



Diversity in the K-12 Education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: A Policy Brief

To the KRG Ministry of Education

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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.”¹ This endorsement of diversity is crucial for a region that has lived through decades of ethnic and sectarian conflict and gender-based violence, and it needs to be reflected in the 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.

The Kurdistan Regional Government has taken good strides towards embracing gender equality through reforming aspects of civil status law, adopting a bill on domestic violence, utilizing a quota system, and establishing the General Directorates to Combat Violence Against Women and the High Council of Women’s Affairs. The education system, which is supposed to reflect these changes, has also made strides but lags behind.

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 (EU), the Center for Gender and Development Studies (CGDS) 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. Attempts were made to show ethnic diversity in a positive light, though racial diversity was mostly lacking. There were good examples of including children with disabilities in some of the textbooks, but other textbooks fell short. We summarize our findings and offer recommendations based on this study.

Findings for Kurdistan-Iraqi K12 Education System

- *Depiction in Illustrations:* Of the total of 9,792 people depicted, there were over a thousand more males (5,619 = 57%) than females (4,173 = 43%).
- *Depiction of Professions:* Of the 1,876 professions mentioned and depicted in all subjects, 1,421 (76%) are portrayed with male professionals and 455 (24%) with females. Males hold more exciting and a greater variety of positions, while females usually hold more conventional and more limited professions. The least balanced number of females to males in professions is Social Science, with 16 (8%):108 (92%), is followed closely by Religious Education (2 (9%):21 (91%). 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. We also looked at the style of clothing, and found that usually, traditionally gendered clothing is often, but not always, portrayed.

¹ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf

- *Sports and Gender*: The depiction of sports was problematic throughout many of the series, portraying males and excluding females in most cases. In the Physical Education series, we found 231 (85%) males and 45 (15%) females. There was a nod to inclusion of females in sports in several places, but overall, especially when it comes to soccer, sports are seen as a male sphere.
- *Racial and Ethnic Diversity*: Diverse ethnic groups are under-represented and very few Black and East Asian people are included.
- *Disability*: While there are excellent inclusions of children with disabilities in several places in the Math, Human Rights, and Science series (with no comment about their disabilities, they are simply participating in activities), other textbooks fall short.
- *Religious Centrism*: Islam is presented as “the religion” without mentioning other religions. There is a marked lack of portrayal of the rich diversity of religions in the world and the region.

Recommendations for Kurdistan-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 interaction between the sexes, more interchangeable activities, and avoid gender-specific roles.
- *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, 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. Depict people with disabilities doing ordinary activities, thus normalizing disability.
- *Religious Centrism*: Introduce diverse 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 Kurdistan’s high ideals of democracy, human rights, and equality and to provide a high-quality education which embraces diversity and inclusion, and is aligned with 21st 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.