

## From the West to the Kurdistan Region: Exploring the Complexities of Gendered Kurdish Return Mobilities

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Études kurdes, n°17, 2024, pages 159 à 193.

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Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Yilmaz, Janroj Keles ; Irwani, Muslih ; Açık, Necla ; Aghapouri, Jiyar. 2024. « From the West to the Kurdistan Region: Exploring the Complexities of Gendered Kurdish Return Mobilities ». *Études kurdes* (17): 159-193

<https://www.etudeskurdes.org/article/from-the-west-to-the-kurdistan-region-exploring-the-complexities-of-gendered-kurdish-return-mobilities/>

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## **From the West to the Kurdistan Region: Exploring the Complexities of Gendered Kurdish Return Mobilities**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the phenomenon of gendered return mobilities among Kurdish diaspora returnees from Western countries, analysing their motivations, experiences, and challenges encountered by individuals returning to Kurdistan, Iraq. Drawing on related theoretical frameworks on return mobilities and empirical data collected in Kurdistan, the study offers an in-depth analysis of the multifaceted nature of return migration. Beginning with an examination of return mobilities within the broader context of migration studies, the paper underscores their importance in comprehending migration dynamics and patterns. Furthermore, the paper provides historical context regarding Kurdish displacement and forced migration, offering insights into the historical backdrop

that informs contemporary return mobilities patterns. It outlines the research methodology, detailing the procedures involved in data collection and analysis conducted in Kurdistan during 2021 and 2022. Focusing on economic, social, and cultural factors, the paper analyses empirical data from Kurdistan to elucidate the drivers of return mobilities and explore the challenges faced by returnees during their reintegration processes. Finally, the paper concludes by presenting policy implications, offering recommendations for stakeholders, and outlining avenues for future research.

**KEYWORDS** : Gendered Kurdish Return Mobilities, Kurdistan, Western Countries, Return motivation, experiences and challenges

## **RÉSUMÉ**

Cet article explore le phénomène des mobilités de retour genrées au sein de la diaspora kurde issue des pays occidentaux et analyse les motivations, les expériences et les défis auxquels font face les individus retournant au Kurdistan, en Irak. En s'appuyant sur des cadres théoriques relatifs aux mobilités de retour et sur des données empiriques recueillies au Kurdistan, cette étude propose une analyse approfondie de la nature complexe des migrations de retour. L'article commence par un examen des mobilités de retour dans le cadre général des études migratoires, soulignant leur importance pour la compréhension des dynamiques et des schémas migratoires. En outre, il fournit un contexte historique sur les déplacements forcés et la migration kurde, offrant un éclairage sur les éléments historiques influençant les modèles contemporains de retour. La méthodologie de recherche est présentée en détail, avec les procédures de collecte et d'analyse des données réalisées au Kurdistan en 2021 et 2022. En mettant l'accent sur les facteurs économiques, sociaux et culturels, l'article analyse les données empiriques issues du Kurdistan pour mettre en lumière les moteurs des mobilités de retour et explorer les défis rencontrés par les personnes lors de leur réintégration. En conclusion, l'article présente

des implications pour les politiques publiques, propose des recommandations pour les acteurs et ouvre des pistes pour des recherches futures.

**MOTS CLÉS :** mobilités de retour genrées kurdes, Kurdistan, pays occidentaux, motivations de retour, expériences et défis

The phenomenon of gendered return mobilities, particularly among conflict-generated diasporas returning from Western countries to their ancestral homelands, remains relatively underexplored in migration studies. Despite this, recent scholarly attention has increasingly focused on understanding the dynamics of return migration among diasporas originating from conflict-affected regions, encompassing both men and women (Keles 2019). These returnees exhibit diverse motivations for return, spanning from seeking economic opportunities and contributing to post-conflict reconstruction and peace efforts to reconnecting with ethnic identity, familiar environments, and familial obligations (Black et al. 2010; Keles 2019; Galipo 2018). This paper specifically examines the intricacies of return mobilities among Kurdish men and women from Western countries (United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Netherlands, France, Canada, Australia and New Zealand ) to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), offering insights into their motivations and the myriad factors influencing their decisions to return. Despite the backdrop of political instability and humanitarian crises, a noteworthy trend has emerged wherein Kurdish individuals from diaspora communities opt to relocate to the KRI. The paper seeks to illuminate the societal, economic, and cultural challenges encountered by these returnees, contextualising the study within broader theoretical frameworks of migration studies, conflict resolution, gender studies, and identity construction. Structured in a comprehensive manner, the paper commences with a review of contemporary debates and existing literature on return mobilities, laying the groundwork for the subsequent exploration of theoretical underpinnings and an in-depth literature review. Furthermore, it offers an overview of the Kurdish diaspora in Western countries, providing essential context for understanding the motivations and experiences of returnees. Detailed insights into the methodology and data collection procedures employed in Kurdistan are then provided, offering transparency into the research process. Subsequently, empirical data collected in Kurdistan in 2021 and 2022 are meticulously analysed to discern the economic, social, and cultural determinants of Kurdish return mobilities and the attendant challenges faced upon reintegration. Finally, the paper concludes by elucidating policy implications, offering recommendations, and outlining future research directions to advance our understanding of Kurdish return migration within the broader discourse on return mobilities.

## **Literature Review**

A significant portion of existing empirical studies concerning return mobilities is dedicated to examining transnational mobility, predominantly examined within politically and economically stable contexts and countries (Wessendorf 2007;

Reynolds 2010; King and Christou 2010; Jain 2013; Bolognani 2013). The motivations underpinning return mobilities expose a multifaceted and nuanced nature. While certain individuals opt for voluntary return, driven by personal aspirations or preferences, others confront involuntary returns arising from visa and residence permit restrictions, employment obstacles, or deportation orders. Economic considerations prominently feature in return decisions, with individuals often seeking enhanced job prospects, career progression, or investment opportunities upon their return. Additionally, familial bonds, emotional ties, and social networks significantly influence return determinations, as individuals endeavour to reconnect with family members or reintegrate into familiar social milieus (Boccagni 2017). Cultural factors, encompassing a profound sense of belonging and attachment to one's homeland, are also instrumental in shaping return mobilities (King & Ruiz-Gelices 2003). Furthermore, shifts in political dynamics, including alterations in restrictive immigration policies or improvements in the home country's stability, can precipitate contemplation of return (Dustmann & Weiss 2007).

In academic discourse, the phenomenon of return mobilities extends beyond labour migrants or the first generation of migrants, encompassing the involvement of the second generation (both male and female) - individuals born in the settlement country who relocate to their parental homeland (Potter 2005; Wessendorf 2007; Reynolds 2010; King and Christou 2010; Jain 2013; Bolognani 2013). Such return mobilities may be "largely as a result of their parents' continued sense of belonging" (King et al. 2011a : 484). Coupled with childhood visits to their ancestral homeland, these experiences instil a curiosity and yearning for familial roots, prompting a quest for identity (Wessendorf 2007; King and Christou 2011). Consequently, this manifestation of return mobilities, traversing between the countries of origin and settlement, has been conceptualised as "roots migration" (Wessendorf 2010 : 1084) or "ancestral return" (King and Christou 2011), emphasising the interplay between the notions of "root" and "routes" (Ley and Kobayashi 2005).

The academic and policy debates surrounding return mobilities are characterised by diverse arguments regarding their ramifications for both individuals and societies. A prominent debate revolves around the impact of return migration on the developmental trajectories of home countries. Proponents of this argument contend that return mobilities can contribute to the development of home countries by facilitating the transfer of knowledge, diffusion of skills, and inflow of investments (Raghuram 2009). Returnees often bring back valuable human and social capital acquired abroad, thereby stimulating economic growth and fostering innovation in their home communities (Bakewell 2010). Nevertheless, debates persist regarding the extent to which return mobilities effectively contribute to

development, with concerns raised about challenges such as the reversal of “brain drain” and difficulties in reintegration that may curtail their positive impacts (Boccagni 2017).

Furthermore, return mobilities entail intricate processes of identity negotiation and cultural reintegration for returnees, particularly concerning the renegotiation of belonging and identity within altered social contexts (Boccagni 2017; King & Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Keles 2019). Returnees may encounter challenges in reconciling their sense of belonging and identity in changed social environments, potentially leading to feelings of displacement or alienation (Keles 2019). Debates are centred on the complexities of identity formation and the repercussions of return migration on individuals’ self-perceptions and social relationships (Boccagni 2017).

The successful reintegration of returnees into their home community hinges on various factors, including access to employment, social support networks, and institutional frameworks (Dustmann & Weiss 2007). Some studies suggest that returnees may face difficulties in adapting to altered social and economic milieus, which could lead to potential conflicts with local residents or their exclusion from mainstream society (King & Ruiz-Gelices 2003). However, debates persist regarding the role of returnees in shaping local economies and social structures, as well as the efficacy of reintegration policies and programs (Bakewell 2010).

Recent years have seen increasing transnational mobility (King and Christou 2010). Nevertheless, prevailing conceptualisations of return mobilities often disregard the diversity of returnee experiences and motivations. By conceptualising return mobilities merely as “return migration” and viewing transnational human mobility as a singular event rather than an ongoing and iterative process (Bakewell 2010), some existing frameworks tend to overlook the pre- and post-return phases of migration, including decision-making processes, adaptation experiences, and reintegration challenges (Keles 2019). Consequently, there is a pressing need for conceptual frameworks that capture the fluidity and complexity of return mobilities over time, especially concerning return mobilities to conflicted or post-conflict countries. Moreover, individual circumstances, socio-economic backgrounds, and migration trajectories must be taken into account to avoid oversimplifying complex migration processes and overlooking the heterogeneity of returnee populations (Boccagni 2017).

A burgeoning body of transnational studies literature on return mobilities has contested the economic interpretation of return migration, focusing instead on

the maintenance of social, economic, and cultural connections across borders. These studies underscore the ongoing and multifaceted transnational engagements of migrants and their enduring cultural ties and emotional bonds with both origin and destination countries (Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Bolognani 2013). By embracing the concept of transnationalism, scholars highlight the interconnectedness of social, economic, and cultural processes across national borders (Glick Schiller et al. 1995). Within this framework, return mobilities are construed as dynamic processes shaped by transnational social fields and networks (Levitt & Jaworsky 2007). The concept of "return mobilities," as employed in this paper following King and Christou (2011), challenges the binary distinction between migration and return, emphasising repeated instances of mobility within sustained transnational social fields. Consequently, return mobilities encompass ongoing movements of individuals between their country of origin and settlement, spanning various forms of mobility across transnational social fields (Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004; Mazzucato 2008; Boccagni 2017; Keles 2019). In this paper, we consider return mobilities not as a one-way movement but rather as the to-and-from of transnationalism.

In the context of return mobilities, transnational perspectives shed light on the enduring ties and engagements that migrants maintain with their home countries, even post-return, encompassing remittances, social networks, and cultural practices (Levitt 2001). Various conceptual frameworks have been deployed to conceptualise return mobilities and elucidate insights into their dynamics, motivations, and implications, including social and human capital theories and identity construction processes. While social capital theory elucidates how returnees leverage their social networks and relationships to reintegrate into their home communities and access opportunities (Portes 1998), human capital frameworks explore how returnees' acquired skills and experiences abroad influence their reintegration prospects and socio-economic outcomes in their homeland (Dustmann & Weiss 2007). Identity construction theories delve into how returnees navigate shifts in their sense of belonging, cultural affiliations, and self-perceptions upon returning to their home countries (King & Christou 2010). Moreover, recent scholarship has proposed additional conceptual frameworks such as developmentalism (Faist 2008) to analyse how returnees' skills, investments, and knowledge transfers impact economic growth, social change, and innovation in their home communities (Brown & Connell 2012).

In analysing gendered return mobilities to post-conflict regions and countries, it is imperative to understand the complex interplay of factors shaping the decision-making process, experiences, and outcomes of individuals returning to their country of origin following periods of displacement or migration. Hence,



a comprehensive analysis necessitates examining the historical, political, social, and economic factors that have influenced conflict, displacement, migration, and subsequent return dynamics. In addition to the aforementioned reasons and motivations for return mobilities, other factors drive individuals to return to their or their parental post-conflict regions. Despite the challenges, conflict-generated diaspora communities have returned to their homeland, driven by factors such as political transitions, peacebuilding efforts, nationalist sentiments, cultural reconnection, entrepreneurial opportunities, family reunification, and economic prospects (Galipo 2018; Ivanova 2015; Black et al. 2010; Keles 2019). In this context, the impact of peace agreements, transitional justice processes, functioning structural factors, including economic opportunities, family reunification, gender equality policies, security concerns, and cultural ties, plays a pivotal role in the decision-making process of return, whether temporary or permanent.

In examining return mobilities to regions affected by conflict or post-conflict situations, it becomes evident that the dynamics of return migration unfold over time. This temporal aspect suggests that the process of returning to such regions is not static but rather evolves in response to changing conditions, both within the home country and in the migrants' host environments. Understanding the complexities of return mobilities in these contexts requires a multidimensional approach that considers various intersecting factors, particularly concerning gender. Intersectionality theory, first developed by Crenshaw (1989), provides a valuable framework for analysing how multiple social identities intersect and interact to shape individuals' experiences. In the context of return mobilities, this means recognizing that factors such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality all influence return mobilities and reintegration processes. Gender, in particular, plays a central role in shaping return mobilities, as individuals' experiences and opportunities may differ significantly based on their gender identities.

In this context, gendered return mobilities could be defined as analytical framework that examines how gender influences the movement of individuals between their country of origin and their country of settlement. It examines the complex interplay of gender, migration, and return mobilities, considering factors such as gender roles, expectations, and identities. This dynamic process involves multiple back-and-forth movements rather than a single, definitive return. By exploring the social, economic, and cultural implications of these transnational journeys, this concept offers a nuanced understanding of how gendered experiences and identities shape and are shaped by the transnational movement of individuals who transition between their country of origin or ancestral homeland and their country of settlement. When examining gendered return mobilities, it's essential to consider

the power dynamics that exist within households, communities, and broader societal structures. These power dynamics can influence migrants' decisions, experiences, and outcomes upon return. Factors such as access to resources, social expectations, and opportunities for economic and political participation may vary based on gender, further complicating the reintegration process. Moreover, the concept of gendered spaces and places (Pratt & Hanson 1994) offers insights into how societal norms and structures shape individuals' access to and experiences within different physical and social environments. Gendered return mobilities involve navigating these spaces and negotiating issues of safety, belonging, and gendered identities within both familiar home communities and the broader socio-political context of the home country. By considering these intersecting dynamics of gender, power, and space, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of gendered return mobilities and develop targeted interventions to support the successful reintegration of returning migrants, particularly in conflict-affected regions.

### **Kurdish Diaspora: Conflict-induced Diaspora and Return Mobilities**

The Kurdish population has a long-standing history of displacement and migration, spanning decades of colonialism, conflict, political persecution, violence, and economic hardship across Kurdistan, which encompasses parts of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria (Keles 2015). Conflict-induced displacement has been a significant driver of Kurdish migration, with millions of Kurds forced to flee their homes due to armed conflict and human rights abuses (Bezwan and Keles 2023). Kurdish return mobilities entail the voluntary or involuntary return of individuals and communities to their places of origin, influenced by a complex interplay of socio-political, economic, and cultural factors. As such, this paper situates Kurdish return migration within broader theoretical frameworks of migration studies, conflict resolution, gender studies, and identity construction. The forced migration from the territory of Kurdistan, where Kurds live under the national jurisdictions of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, has caused a persistent crisis and instability, marginalising Kurds and other ethno-religious groups in the region.

Not only were their existence and identity, homeland, language, and culture denied but they also experienced multiple atrocities, discrimination, and displacement, leading to a significant conflict-generated Kurdish diaspora in Europe (Keles 2015). Therefore, the majority of Kurds fled from discrimination, persecution, war, and hardship, in contrast to labour migrants' motivations (Holgate et al. 2012). This study focuses only on Kurds from Kurdistan-Iraq. Significant Kurdish migration from Iraq to the UK began in the early 1960s and increased

after the 1970s. Further major flows of migration from Iraqi-Kurdistan to Europe increased in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of displacement and mass killing of Kurds and suppression of Kurdish armed insurrections in Iraq (Sami Abdul Rahman 2017).

Kurdish diasporas, similar to conflict-generated diasporas (Wayland 2004; Kleist 2008; Lyons 2006), become non-state political actors. This occurs through their political remittances and transnational involvement in fundraising, demonstrations, establishing cultural and political associations, and lobbying governments in their settlement countries (Shain & Barth 2003; Smith 2007; Koinova 2014; Cohen 2017). The Kurdish exile organisations such as student societies, local Kurdish associations, representatives of political parties and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and, most recently, the Kurdish media have crucial roles in articulation and mobilisation of the Kurdish diasporic population for homeland politics. Kurdish return mobilities are situated within transnational networks of migration, where diaspora communities maintain connections with their homeland through remittances, social activism, and cultural exchanges (Syrett and Keles, forthcoming). Transnational ties and improving the political and economic situation in Kurdistan shape the decision-making process of Kurdish returnees, influencing their perceptions of home, belonging, and identity (Keles, 2019). The dream of return remained an important psychological construct among the Kurds from Kurdistan-Iraq until the collapse of Saddam Hussein, leading to the return of some well-educated Kurdish activists and politicians with extensive transnational human, social, cultural, and financial resources. With the creation of the de facto Kurdish state in Kurdistan-Iraq in 1991, followed by the Iraqi constitutional recognition of the autonomous Kurdistan Region in 2005, a significant return mobility started among the first and second generations from western countries. The number of highly skilled British-Kurdish young people migrating to Kurdistan-Iraq started to increase after 2005. This return mobility has taken place against the backdrop of serious problems in the region, such as the ongoing war with ISIS and disputes with the Iraqi Central Government as well as economic instability. Gender plays a significant role in shaping Kurdish return mobilities, with differential experiences, vulnerabilities, and opportunities for men and women.

## **Methodology**

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methodologies to investigate the experiences of returnees to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq comprehensively. Semi-structured interviews and quantitative sur-

veys were utilised to collect data from a diverse sample of return migrants, outlining the procedures followed in data collection and analysis. To capture the nuanced perspectives of returnees, 50 semi-structured interviews were conducted with both male and female participants. These interviews aimed to explore various aspects of the return migration process, including motivations for returning, reintegration challenges, and post-return socio-economic experiences. Participants were purposefully selected to represent a diverse range of backgrounds, encompassing returnees from both the Global South and the Global North.

Conducted between July 2020 and January 2021, the interviews provided a comprehensive snapshot of return migration experiences during this period, with some interviews conducted online via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to qualitative interviews, a survey was carried out reaching a total sample size of 132 returnees. The survey was carried out using KoboCollect, which is an application developed specifically for humanitarian organisations collecting data for research purposes. It allowed for online and offline data collection and the selection of multiple languages (English, Kurdish Kurmanji, Kurdish Sorani and Arabic). Besides collecting crucial socio-demographic attributes of returnees, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and religion, the survey also focused on behaviour and attitudes encompassing themes such as socio-economic integration, employment, housing, access to services, political behaviour, discrimination and norms.

The analyses presented here are primarily descriptive, focusing on comparing differences between men and women returnees and their gendered experiences and challenges of return and reintegration. They provide this study with a crucial context and show the scope of challenges of return mobilities in Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The qualitative interviews were held in Kurdish, Arabic and English and the interviews were summarised into English with key quotes. These summaries were thematically coded in the qualitative software programme NVivo which allowed for the identification of recurring themes across participants' narratives, offering insights into the complexities of return migration experiences. The qualitative interviews enrich the survey data by providing a more in-depth analysis of the experiences of returnees. Integration of qualitative and quantitative findings provided a comprehensive understanding of return migration experiences in the Kurdistan Region. Triangulation of data from multiple sources enhanced the richness of analysis and validated findings. By combining insights from both methodologies, the research aimed to offer a holistic perspective on return migration dynamics and inform policies and interventions to support reintegration efforts for returnees.

## Research Findings

This section presents the outcomes of both the survey data analysis and the qualitative data analysis. The survey encompassed 132 participants, with men constituting approximately 60 percent (n=79) and women accounting for about 40 % (n=53) of the sample. We encountered challenges during our fieldwork in achieving gender balance, with some women expressing hesitancy to participate without the consent of their male family members. Furthermore, concerns were raised regarding the sensitivity of certain questions, such as those relating to household income, although participation in these inquiries was optional. To enable a nuanced examination of gender-specific responses, this study segregates and compares data for men and women (see table 1).

*Table 1: Summary Statistics*

	<b>Demographic Information</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Men	79	59.8%
	Women	53	40.2%
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single/never married	50	37.9%
	Married/cohabiting	76	57.6%
	Widowed/ disappeared/ divorced	6	4.6%
<b>Religion</b>	Sunni Muslim	103	78.0%
	Christian	10	7.6%
	Other (Yarsani / Kakayi)	5	3.8%
	None	12	9.1%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Kurdish	117	88.6%
	Assyrian	11	8.3%
	Other (Arab/Turkmen/Mixed(Arab-Kurd.))	4	3.3%
<b>Country of Immigration</b>	UK	28	21.2%
	Europe	75	56.8%
	Other Western countries	20	15.2%
	Other	8	6.8%
<b>Returnee</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> generation	96	72.7%
	2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	36	27.3%
<b>Total Sample size</b>		<b>N= 132</b>	

Table 1 provides a detailed socio-demographic breakdown of the survey sample.

The age profile of the survey participants ranged from 18 to 64 with the mean age being 35. The majority (57%) fell within the 18-37 age bracket, signifying a primary representation of returnees in their prime working years. Moreover, the survey was limited to returnees who had returned since 2000 with three groups of returnees striking out; those returning in 2004, in 2014 and in 2018. Overall three quarters of the sample are returnees who settled back in Kurdistan Region of Iraq between 2000-2015. This means, that by the time the survey

was conducted, they had been living in Kurdistan for more than five years. In terms of the number of years they had lived in the country of immigration, the mean time spent abroad is 12 years and three quarters of the sample spent less than 16 years abroad before returning, with the rest (25%) having spent less than 6 years abroad before returning. A relatively high proportion of the sample, especially women have higher levels of education. For instance, nearly 60% of female participants in the sample held a university degree or higher qualifications, compared to only 37% male participants. Conversely, only approximately 20% of the sample reported low levels of education, encompassing no formal education, primary schooling, and secondary schooling. This skews the sample towards returnees with a relatively high educational profile. It is crucial to acknowledge that the data does not represent the entire KR-I returnee population. The sample is more characteristic of first-generation Sunni Muslim Kurdish returnees with high educational attainment, who previously resided in Western countries and settled in major cities upon their return. Therefore, the findings require cautious interpretation due to the sample's specific composition. The qualitative sample mirrored the survey sample in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. Fieldwork for both samples occurred within the same timeframe and was conducted by the same research team, targeting returnees in similar locations and through similar channels. The subsequent sections will be organized thematically, drawing upon insights from both the qualitative and quantitative data.

## **Migration Motivations and Diaspora Experiences**

The compelling narrative surrounding the motivations for migration and the lived experiences of the Kurdish diaspora and challenges of return mobilities unfolds through a mixture of personal stories, quantitative data, and thematic analyses. This subsection explores the intertwined reasons for emigration from Kurdistan, including political instability, economic hardship, and the pursuit of better opportunities and education abroad. It further explores life in the diaspora, emphasising the maintenance of cultural identity, the challenges encountered, and the pivotal role of social networks and media in connecting with the homeland.

The large-scale emigration from Kurdistan occurred within a specific historical context. Notably, the intra-Kurdish civil war of the 1990s emerged as a critical period driving emigration. A substantial portion of returnees cited conflict and economic hardship as primary reasons for leaving, with 46.8 % of men and 37.7 % of women attributing their departure to conflict. This period marked a

significant upheaval, pushing individuals to seek safety and stability elsewhere. Economic factors, including the scarcity of job opportunities in Kurdistan and the lure of higher-income positions abroad, further fuelled this migration. Gender-specific patterns observed in the reasons for emigration underscore the multifaceted nature of migration drivers, with a higher proportion of men stating that they left due to conflict, seeking higher income, or due to lack of job opportunities in KR-I compared to women. Conversely, a higher proportion of women stated that they migrated for educational reasons, to join a spouse, for medical reasons, to reunite with family, and for marriage purposes (see figure 1).

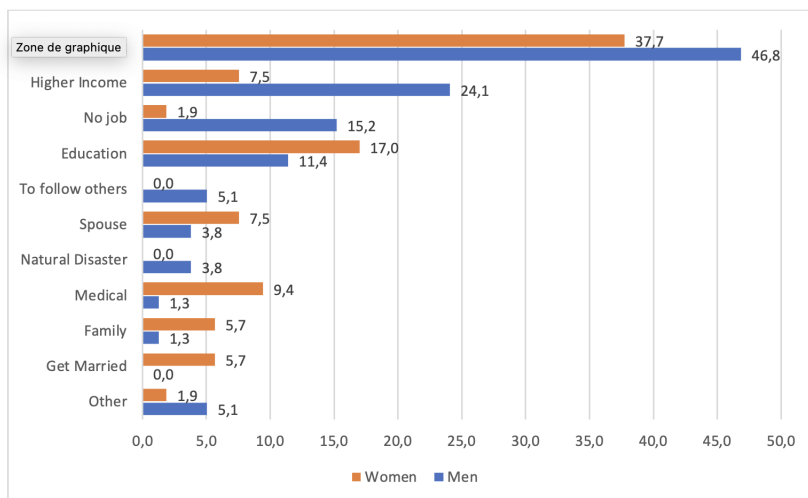


Figure 1: Reasons for emigration by gender in percentage

Interviews with participants shed light on the complex dynamics influencing their decision to leave Kurdistan. Political and security circumstances were frequently cited, with one participant, Hawar<sup>(1)</sup>, lamenting the lack of security and equality, stating, “[T]here was no equality in security ... if you were the son of somebody, your security was prioritised”. Such narratives underscore the profound impact of political instability and social inequality on individuals’ lives, compelling them to seek a better future abroad.

Economic hardship also featured prominently in participants’ stories. Nari recounted her family’s journey, highlighting the dire financial conditions that led them to migrate. She reflected, “In the 90s, life was difficult in Kurdistan ... our family’s fi-

<sup>1</sup> To uphold the ethical standards of research, the names of participants in this study have been altered.

nancial condition was bad”. This account, alongside others, illustrates how economic strife, coupled with political turmoil, propelled families to seek refuge and prosperity in foreign lands.

The pursuit of better opportunities and education was another recurrent theme. Saman’s desire to explore the world beyond Kurdistan and engage in educational pursuits abroad exemplifies the aspirational aspects of migration. He expressed, “I thought there was another world outside of Kurdistan and it had to be experienced ... I was interested in experiencing another world and studying”. Such aspirations highlight the role of education and personal growth in the migration narrative.

Life in the diaspora is characterised by efforts to preserve cultural identity, confront challenges, and stay connected with the homeland. The transition from conventional communication methods to social media platforms has notably influenced this connectivity. For Instance, one participant recounted transitioning from costly phone calls to using Facebook for communication, reflecting broader trends in how diaspora communities engage with their homelands. This paradigm shift highlights the significance of social media as a conduit for connectivity, activism and identity preservation. The study’s findings resonate with theories on identity construction as discussed by Boccagni (2017), King & Ruiz-Gelices (2003), and Keles (2019). These theories and our data collectively underscore the critical role of social media in facilitating the renegotiation of belonging and identity for returnees in their altered social landscapes.

The varying levels of engagement with Kurdish culture among diaspora members reveal the nuanced ways in which individuals navigate their identities. While some maintain profound connections and actively participate in cultural and political endeavors related to Kurdistan, others may exhibit less engagement, influenced by factors such as upbringing and personal inclination. This diversity in engagement reflects the complex interplay of identity, culture, and diaspora experiences.

Moreover, the financial dimension of the diaspora experience, particularly through remittances, underscores the continued ties of support between Kurdish migrants abroad and their families in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. These financial contributions not only alleviate economic hardships back home but also symbolise the enduring bonds and commitment to the well-being of the community.



## *Return Migration: Motivations and Experiences*

The exploration of return mobilities to the Kurdistan Region reveals a fascinating interplay of motivations and experiences, illuminated by quantitative data and enriched by personal narratives. This subsection examines the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon, focusing on the drivers of return mobilities, intentions regarding re-emigration, and the often-nuanced experiences of reintegration into Kurdish society.

The data reveals a compelling narrative wherein familial ties and a profound attachment to the homeland emerge as pivotal reasons for return mobilities. When asked whether any family members were left behind in country of immigration when returning to Kurdistan, 43.2 per cent of the total sample indicated that they did, underscoring the enduring transnational links with the diaspora. Yet, when asked for main reasons for return, family connections in Kurdistan also played a prominent role. Table 2 shows that for men the most common reason of return was to come back and take care or to look after family members, most likely aging parents. Interestingly, this proportion is higher among men (30 per cent) than among women (11.8 per cent). This discrepancy might be due to the specific sample characteristics, which over-represents women with high levels of education. For women the most prominent reason to return was feeling homesick (17.6 per cent) and to help to rebuild Kurdistan (15.7 per cent), showing the greater agency women had in their decision to return which is not overtly driven by familial obligations. Our findings align with those of Boccagni, emphasizing that familial bonds, emotional ties, and social networks play a crucial role in influencing decisions to return. Research participants indicated that they have been striving to reconnect with family members or reintegrate into familiar social environments in Kurdistan. Additionally, our findings resonate with the broader perspective offered by transnational studies, as outlined by Glick Schiller et al. (1995) and Bolognani (2013). These studies challenge the primarily economic rationale for return mobilities by highlighting the importance of maintaining social, economic, and cultural connections across borders, thereby validating our data on the significance of family responsibilities, homesickness and participating in rebuilding of Kurdistan as central to understanding return migration dynamics.

The qualitative interviews further emphasize the aforementioned findings, indicating that the primary motivations for return migration are deeply intertwined with personal, familial, and national identity factors. A substantial proportion of returnees identified familial obligations and the desire to care for family members as pivotal reasons for their return, thus highlighting the profound influence of familial ties. Emotional connections to the homeland, manifested

Table 2: Main reasons for return

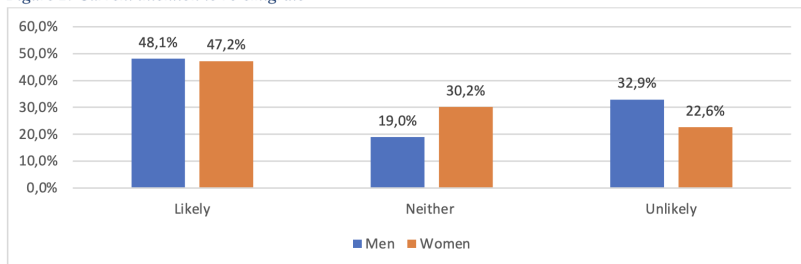
	Men	Women	Total
To take care of/ look after family members	30.0%	11.8%	22.3%
Other family reasons	15.7%	11.8%	14.0%
Feeling homesick	11.4%	17.6%	14.0%
To help rebuild Kurdistan	7.1%	15.7%	10.7%
Political situation improved in Kurdistan	7.1%	11.8%	9.1%
Better employment/ business opport. in Kurdistan	4.3%	7.8%	5.8%
Better education opport. In Kurdistan	7.1%	2.0%	5.0%
End of my studies in Country of Immigration (CoI)	2.9%	3.9%	3.3%
Job insecurity/loss of job	4.3%	2.0%	3.3%
Non-renewal of residence permit or visa	2.9%	2.0%	2.5%
Not wanting to raise children in CoI	1.4%	3.9%	2.5%
Expulsion/removal from CoI	1.4%	2.0%	1.7%
Other	4.3%	7.9%	5.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100% (N=70)</b>	<b>100% (N=51)</b>	<b>100% (N=121)</b>

through feelings of homesickness, further highlight the profound attachment returnees have to Kurdistan. Notably, gender-specific motivations also surfaced, with a higher percentage of women motivated by the political situation and a desire to contribute to the rebuilding of Kurdistan. These motivations reflect a complex amalgamation of pull factors, accentuating the allure of Kurdistan itself despite the challenges faced in the country of immigration. Quotations from interviewees offer a personal dimension to these statistical insights. For instance, one returnee remarked, “I had plans to obtain citizenship for five years, but I couldn’t wait for it because I felt so homesick” This statement encapsulates the strong emotional connections that often outweigh the pragmatic benefits of remaining abroad, such as securing residency or citizenship. The existence of return assistance programs, albeit utilized by a small fraction of returnees, highlights the structured support available for certain individuals contemplating return. However, the limited uptake of such programs suggests potential gaps in awareness or accessibility, thereby necessitating further examination of how these programs can be better tailored to serve the returnee population.

### *Experiences of Return Migration*

The data also sheds light on intentions regarding re-emigration. While 60.6 per cent of respondents reported that when they returned back to Kurdistan, their intention was to stay permanently, with no big gender difference evident. Yet, when asked about current re-emigration intention only 28.8 per cent of the sample still indicate that they are very unlikely to return, while just under half of the sample (47.7 per cent) indicate that they are likely to re-emigrate/ Figure 2 show the responses to this question in more detail comparing the responses of

Figure 2: Current intention to re-emigrate



Question wording: How likely are you to leave KR-I again to live abroad?

men and women. This finding highlights the fluidity inherent in contemporary migration dynamics, where decisions can be revisited and adapted based on changing political and economic circumstances.

Upon return, the initial intention to stay and future re-emigration intentions unveil the dynamic nature of migration. Although a majority of returnees intended to stay permanently, a significant number contemplated re-migration, driven by situational changes. This underscores the fluidity of migration intentions and the importance of continuously adapting reintegration support.

The attachment to both Kurdistan and the country of immigration exhibits some gender differences, with women displaying higher rates of attachment to Kurdistan (7.9 out of 10 on average) compared to men (mean score of 6.1). Men on the other hand, show higher levels of attachment to the country of immigration (mean score of 6.8) than women (mean score of 6.4). Conversely, men showed, on average, higher levels of attachment to the country of immigration than to Kurdistan. These disparities in emotional attachment may also influence gendered return motivations and experiences, as observed above. These disparities in emotional attachment may be linked to various factors, such as the desire to help rebuild Kurdistan as well as potentially stronger family ties in Kurdistan (further research needed to explore these potential explanations).

### *Education and Employment*

The analysis of employment and education outcomes for returnees highlights a concerning gender disparity, particularly within a post-conflict society like the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Women returnees in this sample display higher educational attainment on average. However, nearly half (47%) of the women in the sample are homemakers or economically inactive, whereas this rate for men is only 30%. Furthermore, while 42% of men are unemployed, this figure

jumps to 72% for women. These disparities point to the challenges returnees, particularly women, face in finding employment. Potential reasons for this may include societal norms regarding female employment, gendered social expectations, lack of gender equality policies, industry bias towards male workers, or limited opportunities. The need for targeted policies to improve employment opportunities for women returnees is crucial. Targeted interventions are necessary to ensure that returnees, particularly women, can effectively utilize their education and skills in the Kurdistan labour market.

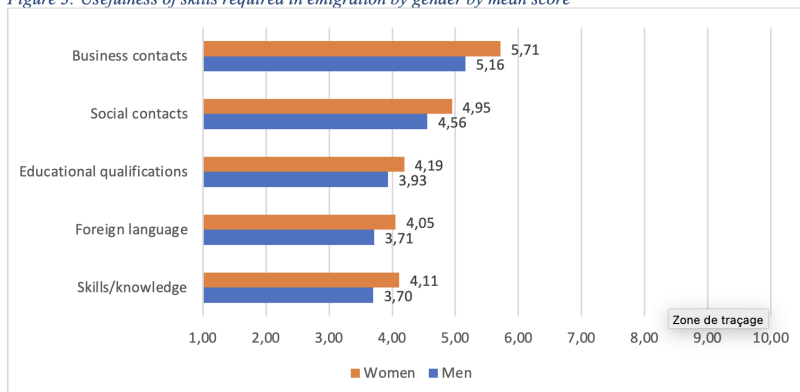
### *Re-adaptation and Integration Challenges*

The journey of Kurdish returnees to the Kurdistan Region is characterized by a complex interplay of hope, aspiration, and multifaceted challenges. This analysis, enriched by both quantitative data and personal narratives, focuses on the re-adaptation and integration hurdles faced by these individuals across various domains including human and social capital, educational adaptation, gendered experiences of reintegration, safety perceptions, and encounters with bureaucracy and corruption.

#### *Human and Social Capital*

The survey's findings unveil that while human and social capital acquired overseas are advantageous, they do not seamlessly translate into effective tools for reintegration. Male respondents exhibit a slightly higher propensity than female respondents in recognizing the utility of skills and networks acquired overseas for navigating the local job market (see Figure 3). This discrepancy underscores the nuanced complexities encountered by returnees in effectively leveraging their international experiences within the labour market of the Kurdistan Region. An insightful reflection from one of respondents illuminates a significant gap: "the human and social capital gained abroad did not on their own provide them with entry requirements to the labour market in Kurdistan/Iraq". These findings are congruent with Dustmann and Weiss's (2007) human capital frameworks, which postulate that while skills and experiences garnered overseas are expected to enhance reintegration and socio-economic outcomes upon return, our study unveils the intricate realities and limitations associated with these assets in practical application.

Figure 3: Usefulness of skills required in emigration by gender by mean score



Question-wording: How useful or not useful have been the following skills to helping you settle down in the Kurdistan region of Iraq? Answer categories: 1= Not useful at all... 10= Very useful.

### Re-adaptation: Educational and Language Barriers

One of the primary objectives of this study was to elucidate the challenges encountered by returnees as they reacclimate to life in their homeland after an extended period in the diaspora or abroad for at least a year. As depicted in

Figure 4: Post-return problems experienced by gender (mean scores)

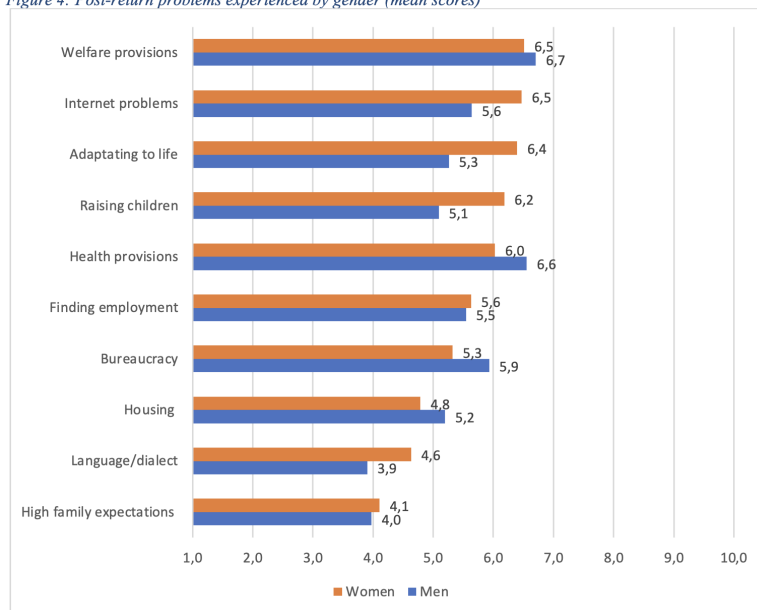


Figure 4, returnees confront a plethora of challenges spanning cultural, political, economic, and linguistic domains. Respondents were tasked with rating, on a scale from 1 to 10, the extent of difficulties they encountered upon their return to Kurdistan/Iraq. The ensuing figure delineates the mean scores for both male and female respondents, with higher scores denoting heightened levels of experienced challenges.

With the exception of problems of language and/or dialect for men (mean score 4.7 out of 10, where 1 mean no problems and 10 means a lot of problems), the overall level of problems experienced by returnees is 5 and above pointing out that post-return problems were common. These observations align with the theory proposed by King & Ruiz-Gelices (2003), suggesting that the difficulties faced by returnees in adjusting to new social and economic environments can potentially lead to conflicts or exclusion from mainstream society. For most categories, women are more likely than men to state that they experienced problems and the differences between both genders are particularly wide for raising children, finding employment, welfare and health provisions, adapting to life, and issues of bureaucracy. The gender differences are less pronounced for high family expectations, housing, and internet problems where men and women indicated that this was an issue for both of them. For example, narratives from returnees like Hojeen and Roniya shed light on the personal struggles with language and educational adaptation. Hojeen's commuting between the Netherlands and Kurdistan, driven by a blend of pride and educational aspirations, and Roniya's family's quest for an English-speaking educational institution, underline the complexity of integration for returnee families, particularly children.

### *Cultural and Emotional Reintegration*

Participants' narratives reveal the emotional and cultural complexities of returning to Kurdistan. Homesickness and a strong sense of belonging motivate the decision to return, despite the potential benefits of staying abroad. The role of family and social support is crucial in easing the transition, highlighting the importance of a strong support network for successful reintegration.

For many young returnees, the return is influenced by parental decisions, with a desire to reconnect with their roots and contribute to the development of Kurdistan. However, the reality of return often involves navigating cultural adjustments, facing discrimination, and overcoming barriers to employment and social integration. The experiences of various discrimination, both abroad and upon return, underscore the challenges faced by returnees in finding their place

within their homeland and the broader global context. Notably, returnees have cited difficulties in adapting to life in Kurdistan, accessing healthcare and welfare provisions, securing housing, finding gainful employment, and managing childcare responsibilities. Women, in particular, have reported heightened levels of challenges pertaining to adaptation and childcare.

### *Gendered Experiences and Safety Concerns*

Gendered experiences and safety concerns present notable disparities in the reintegration process. Women consistently report encountering higher levels of difficulty across various domains, particularly in areas such as employment, access to health provisions, and adjustment to daily life. Furthermore, perceptions of safety diverge significantly along gender lines, with a considerable proportion of women residing in gated communities expressing heightened feelings of insecurity, a sentiment less prevalent among their male counterparts. This dichotomy underscores the multifaceted challenges women navigate during their reintegration journey, encompassing societal expectations and personal safety considerations. Participants were surveyed on their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements commonly used to assess gender norms across different cultural contexts. These statements encompassed various domains, including employment, decision-making autonomy, family dynamics, and educational opportunities. The responses were scored on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating full agreement and 10 indicating full disagreement. The table below depicts the mean scores for men and women in response to these statements, providing insights into the prevailing gender norms within the surveyed population. The questions addressed fundamental aspects of gender roles, ranging from perceptions of women’s independence and value in decision-making to attitudes towards education and tolerance of violence within familial settings. The results offer valuable insights into the gendered perspectives and

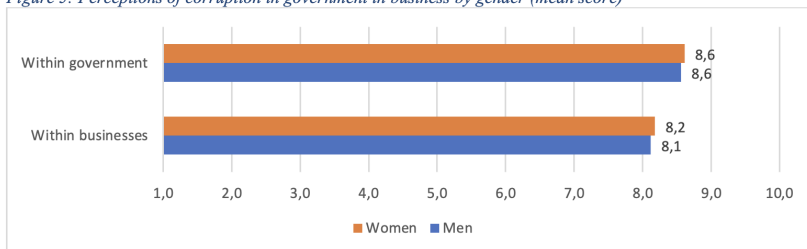
<b>1= Strongly agree, 10 = strongly disagree</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
A woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together.	6.9	7.7
A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl.	7.4	7.8
On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.	6.4	6.6
On the whole, men make better business executives than women do.	6.2	7.4
Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.	5.8	6.1
When a mother works for pay, the children suffer.	5.8	6.0
A woman should be able to choose her own friends, even if her husband disapproves.	5.5	3.7
Women’s opinions are valuable and should always be considered when household decisions are made.	3.9	3.9
Having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person	4.4	8.8

Question-wording: And finally, your personal views about the role of men and women. On a scale from 1 to 10, how strongly do you agree or disagree with the following.

attitudes prevalent among returnee migrants in the Kurdistan Region.  
*Bureaucracy and Corruption*

The bureaucratic landscape in Kurdistan is characterized by complicated procedures and administrative complexities, which often present formidable obstacles for returnees seeking to reintegrate into society. These challenges manifest in various forms, ranging from delays in paperwork processing to bureaucratic inefficiencies in governmental institutions. Furthermore, the pervasive perception of corruption exacerbates the bureaucratic challenges faced by returnees. Corruption, whether real or perceived, undermines institutional trust and diminishes confidence in the fairness and impartiality of governmental bodies. Returnees may find themselves navigating through a system where bribery and nepotism are perceived as necessary means to expedite bureaucratic processes or secure desired outcomes. Such experiences not only erode trust in public institutions but also contribute to a sense of disillusionment and marginalization among returnees. As a result of these bureaucratic complexities and the prevalence of corruption, returnees encounter difficulties accessing essential services and labour market, obtaining necessary documentation, or engaging effectively in civic life. These systemic barriers not only impede the reintegration process but also perpetuate inequalities and hinder social inclusion for returned in Kurdistan. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms aimed at streamlining bureaucratic processes, enhancing transparency and accountability, and fostering an environment conducive to equitable access to services and opportunities for all members of society, including returnees. The graph below, that both men and women perceive levels of corruption to be very high within government and within businesses.

Figure 5: Perceptions of corruption in government in business by gender (mean score)



Question-wording: How widespread do you think that corruption is within the government in Kurdistan region of Iraq? How widespread do you think corruption is within businesses in Kurdistan-Iraq? (1=none, 10= a lot)

Question-wording: How widespread do you think that corruption is within the government in Kurdistan region of Iraq? How widespread do you think corruption is within businesses in Kurdistan-Iraq? (1=none, 10= a lot)



## **Returns as Agents of Change: Socio-Political Dynamics and Returnees' Contributions**

Returnees make multifaceted contributions to post-conflict development in the Kurdistan Region, spanning knowledge production, education, economy, culture, gender equality, human rights, democracy, and overall socio-economic development. Their diverse experiences, skills, and perspectives play a pivotal role in rebuilding communities, fostering reconciliation, and paving the way for a more prosperous and equitable future.

Returnees contribute to economic development through entrepreneurship, investment, and employment. Many returnees establish businesses, leveraging their skills and experiences acquired abroad to create new ventures or improve existing ones. These businesses span various industries, including technology, healthcare, hospitality, and construction, thereby diversifying the local economy and creating job opportunities for the Kurdish population. Additionally, returnees often bring back financial resources, either through personal savings or external investments, which stimulate economic activity and infrastructure development. For example, 28.8 per cent of the survey sample indicated that they brought own capital and 22.7% indicated that they have set up a business since their return. This figure might not be a true representation of the proportion of self-employed returnees as rates of self-employment were relatively low in this particular sample (13 per cent) compared to 48.5 per cent of the sample being in full-time employment. The qualitative interviews provide more insight on entrepreneurship among returnees.

For example, Jina stands out as one of the participants who returned from the US and established an educational academy upon her return. With a team of 25 staff, including expatriates from the US and European countries, her institute is making a significant impact in the education sector. Similarly, Ahura, upon returning from Denmark, found himself in a favourable financial situation, thanks to “the money [he] brought with him and the investments” made by his family in land and properties using the money he sent them while working abroad. Douglas “wasted no time in seeking employment upon his return”; instead, he took the entrepreneurial route and established his own car grooming business, pioneering the industry in Duhok. These individuals are just a few examples of participants in our research who have made valuable contributions to the local economy through entrepreneurship ventures in sectors such as property, agriculture, education, and beauty. Nareen, a female returnee from Canada, shared insights gleaned from her time abroad, emphasising how she acquired valuable knowledge on various aspects of business and industry. She articulated,

“I learned many things from Canada and how to develop them.” Nareen highlighted her expanded understanding of business operations, diverse types of factories and companies, and proficiency in language. She noted a contrast in work practices between Iraq and Canada, stating, “Carpentry in Iraq is like all the work in a factory will be done by one person, while in Canada or Western countries, the work is divided.” This observation underscores the potential for implementing more efficient and specialized approaches to tasks, drawing from international experiences.

Highly skilled returnees serve as repositories of knowledge and expertise, which they transfer to local counterparts through various channels such as formal education, training programs, and mentorship initiatives. By sharing best practices, innovative ideas, and advanced techniques, returnees contribute to the enhancement of human capital in Kurdistan, thereby improving the quality of workforce and productivity levels across different sectors. For example, 28.4 per cent of the returnees indicated that they have worked are currently working in education with a great gender difference: 47.4 per cent for women and 15.8 per cent for men. The second most common industry of employment is being employed in public administration with men (21.1 per cent) more likely than women (13.2 per cent) to occupy such positions. Besides education, women (15.8 per cent) tend to be more likely than men (10.5%) to be employed in the health and social sector.

Nawzad exemplifies this cohort’s ambition and entrepreneurial spirit. Having obtained a Master’s and PhD from the UK and a bachelor’s degree from Sweden, Nawzad, along with his friends, established a training company in the UK. Recognizing the need for similar services in Kurdistan, they decided to bring their expertise back home. Their company offered training in various areas such as effective communication, business etiquette, and oil and gas terminology, particularly targeting individuals working with foreign companies. Their vision extended to teaching Kurdish to foreigners, reflecting their dedication to supporting both local and international communities. Their venture quickly gained momentum, with Nawzad and his team organizing the first-ever job fair in Kurdistan, aptly named "Kurdistan Career." The primary goal was twofold: to empower the younger generation to pursue opportunities in the private sector and to assist the government in optimizing its workforce by encouraging fewer public sector employees. Additionally, they aimed to bridge the gap between universities and industries by facilitating internships and job placements, fostering a symbiotic relationship between education and employment sectors.

Besides, their contribution to expansion of the education sector, returnees participate in infrastructure development projects, particularly in the public sector,

where their skills are utilized to improve education and health sectors. Their contributions help address critical infrastructure gaps, improve access to basic services, and enhance the overall quality of life for the Kurdish population. Additionally, returnees often introduce modern technologies and sustainable practices, promoting efficiency and sustainability in infrastructure development efforts.

Returnees bring back diverse cultural perspectives, experiences, and ideas, enriching the social and cultural fabric of Kurdistan. They contribute to the revitalization of traditional arts, music, cuisine, and customs while also introducing new cultural trends and expressions. Through cultural exchange programs, festivals, and community events, returnees promote intercultural understanding, tolerance, and appreciation, fostering a more inclusive and cohesive society.

Some of our participants were actively involved in voluntary projects, largely influenced by their experiences gained in the immigration countries. For instance, Maryam took part in a voluntary project aimed at raising funds for breast cancer patients in Kurdistan. This initiative involved organizing events with singers, with the proceeds directed towards supporting the charity. Similarly, Hawar contributed to activities focused on environmental conservation and maintaining cleanliness in Kurdistan. As a university instructor, he emphasises the significance of volunteer experiences in shaping students' holistic development. According to him, "such experiences not only enhance professional skills but also instil values essential for becoming responsible citizens, thereby contributing to the future prosperity of the country."

Some returnees actively engage in political processes and governance structures, advocating for democratic reforms, human rights, and social justice. They contribute to the development of transparent and accountable governance systems, promoting civic engagement, and participatory decision-making. By bringing fresh perspectives and international experiences to the political arena, returnees contribute to the democratization and institutional strengthening of Kurdistan. Levels of trust towards charitable and humanitarian organisations were one of the highest (mean score 5.3 out of 10 for women and 4.1 for men). Similarly, levels of trust in the United Nation organisations was also relatively high (4.9 for women and 4.7 for men). This is in stark comparison to levels of trust in politicians (2.5 for women and 2.1 for men) and the Government (3.0 for women and 3.3 for men). This reflects returnees pivotal role in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts, leveraging their international experiences and networks to promote dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation among different ethnic and religious groups in Kurdistan. By fostering social cohesion, tol-

erance, and mutual respect, returnees contribute to the consolidation of peace and stability in post-conflict regions, paving the way for sustainable development and prosperity.

Aron, another returnee from the UK, reflected on his experiences and the knowledge he gained, particularly in the realm of human rights. He expressed, “I learned many things from the UK... I learned many things about humanity, how they uphold human rights, how the system over there is regulated, and the importance of working hard and being patient.” Aron’s remarks highlight the impact of his time in the UK on his understanding of ethical principles and his commitment to applying them in his life upon return.

Returnees maintain strong ties with Kurdish diaspora communities around the world, facilitating transnational cooperation, investment opportunities, and knowledge exchange. Through diaspora networks, returnees mobilize resources, forge partnerships, and advocate for the interests of Kurdistan on the global stage. Their engagement strengthens Kurdistan’s visibility, influence, and diplomatic relations, opening up new avenues for economic, cultural, and political cooperation. As an example, Sulin, thanks to her activist father, was immersed in Kurdish culture and language while growing up in the Netherlands. She attended a reputable Kurdish school where she learned reading and writing. Despite leaving the Netherlands at the age of 8, these experiences instilled in her a strong connection to Kurdistan. She continues to stay updated on developments in the region and maintains her ties with the diaspora. Similarly, Soma maintained her “connections with both Kurdish and non-Kurdish friends in Australia.” This eventually led to “the establishment of a cultural institution dedicated to promoting Kurdish culture and tourism.”

## **Discussion**

In this study, we set out to examine the multifaceted phenomenon of return migration to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. We focused on understanding the motivations behind gendered return patterns, the challenges faced during reintegration, and the returnees’ contributions to societies of Kurdistan-Iraq. We employed a comprehensive analysis to shed light on return migration processes and their impact on individuals and the region as a whole. Our findings indicate that emigration from Kurdistan stems from a confluence of factors, including war, political instability, economic hardship, and the pursuit of better opportunities abroad (Keles 2019). The conflict generated Kurdish diaspora strives to maintain their cultural identity while navigating challenges and staying

connected to their homeland (Keles 2015). The research on the Kurdish diaspora indicate that the displacement and exile experienced by Kurdish diaspora communities have fostered a collective historical trauma, shaped a shared identity, and promoted solidarity. A shared past etched in memory, an unwavering hope for return, and a vow to rebuild what was lost - these are the enduring bonds that hold the Kurdish diaspora together (Keles 2019). Despite the physical distance, participants expressed strong ties driven by identity, emotional attachment, belonging, and a desire to contribute to development of their homeland. This aligns with the concept of transnationalism, which highlights the enduring connections migrants maintain across borders (Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Levitt 2001).

Returnees expose diverse motivations for returning, ranging from economic opportunities and participation in post-conflict reconstruction to reconnecting with their ethnic identity, familiar surroundings, and familial obligations (Black et al. 2010; Keles 2019; Galipo 2018). This resonates with studies by Keles (2019), Galipo (2018), and Kleist (2008), which emphasize the importance of feeling familial ties and emotional attachment to homeland in return mobilities decisions. Reintegration presents challenges for returnees, including navigating bureaucracy, overcoming language barriers, and adapting to socio-cultural norms. These are consistent with existing research on reintegration experiences (Finch 2006; King & Christou 2010). Despite these obstacles, returnees play a significant role in socio-economic development, particularly through entrepreneurship and civic engagement. This finding underscores the potential of return migration for contributing to the development of origin communities, aligning with theories of developmentalism (Faist 2008) and social capital (Portes 1998).

An unforeseen outcome of our study was the significant influence of emotional attachment and familial ties on return migration decisions. While economic determinants typically predominate discussions on migration motivations, our findings indicate that emotional and familial factors, alongside a desire to contribute to the development of Kurdistan, wield considerable influence among men and women to different degrees. Nonetheless, gender disparities in political, cultural, labour, and economic participation, as well as socio-economic outcomes, underscore the imperative for tailored interventions aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering female returnees.

Another unexpected finding of this research pertained to the substantial number of women returning to post-conflict Kurdistan region, in contrast to the prevalent notion of male-dominated return mobilities. While existing literature often portrays return mobilities as predominantly male-driven, spurred by economic and political motives or family reunification, the outcomes of our study chal-

lunge this assumption by elucidating the active involvement of women in return mobilities. This unforeseen revelation underscores the necessity for comprehensive approaches to apprehending gendered return mobilities and associated decision-making processes. Consequently, comprehending the intricacies of gendered return mobilities in such contexts necessitates a multifaceted approach that considers various intersecting factors, particularly those concerning gender. Intersectionality theory, pioneered by Crenshaw (1989), furnishes a valuable framework for dissecting how multiple social identities intersect and interact to shape individuals' gendered experiences. Within the context of return mobilities, this theory can be employed to scrutinize how factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality impact decisions regarding return mobilities and subsequent reintegration processes and policies. Gender dynamics within households, communities, networks, and broader societal structures wield significant influence over migrants' decisions and experiences upon return, affecting their access to resources, social expectations, and opportunities for economic and political participation, as well as their determinations to settle or re-migrate. These power dynamics may exert a considerable impact on returnees' decisions, experiences, and outcomes upon return. Variables such as access to resources, social expectations, and opportunities for economic and political participation may vary according to gender, thereby further complicating the reintegration process. Moreover, the concept of gendered spaces and places, as elucidated by Pratt & Hanson (1994), can serve as a valuable tool for understanding how social norms and structures shape returnees' experiences within different physical and social environments in post-conflict regions. In regions marked by post-conflict circumstances, where gendered spaces may be restricted and gendered participation in politics, economy, public, and private sectors may be constrained, and where gender equality policies may be lacking or not implemented widely, both concepts can facilitate the analysis of gendered return mobilities and how individuals navigate spaces while grappling with issues of safety, belonging, inclusion, exclusion, and gendered identities within both familiar communities and the broader socio-political context of the homeland. By considering these intersecting dynamics of gender, power, and space, a more nuanced understanding of gendered return mobilities can be gained, thereby enabling the formulation of targeted policy interventions geared towards facilitating the successful reintegration of gendered return mobilities, particularly in conflict-affected regions.

Recognizing and addressing limitations in empirical research is imperative to uphold its credibility and ensure the integrity of its findings. A notable constraint encountered in this study pertains to the potential bias introduced by the chosen method of data collection. Conducted during the challenging circumstances of

the COVID-19 pandemic, spanning from 2021 to 2022 in Kurdistan, the research faced obstacles associated with conducting in-person interactions. Consequently, conventional methods like face-to-face interviews or surveys were deemed impractical, leading the study to heavily rely on online surveys and virtual interviews for data acquisition. This reliance on digital platforms may have inadvertently introduced a selection bias, given that the sample predominantly comprised individuals with access to the internet and possessing digital literacy. This limitation is particularly significant in the context of return migration to the Kurdistan Region, where disparities in internet connectivity and digital infrastructure may exacerbate existing socio-economic divides. As a result, the research may not fully capture the perspectives of marginalized or vulnerable groups, such as returnees with limited digital access. Nor is the sample representative of the returnee population in KR-I, but rather it provides us with a snapshot of the challenges returnees face. Despite these inherent limitations, the research still offers valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of return migration to the Kurdistan Region. By acknowledging and confronting these constraints, future research endeavours can leverage the study's findings to deepen our understanding of return migration dynamics and their broader societal implications. Potential avenues for future research may include exploring the long-term reintegration trajectories of returnees, with a particular emphasis on the gendered aspects of return migration in Kurdistan. Furthermore, future research efforts could draw upon established theories such as social capital, transnationalism, intersectionality, gender space and place to explore the full picture of return mobilities to post-conflict regions. Comparative analyses encompassing various migrant cohorts and conflict-affected regions could also shed further light on gendered return mobilities and barriers to successful reintegration. Moreover, investigating the effectiveness of policy interventions on gendered return mobilities outcomes, guided by governance theories and development studies, would be crucial for informing evidence-based migration and diaspora policies. By addressing these research avenues, future studies can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of return mobilities dynamics and facilitate informed policymaking in this realm.

### **Policy Recommendation**

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) can significantly benefit from policies tailored to engage the Kurdish diaspora. The establishment of dedicated Diaspora Affairs Departments within the KRG could serve as a pivotal mechanism for facilitating effective communication and collaboration with Kurdish diaspora communities residing in Western countries. These departments hold

the potential to streamline resource mobilization efforts and provide support for initiatives aimed at leveraging the political, cultural, and human capital of the diaspora to foster development within Kurdistan. Conducting comprehensive assessments to identify areas of labour shortages within Kurdistan and fostering networks within the Kurdish diaspora represent proactive measures to tap into the skills and expertise of potential returnees. Through rigorous assessments of their potential contributions to sustainable development initiatives, the KRG can strategically target sectors in need of skilled professionals. Addressing gendered inequalities is paramount, necessitating the development and implementation of policies and programs that ensure equitable opportunities for both male and female returnees. This includes the adoption of affirmative action policies and the provision of support mechanisms to facilitate the reintegration of female returnees into the workforce, thereby advancing gender equality and fostering inclusive development. Engagement with diaspora civil society organizations presents an opportunity to develop innovative strategies for mobilizing migrant knowledge and expertise. Such collaborations have the potential to reshape perceptions of Kurdistan and promote economic diversification, societal diversity, and gender equality, thus positioning Kurdistan as a beacon of development. Facilitating dialogue and collaboration with Kurdish diaspora communities abroad through various platforms such as events, conferences, and networking initiatives can foster knowledge exchange and collaboration on development initiatives. Strengthening ties with the diaspora and leveraging their support can significantly contribute to Kurdistan's development agenda. International collaboration with organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and governments can provide additional resources, expertise, and best practices to support the return of skilled young people and foster sustainable development in Kurdistan. Actively seeking opportunities for funding, technical assistance, and capacity-building initiatives can enhance the efficacy of policies aimed at promoting return mobilities and driving sustainable development in the region.

### **Acknowledgements**

This publication is based on research supported by the UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub



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