



# **Diversity in the K-12 Education in Iraq: A Policy Brief**

To the Ministry of Education, Iraq

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Article 14 of the Iraqi Constitution states that “Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, colour, religion, sect, belief or opinion, or economic or social status.”<sup>1</sup> This endorsement of diversity is crucial for a country like Iraq which has lived through decades of ethnic and sectarian conflict and gender-based violence, and it needs to be reflected in Iraq’s education and value systems. A curriculum that is free from discrimination based on gender, race/ethnicity, class, and religion is necessary to promote equality, justice, and cohesion.

From a security point of view, embracing diversity is equivalent to embracing the “common good” and combating exclusion. Sexism and ethnic, religious or sectarian prejudice lead to a diminished sense of belonging, to alienation, and even to extremism and radicalization. Building an inclusive and just socio-political order where the interests of different communities are protected can foster a united and strong nation that can withstand foreign influence and violent factionalism. This requires a greater and concerted focus on reforming the education system to embrace values and principles that are crucial for holding the society together, building solidarity, enhancing a sense of citizenship, and maintaining social cohesion.

Funded by the European Union, the Center for Gender and Development Studies (CGDS) at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani reviewed textbooks in all subjects for Years One to Nine in Iraq and the Kurdistan region to assess various aspects of the portrayal of gender, race/ethnicity, religion, and ability. We found that the portrayal of gender parity needs repair. Some attempts were made to show ethnic diversity in a positive light, though racial diversity was mostly lacking. There were very few mentions or portrayals of people with any sort of disability, and even fewer positive portrayals. Below, we summarize our findings and offer recommendations based on the review.

### **Findings for Iraqi K12 Education System**

- *Depiction in illustrations:* A total of 11,668 people were depicted in illustrations. Of these, there were over twice as many males (8,196 = 70%) as females (3,472 = 30%).
- *Depiction of Professions:* In a total of 1,330 professionals depicted in all subjects, there are over six times the number of depictions of professional males (1,133 = 85%) to females (197 = 15%). The professions were especially skewed toward male depiction in terms of exciting jobs such as astronauts and zookeepers. While females are sometimes doctors and journalists, they usually hold more conventional professions such as nurses and teachers. Many of the females are depicted as mothers and housewives.
- *Interactions and Gender Roles:* There is a lot of segregation where boys and girls are often portrayed separately. Looking at the style of clothing, we found that usually, traditionally gendered clothing is portrayed, and the majority of the women wear the hijab.
- *Sports and Gender:* The depiction of sports is problematic, portraying males and excluding females in most cases. The textbooks do very poorly in normalizing girls’ participation in sports.
- *Racial and Ethnic Diversity:* Diverse ethnic groups are under-represented and very few Black and East Asian people are included.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq\\_2005.pdf](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf)

- *Disability:* There are token portrayals of people with disabilities in some of the textbooks and nothing in the others. Disability oppression is normalized and internalized during childhood, including frequent exclusion of children from social participation in families and in wider communities.
- *Religious Centrism:* Islam is presented as “the religion” without mentioning other religions. There is a marked lack of portrayal of the rich diversity of religion in the world and in the region. There is also an over-representation of hijabi women in the textbooks, despite the diversity of Muslim women’s style of clothing.

### **Recommendations for Iraqi K12 Education System**

- *Depiction in Illustrations:* Correct the skewed numbers by using females in illustrations in an equal ratio to males. Females can be substituted for males almost anywhere.
- *Depiction of Professions:* Correct the balance of males and females in professional roles, so as to normalize the idea that females can have any profession, including exciting ones.
- *Interactions and Gender Roles:* Include more healthy interactions between the sexes, more interchangeable activities, and avoid gender-specific roles. Use gender-neutral language.
- *Sports:* Include more girls in sports, and more boys and girls participating in sports together.
- *Racial and Ethnic Diversity:* Work toward a robust inclusion of racial and ethnic diversity through the illustrations and stories, avoiding exotic and stereotypical portrayals.
- *Disability:* Include a wide variety of portrayals of disability both in the schoolchildren and their adult community, while avoiding sentimentalization and “inspiration” stories. Seeing ordinary disabled kids interacting with disabled and non-disabled people in an everyday way is a powerful antidote to exclusion.
- *Religious Centrism:* Introduce the study of religions in the primary curriculum and explain what these religions truly believe in, teach, and preach.

Education is an essential tool to foster a nation’s development and progress. It is important to reform the education system to live up to Iraq’s high ideals of democracy, human rights, and unity and to provide a high-quality education which embraces diversity and inclusion, and is aligned with 21<sup>st</sup> century needs. This brief is based on a program review conducted by CGDS at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani. Please visit our [website](#) to read the full review.