

Investigating Kurdish Women's Experiences With Education
in Kurdistan With Respect to Oppression

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Abstract

The following thesis provides a qualitative study that sought to answer the question: What do Kurdish women's experiences reveal about women's education in Kurdistan with respect to oppression? The study was framed within a postcolonial feminist framework to investigate Kurdish women's lived experiences within education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The study used feminist research methods to collect and analyze data. Through purposeful sampling, 5 Kurdish women living in the KRI were recruited and interviewed by the researcher through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. The researcher used an interpretive approach for data analysis to investigate participants' experiences as women and as members of an ethnic minority. The study was conducted through a postcolonial feminist lens, which highlighted the unique social categories in which Kurdish women find themselves. The study found that the women's lived experiences were determined by the intersections of gender, ethnicity, religion, location, SES, and age, among other social categories. Such categories affect women's quality of life, freedom, and education, as identified by the women themselves. Further, the women identified the following factors acting as barriers that impede their equal access to education and opportunities: gender norms, family, culture, distance, disability, language, and conflict. The study also lays out how women make sense of and cope with such barriers and inequality, before concluding with recommendations for changes based on participants' knowledge and lived experiences.

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Glossary

- GER – Gross Enrolment Ratio
- ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
- KDP – Democratic Party of Kurdistan
- KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government
- KRI – Kurdistan Region of Iraq
- NER – Net Enrolment Ratio
- PKK – Kurdistan Workers’ Party
- PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
- QI – Qualitative Interview
- YPJ – Women’s Protection Unit

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The following thesis provides a qualitative study of Kurdish women's views on education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) with respect to oppression. The research aims to gain an understanding of what Kurdish women's experiences reveal about women's education in locations affected by war or armed conflict. Further, more research on marginalized Kurdish women is required to uncover how those who are affected by such conflicts view the intersections of their ethnicity, gender, and class with respect to education and conflict, how they make sense of such issues and cope with disruptions to education, and how they manage to overcome the obstacles affecting their educational attainment pre, post, and during conflict. This question is crucial as it pertains to the Kurdistan region for women who were affected in past conflicts as well as women who are being affected at present due to the war against the terrorist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Thus, while war and conflict undoubtedly produce adverse impacts on a given population, for the purpose of this research, it is crucial to move beyond the question of *whether or not* the education of females in Kurdistan is affected during times of violent conflict, and instead ask if they are able to effectively access schooling *despite* the possible negative effects. Further, it is essential to hear women's experiences with education in the KRI through their own voices, rather than the voices of those speaking for them. The unique geo-political situation of Kurdistan can provide valuable insight on women's educational experiences, specifically those regarding oppression.

Following the downfall of Saddam Hussein, post-2003 Kurdistan was viewed as the success story of Iraq due to the rapidly growing social, economic, and political

transformations. However, after only a decade, conflict returned as the KRI was drawn into the war against ISIS in 2014 after the Syrian Civil War. This led to an influx of approximately 3.5 million refugees and internally displaced persons taking refuge within Iraq, 46% of whom were living within the KRI by 2015 (Karasapan & Kulaksiz, 2015). In addition to population shifts and war that strained the economy, the region experienced further economic instability due to the Iraqi government withholding the Kurdistan Regional Government's share of the national budget (Backawan & Joly, 2016), further weakening the already-fragile, short-lived stability the KRG built in the post-Saddam era.

Although armed conflicts and instability undoubtedly affect the whole population within a region, research shows that women and children are often disproportionately affected during times of war (Osler & Yahya, 2013). Similarly, women are disproportionately overrepresented within refugee and IDP communities and are left to bear the responsibilities of familial care during times of war and disaster (Brigham, 2014). This has been the case for Kurdish women during and after times of wars and conflicts, as women were left bearing total familial responsibility due to the disappearance of men and boys in the family (Ahmad, Sofi, Sundelin-Wahlsten, & von Knorring, 2000).

As well, the impacts of armed conflict on gender differentials in school appear to be highly context specific. The effects of each conflict are sensitive to the specific events and location of that conflict, along with preexisting levels of educational attainment before war and during times of no war (Buvinić, Gupta, & Shemyakina, 2013). At the time this study was conducted, the effects of the war against ISIS had left the region in a social, political, economic, and humanitarian crisis. Nearly every sector of society had

witnessed immediate negative effects, including serious security threats, delays and cuts in civil servants' salaries, schools being used to house refugees and IDPs, the resulting decrease of available public school buildings, and the postponement of the 2014 academic year.

Statement of the Problem Context

Due to the unique historical, geopolitical context of the KRI, there is often missing or limited data available regarding the population and education of the region. Much of the research presented on education in Iraq and the Kurdistan region relies on statistics and data from Iraqi government records. Even when such data and information on Iraq as a whole does exist, the KRI is often excluded. While the available literature suggests that children's access to education is disrupted during times of war and conflict (Buvinić et al., 2013), there is a gap in the understanding of Kurdish women's experiences with education as female students with respect to oppression.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to explore Kurdish women's experiences in education with respect to oppression for five Kurdish women living in the KRI. This study addressed the central question, "What do Kurdish women's experiences reveal about women's education in Kurdistan with respect to oppression"? Subquestions included:

- How do Kurdish women make sense of their experiences with education as women living in war zones?
- How do women describe their experiences with oppression in the KRI and do they think this has a relationship with their education?

- How do Kurdish women view education in the KRI?
- What kinds of emotions, attitudes, or factors motivate women in war zones to obtain or discontinue pursuing education?

Rationale and Importance of the Study

The Kurds are a distinct ethnic group with a unique linguistic, historical, and cultural identity, and although they are predominately Sunni Muslim, they adhere to a number of religions and creeds, such as Christianity, Judaism, Yezidism, and Zoroastrianism (Van Bruinessen, n.d.). The population of Kurds worldwide is estimated at 36 to 45 million (The Kurdish Institute, n.d.), “although it is impossible to obtain accurate demographic figures for Kurds from the countries in which they reside for political reasons” (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 159), making Kurdish people the largest ethnic group in the world without a state of their own (Glavin, 2015; Jimenez & Kabachnik, 2012). They are also the largest ethnic minority in Iraq, with estimates ranging from 25 to 27% of the total population (The Kurdish Institute, n.d.). Numbering 5.2 million in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG, 2018a, para. 1), Kurds primarily inhabit the Kurdish governorates of Duhok, Erbil, and Slemani.

Despite the tremendous sociocultural, geopolitical, and historic differences amongst the population of Iraq, the discourse on Iraqis often focuses solely on the dominant group in the country, the majority Arab population. Further, the experiences of Arab women located in Central and South Iraq are often generalized with the experiences of all Iraqi females. As I describe further in chapter 2, the discussion around Iraqi and Middle Eastern women often excludes Kurdish women and women of other minority groups in Iraq, unless it is a study that is explicitly focusing on the North or on Kurdish women.

As Mojab (2001) explains, production and publication of literature on Kurdish women are significantly underrepresented in Middle Eastern studies. She argues that it is challenging and at times impossible to conduct research on Kurdish women in Greater Kurdistan, the areas in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey which have historically been predominately inhabited by Kurds (2001, p. 10). Mojab (2001) posits that there is a double exclusion at work. The Kurds are excluded from Middle Eastern studies establishments and Kurdish women are excluded from studies of Middle Eastern women. A third form of exclusion is the non-presence of diasporan Kurdish women in the women's studies programs in Europe and North America. (pp. 11-12)

Mojab adds that such exclusions result in a decreased interest by publishers to produce literature on Kurdish women's studies, which results in fewer resources for researchers interested in Kurdish studies, thus, less research being conducted (2011, pp. 11-12). The evident gaps in the literature on Kurdish women demonstrates the need for further research, specifically, in the area of Kurdish women's perspectives of education in relation to oppression in Kurdistan

As a result of international intervention in the 1990s and early 2000s, Kurdistan Region's ability to self-govern led to significant developments for women in the North, and was a hope for transformations for women in the region. Although this contradicts the dominant discourse surrounding Western intervention in Iraq, Kurdish women's existence and experiences must also be recognized within the discourse around Middle Eastern women and Iraqi women. By recognizing Kurdish women and the multiplicity of oppression they endured as subjects on the outskirts of society and far from the dominant discourse, we can begin to learn and better understand Kurdish women's experiences,

knowledge, social position, their education, and the impacts of armed conflicts on their lives. Furthermore, by gaining an understanding of Kurdish women's lived experiences in their own voices rather than in the voices of those speaking for them or generalizing their experiences with the experiences of the dominant group, positive changes can be made for women's and girls' education in the region.

Although the findings of a research study of this nature are not generalizable across time and locations, researchers and general audiences interested in understanding female education globally, especially in regions that face armed conflicts may also learn and benefit from this research. Moreover, women's rights activists, educators, policy-makers, and NGOs may also find the research beneficial, potentially leading to positive, permanent social change. Thus, it is imperative that research such as this study be conducted in order to fill gaps in the literature, add to the knowledge base, and contribute the understanding of gendered education in the KRI, and the effects that oppression play on women's education.

Outline of the Document

This paper is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 illustrated an overview of the study and situates the research study within the broader context of the research on Kurdistan, Kurdish women, education, and oppression. The chapter also provides the purpose, rationale, and importance of the study. Chapter 2 reviews the literature and theories connected to the study. The chapter begins by providing a more detailed understanding of the colonial history of Kurdistan and Iraq, followed by a presentation of the current geopolitical context of the KRI, then turning the focus to women in Kurdistan. Chapter 2 also presents an outline of postcolonialism and feminist theory, the theoretical

lens through which this study will be examined, followed by a presentation of the relevant literature on education in Iraq in connection with violent conflict. The chapter also addresses international declarations on education, the variables through which access to education is often measured, and the gaps that exist in the literature with respect to this topic. In addition, chapter 2 discusses the missing or inaccurate information within figures on the Kurdish population in Iraq and data on women and education. Chapter 3 lays out the research design, methodology and specific research methods employed within the study. Information regarding the criteria for site selection and participant recruitment, data collection methods, data analysis details such as transcribing and coding, and ethical considerations and limitations of the study are also presented within this chapter. The key findings of the research are presented in chapter 4. Finally, chapter 5 summarizes the research study and findings and provides the theoretical and practical implications. The chapter also outlines possible recommendations for future research, and concludes with final thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The lives of civilian populations in areas affected by violent conflict are interrupted in a multitude of ways, the extent of which can be determined by various factors. Research suggests that educational attainment is negatively impacted by armed conflict (Buvinić et al., 2013), and that children's education is interrupted due to "damage to schools, absence of teachers, fears of insecurity and changes in family structures and household income" (Justino, 2010, p. 3). Even when violent conflict is not a factor, the negative impacts of ethnic inequalities and social class are compounded for women, as shown through research on 49 countries worldwide (Lloyd, 2005, as cited in Stromquist, 2006).

In countries recovering from the effects of war in post-conflict eras, societal norms and institutionalized discrimination can prevent girls from obtaining an equal education. For example, low attendance and enrollment rates for girls occur due to various reasons, including "attitudes to girls and education, the state of the nation's schools, what is taught and how it is taught, the skills and attitudes of teachers, family poverty" (Griffiths, 2010, p. 19), in addition to factors such as the nature of the curriculum, harassment, safety and security issues, and damage to schools and infrastructure (Subrahmanian, 2005). Research demonstrates that educated women are better equipped to sustain human development, join the labour market, make better-informed decisions on marriage, health, children, child health, and become active in the political arena than are non-educated women (Stromquist, 2006). The remainder of this chapter reviews and weaves together research on gender and education in conflict-affected areas, with particular focus on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The chapter

presents the contextual background of Kurdistan, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, followed by the theoretical perspectives that will frame the study, and the existing literature on education and violent conflict.

Historical Context: Sykes-Picot

As of 2016, exactly 100 years have passed since Sir Marc Sykes and F. Georges-Picot devised a secret plan called the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Motivated by power and control of the region's natural resources, the agreement laid out a plan to partition the Ottoman Empire into colonies to be mandated by British or French control. In 1917, British forces occupied the province of Baghdad and issued a letter to the inhabitants of the province, stating:

Our military operations have as their object the defeat of the enemy, and the driving of him from these territories. ...I am charged with absolute and supreme control of all regions in which British troops operate; but our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators. (Signed) F.S. Maude, Lieutenant General, Commanding the British Forces in Iraq. (Fisk, 2004, para. 7)

Even though the letter claimed the occupation was not a colonial conquest, the true intentions and plan of the British and French had already been agreed upon a year prior, through the Sykes-Picot Agreement. In addition, the letter signed by the Lieutenant General, Maude, "in fact had been written by Sir Mark Sykes" (Fisk, 2004, para. 20).

When devising the agreement, both the British and French were aware of the oil potential that lay beneath the desired territory, as indicated by the British Secretary of the War Cabinet, Sir Maurice Hankey, who stated, "the retention of the oil-bearing regions in

Mesopotamia and Persia in British hands... would appear to be a first-class British war aim... we should obtain possession of all the oil-bearing regions in Mesopotamia and Southern Persia” (Mejcher, 1976/2018, para. 9). The knowledge of vast petroleum resources in the region is also evidenced through several reports, such as one written by French Professor, Tassart, and sent to the Imperial Crown Lands Department in Paris. In discussing the region’s rich oil supply, Tassart explains, “the biggest part of which is admittedly located in Persian territory, but with a sufficiently large zone left in Turkish Kurdistan” (as cited in Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 701), referring to present-day Mosul.

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the Allied powers and the Turks agreed to the 1920 Treaty of Sevres, which recognized an independent state of Kurdistan, and forced Turkey to surrender its non-Turkish possessions. Instead, after Turkish nationalists rejected the terms of the agreement, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne superseded the Treaty of Sevres (Glavin, 2015), and the promise of an independent Kurdistan was abandoned. Under the British and French Mandate, historically Kurdish territory was divided amongst the newly formed nations of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 1993) and the Soviet Union (Simons, 1994). Without the promised independent nation of Kurdistan, the Kurds subsequently became minorities within the superficial borders of each newly established state.

In Iraq, uprisings against colonial rule were met with a British bombing campaign, demonstrated through reports such as one by Royal Air Force squadron commander, Arthur “Bomber” Harris, who explained, “The Arab and Kurd now know what real bombing means, in casualties and damage” after a mission in 1924; he

continued, “they know that within forty-five minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured” (as cited in Fisk, 2004, para. 33). As well, Winston Churchill’s support of indiscriminate attacks on the indigenous populations as a means of control is shown through his statement, “I am strongly in favor of using poisoned gas against uncivilized tribes...gases can be used which...spread a lively terror” (Simons, 1994, p. xiv). Soon after subjecting inhabitants to such violence, the British established Iraq as a monarchy, placing King Faisal as the monarch “puppet,” while maintaining colonial rule (Simons, 1994).

Although Iraq did eventually gain independence from Britain, the early colonialists’ suppression, bombardments, and chemical gas attacks on indigenous inhabitants became a cycle of violent oppressive rule that would continue and later be used by the dominant nation states as the 20th century unfolded. The borders drawn out by colonialists fostered a century of violence through armed conflicts, wars and genocides, of which Kurds have been on the receiving end. As Anderson and Stansfield (2004) argue, “This injustice is, and will increasingly be, a major destabilizing force in the volatile politics of the Middle East” (p. 159). As well, in order to eliminate any personal, public, or political expression of their Kurdish identity or claim their right to self-determination, severe assimilation policies were implemented in each of these states, most notably in Iraq and Turkey (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004; Mojab & Gorman, 2007). Consequently, due to a strong sense of Kurdish identity, the Kurdish struggle for recognition and unity also evolved into a pan-Kurdish nationalism, calling for the unity of Kurds beyond imperialist-imposed borders. As Bajalan (2009) states, “pan-Kurdish nationalism is an ideology that seeks to unite all ethnic Kurds living within the

boundaries of the Kurdish homeland (Greater Kurdistan) under a single state” (p. 1).

Due to the current political state of the region, the geopolitical complexities, and the resulting barriers of conducting research on the Kurdish population within all of Greater Kurdistan, I will centre my research on the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Setting the Stage: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq

According to Anderson and Stansfield (2004), by the early 2000s it had taken “nearly a century of armed struggle for the Kurds to achieve the level of autonomy currently enjoyed” (p.180). The successive wars and internal turmoil were tragic for the Kurds. In the last few decades alone, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Gulf War (1991), the Iraq War (2003), and the 2014 insurgency by ISIS resulted in much destruction against the Kurdish population and other minorities. However, it was Iraq’s military action against the country’s own civilian population that would prove to cause the most detrimental damage.

Following in line with colonialist means to maintaining power, the Ba’athist government of Iraq maintained strict control of the population through any means necessary, including state-sponsored violence. The state’s control of education, economic, political, military, and social sectors of life meant that it could reward those who cooperated, such as through career advancement, and punish those who didn’t (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 58). The control even extended to rearranging the demographics of entire cities and populations. Since the 1960s, the government succeeded in shifting the demographics of Iraqi Kurdistan, especially cities that were rich in petroleum resources or held strategic significance, through Arabization policies such as

forced displacement. Several hundred thousand Kurds and other non-Arabs were evicted from their homes in northern locations and transferred to deserts in southern Iraq. In addition, oil-rich cities such as Kirkuk and Mosul, were then resettled with Arabs from the country's South, and "the government even gerrymandered the boundaries of Kirkuk to ensure that Arabs were a majority in the key areas of the city, and Kirkuk was renamed to 'Al-Tame'em' (which translates as 'nationalization') to give it a more Arab nationalist flavor" (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 167). In November 1991 alone, 100,000 people were expelled from Kirkuk, and by 2001, the number of Kurds in Iraq forced to leave their homes had reached 500,000 to 600,000 (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004; KRG, 2018b).

Iraq's oppression of the Kurdish population wasn't limited to forced displacement however, and by 1987, "Al-Anfal" was well underway. Al-Anfal, which translates to "the spoils of war," was a sustained campaign targeting the entire Kurdish population (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004). The campaign included the execution, imprisonment, torture, and disappearance of thousands, the systematic use of chemical weapons and nerve agents against civilian populations, the destruction of 4,000 Kurdish villages, and resulted in the mass exodus of refugees fleeing the country into bordering Iran and Turkey. The worst use of chemical weapons was the infamous attack on the Kurdish city of Halabja in 1988, which was hit with a concoction of mustard gas and cyanide, instantly killing 5,000 people including women and children (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004). The regime's genocidal campaigns and Arabization policies ultimately resulted in the death or disappearance of several hundred thousand people, many of whom are still

missing and unaccounted for (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004; Jimenez & Kabachnik, 2012; Voller, 2012).

Due to the gross human rights violations and acts of genocide against the country's minority population by the Iraqi regime, in March 1991, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France imposed two no-fly zones over the North and the South of Iraq respectively ("No-Fly Zones," 2001). The western intervention and implementation of a no-fly zone over the Kurdish regions in the North as well as the Iraqi military's withdrawal from the Kurdish governorates of Erbil, Slemani, and Duhok, mandated by the UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution-688, (Voller, 2015), created a safe haven for refugees to return to Iraq. Increased international attention to the dire situation of the Kurds, coupled with the weakening state of the Iraqi government (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004), provided room and opportunity for a Kurdish semi-autonomous state in Iraq known as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and previously referred to as Northern Iraq.

The region was to be governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and in 1992, the KRG held the first democratic elections the country had seen in decades, beginning the democratization of the KRI (Voller, 2012). The elections led to a coalition government comprised primarily of the two leading political parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK; Voller, 2014). Shortly after the formation of the KRI, the early stages of state-building were severely impeded when "the division of labour between the PUK and the KDP led to political stagnation, which eventually deteriorated in 1994" (Voller, 2014, p. 12), leading to a civil war that lasted from 1994 to 1997.

Despite the initial internal instability, nearly two decades after its creation, the KRG made developments that were more dramatic than neighbouring countries, as it “had already experienced three election campaigns, had a dynamic media sector, and was far more open to discuss subjects once considered taboo, such as the role of women in society or the government’s obligation to protect women from domestic violence” (Voller, 2014, p. 131).

The 2003 U.S.-led Iraq War, known as “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” led to the defeat of Saddam Hussein and the end of the international economic sanctions imposed on the country. Although Iraq as a nation continued to be afflicted by conflicts such as sectarian violence, the removal of the brutally oppressive regime from the country allowed for more self-governing and social transformations in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region. With the defeat of Saddam from Iraq and a newfound stability in the KRI, the Kurds took advantage of the opportunity to rebuild the region and prosper, compared to the continued armed conflicts and turmoil that escalated in Central and South Iraq. However, in the complex post-conflict period, infrastructure and education were just two of the many sectors within the KRI that had suffered and were in major need of reformation and rebuilding. According to the UN Situation Analysis of Education in Iraq of 2003, “The imposition of sanctions after 1990 exacerbated an already fragile situation and made the educational planning and implementation process that much more complicated” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 14). In addition to the internal sociopolitical turbulence and population shifts of the 1990s, in 2005 the region saw further major population shifts when Christian minorities were forced to flee sectarian violence in regions under the control of Iraq’s central government, seeking refuge in the KRI (Voller,

2012).

Within the same year, the KRG started a campaign known as “the Other Iraq,” in the interests boosting the economy by attracting tourism and foreign business investors to the region (Jimenez & Kabachnik, 2012, p. 31), previously called the “democratic experiment” in the 1990s (Voller, 2015, p.14). Promotional advertisements showcased the region’s relative safety, its positive relationship with the West, and the thriving economic environment. The ads highlighted statistics such as, “Since March 2003 not a single coalition soldier has died nor a single foreigner been kidnapped in the areas administered by the KRG” (KRG, n.d., para. 3), which were revealing of the region’s safety compared to statistics from the rest of Iraq that indicated 4,487 American service members were killed from 2003 to 2011 (Ackerman, 2014). Further, in 2006, the KRG approved a new foreign investment law to attract foreign companies and provide them with incentives to invest in the region (KRG, 2018c, para. 12).

Since 1991, the KRI has enjoyed a long era of progressing stability uncharacteristic of the rest of Iraq, with nearly all of the features of a recognized state (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004). The KRG began to reform the education system, incorporating gender equality as well as human rights and religious freedom into its curricula, and establishing that schools be “religiously neutral,” which meant that schools will not drive any specific religion, and that students will learn about all religions (Mansfield, 2012). As well, 10 out of the 11 public universities that exist within the KRI today were established after 1992. Other measures included increasing the political representation of women and minorities, and passing laws combating violence against

women (Voller, 2012). Moreover, the regional government rebuilt 65% of the villages that were destroyed by Ba'athists since 1980s (KRG, 2018c).

The state of the KRI in 2005, “At first blush...seems the Neoliberal success story of post-Saddam Iraq. For decades a poor, underdeveloped and conflict-ridden part of the country, it has emerged as by far the most stable, secure and prosperous region” (Leezenberg, 2005, as cited in Voller, 2012, p. 172). Although the economic boom in the region created hope for further major educational reforms, growth and development would soon come to a major halt after the Syrian Civil War. The flood of a quarter of a million Syrian refugees resulted in unanticipated major population shifts within Iraq. The already fragile state of the region was further affected by the invasion of Iraq by ISIS in 2014 (Glavin, 2015), which intensified the humanitarian crisis, adding another 2.5 million internally displaced persons in Iraq that year (Karasapan & Kulaksiz, 2015, para. 1). As of 2015, Iraq was hosting 3.5 million IDPs, 46% of whom sought refuge in Kurdistan, increasing the KRI's population by 28% (Karasapan & Kulaksiz, 2015, para.1). In Duhok alone, the population increased by one third to 1.7 million, and “refugees were housed mainly in the district's schools, community centers, parks, mosques, and underneath highway overpasses” (Glavin, 2015, p. 9). As of 2016, along with the persisting, long-term effects of the previous conflicts, the KRI still hosted millions of neighbouring refugees and IDPs from all over Iraq, and was expected to increase by an estimated 420,000 due to the operation to liberate Mosul from ISIS in November 2016 (Parvaz, 2016, para. 15).

Postcolonialism

The emergence of postcolonial theory is often attributed to Edward Said's (1979) influential work, *Orientalism*. In order to situate and understand this research through a postcolonial theoretical lens, one must first understand imperialism, colonialism, and orientalism. According to Said (1994), imperialism is, "the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" (p. 8), while colonialism is often a result of imperialism, and is defined by the colonial settlement of a distant territory. Put simply, "Orientalism" is the divide between the West ("Occident") and the East ("Orient"). The theory states that the Orientalists dominate and Orientals are dominated, meaning "their land occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power" (Said, 1994, p. 36). Further, Said argues that Orientalism is used by the West to deal with the "Other" by naming it, describing and depicting it, and controlling it. In short, Said (1994) explains Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3).

Said discusses the misrepresentation of the Orient, arguing that despite their lack of understanding of the "real" Orient, Western intellectuals and artists alike ignored the diversity of the Orient, portraying the people as primitive and uncivilized "Others" and presented in contrast to its binary opposite—the civilized West. Said states, "the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics...and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse, cannot remain as potent as they are, and must be opposed" (Said, 1979, p. xxii). Said argues that such misrepresentations can create and reinforce hierarchies which should be challenged, and

that such judgments, misrepresentation, and stereotypes by the West were due to an inherent bias against the East.

Representation is a common theme that emerges in the various works on postcolonial theory. Bhabha (1983) argues that representation is a key factor within the objectives of colonialism. Bhabha argues that colonialists' aims were to "construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (p. 23). In Spivak's (1988) influential work, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she discusses British colonization of India and the implementation of a hierarchy and system of laws to maintain control of the population. By forming an "elite" class of interpreters who were "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (p. 77), the British instilled western ideologies to this class, which were then to permeate to the rest of the indigenous population. The result was a hierarchy that held the oppressor at the top—British Colonials—followed by the new elite class of "sub-oppressors," and the oppressed at the bottom. Within this hierarchy, Spivak goes further to argue that there exists a class even further oppressed, the subaltern. According to Spivak, the subaltern is far removed from recognition within the dominant discourse, and therefore cannot speak, as they do not have representation, nor are they re-presented.

In addition to lack of representation or recognition, the subaltern are also often *misrepresented*. Orientalist texts often categorize women as members of a homogenous group, regardless of significant distinctions. Mohanty (1988) explains this in her example of Indian women who are grouped together as a homogenous group despite important distinctions such as class, location, religious, ethnic, or linguistic differences. She argues that this is problematic not because such terms are used for descriptive purposes, but

because it “assumes an ahistorical, universal unity among women based on a generalized notion of their subordination ... this analytical move ... limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities” (1988, p. 72). Colonialist representations of the “Other” as members of an inferior homogenous group who ought to be controlled, not only silences the oppressed groups, but it also prevents or limits them from accessing and writing their own history, and assumes this should be done for them. Mohanty argues that “homogenizing and systematizing the experiences of different groups of women, erases all marginal and resistant modes of experiences” (1988, p. 81), which results in an inaccurate, incomplete, and stereotypical narrative about the oppressed group.

Feminist Theory

In general, feminist theory encompasses an underlying theme of the concern for the lives and experiences of women, and draws attention to the ideologies and social structures that oppress women. According to Freedman (2002), feminism is, “a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies” (p. 7). As Freedman points out, feminist theory explores the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and other social categories alongside gender, and such intersections ought not to be, as doing so would only serve the interests of women who have more privilege (2002, p. 8). This important tenet within feminist theory known as “intersectionality” can be defined as, “the relationships among multiple social dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). Intersectionality theory emerged through the critique of mainstream feminism and race/ethnic scholarship by

women of colour, as their experiences were not considered or represented within mainstream feminism. Windsong (2017) explains, “women’s studies and feminism often referred to a universal category of womanhood that usually gave primacy to white women, and race/ethnic studies often focused on racial inequality from the perspective of men of color” (p. 136).

Feminist methodology highlights the importance of hearing women’s voices and affirming their experiences, thus feminist research can be used to “correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (Lather, 1991, p. 71). Specifically, feminist research is “politically *for* women; feminist knowledge has some grounding in women’s *experiences*, and in how it *feels* to live in unjust, gendered relationships” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 16).

Converging Postcolonialism and Feminist Theory

Postcolonial feminist theory suggests challenging preexisting notions of “Oriental” women, and recognizing the intersectionality of issues such as ethnicity, social class, sex, and religion. Moreover, this theory draws attention to the complexity of women’s location, history, oppression, and experiences, and that these should be positioned within the colonial context, which maps out well for the purposes of this study. This theoretical lens is beneficial for exploring Kurdish women’s perspectives on education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as it provides a framework through which to understand and challenge the distorted narratives and images of Kurdish women, and address the limited recognition in literature and academia.

Kurdish women have a long history of being marginalized, enduring multiple layers of oppression as a result of colonialism. They have been denied recognition due to

their ethnicity and language, subjected to the rules and expectations of male-dominant societies, and endured brutal violence, not only as members of the Kurdish minority, but as members of the “weaker” sex as well. Moreover, despite the great ethnic and religious diversity in Iraq, as a majority Arab state, it has been regarded as part of the so-called Arab world, and within academia and mainstream media, research on Iraqi women often overlooks and misrepresents the experiences and knowledge of women of minority groups, such as Kurdish women. The dominant discourse around Iraqi women is saturated with the single-story of the Anglo-American occupation that destroyed every aspect of Iraq to no resolve, and the one-sided consequences felt thereafter.

Even though Iraqi Kurdistan has been considered a war zone since 1961 (Mojab, 2003), Kurdish women are also often excluded from the discourse around women in Iraq. A noteworthy example of this is Haifa Zangana’s (2008) work, “Women and Learning in the Iraqi War Zone.” Zangana does not indicate or clarify that the essay solely focuses on the experiences and knowledge of Arab Iraqi women as she covers the situation in Baghdad and the rest of Arab-majority Iraq. She paints the struggles and challenges of all women in Iraq with the same proverbial brush, portraying a homogenous group of Iraqi women as recipients to the same rights and privileges offered by the Iraqi government, and victims who have felt the same repercussions of the sanctions and U.S. invasion of Iraq. Without any explanation, there is no mention of the numerous ethnic or religious minority women in the country and the plight of such women is ignored, as is often the case with literature surrounding Iraqi women. For example, when discussing the adverse effects of the economic sanctions on Iraq, Zangana offers a detailed account from the viewpoint of women in South and Central Iraq, yet fails to mention the effects of the sanctions that were felt by the population in the North, which suffered from an additional

blockade from the rest of Iraq imposed by Iraq's central government, as well as the embargo by neighboring states on the landlocked Kurdish "safe haven," which Mojab (2003) refers to as a "triple embargo" (p. 22).

Furthermore, literature often attributes advancements in education in Iraq prior to 1991 as an indicator of the quality of life for Iraqi people, glossing over the unequal treatment, oppression, and genocide of minorities that was simultaneously occurring. Anderson and Stansfield (2004) explain this when discussing such improvements, stating, "The Kurds fared less well, but even here there were improvements. ...Of course these quality-of-life improvements pale into insignificance relative to the magnitude of the violence inflicted on the Kurdish population over the period" (p. 79).

The dominant discourse surrounding Iraq often generalize, misrepresent, and fail to recognize the most marginalized populations, and equivocate the experiences of the majority to the minorities. This is often done in attempts to reinforce the narrative of Western intervention in the late 20th century solely as a negative. This parochial claim hides the full reality of the foreign intervention, which includes the shared experience of over five million of the country's minority population being liberated from a genocidal dictatorship, state-sponsored violence, oppression, and finally receiving recognition and political representation. The reality of the situation cannot be essentialized to fit compactly into a simple binary of good and bad, right and wrong. In fact, despite the struggles of Kurdish women, the political and social gains in the KRI, as discussed above, are an important indication of the successes that women's rights groups have achieved through social activism and democracy. In the aftermath of the Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War, the creation of the KRI and the Kurds' ability to self-govern through

the KRG has resulted in significant social changes for women in Kurdistan that would not have otherwise been afforded, and which are at times ignored in the literature.

The increase in women's organizations and political representation resulted in a new platform for women, meaning that they could become more socially and politically active. Further, women's shelters also increased, which is especially significant when coupled with new amendments to legislation that broadened the definition of domestic violence, ordering women's testimony be weighed equally to men's testimony within the legal system (Parliament of Kurdistan–Iraq, 2011, Art. 1). Other significant measures to combat gender violence by the KRG included legislative changes such as amendments to the 1959 Personal Status Law, the 1969 Iraqi Criminal Code, and renouncing the 1990 Penal Code introduced by Saddam that legalized honour killings (Brown & Romano, 2006), which are all indicative of the important improvements made for women's rights during this time. Such improvements should be recognized, even if they do not support the popular narrative.

Given the diversity of age, gender, ethnicity, location, religion, and class within the Iraqi population, the country's borders evidently do not encompass a homogenous population. However, such significant factors are often discounted within generalizing narratives, such as when Zangana (2008) discusses the effects of the 2003 occupation, stating, "Iraqi women's political, economic, social, educational, and cultural rights have markedly deteriorated as a result" (p. 153). Although adverse consequences felt by the various populations affected should be recognized and represented, generalizing claims that fail to recognize the already-marginalized minorities are problematic. Likewise, such representations should not be at the expense of those who are already misrepresented and marginalized. Kurdish women are often grouped in as members of a homogenous

population of Arab Muslim women; their existence and experiences are generalized with that of the dominant group, and it is assumed that they have enjoyed the same rights, privileges and opportunities, lived the same experiences, and endured the same oppression. The exclusion and misrepresentation of these women is problematic as it renders such women invisible, diminishes their value, and marks their social positions, voices, experiences and knowledge as insignificant.

Kurdish Women in Iraq

Although Kurdish women have a shared ethnic identity, they have been separated by borders and have fought a distinct fight, each group against the oppressive regimes of the dominating nation within which they fall. Historically, Kurdish women have actively sought human rights, equality, and liberation from the oppressing regimes through social and political activism, as well as militarily (Voller, 2012). Susan McDonald (2001) explains, “Women are asked to stand united with men in their common ethnicity and to set aside questions of gender equality” (p. 146), which is the case in the Kurdish national struggle. Resisting the dominant regimes and preserving the Kurdish identity has historically taken precedence over the fight for gender equality, thus, Kurdish female activists have historically been primarily focused on the struggle for gaining human rights and national rights, letting the struggle for women’s rights take a back seat (McDonald, 2001).

The 1980s were arguably the worst era for Kurdish women in Iraq. The Iraqi regime’s genocidal campaign against the Kurds resulted in the murder and disappearance of thousands of men (HRW, 2003, p. xviii), leaving behind widows who were unable to provide for their families. As well, the economic crisis during the time challenged Saddam Hussein’s legitimacy as a leader, thus motivating him to regain public support by

revoking legislation and policies that were previously established to integrate women into education and the workforce (Voller, 2012).

The emergence of a de-facto state in Northern Iraq in 1991, known as the KRI, provided growth and opportunities for Kurdish women's rights groups to promote a gender-specific agenda (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011). The KRI's first democratic elections attracted women from all over the region to participate, and concluded with six women voted into parliament. Since 1991, the number of associations established by women and for women has greatly increased along with their action. From 1991 to 2014, there were 44 NGOs and associations that had been established in Kurdistan with the goal of pursuing women's issues (Backawan & Joly, 2016). Women's rights activists took advantage of the newfound opportunities by shedding light on issues such as "political representation, integration of women into the workforce and financial support for widows who had lost their husbands during the Anfal campaign" (Voller, 2012, p. 263). During this time, women's rights groups began to mobilize, and in 1994, hundreds of women from Erbil and Slemani provinces marched to parliament in protest of the civil war between the two major political parties in the Kurdistan region (Backawan & Joly, 2016).

Even though Kurdish women's rights groups still faced a multitude of challenges from the successive wars that had exhausted every facet of society, in post-2003 Iraq, the removal of Hussein and the Ba'ath government gave way for increased women's rights and women's place within society (Voller, 2012). During this time, women's political representation increased, with the minimum quota of women representatives rising from 25% to 30% (Voller, 2015). Moreover, dismantling Ba'athist laws and institutions was "a preliminary condition to the advancement of the women's cause in Kurdistan" (Backawan

& Joly, 2016, pp. 960-961), and led to the KRG taking measures to combat gender-based violence through amendments to the 1959 Personal Status Law in 2008, the 1969 Iraqi Criminal Code in 2011, and passing “The Act of Combating Domestic Violence in Kurdistan Region-Iraq” in 2011. Amendments to such laws included setting stricter conditions for the authorization (but not prohibition) of polygamy (Parliament of Kurdistan–Iraq, 2008, Art. 1), prohibiting forced marriage (Art 6), granting women’s testimony as equal with men’s in marriage court (Art 3, 1), as well as laying out the parameters of domestic violence as,

Every act and speech or threat of doing so based on gender within family relationships constituted on marriage or blood to the fourth degree or whoever is legally in the family, which may harm an individual physically, sexually and psychologically and deprive his/her freedom and liberties. (Parliament of Kurdistan–Iraq, 2011, Act No. 8, Art. 1,2)

Since the war against ISIS started to capture international headlines, the presence of Kurdish female fighters also sparked mainstream media attention to Kurdish women, with many reports focusing primarily on the role of women in combat. Although this unprecedented coverage can be viewed as a sign of the improvement in representation as well as progress for Kurdish women, a closer look at the coverage tells a different story. A quick Google web-search for “Kurdish female fighters” or “Kurdish women” resulted in online newspaper headlines that read: “‘If We Die, We Want to Look Pretty’: Defiant Kurdish Soldier Girls Refuse to go Without Makeup While Gunning Down ISIS Fighters in Iraq... With a Helping Hand From the British” (Brown, 2016); “‘Isis Are Afraid of Girls’: Kurdish Female Fighters Believe They Have an Unexpected Advantage Fighting

in Syria” (Dearden, 2015); “Kurdish Angelina Jolie Dead? Anti-Isis Soldier Asia Ramazan Antar Reportedly Killed in Islamic State Fight” (Drakeford, 2016); and “Meet the Brave Beauty Who Quit College to Go Kill Isis” (Freeman, 2016). It is apparent that news stories and images presenting Kurdish women are often centered on beauty and physical stature. Such stories objectify the women in combat, especially when they are portrayed through romanticized and sexualized representations.

Moreover, the stories position the Kurdish women in a binary representation of good versus evil, heroine versus savage. Often, the women’s identities are essentialized, with stories solely describing them as “Kurdish,” and there is often minimal or no effort to understand the women and their struggle or the multiple layers of oppression they endure. The coverage fails to mention the oppressive nation within which they are marginalized, thus the multiple fronts the women are fighting on. Further, they often fail to discuss which Kurdish armed forces the women are members of, or the political beliefs and ideology motivating them to take up arms in combat. Sensationalized depictions show the women’s struggle as a new phenomenon that arose as a result of ISIS, not recognizing their existence or cause before the current war. Such one-dimensional portrayals diminish their life-long struggles against oppression and their decisions to take up arms in the first place.

The representations of Kurdish women also reflect Western media’s bias: when Kurdish women are fighting a common enemy with the West, the women are recognized, and hailed as heroic. Alternatively, when Kurdish women are not fighting the West’s common enemy, but are fighting against one of the oppressive dominating regimes, their struggle is ignored. In fact, many of the women who have been hailed as heroic by

Western media are members of the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) in Syria and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey—a strategic ally to the West, and have been labeled by the West as terrorists. Coverage of Kurdish female fighters in mainstream media is a recent example of the West's underlying Orientalist views and representations of the East, which I discuss further in the remainder of the thesis.

Education in Iraq

From the 1950s to 1980s, Iraq's education system was widely regarded as one of the best in the Middle East (Al-Tikriti, 2005), “both from the point of view of access to education and quality” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 57). The Provisional Constitution of 1970 lay out the right for all of Iraq's citizens to a free education at every level (UNESCO, 2003), and in 1977 The Comprehensive National Campaign for Compulsory Education was launched to combat illiteracy (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004), for which UNESCO (2003) commended the country's efforts in challenging and decreasing levels of illiteracy. During this time, laws forbidding discrimination against women were also passed, (Zangana, 2008), although the degree to which these laws were enacted and guaranteed to all citizens is questionable due to the oppressive nature of the Iraqi regime and its record of human rights offences against ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq, as previously discussed.

The educational advancements during this time were historic for Iraq, and are frequently referenced throughout the discourse on education in the country. However successful, the government's underlying motives in introducing such educational laws and campaigns are often omitted in the dominant discourse, which as Anderson and Stansfield (2004) posit, “would be naïve not to recognize the underlying political

purpose” (p. 77). Just as previous governments had employed education to further the cause of their party, so too did Hussein’s Ba’athist government. Expanding access to education and combatting illiteracy enabled the Ba’athist government to reach a higher level of state-control through continually indoctrinating children with the Ba’athist ideology and its agenda to defend the “revolution” of the regime against its enemies (Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 8). Such efforts were achieved through the new legislation which required all educational administrators to be tied to the principles of the regime, as well as renovations within the curriculum for the purpose of promoting “our Arab nation’s basic aspirations and its aim for unity, liberty and socialism” (Nakash, 1994, as cited in Anderson & Stansfield, 2004, p. 69).

In addition, as the UNESCO (2003) report indicates, before 1990, Iraq’s Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the primary level was at 100%; however, since the primary level also included some over-age students, the GER was reported at “over 100%” (p. 5). The United Nations Institute for Asia and the Pacific (UNSIAP, 2013) defines GER as the “Total enrolment in primary education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the eligible official primary school-age population in a given school-year” (p. 1). While countries with a GER of more than 100% indicate the country’s ability to “accommodate all of its primary school-age population” (UNSIAP, 2013, p. 4), it does not indicate the percentage of that population that is actually enrolled in school. Along with the GER, a Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) is also necessary to better assess the participation of the primary school-age population. NER is the “Enrolment in primary education of the official primary school age group expressed as a percentage of the corresponding population” (UNSIAP, 2013, p. 7). The GER and NER also serve to better

represent the geographic and gender disparity, and the extent of over-age and under-age students (UNSIAP, 2013, p. 10).

However, a truly representative GER and NER rely on accurate and complete population information (UNSIAP, 2013), and the figures representing GER presented by the UNESCO (2003) report reflect South and Central Iraq only (p. 79). As such, due to missing or inaccurate population information that excludes the Kurdistan region, the gross enrolment and net enrolment ratios presented in the UNESCO Report are not representative of the Kurdish population or of Iraq as a whole.

The missing census information for the North and resulting inaccuracies that are rampant within Iraqi government records and NGO reports are a result of Iraq's discriminatory policies against ethnic and religious minorities. One such example is the October 1987 National Census in Iraq, which was conducted to identify the targeted population in the genocidal campaign against the Kurds. Inhabitants in the Kurdish North, which the Iraqi regime deemed desirable land, were given the option of abandoning their homes and forcibly relocating to camps under the regime's control, or else losing their Iraqi citizenship, being regarded as military deserters, and subjected to a death sentence; those who refused to register would also face the same repercussions (HRW, 1993). While registering, citizens were given "two alternatives when it came to declaring their nationality. One could either be Arab or Kurdish..." (Mojab, 2001, p. 10). Due to the limited options for self-identifying as any other ethnic minority and the concomitant life-threatening circumstances tied to self-identifying as Kurdish, the census solely served the purpose of Iraq's Arabization policies and genocidal campaigns, and is one example of a plethora of factors contributing to inaccuracies and misrepresentation

within the literature on the people of Iraq. As Mojab (2001) argues, “there are no census or statistical data on the Kurds living within the borders of each state. As a result, Kurdish women do not appear in census figures or in other state-administered data” (p. 10).

Throughout the course of the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq was still able to maintain the strengths of its education system despite the emerging adverse effects of the war (UNESCO, 2003). However, the past educational successes were not able to withstand the prolonged conflict and the grave impacts of the 1991 Gulf War and the strict economic sanctions that followed. The blockade banned all imports and exports to and from Iraq, causing a serious drain on every sector in the country. The results of the economic sanctions lead to impairments within the literacy campaigns, as well as a “shortage of qualified staff, lack of funds and equipment, and political as well as intellectual isolation of the country compounded the deterioration of the system.” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 14). Compared to the highly regarded education system that existed in the 1980s, today the education system has become further debilitated with the negative outcomes of war, internal conflict, and economic sanctions.

In 2006 post-conflict Iraq, some “800,000 children were not attending primary school, 74% of them girls” according to the UN *2010 Report on Girls’ Education in Iraq*, which includes data on the governorates in the KRI as well (Griffiths, 2010, p. 9). Further, 22% of the adult population in Iraq has never attended school, and 47% of women in the country are illiterate or partly illiterate (Griffiths, 2010, p. 51). While the report also showed that the Kurdish governorates of Erbil, Duhok, and Slemani had the highest percentage of girls in primary schools as well as the highest percentage of boys and girls in pre-school education, none of the governorates reached or exceeded 50% for

girls in primary school (Griffiths, 2010, p. 4). Data from the report also indicates that within every governorate in Iraq, there are lower rates of girls starting school, more girls than boys dropping out of school over the course of their lives, and a decline in the percentage of girls in each successive grade of primary school—a trend that continues in intermediate and secondary school as well (Griffiths, 2010, p. 4), and “Some 80% of girls who start school have dropped out by the third intermediate class” (Griffiths, 2010, p. 16).

Such information is crucial to understand the situation and its effects on a population. Figures and data surrounding education in Iraq and in the KRI often rely heavily on government records, such as census surveys, as well as NGO documents and reports, such as United Nations’ reports on education. As previously noted, however, difficulty obtaining accurate information remains a challenge and is apparent in the Griffiths (2010) report as well, with the “enormous gap of reliable and accurate data, causing confusion and discrepancies in figures, and thus making it very difficult to measure against set indicators for MD goals 2 & 3, as well as for many other Education Indicators” (p. 51).

Griffiths (2010) suggests that for Iraqi girls, family attitudes and circumstances are the strongest factors in determining whether they start and complete their education (p. 20). However, access to education is affected by a host of reasons including the psychological and social implications for students as well as teachers, instability and lack of security affecting the ability to attend school, school closures, poverty, damaged schools and infrastructure due to warfare, and internal displacement (Griffiths, 2010, pp. 34-35). As well, continuous population shifts due to internal and external displacement, and the exodus of teachers has also resulted in a decreased quality of education (Griffiths, 2010, p. 50).

Children who are displaced during the conflicts also face other issues that prevent them from accessing education such as a lack of proper papers or identification (Griffiths, 2010, p. 51). Additional factors that reduce children's access to and quality of education include: the physical deterioration of school buildings and infrastructure; greatly reduced teacher salaries which manifest into a multitude of additional negative consequences such as a decline in the quality of teachers, loss of qualified teachers, and low teacher-motivation; shortage of textbooks and school supplies; and family's economic conditions, which are carried through to secondary education as well (UNESCO, 2003, p. 57).

Violent Conflict and Education

For the purpose of this paper, I use the USAID *Glossary on Violent Conflict*, which states that violent conflict is “[T]he use of armed force by two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, that results in at least 25 battle-related deaths per year” (Payson Conflict Study Group [PCSG], 2001, p. 75). This definition categorizes violent conflicts into three groups based on the number of battle-related deaths related to the conflict: minor conflicts, intermediate conflicts, and wars. Conflicts are considered minor when deaths are below 1,000; intermediate when there are more than 1,000 deaths during the conflict, “and in which between 25 and 1,000 deaths have occurred during a particular year” (PCSG, 2001, p. 75). When the number of battle-related deaths during one particular year exceeds 1,000, they are categorized as wars (PCSG, 2001, p. 75).

Armed conflicts undeniably interrupt the lives of the affected civilian populations, and education is no exception. Research suggests that children's education is interrupted in times of violent conflict due to “damage to schools, absence of teachers, fears of insecurity and changes in family structures and household income” (Justino, 2010, p. 3), along with the other negative effects due to the war, such as physical health and well-

being. As well, decreases in enrollment and attendance at school during times of conflict suggest that several factors prevent children's access to education or prevent from attending school while they are already enrolled due to being removed from school by family or "soldiering, household labour allocation decisions, fear, changes in returns to education, targeting of schools, teachers and students and displacement" (Justino, 2010, p. 1). Children who are directly affected by war and violent conflicts complete less grades of schooling than children who are either not affected by the conflicts, or are minimally affected (Alderman, Hoddinott, & Kinsey, 2006, as cited in Justino, 2010). Although these factors and the effects they bear on education should appear in a similar manner between boys and girls, research points to the importance of context-specificity.

For example, Chamarbagwala and Morán (2011) studied the exposure of school age children to civil war in Guatemala. The researchers concluded that those who lived in the areas with the highest intensity of human rights violations during the 36-year-long war lost the most schooling, compared to the national average. As well, compared to the unexposed cohort, "each successive cohort exposed to the war during three distinct periods of violence and conflict obtained less and less schooling" (Chamarbagwala & Morán, 2011, p. 60).

Studies also show that at times, the effects of armed conflict on education can be greater for one gender than the other, for which there are a number of reasons. A study by Swee (2011) assessing the variation of war intensity in different municipalities in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the variation of birth cohorts, which determined the level of schooling that the children were at during the 1992-1995 civil war, found that "war intensity effects tend to be realized via the male sample, especially among secondary schooling cohort",

thus suggesting military draft as the main drive of such effects (p. 25). Akresh and De Walque (2008) found that during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, boys and children who were not economically-disadvantaged were disproportionately affected, attributing this to their pre-conflict advantages with regards to education, rendering them with the most to lose in education during conflict (p. 13).

The ways in which the effects of violent conflict on education emerge and manifest during and post conflict are sensitive to the specific social, geopolitical climate of the region, and the specific events and circumstances of each conflict, as well as the conditions of education before war and during the absence of war (Buvinić et al., 2013, p. 1). Thus, while the available literature can aid in understanding the effects of war on education and gender in the KRI, it does not suffice to gain a true understanding of such effects. In addition, in a country where the oppressed minority population has been suppressed, unrepresented and unrecognized, it is imperative to rely on research conducted on the Kurdish population specifically, and to hear from women who have actually lived through times of armed conflicts, in order to gain any understanding of the intensity of the violence they endured, and how they were affected.

Gender Parity and Gender Equality

The terms gender parity and gender equality appear frequently in the literature and empirical research on armed conflict and education, as well as throughout international commitments such as the MDGs, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in the Dakar Framework for Action. While the terms are similar, they are not the same; *gender parity* can be defined as equal representation of females and males in education. As Cheung and Chan (2007) explain, gender parity reflects “‘formal’ equality,

in terms of access to, and participation in, education” (p. 158). Formal equality is “premised on the notion of the ‘sameness’ of men and women, where the male actor is held to be the norm” (Subrahmanian, 2005, p. 397). Achieving gender parity is not the same as achieving gender equality.

Although gender parity is a necessary step to achieve gender equality, prior inequalities within the social sphere that “constrain women’s access to and utilization of resources on an equal basis with men” must also be addressed (Subrahmanian, 2005, p. 406). Gender equality not only means equal access to education or equal representation between boys and girls in education, it also means rights *within* education such as the right to be free from discrimination in schools (Cheung & Chan, 2007, p. 160).

Tomaševski (2001) posits, education “operates as multiplier, enhancing the enjoyment of all rights and freedoms where the right to education is effectively guaranteed” (p. 10).

Duncan Wilson’s three-fold characterization of education rights also outlines a model which includes: rights *to* education, measured through “access, survival, attendance, retention, and to some extent transition between levels of education” (Subrahmanian, 2005, p. 399); rights *within* education, which encapsulate gender equality, and rights *through* education, “recognising that gender equality within education is shaped by, and in turn shapes rights and gender equality in other dimensions of life” (Subrahmanian, 2005, p. 401).

Tomaševski (2001) breaks down *right to* education as a civil, political, social, and economic right, embodied by availability and accessibility; *rights in* education, explained by acceptability and adaptability; and *rights through* education, also embodied by adaptability (p. 12). These measures are an important indicator of the lives of women and

girls, as the apparent gender inequalities that exist in rights *to*, *through*, and *within* education can be an instrument or a reflection of the “social norms and inequalities, related to poverty, structural inequalities, historical disadvantage, institutional discrimination of women and minorities, gender-based violence and traditional practices which harm or impact unjustly on women and girls” (Tomaševski, 2005, as cited in Osler & Yahya, 2013, p. 193).

International Commitments to Universal Education

Major international commitments to universal education such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) support the role of education in social transformation, and international agencies such as the World Bank, “which wields inordinate influence on public policies in developing countries, assure us that ‘education is the most important productive asset most people will ever own’” (Perry et al., 2003, as cited in Stromquist, 2006, p. 145).

In September 2000, all 187 members of the United Nations signed the Millennium Declaration, which promised to achieve the MDGs by 2015. Goal 2.A of the eight goals aimed to promote universal primary education by ensuring that, “children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling, and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education” (United Nations, 2015, p. 24). Gender issues in education were also emphasized through target 3.A, which aimed to “Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015” (United Nations, 2015, p. 28).

In order to help national governments realize these goals, the United Nations’ Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI, 2010) was launched in April 2000 at the World

Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, so that national governments could “fulfill their responsibilities towards ensuring the right to education and gender equality for all children, girls and boys alike” (p. 7). These international commitments highlight the need for universal access to education and bring such issues to the forefront of national government’s priorities, while identifying important ongoing factors that delay realization of universal education.

In 2013, Iraq’s primary education enrollment was steady, and had increased 12% from 2000 to 89.1% in 2011, and was expected to increase to 95% by 2015; the percentage of children who complete primary education was at 95%, although secondary school enrollment rates remained at 48.6%, and literacy rates amongst 15-to-24 year-olds was 85.5% (United Nations Development Programme, 2013, p. 5). Although progress has been made in Iraq’s education system, there still remains much needed improvement. Fifteen years after the MDGs were established, UN Member States adopted 17 Global Goals, which build on the MDGs, such as goal number four, which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (Sustainable Development Solutions Network [SDSN], 2015 p. 6).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the educational experiences of Kurdish women in Kurdistan with respect to oppression. This chapter provided a detailed background of the history and scope of the problem context in order to begin exploring the research question, which asked, “what do Kurdish women’s experiences reveal about women’s education in Kurdistan with respect to oppression?” The chapter presented a review of the relevant literature on gender, education, and violent conflict in Iraq and

Kurdistan. Further, the chapter presented postcolonialism and feminist theory, the theoretical lens that informed the study. Next, the study's research methodology and design is outlined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

The objective of this research study was to understand Kurdish women's experiences with education in the KRI with respect to oppression. I chose a basic interpretive qualitative research approach to explore the research question. The study allowed women who have lived in Kurdistan for the majority of their lives to express their thoughts, attitudes, and experiences with education, and share their beliefs and understanding of their experiences with education and oppression. The qualitative nature of the study gave the women an opportunity to share rich, descriptive accounts of their knowledge and experiences through the use of semi-structured interviews which can lead to a better understanding of how Kurdish women perceive their experiences with education and conflict, and how they create meanings of their experiences and the world around them.

This chapter describes the selected methodology for the study, sets out the participant recruitment and selection parameters, and describes how data was collected and analyzed. As well, the chapter includes a discussion of the boundaries and limitations of the inquiry, how I established credibility, and the ethical considerations, of the research study.

Research Methodology and Design

In social research, methodology links the relationship between different ontologies and epistemologies (i.e., the relationship between being and knowing). As Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) assert, methodology "comprises rules that specify how social investigation should be approached setting out rules to produce valid knowledge claims" (p. 11). Within the qualitative research approach, there are various methodologies

for investigating the research question at hand. While some authors identify numerous methodologies, for this study, I used a basic interpretive qualitative research design.

The interpretive qualitative research approach is used for “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). According to Merriam (2002), the purpose of the basic interpretive qualitative research is to “discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved, or a combination of these” (p. 6), and the researcher’s focus is to understand the central phenomenon from the perspective of the participant, not the researcher. Unlike the quantitative approach, which is based on the belief that knowledge is preexisting and is waiting to be discovered, the qualitative approach is based on the belief that people construct knowledge as they simultaneously engage in and make meaning of the world around them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thus, the basic interpretive qualitative research design is informed by a constructivist worldview, which focuses on how human beings interact with and interpret the world around them, and the multiple, varied subjective interpretations they generate (Creswell, 2014). Interpretive constructionists highlight the possibility that not all participants will experience or view the same events or experiences in the same way, but that various diverse or even contradictory experiences can exist at the same time (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Further, the meanings that individuals ascribe to their surroundings are based on their personal, historical and social perspectives, thus, it is important to understand the intersection between the participant and their context or setting (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). While constructivism views research as relying on participants’ perspectives of the phenomenon being studied, it also recognizes the ways in which a researcher’s

experiences and background can shape the interpretation of data. In addition, constructivism views qualitative research as an inductive process whereby researchers generate meaning from the data, rather than a deductive process (Creswell, 2014).

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain that the constructivist worldview focuses on “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 23), which map out well with this study’s goals: to understand how Kurdish women interpret, make sense of, or describe their world and experiences. This approach is also useful to explore the social situations in which Kurdish women’s knowledge and beliefs are constructed. The specific purpose of this research study was to explore Kurdish women’s experiences with education with respect to oppression in the KRI, and to understand how women make sense of and describe their experiences with education and oppression.

The interpretive qualitative approach was also suitable for this study as it emphasizes individuals’ perspective and remains true to the participants’ own interpretations about her life and social situations, allowing researchers to “learn the personal reasons or motives that shape a person's internal feelings and guide decisions to act in particular ways” (Neuman, 2000, p. 70). As such, the interpretive qualitative research design allowed me to learn about the participants’ personal experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and concerns, and gain insight into Kurdish women’s interpretations of and motivations surrounding their educational experiences with respect to oppression in the constantly changing social conditions of Kurdistan and Iraq. Thus, while there are various alternative designs through which the research question can be addressed, the primary purposes of a basic interpretive qualitative study were deemed the most appropriate.

Within the interpretive qualitative research approach, data can be collected through various methods including participant observations, interviews, and text or artifact analysis, all of which are directed at analyzing “concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity and starting from people’s expressions and activities in their local contexts” (Flick, 2009, p. 21). Data analysis is done through an inductive process so that researchers can identify common themes and patterns that emerge from the data (Merriam, 2002). Finally, a “rich, descriptive account of the findings is presented and discussed, using references to the literature that framed the study in the first place” (pp. 6-7).

For this study, I collected data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which asks a mixture of structured and not-so-structured questions (Merriam, 2002). Some authors argue that the best method of collecting high quality data is through interviews (Mathers et al., 1998, as cited in Wambui, 2013). As Hesse-Biber (2007) explains, the in-depth interview “is a particularly valuable research method feminist researchers can use to gain insight into the world of their respondents” (p. 115). In-depth interviews also allow researchers to gain participants’ insights, experiences, and ideas in their own words (Reinharz, 1992), which was particularly relevant and beneficial to the data collection of this research study. Employing the interview method allowed me to address the research questions, “What do Kurdish women’s experiences reveal about women’s education in Kurdistan with respect to oppression?” The study aims to understand how Kurdish women make sense of and describe their experiences with education as women living in war zones, ultimately generating rich, descriptive data for analysis. By documenting their knowledge and experiences, in-depth interviews also

provided a platform to access Kurdish women's voices, which have often been ignored. As Reinharz (1992) explains, "in this way learning from women is an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women" (p. 19), aligning with the objectives of feminist research, which include understanding the lives and experiences of women and marginalized groups and promoting positive social change.

Hesse-Biber and Brooks (2006) explain that "Feminist researchers hold different perspectives, ask different questions, draw from a wide array of methods and methodologies, and apply multiple lenses that heighten our awareness of sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist ideologies and practices" (p. 4). Through the interpretive qualitative research design, researchers can situate gender at the centre of the research by highlighting and documenting the lives and experiences of women through their own voices. Feminist research can challenge social structures and ideologies that are oppressive towards women by paying attention to the lived experiences and situated knowledge of people, and "illuminating gender-based stereotypes and biases, and unearthing women's subjugated knowledge" (Hesse-Biber & Brooks, 2006, p. 4).

Feminist research views in-depth interviews as a natural conversation between the researcher and participant. Edwards and Holland (2013) argue that the key to unstructured interview is flexibility, "with the researcher able to respond to the interviewee, to trace the meaning that s/he attaches to the 'conversation with a purpose'... to develop unexpected themes and adjust the content of interviews" (p. 30). In addition, understanding individuals' positions and the relationship and power dynamics between the researcher and the participant is also an important focus for

feminist research, thus, researchers are encouraged to establish rapport with participants and create a safe and comfortable environment where participants can provide detailed, open responses about their experiences and knowledge.

Power and reflexivity have also become “critical within feminist discussions of methods, methodologies, and epistemologies” (Hesse-Biber & Brooks, 2006). Feminist researchers emphasize the importance of listening carefully to participants and allowing them to speak from their own perspective, as well as practicing reflexivity throughout the research process, which reminds the researcher to be mindful of their own positionality as well as that of the participant (Doucet & Mauthner, 2006; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). According to Hesse-Biber (2007), reflexivity “begins with an understanding of the importance of one’s own values and attitudes in relation to the research process” and means “taking a critical look inward and reflecting on one’s own lived reality and experiences” (p. 123). Such practices can challenge issues of power dynamics that can arise between the researcher and participant and affect the quality of the research, as it may interfere with the level of openness in participants’ responses. Feminist researchers recommend the practice of reflexivity to begin at the start of the research process and throughout the study (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Researchers must understand how their position, knowledge, and experiences affect the research process. Thus, in committing to reflexivity, I will discuss my own lived experiences and social positions in the following section.

Role of the Researcher

As a Kurdish female born in Duhok, Kurdistan in 1987, I was born in a time and space of war and violence, and immediately became a member of the persecuted minority

population. During this time, the Iraqi government's genocidal campaign targeting the Kurdish population was well under way. Upon hearing rumours circulating about the bombing campaign that was to take place the following day, which turned out to be true, my parents were left with no choice but to flee our home for the second time, after experiencing years of oppression in Iraq. My family was fortunate to escape Iraq in time and survive the atrocities. After crossing the border into Turkey with thousands of others, we lived in a refugee camp with prison-camp-like conditions until receiving refugee status in Canada 4 years later.

Throughout the years since then, whether I was aware or not, those early years of my life have significantly shaped my reality. My thoughts, perspectives, and decisions, including the decision to pursue this research study, have been influenced by my family's history. In addition, although my minority status remained with me, I have always been thoughtful of how fortunate my family was to live in Canada and enjoy equal rights and opportunities as Canadian citizens. Even though I have a deep, personal understanding of Greater Kurdistan, the KRI, and the Kurdish struggle, feminist researchers argue that sharing membership with a marginalized minority group is not enough to override power dynamics within the research process (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Thus, my current position as a Westerner is at odds with my shared membership with the marginalized Kurdish minority in Iraq. Although my shared experiences and traits allowed me to better understand participants and their own experiences of living in Kurdistan during past or present wars and violent conflict, as the researcher conducting this study, it was important for me to reflect on my position within the research context and with relation to the study participants.

My social position and experiences situated me as an insider to the group being studied, however, “one’s insider/outsider status is fluid and can change even in the course of a single interview” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 143), hence, while there may have been certain areas where I shared similarities with a participant, there also could have been areas where I was simultaneously positioned as an outsider who had no knowledge of the specific experience. Sharing an insider status with participants allows researchers the benefit of access and acceptance from the participants, as well as the opportunity to gain a level of trust and openness from participants that may not otherwise be present with outsider researchers (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). While there are apparent advantages to sharing important traits with the member of the group under study, on the other hand, “Sometimes sharing some insider characteristics with a respondent is not enough to ensure that the researcher can fully capture the lived experiences of those he or she researches” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 141). There is also a potential for the insider role to impede the research, as participants may fail to fully share their thoughts and knowledge based on the assumption that the researcher shares their experience or already has an understanding of the experience or issue at hand. I anticipated that participants may omit valuable information under the assumption that I, as a Kurdish woman from Duhok, was already aware of said information, thus I paid particular attention to this, and I was prepared to encourage the women to elaborate and give detailed, descriptive responses. I overcame this issue by informing participants and reminding them throughout the interview, when necessary, that they should answer as though they are speaking to a non-Kurdish, non-specified gender audience, who is unaware of the local history, culture, norms and values.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) posit another potential impediment as an insider to the study, stating, “it is possible that the researcher’s perceptions might be clouded by his or her personal experience and that as a member of the group he or she will have difficulty separating it from that of the participants” (p. 58). I was aware that my experiences and perceptions could potentially shape the way I recognized the participants’ experiences and influence my analysis and interpretation of the data thereafter. However, I kept an open mind throughout the research process and ensured every effort to set aside my own beliefs, experiences, values, assumptions, and/or biases. I also used other approaches such as member-checking, triangulation, and recording pre-existing beliefs, biases and assumptions, all of which I will delve further into in this chapter.

Despite my shared gender and ethnic identity with the participants, which may have positioned me as an insider, my role as the researcher as well as being a Western woman positioned me as an outsider. Hence, I was not fully in an insider or an outsider position, but rather in a third space, called a “space between” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 61). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue that “because our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher...we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions” (p. 61), regardless of which position we may be closer to. As the researcher who was cognizant of potential power dynamics and pre-existing assumptions or biases, I conducted this research study using an unbiased lens, not searching for answers that validated my own beliefs or assumptions. Throughout the study, I was aware that my perceptions and experiences were unique to me, and that the participants’ experiences may or may not be shared or even similar to my own.

Data Collection

Upon approval from the Ethics Review Board at Brock University, I used purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2014) to select five Kurdish women for participation in the study. The participant profile required participants that were older than 18 years of age and had lived in Kurdistan for all of or the majority of their lives, and had a basic understanding of the English language. I located participants by asking family and friends to identify women who fit the recruitment criteria from amongst their own personal contacts, and to extend the research study invitation so that the “snowball” grew as I located “new information-rich cases” (Creswell, 2014, p. 182). Locating participants through family, friends, and acquaintances, ranging from working class to upper-middle class backgrounds, allowed me to gain a better representation of the diversity of women in Kurdistan, although it by no means could be a true and absolute reflection of the female population. Eligible women were invited to participate regardless of level of education completed, as long as she was able to communicate her experiences and knowledge, thus contributing to an understanding of women’s experiences with education and oppression in the KRI.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed upon location that allowed the participant and research to feel safe and comfortable opening up and providing meaningful responses to the open-ended questions. With the permission of the participant, the interviews were recorded through an audio recording device accompanied by field notes taken during the interviews to record any other information important information such as unanticipated follow-up questions. I also recorded field notes immediately after the interview to document any information or knowledge that may

have been useful to the remaining data collection and data analysis process. After completing the interviews, I transcribed the audio-recordings as soon as possible in order to have a fresh memory of the interview and ensure the best possible transcriptions.

Selection of the Site and Participants

For this study, I used purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2014) to ensure participants met the specific recruitment parameters (i.e., a Kurdish woman who has lived in Kurdistan for all of/the majority of her life, and has the ability to communicate in at least a basic level of English). As Patton (1990) states, the aim of purposeful sampling is to select “*information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 169). Specifically, I employed the snowball sampling technique, which “Identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know people who know what cases are information rich, that is, good examples for study, good interview subjects” (Patton, 1990, p. 176). Thus, I began recruiting participants by extending the study invitation to family, friends, and acquaintances and former colleagues, who were asked to forward the invitation their own contacts, so that the “snowball” kept increasing as it reached more potential participants. I also forwarded the invitation to a women’s group in Erbil, once again with the instruction for women to only contact the researcher if interested in participating. I located “new information-rich cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 182) by extending the invitation to a relatively diverse group of contacts, which helped to increase the diversity amongst the sample, although there still existed the limitations; the invitation to participate through the snowball technique could potentially not reach women who lived in rural areas or villages or those living in or below the poverty line.

Once I began recruiting, I continued the snowballing technique by asking eligible participants to share the research invitation with their own contacts that fit the participant eligibility criteria (Edwards & Holland, 2013). In order to maintain confidentiality, the invitation asked women interested in participating to contact the researcher directly rather than the previous participants. I recruited participants in Duhok and Erbil provinces of Kurdistan, as I had more access to these governorates than to Slemani province, as well as due to safety/security issues accessing Slemani, although I attempted to recruit participants from Slemani living within Duhok or Erbil. Table 1 presents the participant and interview information along with pseudonyms assigned to each participant. Pseudonyms were also used in place of names of all individuals, organizations, schools, and other identifying information throughout the study.

Due to the dialect differences within the regions and my inability to fully comprehend and communicate in every dialect of Kurdish, I conducted the interviews in English with English-speaking participants. I understood that this criteria could have potentially limited the sample, so I considered the use of a translator between participant and researcher. However, the use of a translator also presented various issues such as inaccurate translations or causing participants to not feel comfortable answering in-depth interview questions, thus affecting the detail of their responses. Also, as the interview process progressed, after answering questions in English, a few participants used Kurdish to ensure that certain words, ideas, or experiences that they wanted to convey were not lost in translation. Potential participants were emailed an invitation to participate in the study, and from there, I contacted selected participants via telephone or email in order to arrange the interviews.

Table 1

Participant and Interview Information

Q.I #	Pseudonym	Age	Birthplace	Occupation	Date	Location
1	Jwan	28	Erbil	Human Resources Officer	15-06-17	Erbil
2	Tara	36	Erbil	Homemaker	15-06-17	Erbil
3	Zhiyan	21	Duhok	Undergraduate Student	17-06-17	Duhok
4	Dalia	21	Duhok	Undergraduate Student	17-06-17	Duhok
5	Kani	60	Kirkuk	University Instructor	20-06-17	Erbil

As Hesse-Biber (2007) states, qualitative research “is concerned with in-depth understanding and usually involves working with small samples. The goal is to look at a “process” or the “meanings” individuals attribute to their given social situation, not necessarily to make generalizations” (p. 119). Therefore, I intended to conduct five to seven interviews, but did not finalize the number of interviews until during data collection. In addition, although I aimed to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of the women’s stories, experiences, and knowledge, I used pseudonyms and omitted any information that could potentially infringe on the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, in order to protect the identity of the women and their right to privacy.

Interviews

After accepting the invitation to the research study, the five women were interviewed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. This method allows participants to share experiences from their own perspectives, as “viewpoints are more likely to be expressed in an openly designed interview situation than in a standardized interview or a questionnaire” (Flick, 2009, p. 150). Participants were asked to volunteer up to 90 minutes of their time for the interview and were informed that they may be requested to do a follow-up interview that could take up to 30 minutes.

Interviews took place in the KRI in order to connect to and remain as close and true to the context as possible. Conducting the interviews in person helped avoid barriers in communication that can surface through video-messaging services. More importantly however, meeting participants in person provided room to create rapport and build the researcher-participant relationship through face-to-face contact in the real settings in which the women lived—an option that may have otherwise been difficult.

Participants were not expected to travel during this study, as I made every effort to meet them in a location that was safe, easily accessible, and convenient for them. Interviews were held in a setting that allowed the participant and researcher to feel safe and comfortable answering a number of open-ended questions, such as in a coffee shop, library, or other mutually agreed upon setting. When agreeing on a location, participants were also reminded that the ideal setting should not interfere with audio recording equipment, participant/researcher comfort, or the nature of the conversation and the depth of interview responses. Participants who selected a coffee shop also informed me that in the month of Ramadan, many restaurants and coffee shops are closed during the day, but those that remain open have a significant decrease in business, which had also been my experience and is stated in an online guide to Erbil (Douglas-Scott Legal Recruitment, n.d.). Thus, I decided to move forward with the chosen setting, keeping the possibility of a potential follow-up interview if the location proved to limit the discussion, which ultimately was not necessary.

The open-ended nature of the interview questions were designed to elicit meaningful, descriptive responses by exploring the participants' personal histories, their educational histories, family attitudes, gender, and their beliefs and experiences with education and oppression in the KRI. Due to the potential sensitivity of certain topics, the flexible, semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me to add questions while listening to participants' responses, which affected the order of the interview questions. Also, responses that were unanticipated or introduced topics that were not covered required follow-up questions that I created on the spot.

Although there is flexibility within qualitative semi-structured interviews, as previously discussed, such interviews are conducted with an interview guide, a set of

written questions to be asked while conducting the interviews (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2007). The list of questions addresses important topics in the research, but are not set in a fixed, specific order. Rather, researchers are encouraged to listen intently to participants, use probes, and pay attention to unexpected themes or topics that may arise in respondent's answers. Researchers are generally interested in "the context and content of the interview, how the interviewee understands the topic(s) under discussion and what they want to convey to the interviewer" (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 29). The interview guide in this study listed a set of interview questions to guide the interview process, and was centered on the study's main research question: what do Kurdish women's experiences reveal about women's education in Kurdistan with respect to oppression? (See Appendix for full list of interview questions.)

The interviews opened with questions allowing the participants to introduce themselves and give some background information such as their age, occupation, family, and location. The opening questions then asked participants to provide a general idea of how they would describe life in Kurdistan. This allowed me to get an impression of what their initial thoughts are before delving into specific questions or topics such as gender, education, wars, etc., as well as to see if there are any unexpected topics of interest that might arise. The participants were then asked to describe life in the region *specifically* from a woman's perspective, leading the way to the following gender-oriented questions. Questions also asked participants' thoughts and ideas on the differences of being male or female in Kurdistan, if there was a significant difference in the treatment of people based on gender, and if/how they felt their life might differ as a male in Kurdistan. The questions were framed so as to engage participants with the idea of gender equality while

avoiding leading questions. Also, asking participants to share their own perspectives and experiences on the differences for men and women in the region could highlight gender-related issues that were of importance to the women. For example, while I had not anticipated the issue of marital status, male-guardianship, and freedom, this developed into an important theme that emerged throughout all of the interviews.

The next group of questions turned the discussion towards education, focusing on the participant's educational history, grades attended, level of education reached, etc. Each participant was asked to speak freely on the subject of education, all the while being given the opportunity to share more of her personal background and experiences with education in the region. Next, questions brought attention to participants' personal views on education, the education system in Kurdistan/Iraq, and specifically, their experiences with education as women and, which uncovered issues such as their thoughts on the purpose and value of education in general, the quality of education provided in the KRI, schools and teachers, as well as the various current issues surrounding education, all of which are laid out in chapter 4.

The interview prompts then drew attention to the conflicts in the region and aimed to first gain an understanding of each woman's thoughts on oppression and the level of exposure to the conflicts. The questions also intend to gain the women's insights into the types of changes that have occurred as a result of conflicts, their thoughts on the various wars, and if there has been any impact on their education. Next, to understand the ways in which women cope with the stress of wars and conflicts, participants were asked about the types of support systems and programs are available for women. Participants were then asked to share their ideas on issues they believe require change, whether social,

political, or economic, before focusing on gaging their perspectives on *how* changes could be achieved. All of the interviews concluded with an opportunity for the respondents to address any other important issues or discuss any additional thoughts or comments. Although the interview prompt was used as a guide, the questions were not always asked in the same order, and new questions were often asked with each participant's unique history and experiences. The questions aimed to help answer the sub-questions listed in Chapter One and were designed to gain insights into each participant's background, lived experiences, and thoughts and beliefs about gender, education, and oppression as women living in the KRI.

Data Analysis

Researchers stress the importance of starting data analysis early, almost simultaneously with data collection, “for qualitative data analysis is an iterative process of data collection along with data analysis” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 144). Thus, throughout the data analysis process, analyzing the data from one participant went hand-in-hand with data collection from other participants. That is to say, as soon as one step was completed for each participant, I moved on to the next appropriate stage of recruitment, data collection, or data analysis immediately following the previous step, rather than waiting to collect all of the data at once before starting data analysis.

Data to be analyzed in this research comprised of audio recordings and field notes. I followed Creswell's (2014) general stages of qualitative data analysis, which are layered with more specific steps as well. First, all of the data, interview recordings, as well as any field notes recorded during or immediately after each interview, were transcribed verbatim. After transcribing the interviews, I organized and prepared the

transcript for analysis. I then replayed the tapes and read through all of the data to make sense of it and to ensure an accurate transcript. This also allowed me to establish familiarity with the participants' experiences and gain a general meaning before coding occurred. I also employed analytic memos to keep track of the research progress (Creswell, 2014, p. 144), to reinforce the practice of reflexivity throughout the study, and as a potential data source.

According to Saldaña (2009), "Coding and analytic memo writing are concurrent qualitative data analytic activities" (p. 33), thus, in addition to analysing and coding the data, I used analytic memos throughout the research process to assist in effective data analysis. Memo writing is used to "to document and reflect on: your coding process and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergence of patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data – all possibly leading towards theory" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 32). Strauss and Corbin (2015) explain that compared to field notes, memos are "lengthier than jottings and include more in-depth thinking about a concept...they are more complex and analytical" (p. 118) and they go on to argue that memo writing is just as important as data collection itself. Further, memo writing allows the researcher to get their ideas down on paper so that important insights are not lost (Maxwell, 1996), as "repressing analytical insights may mean losing them forever, for there's no guarantee they'll return" (Patton, 2002, p. 406). Moreover, analytic memo writing facilitates reflection, and as previously discussed, feminist scholars advocate the practice of reflexivity throughout the research process. Thus, writing analytic memos throughout the study also allowed me to maintain the practice of reflexivity and to remain mindful of any preconceived notions or assumptions I may hold.

During the next stage of data analysis, I used NVivo, a qualitative software program to code the data. Coding is “the process of organizing data by bracketing chunks...and writing a word representing a category in the margins” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, as cited in Creswell, 2014, p. 197). I used the following general steps to guide the coding process, as suggested by Bryman (2008). Firstly, I began transcription at an early stage and coded as soon as possible. I read all of the transcripts and field notes, recording any general notes of themes or things that may seem significant or interesting. Next, I repeated the process, this time making marginal notes such as keywords and themes. I then compared the codes generated from this process to important concepts from the literature review before finalizing the codes and categories. The next step entailed grouping chunks of data into files whilst keeping track of the origin of each piece of data. This process was repeated for each interview transcript, generating a file for each code or category that had been created (Bryman, 2008, pp. 550-552).

Throughout this process, I also made use of beneficial steps in the guide for coding suggested by Tesch (1990, as cited in Creswell, 2014), which includes making a list of topics after several transcripts have been read, and grouping the topics together based on similarity, forming them into columns, and making a list of codes. Going back to the data, I wrote the codes next to any related appropriate text. The next step involved turning the topics into categories by grouping related topics together and renaming them using descriptive words, followed by alphabetizing the codes. The data material that belonged in each category was then all assembled in one place for a preliminary analysis. In addition, I maintained a qualitative codebook to record and track the codes used in the process (Creswell, 2014).

There are various coding mechanisms that can be used to filter the data, and specifically, I used the in vivo coding technique, which Saldaña (2009) explains is a first cycle coding method that is “appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for...studies that prioritize and honour the participants' voice” (p. 74). This coding technique grounds the analysis from the perspective of the participants by creating codes from the participants’ own language, rather than words generated by the researcher (Saldaña, 2009, p. 48). My decision to use this technique was based on the theoretical framework of postcolonialism and feminist theory, which emphasizes the importance of drawing attention to unheard, marginalized voices.

Next, I used second cycle coding, which “further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, concepts, grasping meaning...and/or building theory” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8). The second cycle includes coding techniques such as focused, axial, and theoretical coding (Saldaña, 2009, p. 151). These methods are also referred to as open coding, breaking down the data into categories and examining them; axial coding, making connections between categories after open coding; and selective coding, identifying relationships between core categories and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). As Saldaña explains, these coding processes “literally and metaphorically constantly compare, reorganize, or ‘focus’ the codes into categories, prioritize them to develop ‘axis’ categories around which others revolve” (2009, p. 42).

After the coding process, using thematic analysis allowed me to generate meaningful categories, examine data that was similar to, contrasted, or had a distinct relationship to other categories, identify patterns that emerged throughout the data, and

locate themes that were characteristic of those found within the literature review, all the while maintaining a postcolonial feminist lens. According to Doucet and Mauthner (2006), “As the site where research participants’ voices, accounts, or narratives become “transformed” into theory...the interpretation stages and processes of empirical research are critical to feminist concerns with power, exploitation, knowing, and representation” (p. 41). Thus, after coding the data, I used the coding process to create a “description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis” (Creswell, 2014, p. 199) with the theoretical lens in mind. The next stage involved developing a representation of how themes and descriptions would be presented in the report, considering the use of narrative passage, visuals, tables, or diagrams. Finally, I interpreted the findings by comparing the findings to the literature and/or theories.

Establishing Credibility

I used various methods to ensure trustworthiness and validity within the research study. Firstly, to verify the accuracy of the data collected, I emailed a copy of the interview transcript to the participant after transcribing each interview. This gave participants an opportunity to read the entire transcript and make any necessary changes/clarifications, correct potential mistakes, or to provide any additional comments if she wished to do so. After doing so, one participant noted an error in her interview transcript regarding the name of a volunteer program of which she was a member. I also carefully triangulated between the interview recordings, transcripts, and written report to ensure accurate information. In addition, I provided rich, meaningful descriptions of the participants’ experiences in the presentation of the findings, and remained transparent and cautious of any biases or assumptions I may bring to the study.

To ensure reliability within the research study, as the principal student investigator, I was the sole researcher conducting the interviews and transcribing the data. I strived to maintain consistency throughout the study by following predetermined, documented interview protocol to conduct all interviews in the same steps. The interview protocol was followed so that participants were all reminded of important information, such as: the use of audio recording equipment; their right to pass a question, take a break, discontinue the interview, or withdraw their consent at any time without consequence; and information for counseling services. As well, I made every effort to ensure there were no obvious or avoidable transcription mistakes presented by maintaining consistent data analysis techniques, such as double-checking the transcripts. I also kept a record of the codes and their definitions and constantly compared and referred to them to ensure that a single code did not have multiple meanings or that the same concept/definition is not covered by multiple codes.

Ethical Considerations

To protect the rights of human participants involved in the study, there were certain ethical considerations that had to be addressed. Before any participant recruitment or data collection began, I applied to Brock University's Research Ethics Board (REB) so that I could continue the research study process as a Brock University graduate student working with human participants, and to avoid representing Brock University without permission. Thereafter, I received approval from the REB to proceed with the study through a Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research (File #16-268).

Further, I ensured that potential participants were fully informed of the nature of the study, their right to participate free of any pressure or coercion, and their right to

withdraw from the study at any point. I also ensured that participants understood that they would not face any penalties if they wished to discontinue participation at any point, and that they had the right to have all of their information discarded and removed entirely from the study. Participants were also informed of the interview specifics, such as format, time, location, and the use of an audio recording device. I obtained participants' signed consent to use the audio recording device during the interview through a Letter of Informed Consent, as well as verbally at the beginning of each interview. Participants received full transparency, with all of this information provided clearly before any data collection started. Data collection only commenced with the participants' full approval and signed consent. Furthermore, interviews were conducted in a convenient, mutually agreed upon location where the participants could feel safe, comfortable, and able to provide detailed, insightful responses.

Additionally, I ensured the participants' right to privacy and anonymity by omitting any identifying information about each individual via written or any other communication. Any information provided by participants was treated with confidentiality and participants were assured that apart from the researchers, no other individual would know or have access to their personal information. I used pseudonyms and renamed or omitted any identifiable information such as the names of other people, institutions, locations, et cetera, to prevent any risk of identification. Data collected from participants was analyzed striving to remain true to each woman's message, and avoiding misinterpretations or fraudulent analysis. Throughout the study, all material with participants' personal information was in a password-protected file, including the master list of the participants and their pseudonyms, and upon completion of the interviews and

dissemination of the findings, audio recordings were erased.

Due to the nature of the research study, it was essential that I attempt to build rapport with participants from the very first encounter. From the beginning of the study, I clarified the research objectives and ensured that the participants understood the rationale for the research, her role as a participant, and the importance of her experiences and knowledge, as well as the benefits of the research and how the results could be used in the future. I showed respect to each participant and her knowledge and experiences, and chose a safe environment that allowed her to feel comfortable sharing and opening up. As the rapport-building process is necessary in order to elicit detailed answers to the in-depth interview questions, I began the interview with broad, non-threatening questions.

Throughout the interviews, I ensured that participants heard and understood what was being asked, rephrased questions when necessary, gave them time to think about and respond to questions, listen to their responses, and was prepared to ask any potential follow-up questions. As well, by repeating participant's words, I was able signal the need for clarification and avoid misinterpreting their answers or ask misleading questions. I also tried to "develop commonality and empathy...between interviewer and interviewee" (Ryan & Dundon, 2008, p. 447), so that the interviews were more relaxed and the dialogue could be more fluid and natural, which could create a 'level playing field'. This was also done through self-disclosure and reciprocity, which "ensure that the relationship between the researcher and the participant is non-hierarchical" (Dickson-Swift, James, Sandra, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007, p. 332). Participants were reminded not to feel pressured to answer any questions they did not wish to answer, and were encouraged to ask for clarification of questions if needed, to take as much time to answer as needed, to

skip or come back to any question(s), or end the interview at any point, without any consequence.

Hadjistavropoulos and Smythe (2001) explain that qualitative studies can potentially stir up “painful memories or emotional conflicts for participants both during the interview and afterward” (p. 167), or that participants may not be prepared to discuss sensitive topics that bring up emotional issues. Given the nature of the research topic, the interview required asking questions that could have been potentially distressing for some, so I informed the participants of this early on. Whilst in Kurdistan, I also researched counselling services in the region, and found an organization that offered free, easy-to-access counselling to any woman. At the beginning of each interview, I provided a resource sheet including the name, address, and contact information for the organization’s offices, which were located in Duhok and Erbil. I also offered to contact the organization on her behalf if she wished. I informed participants of any potential risks before the study commenced, and indicated this through the Letter of Informed Consent, ensuring that participants were aware and prepared to participate in the study (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001, p. 172). In cases where participants had an emotional response to the question or seemed unable to continue, I offered to stop the interview, at least temporarily, or to take a break (Cowles, 1988).

When closing the interview, I strived to make participants feel as though their time and efforts were appreciated, and that their insights may be requested post-interview as well, such as in the member-checking steps. This stage of debriefing provided another chance to minimize or prevent potential risks, where researchers can “screen participants for potentially negative psychological consequences and take specific steps to minimize

these” (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001, p. 173). Again, I used the debriefing stage to remind the participants of the free counseling services described earlier.

Limitations

The location, timing, eligibility criteria, and nature of the interview questions all presented limitations within the scope of this study. Although data collection would have been possible through video-messaging programs such as Skype, I chose to recruit participants and conduct the interviews in person in Kurdistan. While this decision could have presented various challenges, especially for a researcher who was not aware of the realities of living in the region or had no connections or personal experience with the KRI. However, my history, knowledge and lived experiences allowed me to safely and easily travel to, within, and from the region. By doing so, I was able to remain as true to the problem context as possible, and to develop rapport with participants and make them feel more comfortable answering personal questions. Unfortunately however, I was still limited in the recruitment of participants from Duhok and Erbil provinces alone, due to access and safety issues.

Further, because the study was conducted in post-ISIS Iraq, the increased threats to safety and security impeded on the intended time frame required to gain approval from the Brock University Ethics board, recruit participants, and conduct interviews, thus resulting in a longer than anticipated data collection process and overall longer time to complete the study. Fortunately, the KRI governorates were relatively safe during my time in Kurdistan, and such impediments did not affect my ability to travel within or between Erbil and Duhok. As well, even though safety within Duhok and Erbil was not

an issue for participants, I still aimed to conduct the interviews in a location where participant could access easily and safely.

The participant eligibility also presented a limitation, as I was restricted to interviewing participants who spoke English due to the complexity of conducting interviews in Kurdish. Although I am a fluent Kurdish speaker, the Kurdish language has a number of dialects, some of which I am unable to fluently communicate in. Thus, conducting interviews in Kurdish with non-English speaking participants would have required the use of an interpreter. As previously stated, the presence of another individual during the face-to-face interviews could have inhibited participants from answering questions in detail or opening up and providing in depth responses. Therefore, the best option was to conduct interviews in English. In the KRI, English is taught in elementary schools and at the post-secondary level; there are both public and private universities where English is the primary language of instruction and examination, such the University of Kurdistan–Hewlêr (Erbil) or the American University of Kurdistan (Duhok). Thus, seeking English-speaking participants did not limit the sample to economically advantaged women or solely “elite” women. Although such issues relating to communication or access to participants were present, they did not prevent or compromise the quality of my research.

Eligibility to participate also required selecting individuals with whom I did not already have a relationship, which presented a challenge in developing rapport and building trust. As well, due to the nature of the central research questions, interview questions could have also presented a limitation wherein participants potentially may not have felt comfortable responding with in-depth answers. I believe that sharing a common

ethnicity and gender with the participants worked to offset such limitations and foster enough rapport so that participants felt comfortable answering potentially distressing questions.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the methodology and research design of the study. The data collection process was outlined, presenting the site selection, participant recruitment criteria, and interview method. Data analysis procedures were also provided, which included coding of the data and ethical considerations. The chapter included the role of the researcher and the insider/outsider perspective, establishing credibility as a researcher, the importance of reflexivity, and the limitations of the study. The next chapter provides a presentation of the research results.

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of Kurdish women in Kurdistan with respect to oppression. For this qualitative interpretive study, I conducted five face-to-face interviews with Kurdish women in the KRI on their experiences with education, recorded field notes, and documented the research process through memo writing. Research questions focused on Kurdish women's lived experiences in the KRI, their experiences in the education system, and their attitudes towards education.

The participants' ages ranged from 20s to 60s, and their occupations varied, including an educator, a Human Resources officer, a stay-at-home mother, and two undergraduate students. Interviews took place in Erbil or Duhok, two of the three provinces in the KRI, which is also where the participants lived. Four out of the five women interviewed had first-hand experience with the education system as students in the KRI; the fifth participant, who did not attend school in the KRI, has seven children aged two to eighteen, five of whom attend schools in Erbil.

The semi-structured interviews explored how each participant described her lived experiences as a woman in the KRI, if/how she described any experiences with oppression, and what factors she believed hindered or benefitted her education. Data collected included audio-recorded interviews and field notes, and was transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. During data analysis, I read through each interview individually, and wrote memos during the process. I then coded the interview line-by-line, tracking the codes that emerged through a qualitative codebook. After completing the first cycle of coding, I ran a second-cycle of coding, keeping track of emergent categories, patterns, themes, and frequencies through memos.

The following sections in this chapter present the nine themes that emerged from data analysis of interviews conducted with five female participants. As members of a marginalized group whose voices are often ignored or not heard, the research methodology allowed participants to speak in their own voices and have their experiences and voices validated, which aligns with feminist research practices. The themes that emerged reflect the research question, focusing on Kurdish women's lived experiences, beliefs, attitudes, challenges or barriers, and motivations with regard to education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The themes illustrate the shared experiences of Kurdish women in the KRI, and although they are all interconnected, they are organized into four groups and each theme is discussed individually (see Table 2: Main Groups and Themes).

The Problem Context

For the Kurdish women interviewed, a common theme that emerged across the interviews was the lack of freedom for women, lower quality of life for women, and the problems in education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Freedom and Quality of Life for Women in the KRI

As discussed in chapter 2, Kurdish women have endured multiple layers of oppression, and are often viewed, treated, and represented as members of the “weaker” sex. They have been marginalized as members of a minority ethnic group, and subjected to the norms, traditions, and expectations of male-dominant societies.

At the beginning of the interviews, each woman was asked to describe life in Kurdistan for women. Dalia, Zhiyan, and Tara all initially expressed that it was “good” overall; upon further questioning however, differing views emerged. For example, Tara, a 36 year-old stay-at-home mother stated, “We have the freedom to dress...drive, [and] go to school. I think everybody's free to do whatever he or she want here.”

Table 2

Main Groups and Themes

Group	Themes
A) The problem context	1. Lack of freedom and quality of life in the KRI 2. Problems in education
B) Living in areas of conflict	3. Life after war 4. Experiences with oppression
C) Equality and access	5. Gender inequality 6. Barriers to equal education and opportunity 7. Understanding and coping with inequality and barriers
D) The future	8. Fears, concerns, and uncertainties 9. Moving towards positive change

The women soon brought up difficulties confronting women due to expectations or rules within a male-dominant society. Zhiyan, a young undergraduate student explained, “as women in the culture, whenever you’re trying to do something or you need a little bit of freedom to build yourself, to develop yourself, there are sometimes barriers.” Dalia who was also a 21-year-old undergraduate student, shared how freedom could be contingent on one’s family: “in general it’s not that bad, but it depends on your family, which culture you are. ...Basically you’re living in a male society, because in everything you want...a man should be with you. Because you’re a woman—you can’t. That’s what they say.” Kani, a single mother who had experience in various roles as an educator, shared what life is like for a single woman in Kurdistan, saying, “it’s not fun for a woman, especially when the woman is alone.” Jwan, who had completed a graduate level education and was currently working as a human resources officer, explained her view on the topic by stating,

I don’t want to be a pessimist, but it’s not easy. It’s not easy—of course it’s easy for a woman who wants to go with tradition, everything that society tells them, and a male-dominated society tells them to do, but if you want to do things on your own, to be independent, it’s not an easy life.

However, despite such difficulties that each of the women identified, participants also highlighted positive changes they experienced whilst discussing life in KRI for women, and a common sub-theme emerged: participants had witnessed an increase in how independent women were becoming. Jwan’s illustrated this using an example of her experience as student, adding,

In 2008...I was doing 2nd year of university, I was the second woman who was

driving a car in my university. ...So now things have changed, like look how many women you'll see outside...doing businesses, you'll see a lot of women doing businesses now. Yeah, there's a big change. I'm very positive of this.

Zhiyan also noted the theme of becoming more independent, as she shared; "I think people started being more independent on themselves than on the government. Everyone used to wait for the government to hire him or her when they graduated. Now they start thinking about how to live, what to do in life." Tara also brought up the role of government when discussing women's independence, however she drew on an example of representation within politics. Tara explained, "In politics, a lot of women are working...that's a good thing, that's very good. Even one of my friends...she was a teacher. She wanted to work in the parliament. She was nominated and then we voted for her."

The themes of "quality of life" and "lack of freedom" were intertwined throughout the interviews and experiences of all of the participants. While describing their own freedoms as well as freedom for women in general, participants identified the various factors in a woman's life that can affect or determine her freedom. Jwan, for example, compared freedom between genders saying, "Well we don't have enough freedom. I'm not saying we don't have freedom, but we don't have *enough* freedom as men do have it." When asked what types of freedoms she believes women do not have, Jwan explained, "Everything...I'm talking about women in general: studying abroad, working—there are things that—of course you're allowed to work, but we need to step bigger and jump further. There are certain things that are easier for men to do, but not a woman." Zhiyan, however, focused on women's unique positions, saying, "A woman in

Kurdistan—you can say that they are not all the same—some of them have freedom to work, to study, to just live, and some of them don't... some of them are just at home.”

Participants also held some contradictory perceptions regarding freedom. For example, even though Tara mentioned early on in the interview that women have many freedoms that are granted by the law, she also noted that such freedoms were not guaranteed, as many women usually require family or spousal permission before all else. She elaborated using her own experience as an example,

There are not a lot of freedoms, especially for women. Like for myself, I don't see that I could be free to do most of the things that some people can. ...Here people call women “zaifa”—what they mean is that they're weak. A lot of people say that women are weak. “You can't do that job, you can't do this, and you can't go there.” They call them ‘weak’, and they think the man is stronger.

Women’s freedoms were discussed in comparison to that of men’s, in order to illustrate the limits and barriers women face. For example, when discussing her thoughts on women’s quality of life in the KRI and Iraq, Kani described the difference between life for men and women, explaining, “When it's a man- it's the default, it's okay.” Zhiyan also expressed an interesting viewpoint on the gender difference, explaining that men do have more freedoms, but that she did not believe that she would have a better quality of life as a man. She explained that with more freedoms, she wouldn’t have reached the level of education she had achieved thus far, as her limited freedom in other aspects of life drew her time and efforts towards her education. She noted,

First of all, if I was a man, I think it would be worse...my quality of life, I think it would be worse. ...Because, as woman, I used to stay home a lot, not like boys,

like go out. So I was spending my time trying to learn new stuff and study at school, so I got here. But if I was a man, I think it would be very different.

Tara talked about her experience as a working mother early on in her marriage, saying, “I used to work when my kids were younger...I was there for a year, but then my kids had to go to school.” She added her reasons for leaving her job and becoming a stay-at-home mother, explaining, “My husband didn't trust babysitters. His mother didn't actually appreciate that I was working. She was like ‘you should be at home taking care of the kids.’ So I had no choice, I had to come back and raise the kids at home.” Tara provided further examples of limitations by family on freedoms otherwise granted by the law explaining,

I asked my husband a while ago, “Can I drive?” and he's like, “No, you don't need to...because whenever you wanna go somewhere I'll take you. Where do you wanna drive to alone?” So this is the kind of thing that I want and many women here like to have but they need permission from their husband.

Kani, the only participant who also experienced living, working, and attending schools in areas of Iraq that were outside of the KRI, discussed her experience with limited freedoms as a woman who was involuntarily transferred from Kirkuk to Baghdad:

For a young women in her 20s to go to Baghdad, live alone, it was not acceptable for a woman to hire a room...I mean, at that age, not to have your own place, not to feel free to do whatever you want. So it was—you know, it was a very nasty experience.

Through various settings and times, the participants illustrated ways in which a woman's freedoms are limited and how she may experience a more difficult life.

Participants provided examples of factors such as society's attitudes, cultural norms and expectations of women, and requiring family or spousal permission, all of which they believe limit women's freedoms and ultimately impose on the quality of life a woman can enjoy. For some women, the advancements made towards women's independence were worth noting and gave them hope for further progress in the future.

Problems in Education

Regardless of the level of education each woman obtained, all of participants in this study placed a very high value on education. In addition, the theme of Problems in Education in the KRI soon emerged within all of the interviews. All five participants received a public education throughout their academic careers, with the exception of Dalia, who attended public schools until she was admitted to a private high school based on her academic achievements. Kani, a lecturer at a local public university, held a Master's degree, and had spent her career working in various positions within the field of education and humanitarianism. Jwan also obtained a Master's degree and worked in Human Resources. Dalia, who expressed an interest in pursuing a career within education, was an undergraduate student, as was Zhiyan—both of whom expressed their plans to pursue higher education in the near future.

Tara was the only participant without a postsecondary education, setting her apart from the other participants. Tara's experiences were also distinct as she was the only participant who attended elementary school outside of Iraq. As Tara explained, her family fled Iraq to Iran during Saddam's campaigns targeting the country's Kurdish minority, and she eventually lived in Canada after years as a refugee in Iran and Turkey. She began

her education at age 9 in Canada, and before graduating from high school, she returned to Kurdistan at age 16.

Aside from the differences in level of education, the participants were unanimous in their feelings and thoughts towards the importance of education, expressing its value for the individual, the country, and the future: “I love education. It's very important for myself, for my children. If you don't have education, you don't have much of a life,” explained Tara. Kani expressed her thoughts on the value of education by saying that education “is the only hope for Kurdistan.” Also, Dalia added the potential of education, explaining, “If the education system is implemented properly and taken care of, it is great.”

Even though participants exemplified the value which individuals place on education in Kurdish culture, it soon emerged that even when women are able, allowed, and encouraged to access education, they are still expected and encouraged to inevitably fill the role of wife and mother as well. Jwan shared that education is “the most important thing. Like I told you, I will definitely go for a happy marriage or a very successful career backed up with a very good education? I would choose the second one, definitely. You can tell how important education is to me.” Tara also illustrated this by drawing attention to gender roles for women through her discussion of what she teaches her daughter, She explained,

If you don't have education, you don't go to school, you don't have a job, what do you do then? Like I tell my daughter, “Please study hard. Get good marks so you'll be accepted at a good college, and after college you'll get a good job. If you don't, if you drop out of school, what are you going to do then? You're going to

stay home, get married, have kids...you can do that *and* have a good job, *and* a good education.”

As women who live in locations affected by wars and armed conflict, the participants’ lived experiences revealed various factors that they regarded as problems throughout the education system, some of which have been further compromised due to war and conflict. Jwan explained problems with the out-dated curriculum and believed that the system was in need of “more updated knowledge or things that are more useful to the society or school.” Kani elaborated on such problems, sharing her experience as a student and an educator in Iraq since the 1960s, explaining:

The problem here, until now they keep thinking, “Oh, the good old days,” and there weren't good old days...they very much use a sort of ideology that the Ba'ath Regime used, without realizing it. They don't realize it that they've been under the Ba'ath Party for so long, they just do it. ...I mean this is of course often repeated that UNESCO said this or that about education in Iraq, this myth. I was there in the 70s. I was in Iraq in the 70s, and this, “Iraq is free of illiteracy”? My God! I mean, we were underground, we knew what was happening—it was never true.

As discussed in chapter 2, although Iraq was once regarded as having one of the best education systems in the Middle East (Al-Tikriti, 2005), and was recognized by the United Nations for the country’s campaigns against illiteracy (UNESCO, 2003), the significant gaps in accurate information such as the absence of Iraqi census records in Kurdish regions, points to evidence indicating false or inaccurate reports of enrolment, literacy, and access to education. Inconsistencies and missing data also limit the ability to

measure against education indicators determined by international commitments to education (Griffiths 2010), revealing the reality of the education system in Iraq in past several decades. Kani challenged the misrepresentation as well, stating,

That image that they gave was not true! ...I can prove it wasn't true. They said Iraq was free of the illiterate people. Okay, at that stage, they enrolled everybody who was illiterate from age 15 to 45. Okay, if you just take a sample from the illiterate people of Iraq, you will find many of them were in that age group at the time, and they are *still* illiterate. What happened? They forgot (how to read and write) or something?

According to the Iraqi Curriculum Framework report, the role of teachers in Iraq and Kurdistan includes creating an environment that encourages enjoyable, active learning; using a variety of teaching and learning methodologies to reach various learning needs and styles; and encouraging social dialogue and independent thinkers, among other aims (UNESCO, 2012). However, throughout the levels of schooling, the literature suggests that educators continue to employ traditional methods, such as using a teacher-centered approach, limited student participation in the classroom, lacking the use of proper resources or technology, and using exam-centered assessment and evaluation that encourage and reward memorization of outdated material rather than comprehension, analysis, thinking, and critique (M.Amin, 2017; Mhamad & Shareef, 2014; Saleh, Al-Tawil, & Al-Hadithi, 2012). Participants expressed similar concerns based on their experiences with the approach to education and the teaching styles used within the classrooms. Kani explained her disappointment in the system:

Intellectually, I mean the approach, very old fashioned, very out of date, and

hardly any challenge at all. It's just they don't want to change. They don't want the students to come out with something useful. They just make the students learn the handouts by heart, and take the exams, and pass. ... I'm very disappointed and I feel it's very unfair, because we get a lot of students, thousands, and we give them nothing. ... They got a degree, but they're not qualified.

Jwan shared similar concerns, saying, “it's not only the education; the attitude—the personality that the education builds here in Kurdistan, it's not that; it's not up to the point that you're saying “okay, satisfied.” Zhiyan also expressed discontent with the education system: “I don't think it's a good system for education... it's not being implemented properly.” Along with the various problems highlighted, all of the participants also pointed out the continuous decline in the quality of education since the most recent war with ISIS. Jwan believed the quality was “getting worse every day. Even with having all the private schools, universities, you don't see the results.” Tara shared her concerns for her children's education, saying “it has slowed down a lot, the teaching. And my kids have been going to school, but I don't think they're getting the proper education.” According to Dalia, the decline was “getting worse because of the budget and economic crisis.” Kani was able to share insights into the same issues from the perspective of an educator, highlighting additional issues, such as the lack of quality control and performance appraisals for teachers. She explained,

They go and usually they're given a big number of schools to supervise in each case. And so, usually, each teacher may or may not just have one supervisor once a year or twice a year. Even if it is, in the best of luck it's twice a year—that report doesn't have any effect.

On the other hand, when asked about their own experiences with education, most of the participants described the education they received as “good,” although they later brought up areas of concern. Dalia and Jwan were both pleased with the education they received. The women also shared a common experience in that they both received admission to special programs for students with the top grades. Jwan discussed this experience, saying,

My scoring was very high. I was so lucky. That year they opened intermediary and then high school, and it was only for students who got very high scores in Erbil, so I went to that school. ...It was a big difference in terms of getting the education, the curriculum we were studying from the other school. ...Comparing it to the general quality of education in Kurdistan it was very good.

Dalia also compared her educational experience in the private program to education received in public schools, saying, “it was very good. It was so much better than public school... I was a top student, that’s why I went to that private school. It was so good.”

Dalia further elaborated on the difference between public and private schools, explaining, “they were more valued than the others because we had high grades than others.” Tara and her husband chose to send one of their children to a private school to see if the quality of education would be better than that of public schools. She explained, “one of my sons goes to a private school. He comes home at 3 o'clock. His school days are longer. He gets a better education. We paid for his school, but I'm so glad.”

Across all of the interviews, participants stressed the importance of education. They all expressed the belief that a better education could lead to increased opportunities, and an increase in women’s quality of life. A unanimous area of concern was the steady

decline in the quality of education available in the KRI. Thus, according to the women's knowledge and experiences, there is a tremendous need for better quality education. Although three participants described a better quality of education in private schools, access is only available to select groups; Jwan and Dalia obtained access through maintaining high grades throughout school, and for Tara, the private education in which she enrolled her son came at the cost of tuition. Participants identified areas in particular such as out-dated curricula, schools and teachers using ineffective teaching methods and approach to education, and inaccurate representations of the education system, which result in failure to adopt a new and more effective system. The data also indicated various other problems in education, specifically ones that have resulted from war, which are further discussed in the Life After War section of this chapter, as well as the Barriers to Equal Education and Opportunities section.

Living in Areas of Conflict

Throughout the interviews with the Kurdish female respondents, the salient theme of coping with life within areas of conflict emerged, focusing on life after war as well as personal experiences with oppression.

Life After War

The cycles of oppression, war, and conflicts in Iraq have left irreversible damages in every aspect. After the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'athist regime, the KRI obtained further autonomy from the central government. As a result, the KRG began the reformation and rebuilding of the region, creating significant improvements. Some of the participants shared family experiences although they were too young to recall the events. For example, Dalia discussed her

limited recollection of the events as a seven year-old, explaining, “in 2003 when the war started, my family fled to a village, and honestly, I mean I didn't really see the war. I wasn't aware of it because I was so young.” On the other hand, Tara and Kani shared their thoughts and experiences during the difficult time. Kani opened up about the hopes she had after the fall of the regime, explaining,

In 2003, we had high hopes. We really did. I thought ‘this is the time when can all celebrate the new Iraq’. And then, it was a few months of uncertainty when the war was on, but eventually we were hopeful that something good will come finally, and it would be a different Iraq. But very soon, that faded away with the explosion at the UN and other terrorist acts started¹.

War and instability have become a new norm, for Tara. She explains,

this country has been in war all its life. Look at history, it's been in war for many, many years. Yes, war does that to you. You try to rebuild after one war, you're not finished, and another war starts. In 2003, the war stopped, and now another war began. All I've seen, my happy years here in Kurdistan since I've been married for 20 years, are 6 years of happiness. Six years of no war, fine jobs, people living freely...after Saddam fell and before ISIS. In between that time, it was perfect... the education improved, people were being hired from all over the world to work in this country. We felt great! We were like “we're going to have a real country soon.” Life was going to work for us...the government was doing so much—they began a lot of positive changes.

¹ On August 19, 2003, a truck bomb explosion killed 17 people at the UN Headquarters in Baghdad. In the following month, the UN office in Iraq was the target of another suicide car bombing (UN Headquarters Compound, 2018).

In post-2003 Iraq, growth and urban development was a significant indicator of positive changes to come. Tara discussed the changes she witnessed, saying,

A lot of good things happened after 2003... a lot of new companies from other countries opened up companies here. ...The city actually changed a lot. It was more beautiful. There were a lot of beautiful buildings, a lot of nice places to go. ...I saw the city growing a lot.

Kani added her insights as she witnessed the growth in Erbil, saying, “Well, it has changed a lot since I came here in 1999...Erbil was like a little village, I mean a huge village—but not a town, not a city. There were hardly any places to go, hardly anywhere to socialize. So things have changed a lot since then.”

As discussed in chapter 2, the growth and development that occurred in the KRI after 2003 came to an end. Participants discussed witnessing the pattern of regressing back to war and described their experiences during the 2014 invasion of ISIS. Dalia explained,

But after that, ISIS came, Daesh came, I saw that a lot of fighting was going on, these (kinds of) things....when they went to Shingar and did that to those families—I heard about these things happening during Saddam's time too, but this was the first time I saw it. I just felt it.

Tara added that, “it has changed a lot.” She described her life during the post-Saddam and pre-ISIS era, explaining, “before ISIS, we were fine. [My husband] had his own house, he had a car...he had his own job, my children were in school, we were fine.”

Zhiyan described witnessing a unique change to peoples’ attitudes towards women and their freedoms after the economic crisis. She explained, “the whole society in Kurdistan,

in Duhok especially, it all has changed in a couple years,” adding that women were able to gain more independence as a result of being pushed into the workforce, and that “their families didn't mind because they (were) happy if someone from their family can depend on herself.”

When discussing life after war, participants also described the impacts of past and present wars and conflicts specifically on their own education, highlighting issues such as safety, damage to infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, shortage of school, and shortened school hours, all of which affect the accessibility, adaptability, and availability to education, all of which were discussed in chapter 2. Tara described the interruptions to schooling that she experienced, explaining,

I went to school at 5 years old... one day, back in Saddam's regime, there was war. I heard bombs...all I remember was going under the desk. And a few months later we were gone. We left this country. My father was like “let's go, it's not safe.”... After leaving, we went to Iran, and then we went to Turkey. ... My schooling started at 9 and stopped at 16 when I came back here, so all the schooling I basically had was in Canada. The rest of the countries I went to, either they were *in* war or we were running *away* from war.

Dalia shared her thoughts on the affects of ISIS on education, explaining that after ISIS invaded Iraq, “it didn't affect me in education because I was in college, but it affected those who were in school because IDPs were housed in their schools... the ones who were in middle school and elementary school.” Tara also illustrated examples of the broken system through her experience with her children’s education. She explained,

I haven't let my kids be absent from school... I want them to be at school every day, but they don't like it. And sometimes I'm like "what is there not to like?" But then I go to the school, and I see broken windows, no heater in the winter, and a lot of noise...they go to school at 8 o'clock, they come home at 11:30. I don't know how much education they get in half a day. ...That sucks, just a couple hours of schooling is not enough.

The short school hours were also an area of concern for Jwan, as she questioned the amount of learning that children were able to get:

I'm not sure what teachers are teaching these days with going to school only two or three days a week or having 40 students. My mom is a teacher and she says they have 50 students in one class. I mean in 45 minutes, what do you teach these kids?

While issues such as damage to school infrastructure undoubtedly prevent children's access to education, Kani addressed an area that she believed is a deeper problem:

I know buildings are not so good, but the main weak point is the quality of the teachers and the way they are trained. They're not capable to bring up a generation, a new generation, in a way that would be peace-loving, friendly, environment friendly, and sort of feel the kind of citizenship and affiliation to your land, to your country. They're not doing that at all. And I think it is at risk, and it is a point that people should really pay attention to.

Teachers' salaries soon emerged as a common sub-theme amongst all of the participants when discussing education and life after war. The economic collapse felt by the KRI,

which was due in part to insufficient budgetary allocations from the Iraqi central government withholding the KRG's budget, resulted in a wave of effects felt throughout various sectors in the region, education notwithstanding. In addition to budget cuts to education, civil servant workers received salary cuts and delays. Tara elaborated on the situation as she explained,

We're in a crisis right now. So the first thing they did was cut the teacher's salary. ... They're receiving a quarter of what they used to, (the teachers). So let's say if you were a teacher in that public school, would you have energy and, you know, wanting to teach as you used to?

Jwan also shared her concerns with the implications that would result from salary cuts. She explained from the perspective of a teacher, that “you're teaching kids, and you have a feeling that you're not rewarded for your hard work. How can you teach kids? I just don't understand this. ... Teachers are paid the least, and right now I think they're receiving 35% of their salary, per month.”

Dalia and Zhiyan's insights pointed to a neglected system. They both expressed the belief that educators didn't care for education or weren't motivated to teach, as Dalia explained, “they don't care much like before (the teachers). Even others in education, they don't care that much about students... teachers also, they don't get in the mood of teaching anymore... I'm not saying all of them, but mostly.” Zhiyan explained that such problems start with the school administration, explaining that “if the head [of the school] does not care for the education, the teachers don't care too. So if the teachers don't care, of course students won't care for education.”

A common theme amongst the participants was their understanding of life during war and appreciation for life after war, which can result from living in a country that has been afflicted by war and atrocities for the majority of its recent history. The participants recalled various aspects of the past and present wars and conflicts. Kani and Tara described more vivid experiences of life during war, as well as the growth and positive changes they witnessed post-2003. Unfortunately, all of the participants were living through another war and an economic crisis at the time of the interviews. Dalia, who was born in 1996 and did not recall life pre-2003, connected the massacre of Yezidis by ISIS in 2014 to the experiences of her family who had survived Iraq's genocide against Kurds. The recent impacts on education were a common area of concern, as participants explained the various facets of the already fragile education system further deteriorating.

Experiences With Oppression

Apart from witnessing the changes and impacts of war to the region, participants shared their own experiences with past and/or present wars. A commonality amongst some of the participants was the theme of displacement. Four participants, Tara, Kani, Dalia, and Zhiyan, all described becoming displaced due to war or violent conflicts, at one point or another. Tara explained her experience fleeing Iraq as a child, saying, "I was 6 years old when my family left Iraq. We lived in Kurdistan-Iraq. We left because of Saddam's Regime. My father was a Peshmerga² so we had to escape. We went to Iran and then Turkey." Tara then described her experience years later during the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The instability and unpredictable nature of Saddam's history of targeting Kurdish cities became an immediate fear for Tara, as she explains:

² Peshmerga are Kurdistan's armed forces.

The time, (March) 2003—when the Americans and Saddam's regime fought... we were so scared that he [Saddam] was going to bomb us again just like [what happened in] Halabja. We actually even mentally felt something. It didn't happen, but one night my husband was like “I can smell apples”...He was like, “remember back in Halabja? ...The bombs, they had to smell beautiful so people could smell it. That's how the chemicals went into their body. That's how they were killed.”

So as soon as my husband said that, I was like, “oh, I can smell it,” and I couldn't, but I was so scared! I was like, “I can smell it. Let's leave. Let's go!” We all left the city because we were so scared that Saddam was going to do the same as he did to Halabja...we were like Hewler³ is probably going to be the target. ...I think it was March. It was so cold. ...I had three small kids. We took enough food, but we couldn't eat, we were so scared, and we weren't comfortable. We had tents.

We just wanted to be home.

Kani's experience with displacement was the result of the forced resettlement campaigns within the Ba'athists' Arabization policy. For the purpose of shifting the demographics of oil-rich cities, Kurds were expelled from the Kirkuk, as discussed in chapter 2. Kani shared her experience with such events:

Well, I come from Kirkuk, originally—from a Kurdish family that lived in Kirkuk until 1980, when I just graduated from University. I was forced to leave Kirkuk because at the time they were Arabizing the area and I didn't have a choice. So at that time, it was kind of the beginning of Saddam's rule. He came to power in '79, so by the year '80, it wasn't as bad as it became later on, when they would actually

³ That is, Erbil. Hawler/Hewlêr is the Kurdish name for Erbil.

bring a truck and put your belongings, and *make* you move. At that stage, they just transferred us.

For Zhiyan, a much younger participant, experiencing displacement did not occur until during the 2014 invasion of ISIS, which caused her to leave her home and miss schooling. She explained that even though she had always been a strong student, ultimately that year, “I failed the 12th grade.”

As the participants’ stories illustrate, oppression, which was explained as any type of cruel or unusual mistreatment or control, can operate on various levels and settings. As well, the participants’ experience during the same time and location could result in differing experiences and perspectives. When asked if she had ever experienced oppression, Jwan stated that she had not experience, and added,

There was nothing that could affect my education. ... There was only a time when my dad had to go—and that was because of the civil war here, my dad had to go to Baghdad for some years. That was like, it wasn't something that big. ...

Because I think I was a kid, and I was busy with studying most of that time, and during summer most of the time I was going to Baghdad to stay with him.

In contrast, Kani shared various experiences, when answering the same question. She explained,

Well I've experienced oppression because my father was sort of much older. ...

He only appreciated that one son that he had. ... So for him, maybe because we were girls, he didn't pay that much attention. I didn't feel that much [attention],

but he was always there to punish and to oppress, that kind of thing. He wasn't

there to give love and care...I mean this is my first-hand experience, yes, I would

say yes. Even though he was a very educated guy...the way he behaved at home—he was not caring for us... and he oppressed.

Kani also added that the oppression she felt at home carried into her life as a married woman as well. She explained, “and of course, I wasn't lucky, so even when I married, it was somebody who would oppress women all the time, and that's why eventually I separated.” Dalia, who was raised by her grandparents for most of her life, also discussed her experiences within her family when answering the question. She explained:

I can tell in my family, because I wasn't living with them, I was living with my grandpa and grandmother. So now I'm living with them (my parents), so it's getting bad—I'm not saying I'm oppressed, but in some way because they don't know me that well, so sometimes they get [pausing]; sorry I. ...So, they didn't understand me, because they don't know me that well.

Tara explained that “Yes, I have been [oppressed] by society of course, a lot of times—especially in a country where there's been war.” Tara explained such experiences, saying,

It was years ago... just before the Americans fought Saddam's regime and he was destroyed. My husband, he was working and we were very poor. We just had a small family. He was working at a small shop and then the war started. Once the war started he had to close down his store and come home, stay home until everything was quiet (stable) again. So when he decided to go back to work, the war was over, he had nothing. He didn't know where to start... We weren't starving but we were suffering a lot for a while.

Kani, who has spent the longest time in Iraq, described many lived experiences under oppression, some of which were based on her Kurdish ethnicity. Kani's experience illustrates a form of oppression women faced in the 1980s, losing their husbands and sons when thousands of men were arbitrarily detained, disappeared or were killed (HRW, 2003, p. xviii). Kani shared her experience, saying,

I've seen a lot of wars, actually. And being in Kirkuk...our house was located somewhere on the main road, so I would see all these army going North, and I would see that they're only going to kill; all these tanks and artillery going right in front of us. And of course my brother, the one brother that I had (he's dead now), he was a Peshmerga in the '60s, and eventually my father was put in jail. Also just as a Kurd, there was nothing particular that – I mean, at the time most of the people, most of the Kurdish people in Kirkuk were put in jail in the '60s, and he was also in jail. So in my childhood, I've been through visiting prisons, visiting my brother, visiting my father, that kind of thing.

The oppression that Kani endured did not end there. Kani also explained the oppression she felt as a student subjected to Arabization and indoctrination by the former Iraqi regime. As discussed in detail in the Education in Iraq section of the literature review, the Ba'athist regime employed education as an instrument to indoctrinate the population, ultimately furthering the Ba'athist ideology and promoting its agenda (Nakash, 1994, as cited in Anderson & Stansfield, 2004), and Kani's experiences as a student illustrate this indoctrination:

There are forms of oppression. ...For example, every Thursday they would gather us in the schoolyard and they would make us cry for Palestine... even as a child,

they would force us to donate. At the time when my father was in jail, my brother was a Peshmerga, and we didn't know their whereabouts; our property was confiscated, and we had to donate to Palestine. I mean, imagine. Do you think that I should sympathize with Palestine when my own nation was going through this at that time? I think that was a kind of oppression. ...So every Thursday [they had the event] “Rifat Al Alam” [Joyous Flag] ... and they talked to the students about some of these Arab Nationalism kind of things...And of course, I mean oppression—for me was like, *this* [Kani’s emphasis] was oppression. And ever since we were in college in Baghdad...they would use all these loud speakers and they would sing for ‘the hero’, for Saddam, for Ba'athism, for this and that, and you could just do nothing, just listen- you *had* [Kani’s emphasis] to...it was just too much. All the time you would hear that, and you would absorb... all the time they would make you—suffocate you with these ideas, with their songs, and it definitely made me very unhappy.

After completing her education, Kani continued to feel oppression. She described her experiences as an educator in the workplace and elaborated on the discrimination she faced based on her Kurdish ethnicity. Kani talked about being targeted for speaking Kurdish, as well as being accused of sympathising with or supporting the Kurdish cause:

In Kirkuk, I was investigated a couple of times. They accused me—they said that “you talked about Kurdish and revolution,” and all that, at the time when I should have said “rebellions” not “revolutions.”... But I know that I was very cautious... I knew that I was coming to a Ba'ath Iraq, and I should be careful, so I'm sure it never even so much as crossed my mind to speak publicly in front of the class. ...

So I was investigated that way. ... And that was one reason why I didn't mind being transferred (although it was out of my will—they forced me to go to Baghdad), because Baghdad would be bigger and you were less under focus. With Kirkuk, being a Kurd at the time, that was when Saddam Hussein just assumed power and his Arabization scheme was sort of on the way.

The data in this study illustrated the multiplicity of ways in which an individual woman living in the KRI or Iraq could have experienced oppression throughout her life. As the participants with the most experience and time living in Iraq, Tara and Kani presented various stories of the oppression they endured. Both participants described oppression based on gender and their Kurdish ethnicity. The types of oppression that participants described included displacement, mistreatment, family separation, witnessing family members' disappearance or imprisonment, witnessing war and violence first-hand, living with the trauma of past atrocities and the fears that it may occur again, being subjected to indoctrinating ideologies, and being targeted and accused of wrong-doing due to ethnicity.

Inequality and Access

Inequality and Access were noticeable themes amongst all of the interviews. Within this theme, gender inequality, the various barriers to equal education and opportunities, and the ways in which women understood and coped with such barriers and inequality developed as the main subthemes.

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality was as a significant theme throughout the data. Participants' experiences and knowledge on gender inequality resulted in three subthemes: personal experiences, gender inequality throughout society, and gender inequality within

education. All of the participants in the study believed that quality of life for men and women in the KRI was unequal, with men as the advantaged group.

When asked if she believed her quality of life would be different in any way if she were not a woman, Jwan expressed,

Yes, definitely. There was a time that I believed I could do anything that men could do here, but then when you start doing things, then you realize you're dreaming big dreams. ... We're not treated equally, because simply we're expected to be—the kind of education that women get is very narrowed down to being a doctor, engineer...and engineers are not considered as women's job. Doctors, yes; teachers—the preferred job for every single woman in this country because she can work for a couple of hours and then cook and take care of the house for the rest. So it's pretty narrowed down, so even if you want to get a better education, to go for post-grad later, you're expected to do less, always. Get a degree, that's good. Work for the government, that's even better. But then, that's it. Not more than this.

When answering the same question, Dalia first focused on the positive changes that had occurred, and then explaining her belief for the difference. She stated, “it's getting changed and getting better. But in the last decade, you can say it was a huge difference for men and women, even in education. But like I said, we're living in a male society.” Kani shared specific experiences as a woman in Post-Saddam Iraq, adding that she remained hopeful of the positive social and political changes she had witnessed in the KRI. However, she discussed her disappointment later on when she had first-hand experience of unfair treatment as a woman. Kani noted how gender was a factor when explaining her experience being pressured and intimidated into vacating her residence

during an unlawful eviction, “Usually, you can never ever do that to a man because according to the law—especially the fact that this other guy...he had his own house. So he was not at all under pressure to evacuate me. And you never do that to a man, but they did a nasty job and they didn't even stop at that.” She described the experience, after being summoned to court,

I go to that office, and all I see is men, absolutely no women. It was supposed to be the Social kind of office of the political party or something. I entered, and the guy who was in charge there, the first thing he says is, “Do you live alone in that house?” Like you know, the way they treat you like you are some woman who uses the house for a bad purpose...and then the new owner comes along, and very respected, received very well, like a VIP entering... he sort of receives the VIP treatment, while when I come in they're just like “Tuh [scoffing]. Why are you living in this house alone? Why aren't you emptying it? Why aren't' you vacating it?” And it was like a court session, like I was being put on trial. And I said, “Look I'm living in that house, according to the law, and I have this contract. It's a valid contract.” He tells me, “F*ck your contract!”

Kani also expressed that she believed the unfair treatment she experienced would not have occurred if she was not a single woman. Tara, who expressed that she did not feel unequal treatment based on her gender, later described the role she played as a woman, wife, and mother. She later added that the gender expectations she faced came with limitations on her freedom, most notably, requiring her husband or family's permission in order to enjoy certain freedoms otherwise granted by the law, saying,

Nobody has ever treated me wrong because I'm a woman... even my husband,

he's never treated me wrong because I'm a woman. He's just told me "Since you're a woman and you're a mother, this is the best thing for you. Don't think of being more free, and going out, and doing work and stuff like that." He's like "This is not your job, *this* is your job. *This* is better for you."

When Zhiyan was asked if she believed that men and women were treated and viewed equally, she expressed, "In general these couple of last years, yes. But before it wasn't like that...women were not working, and the society was not looking at them like equal to a man, like she can grow, she can just depend on herself."

Within education, some participants believed that gender inequality was less apparent, or not apparent at all. As Tara explained, "men and women, in education, they're together. And they're treated exactly the same way in my view." Zhiyan believed that people are treated equally within schools regardless of gender, and shared her own experience, stating, "It was so easy; and equal." Dalia believed that while women were treated equally in some aspects of schooling, there were other areas in which women were not treated or viewed equally. She clarified, saying, "for example, we have engineering, women engineers. They don't care about them, they don't see them as good as men...even if that woman was better than any other (male) student." Although Kani believed that she received an equal education to boys throughout her schooling, she expressed that there were still differences in the treatment of boys and girls in schools. She illustrated with an example, stating that,

This country is for men first. Even in the very early years of schooling when I was doing very well. When I was at the top of the class, they would always make another boy become the "co-first"... although he was much poorer than I was in

his knowledge and everything...they would never give you the chance to be at the top.

Even though participants unanimously described receiving an equal quality of education to males, gender inequalities quickly emerged amongst the women's experiences as female students.

Barriers to Equal Education and Opportunities

The following section describes participants' experiences with various types of barriers preventing them or others from pursuing professional or academic goals, as well as barriers that limited their access to basic rights, freedoms, or opportunities. They include: gender barriers, family-imposed barriers, sociocultural barriers, systemic barriers, physical barriers (distance or physical ability), language barriers, and conflict barriers.

Gender can act as a primary, significant barrier denying or limiting Kurdish women and girls' access to rights, resources and services. Participants discussed their thoughts and experiences with the gender barriers that prevented them from obtaining further education or career opportunities. Jwan shared her career ambitions and the main factor she felt prevented her from achieving it, saying, "I always wanted to get into real estate. I wanted to have a business, and start doing it. And I tried it for a year and a half, and it didn't work, simply because I'm a woman, and that was the only reason." Tara explained her thoughts on why women face limitations, explaining, "they (men) want their wives to be at home, taking care of the house, and the children. They think that's a better job for them. ...People in this society would like to see women more inside the house."

Family-imposed barriers were also present within the data and are interconnected with gender and socio-cultural barriers. Participants discussed a family's influence in preventing a woman or girl's access to education or other opportunities. Tara shared her husband's role in her decision-making regarding pursuing further education, explaining, "one time, I said, 'Listen, I want to improve my education. I want to finish high school, go to school.' And about that, he also said to me, 'it's better that you raise the kids.'" Tara further highlighted the role of family while sharing her daughter's experiences as well. She explained, "[Her father] really wants her to finish high school, college—he's supporting her all the way. But in some other families...they're like 'she's a girl, she needs to stay at home. She doesn't have to finish school. As long as she knows how to read and write, that's enough.'" Jwan also discussed her family's support and encouragement of her pursuit for higher education. She described their influence in her decision-making and how that worked as a barrier, saying, "I wanted to be a journalist when I finished high school. My family was like, 'No. Either you're going to medical school or engineering.'"

Social norms and traditions, values, expectations, and the attitudes of others developed into the next subtheme: sociocultural barriers. Although some participants had differing views on how culture and religion create barriers for women, there was no question that such barriers do exist. Kani provided an example through her daughter:

My husband died 3 years ago, and my daughter gets only half [the inheritance] that her brother gets. Isn't that oppression? Why? She's the daughter of that same man... isn't this oppression? Isn't this [Islam] a religion that has the oppression in it? And the fact that you can't be called a witness, only two of you will be worth

one man. What is this? Of course this is oppression.

Unlike Kani, Jwan believed that barriers are presented by culture rather than religion, explaining:

I don't believe in a religion interfering into anything...it's mostly cultural. ...

Marriage, having kids, taking care of your man; as I said, it's a male-dominant society. People think—unfortunately a lot of women think that the woman should take care of the man, serve her man, and dedicate all her time to her man. So, it's the marriage and kids, and taking care of your husband that are the reasons that make women step back and not go for better education.

Jwan also described her own experience with others' attitudes and expectations towards her and her education. She stated, "Most of the people think you're crazy, your education is taking too much time." She identified one way in which social expectations for women can pose barriers between women and education, saying,

[For women] there are more risks involved, and we do have to sacrifice a lot of stuff. ... [When] I started my Master's program...one of the employees in our office told me, "You know what, you just started your Master's, and you just lost another chance for getting married." You see, if you want to do something, something very simple—studying your Master's, something that you can do on your own and you can manage your time and everything—but still, people think that you lost a chance for getting married. They're telling you that at some point you have to forget about marriage because you're doing your Master's.

Systemic or institutional barriers, which are linked to the policies, practices and procedures within institutions such as government, education, and organizations, also

build upon pre-existing barriers to women and girls' access to rights and freedoms and equal education and opportunities. Patterns within the theme of systemic barriers pointed to the practice of nepotism, partisanship, and favoritism, resulting from one's class or political affiliation. Some participants described how such elements prevented career advancement or educational achievement for themselves or for women in general. Tara shared her views on inequality and systemic barriers:

I think the people in this country that are not treated equally are the rich and the poor. And the people in government. ... Ministers and parliamentarians—their children with our children are treated very differently when they go to schools and colleges. They have more privileges. ... Why is that? Because the father just gave the teacher a phone call and said, “give one hundred percent to my son. He needs it.” It's all about power, and government here—ministers, they all have power...they have better advantages.

Kani also discussed how power and corruption results in inequalities within education. She explained,

It's definitely who you know—who you know, and where in the party you belong... for example there's a lot of demand here or requests to get into higher education...and there was this program to send students abroad to study for their Masters and PhD. Most of the time, it was done on a basis of party political favouritism...but it was mostly men. ... You can see the numbers, the statistics; a lot of men get their degrees that way.

Kani and Dalia's lived experiences with inequalities or mistreatment resulting from partisanship or favouritism further illustrate systemic barriers. Even though Dalia

was a very strong student, she still experienced unfair treatment that affected her grades, as she described, “even if in school, in some stages I got low degrees or low grades because in some situations there was favouritism...some people knew each other—I mean that they had a relationship, whether they were related, or however.” According to Kani, those who held higher ranks in a political party often benefited from inequality. She discussed her thoughts on the problem and provided an example from her life during pre-2003 Iraq, stating,

The Heads of Department and the ones in key positions were all Ba'ath Party members. ... While people like me, who had a better degree than they had, I was just sort of a teacher, and so I was under scrutiny all the time...especially being a woman, in Kirkuk, being young...I was sort of forced—pressurized, to belong to the Arab Ba'ath Party. I ignored the request, and it was repeated a few times, and I ignored it all the time. So by the end of 1995, I was given early retirement, because there were certain colleges and universities that were called “closed”—exclusively for Ba'athists. ... A few times somebody would come to where I was working and would try to persuade me to work for them, and whatever it meant, “to be our eyes,” and that kind of thing. ... Which means to be our spy... this is one reason I couldn't go on...I always had the dream of going and sort of doing my PhD, and I actually had the letter of admission in a university abroad with a professor I knew, and I was so pleased. They postponed it for me for 3 successive years, and I wouldn't get the approval from Baghdad. I would apply and apply, and I would never get any approval, ever. I would have to get either a person- a mercenary... or, to belong to the Ba'ath Party...and then, I got an offer

one day. They said, “Okay, we will facilitate that. You will go, you will get your PhD”... and I was very surprised...then he said this kind of, “and of course, you will go abroad, and I know you know very many people there—Kurdish people. So, you will be our eyes and ears over there.” And when he said this, I said, “I’m sorry, but I don’t know anyone there.”... His response was, “No, come on. We know that you know a lot of families.” I said, “No, I hardly know anyone. I don’t know anyone, and I’m sorry I can’t be of use.” And that was it.

As discussed in chapter 2, because the state controlled every sector of life, even career advancement was used as tool to control. According to Anderson and Stansfield (2004), those who cooperated with the Ba’ath regime were rewarded, and those who didn’t were punished. Despite meeting all of the criteria required to pursue the highest academic degree, Kani was targeted based on her ethnicity, age, and gender, and was placed in an ethical dilemma: work as a mercenary for the Ba’ath Party in order to receive permission to access higher education abroad, or not cooperate with the party, and face the rejection of her application to study abroad. Ultimately, the conditions set forth by the ruling party prevented Kani from accessing the PhD program, illustrating how institutionalized discriminatory practices and policies, such as partisanship, favouritism, and nepotism act as barriers to equal access to education and other opportunities.

As the data analysis continued, other types of barriers emerged. The data showed that women and girls also face physical barriers due to long distances to schools or a physical disability preventing males and females alike from accessing education. Kani’s experiences as an educator and a student in Iraq during the control of Saddam’s Ba’athist

government provided examples of such barriers. She explained one experience:

I've been through incidents where there were disabled people who were not accepted in the schools because they were disabled. Even though the disability was just limping, or on wheelchair—nothing to do with their brain. ... I went to the school principal and I persuaded him that this guy is, I mean the young child, is disabled but he's got the brain, he could come. And he said, "students will pull him, he will fall, there will be problems. I won't do it."

Kani's own experiences as a student in Iraq since the 1960s illustrated the physical barrier presented by distance, while also revealing a different barrier, language. She described the experience, saying,

I know a lot of people in the villages who would drop out of school because they would study primary school and there would be no intermediary school. Or, they would have to travel for miles and miles and that was not realistic... in Kurdistan, with all the destruction of the villages, more or less all the people came to urban areas... the population increased and (there was) a shortage of schools and all that. ... When we were kids in the 60s, not everybody went to school... and even those who registered, they wouldn't sort of go on for long... in my area, because screening was done in Arabic, and the majority didn't even speak it, a lot of people dropped out because they were not treated nicely in the school that I went to in Kirkuk. Because when they didn't understand Arabic, they were humiliated. They were sort of looked down upon and shouted at, so I know a lot of them would just drop out.

Finally, conflict barriers were the last type of common barrier that emerged amongst the interviews. As described in the Living in Conflict Areas section, most of the

participants experienced displacement due to the threat of war and violence, and for some participants, this ultimately prevented or delayed their education. Jwan provided an example of conflict barriers due to the civil war in the mid-90s, explaining, “I didn't go to Kindergarten because my family was going through a difficult time back then, my dad had to leave to [go to] Baghdad and we had to stay here.” Jwan also discussed the war in 2014 and how it acted as a barrier in achieving her career goals. She explained that,

I had everything settled. I wanted to start a business, and then because of the situation, I just thought that I couldn't do it. ... Before the invasion I prepared everything, even during the invasion. But January 2015...everybody was telling me, “this is not gonna be successful so stay away”...I was planning to [open] a beauty salon... but when something like this happens, when a war happens the economy collapses, the first thing that people will leave is the luxury stuff ...so that's why I stopped doing it.

Dalia also discussed her experience during the same time, explaining that she had a lot goals and how they had been hindered. As she explained,

some of them I can't do now because of ISIS and these things... one, I wanted to go to Baghdad, and the second, I wanted to drive and get a car license. But still I haven't gotten it because that year ISIS came. ...Then it didn't work out, and until now I'm still waiting. ...Also, there's a project I was going to go [to Baghdad] for... my family didn't let me... they said “it's not safe anymore,” and going out, even to go to a park, just like I said, they said “you can't even drive alone.”

Participants shared unique personal experiences throughout the interviews and identified various barriers to equal access to education and opportunities, as presented in

this section. The barriers were all highly interconnected and included those imposed by gender, family, society, practices and policies within institutions, distance, physical ability, language, and violent conflict, all of which. While they can be viewed as separate barriers, women and girls often face multiple barriers at a time, compounding the effects and further restricting their freedom, equality, and access. Falling in line with intersectionality theory, which recognizes the interconnected relationships amongst social categories such as gender, race, age, ethnicity, et cetera, such barriers not only illustrate how women endure multilayered oppression, but also demonstrate male-privilege and the privileging of the dominant groups, such as the ethnic majority Arab population, the physically-abled majority, and the wealthy or elite.

Understanding and Coping with Inequality and Barriers

The ways in which participants understand, make sense of, and overcome issues with and disruptions to education were also a focus of this study, and emerged as an important theme through the data analysis process. While describing their knowledge or experiences with wars or inequalities, participants opened up about their emotions and how they felt during or after such events. Zhiyan shared her initial emotions and how it changed thereafter:

First I was angry, when the Jihadists, in 2014. First I was angry, on Jihadis, on Arab...but then, it's gone, because I understood that it's not something that some people decided to do. I understood that it's planned like that, it's not their fault...it's not people deciding to do that. I think it's bigger than that, because some other countries supported some groups to do these things for their benefit. I

don't think that—I mean the Jihadists are supported from some countries to be Jihadists. It's created, it's all created, it's fake

Dalia discussed the stress and emotional effects that she felt from meeting and interacting with victims of ISIS, explaining,

Emotionally, I get very sad. I mean that didn't happen to anyone in my family, but I see it in social media, on television, however it is, I get very saddened by it. And recently, I went to some workshops that I told you about in the Dealing with Violence Program, and some Yezidi members were in it, and they told us about themselves. ...They talked about their lives, their experiences, so I got very affected by that. ... I'm not saying that things have turned for the worse, because some things I- I'm growing so much. I've learned so much about myself. ...But I sometimes helpless...our life, our situation right now. I mean all of these years living here; it affects me, my family, and everyone here.

Dalia also explained her outlook and how she makes sense of the negative events and experiences, saying that, “I think sometimes bad things happen in your life, but you gain more from it. If these things hadn't happened, I don't believe I would have gone to all these NGOs, met all these people, friends, even interviews like this, I wouldn't have done a lot of them.” Tara also described how she recalled the world around during the events, explaining,

When ISIS came, I don't know—the building [urban development] and the trees are still where it was, where it is now, but it doesn't have any; it doesn't make you feel good anymore. ...Currently, ISIS is still around, Peshmerga are still being killed, and it's for no reason at all. It's worthless.

Kani discussed her thoughts on the reaction of her colleagues and people had just become “numb” to atrocity. She explained,

This war, it has made me very unhappy—especially, I mean we've seen many wars, many killed, many casualties; but never in my life I would have expected to see what happened to the Yezidis⁴... I mean, my total disappointment that something like this would happen to a minority. It's just far too much. The fact that the Arab and the Islamic governments never condemned it enough. ... And I got so disappointed in the society here. They're just not alive enough to get the rhythm of what is happening. And this is not what I'm used to. I think, whatever happens around you, obviously affects you, and if we have absolutely no reaction towards whatever, I felt that we are not human. And that's one thing that doesn't make me happy in that kind of environment.

Kani continued describing the experiences by adding her thoughts on sense of belonging and position when she was viewed as the “Other”:

When I was in Baghdad and Kirkuk, I tolerated it, like you know, you don't belong there. Of course, they were on the “other side.”...I get very disappointed, and I don't get disappointed just for myself, I mean I'm one person. But I feel sorry for the nation, for the people. And I think, I'm sure, very many other people, young people, who should be given their space, who should be given opportunity

⁴ In August 2014, the minority Yezidi people of Sinjar were attacked by ISIS. Thousands were executed; women and children were enslaved and sold or sent to military training camps. Over 100,000 escaped and sought refuge on Mount Sinjar, where they were trapped for days and many died of dehydration (Otten, 2017).

to flourish, to prosper, to be creative, are not given that because they don't belong to this, that, and the other, kind of influential people, or party, political people, that kind of thing. So I feel sorry for the region. And I feel sorry for the region because there's so much ignorance about issues to do with their beliefs, with their religion, with their practice, with their feeling.

As Tara described the limited freedoms that women enjoy, she made sense of the inequality by contributing it to gender roles. She explored the reason for her thought process and perspectives while sharing her response, stating,

I'm thinking that maybe he's like this—maybe a lot of other men are like this, that's why he's like this... I have to look at my husband for example. He works a lot, he's outside a lot, and he has a lot of freedom to go places he wants to go to. He doesn't ask me for permission like I ask him for permission all the time. He doesn't do that because he thinks it's his right to go to places he wants to go, to do things he wants to do. So yes, in that case, he does have a lot of freedom. If I was a man I would have a lot of freedom, but I still like to be a mother and a woman.

Tara explained that a person's predetermined rights and responsibilities were based on gender, and that while women face difficulties in Kurdistan, there was a natural balance where men also have equal challenges due to male gender roles, explaining, "It's very hard to be a man in this society... because nowadays, the work is not as it used to be. There's war going on, so it's very tough to be a man. He has to think about going to war, and if he doesn't go to war he feels bad that he's not."

Similar to Tara, Zhiyan also expressed that at times, men face more difficulties than women. She added that women can have an advantage over men in the workforce,

and that female applicants are sometimes hired over an equally qualified male applicant due to gender. She explained, “Women can find jobs easier than men can. And for men, it's like when they graduate, it's hard for them because they can't find jobs...I always hear them complaining about they can't get jobs, and when they apply for jobs, women take them.” This view contradicts the view of other participants who expressed the exact opposite, such as Jwan’s discussion of female engineers versus male engineers discussed earlier. However, it is important to remember that the five participants are women from different locations, age groups, communities, and social classes. Thus, the various social categories that separate them also lend to diverse experiences. So as each woman’s various identities intersect, the outcome of her unique experiences can result in differing perspectives and worldviews.

Within the theme of understanding and coping with disruptions to education, some participants shared their thoughts and experiences with support from family or other networks:

Jwan: Everybody was supporting me in the beginning. ... I've got amazing support from them. My father, mom, brother, they were very supportive. ... I had a small circle of people who were very supportive.

Tara: a lot of families do let their children go to school, let their daughters go to school. But sometimes when, let's say she doesn't pass, they're like “why do you need to go to school anymore? If you don't pass, just come home.” They don't encourage the kids...but there are other families that really want their kids to be educated, to finish school, college.

Zhiyan explained how she coped with failing a year of school as a result of effects of the 2014 war; “My family supported me, my friends...They were telling me ‘it’s okay.’”

Dalia in turn said:

There’s a centre...through that, I was able to access these NGOs and meet all these people that I've been interviewed by for their research. Also, sometimes, we have a group of activists. We do a lot of activities in Duhok like hiking, fun things like that, and we go out.

The theme of support also revealed limitations or difficulties for those wishing to access support within the community. When asked if there were any support programs that she could access to deal with challenges, Tara explained, “Not much, no. Who would help you?”

Kani: I mean, even going to a psychiatrist is not a trend at all. And I don't think that we have qualified psychiatrists quite honestly...psychiatry is not an area in medicine that people here care for.

Jwan: to get everything is difficult. And you have to do everything on your own or through your family's support. We don't have a system that supports you to do things. ...I know education is free here, but the society mindset and the system that we have in Kurdistan it's not supportive to an individual’s development and growth.

Jwan described how she dealt with family pressure to follow their advice or plans for her education:

So, my parents were very concerned about this, but I still went for it. I kept thinking that something will happen—change will happen to this place. I can find

my way doing something different.

Kani, who was mistreated and pressured to vacate her apartment, dealt with the pressure through resistance:

I said “look, you're only doing this because you want me to empty it so he can hire it to a foreigner to make more money, that's all.” I said “if you're doing that, I'm going to write about it in every magazine, newspaper that I find in Erbil.”

On the other hand, Kani explains examples where those who faced pressures and limitations from linguistic or ethnic barriers conformed and assimilated with the majority group:

Well, I think worldwide there is these kinds of pressures to get yourself out of the minority...conform to the majority. The impact of the majority language, the majority wealth...so people are under even more pressure. I mean I've heard Kurds saying that Arabic is the “better” language.

The final common subtheme within coping or dealing with challenges and difficulties was the subtheme of “desire to leave” (Kurdistan and Iraq altogether). Most of the participants expressed an interest in moving from the country permanently from the toll of their lived experiences in the region:

Jwan: when I was a kid, civil war was taking place. I can remember most of the things because my dad left to Baghdad. So, it was kind of sad. To leave your home because of something like this. And now, it's—I don't know how to explain it, I'm just sad about it. The more I think about it, the more I become sad about it. There are times that I'm thinking of leaving this place, because of it.

Tara: right after ISIS came, we decided let's go; let's leave this country. ... We want our kids to have a better future. I don't want my kids to grow up here. I'm

sending them to school, and I'm afraid that something will happen. ...I think if we go to the West they'll have a better future. We'd love to stay here, we'd love to be around family and have a fine life, but when they don't let you- ISIS, when they won't let you, what do you do? You have to choose what's best for your kids. ...I don't want to live here anymore, and I don't want to raise my kids here.

Kani: I mean after all these years, I think that I should just leave this region, Iraq altogether. ...And I feel sorry that I didn't make this decision earlier...my daughter is definitely thinking of leaving this country altogether because of the same sort of problems. You know, you either have to do this, that or the other, or you will never get your rights... maybe I haven't told you every little detail, every incident, but definitely very, very disappointed in the way they're operating and running things, and dealing with women, and whatever. So although it's too late in my life, but I think still, I would rather be somewhere outside of this.

The Future

Amongst all of the interviews, two important themes that emerged under the umbrella this theme were the women's' fears, concerns, and uncertainties in the future, as well how to moving towards positive change.

Fears, Concerns, and Uncertainties

The research methods chosen in this study uncovered participants' lived experiences with education and oppression, and the obstacles and challenges they have faced. As a result of such experiences, the theme of fears, concerns, and uncertainties of the future was uncovered as another important theme within the data. Participants expressed their worries about an unpredictable, unstable future due to living in a conflict-

afflicted region, which can be difficult to plan or prepare for. Jwan explained what it was like to go through such experiences:

Well you feel negative, you feel down. There are things you want to do and then you stay away from it because you don't know what's going to happen. ...I'm still working, but uncertainty is killing. Because most of the time, you're like "am I gonna lose my job or not?" ... We're not very sure what's going to happen in the future.

Tara explained the difficulty of living with the threat of ISIS so close and her thoughts and worries during this time:

The killing of the Peshmerga, the war, and them getting a chance to come into the city, doing suicide bombs—that's why I'm afraid. Sometimes my kids want to go to the market, I'm like "please, don't"...Especially when we're on a busy street, that's where I'm really scared. Like what if somebody just blows himself up? What if it's ISIS? ...Living here with ISIS around, you feel that any chance they get, they'll do a terrorist attack ... a while ago they said a school was bombed...I get so scared, I'm like what if this happens to my kids' school?

Dalia had similar fears and thoughts preoccupied with the very real possibility of day-to-day security threats, explaining that at first, "I was very saddened by it. I see that for some people, their lives aren't so good, and mine is like this—I should be grateful until now. But still, I'm like—maybe ISIS will come for us and do that to us too, who knows?"

Aside from fear of security threats, another concern, which was shared by Tara and Kani both, was the lack of resolve or progress towards issues such as nepotism and

corruption, and the implications for the future. Tara addressed the issue by raising her frustrations with it, explaining,

I feel like life won't go on as we want to here. We'll never succeed; our children will never succeed. My daughter has been studying so hard. ... Today was her first day going to exams. She's in grade 12, and right away on the Internet I heard stories that (her exam paper) was sold to a minister's kid beforehand. ... This happens every year.

Kani shared her belief such changes would remain unresolved, as the individuals in positions of power were motivated by wealth rather than using their positions to enact positive changes. In her own words, Kani explained it by saying,

With the sort of people in charge, our government now—it's hopeless. ... Because there are people there who don't care, who don't have a vision, who don't love Iraq that much...and all they think of now is just to hold, grab wealth. They just don't have any feeling; I mean I think I have more feeling to Baghdad than these people who are ruling Baghdad. They don't love it. I'm sure if you love your city, you will do something. It's been 13 years, 14 years. You would do something to beautify it, to improve upon it, to build it. I can't think that these people care for Iraq. And it seems that from the way the religious indoctrination and all that, and the fundamentalism, and all this Shia/Sunni rubbish, I think they will go on like this. It's a problem that hasn't been solved for 1,400 years.

The women expressed a number fears and worries, some of which they shared in common with one another. They included fears the women felt in day-to-day life, as well as concerns and uncertainties about the future, specifically, in relation to instability

regarding safety and security, or economic and political stability. Although the women had already endured various experiences with mistreatment, discrimination, violence, or oppression, they still lived with the very real possibility of escalating violence or a further decline of the state of the region. As participants feared, the situation in Kurdistan did worsen following the interview, and in October 2017 the Kurdistan Region experienced increased violence due to conflict between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi Government. Participants identified such conflicts, which add to the continuous cycles of violence, instability, and unpredictability of life in the KRI as the source of their fears and concerns for the future.

Moving Towards Positive Change

The final theme apparent in the data was the theme of moving towards positive social change. Throughout the interviews, participants shared their unique knowledge, stories, and experiences, and provided a look into the lives of Kurdish women and the education system in the KRI. Participants not only shared their areas of discontent, but they also provided various changes they wished to see; one of which was educational reform. All of the women hoped to see steps taken to achieve reformation within various levels of the education system, so that schools would providing a better quality of education as well as to ensure that access to education would be granted to all. Dalia explained in order that “Education to be implemented properly... if they increase schools...things like that are increased,” they could see positive changes. When asked what changes she would like to see in the future in Kurdistan, Zhiyan stated, “To see a stronger education system. And also, I'm hopeful. I see that things are getting better and better each day.” Zhiyan, along with Jwan and Kani, also emphasised the purpose of

schooling and the role that teachers play in shaping children's futures and acting as an instrument for social changes. For Zhiyan, the key to future transformations lied in adopting new teaching methods and approach to education. She explained her thoughts, saying,

I think if students were encouraged to study, to do anything they dream- to have dreams, to reach their goals, to have goals... and I think they don't see they are raising the future. They are just going there to sit there, get their money, and go home. They're not seeing that these kids are the future.

Similar to Zhiyan, Kani's thoughts on the topic also centred on children's education:

A lot of people think that maybe providing wonderful universities will do the job, but I don't think so. I think it's really—it's the attitude of the people, starting from how they treat each other, how they treat the environment, everything. It has to start from childhood. And I think that Kurdistan should invest in education a lot more than they are doing now. And I think that they do not have the expertise to do it alone.

Jwan also brought up the role of education as more than a site for depositing knowledge from out-dated curricula. Jwan shared that schools should also “teach students how to build their personality, aside from only the knowledge that they're getting.” Jwan added,

Right now, education is [focused on] only the knowledge, and for a kid, [they should be taught] how to behave, how to be a good person, how to love their country. But that doesn't exist that much. I act based on what my family told me about how to behave outside, and for somebody else it's the same thing. So we

don't have one kind of...attitude that's built based on—it's not education oriented, it's family oriented. We're acting based on what our families are telling us. And this is very sad by the way, because if the school cannot change your mentality, then the kind of mentality that we have at the moment will stay as it is.

Kani and Tara shared a similar perspective with one another, stating that the changes that are required must occur at the level of government. Kani discussed the responsibilities of the government that were not being met, stating,

There are political decisions—I mean, regarding the citizenship or the belonging of the people, each ministry should have a clear vision. ... What is it that they are after? What do they want? How do they want the population of Kurdistan to be like in 5 years? In 10 years? How do they want their citizens? And I think that needs consideration on behalf of the Ministry of Education and all of the ministries.

For Tara, the government responsibility included providing more support:

First of all the war has to stop. And then, the government has to be very helpful. The government has to be open and say, “This country needs a lot of help.” It's below zero, in education, in everything. ... This is the program I'm going to open for you...borrow some from me to build your life again.

Further, participants discussed the necessary changes to teacher education as well as the issue of teachers' wages. Kani's ideas included “changing the education system” regarding teacher education. She elaborated, adding, “They need to change the way that teachers are being qualified. That's very, very important. ... These will be the people who will be in charge of raising your children—giving them an upbringing.” As Jwan

explained, before all else, “teachers at least need to receive their salaries.” Adding to this opinion, Tara explained her views:

They should provide the teachers more because teachers are very important as well. They shouldn't let the teachers down just because of the war...and schools shouldn't stop, education shouldn't stop, even though there's a war going on.

Next, ideas on the changes that should be made to improve quality of life for women were also common. Participants expressed their hopes that such changes would lead to female empowerment, access to free education, job opportunities and programs created by the government and local NGOs, and women becoming participatory actors in gaining their rights, creating positive socio-cultural changes, and changes to government policies that. Kani's ideas included creating job opportunities and empowering women:

I think maybe this is the time for...some real NGOs to come and play a role in creating job opportunities and sort of providing skills that people could use to become employed. I think this is very much needed in this region. ...I think women need to be empowered here. Because they still are- they don't realize that they could have the power—to change themselves, to educate themselves. And this is one issue. I don't know, it's usually women's organizations should focus on that, but they're incapable because they are the wrong people to start with... and I think if the choice of the people in powerful positions are qualified people, and not based on their connections and that sort of thing, and if there's some sort of checks and balances... if they make it like in Europe where you're only cabinet minister for four years, 5 years, and then there's some change, people will not abuse their powers that much. You won't give them that chance.

Tara also discussed creating jobs for women among other ideas:

This is one of my dreams—I would like to see the government or some companies make jobs for women ...women who don't have husbands, who are divorced, or who have husbands who are killed in wars, or who have husbands who just died, and they wanna raise their children, they don't wanna beg from relatives. They want to work and raise their children. ...At the same time if they have small kids, to take their kids with them to a day care. ...There needs to be more programs besides just helping them - just give them a job, let them work for themselves...Also free schooling for them is good too...or for anybody else – for women especially; if there was an adult school for people. ...Free to access. I think a lot of women would go to school.

Jwan said that she had hope that there could be gradual positive change from one generation to the next, explaining that,

Once a social change happens—and especially today, since you have media and social media, people are more open to the world. ...For example, I can travel on my own and do things that I like to do, and tomorrow I will let my kids to do that too. So I'm very positive about this- to see more [of this] in the future. ... And the only change that I'm looking for is women working for themselves, making the changes themselves, and not expecting everybody to tell them “here are your rights.” I think women should be fighting for their rights more than just people giving [the rights] to them. If you don't work for it, no one is going to give it for free.

Participants identified various issues that require social change, and the importance of education as a tool to propel such changes. All of the women interviewed

believed that if education is implemented properly and effectively, it can be used as a tool towards achieving long-lasting social changes, however, there are there major issues within the education system in Kurdistan that need to be addressed and resolved in order for such changes to begin.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented and discussed the nine main themes that emerged from the data analysis, all of which were tied to the participants' perspectives and experiences with education and oppression or conflict. The chapter also introduced the five participants, their educational backgrounds, and their attitudes towards education. Because the themes were all interconnected, the presentation began with participant's views on the quality of life for women in the KRI, which was also one of the initial questions that participants were asked. The participant's responses all pointed towards the theme of freedom, which is presented within this theme. Next, the chapter discussed the problems that participants identified within education. This section identified problems that resulted from the Ba'athist governments' destruction of the Kurdish region and its population that have plagued the country for decades. Thus, they were presented separately from the problems that developed after the invasion of ISIS in 2014. The chapter also delved into the participants' thoughts and experiences with war and oppression. I then discussed gender equality and the barriers preventing women from accessing equal education and opportunities. The ways in which participants made sense of and coped with their experiences was presented next, also highlighting the support systems that participants identified, such as family, community, or support programs. Finally, the chapter ended by focusing on the theme of the future; first discussing participants' fears, concerns, and

uncertainties, then presenting the participants' ideas for what they wished to see in the future.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the educational experiences of five Kurdish women with respect to oppression. The study aimed to gain an understanding of Kurdish women's lived experiences and perceptions on education in a region affected by war or armed conflicts such as is the case of Kurdistan, and to explore the ways in which women coped with the impacts and made sense of such experiences. The rationale motivating this research study was based on the gaps in the literature on Kurdish women, as discussed in depth in the literature review, thus, the objective of this study was to contribute to the literature on and knowledge about education, gender, and conflict, specifically, Kurdish women's experiences with education in Kurdistan. This chapter of the study provides a summary of the study as well as the key findings in chapter 4, which are discussed in connection with the research questions and in the context of the literature discussed in chapter 2. The discussion will be followed by the implications and recommendations for future research, practice, and/or social change will also be explored.

Discussion

This study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on gender, education, and conflict. This section discusses the main themes of the study, supported by the research questions, theoretical framework, and existing literature. The central research questions of this study asked "what do Kurdish women's experiences reveal about women's education in Kurdistan with respect to oppression?" Subquestions asked, how the women described, made sense of, and coped with their experiences, how they described education in the KRI, and what kinds of emotions, attitudes, or factors motivate women to pursue or discontinue education. This section addresses the questions that framed this

study, and is organized into sub-sections, according to the four main groups of themes: the problem context, living in areas of conflict, equality and access, and the future.

The Problem Context

The findings of this research build on the research and literature reviewed in chapter 2. The data showed that women living in the KRI describe having a lower quality of life than men, due to the limitations on their personal freedoms and decision-making ability. A study by Backawan and Joly (2016) found that in Kurdistan,

male domination over women corresponds to a form of patriarchy steeped in an ancestral model which grants power to significant men over the group and in particular over the women. ...The family structure is that of the extended family, whereby the man in charge holds authority. (p. 961)

The data from this study supported this, as participants described the KRI and Iraq as a “male-dominant society,” explaining that society’s perceptions of women as the ‘weak’ gender meant that women often require permission from her family/husband, and/or require the presence of a male guardian in public.

In terms of education, women’s concerns mainly pointed to the poor, declining quality, and the implications of it, as they explained that education is not being utilized to its full potential in the KRI. Firstly, participants identified out-dated curriculum content, teacher-centred teaching methodologies, and an ineffective approach to education as factors leading to the poor quality of education and its decline. Next, although all of the women received equal access to education as males, the study showed that equal access does not suffice when the quality of education is poor to begin with. As Stromquist (2006) argues,

While access is crucial, in order to put women on par with men educationally and professionally, much more has to be done. It is necessary to go beyond access and revise conventional values and messages in the curriculum and to alter the practices of teachers, principals and students at the school site, where they constantly reproduce gendered expectations. (p. 148)

Thus, while ensuring males and females receive equal access and equal education, may be viewed as a solution, the serious inadequacies within the current system, the low quality of education provided, and the lack of adequate opportunities for students within and beyond schooling, are not enough to address the problems and barriers limiting women today. As such, beyond the obvious issues of repairing infrastructure, increasing resources, decreasing class sizes, et cetera, the traditional attitudes, values, and expectations that society holds for females must also be challenged through revising messages and values reinforced through the curricula, so that women and girls are not limited by the roles they are expected or pressured to fill.

In addition, society's attitude towards teachers and teacher's own attitudes are also areas of concern, as the data showed that the teaching profession is at times not taken seriously, and that some teachers did not appreciate the significance of their roles as educators. For example, Zhiyan believed that neglectful administrators and teachers who don't care about education can influence students to adopt similar attitudes. She explained, "if the teachers didn't care, students of course they won't care for education." Further, teaching is often viewed as a desirable job for women to pursue, as it does not interfere with the traditional role of wife and mother. Jwan described teaching as, "the preferred job for every single woman in this country because she can work for a couple of

hours and then cook and take care of the house for the rest.” Such traditional roles and gendered expectations are further discussed in the following section, firstly within the context of living in an area of conflict, and then followed by the barriers and issues affecting gender equality and access.

Living in Areas of Conflict

UNESCO’s (2003) *Situation Analysis on Education in Iraq* provides a background into the myriad of issues affecting the country’s education system in 2003, prior to American intervention; the report highlights the “serious degradation of education services and infrastructure” (p. 3) and identifies problems within the education system, which included a shortage of schools, the poor state of infrastructure, low teacher salaries and low/declining teacher motivation. The findings of this study showed that such problems are still present in the state of education today. All of the participants had experienced or witnessed disruptions to education, in one way or another, as a result of the conflicts. Participants identified various negative impacts of war on education that they witnessed. The findings showed that safety, damage to schools, overcrowded classrooms, shortage of schools, and shortened school hours were key factors aiding the low quality of education.

The most significant factors that the participants unanimously identified were teacher education and training, low/decreased motivation to teach, and unpaid salaries. The findings support research that suggests that economic pressures facing a region during/after war can result in a trickle effect, wherein teachers’ salaries are lowered or delayed, lowering teachers’ motivation to teach, and in turn lowering students’ motivation to learn. Since the invasion of ISIS and subsequent economic crisis in the

region, cutbacks and delays to teachers' salaries left a significant negative impact on their motivation to teach.

The quality of education is even further at risk when this factor is added to the previously mentioned variables affecting quality of education during/after times of war.

Kani, who once worked for a non-government organization, stated,

it's not to that much avail because usually the attitude is, from my experience and from what I hear, they think whatever training they do, it's an NGO baby. So when the NGO is out, they just leave it. They don't adopt it. ... They just go back to where they were before.

In regard to conflict and oppression, the findings showed that each participant's experiences were highly specific to that individual. The data highlighted varying ways in which women endure oppression including displacement due to war and violence, ethnic discrimination and forced displacement due to Arabization policies, trauma, witnessing violence and armed conflict first-hand, and living with the inherited trauma of past atrocities and wars. While the participants all shared the same gender and ethnicity, each individual's age, location, class, educational background, history, family, and other characteristics or social categories combined to create unique experiences, thoughts, and beliefs regarding oppression. In other words, the data did not show one single identifying factor or characteristic that could connect all of the women's experiences with oppression; rather, along with her gender, factors such as the women's age, ethnicity, class, and other social dimensions, were interconnected. Kani and Tara, who were older than the other participants and had experienced life in Kurdistan and Iraq much longer

than the other participants, also shared more experiences with oppression than the younger participants.

Intersectionality theory highlights the interconnectedness of social categories an individual may belong to, such as one's gender, race, religion, class, or citizenship status, and refers to "particular forms of intersecting oppressions" since oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type (Collins, 2000, p. 18, as cited in Windsong, 2017). Even when participants were asked questions specifically regarding gender, they often shared experiences that were the result of other factors combined with gender, such as ethnicity, class, or both. For example, Kani shared her experience as a young woman living in Baghdad, and explained that her gender, age, and belonging to an ethnic minority group were interconnected variables within the oppression she faced. Thus, there was no single identifiable source of oppression amongst the women's experiences; rather, participants identified varied sites and settings within which they felt oppression, such as in the home, at school, or at work, revealing the diverse sources of oppression. While some experiences pointed to the former Ba'athist government as the source of oppression, others pointed to patriarchy, a male family member, or religion as the source. Backawan and Joly (2016) discuss the influence of religion in Kurdistan, explaining that "Islam, as interpreted and implemented in much of rural Kurdistan, does not depart from cultural patriarchal practices but complements them with a religious veneer" (p. 962).

Attributing oppression to various sources or not experiencing oppression at all is also explained by intersectionality theory, which is one of the key issues that postcolonial feminism raises. Even though the women all shared the same ethnicity and gender and had lived in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, their experiences cannot be generalized to all

Kurdish women in the region. Instead, each woman's diverse location, community, age, and class backgrounds, all intersect with her gender and ethnicity to produce unique experiences and struggles.

Inequality and Access

Inequality and Access was a significant theme within the data, emerging from codes such as "mistreatment," "disadvantaged," "need connections," "unfair," and "unequal," among others. The study found that gender inequality in the KRI reduces women's freedoms and lowers their quality of life. Women do not enjoy the same rights and freedoms as men, often relying on her husband or male family member, for permission. Discrimination or mistreatment are not uncommon, thus women sometimes have a male guardian present for tasks like attending a government office or going to the mechanic. These findings support previous research, such as Backawan and Joly's (2016) study, which stated that women and girls in Kurdistan are viewed as family property and are bound by social gender roles like wife, mother, daughter (p. 961).

The data also showed that women are confronted with societal and family pressures and challenges when pursuing academic and/or professional goals, compared to women who choose a "traditional route." Limited freedoms imposed by family and attitudes of others often acted as one of the main factors hindering a woman's freedom and quality of life, and ultimately her education. This was also demonstrated when participants described a woman's freedoms and quality of life by stating, "it depends on the family," illustrating the role that one's family plays.

Within the KRI and Iraq, Kurdish women face multiple barriers that prevent them from accessing basic rights and freedoms, and quality education and opportunities. The

difficulties, challenges, and limitations that women experience in day-to-day life pointed to seven types of barriers: gender norms, violent conflict, family-imposed, systemic, physical, language, and sociocultural. This supports the existing literature that identifies barriers that include, but are not limited to: gender (norms), conflict, distance, poverty, language, and disability (CARE, n.d.; Hill & King, 1997; Plan International, n.d.; 6 Million Girls, 2016; The Global, n.d.). This study found that gendered norms were one of the main barriers that prevented women from accessing equal opportunities, education, or freedoms.

Women and girls face family-imposed barriers, as Hill and King (1993) posit, the family usually makes the decision when it comes to women and girls' education, career, childrearing, or marriage. The data pointed to various incidents where participants were prevented from accessing further education, opportunities, or freedoms. In the case of Tara for example, who married young and did not graduate high school, she explained how her husband's family's decision prevented her from returning to work after marriage. Tara also discussed how she was unable to return to school to further her education, as she did not have her husband's permission.

The findings also suggest that both religion and culture emphasize gender barriers, as they reinforce gender norms. Although participants had different opinions on the influence of religion versus culture as a barrier, they unanimously identified gender norms and expectations that determined or strongly influenced women's freedom and access to education. Hill and King (1993) argue,

Muslim girls are socialized into accepting that marriage and raising a family is their ultimate goal. Schools reinforce gender roles. The prevailing attitude is that a

woman should stay home to take care of her family while her male guardian—husband, father, brother, or older son—supports her” (p. 152).

Such attitudes of women and girls also exist in schools, by teachers and curriculum, as well as in work opportunities, hindering women’s education and employment opportunities, as in an example Dalia provided, explaining that female engineers are viewed as less capable than their male counterparts, even if she is better qualified. This often leads to discriminatory practices against women, which prevent them from accessing equal employment opportunities and can deter women from pursuing education, especially in certain fields (Hill & King, 1993).

In addition, the study findings highlighted practices that disadvantage women and girls or limit their equal education and opportunities. According to the data, nepotism, favouritism, and partisanship are commonplace in the KRI, and can occur within schools, in the workplace, or when accessing government services. Participants’ experiences show that in the context of the KRI, where women and girls already face barriers due to gender and conflicts, such practices create further limitations or disadvantages for women, and favour those who possess a family relationship, political affiliation or some type of connection that can create an advantage.

The literature shows that those who live in rural areas are often at a disadvantage in educational opportunities due to the distance to schools and other services. The distance also creates safety concerns for parents, who, as a result, are reluctant to send their daughters to school (Plan International, n.d.). While there have been great population shifts and transfers from rural to urban communities in the KRI, women who grew up in rural communities are very likely to have missed out on a proper education

due to distance to schools. As Kani's experiences as a child reveal, the lack of nearby schooling beyond the primary years meant the end of education for many children. Girls and boys alike are at disadvantage due to long distances, however, "girls may face dangers or violence on the long way to school, so many parents opt to keep their daughters at home and out of harm's way" (Plan International, n.d., para. 7). As well, the findings also suggested that individuals with a physical disability are also prevented from accessing education and other resources or services, due to the lack of accessibility and the attitudes or discriminatory practices towards people with disabilities. Similarly, there are a lack of accessible schools as well as "social stigmas that exclude children with disabilities from interaction with wider society" among other factors that impede on children's equal opportunities (The Global, n.d., para. 1).

Another important factor preventing members of marginalized groups from accessing education is language (The Global, n.d.). Though the current language of instruction in the KRI is Kurdish, past discriminatory policies against Kurdish speakers resulted in barriers to education when they were required to attend schools where the language of instruction was Arabic. Non-Arabic speakers at times faced challenges or limitations due to their limited knowledge of the language, as well as feeling discouragement from teachers' attitudes against those who spoke minority languages. Again, women who attended schools during these times are likely to have faced such barriers. Research shows that individuals who speak a minority language are less likely to learn in schools where instruction is not in their mother tongue, leading to elevated drop-out rates, and further marginalizing the minority ethnic group (6 Million Girls, 2016).

Violent conflicts in the KRI and Iraq as a whole have severely affected the education system in the country. Justino (2010) identifies three particular ways in which overall educational systems and the supply of education are adversely affected by violent conflict: first, the destruction of infrastructure and educational resources, and next, displacement. The two effects combined can lead to the third, distributional effects, “along gender, ethnic, religious, economic or geographical dimensions that may affect not only the overall supply of education, but also shape inequalities in education access” (Justino, 2010, p. 5). The findings supported this argument, as it demonstrated that participants witnessed disruptions to schooling during the cycles of conflict in Kurdistan and Iraq. The findings also showed that there is still a need for increased access to education due to the shortage of schools, which was worsened when school buildings were turned into shelters for refugees and internally displaced persons entering the region since 2014. Barriers from gender norms, family, location, and systemic barriers can overlap, preventing or limiting women’s access to education and opportunities, and times of violent conflict can present new barriers or increase the existing ones.

One of the sub-questions of this research study asked “How do Kurdish women make sense of their experiences with education as women living in war zones?” The findings showed that women tried to make sense of their unique life experiences with violent conflict, inequalities, or barriers in the KRI by understanding the situation and the cause of the problems that caused such experiences. For example, Zhiyan explained that she initially had feelings of sadness, and notably anger and resentment towards Arabs, which subsided thereafter when she understood the complexity of the conflict. She explained her understanding of the war against ISIS as a proxy war in which wealthy,

ruling nations were responsible for the plot of ISIS, and that those who joined were merely puppets in the grander scheme. While Zhiyan's perceptions of the war reduce the motives to a simplistic conspiracy and can be deemed problematic, they are not meant to offer an explanation for the conflict and thus, not to be dismissed. Rather, her perceptions are a result of her lived experiences as a 21 year-old female member of a minority group who has suffered through the consequences of the conflict; most notably, they are likely also a coping mechanism to make sense of the world around her and the unending conflict afflicting the region.

Zhiyan described moving on and living her life as "normally" as she could, highlighting the importance of continuing her education. For example, during times of conflict participants described situations in which they were physically prevented from accessing education due to issues of safety and were required to flee the region. However, the ongoing war or violent conflicts did not discourage participants from obtaining an education when they were able to safely access school and family/spousal permission was not an issue. Rather, participants discussed continuing education despite such experiences. The wars and conflicts were viewed as being out of their control and reoccurring; potentially causing adverse effects to their education or achievement, but not viewed as a deterrent to completely discontinue pursuing education.

The data also showed that participants unanimously attributed gender inequalities and barriers to the existing gender norms that confine women to roles of daughter, wife, and mother. Supporting this view, Ahmqd et al. (2000) stated that in Kurdistan, the boys and girls rapidly take the responsibilities as men and women, respectively. While the women have the responsibility for taking care of home

and children, the men are usually responsible for family economy and protection. Thus, the female sex is vulnerable in case of disasters when the male protection disappears. (p. 236).

Participants also identified culture, religion, and education as sites that reinforce gender roles.

As described in chapter 3, the psychological health of participants was taken into consideration throughout the research methodology. During data collection, participants were reminded of their right to skip questions, withdraw from the study without consequence, or take breaks at any time. They were also provided with information to free access to counselling services provided through a local non-government organization. When it came to discussing issues that could potentially be distressing, participants were open and eager to share their emotions and experiences. The findings showed that women shared similar responses to the conflicts, inequalities, and limitations or barriers they experienced, describing feelings of overwhelming sadness, anger, and disappointment. Participants also expressed many experiences wherein they described feelings of helplessness or hopelessness. Kani noted her overwhelming sadness at the 2014 atrocities committed by ISIS against the religious minority group of Yezidis, and expressed her disappointment at her colleagues' lack of response to the issue, explaining that people become desensitized when tragedy and conflict becomes so common, and that they "just become used to it."

When discussing how they coped with issues causing psychological or emotional distress, the data showed that participants mostly turned to family and friends as a source of support. In Kurdistan, during times of distress, families stick together and rely on each

other for support. As previously discussed, family is viewed as the only protecting social unit, and is “further strengthened by the minority status of the Kurdish people” (Ahmad et al., 2000, p. 236). However, in some cases, family members don’t provide the support that women and girls need, as in the example of Zhiyan and Kani, who explained limited support from one or both parents as a result of disconnected relationships.

Research by the Global Burden of Disease collaborators suggests that while war and conflicts are the primary cause of death and disability in many Middle Eastern countries, the most common mental health issues affecting the region are depression and anxiety disorders, both of which disproportionately affect women (Flemons, 2015). Similarly, Murthy and Lakshminarayana (2006) found that women and children are especially vulnerable to the adverse psychological impacts of wars, with evidence consistently pointing to higher rates of mental health problems in children, and adolescents being the most vulnerable age group. Alongside the civil unrest, the matter of mental illness is often neglected due to a shortage of funding for mental health services and a shortage of mental health practitioners, and “in countries such as Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, there were only 0.5 psychiatrists per 100,000” people, compared to the region average of 7 mental health practitioners per 100,000 people (Flemons, 2015, para. 7).

Studies on the effects of mental health amongst populations in the KRI are limited, however, the research that is available points to significant adverse psychological effects on populations in war zones and areas of conflict (Flemons, 2015; Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006). A study conducted in the KRI 5 years after the Anfal campaign showed that post-traumatic stress disorder was reported in 87% of children and 60% of

their guardians amongst a random sample of 45 families in two displacement camps. Those between 8 and 12 years old were the most vulnerable, and preverbal children considered to be “totally dependent on their parents, both in recognising the threat and in reacting to it” (Ahmad et al., 2000, p. 235).

The findings in this study showed that access to support programs or services within the community were extremely limited. Women did not feel that there were resources they could access for counselling or to assist in their growth and development. The data suggests that there is a need increased trained professionals within the field of psychiatry in the KRI. When researching the free and accessible services and resources available to women, my own experience supported this, as I experienced difficulty locating such services that did not solely focus on refugee or internally displaced women. Although research on the benefits of psychological support is very well established, in the Kurdistan region, there is little emphasis on psychiatric wellness or support. According to Murthy and Lakshminarayana (2006), research consistently shows “the value of both physical support and psychological support in minimizing the effects of war-related traumas, as well as the role of religion and cultural practices as ways of coping with the conflict situations” (p. 28). Unfortunately, however, mental health often takes a back seat when safety and other needs are met, and as Kani explained, “psychiatry is not an area in medicine that people here care for.” Moreover, when describing the outcome of their lived experiences, most participants expressed feeling overwhelmed and wishing to permanently leave Iraq and the KRI after experiencing the toll of adverse effects.

This study found that women responded to barriers or inequalities in unique ways, and that despite the significant disruptions, barriers, and inequalities, women often still

continue to pursue education or other goals. The emotions and attitudes or other factors motivating women to continue or discontinue their pursuits were of particular interest to this study. While some women tolerate or accept barriers or inequalities, others pursued their goals despite barriers, such as by resisting pressure or defying social norms. For example, Kani explained distinct experiences where she was faced barriers associated with gender or ethnicity. First, as a young professional living and working in Baghdad, she was discriminated against due to belonging to the minority group. Kani explained that she was ultimately given an “early retirement” because of consistent refusal to give in to pressures, and explained that she tolerated the mistreatment because she was the “Other” and understood her vulnerable position as a member of the ethnic minority and weaker gender.

Other women were bound by their family’s decisions pertaining to their education, career, or freedom, and made sense of the limitation once again through gendered norms. For others, dealing with barriers also means defying social norms and expectations, such as for Jwan who described experiencing the social pressures to choose marriage over higher education. In situations where language is a barrier, conforming and assimilating to the language of the majority group was one way to overcome the barrier, as Kani explained.

Despite the adversities that arose from conflict or inequality, none of the women viewed or described themselves as victims. The participants often described their difficult experiences all the while maintaining positivity and returning to the progress that had been made in the region. Such factors can motivate women to continue to work towards or strive for changes. Participants often demonstrated a positive outlook, highlighting the

progress and improvements they had witnessed in the region during their lives. The data showed that this was common, and that despite many of their disappointments and feelings of despair, the women continued to maintain this positive view. For example, Dalia explained illustrated this when saying, “sometimes bad things happen in your life, but you gain more from it,” when explaining the significant adverse impacts on her life or in the KRI in general since the war against ISIS. Tara, who had limited freedoms and faced many gender barriers, explained that she was still hopeful of future progress for women.

The overarching theme within the findings on equality and access once again demonstrate that although numerous barriers, challenges, and limitations exist, the women interviewed did not all face the same struggles or have the same perspectives on such challenges and inequalities. The distinct social, geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural or religious contexts that shape each woman’s experiences also produce distinct or even contradictory perspectives of gender issues, education, conflict, and the world around them. In addition, even when participant’s faced similar barriers, their views on the source of such barriers were often also quite varied and shaped by their history, family, class, et cetera.

The Future

The final group of themes in the data focused on the future, highlighting women’s own ideas for social change, and addressing what changes women want to see, what they saw as potential solutions or steps to solutions, and what problems they saw as immediate and or requiring priority attention. The women unanimously identified the stress of living in instability and with uncertainty of the future due to living in a conflict area. The data

showed that stress, worrying, fear, and concern were common responses to the ongoing instability in the region, as well as the difficulty planning or preparing for an unpredictable future. Women's future goals or plans were delayed due to uncertainty of the future, and they expressed the stress surrounding the fear that conflicts might worsen or that they could be under threat of attacks from ISIS. Participants also expressed their concern that the situation would remain stagnant due to the complexities of resolving issues in education or social issues during times of war.

Participants highlighted various areas in which they hoped to see change and reform, which included: educational reform for better quality education and equal access to education; an increase in the number of schools available; educating the public on value of education as an instrument for social change; a clearer vision, goals, and plans for changes within the ministry of education; changes to teacher education and training; and ensuring that teacher motivation isn't further affected during times of war by timely providing teachers' with their full salaries. The study also showed that women believe these changes could lead to female empowerment, access to free education, job opportunities and programs created by the government and NGO's, and women becoming participatory actors in gaining their rights, creating sociocultural changes, and changes to government policies.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Recommendations in this study include the need for further empirical research on women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Studies such as this hope to fill in the gaps where there is limited knowledge and literature available on women and education in the contexts of the conflict-affected KRI. As previously discussed, Kurds are significantly

underrepresented in Middle Eastern Studies, and Kurdish women are underrepresented Middle Eastern Women's Studies (Mojab, 2001). Thus, continued research on Kurds and Kurdish women can begin to strengthen the literature and research on Kurdish women.

Mojab (2001) highlights the challenges researchers face due to the geopolitical complexity of the region, and the instability and cycles of violence in the region.

Although I faced many challenges throughout this study as well, I had the advantage of knowing the local culture, language, and having family and friends in the region.

However, due to certain limitations of the study that I could not avoid and the small sample size, I recommend future research to include a larger sample of participants and to include non-English speaking women as well as women in rural areas to explore a broader range of experiences and perspectives. This study could also be extended by including participants from the diaspora community to include the perspectives of women who have experience both in and out of the education system in Iraq and Kurdistan.

In a situation as complex as KRI, the "semiautonomous" KRG had the task of rebuilding and recovering from the anti-Kurdish former government that caused tremendous damage to entire cities and its populations. It also had the task of reforming and rebuilding the flawed education system inherited from the former government, all the while dealing with the war against ISIS, resulting in over a million Syrian refugees and internally displaced people, and coping with the economic sanctions imposed by the central government. Thus, the improvements made in the region, which were identified by the participants as providing hope for future change, should be commended and efforts should be made to support the growth and development in this direction.

The data showed that the improved training of teachers and educators is needed so

that teachers are equipped and effective in providing a better quality education. Although solutions to the economic crisis go beyond the scope of this study, ensuring that teachers receive sufficient compensation for their work along with providing better training can target lowered teacher and student motivation and ineffective teaching styles.

Working towards providing *quality* education and not just *access* to education alone is also an important step to be made, as the data suggested. Even when women and girls are able to access an equal education, they are often not able to receive the full benefits that an education can and must provide. In the KRI however, students are faced with overcrowded classrooms, low teacher motivation, and out-of-date curricula.

Participants' own attitudes towards education, and their ideas for social change and equality are an indicator that women are ready and willing to pursue their own freedoms. Their hopes and ideas for progress in the future is also a testament to their resilience. However, the sociocultural nature of the region creates great struggles and barriers that women must go to great lengths to overcome, or are unable to overcome at all.

The KRG has made efforts towards combating gender violence such as enacting new legislation against domestic violence, (Parliament of Kurdistan–Iraq, 2008, Art. 1), renouncing former legislation that legalized honour killings (Brown & Romano, 2006), as well as launching a campaign in a joint effort with the United Nations in 2017 to combat violence against women and girls (United Nations Population Fund, 2017). Such steps can be taken further to address gender issues in education as well, such as by providing funding to women's rights groups, and providing scholarships and incentives to encourage women and girls to pursue nontraditional roles outside of the home, or to enter male-dominated fields. Also, as the participants noted, providing women and girls with

the resources and services, such as within counseling, services for widows, and access to adult education, among others, are also important steps that should be taken. Further, the issue of inclusivity within the classroom is another area where policy-makers and school administration have a responsibility of addressing. Challenging gender norms and binary views on gender can begin at the primary level by co-educating girls and boys rather than having segregated classrooms. The governments

As well, local women's rights activists and NGOs should launch awareness campaigns to challenge gender roles and stereotypes, and promote positive attitudes towards women and girls' education, and to educate and empower women and promote female agency. As the data revealed, participants in this study also argued for the active role of women to be involved and fight for their own rights, freedoms, and equalities. The findings showed that participants believe that in order for gender issues to obtain a higher platform and receive wider recognition, women must be empowered to act independently and use their own voices, rather than relying on others to speak for them. The role of media can also be used as a tool for such campaigns to reach wider audiences.

Reflexivity

This section of the thesis addresses analytic memos that I took during the study as well as my own personal experience as a female researcher living, working, and travelling alone in Kurdistan. This study selected a purposeful sample of women who lived in Kurdistan. The findings of this study are by no means a reflection of the experiences of *all* Kurdish women, but rather a sample that was relatively diverse in age, background, education, and occupation. The participants were selected randomly after they met certain criteria. Thus, they all shared the same ethnicity (Kurdish), location

(Duhok or Erbil), and all had the ability to communicate in English. Their knowledge of English did not result in a privileged or elite sample of women, as 4 out of 5 of the participants learned English through public schools or public universities. Two of the women spoke English fluently: Kani, who studied abroad while obtaining her graduate degree; and Tara, whose family fled the war and anti-Kurdish genocide campaign in the late 1980s, and lived in Canada for 7 years. Tara who was very friendly and soft-spoken, expressed that she was very eager to participate, even though she was self-conscious of her English. She explained that during her time living in Kurdistan, there was a significant decrease in her use of English, which resulted in her forgetting much of it and developing an “accent” (though I disagreed).

Selecting Kurdistan as the site to conduct the study allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of each participant and her life. For example, I had to carefully consider my safety in the region while planning and conducting the research. As such, when it came to data collection, I was restricted to Duhok and Erbil alone, eliminating the possibility of travelling to Suleimani. While planning my trips between the cities, I had to consider the method of transportation and the routes taken while travelling to collect data, meaning that I only used taxi services referred by family, and ensuring that the routes taken avoided areas where my safety could potentially be at risk. As well, when passing the various checkpoints throughout and in between the cities, I was aware that I would often be questioned or required to provide identification as a woman travelling alone. However, I did not feel discriminated or inconvenienced by the security checks, as I understood the responsibility of the Peshmerga in upholding the security of the region as well as potentially identifying victims of human trafficking, as was often explained to me

by various taxi drivers and locals alike. Thus, experiencing various facets of day-to-day life in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, such as travelling between Duhok and Erbil, allowed me develop a deeper understanding of the problem context itself- the location that informed the women's' lived experiences, perspectives, thoughts, and beliefs.

During this time, I was well aware of society's attitudes of women as the weaker, vulnerable sex in need of protection, as well as the gendered norms that bind women to certain roles and responsibilities. However, I was able to travel and work alone, and complete any tasks I needed without requiring a guardian. I also did not experience any discrimination or mistreatment, due to my gender or otherwise, during my time in Kurdistan. As well, as some of the participants pointed out, I felt that I was not alone in this sense, as I witnessed many women independently travelling, working, driving, and alone in public.

This research study required more time to conduct than initially anticipated, due to various reasons, one of which was the ethics clearance process. At the time of the study, there was a travel advisory notice in place on the Government of Canada website advising Canadians to avoid all travel to Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. However, I demonstrated to the BREB through correspondence and by video meeting that I was able to safely travelling to and from Iraq as I had done so for the past few years. As well, the sensitive nature of certain interview questions also raised an issue of whether or not there ought to be an expert present during the interviews in order to assist the participants should the questions cause them to feel distressed. As I am not a trained psychiatrist, I was not fit to do so, nor would it have been feasible for me to have a psychiatrist present. This also created a hurdle, as approval from the BREB would be near impossible if any

part of the study posed any type of risk to the mental and/or physical well being of the participants and the researcher. As I demonstrated to the BREB, Kurdish women are already excluded and not represented or misrepresented from research and academia. Requiring the use of a trained psychiatrist creates further challenges for researchers and can potentially cause researchers to lose motivation or interest in the study of Kurds and Kurdish women. The drawn-out ethics approval stage caused great frustration for me and at times I questioned whether I should have designed a study that had fewer risks and obstacles to overcome in order to complete. Once again however, by demonstrating the importance of a study that highlights Kurdish women's voices and experiences, and by finding counseling services in the region that participants could access, I was able to overcome this hurdle as well. It was also important for me to highlight that although women in the Kurdistan region may not receive necessary access to psychiatric care, their voices should still be heard none-the-less. The participants should also be able to make their own decision when participating, whether they would like to volunteer despite potentially distressing questions, or avoid it altogether by not participating. When faced with the opportunity to participate and given the freedom to choose whether or not they were capable of participating in such a study with the given risks, all of the participants chose to participate in the full interview. The challenges I met throughout this study were an example of the difficulties researchers face when pursuing studies on the Kurdish people or Kurdish women. Researchers should not feel discouraged when facing such challenges, as their work can greatly contribute to filling the gaps in the literature.

When I began the recruitment phase, it took no more than a few days for interested participants to reply to the invitation to participate in the study. From the onset,

participants were all very keen and excited to be part of the research study. All of the participants emphasized the need for research on gender and education in the KRI, and were motivated to participate when they had the opportunity to contribute to the research. While collecting the data for this study, I was at times surprised and excited to learn of the diverse perspectives that I had not considered or expected to hear.

In addition, participants provided great insights into their various experiences and knowledge on the issues that they believed limit women and girls in the KRI. However, the women were also quick to point out the changes and growth they had witnessed in the region over the past years. It also became apparent that the women's participation was partly motivated by their desire to challenge the depictions of women as weak or vulnerable, and provide their own insights and recommendations for changes.

My role as an insider-outsider to this researcher also required the use of reflexivity, forcing me to question my pre-existing notions and assumptions of the research topic. My initial interests in pursuing this research topic arose from my family's history as survivors of the Anfal campaign. Although I have no recollection of fleeing Iraq at the age of 1, my early years were shaped by life in a refugee camp, and my formal education did not begin until arriving in Canada at age 6. These experiences have remained with me, as have the stories and experiences of my parents, grandparents, older siblings, and extended family. Thus, I was constantly aware of my position and the balance between insider/outsider, and the participants' experiences that affirmed my own family's experiences with conflict, in addition to those that were completely new to me.

Further, listening to the women's experiences was at times emotional for me to hear. In the case of Kani, I could not help but see similarities to my own mother who is of

the same generation, and was reminded of her struggles and experiences with oppression and violence while living under the Iraqi dictatorship. On the other hand, hearing the hope and positivity in their voices and perspectives, their ideas for change, and the way they were often able to highlight the progress made even during times of adversity demonstrated the women's resilience. As well, I was surprised at my own reactions, at times noticing that their hope and positive outlooks they portrayed were contagious and left me feeling similarly hopeful. Participants' eagerness to participate and share their potentially distressing experiences also underlined their wish to be heard. Thus, it is crucial that steps are taken to hear women's voices and challenge the barriers and attitudes that limit them from accessing quality education and equal opportunities as well as the sites and sources that perpetuate barriers.

Conclusions

This research study was motivated by the history of violence, oppression, and genocide against the Kurdish populations by Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, along with my personal history and experiences as a Kurdish minority member born in Ba'athist-controlled Iraq. Further, this study focused solely on the experiences of Kurdish women, rather than the experience of a random sample of the population of the KRI, as Kurdish women are often excluded from the literature and academia and are marginalized due to ethnicity and gender. As a Bachelor of Education graduate and a Master of Education candidate, I was interested in focusing on Kurdish women's experiences within education and the implications of war and oppression on their education. The data revealed numerous significant problems and issues within the education system in the KRI as a result of the former regime, which were exacerbated in 2014 before such issues had been

addressed or resolved. The findings also identified the barriers that prevent women and girls from access to equal education and opportunities, ranging from ethnicity, location, society's attitudes and beliefs, class, partisanship, etc., all of which are highly interconnected with gender and conflict.

The implications of the study findings, as discussed in this chapter, highlighted some recommendations for future research and practice. First, I argue for the importance of continued research on Kurds and Kurdish women, with the aim of filling in the significant gaps in the literature. Recommendations for future research include selecting larger samples of participants that include women who live in rural areas as well as including those who do not speak English. As well, I presented the issues that participants' identified, such as the need for improved training of teachers and educators, as well as their compensation. I also highlighted the women's concern for the importance of addressing the sites that reinforce values, norms, and expectations that limit women and girls to traditional roles, primarily through education, such as curricula, teaching styles, and practices and policies within schools. Further, I outlined recommendations that included participants' ideas for social change, such as educational campaigns that challenge negative stereotypes and promote positive attitudes towards women, those that educate and empower women and promotes female agency, as well as programs that offer resources and services to women and girls such as scholarships for women entering fields traditionally occupied by men, access to free adult education, employment opportunities for widows and divorcees, and daycare services for their children.

The recommendations presented are by no means an exhaustive list of the solutions and steps to be made for women's education in the KRI, nor are they meant to

be an answer for all of the problems identified within women's education in Kurdistan. This research study set out to shed light on Kurdish women's issues, specifically within education and with respect to oppression, and as indicated by the findings, the intersectionality of barriers point to a multitude of sources limiting women's freedoms and preventing their access to equal, quality education and opportunities. The study also aimed to provide an opportunity for Kurdish women to speak about their own knowledge, experiences, concerns, fears, and hopes for future change, and to contribute such experiences and knowledge to the literature on Kurdish women and education in Kurdistan. Thus, such recommendations are also a presentation of recommendations from the actual women who have experienced the gender inequality, barriers, conflicts, and/or oppression. It is my hope that this study will bring recognition to the plight of oppressed people who are marginalized to the outskirts of society and not represented within research, literature, or academia. Moreover, I hope the research draws attention to the misrepresentation of oppressed groups, as those who have long been oppressed have also had their histories and experiences written for them.

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Appendix

Interview Prompts and Guiding Questions

Title of Study: Investigating Kurdish Women's Experiences in Education in Kurdistan With Respect to Oppression

Opening Questions:

- Tell me a little bit about yourself (age, family, ethnicity).
- Do you study/work?
- How would you describe life in Kurdistan?

Core Questions:

Gender:

- How would you describe being a woman in Kurdistan and Iraq?
- Do you think your quality of life would be significantly different if you were not a woman and/or if you were not Kurdish? If so, how?
- How would you describe the main differences between being male and female in Kurdistan from your perspective?
- Have you ever felt that men and women were not treated equally? (In general and with respect to education)
 - o If so, how? Why do you think that is?

Education:

- Tell me about your educational history (location, grades attended, level reached).
- How would you describe the education you received?
- How do you feel about education/schooling?

- How would you describe the education system?
- How would you describe your experience as a girl/woman in school?

Oppression:

- Have you ever experienced oppression? (If so, can you tell me about your experience?)
- What are your thoughts on the armed conflicts that have occurred during your lifetime in Iraq and/or in Kurdistan specifically?
- Do you think these wars have had any impact (good or bad) on your life?
- If so, how? What aspects?
- Has life changed for you in any way since the 2014 invasion of ISIS? If so, how? What is different?
- Have these wars impacted your education specifically?
- If so, how? (Absenteeism, withdrawal from school, emotional/mental/physical effects, quality, attitudes of others such as family/teachers, availability?)
- Have you noticed any other significant differences in your life as a result of such conflicts?
- How do/did you deal with/cope with/overcome these issues? (programs, support systems?)

KRI:

- Have there been any significant changes in Kurdistan throughout your life (positive or negative)?
- Are there any changes you would like to see in Kurdistan (regarding women, education, or oppression)? If so, what?

- What do you think needs to happen for those changes to be realized? (i.e., politically or socially)?

Closing Question:

- Is there anything you would like to add that you think is important to know in order to understand women education in Kurdistan?