. Again, boys from the host community were the most supportive of women and girls' rights, followed by Syrian refugees and then IDPs. While most girls had big ambitions to make their own life choices, they also acknowledged their lack of power to make these determinations.

2.5. Receptivity to External Interventions

Overall, respondents expressed openness to building healthier and more positive parent-child dynamics. But while men were willing to have mixed-gender groups together with children, women were more inclined toward safe spaces in all-female groups to discuss these matters.

The formative research also suggests that using social media with girls and video games with boys could be a good way to engage youth and a consideration when designing the program, while taking care to ensure this engagement does not reinforce unequal gender norms.



3. Conclusion and Recommendations

In general, women, men, and children's roles in the family and community are clearly influenced by the volatile context, economic conditions, and traditions, and to a lesser extent, religion. Women and girls acknowledge unhealthy patriarchal norms much more than do men and boys. Male privilege is apparent in perceptions of injustice, but not easily acknowledged by men who mostly do not live a life of privilege. The research participants have lived through conflict, especially the IDPs and refugees, whose children have lived most of their lives in displacement. Any proposed intervention must consider the factors of oppression that men, women, and children alike suffer in such a context.

Parenting is highly gendered, with mothers and fathers showing substantial affection for girls over boys while restricting girls' mobility and career aspirations as they grow older. Fathers love their daughters and want what's best for them, but defining what is "best" is subject to what they perceive to be possible in a gender-unequal context. Fathers love their sons but generally lack the capacity to spend much time with them, as these men often work long hours to make ends meet. These factors result in a patriarchal system of decision-making, in which the man of the family often has the final say in household decisions.

Gender and age largely determine parenting techniques and family relationships. When children are younger, differences in treatment and relationships with parents are not as pronounced as they are beginning puberty. Teenage girls develop a closer relationship marked by kinship and companionship with their mothers, while teenage boys start gaining independence due to their relative freedom of movement and social interaction. Men start spending less time with their children of both sexes, although boys have more opportunities to socialize with their fathers than girls do.

Families do acknowledge the need for more effective communication skills to strengthen intergenerational relationships and are open to interventions. Men (and women) don't feel equipped with the life skills and tools to counter the economic and cultural factors that create barriers to healthier and happier intergenerational relationships. Mothers especially pointed to the need for fathers to learn better methods to communicate with their children.

Based on the formative research, the following considerations should be incorporated into the future design and implementation of interventions:

1. Despite the assumption that religion has a significant influence in shaping people's lives, this is circumstantial and subjective. Thus, it could be counterproductive to use direct references to religion during the intervention.
2. The use of harsh physical discipline is barely acknowledged by parents, perhaps because beating one's children is seen as socially acceptable and rooted in the culture. It is crucial to approach the issue using the appropriate terminology and culturally sensitive language.
3. There is a clear resistance to certain topics and terms – "feminism" or "human rights" – that are seen as part of a foreign agenda that is culturally inappropriate and imposed externally. This, linked to the fact that men in those communities also live underprivileged lives, makes it crucial to implement programs using the right language and showing how everyone in the family would benefit from the intervention rather than framing it as a gender equity program. A multilayered approach that makes the connections between equitable family dynamics and healthy masculinities through a meaningful intergenerational approach addressing the well-being of children and society at large is more fitting for the KRI context.



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