



Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration

Kurdistan Region Iraq

Muslih Irwani, Jiyar Aghapouri and Eleonore Kofman



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Migration & Displacement Stream

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Muslih Irwani (American University of Iraq-Baghdad), Jiyar Aghapouri (American University of Kurdistan) and Eleonore Kofman (Middlesex University London)

Project Co-Investigators: Eleonore Kofman (Middlesex University - London) and Ezgi Tuncer, Kadir Has University, Istanbul

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1. Introduction

This study is part of a larger multi-country research project '*Gendered Dynamics of International Labour Migration*' involving four countries and main cities in them: Islamabad in Pakistan, Istanbul in Turkey, Beirut in Lebanon and Erbil in Kurdistan Iraq (KRI). The analysis aims to contribute to theoretical and empirical knowledge of gendered migrations, both within the Global South (Izaguirre and Walsham 2021) and from the North, especially from Europe and North America (Kofman 2022) and to highlight the diversity of migrants in relation to sectors of employment, educational and skill levels, and countries of origin. In doing so, we seek to avoid a perspective that sees migrant women only as victims of the process of migration, but also to highlight women's agency in bringing their voices to the fore.

The project sets out to elaborate a gender-sensitive understanding of the interaction between economic and socio-cultural drivers of labour migrations and the experiences of women migrants in KRI. The investigation examined in particular the following issues:

- the drivers of migration which are likely to comprise for women factors of discrimination arising from familial practices, access to employment and resources and presence in the public sphere;
- their living and working experiences and practices;
- their agency and coping strategies;
- spatial mobility and use of the city

The Kurdish research team interviewed a diverse group of women migrant workers, especially those working in the household, education and NGOs, and who originated from neighbouring countries, other countries of the Global South (Africa and South-East Asia), and the Global North (Europe and North America), about their living and working conditions and how they dealt with the pandemic in Erbil, the capital city. The report is based on fieldwork conducted in 2021 during a period when the Covid-19 pandemic was impacting on how we conducted our fieldwork and whom we could access.

This report has been cooperatively written by the members of the research team. It is theoretically grounded in critical migration and feminist theories. On the one hand, the political and economic factors of structural violence, and their role in women's migration, are

acknowledged. On the other hand, micro-processes are recognised and highlighted, so as to be able to see the nuances of experiences at the interplay between power and agency, away from prefabricated and stereotypical understandings of South-South women's migration. This implies adopting a perspective which is close to migrants' experience and their own sense- and self-making away from victimising stereotypes (Mulinari and Sandell 1999). Women's subject positions are located within intersecting structural conditions of oppression (Smith 2000; Crenshaw 2017). These are often rooted in unequal power relations and discriminating social and gender norms, such as the labour market, national regulations on visas, work/residence permits, wars, conflicts and religious discrimination, gendered drivers of migration that effect their decisions to leave their countries of origin, and so on. The resources and strategies which helped the migrant women involved in this study cope with both the conditions in their home countries, as well as the working and living conditions in the host country, are given voice. The emphasis on migrants' coping practices sits with the call for the necessity of dismantling the post-colonial, Western-centric and patriarchal ideology, whereby Global South migrants are constructed as disempowered and vulnerable (Mahmood 2001; Mohanty 1984) which crystallise views of women migrants in the Global South as traumatised or resourceless subjects with little agency in need of assistance (Bankoff 2001; Aloudat and Khan 2022; Deshingkar and Zeitlyn 2015). These reified views hold particularly true in relation to women migrants within under-explored South-South mobility circuits.

In line with these theoretical groundings, it is important to highlight that the use of the terminology Global South and North is employed with critical awareness. This means that we do not wish to retrace the idea of migration as occurring across the static divide between, in Khan's words, a 'marginalised' South and a 'prosperous' North'. It also means that we are aware of the fact that the South-South migration language is an etic one, originating from Northern scholarship, and that it bears a number of 'perception deficits' (Khan 2022). Such Northern literature distortions include views on South-South mobility as singular and temporary. Additionally, it ignores relevant Southern contexts (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020) and "the need for the South to take responsibility for its own knowledge" (Khan 2022).

South-South migration had received less attention since the 1990s unlike South-North migration which focused on the transfer of labour from poorer countries to affluent households in high income countries to fill the gap in social reproduction of families (Hochschild 2000; Parreñas 2001). Whilst women migrants tend to migrate to a greater extent to high income countries than men (IOM 2020), there has also been considerable intra-regional migration within the South, especially to upper-middle income countries, such as Argentina, South Africa and Turkey (Kofman and Raghuram 2010; 2015). In fact, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the demand for domestic and care workers also grew enormously in middle- and upper-class households in Asia, the Middle East and Central and Latin America. For wealthier urban households, employing a migrant worker not only helped to provide household services (cooking, cleaning, care), but was also seen as a symbol of social status. As with the studies of gendered migration to the North, attention has focused on domestic and care work in particular (Izaguirre and Walsham 2021). Yet as Deshingkar and Zeitlyn (2015, 170) note, the literature on this issue is mainly focused on “[...] power relations between workers and employers, the absence of protective legislation, neglect by states, and exploitation by recruitment agents and employers”. These issues are of course important but migrants’ agency, on the other hand, remains understudied in many regions, though in recent years perspectives demonstrating agency and activism of migrant domestic workers through diverse channels have emerged (Fernandez 2019; Bechtold et al. 2022). This occurs both in relation to their responses to gender discrimination in their countries of origin, for example domestic violence, stigma of divorce, discrimination and lack of opportunities in employment where emigration may offer a solution as the Social Institutions and Gender Index analyses suggest (Ferrant and Tuccio 2015; OECD 2023). Post-migration and in response to exploitation and poor working conditions, a number of coping strategies, such as changing employers within the country, often using networks of friends and co-nationals or moving countries to improve their conditions of work and earn higher salaries (Parreñas 2021; Paul 2015) are also evident. Less common is the recourse to unions for collective action or use of courts to contest the breaking of contracts, though in a number of instances, they may form community associations as in Lebanon and among Filipinas in Pakistan.

The literature on gendered skilled migration from South to North is much less abundant than that on less skilled sectors, but in the South it is very meagre with most studies limited to Western Europe, North America and GCC countries (Kofman 2022; Kofman and Raghuram 2015). In the past, educated migrant women in the South were represented as the 'trailing spouses' of elite global migrants or expatriates (Kunz 2016). Though still privileged in terms of class and race, they are often part of the transnational middling (Conradson and Latham 2005) and not necessarily highly paid and in secure employment. Yet sectoral studies indicate a range of employment undertaken by women moving independently. International schools have expanded in recent years (Koh and Sin 2019), especially in Asia though less in the Middle East, employing staff from Europe and North America in particular. Humanitarian organisations are also significant employers. Others work in business and management and administration. Key sectors, such as health, in South-North movements are less likely in Southern countries with a few exceptions such as South Africa. Studies of gendered skilled migration have extended beyond the workplace to encompass the experiences of family life and other social dimensions (Bailey and Mulder 2017). In addition, studies have highlighted the presence of skilled workers in the labour market who have entered through other routes such as education, marriage, family reunification and refugees and the articulation between them (Kofman 2012). These configurations also exist in South-South and North-South migrations as our research, which includes those entering through marriage and as refugees, demonstrates. Furthermore, Southern countries are represented as unattractive places for students although many countries have some excellent universities which are becoming more attractive due to the expense and other difficulties of studying in the North. For example, large numbers of international students study in China (Tu 2022) and in African countries such as Morocco and Senegal. Overall, as Khan (2020) suggests, we should move beyond a simplistic view of migration in narrowly economic terms, and we would add, recognise the complexity of gendered migrations within and to the South (Kofman 2022).

As for the other countries in the broader research project, the KRI case expands our current knowledge of South-South migrations and reveals the complexity of gendered dynamics and patterns. In the following section we outline the little knowledge we have of gendered migrations in the context of a substantial increase in labour migration in the past two decades. We should

also note that KRI has received large numbers refugees from neighbouring countries in conflict (Kaya and Luchtenberg 2018). In fact, most Syrian refugees in Iraq are of Kurdish ethnicity and within KRI 47% of these refugees are women (IPSOS Group SA 2018).

2. Gendered Migrations in KRI

The issue of women labour migrants in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) emerged in 2005, coinciding with the official recognition of KRI as an autonomous federal region within Iraq and its subsequent economic and social development (Yusuf 2018). The increasing number of foreign workers and recruiting agencies in various sectors such as education, construction, energy, hospitality, beauty, housework, and other services indicates the attractiveness of the Kurdistan Region to foreign workers (Yusuf 2018). Since the collapse of the former Iraqi regime in 2003, KRI has experienced an economic boom, particularly in the service and hospitality sector, leading to a gradual rise in the number of foreign workers (Stansfield 2021). This growth is evident in the statistics provided by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of the Kurdistan Region (Table 1).

Labour migration to the KRI is also driven by conflict, war, and poor economic conditions in neighbouring countries. Iranian migrants, affected by US sanctions, constitute the largest contingent of foreign workers in the region, and Turkish companies operating in the KRI have brought numerous labor migrants since 2018. Inflation and the devaluation of the Turkish lira have further incentivized migration among individuals working for Turkish companies in the region. The emergence of ISIS and ongoing conflicts in Syria have displaced many Syrians, particularly those of Kurdish ethnicity, to the Kurdistan Region. The majority of Syrian migrants in the KRI are of Kurdish ethnicity, with a significant percentage residing in urban and rural areas outside of camps. These individuals hold Kurdish residence permits, granting them employment rights and access to essential documents (2018). However, their integration into the labor market varies, with a considerable portion employed in the service sector (Kaya and Luchtenberg, 2018).

According to Yadgar Anwar, the head of the Residency Office in Erbil, during the war with Islamic State (ISIS) “the number of foreign workers applying daily for work permits in the Kurdistan

Region was 500 to 600...They are mostly from Iran. Some also come from Turkey, India, Nepal and some Arab countries” (Rudaw News Agency 2019)¹. So, this created a new type of population in KRI and complicated social and legal issues. For example, foreign workers:

“do not possess citizenship from the country they work in”, and they cannot participate in elections, hence the political parties do not care for them much, and on the other hand, whilst the attitude of the native public is, most of the times, negative because foreign workers have caused them to have fewer job opportunities.” (Yusuf 2018:4-5).

Based on the categorisation of the KRG’s Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MOLSA) foreign workers are divided into two main categories, skilled and service migrant workers. Skilled migrants include those foreigners working in sectors such as business services, education (international schools and universities), international NGOs, health industry and any other sectors which require education or training background. These are typical sectors in which educated women migrants work. The service category includes foreigners working in projects [oil and gas industry] and domestic workers, cleaning, hospitality, housework and other services which do not require specific educational or technical background. The less skilled such as domestic workers have entered through recruitment agencies which is discussed in the first section on recruitment, regulations, sex trafficking and the impact of Covid-19. There appears to have been an increase in their number. For example, an earlier study in Erbil (Carter and Aulette 2016) conducted among Filipina and Ethiopian migrant workers estimate 2000 while more recent estimates are of the order of 5000-10,000.

The methodology section (Section 3) of the report provides demographic information about the participants. The subsequent section (Section 4) focuses on the analysis of the interviews, categorized into major themes: a) drivers of migration, b) cultural challenges, c) perception of locals, d) legal rights and responsibilities, e) work satisfaction, f) the impact of COVID-19 on women migrants, g) sexual abuse and harassment, and h) safety in the environment. The report concludes with policy recommendations directed towards the Kurdistan Regional Government,

¹ [Facing lack of opportunity at home, foreign... | Rudaw.net](#)

Government of Iraq, and other national or international bodies involved in the labour migration issue, particularly concerning women domestic workers.

Year	The Number of Foreign Workers		Total
	Domestic Workers	Project Workers	
2007 & 2008	491	512	1,003
2009	474	1222	1,696
2010	639	1549	2,188
2011	744	2374	3,118
2012	744	5345	7,129
2013	2942	3320	6,262
2014	4435	4313	8,748
2015	5169	5007	1,0176
2016	3882	1271	5,154
2017	2851	992	3,843
2018	3337	425	3,762
2019	6358	466	6,824
2020	3681	7	3,688
2021	8373	187	8,560
2022	7039	109	7,148
Total	26,991	45,150	72,141
Source: Directorate of Labour, Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs, KRG			

2.a Recruitment Agencies and Entry of Less Skilled Migrants to KRI (Kafala)

Generally, foreign workers in less skilled sectors, such as domestic and hospitality workers, operate under a kafala system with a guarantor (Bouri 2023). These workers are primarily brought into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) through Foreign Workers Recruitment Agencies/Companies that work in collaboration with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

Various reports from non-governmental organizations and governmental institutions have highlighted the involvement of numerous recruitment agencies in the process of finding, bringing, training, and hiring foreign workers in KRI.



Figure 1 Screenshot of an advertisement by a recruiting agency on the types of workers they may offer to households. Photo credit: Jiyar Aghapouri

Based on data obtained from the director of the recruitment office in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, there have been 163 formally registered companies/agencies authorized by the Ministry to recruit foreign workers from 2007 until the present time. Among these, 32 agencies are currently active in Erbil, Sulaimani, and Duhok, while 57 companies ceased operations due to their failure to transfer the required 50,000 USD assurance money² to a designated bank account, which is a mandatory requirement. Additionally, 32 other companies were terminated for breaching regulations, financial and/or administrative reasons, while some of these

²Based on the KRG's Regulation number 2, year 2015 on Foreign Workers, the registered recruitment agencies responsible for recruiting the foreign workers are obliged to deposit USD 50,000 in a bank as a security guarantee.

companies transferred their workers to other agencies. Furthermore, 11 agencies are blacklisted for violating the regulations set by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.³ During our interview with Karzan, the head of the Directorate of Labour at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, he provided further insights on this matter:

If a recruiting agency breaches its obligation and treats workers badly, we follow up very seriously... Our agencies must submit their applications to the daily newspaper for 15 days. And we don't allow anyone looking for a worker to go and bring it as long as we have a local worker for that position.” (Interview with Karzan, the head of the Directorate of Labour at the Ministry of Social Affairs)

Not being a state, foreign workers entering the Kurdistan Region do not enter through a bilateral agreement between KRI and other countries. It means they do not directly enter the Kurdistan Region, rather they come from other third countries, particularly the Arab Gulf countries. These agencies rely on the commissions they receive from the employer which is from USD 1500-2000 per person for each household during the contract time. The agency’s commission and migrant’s salary differ according to nationality, for example, Ghanaians cost less than Indonesians and Filipinos are more expensive (Interview with Hevin, manager of Koshma migrant recruiting agency in Duhok). In fact, the recruitment agencies are responsible for all aspects of the recruitment process from the day they recruit until the day the migrant worker leaves Kurdistan. According to a K24 TV’s report (2016)⁴ which interviewed the director of a recruitment agency in Erbil, when service foreign workers come to Kurdistan, they will undergo a medical examination and will also be checked by the Interpol Police about their criminal records. The director explained the process of recruitment as:

“There are several stages to the contract signing process: First, we ask foreign companies to send CVs [of potential workers], and according to the needs of local people, we pick the CVs. For

³ There is a law to blacklist those companies which break the law, “Blacklisting a company is for six months to a year, then if the company has fixed the problems that made it be blacklisted, the company will, for sure, resume business.

⁴ *Kurdistan 24 TV* Program on Foreign Workers in Kurdistan, 4 October 2016. Available at: [کریکاری بیانی - YouTube](#)

example, some people want a person to be a Muslim, also some people said, it doesn't matter where a person is from. After selecting the person, they refer to the Labor Directorate and the work permit will be issued. But for some positions [skilled workers] we need to post that position [to recruit a local worker] in a local newspaper for 15 days and then it is placed on the website of the Ministry of Labor for another 15 days. If a person in the Kurdistan Region is not ready to do this work, then a foreign person can do that job.” (Interview with Karzan, the head of the Directorate of Labour at the Ministry of Social Affairs)

2.b Rules and Regulations

A significant issue is the lack of any policy to protect foreign workers in KRI, even though some regulations exist to deal with foreign workers. One of the very few working laws in Kurdistan Region in relation to domestic/household workers is a decree issued by The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) of the Kurdistan Regional Government (Regulation number 2, Year 2015, Foreign Workers). The document includes 28 articles, each one concentrating on the legal aspects of foreign workers in KRI. It defines the basic concepts like foreigners, foreign workers, recruiting agency, householder, household workers and others. In article 2, it explains the process of recruiting foreign workers by a recruiting agency and those terms and conditions made by the ministry. For example, the foreign workers Recruitment Agency is obliged to pay several fees such as: 1) an amount of 1,000,000 IQD as a registration fee for the company, and 2) An amount of 500,000 IQD as a license renewal fee for one year.

Based on this document, employers in the private, mixed and cooperative sectors could employ foreign workers, the duration of which is one year, after which it can be renewed on a conditional basis. According to the regulations, foreign workers during their residency in the KRI, can use the ID card that is granted to them officially by following the legal processes. There are several articles which pointed to the recruiting procedure of foreign workers by agencies and other agents. For example:

- a) Submit a written application to the provincial Directorate of Labour by attaching the full information and skills of the foreign workers who are going to be recruited into the Region.

- b) Advertise the vacancy position twice in the period of 15 days in printed and visual media by specifying the type of project, job, wages, number of workers, and the required skills and expertise for the position.
- c) Provide a copy of the employment contract.
- d) Project owners and investors who employ foreign workers are required to allocate a bail amount between USD 500 - 1,000 in a public bank for each worker, based on the cost of their return to their home country, to guarantee the foreign workers' rights, as well as to return them to their home countries following the termination of their contract. The maximum amount of bail is USD 25,000.
- e) The foreign workers' recruiting agency is prohibited from engaging the foreign workers in daily trades or enslaving.
- f) The company or employer is prohibited from re-employing the foreign worker to work for other companies or other employers for a charge or profit.

In this document registered companies are responsible for foreign workers from their start day up to the end, and most of the articles mention the quality of interaction between foreign workers and their recruiting agency.

The second part of the regulations is about the householders. There are three types of commitment that should be fulfilled. First, household worker/domestic worker's commitments such as responsibility for doing the services, protection of physical and non-physical properties, rules of coming and going and so on. The second commitment belongs to the house owner [the employer], such as payment, health services, treatments, communications facilities and so on. The third part is about the commitments of the household workers' recruiting agencies such as submission of documents, contract situations, suitable accommodation for foreign workers and other aspects. The last part of the document is about the general regulations that are related to foreign workers like the age of the workers, renewing contracts and so on.

Overall, the current document [Regulation No. 2 (2015) on Foreign Workers] has not been updated and does not cover the new issues raised in relation to labour migration following COVID-19. The document is available in Kurdish only and it is not accessible openly to labour migrants. We found this document through our personal links at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, not through an online website which is accessible for all. Furthermore, similar to all other laws in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, there is a wide gap between the laws on paper and the way they are implemented on the ground. So, without assistance from the Ministry of Labour

and Social Affairs it is almost impossible for a domestic worker to file a case against her employer in the court due to the heavy bureaucracy and time-consuming process.

2.c Women Migrants Trafficking

While none of our interviewees had been trafficked, the subject of migrants trafficking in KRI, particularly of women migrants, is related to human trafficking at international levels. Yusuf's study on the living condition of foreign workers in KRI (2018) points out that some of the participants of his study stated that women foreign workers are involved in sex work while working under other categories:

“This is another example of human trafficking and deception, because the workers do not come for sex purposes, but they are obliged to do so, many of the participants said that places like massage centers and night clubs are the many places for these illegal actions.” (Yusuf 2018: 24).

However, most of the Kurdish officials and legal experts related this trafficking to external sources beyond KRI control, particularly to the Iraqi and Gulf states' environment. They also blame the recruiting agencies for neglecting migrant workers (Interview with the Arif Heto, Director of Labour at MoLSA, on Kurdistan 24's program). Akam, a migration lawyer, talked about the cases he worked on and mentioned how these workers were deceived and became a sex object:

“These women were brought from other countries [home country or a third country] and promised to work in suitable places such as hotels and famous restaurants, but when they arrived nothing happened, and they were sold before they arrived. In some regions, many of them were not even told they were going to Iraq, some were taken to France, then to Britain, then to Arab countries, and finally to Iraq.” (Interview with Aras on a K24 program of Labour Migrant Workers in Kurdistan)

Akam's words prove that the trading of foreign workers happens, and it is a kind of human trafficking. This type of human trading was mentioned in the report number 1 in 2018 of the Ministry of Interior of the Kurdistan Region.

2.d COVID-19 and Labour Migrants in KRI

As in many other countries, KRI was very much affected by COVID-19. The pandemic impacted the economy and labour migrants too. Due to COVID-19, many foreign workers, especially service workers in hospitality sectors, were left without a job in the Kurdistan Region. After losing their jobs due to the pandemic, foreign workers in KRI were unable to return home due to travel restrictions. On 14 June 2020, AP News Agency published a short video explaining the circumstances of some migrant workers in the Kurdistan Region who were impacted by the travel restrictions due to COVID-19.⁵ They were workers from Georgia, India, Bangladesh, and China, among other countries. For the time being, some were left without any possibility of going home because of border and airport closures. Adam Dombek a 27-year-old Georgian migrant worker in the hospitality sector was stuck in Duhok and could not physically be with his family. He came to Dohuk with his parents in 2015, working as a hotel receptionist. Dombek told AP that he and his parents had lost their jobs because of the coronavirus. "We are all sitting here with nothing to do. There is no job, nothing". Due to the virus outbreak, most hotels had closed. Dombek and his parents were allowed to stay for free at the hotel. Relatives had sent money over and the hotel owner also helped out. "But this is not nice at all. I would like to go back home, but all roads are blocked," he said (Associate Press Newsroom 2020). Many Georgians work in hotels in Dohuk, often staying in the hotels where they work. Foreign workers in the city typically also work in construction, supermarkets, factories, or housekeeping. Rajesh Kumar was an Indian worker who used to work in a supermarket before being sent home by the store owner. Kumar said he cannot go back to India now. "I paid too much to come here. If I go (back), I lose too much...I can't go back to India without money". He was one of many labour migrants around the globe whose life and income became victims to a virus-driven crisis (Foley and Piper 2021). As we shall see among our interviewees, there was a range of situations depending on the kind of work they were engaged in.

3. Methodology and Demographic Table of Interviewees

The study adopted a qualitative approach based on an ethnographic content analysis (ECA) method using tools such as participant observation of a number of households and agencies and in-depth interviews. It also includes a review of relevant social media pages and website, including social activities of labour migrants in public space. A qualitative content analysis research deals with more with interpretation than numbers and allows for more engagement of the researcher (Daymon & Holloway, 2002: 6). ECA is a creative and inductive approach which applies qualitative content analysis to explain the 'reading of texts'. ECA fits well with thematic analysis and narrative discourses, although it "focuses more on situations, settings, styles, images, meaning, and nuances presumed to be recognizable by the human actors/speakers involved" (Krippendorff, 2013:23).

Aligned with its theoretical framework, this study adopted a participatory design based on the collaborative work of a research team made up by Western/North researchers and local/South ones. This collaboration occurred in different phases of the project, such as adaptation of the interview guide, data collection and analysis, and writing-up phases. This approach not only contributed to de-Westernise the study and enrich it with the expertise of research belonging to the local context.

A review of the literature covering gender and migration (see Introduction), migration statistics of residence permit holders and the legal framework, provided the background of a semi-structured interviews based on four themes: the process of migration, drivers of migration and experiences of gendered discriminations in the country of origin, experiences of working and living in Kurdistan Region-Iraq, public access and spatial mobility in urban places.

In-depth interviews were conducted from July 2021 to December 2021 . Due to the re-emergence of COVID-19 in KRI and other technical issues with our local university partner there were many pauses in the fieldwork. It also impacted on our research in slowing down the research, making to difficult to access migrants, especially in sectors such as hospitality and the means used to conduct interviews ie. online rather than in person. We accessed 23 migrant women working in a variety of sectors such as household work, hospitality, education

(international schools, university), beauty, NGOs, and business (self-employed and services). They were aged between 20-40 years and had migrated from North America, Europe, Africa, South Asia and neighbouring countries in the Middle-East. They have been in KRI between 1 and 15 years. Two interviews were also conducted with the director of a migrant recruitment agency and the director of Labour at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA).

While the location and nationality of skilled migrants was diverse, including neighbouring countries such as Iran and Syria, and Europe (Denmark, France, Ireland) or North America (Canada, USA) most of our participants in the service sector (domestic work and hospitality) migrated from Africa, and South Asia. South-South migration included both highly educated and skilled (Iran, Pakistan, South Africa, Syria), as well as less skilled, waitresses and domestic workers (Ghana, Indonesia). Two from the Philippines had college degrees, one of whom was working as an accountant manager. From the neighbouring countries of Iran and Syria, several were Kurdish.



Figure 2. A restaurant owned and managed by Filipina workers in Erbil. Photo credit: Jiyar Aghapouri

Although the majority of them have full-time jobs, only a few had access to social security healthcare. Most of the interviewees were selected through researchers' academic and social networks in addition to snowball sampling. A few interviewees hesitated to be interviewed due

to their concern about their employers' identity which was supposed not to be revealed. They finally agreed to be interviewed by having the choice of not answering the questions they don't want to do. Five selected interviewees declined to be interviewed for unknown reasons. We were first introduced and had short conversations before our interviews. Due to sporadic re-emergence of COVID-19, five interviews were conducted online. Face to face interviews were conducted at coffee shops, libraries, or participants' workplaces; Zoom, and WhatsApp applications were used for conducting online interviews. Both offline and online participants had the trust in the researcher that the interviews will be solely used for research and policy papers and the research could help improve the situation of women migrant workers in Kurdistan Region and Iraq. After introducing the purposes and scope of this research, interviewees gave their verbal consent to participate. Each interview took between 45-75 minutes. Below is the demographic table of the participants:

NO	Age	Nationality	Level of Education	Previous Occupation	Current Occupation	Marital Status	Stay in KRD	Place of stay	Legal Status
1	33	Ireland	Master	Teacher/Retail Worker	ESOL Teacher	Single	6	Erbil	Residence card (RD)
2	30	Canada	Master	NGO Employee	NGO Employee	Single	1	Erbil	RD
3	42	South Africa	B.A.	Teacher	ESOL Teacher	Single	5	Erbil	RD
4	34	USA	B.A.	Journalist	Communication Coordinator	Married	6	Suli	RD
5	39	France	Master's	No Job	French Teacher	Single	2	Suli	RD
6	39	Pakistan	Master's	Humanitarian NGO Employee	Humanitarian NGO Employee	Married	6	Erbil	RD
7	41	Indonesia	High School	Housewife	Cleaner	Divorced	4	Erbil	RD

8	40	Indonesia	High School	Housewife	Housemaid/Domestic worker	Married	3	Erbil	RD
9	37	The Philippines	B.A.	Retail worker	Waitress	Single parent	6	Erbil	RD
10	28	Ghana	High School	Therapist Assistant	Housemaid	Single	2	Erbil	RD
11	39	The Philippines	College graduate	Salon admin	Accountant manager	Married	2	Erbil	RD
12	40	Ghana	High School	Housewife	Housemaid	Married	?	Erbil	RD
13	35	Iran-Kurdish	Primary School	No job	Cleaner	Single parent	3	Erbil	RD
14	35	Iran-Persian	B.A.	Accountant	Nail salon owner	Single	4	Erbil	RD
15	34	Iran-Kurdish	B.A.	Graphist	Beauty/Tattoo salon owner	Divorced	8	Suli	RD
16	40	Iran-Kurdish	B.A.	N/A	HR advisor	Married	15	Erbil	RD
17	29	Ghana	High School	N/A	Housemaid	Married	2	Erbil	RD
18	31	Syria-Kurdish	B.A.	N/A	ESOL Teacher	Single	7	Duhok	RD
19	27	Ghana	High school	Beautician	Cleaner	Divorced	5	Erbil	RD
20	27	Syria	B.A.	Design Engineer	Procurement officer	Married	3	Erbil	RD
21	30	Syria	B.A.	Lawyer	Sale Specialist	Married	7	Erbil	RD
22	29	Ghana	High School	Waitress	Housemaid	Married	1	Erbil	RD
23	30	Ukraine	B.A.	Waitress	Hotel administration	Single	3	Erbil	RD

24	40	Denmark	Master	English teacher	University Lecturer	Married	18	Erbil	RD
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4. Findings and Analysis

In this section, we examine the drivers of migration, the cultural challenges in living in KRI, and the perception by locals.

4.a Drivers of Migration

The drivers of labour migration are various, including social, political, cultural and economic ones. Lack of Job opportunities, experiencing a new job and life, marriage, political issues in the homeland and gender discrimination and inequality in the country of origin, have been the main causes which can be highlighted as the drivers of labour migration to the KRI.

Many women labour migrants, especially from African and East Asian countries, are engaged in service jobs, and most of them have migrated to Kurdistan to earn better incomes and create a better future for themselves and for some their children in their countries. The noteworthy point is that most of these people are satisfied with their salaries, and this is also a motivating factor for others to migrate to Kurdistan.

“I planned to go abroad myself... because in the Philippines my salary is not same [as] here in Erbil. My salary there in the Philippines, for one month, I will get only \$300. And this it's not enough for my kids.” (Interview 9: Elpa working at KFC, from the Philippines).

They use this working opportunity to support their families back home through sending remittance:

“I left my country to have a job and support my family” I send parts of my money to them every month.” (Interview 12: Mokocho, housemaid from Ghana).

A new life and working experience: Some of the participants stated that they are in Kurdistan Region to gain a new experience of living in different places, and most of these people were not

under economic or social pressures to migrate, but they wanted to experience a new “thing” and different place while working. For example, Amanda says:

“I [like always] wanted to work abroad” to explore people and culture.” (Interview1: Amanda, teacher from Ireland).

Similarly, Jessica the Canadian migrant who works in an NGO in Erbil stated that she “saw the job posting” and it was something she “was really interested in.”

Gaining new experience in challenging areas is another reason for labour migration. For those who work in international NGOs and humanitarian sector, Kurdistan Region has been one of the attractive places which could give them a new job experience. Sana mentioned that:

“in the job of humanitarian sector, one of your achievements is to expect to have experience of different countries, especially the countries having conflicts or post conflict situation. I wanted to go for a conflict situation also, like Syria or Yemen. But you know, as a married as a mother, I was not. I was having some limitations. So that is why I choose Iraq, because of it's post conflict situation” (Interview 6: Sana, working in humanitarian sector, from Pakistan).

Partnerships/Marriage : is one of the most common reasons, especially for those migrants whose partner is Kurdish or from Iraq. For example, Lone mentioned that she moved to Kurdistan to accompany her husband:

“I basically moved here because of my Kurdish fiancé at that time, and I started to work here for NGOs, before we got married just to get to know [the] region, and just experience with my own eyes and then I moved back forth for two years then moving to Kurdistan for three to six months implementing different projects; then [in] 2005 we got married and settled here permanently; then when my three children were born, I spent time in Denmark on my maternity leave” (Interview 24: Lone, lecturer from Denmark).

Political and Conflictual Issues in home country: Political issues, conflicts and poor economic conditions in the home country are some of the main drivers which pushed participants to work in the Kurdistan Region. This group are mostly recognized as IDP or refugees by UNHCR but they are given the work permit by the KRG. Most of these people are from Iran and Syria, or in other

words from the Kurdistan parts of Iran and Syria who have considered Kurdistan Region in Iraq a suitable and safe haven. Roja a Kurdish political activist from Iran stated that:

In Iran I became involved in activities related to the Kurdish political movement and my life have changed. For several years, I was involved in political activities with one of the Kurdish [outlawed] political parties. Then I joined the party in Qandil mountains and worked with them as a guerrilla/peshmarga until 2006. Then I ended my cooperation with the party and came to stay in Erbil. I could not go back to Iran due to my political history” (Interview 16: Roja, HR advisor, from Iran).

The war and conflicts in Syria started from 2011 and the emergence of Islamic State exacerbated the condition. The Kurdistan Region received millions of refugees from Syria who were mainly Kurds. Rima, is one of the Syrian Kurds who moved to KRI to find a job and live there:

I decided to flee my country because of the war. You know, I was living in Damascus and back then, the situation was insecure so my family decided to leave that city and then we went to Qamishli city and we stayed there for about seven months, but life conditions were very poor there. There was no electricity, no water. There was a bread crisis, gas crisis. It was awful in a nutshell. It was awful. That’s why we decided to travel to Kurdistan in Iraq” (Interview 18: Rimas, English teacher from Syria).

Lina, a Syrian Kurd and a professional sales specialist, stated that “the general situation in Syria is not suitable [to live]. We just miss living in peace and the quality of life we got used to it before.”

Gender discrimination in home country: Some participants pointed to their plight in their own countries and the existence of discrimination and inappropriate behavior of families toward women. As studies of gender discrimination have highlighted, this may be a contributory factor in the decision to migrate (Ferrant et al. 2014; OECD 2023). For example, Sholeh said:

“It was not good...I really wanted to go out. I was tired of that situation... I was getting discriminated a lot in my family. Even after my marriage, I was being harassed at my in-laws' place [while living with them]. I was only thinking to go out, my husband also agreed with me...When we went out my husband got involved in political activities and became a wanted person [by the

Iranian government], but he also left me alone” (Interview 13: Sholeh, cleaner, from Iran-Kurdish).

Some of them mentioned that in their countries, women cannot work to have an independent income. Some of the participants pointed out the severe gender discrimination in their countries. For example, Mary said: “It is difficult to find a job in Ghana as a woman” (Interview 22: Mary, housemaid from Ghana).

Sana didn't express her personal experience in term of gender disparity and employment in her home country, but she acknowledged that being a women can be an issue if you want to find a proper job in her home country:

“Actually, you know, this gender parity or this gender discrimination is every bad. And most of the time, a woman has to struggle a lot, like if you talk about any woman who is married and was unable to have a family, your employer will likely not hire that woman. If they have babies, for example, if she is unmarried, there is a better chance of getting her a job.” (Interview 6: Sana, working in the humanitarian sector, from Pakistan).

4.b Cultural Challenges

The interviewed foreign workers came to KRI from different countries and backgrounds. Their language, religion, nationality, race and gender might be different from the employers or the people they are interacting with. Therefore, their different worldviews and perspectives affect the social interactions and relationships with members of the Kurdistan Region society. This situation has left apparent effects on the living conditions and the rate of integration with the local society. For Sana language has been one of the main challenges:

“The only problem like differences about the language because, you know, we are not speaking the same language.” (Interview 6: Sana, working in the humanitarian sector, from Pakistan).

However, the language challenge for Sana who is still able to communicate with some people in English is less than the challenges for a domestic worker who cannot communicate basic things with the members of the family for whom she works. In some of the interviews, the domestic worker was unable to communicate in English, Kurdish or any other local languages. So, the

interview could not meet an acceptable level as the answers were YES or NO only for three interviews. We were unable to find a translator in their native language.

Moreover, in addition to a new lifestyle and working environment, there have been other major challenges while asking about cultural issues. Some of the participants see it as a challenge, others may view it as a new experience. Jessica mentions that:

“Whether that's just the [life] style, whether it's the language barrier. I think it's not a con per se, but it's a challenge that in every international situation I've been in, that takes time to learn and to understand what is common here and what is acceptable.” (Interview 2: Jessica, Working in NGO, from Canada).

Although there is not such a strict restriction on the type of attire in a big city such as Erbil or Sulaimani, a participant mentions wearing certain types of clothes which were interpreted differently by local society:

“I don't wear shorts or short skirts here in Erbil because they will think that I'm kind of a bitch, but in my country, it's fine to wear anything we like.” (Interview 9: Elpa, working at KFC, from the Philippines).

An issue that most of the participants mentioned is the way that men tried to flirt or start a relationship with foreign women workers regardless of their position, race, or ethnicity. Katrina was a waitress in her first job in Erbil but is working as an administrator at a 5-star hotel. She mentions her story in this way:

“One of my captains came to me and told me that he wants us to be friends. So that time I didn't understand what it [means] for the Middle East to be friends with a woman... because you know, in Ukraine and Russia, we don't have such kind of things that if you're friends it means you're having an affair. I was looking at him, and he told me ‘I want to go outside and drink a coffee with you.’ I left him and said that I know [he is] married. He said yes, but this is not [a] problem, my wife is at home with the kids, and she can't know where I go. I told him that I have enough money to buy a cup of coffee for myself.” (Interview 23: Katrina, hotel administrator, from Ukraine).

A couple of participants talked about the limitations that the house owner may impose on them regarding their religious beliefs and practices. Felicia, a Ghanaian domestic worker said that her employer doesn't allow her to do religious practices or to go to church with her friends. However, this is not always the case regarding the way Islam views “servant-master” [employer-employee] relations. In an interview with K24 TV, the religious leader Mullah Maghdid stated that Islam rejects any kind of salvation, or religious discrimination and the workers must be allowed to practise their own rites and beliefs:

“Islam says that the person should be respected and if he or she is not respected, owners should be treated according to the law. The servants must be bought clothes, fed, and must be paid their full salary, and if these are not implemented, the owner should be punished.” (Interview with Mullah Maghdid, K24 TV Program).

Most of the participants of this study, especially the recruitment agencies and the government officials pointed out that cultural differences and work-related issues have most of the time caused both the foreign workers (especially the domestic workers) and the employers/house owners' issues with not being able to cope with each other. In such cases, the agency usually sends the worker to another employer (new house) or if the worker cannot continue with the new employer the worker may be returned to their home country. According to Regulation number 2 2015, the house owner can only return the worker back to the company in the first 3 months and ask for another one. According to the same regulation, if the issue is a cultural and language issue, and the foreign worker has not breached the contract, it is the responsibility of the company or the employer to provide a travel ticket to the worker to return to her/his home country, i.e., the country the worker has been recruited from.

4.c Perception of locals

In relation to our sample, the way foreign workers are treated and viewed has a direct relationship with their gender and nationality. In this sense, people's perception of a ‘blond European women’ may be different from others, as stated by Lone:

“For me, being a blond, European I guess it’s not so difficult, people have always treated me really respectfully, and it’s never being difficult for me to find the job that I wanted, and also I’m being

paid a lot more than locals, and also lot more than other migrant workers from the rest of Middle East...People were very friendly and very interested in talking to me, very helpful, yeah it was good experience, beautiful country.” (Interview 24: Lone, lecturer, from Denmark).

Also, the perception of locals may differ based on the migrants’ ethnicity. For example, Kurds in Iraq have strong historical, cultural, and ethnic ties with Kurds in Iran, and it is not unusual that a Kurdish migrant woman from Iran is treated differently from a migrant woman from other parts of Iran or from an African country. However, many Iranian Kurdish women migrants are facing an identity crisis in KRI too; on one hand, they expect to be treated as Kurds and consider themselves as members of the wider Kurdish nation, on the other hand, they are still considered Iranians in terms of their legal documents and nationality. So, they still face those negative perceptions that locals may have towards Iranian foreigners:

“There is a negative view toward the women of Eastern Kurdistan [Iranian Kurdistan] here. I'm not hiding this and I'm not afraid to say it. Not only at workplace, but also in society, there is a bad view. For example, when you get in a taxi, the taxi driver gives himself the right to talk to you differently, allowing himself to treat you differently. In their minds, the women of Eastern Kurdistan are shaped in this way [being open to relationships/affairs with others]. Of course, this traces back to the recent years, when some people have come here for other things [drug dealing sex, etc..]. We are coming from a very closed community, but we are open-minded about talking about ourselves or in conversation. Hawraman [a region in Kurdistan-Iran]is very different from other places.” (Interview 16: Roja, HR advisor, from Iran-Kurdish).

Tara, a successful business owner had a similar story:

“Here, people see women from Iran differently. They can be right as Iranians have been involved in many bad things here in KRI... Actually, I have many friends whom I get on well with. The people’s perception is good when they see you as a Kurd. It gives the feeling of being the same nation although in different countries. But some Iranians have been involved in illegal works such a drug dealing. This has changed the perception of some people when they found that you are form Iran. I always introduce myself to them a Kurdish from Rojhelat [East Kurdistan or Iranian Kurdistan] rather than an Iranian.” (Interview 15: Tara, business owner, from Iran-Kurdish).

4.d Legal Rights and Responsibilities

Although cultural differences are seen as challenges for many of the participants, this has not led to discrimination at work or violations against foreign workers who are in non-service sectors. But for the service sector, subjected to the kafala system, the story is different as there are issues beyond the violation of their rights such as issues of workers vs. employers, workers vs. locals or problems among workers themselves which the Ministry of Social Affairs and the recruiting agencies must deal with. The workers “must have an agreement and cooperate with the ministry and the related government bodies, so that the ministry considers their issues, including financial problems” said Karzan, the head of the Directorate of Labour in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. He added that foreign workers should be aware of their rights and responsibilities, so they adapt to the employer [household] they work for. For example, the right to wear, pray, call family members back home, and have leisure/break hours are personal rights and must be protected. He mentioned one of the cases he was dealing with on the day we interviewed him:

“We have 5,000 to 10,000 [domestic] workers here in Erbil...imagine, if you have one problem per day...Even a couple at home can have problems once a week. For example, I've been ringing two [workers] before you arrive here...they had problems. The worker was at home for a month and later got the Coronavirus, then at 10 p.m., he threw her out of the house. We won't pardon him [employer] easily. Because this worker has come by law and has received a visa by law and works here by instructions. The landlord is responsible for her until the day the worker works for them.” (Interview with Karzan, the Head of the Directorate of Labour in the Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs).

The Kurdistan Region's Regulation No. 2 of year 2015 obliges recruiting agencies to “contract the foreign workers by complying with the existing rules of labour, retirement, and in line with the social securities issued by the ministry,” yet none of the domestic workers participating in our interviews were aware of their rights based on the contract when it comes to practice. Givcy is a Ghanaian cleaner, she came on a travel visa through one of the recruiting agencies and stayed in the Kurdistan Region. She talked about how she was recruited and brought to Kurdistan and mentioned that she has not seen her contract yet:

“My friend sent me to a [recruiting] agency in Ghana with my passport, she took \$200 [for the application fee] and after they that she [charged] another \$200 for the flight...I [didn't]t have any money to go to a country but here [Kurdistan] it is free. I didn't pay other money, [that was the] only money I paid for my passport and [ticket]... I have not seen my contract yet, I don't know where it is.” (Interview 19: Givcy, cleaner from Ghana).

According to Karzan, the head of the Directorate of Labour, since 2019 the 9th KRG Cabinet has been strict enough on these agencies and if they find any foreign workers without contracts the agency's licence will be revoked. He mentioned that before 2019 his Directorate recorded several cases of uncontracted workers who were recruited through these agencies. However, the lack of contracts has never been a case for women skilled migrants, most of whom mentioned their contracts with their employers and were aware of the places they could go in case any disputes arise. Some of the skilled workers complained about overtime work beyond their contracts. For example, Amanda stated:

“The first job that I got in Kurdistan, I'm still in it. So, I've been here for six years in August. I'm contracted to teach about 30 hours a week. But then on top of that, I also mark exams. But it would definitely be over the 30 hours that were contracted to teach. So maybe 45 hours... Yes, or no more than enough to live.” (Interview number 1, Amanda, teacher from Ireland).

When an issue happens between the worker and employer (house owner) the first point of contact for solving it is the agency. The Iraqi Labour Law number 37 of the year 2015 in its article number 16 states that Arabic and Kurdish languages should be languages for writing the contract. However the contracts of foreign workers are written mostly in English. To avoid confusion, the Directorate of labour helps the workers with court cases for solving any problems that may occur. In fact, for all matters between workers vs. houseowners, houseowners vs agencies, or workers vs. agencies, the Directorate of Labour at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affair can intervene and support the worker. Karzan stated that they had 36 cases dealing with issues of domestic workers on the same day we interviewed him:

“These 36 cases that we were facing today were solved by the court...In one example, with the judge's order, the agency was revoked, and the judge would decide whether the workers will be

sent back or kept.” (Interview with Karzan, the Head of the Directorate of Labour in the Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs).

One of the significant issues that has emerged from our observations and interviews is the evident discrepancy, imbalance, and inequality concerning the visa process for domestic and other migrant workers in the Kurdistan Region.

First, obtaining a visa is not a straightforward task. While it is the employer’s responsibility to initiate the visa process for their workers, the procedure itself is arduous and expensive. The government imposes various requirements, including the submission of multiple documents and mandatory medical examinations to ensure the worker is free from contagious diseases. When workers visit the relevant government agencies, they often encounter significant communication gaps. Many of them cannot effectively communicate in English or Kurdish, and the local staff at the government agencies are similarly unable to converse in English. This language barrier further exacerbates the challenges faced by domestic workers during the visa process.

Secondly, the cost of obtaining a visa is excessively high. According to the Directorate of Visas, which we engaged with during our workshop on 24 May 2023, a one-year residence visa for a foreigner in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq costs approximately USD 600. An additional USD 100-200 is required for medical examinations and other governmental fees. Consequently, the visa expenses for migrant workers amount to at least USD 800 per year. This becomes especially concerning when considering that their monthly salaries typically range between USD 250-400. Although it is the employer’s responsibility to cover the visa costs, this significant financial burden raises questions of fairness and equality. For instance, an individual employed in the lucrative oil and gas sector with a monthly salary of USD 10,000 would pay the same amount as a domestic worker or a restaurant waitress when issuing or renewing their annual residence visa.

It is worth noting that the situation is even worse for workers whose visa costs are not covered by their employers. For instance, we encountered the case of a Georgian cleaner employed in an international company who revealed that she was charged USD 800 by a lawyer to renew her annual visa. She mentioned that the actual cost of the visa is USD 600, but the lawyer added a USD 200 fee. Considering her monthly salary at the company is USD 600, she struggles to meet

her living expenses and pay rent. Shockingly, she has been living in Kurdistan for ten years, and she had to do this process every year.

These stories illustrate the significant gaps and issues prevalent in the visa processes and associated costs within the Kurdistan Region. As we will highlight in the Policy Recommendations section of this report, it is crucial to address these challenges in order to create a more equitable and accessible system for domestic workers and other migrant workers in the region. By streamlining the visa process, reducing costs, and improving language support at government agencies, the Kurdistan Regional Government can contribute to fostering a more inclusive and fairer environment for all workers, regardless of their occupation or nationality.

4.e Work satisfaction

Foreign workers, especially women domestic workers are not a part of the formal economy of KRI, thus apart from a few legal initiatives stated above, there is no legal or political framework protecting these workers. In such cases, a good level job satisfaction is the only hope that could help them to stay longer, integrate more into the society and overcome many of the above-mentioned challenges. Based on the current fieldwork and conducted interviews, we can argue that “Two-Factor Theory” by Herzberg (Noell, 1976) can explain the level of work satisfaction for women domestic migrants and skilled migrants in KRI. This concept suggests that job satisfaction includes two separate independent aspects; first it is related to “satisfaction” and the second is related to “dissatisfaction.” To frame it in this study’s context, there are factors related to exploitation in the employment relationship which led to either job satisfaction or dissatisfaction for the employee. One aspect of such ‘satisfaction’ is a good salary and other bonuses which women migrants may receive. Lone is a lecturer at a private university where salaries are better than other universities in KRI. She mentioned that she is “doing very well financially” as her partner works too. This has affected her perception regarding work satisfaction:

“Yes, I’m very happy. I really like being with my students, and I really enjoy being with my colleagues, so and I like, you know I’m not super stressed in my position, I have time to work on

some other project apart from my teaching, so over all I'm very happy both in terms of content, environment, and everything." (Interview 24: Lone, lecturer from Denmark).

However, due to the lack of medical insurance and job security, workers in low paid jobs showed dissatisfaction in their work and were looking to change the job or leave the country:

"No, not at all. It is more than three months that I am in the waiting list to have an MRI scan because I don't have enough money to go to a good centre. It is done for 65,000 [Iraqi Dinars], but if you wait you can do it for 15,000 dinars. So, I am waiting for the cheaper one." (Interview 13: Sholeh, cleaner, from Iran-Kurdish).

In addition to the salary and bonuses, dissatisfaction may arise from the high expectation of the employer and a cultural stereotype that a domestic worker should do 'everything in the house' which is an example of work exploitation. Marian, an Indonesian working in cleaning sector mentioned her story as:

"My problem is that when I work in a house, I don't just work for them, but I also must do personal work for other family members, and they don't allow me to rest. They take us out several times during the day to show us to people, and it makes us feel very bad. If it's a special thing to do, it's not a problem, but it feels bad to show off and boast." (Interview 7: Marian, working in cleaning sector, from Indonesia).

Feeling of being discriminated at work due to racism or ethnocentrism is another example of showing dissatisfaction at work which pushed them to change their working place or the type of work. Layla is an Iranian-Persian nail technician working in a beauty salon. She believes her clients and employers prefer Eastern European women to the Middle Eastern ones:

"Yes, it's good [income] but not that much because I have to pay rent and transportation, but sometimes they are paying the Ukrainian nail technicians more than Iranian because they are saying Ukrainians are doing better job... but it is not true and they want them for something else." (Interview 14: Layla, nail technician, from Iran-Persian).

4.f The Impact of Covid 19

As mentioned previously, during the outbreak and spread of COVID-19, the world faced new conditions that affected almost all aspects of human life. This new critical situation had various and complex consequences on societies in general and the Kurdistan Region in particular. The community of foreign workers is one of the vulnerable groups who were impacted noticeably by COVID-19. These impacts can be categorised as followings, according to the participants of our study:

New method of education for foreign workers

With the start of COVID-19, the educational system was one of the dimensions of social life that faced a challenge. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, foreign teachers often work as foreign language teachers, especially English and French, and with the spread of COVID-19, their teaching methods changed; online education became a dominant model and many of them worked from home countries. Amanda stated:

“I was teaching online last year. So that meant that I was living at home living in Ireland for six months and working in Kurdistan in the meantime.” (interview 1: Amanda, teacher from Ireland).

According to the interviewees, online teaching has become an alternative model for face-to-face teaching. In this situation, teachers have been teaching online either in their own countries or in the lockdown conditions of Kurdistan region.

Salary cut and job loss

One of the common challenges during COVID-19 was salary cuts, which were the result of the lockdowns, and issues in transportation, production and economic hard time. This phenomenon is seen among different sectors, but the service workers were affected more. For example, Katrina is one of the migrants who was impacted severely by the salary cuts and the issues of lockdowns in KRI:

“During the COVID, our situation was really hard... I was working in the hotel, and we got our salaries cut, almost in half. We didn't have a lot of work” (Interview 23: Katrina, hotel administrator from Ukraine).



Figure 3. Domestic worker leaving Erbil. Photo credit: Jiyar Aghapouri

On the contrary, some people such as teachers or higher skilled workers worked remotely and received their full salaries. For instance, Celine, a French teacher from France, mentions that COVID was not that bad for her as it was for other people:

“We missed only one month of school, and we got the salary... Oh, well, I was keeping my job and I was keeping my salary.” (Interview 5: Celine, teacher from France).

The impact and type of salary cuts differed based on types of foreign workers’ job, employers and recruiting agencies. What is common about the impacted groups is that no one received any financial support from the government. All support was from locals, employers, charity groups and in a few cases NGOs. In fact, keeping the job or survival of the business was one of the important concerns for both employees and employers during COVID-19. Foreign migrants who

had a lot of contacts with people were most affected and lost their jobs more. For example, Tara said that:

“It affected a lot last year. I closed my business down last year for some time. Because our clients were affected and we could not risk our lives.” (Interview 15: Tara, business owner, from Iran-Kurdish).

On the other hand, some foreign workers who worked in international NGOs and were supported by international employment laws could keep their jobs. Dolores mentioned:

“I don't believe anyone in my entire organization who has lost their job directly because of COVID-19. I don't know any of my friends who work in NGOs who may have lost their jobs.” (Interview 4: Dolores communication Director, from USA).

Also, during COVID-19, the Kurdistan Regional Government went through several economic challenges namely the drop in oil price and the Iraqi central government's delay in sending the KRG budget due to the political tensions between the two governments. This caused huge problems not only for workers, but in all sectors in KRI. Unemployment insurances were not paid by the companies or other supporting institutions and the government could not reimburse them. In some cases, even foreign workers were not able to return to their own country after losing their jobs. Hospitality service workers were one of the most vulnerable groups of foreign workers in the Kurdistan Region; they lost their jobs and had to live in poor conditions during the lockdowns.

Domestic workers during COVID-19

During COVID-19, women domestic workers were not impacted as other service or hospitality sectors, because their situation completely depended on their employers, i.e. house owner or recruiting agency. For example, Sholeh says that there was no rest or quarantine for her during the Covid era:

“It has not affected me...I have always worked more than 10 hours per day, even during the Ramadan month.” (Interview 13: Sholeh, cleaner, from Iran-Kurdish).

In some cases, when they were infected with Covid, the house owner provided free treatment to them and supported the worker and they still could keep their jobs:

“I [got] Covid in June 2020, first my boss got it and then the whole family, we were all quarantined at home, the house turned to a hospital, with oxygen bottles as well. The doctor was coming every day to check on family and me as well, I was getting treatment but I was working too.” (Interview 8: Assifa, domestic worker from Indonesia).

4.g Sexual Abuse and Harassment

The phenomenon of sexual harassment and abuse are the most common problems that most of the participants of our study mentioned in terms of public spaces and places of work. In particular their accounts showed how it impacted on their use of urban spaces.

Sexual harassment

Our findings indicate that many foreign workers have difficulty using public transportation, especially taxis. In fact, sometimes the basic conversations inside taxis are interpreted as a kind of “sexual harassment” which is a possibility that foreigners have not understood the cultural differences in starting the communication or that the locals may like to know more about the foreigners which is part of the Kurdish culture. So, they may want to ask some personal questions, which are normal questions in the context of Kurdish culture. However, these questions may go too far into the personal life. For example, Amanda said:

“If you get a taxi here, it's happened to me where the taxi driver will ask my number or he'd ask me if I'm married, how many kids do I have which I have to [say] I got my five kids.” (Interview 1: Amanda, teacher, from Ireland).

In most of the cases in public transport (especially with taxi drivers) the communication has led to sexual harassment of foreign workers, flirting with them, touching them and offering them sex. Rutina stated her experience in this way:

“With the taxi drivers sometimes...But there was a time where a friend of mine, from Zimbabwe, had taken a taxi and it wasn't even too late at night. It was 11:00 pm. We were coming from X village [a wealthy neighbourhood in Erbil] the taxi driver was watching porn on his phone. He

was like, turning his phone for us to see it. And we were really scared.” (Interview 3: Rutina, English teacher, from South Africa).

Assifa mentioned a similar story:

“When I’m getting inside a taxi, the driver would touch my hands and [do] it in a way to look like it was an [accident]. And [he] waits for my reaction... I would tell them to stop and [I would call] the police...some of them don’t care. So I need to get out of the taxi.” (Interview 8: Assifa, domestic worker from Indonesia).

And the experiences of Roja is not different from the others:

“Encountered taxi drivers three times who said bad things or asked me for some things [proposing sex or affairs].” (Interview 16: Roja, HR advisor from Iran).

In addition to public transport, sexual harassment is a common experience among most foreign workers in other public spaces. For example, men followed them, insulted them and touched them. For this reason, foreign workers dress with many considerations,

“We were walking in Ankawa [a neighbourhood in Erbil which is known for having bars and clubs]. She [my friend] was wearing leggings and short dress. And when one guy passed us, he touched her and we started getting upset.” (Interview 1: Amanda, teacher, from Ireland).

In another account, Lone, a lecturer from Denmark stated:

“I did experience that [sexual harassment] myself, just like going out, yeah men would be approaching you in an inappropriate way, touching you, talking to you, shouting something after you. I have experienced that... I have two friends who experienced sexual assault as well” (Interview 24, Lone, Lecturer from Denmark).

Any sexual harassment is prohibited according to the law of the Kurdistan Region and people can take legal actions immediately, but none of the interviewees mentioned that they went to the police and filed a complaint.

Sexual harassment at work

As mentioned earlier in the report, the women foreign workers in KRI are divided into two categories. skilled workers and service workers. During the fieldwork, skilled migrant workers mentioned the least or no experience sexual harassment at work. However, most of the service workers mentioned their own or their friends' story of harassment. Sholeh, a cleaner in a beauty salon mentioned that:

“My husband’s boss [who introduced me to my current employer] was looking to have an affair with me ...He wanted to make the most of our miserable financial circumstances to have sexual relations with me and abuse me; he proposed me another job in a cleaning company. I worked there for two weeks but couldn’t continue as he made his harassments more obvious.” (Interview 13: Sholeh, cleaner, from Iran-Kurdish).

Although most of the stories of harassment are mentioned by women workers in health, beauty and hospitality sectors, domestic workers also had some similar storied:

“The family’s son-in-law tried to sleep with me more than once, so when I told the lady of the house that your daughter’s husband is trying to sleep with me, she told me to keep it quiet and not to tell anyone.” (Interview 10: Sara, housemaid from Ghana).

Sexual harassment is a very serious challenge that foreign workers face at work and public environments. It is a major challenge whether it be due to a lack of proper understanding, cultural differences, or intentional sexual harassment.

4.h Safety/security in the city/Kurdistan Region

According to the interviews, the phenomenon of security can be considered in terms of the feeling of security against possible threats in the Kurdistan region. Although Kurdistan is located in Iraq and has experienced the war with ISIS, almost all of interviewed women foreign workers felt assured to live in KRI. For example, Celine said:

“I would say Kurdistan is very safe. For me I don't I don't feel any restriction in my life here. I am in to move around to go out like I feel very comfortable everywhere.” (Interview 5: Celine, teacher from France).

Many women foreign workers acknowledged that they had a “wrong perception of security” in the region before entering Kurdistan. This can be related to the stereotype that especially Westerners may have about security and safety in The Middle East. In fact, KRI is still at the stage of post-conflict, but most participants had considered Kurdistan Region to be a part of the war-torn areas of Iraq, where the level of safety is low. But when they experienced living there, most of them felt safe and satisfied from this point of view.

The aforementioned sense of security is rooted in the efforts made by the Kurdistan Region. Although it may not look nice to see many checkpoints when travelling from Erbil to Duhok for example, it has created a calm and safe environment for people and greatly reduced the number of threats. This phenomenon has also attracted the attention of foreign workers and they have no problems with such checkpoints, for example Sana said:

“Of course, the security and checkpoints and everything I find them very nice; you know, it also depends on us whenever you are crossing a checkpoint, you have to be humble. They are very cooperative.” (Interview 6: Sana, working in humanitarian sector from Pakistan).

Another point is the situation of Kurdish workers who are from Iranian, Syrian or Turkish parts of Kurdistan. Most of these people are refugees and migrants who are affiliated with Kurdish opposition parties of Iran, Turkey or Syria. Due to the influence of the Islamic Republic in Iraq or Turkey in KRI, they are worried about their safety, or being kidnapped or assassinated by people related to Iran and Turkey’s regimes. Although with the existing checkpoints and security layers such threats have reduced, this fear still exists:

“Because our refugee status is a political based and every now and then you hear the Iranian government assassinates or kidnaps its dissident groups in the neighbouring countries.” (Interview 13: Sholeh, cleaner, from Iran-Kurdish).

5. Conclusion

While previous studies have focused on gender perspectives regarding displaced people and refugees in the Kurdistan Region, there is a notable lack of research on labour migration. Our study demonstrates the existence of diverse women migrant populations in the region, encompassing different sectors, skills, educational levels, and countries of origin. Migrants come from neighbouring countries with political conflicts as well as high-income countries. The terms of migration, regulations, and knowledge of rights differentiate migrants. Service workers are regulated under the kafala system, while skilled workers have contracts with their employers. Refugees from neighbouring countries have the right to work granted by the KRI government.

The study found that there are different job opportunities, particularly in the service sector, for women labour migrants. Most migrant workers expressed satisfaction with their income in the KRI, which allows them to support their families through remittances.

Some participants mentioned that their motivation to migrate to the Kurdistan Region was not solely driven by economic pressures but also to gain experience and enhance their CVs by working in challenging conflict-torn areas. For those working in the international humanitarian sector, the Kurdistan Region has been an attractive destination. Women migrants who have Kurdish or Iraqi partners also relocate to the Kurdistan Region to be with them.

Political conflicts and poor economic conditions in neighbouring countries such as Iran, Syria, and Turkey have compelled individuals of Kurdish ethnicity to seek refuge in the Kurdistan Region. Most of them are recognised as displaced people or refugees by UNHCR, and the KRG has provided them with work permits.

Apart from migrants from neighbouring countries, others come from different cultural backgrounds, which sometimes creates challenges in social interactions and integration. Language barriers, especially for middle-skilled and unskilled workers who lack English, Kurdish, or Arabic proficiency, further hinder communication with the local community. Differences in worldviews and perceptions add to the complexities of integration.

Cultural differences, including clothing choices and religious practices, have led to misunderstandings and conflicts between foreign workers, especially domestic workers, and employers or household owners. The study participants highlighted these cultural issues as significant challenges in their working relationships.

The perception of locals toward migrants varies based on their ethnic background. Kurdish migrant women from Iran may be treated differently than migrants from other regions or African countries. However, Iranian Kurdish women migrants also can face an identity crisis. While they identify themselves as Kurds and expect to be treated as such, their legal documents and nationality still label them as Iranians, subjecting them to negative perceptions from locals.

Service sector workers experience discrimination at work, and disputes between workers and employers often involve recruiting agencies. The Directorate of Labour in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs assists workers with court cases to resolve disputes.

Sexual harassment is a common experience among foreign workers, both at work and in public spaces – the results of this study suggested. However, it is important to note that not all personal questions asked by locals, which may be culturally insensitive, should be considered sexual harassment. While the law prohibits any form of sexual harassment in the Kurdistan Region, interviewees did not mention filing complaints with the police, indicating a potential underreporting issue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the foreign worker community in the Kurdistan Region, though women domestic workers have been less affected compared to those in the service or hospitality sectors. Non-service workers reported changes in work practices, job loss, and salary cuts.

6. Policy Recommendations

Improving knowledge and data of gendered labour migration across the different sectors and nationalities.

Implementing Age Restriction: The Kurdistan Regional Government should implement an age restriction policy to prohibit the recruitment of teenage migrants or girls under the age of 18, safeguarding their rights and ensuring their well-being.

Communication Barriers: Measures should be taken to reduce communication barriers between employers and domestic workers, such as providing interpreters or promoting the use of machine or online translation services, to enhance understanding and effective communication.

Monitoring & Evaluation: The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs should establish a system to gather and update data on women domestic workers (WDM) to inform policymakers and ensure accurate information for monitoring and evaluation.

Regulations and Policy Updates: The Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs should review and improve the existing instructions and regulations from 2015 regarding domestic workers' rights and working conditions to align with international standards and address emerging issues.

Unions Engagement: It is essential to actively involve and engage labour unions in matters pertaining to women domestic workers, allowing them to advocate for their rights, welfare, and improved working conditions.

Medical Coverage: The Kurdistan Region's Social Protection Policy should incorporate provisions specifically addressing the needs of women domestic workers, including access to work insurance and medical services, to ensure their overall well-being and protection.

Monitoring the Recruiting Agencies: The government should establish a system of regular and thorough supervisions of recruitment agencies and employers to monitor compliance with labour laws, employment contracts, and the well-being of domestic workers.

A network of support and services for labour migrants and women domestic workers should be established in the Kurdistan Region to provide guidance, assistance, and resources, ensuring their integration and access to support networks.

Visas: Addressing the visa challenges is of utmost importance to establish a system that is fairer and accessible for both domestic and migrant workers in the region. To achieve this, the Kurdistan Regional Government should focus on streamlining the visa process, lowering associated costs, and enhancing language support services at government agencies. By undertaking these measures, the government can play a pivotal role in fostering an inclusive and equitable environment that upholds the rights and well-being of all workers, irrespective of their occupation or nationality.

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