Peace education as a means to understanding and mitigating physical, structural and cultural violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan

Maamoon Abdulsamad Mohammed[1], Muhammadsaeed Hussein Barwary[2]

1. Dep. of Peace and Human Rights Studies, University of Duhok
2. Head of sociology department, university of Dohuk

Abstract

In general, projects to improve human rights have been imposed on Iraqi Kurdistan by external agencies and have often been criticised for not being sensitive to the real needs of the people. In response, this paper suggests some theoretical foundations from which to develop a locally-based form of peace education, identifying specific strategies to address violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan and so ameliorate the situation while benefiting society as a whole. Considering ideas based in peace studies developed in the Middle East and around the globe, it seeks to shed light on the specific issues involved through a discussion based on the work of scholars such as Hataw Kareem, Sherzad Mojab, and Amir Hassanpour, with their focus on Kurdish issues, as well as that of international peace researchers such as Johan Galtung, Paulo Freire and Betty Reardon. Sensitivity to the specific cultural context is fundamental to this approach; therefore respect for Islamic teachings – and those of other ethnic religions – is essential while supporting women's right to live in this society without fear of violence.

By highlighting the triangular relationship between abusive attitudes, violent behaviour and cultural contradictions, peace education can provide a means whereby participants develop awareness, values and relationship skills that can enable women and men to live peacefully together. These are acquired through participatory learning methods that encourage students to recognise and understand their context and become catalysts of change in ways appropriate to their own culture.

1. Introduction

Violence against women is endemic throughout the globe and Iraqi Kurdistan is no exception. While everywhere it is linked to women's inferior social status, its specific characteristics – and so its remedies – are dependent on socio-political context; thus, they vary according to culture. Respecting these specifics, in particular religious teachings, is essential if we are to find solutions that can promote a more stable and harmonious society by enabling women to contribute more positively. Consequently, this paper seeks to provide a framework through which a local perspective and more compatible solutions can be developed.

In Kurdistan, as Mojab (2001b) demonstrates, the liberation of women has been connected with the liberation of the people as a whole. Thus, in 1945, the Constitution of the Kurdish Democratic Party supporting the establishment of *Mahabad*, the Kurdish republic in Iran, states that the principles of the party were based on democracy and gender equality (Chapter 2, Articles 4 and 5, and Chapter 4, Article 21). However, when the Kurds first gained autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1919–1923, the status of women was not mentioned (Mojab 2001:128); and, when creating the Kurdish Autonomous Region in the 1970s, women's right to own land was not respected (Mojab 2001a:78–83). Indeed, throughout Kurdish history, in wartime, women have been promised (and sometimes given) rights because this has been politically expedient; but when this was not useful, these have been denied (Mojab 2001b).

2. In contrast, after gaining autonomy in 1991, the Kurdish government, international NGOs and local NGOs have all made serious attempts to end or mitigate violence against women in contemporary northern Iraq through a variety of methods, while international laws and conventions have delegitimized this form of abuse. Moreover, Iraq is a signatory to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which states in the Preamble:

3. Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.

4. Nevertheless, it appears that these attempts have not succeeded in ameliorating the situation since there has been little improvement – indeed, reported cases of violence against women have increased. Consequently, this paper seeks to understand why so little progress has been made and how this might be transformed. It explores a complementary way of understanding and addressing violence against women – namely, to introduce a form of peace education appropriate to the context of Iraqi Kurdistan in training sessions for local NGOs and for boys and girls in schools.

5. Peace education has developed to enable people to become aware of the issues that drive this chronic problem, to empower them with necessary skills to deal with it, and to facilitate implementation of solutions in ways that are appropriate to their situations. This involves learning to change attitudes rather than simply curtailing or punishing violent behaviour; thus, it has the potential to maintain positive and sustainable solutions. In short, peace education involves the study of how to transform victims into survivors without

damaging relationships or causing any loss of human rights to men in the process.

6. Although, in some circumstances it has been imposed by the international community, at heart, peace education needs to develop from the social context and there is no 'one size' that fits all societies. It is therefore important that a version of peace education is developed that is appropriate to Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus, while Reardon's (1999:7) definition of peace education as "the transmission of knowledge about requirements of, the obstacles to, and possibilities for achieving and maintaining peace, training in skills for interpreting the knowledge, and the development of reflective and participatory capacities for applying the knowledge to overcoming problems and achieving possibilities" may provide a useful basis to work on, more work that is specifically relevant to Iraqi Kurdistan is needed.

7. Education in general is an invaluable tool that can be used to enhance peaceful positive social changes. Although it can be used to indoctrinate citizens into accepting the ideology of domination, it can also enable them to challenge it; moreover, it can motivate people to achieve sustainable development that benefits society as a whole. However, to do so, it needs to be explored in non-formal settings as well as in formal education and, most importantly, it must involve awareness of the context of learners so that they are better able to understand their specific issues and provide appropriate remedies to social ills.

8. Northern Iraq is currently in a state of great change, and few scholars would disagree that after so many troubled years, if Kurdistan is to thrive, it is essential to have social stability. Moreover, women are an essential part of society and already contribute in many (often taken for granted) ways – including support (and sometimes active participation) both for and against ISIS – as well as through their traditional roles in the home. Due to their fundamental societal roles, the widespread use of violent methods to reinforce women's subordinate social status indicates that the situation is inherently unstable. While ISIS attempted to provide solutions to social ills, it has become clear that this involved a great deal of violence and suffering, particularly for women, while not being sustainable. Nevertheless, as illustrated below, ameliorating women's suffering is in accordance with the Qur'an and this paper argues that peace education can help develop peaceful and sustainable ways of managing the conflict and alienation associated with violence against women. Fostering human dignity, which is basic to peace education, is essential to cultural stability and can only be achieved when, by developing a culture of peace, Kurdistan has eliminated all forms of cultural and structural violence against women, coupled with changes at other levels. Essentially, the field of peace education rejects the belief that chronic violence is an inherent part of society and human beings.

9. This paper seeks to create a space wherein the argument that peace education can effectively address violence against women in Kurdistan can be developed by providing some theoretical foundations for discussion; rather than dismissing the work done by women organisers, it seeks a way to support their work. Although the focus is mainly on Muslim culture because this is dominant in the region (and my own

culture), focus on other ethnic religious groups is also necessary as they involve their own specificities regarding violence against women, especially since sensitivity to cultural context is crucial. After outlining, in the next section, the contemporary context regarding attempts to ameliorate the situation, in Section 3 the paper suggests the elements of peace studies theory that are most appropriate to elucidate the underlying causes of such violence and explains the theoretical basis informing peace education workshops. It then explains the methodology and presents findings from interviews with women working in the field, and other relevant research, to outline the specific issues pertinent to Iraqi Kurdistan. This is followed, in Section 6, by an in-depth discussion of how peace studies theory may be used to challenge and transform violence against women, before making recommendations as to how peace education could be introduced in practice.

2. The context

Iraqi Kurdistan is a multi-ethnic culture and women have inferior status across all ethnic groups. Certain changes have been attempted both at institutional level and at grassroots level. In particular, the KRG has made significant efforts to tackle the issue of violence against women, including opening directorates in the six major cities under its governance and twenty-eight sub-offices in districts and sub-districts. In 2011, it also issued a law (No.8) specifically to combat domestic violence. [1] Despite this, studies show an increase in cases

of violence against women (Alsabah Aljadid 2017).

Women campaigners and relevant NGOs have raised concerns regarding the current situation. Bakhshan Zankana, the High Director of the Women's Affairs Council [2] has asserted the urgent need for KRG institutions, as well as international and local NGOs, to resolve these issues. In doing so, she emphasised that "violence against women is driven by historical issues, it comes as a consequence of discrimination between men and women and deprives women of their rights. Moreover, there are new consequences due to ISIS since IDPs experience increased violence against women" (Bakhshan 2017).

Other women organisers confirm that, in general, recent efforts have been relatively ineffective because violence against women is so rigidly embedded in the structure of society. For example, Chawan Khesro, a civil society activist, said that "all the solutions to end violence against women in Kurdistan have not been effective because they are not solutions to end the structural basis of this violence".

For instance, local women's NGOs have set up various projects to tackle the issues at grassroots levels. For example, in one project they have put enquiry boxes in every girls' secondary and high school so the girls can inform them if they confront any violation of their rights. Every two weeks, workers from the women's NGOs open these boxes and try to deal with their enquiries. These activities have enabled women to attain "conscientisation" (Freire 1970), that is, awareness of the violence in the Iraqi Kurdistan context and so gain the opportunity to self-discover the injustices and

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[1] For further information on the laws sections and subsection, see http://www.arabwomenorg.org/MediaFiles/Landing/files/kordi-law.pdf

[2] For more information, see http://cabinet.gov.krd/p/page.aspx?l=12&s=000000&r=407&p=400&h=1&t=405

violence committed against them. Although this encourages girls to be catalysts for change, without more far-reaching changes to support them, they remain stuck and in many cases even more frustrated as they are unable to resolve the problems. Moreover, while this is a good strategy when there is no other alternative, it can further polarise the issue as it puts the onus solely on women and does nothing to make men more aware of women's problems with violence.

While it is important to identify the problem, expose contradictions and respond to individual issues, this cannot create significant improvement without more pervasive change in attitudes and social structure. Although some relevant laws were amended after 2001, these amendments were not implemented and, in general, women lack awareness of the implications of this. Moreover, as indicated above, activists have come to realize that changing the law would have little effect without also changing social traditions and institutions. To do so, boys and girls, men and women, as well as cultural institutions, need to develop skills and awareness to empower them to overcome this challenge.

3. Theoretical background

To facilitate development of analyses and remedies that grow out of an understanding of Kurdistan culture rather than being imposed from outside, this section outlines elements of a theoretical framework that are appropriate for Iraqi Kurdistan society. After explaining the potential of transformative tools – namely, the triangle of violence (as a basis from which to theorize violence) and the triangle of conflict resolution (as a focus for catalysing change) – to facilitate a coherent analysis of the issues involved and of how they may be transformed, it presents the three main concepts informing peace education workshops: participatory

techniques, conscientisation and agency. Bearing in mind that one of the fundamental tenets of peace studies (too often ignored in peacebuilding) is that issues and solutions vary with context, the intention is not to provide solutions to the issues involved in violence against women in Kurdistan but to support a process whereby participants can develop their own.

The triangular relationship between cultural, structural and direct violence

Violence can usefully be categorized as cultural, structural, and direct. These types of violence affect, intersect, and influence one another. Direct violence is an event, i.e., a killing or beating; structural violence is a process that varies according to laws and economic constraints; and cultural violence is a part of a culture and as such is reproduced across generations.
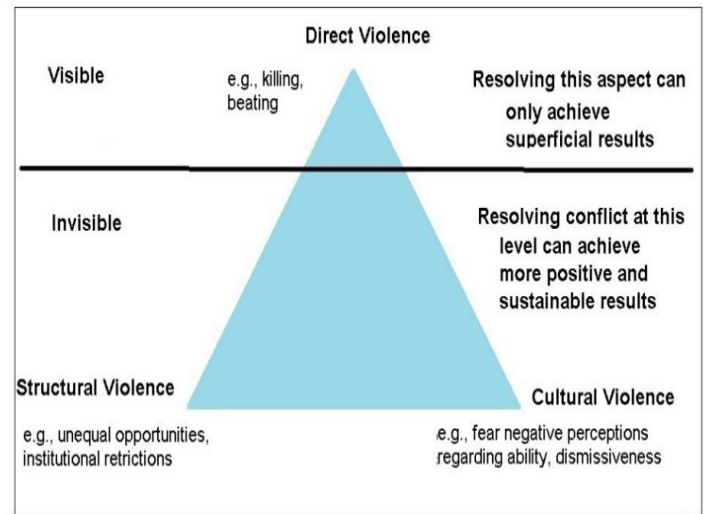

Figure 1: Triangle of Violence (adapted from Galtung 1969)

The diagram above shows the relationships between the three basic forms of violence. As Hassanpour (2017) makes clear, direct violence can be emotional and/or physical. Similarly, Galtung includes psychological and verbal abuse as direct violence because consistent abuse may

cause trauma. For instance, long term abuse may lead to self-immolation. Honour killing and wife beating are also examples of direct violence in Kurdistan, which can be understood as "the confiscation of one's right or interests through the use of physical violence" (Stark, Flitcraft, and Frazier 1979).

Structural violence is understood as any constraint on human potential due to economic and political structures; including unequal legal status or access to resources, political power, education, or healthcare (Galtung 1969). Stark, Flitcraft, and Frazier (1979) define it as "the confiscation of someone's rights through the use of ideas"; and as such it would include marriages arranged without the woman's consent. Indeed, according to Galtung, structural violence is synonymous with 'social injustice'. Meanwhile, supporters of laws and policies that contribute to structural violence will argue that it is in the woman's interest since women lack knowledge, are incompetent at making decisions, and men know better.

Cultural violence functions as the core, intermediator and facilitator of all types of violence. Many aspects of culture, such as religion and ideology, language and arts, empirical science and formal science can be used to justify or legitimize direct and structural violence. This kind of violence may be invisible to people because it is taken for granted and so it may not be recognized as violence at all. Indeed, cultural context may "change the moral colour of an act from red/wrong to green/right or at least to yellow/accepted" (Galtung 1996:196). Thus, some forms of violence that are taboo in one culture are considered acceptable in another.

An key part of cultural practice is language. Language creates the environment in which we communicate and express ourselves. As Hassanpour argues, the everyday language of discrimination and bias leads to symbolic violence that strengthens the hierarchal relationships between males and females, making males dominant and females subordinate. He provides a nuanced understanding of various forms of violence – symbolic, emotional, and physical – that are committed against women and argues that "linguistic, discursive, and symbolic violence against women is ubiquitous [in Iraqi Kurdistan]" (2001:227). We follow the rules embedded in language unconsciously and consciously, and our actions and thoughts are restricted by the limits of language (Levi-Strauss 1984).[1]

Cultural violence is also expressed in myth, the crucial point being "not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact" (Lévi-Strauss 1969:12). Rasoul (2017) highlights how many myths and discourses found in Kurdish tradition and folklore affect women and contribute to the marginalization of women. For example: "A woman is a woman even if she extracts lion's ears" (i.e., a woman would never be equal to a man, even if she does impossible things); "A thousand women equal one man"; and "The one who lies is the woman not the man". These all reflect and promote a very negative view of women (Rasoul 1997).

Hence, cultural violence becomes validated through codified tribal customary laws that directly strengthen the use of structural violence and, as Galtung argues, this becomes a social pattern that people naturally learn and

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[1] For further information on these structuralist ideas, see Neil J. Smelser, 1988. "Social Structure" in *Handbook of Sociology*, edited by Neil J. Smelser. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage. And Anthony Giddens, 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

easily transmit. It exists in cultural norms and practices that perpetuate social injustice, particularly against women. Cultural violence comprises the beliefs, everyday practices, prejudices and negative stereotypes that enhance social injustice in power relations between men and women. Through this, social injustice becomes embedded within the culture and becomes manifest as structural and direct violence.

The triangle for resolution – Attitude, Behaviour and Contradictions (ABC)

Galtung (1969) developed this triangle to represent the three elements present in every conflict: attitude (A), behaviour (B) and contradiction/context (C). *Attitude* refers to the beliefs, feeling and values that people have (cultural violence) and *behaviour* means the expression of these, such as direct violence, while the *context* refers to the system and institutions that conflicting parties live with and the *contradictions* inherent in this (structural and cultural violence). These elements influence and intersect with one another and constitute the three corners of a triangle that complements the Triangle of Violence (Galtung 1990). It illustrates how punishing or prohibiting violations (through laws, sanctions or legal action) can only make superficial changes that do not have a sustainable effect on behaviour. However, encouraging change in behaviour can initiate a process whereby the contradictions in women's situation can be resolved on a long-term basis.
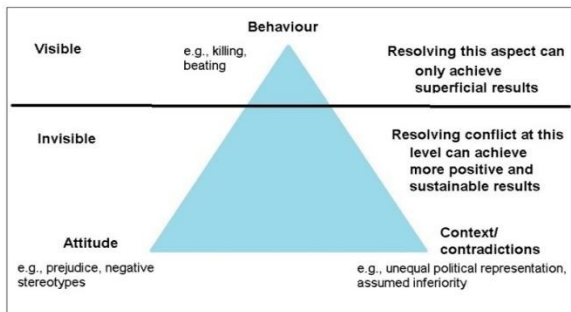

Figure 2: The ABC triangle (adapted from Galtung (1990))

Thus, contexts wherein cultural traditions deem women inferior contradict the experience of capable women, and violation of women's rights becomes embedded in social practices (as cultural violence). This supports and develops attitudes and feelings that it is legitimate to be violent to women which often results in violent behaviour based on disrespect for women and their rights. The aim of peace education is to change the oppressive situation by enabling both women and men to develop an awareness of the contradictions that disempower women and of how they can transform these and so eliminate violence against women without violating men's human rights. Through this, changes grow out of the socio-cultural context rather than being imposed from the outside (e.g., through the work of government institutions and international NGOs which, as discussed above, have proved fruitless). This is not to suggest that laws and the Declaration of Human Rights are not useful but that, *they need to be supported by these other changes that peace education can provide.* Indeed, laws improving women's nominal status are essential to ameliorating structural and cultural violence against women, as is the work of grassroots organisers.

Concepts of peace education

Peace education aims not to reproduce or destroy, but to transform – it is a process that inculcates not only a shift in the current status quo but also a re-evaluation of values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, it seeks to build life skills to enable both men and women to catalyse change in ways that are neither disruptive nor detrimental to those involved. These skills include communication, active listening, understanding different perspectives, cooperation, problem-solving and critical

thinking, decision-making, empathy and compassion, mediation and conflict resolution, patience and self-control, responsible citizenship, imagination, leadership, vision and social responsibility. To do so, it relies on three specific concepts which support the methodology of peace education workshops: the participatory approach, conscientisation and agency.

The participatory approach

Two of the fundamental tenets of peace education is that it should be genuinely inclusive and context-based. Therefore, a participatory approach is used to ensure that issues identified, and their solutions, come from the participants rather than being imposed externally from agencies (international or national) outside their community. It involves engaging participants, eliciting their thoughts within the group, and the facilitator offering new information or skills; then, allowing space for learners to reflect and internalize what they have heard and how this makes sense to them. Finally, they consider how they will use what they have learnt, and if possible implement this within the group. They are then encouraged to practice what they have learned in the community.

Conscientisation

Conscientisation means becoming cognisant of your context and your place within it. It is the process "by which individuals become aware of the socio-political and psychological conditions that oppress disadvantaged groups" (Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2005. p.22). While it provides the motivation that leads people to struggle for social change, it does not encourage people to be rebellious or anarchic; rather, conscientisation supports them in developing their ability to think creatively and to choose a future in which they can thrive. Hence, it is the

process whereby those who are disadvantaged, marginalized and oppressed develop the ability to critically reflect, plan, and implement positive change in their communities. They further develop an understanding of the effects of oppression (including that imposed by other cultures) and marginalization and of how to locate their personal distress within a socio-political context; thus, they regain a sense of power and control over their individual and collective destinies as they partake in the process of transformation necessary for wellness (Martín-Baró, 1994). Freire (1970) argues that conscientisation means being fully human, that it is the right of everybody, not only for the privileged few. It addresses situations where there is a *culture of silence*, wherein people are accustomed and taught to accept without questioning whatever is prescribed for them by elites and, consequently, their understanding of their own situation is limited to this.

Significantly, conscientisation builds self-efficacy, takes away the self-blame that oppressed individuals experience, and makes clear that their trapped situation is a result of power arrangements within their society; this reduces their feeling of depression and makes them more capable of changing their own situation and making a more positive contribution to society (Gutierrez 1990:150). As regards women's experience, this may involve awareness that some practices and beliefs which women themselves follow cause undue suffering; for example, that a woman asking for an inheritance is shameful or that a woman should be forced to marry a man who has raped her. In peace education, this may be brought into discussion without implying that it is the woman's fault (nor focussing on blaming the man), but instead understanding it as the product of her situation, which she can change.

Eventually, once enough people are aware of the issues involved and they are able to develop agency as discussed below, human behaviour (expressed as social practices) can reproduce new more egalitarian structures.

Agency

While conscientisation describes the process whereby people become aware of their situation and its underlying issues, agency denotes the means through which this can be transformed. It is the capacity that humans have to shape the circumstances of their own lives based on understanding how actions that people think of as free, unintended by others, are often a result of societal structures (Hitlin & Elder, 2007). Again, according to the ethics of peace education, this is not designed to be rebellious but to be respectful of the needs and rights of all parties involved.

Developing agency is fundamental to empowerment. Kabeer (2001a) explains empowerment as the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied them. Focussing specifically on women's situation, Malhotra, Schuler and Boender (2002) describe it as a *process*, a change from a condition of disempowerment. This requires an agency role: people themselves must be significant actors in the process to ensure it truly incorporates their solutions rather than those imposed on them. Viewing agency from the perspective of gender and power, Kabeer (2005) demonstrates the need to boost individuals' capability through access to resources, explaining that, alone, agency cannot enhance capabilities; it takes resources plus agency to achieve positive and sustainable change. Deep knowledge regarding their own context, as developed through conscientisation, creates a social power source (such as social belonging, leadership relations, sense of identity) and psychological power (self-confidence, self-esteem, the ability to imagine and aspire to a better future).This then needs to be supported by people`s collective assets and capabilities, such as organization, voice, representation and identity. Malhotra & Schuler (2005:73) support this, not only contending that 'changes' in law or policy *alone* have little influence on practice, but also that, although resources are important for empowerment, having access to resources does not guarantee that empowerment will take place; rather, it requires "women's individual and collective ability to recognize [i.e., conscientisation] and utilize resources in their own interest [i.e., agency]".

Bourdieu provides some useful insights in his theory of practice where he describes how human action in everyday practice creates discourses and structures. His ideas focus on the relationship between *structure* and *agency*: structure guides human action but human behaviour can also change the structure. As a result, the relationship between structure and agency is dynamic, and *inter*dependent. His theory indicates that social structures are embedded in society through everyday events and this makes prejudices, stereotypes and discrimination toward women look normal – however, these can be changed (Bourdieu 1977:3). Thus, the process of developing agency involves positive interaction between developing skills, access to resources and existing social structures, and thus leads to empowerment.

Conscientisation and agency, as well as the participatory approach, are particularly problematic concepts in countries that have experienced totalitarian regimes in living memory because the two approaches involve fundamentally different perspectives as to how to create a stable, prosperous country. Indeed, people who have grown up under a dictatorship

may fear that conscientisation may create instability. However, while awareness of oppression without the skills to transform it peacefully and cooperatively can lead to dynamic, even destabilising, action, peace education provides skills to enable peaceful change that enhances rather than undermines social structures. This approach seeks to catalyse transformation rather than attempting to instil structured knowledge in an attempt to make people think in a certain way; thus, its aim is to enable people to make decisions more creatively and positively and to think more critically about their part in their situation, so to have a better chance in their existence in Kurdistan. As the findings below indicate, currently, women feel powerless, lack self-confidence and have a common sense of victimhood which means they are not contributing positively. This paper argues that through peace education, they can come to feel a sense of self-worth and become catalysts of positive change. Moreover, women's agency not only works for the benefit of women but has been shown to enhance the wellbeing of all around them, not only their families (Sen 1999: 191).

4. Methodology

The primary data collected for this paper comes from qualitative interviews made over years of interest in ending violence against women. In particular, the researcher conducted interviews with six individual women working in local organisations concerned with women's situation: two from the Violence against Women Directorate, two from the Sulymania branch of the local NGO, Asuda,[1] one from the Khanzad Centre for Women,[2] and another

[1] See http://asuda.krd/
[2] Khanzad Centre provides consultancy, legal aid, awareness training, a hot-line and shelter for women in danger.

women from a local NGO that did not want its name to be mentioned. All three NGOs work to combat violence against women; consequently, all these interviewees' work involves violence against women. The names of the informants are withheld for reasons of confidentiality.

Data for nine months period in ...	Number who were killed	Number who committed suicide	Number who were burnt	Number who committed self-immolation	Number tortured and reporting VAWDA	Number who were sexually abused
2016	30	60	169	72	4,814	77
2017	38	58	166	95	6,987	101
2018	47	72	149	110	9573	107
2019	50	60	155	95	10899	180
2020	29	61	115	No data	85031	191
2021	23	60	86	No data	13249	119

The research also draws on the author's experience teaching conflict assessment in the Peace and Human Rights Department of Duhok University. In addition, quantitative data gathered by the Directorate for Combating Violence against Women was used, as well as research conducted by Kurdish authors abroad and in Iraq in the field of gender violence. The research findings are presented below, categorised according to the significant issues that arose during data collection and the author's teaching experience so as to reflect specific issues experienced by women in Iraqi Kurdistan.

5. Findings Direct violence

Statistics from the Directorate for Combating Violence against Women demonstrate that endemic violence against women is on the increase despite the efforts of women's NGOs and government initiating domestic laws of violence against women. These are presented in the table below, which not only demonstrates

an increase in violence of 28.9% during the nine months of 2017 (compared to the nine months of 2016), but also the specific forms of abuse prevalent in Iraqi Kurdistan. It is notable that those suffering torture and violence against women and domestic abuse (VAWDA) increased by over 50% and those who were sexually abused by almost 50%, while those committing self-immolation also dramatically increased. The women who committed suicide violence stayed the same, the women reported VAWDA were on increase, the women who were sexually abused stayed the same.

Table 1: Reported numbers of women experiencing various forms of violence during 2016 and 2017[1]

(Directorate for Combating Violence against Women 2017)

Moreover, the actual number of cases might be even higher; Mohammed Komsheni, spokesman for the Committee of Human Rights of the KRG, stated that statistics released by different agencies regarding sexual violence against women do not represent the real size of sexual violence against women. He argues that traditions and customs practiced in Kurdistan prevent disseminating the real statistics (Alsabah Aljadid 2017).

It should be noted that emotional abuse presents a much more pernicious problem, not only because it is especially difficult to gather statistics relating to this. As one informant from a local NGO stated, "not only is emotional abuse more prevalent than physical abuse, it is also more impactful and problematic in that it is difficult to be prove, likely not to be believed by the family of victims or considered too trivial to be discussed. Consequently, it tends to be more insidious since the damage it does is less visible, it is especially difficult to deal with, publicly and

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[1] For comparison, the population of Iraqi Kurdistan is approximately 5 million.

privately" (interviews with Asuda staff, December 2017).

Norms, roles and attitudes

According to all the interviewees, gender differences are embedded in the social context of Iraqi Kurdistan in various forms of cultural violence directed against women. For instance, certain duties are considered strictly feminine, such as cooking, cleaning, changing nappies and looking after the house. However, while the household, and most specifically the kitchen, is considered a woman's domain of expertise, these very important duties have low status and not recognised as real work.

The interviewees reported that many forms of violation lie in the mindset of many Kurdish people, men and women. For instance, many people say, 'Why invest in other people belongings?'; meaning that it is not worth spending money on girls or taking good care of them as when they get married they will leave the house and become the property of someone else. The informant from Khanzad Center argued that "many parents say that they cannot support their daughter as people will make jokes about them, saying the parents fear their daughter". Meanwhile, as an informant working in Asuda explained, "women who cannot have children need to bear their suffering without support, and they have to accept all kinds of behaviour from mother in laws, husbands and sisters, because they cannot have babies; otherwise, the man will marry another woman".

Thus, the respondents emphasised how women's inferiority is embedded in people's attitudes independent of ethnicity, expressed in everyday actions and practices, and internalized through daily speech. Everyday discourse and practice in Kurdish culture reflects the belief that a woman should not speak her mind, even though she might be right. Moreover, she

should not work outside the home, even when her financial contribution is needed. When women do get the opportunity to work outside and even to be economically independent, they have to do housework after work. Not only should women be covered, they should also not be mentioned. For example, it is considered shameful for a man to mention a women's name in public; thus, inhibiting any public identity. Because of these social strictures, many women prefer not to inquire about anything, even when it concerns them, nor to speak with men even when they have a good reason. Thus, normalisation of women's low status is perpetuated in everyday life and attitudes.

Language

Hassanpoor's (2001:227) research indicates that "unequal distribution of gender power is clearly recorded in the Kurdish language, which is one of the ignored yet powerful sites in the exercise of patriarchal rule". This demands that women's role and responsibility is at home. In everyday interaction, 'home' has become a synonym of 'woman'; indeed, we hear people says "mal na lmalen" which means "home without a woman is not home". This means that women's work is at home and she needs to be home. Other people refer to the kitchen as the house of the women.

Moreover, if a man behaves badly (such as breaking promises or not working properly), people call him the wife of men or tell him that he is a woman. Similarly, a man who does not conform to the male cultural norms of the society is called a woman as an insult, and if a man does not dominate his wife, he is said to be weak and scared of his wife, people make fun of him. Indeed, when the researcher discussed this in class, students – males and females – laughed and made fun of it. They did not take it seriously as it is considered material for jokes.

There are many other words and phrases in everyday speech and communications that reflect and reinforce assumptions about women's inferiority, as researched in detail by Hassanpour (2001). Such issues related to language arise in many situations.

Current solutions

Despite the good efforts of the KRG in setting up the six directorates to deal with violence against women, only one of these is run by a woman and, among the 28 sub-offices, only two are run by women. Similarly, in all 21 government ministries, only one minister is a woman.

The only official way for women to get out of the circle of violence is to report their suffering to the police. However, most police officers running these stations are men, so the survivors normally talk to men, which can be humiliating, and who encourage the victim to revoke the case and compromise. Then, there are mediators in the Violence Against Women station who attempt to resolve such issues. In addition, reporting violence exposes women to stigma and shame, which further disempowers women by undermining their self-confidence. This has left some women with no effective way of expressing their frustration and grief except to commit self-immolation as a message of protest against injustice.

There is also a socio-cultural aspect to reporting the issue, as women do not get any support even from close family or the community when seeking justice. Often women see no exit since women culturally need to maintain patience in all circumstances. People, including women, understand that separation from a violent husband will be a problem for the children, who will also be socially stigmatised. Shelters are like prisons, where women and children are shut inside the building, unable to go out, and they live under threat. An informant from Asuda

said, "often women come and seek help but after some time they regret doing so, and go back to their husbands. Women find no safe way, if they go to their parents, often the parents send their daughter back to her husband."

Several of the woman from local NGOs criticized the government for not doing enough in supporting their aims. But the government cannot be blamed for every misfortune women suffer; sometimes, the government may find itself in a difficult and conflicting situation as the solution adopted by government and supported by women's NGOs is against human rights principles. For example, as one interviewee explained, the law states that the minimum penalty for rape is five years imprisonment. The perpetrator can also be executed by hanging, if the rape included severe violence or the victim was a 'taboo relative'. But the law also says that the perpetrator can be freed if he marries the victim and stays in the marriage for three years before divorcing her (Harikar NGO 2017). In suggesting a rapist should marry his victim, the law itself constitutes a violation of women's rights: violence is solved by more violence. While some may argue that the government has no other alternative since, otherwise, it is likely that the woman's family will kill her, binding the marriage for three years can cause extreme suffering and humiliation. If the rapist divorces the victim after three years, he will be free – but what about the victim's situation afterwards? To some extent, this is a provocative law which can encourage men to rape women without fear of punishment.

Decision-making

In principle, women have the right to take part in all decision-making activities and, in theory, women's freedom is no more curtailed by laws and official structures than men. However,

since women lack self-confidence and are likely to be stigmatised when they assume decision-making positions equal to men, this presents invisible barriers to women taking part in decision-making processes. Indeed, there is a Kurdish saying that says "consult women but do not listen to them".

Moreover, knowledge about women leaders and roles in decision-making is rarely mentioned in the school curriculum and, while the number of women schoolteachers strongly outweighs that of male teachers, the number of women holding school managerial/decision-making posts are very few (Mohammed 2015). Thus, however many structural changes are made, this situation is unlikely to change without promoting women's self-esteem and strengthening their confidence.

Similarly, cultural barriers also hinder women from seeking political office. Women are supposed to be seen but not heard, in Kurdistan people refer to such women as 'men' to signify politics is a man's job. Although the interviewees indicated that this is changing and has become less emphasised in recent years, there is still much to discourage women from vying for these decision-making positions and most would rather abide by the norm even if it limits them. One informant from the women's centre of a political party said that "although my political party has nominated me to be a candidate for Parliament, and I wanted to be nominated, but my family did not like it, so I did not accept the offer … I am defending women rights but sometimes it's very rigid, one has to abide by the norms". Moreover, as one interviewee highlighted, there is little liaison between women who have attained decision-making positions and campaigners at grassroots level.

Interpretations of Islamic Religion In

general, religion shapes people's behaviour,

attitudes, worldviews, interactions and those who make religion part of their daily life are most respected. According to the interviewees, in Kurdistan, whichever religion they follow, women are preferred to be pious, covered, to be quiet and talk little. A woman must submit to a husband since in all Kurdish religions it says that *if a woman is to prostrate herself to someone, it should be to her husband*.

Interviewees were concerned that, by differentiating between the roles of women and men, religion is used to discourage women from aspiring to fulfilling achievements and instead to confine them strictly to domestic chores and duties whilst giving men much wider responsibilities,; thus, strengthening male dominance. Women are conventionally kept out of the public sphere including the pulpit. Their place is to listen, not talk. Men's responsibility is to take care of his wife and family. This demotivates women, why should a woman seek empowerment if she is destined to sit at home and carry out house chores to perfection? Moreover, religion often dictates more restrictive and self-abnegating clothes for women. Meanwhile, early marriage is still prevalent based on the argument that if a girls marries very young she will not to deviate. Overall, Kurdish religions prescribe that a woman must be good, talk very little, and be obedient to her family, brother and husbands; a very frustrating and demeaning social role.

6. Discussion

From the findings above, it is clear that despite the structural changes enacted by the government, women's situation remains oppressive both in terms of direct violence and the restrictions they face in life opportunities. In terms of direct violence (i.e., the visible part of the Triangle of Violence, Figure 1), it is notable that torture, domestic and sexual abuse have all significantly increased, indicating the deterioration in women's situation and their greater suffering. Regarding the relationship between attitudes and behaviour, the data demonstrates how women's low status is reflected in discriminatory practices that go beyond direct physical violence in that they hamper women's ability to develop their potential to contribute to society beyond and within the home. This is not only deeply frustrating for most women in Iraqi Kurdistan (even a tragedy as the significant rise in self-immolation indicates the severest desperation), it is also a loss to our society as a whole. We lose their potentially very valuable contribution to public life while our private lives are characterised by friction due the inequalities and resentments inherent in it.

Here, it is worth focusing on the two most significant societal influences directly affecting women's situation and thus comprising the context of women's experience; religion and patriarchal beliefs. While religion provides us with spiritual guidance and an important moral framework, it is also used to legitimate women's subordination. However, many perspectives are represented in religious texts. Moreover, many people legitimise statements that are not from religion by claiming or implying that they are. Or they take a religious text that is relevant to one incident in the distant past and apply it to modern day life, or generalise it to all contexts.

Furthermore, cultural traditions are sustained by interpretations of religion that support specific perspectives and dismiss other perspectives that are also represented in all religious texts. For example, since most Islamic texts have been written in Arabic, most Muslim preachers in Kurdistan have gained their knowledge from other preachers through word of mouth, consequently it inevitably reflects the personal bias or prejudice of their teacher.

Meanwhile, the Qur'an itself provides us with numerous exhortations to treat women well. For example, "among God's signs is this: He created for you mates from amongst yourselves (males […] for females and vice versa) that you might find tranquillity and peace in them. And he has put love and kindness among you. Herein surely are signs for those who reflect." (Qur'an, 30: 21). There are many more examples of God's desire that women should be treated well and/or equally including a statement in Prophet Muhammed's Last Sermon exhorting people to do so.[1] These are as valid as those parts of the scriptures that advocate domination of women.

Thus, it is a choice whether or not to interpret Islamic teaching as representing a peace-loving religion in which women are valued. Consequently, the influence to focus on those parts of Islamic teachings that favour violence and inequality comes not from Islam itself but from other cultural sources; in particular, entrenched patriarchal beliefs.

Patriarchal dominance is supported and sustained by social, cultural and political institutions; and protected through the threat of punishment. Thus, it is a systematic and pervasive form of cultural and structural violence that has been reinforced over generations, along with social instabilities and women's unnecessary suffering. One of the most significant findings of this research was that most women have very low confidence and do not wish to put themselves forward, particularly if this goes against the customs of their families and exemplifies the contradictions that women face. Sulaiman's studies of domestic violence in Kurdistan (2013:80), which found that 80% of her women respondents

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[1] Further examples: Qur'an 3: 195; Qur'an 2: 187; Qur'an 2: 228; Qur'an 9: 71 among many others

suffered more than one form of abuse, demonstrated that because in Kurdish culture women are often considered troublemakers and/or lacking in knowledge, they lose self-confidence and are unaware of their subordination or think it is justified. This makes them complicit in maintaining patriarchal dominance and indeed preaching it to the next generation. For example, female genital mutilation, which constitutes an act of direct violence and is used to control female sexual desire, is generally supported by Kurdish women as well as men – however as cultural practice this constitutes cultural violence. Moreover, until 2011, this was supported by structural violence in that there was no law condemning it, which meant that the practice was accepted and perceived as normal. However, although it has been criminalized since 2011, not a single case has been taken to court (Rudaw Radio 2017).

Even when it comes to finding solutions, men are considered better able to find solutions for women's issues, as exemplified by the scarcity of women in decision-making positions in the directorates for violence against women. This implies that men must know better how to resolve women's issues and women are not capable of this (Rojnew 2018). Nevertheless, women have proven themselves able to make valuable contributions both in Kurdistan and around the world. Thus, as Einstein asserts, patriarchy can be understood as a "system of oppression that recognizes the potential power of women and the actual power of men. Its purpose is to destroy a woman's consciousness about her potential power" (Einstein in Juschka 2001:327). This reflects Hassanpour's findings (2001:227), who argues that "[Kurdish] women have been denied the right to control their own bodies, sexuality, and sexual desire. [This right] is conferred on the male members of the family,

tribe, community, nation, and the modern state".

Thus, over time, many other cultural norms have become intertwined with religion, and what is considered acceptable has changed a great deal. Regarding this, it is important to remember that societies have always changed over time and it is natural for them to do so. Therefore, we need to focus on how those changes can be most beneficial to society as a whole – men and women, and to ensure that they happen as harmoniously as possible so as to be sustainable.

7. Peace education as a solution

So how can peace education provide a solution that improves women's status and reduces abuse in a way that benefits society, is sustainable, and evolves without causing unnecessary or irresolvable conflict and social disruption? Moreover, one that respects the teaching of Islam? The core idea is to develop critical consciousness among learners, enabling them to question the nature of their historical and social situation, to interpret their world with the goal of acting as subjects in the creation of a more peaceful society. This is very different to contemporary teaching in Kurdistan (and much of the world including many Western countries), which depends on what is known as the 'banking system' of education. In this, the student is viewed as an empty 'bank account' to be filled with knowledge by the teacher (Freire 1970). Freire challenges these modes of learning which involve coercion and non-participation, and argues that to create a more peaceful society we need to enhance the learner's role to bring experiential as well as theoretical knowledge into learning.

Making power more balanced

It is clear that the findings relate to the Triangle of Violence introduced above which represents the relationship between structural, cultural

and physical violence and, to understand how peace education can help transform this situation, we need to look in more detail at the process represented in the second triangle. This indicates the need to encourage change in attitudes – alongside structural changes – to enable change in behaviour, thus, catalysing a process of empowerment that can lead to positive change for society as a whole. Figure 3 below maps out this process in detail.
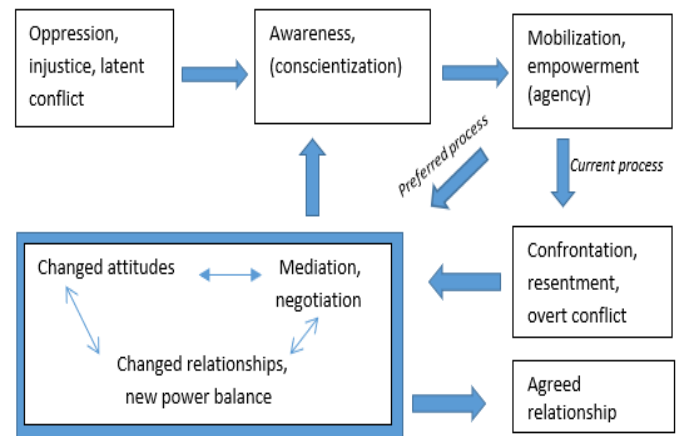
(adapted from Fisher, S., Abdi D. et al. 2000:121)

Figure 3: The process of transforming oppression

Putting Iraqi Kurdish women's situation into this diagram: women experience oppression, marginalisation and discrimination and to deal with this they need to understand their own situation well (conscientisation) before confronting the issues. If women have sufficient resources, both in terms of skills and of support, this leads to negotiation and eventually to a new consensual relationship.

However, the current process addressing violence against women, follows the other course represented in the diagram. Also, while some women have become leaders working at the top level, including Parliament, and many work at grassroots level, there is little constructive liaison/communication between

the two. There is communication between women leaders and policy makers in government but there is lack of grassroots involvement in the process. Women leaders place importance on changing the context (laws), but less so on changing attitudes and feelings. To catalyse positive change, women need collective power, that is shared among individuals. They need to be able to work effectively at conscientisation to enable negotiation and mediation so as to change the attitudes of people. If initial attempts fail, they must return to the conscientisation stage to understand why and then start the process again. This involves developing collective capabilities to organize and mobilize themselves through a good, solid network that includes women from all levels of society, and is supported by men. Otherwise, as the diagram indicates, attempts to deal with issues lead to confrontation, rather than resolution.

How can women change the unbalanced power and reach agreed equal status? Below I set out how the introduction of peace education programs can provide an effective way of managing this process in a constructive way.

Introducing peace education in practice

Peace education involves a holistic life-skills approach to understanding the daily functioning of society, not only providing knowledge and skills but also influencing attitudes and behaviours. Through this, it endeavours to enable individuals to function better in a complex and changing society, the aim being to foreground positive practices and encourage group discussion of associated logic and myths. It can take many forms: it can be integrated into all schools subjects or be incorporated as a specific subject, such as human rights education, in the KRG curriculum; and can involve workshops, training and seminars at all societal levels. It can be introduced in protracted ethnic conflicts, such as between Palestine and Israel, and in peaceful societies such as Norway and Sweden, Here, I specifically consider training and workshops in women's NGOs.

The transformative element of peace education lies in its participatory nature, and it relies on families, communities, and social networks to affect positive and lasting change. The underlying philosophy seeks to prepare learners for active and responsible citizenship in the process of addressing all forms of violence. Using an inquiry-based methodology, it encourages learners to be reflective, think outside the box, and see things from others' perspectives. It uses experiential learning where participants bring their suffering into the class and discuss it (Dewey 1989). In this section, I highlight issues that need to be considered in introducing peace education, focusing particularly on those that are most relevant to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Recommendations Approach

The approach taken must not only involve cultural/conflict-sensitivity but also be participatory. Participants not only need to understand the importance of the work but to feel part of it, be able to identify with the issues it highlights and the process adopted. Thus, they themselves decide the methodology to use, the contents to include and how solutions should be implemented; for instance, some may prefer to do so using arts, other may prefer discussion or political work. Whatever is chosen, participation is crucial. Since women in Kurdistan lack confidence, it is important to ensure that the space feels safe.

Awareness creation

This is the process that supports conscientisation and aims to address cultural and structural violence so as to enhance sustainable development at these levels.

Trainers use games and activities involving role-play, drama, stories and discussions that reflect participants' reality and which are designed to encourage learning through interaction. After each activity, there is always some time for reflection, in which they share thoughts and feelings arising from their experience. Then, lessons learnt from the exercise are discussed. It is important for trainers to be aware that these sessions can involve sensitive issues especially where religion is involved and to take into account the various ethnic cultures that exist in Kurdistan, using a language that everyone understands.

Capacity-building through training

A great deal of training is required for those passing on information on peace education at grassroots level to be effective. Such training should be held for both women and men within communities. Training would give an opportunity to the intended beneficiaries not only to learn but also to have a platform from which to make queries and seek clarification. Qualities developed include gender sensitivity, caring and empathy, understanding non-violence and reconciliation, social responsibility, respect for human dignity and difference, and solidarity.

For peace education to have significant effect, such capacity-building must be shared among community leaders, teachers and all who shape the minds of students, as well as NGOs and the media. If the training is also extended to policymakers, they will be aware of the potential of peace education when adopting new policies.

Female Role Models

While awareness creation helps participants to develop an understanding of the oppression inherent in their situation, and training supports agency, role models provide an understanding of the positive effects of agency. Thus, participants can gain valuable inspiration by learning about women who have succeeded in their chosen, competitive careers – and, despite the severe challenges, several respected Kurdish women have become successful in a range of professions, including writers and businesswomen, such as Najiba Ahmad and Kani Ahmed, respectively. This can give girls hope and encouragement that they can attain what they desire and it would also enable boys to look at the girls differently to improve girls' chances of getting equal treatment; thus, enhancing equity, progressive development and peace.

Advocacy

If peace education is to have a far-reaching effect that reflects the needs of the community, certain key people need to be encouraged to advocate women-orientated peace education; these include men and women, especially community leaders and religious leaders. These are the people who are most able to understand the needs of their communities and can be aware of the cultural values that influence structural violence against women, therefore they can explain the potential of peaceful change to people in their communities, including the advantages and opportunities that peace education holds for them. It is especially important for women to be cognizant of the concepts of peace education and able to internalize their importance for its implementation to be effective so they can gain a sense of ownership and authorship. Otherwise, if women themselves are not open to this transformative change, the intended objectives will not be attained.

For peace education to be viable on a large scale in Kurdistan, these community leaders need to utilise the agency they develop through training to employ advocacy in influencing

Members of Parliament, so the government can ensure implementation throughout the region.

Specific challenges

The paper identified three relevant issues that are specific to Iraqi Kurdistan: the multi-ethnic nature of the culture that has a long history of conflict, the long-term effects of education under Saddam Hussein and the hiatus between grassroots campaigners and women who have attained positions through which they can influence structural change. For the latter, workshops involving women from both these groups could be an effective way to bridge this gap.

To allow for the effects of the very different form of education most Iraqi adults received, it would be best to first create awareness through unofficial means such as informal workshops and seminars to avoid participants feeling pressured to agree with their trainers. To support this, civil society organizations including local NGOs, faith-based institutions, and the participants' communities (male members included) could introduce peace education focussed on violence against women, as well as government and the INGOs later providing official training in their awareness programs.

To sum up, the aim of peace education in the long term is to address the deep structure and cultures that have developed over many years and so it will not change immediately but it is a healthy option and, as the saying goes, a journey of a hundred miles begins with a single step.

8. Conclusion

The paper considered the specifics of violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan, in particular, how cultural and structural violence interact and reinforce each other, and support direct violence. It showed that, although some structural restraints have been reduced, direct violent abuse is increasing with a growing number of Kurdish women even choosing self-immolation as preferable to their current situation. This indicates a truly shameful level of suffering that should be the concern of all society, men and women, especially since treating women well is in accordance with the Qur'an. It then explored how, as an experiential form of learning, peace education can enable men and women to recognise violating behaviour that they had previously taken for granted and to better understand how much of their suffering stems from the context and contradictions in their situation that arise from prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination, in which they live; as well as how to build self-esteem and confidence, and to become catalysts of peaceful change.

Overall, peace education stresses the importance of tackling contradictions and changing attitudes over and above punishing abusive behaviour. It provides a positive and constructive approach, including tools for peaceful resolution, and emphasizes that it is essential that this be part of an integrated process so increased awareness leads to cooperative and sustainable solutions rather than increased suffering and resentment, even disruptive behaviour.

Rather than to dismiss the impressive work by grassroots organisers and the structural changes enacted by government, the author hopes that the results from the study can provide groundwork for further academic discussion and support for women already working in the field. Moreover, action promoting the efficacy of implementation will be crucial in furthering the argument for gender-aware peace education. In particular, it can provide a means to address the hiatus between grassroots activists and women who have attained positions through which they can influence structural change. This can enhance

communication and liaison between the grassroots level and the middle level (academia, NGOs, religious leaders) and the top level (parliamentarians and policy makers level), which is essential to achieve sustainable solutions. Thus, by working cooperatively change can be catalysed on all side (changing the behaviour, the context and the attitudes to be more effective. However, the paper does not pretend to cover all the issues in particular multi-ethnic issues and the specificities of other ethnic religions need further focus but to lay the groundwork to support women already working in the field at all levels.

Indeed, this is why peace education is so important as, unless the country is completely isolated from changes in the outside world, awareness and discontent will inevitably develop. Where there is oppression it is inevitable that there will also be the potential for conflict and disruption. While patriarchal influence has been dominant for centuries, so also have societal instabilities along with women's unnecessary suffering. make the issues more complicated as it leads to more resentment, so violence increases. Since the attitudes and belief of people are not changed and resentment increase, people will always to try to find ways of expressing their resentment. Especially women consider vulnerable and lack power. – both men and women need to become more conscious of women's situation.

Peace education can support long-term solutions that not only provide diagnoses but also prognoses and therapy for this chronic problem. as a possible and viable solutions to end the structural and cultural violence against women in Kurdistan and in doing so, enriching society as a whole. Some may argue that it is necessary to beat women, but this will only compound the problem since, when people become demoralised, they are resentful and less able to act intelligently and cooperatively. On the other hand, if women are valued, they can act with self-respect rather than resentment and contribute positively to society, both within the home and more widely. Thus, by improving women's situation not only will we alleviate their suffering but also help Iraqi Kurdistan to thrive.

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