

An introduction to the Kurdish Culture

**MODERN
SLAVERY**
**ORGANISED
IMMIGRATION
CRIME**



Introductions/background to project

- MSOICU
- Guest speakers:
 - Dr Farangis Ghaderi, Lecturer in Gender and Kurdish Studies, University of Exeter and Director, Centre for Kurdish Studies
 - Kharman Adhim, Senior Specialist IDVA & Adviser, IKWRO - Women's Rights Organisation
 - Huseyin Eroglu, Border Force officer
- Reasoning behind the project
- Methodology
- Handouts

Intro & historical background

- Over 35 million (some estimates over 40 million) Kurds worldwide
- Stateless, across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria
- Crossroads for the 'Middle East'
- Many different groups: linguistic and religious diversity
- Political struggle, persecution and battles
- World War 1 – segmentation into British and French zones, Sykes Picot Agreement 1916
- Kurdistan oil reserves
- Kurdish nationalism and political activism
- Iraq- Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)
- Syria –Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria; Fighting against ISIS
- Turkey - Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)
- Iran- Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), Komala, Party for Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK)



Greetings

- West Iranian Indo-European language
- Greetings of ‘hello, how are you’ etc. prior to any in depth discussion
- Kurmanji (most Turkish Kurds) and Sorani (most Iranian and Iraqi Kurds) as main dialects

English	Kurmanji	Sorani
Hello	Silav	Slaw
Welcome	Bi xêr bê	Be xêr bête
How are you	Çawa yî?	Chonî?
Are you okay/are you well?	Tu Baş î?	Tu Baş î?
Good morning	Roj Baş	Roj Bash
Thank you	Spas	Supas
Where are you from?	Tu ji ku derê yî?	Khalke kwei?
Do you understand?	Tu têdigihiyî?	Haly bwet/tegishte?

- 2nd or 3rd language may be preferred.
- Physical space/ hand shaking gender differences. Gender appropriate officers and interpreters. Explain your role.
- Eye contact, warmer tone.
- May downplay language barriers
- Gender appropriate officers/interpreters
- Explain role

Key cultural elements

- Not a single Kurdish culture, merger of backgrounds from Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey
- Religion and educational background influencing factors on cultural identity ,
- Tolerant of other cultures.
- Own music, food, clothes and dance.
- Collectiveness vs individuality
- Family and kinship – dishonour, impact on engagement
- Tribal and clan structures
- Hospitality
- Pride – impact if humiliated or threatened, link to past struggles
- Political struggle, no recognised state – migration data. Fight for freedom, persecution, mistrust in the state.

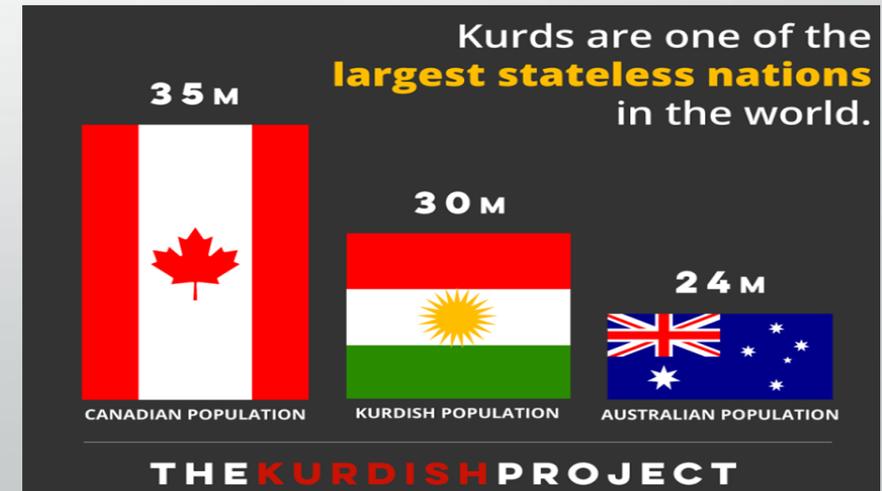


Taboos/prejudices

- Sexuality – speaking about in public., treatment of LGBTQ+ community
- Extra marital affairs. Divorce. Pregnancies out of wedlock.
- Mental health and disabilities
- Disrespecting elders or leaders.
- Involvement in crime, although fighting for the cause of a nation state is honoured.
- Women as victims of sexual exploitation often blamed.
- Women will fear judgement as a perpetrator.
- Family dishonour, shame – not to contact the family/community members directly – use NGO reps/interpreters from different part of community
- Islamist fundamentalists and patriarchal structures may justify violence against women
- Sexual exploitation, honour-based abuse/killings, FGM and forced marriage.
- Criticisms of Islam and the Qoran/Quran, religious leaders.
- Discrimination against minority groups.
- Discussions around political affiliations and religious views early on.

Migration

- Political persecution, war, displacement and instability.
- Criminalisation of Kurdish cultural expression; risk of imprisonment, death.
- Denial or suppression of Kurdish identity.
- Discrimination in employment and wider social marginalisation.
- Persecution based on sexuality (smaller number of cases).
- Established UK diaspora.
- Community businesses
- Strong Kurdish community networks in UK, but internal divisions visible.
- May arrive via irregular routes without full awareness of legal consequences.
- Impact once encounter immigration authorities.



Picture source/credit: The Kurdish Project:
<https://thekurdishproject.org/>

Migration continued

- Strong expectation to financially support family.
- Moral obligation.
- Limited or non-existent pension systems.
- Investment in extended family education or property.
- Severe economic hardship, including high inflation.
- High unemployment; forced into informal or smuggling work.
- Kurdish regions in Iran economically marginalised.
- Internal migration to cities for employment; screening by authorities.
- UK reality often differs from pre-migration expectations.
- Fear of dishonour or shame if viewed as unsuccessful.
- Awareness of migration risks, escaping persecution and instability.
- Kurdish OCGs facilitating small-boat crossings to UK - Horn of Africa migrants.
- **Kolbars.**

Family/gender dynamics

- Large families in the past, strong kinship.
- Farming needed larger families, now migration to cities, means nuclear families are more common.
- Tribal structure up to 20th century.
- Respect for seniority - leadership/elders to resolve conflicts.
- Traditional roles, but women have a stronger position, centre of political struggles.
- Women's liberation, role in the military/roles within government.
- Still patriarchal structure. Responsibility of household chores/childcare/household finances.
- Children stay with family until marriage, return if divorced.
- UK diaspora - younger generations adapt, elder relatives negotiate between Western and Eastern cultures, can lead to conflict/forced marriage.
- Arranged marriages less common.
- Inequality – divorced or widowed females face some stigma.



Education

- Tool for social mobility.
- Higher education – both males and females.
- Opportunities for employment limited.
- Many barriers to prominent positions.
- Rural areas – need to look after the land.
- Preservation of the Kurdish dialect.
- Iran – full control over educational system.
- Turkey - teaching of Kurdish forbidden
- UK Diaspora



Religion, beliefs & festivals

- Diversity of religions, majority Sunni Muslim, not all practising.
- Also Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Yazidis, Alevis, and Yarsans.
- Most secular in the Middle East.
- National ethnic cause stronger still.
- Much persecution of minority groups - Yazidi in Iraq, Alevi in Turkey, Yarsans in Iran
- Genocides of Alevi and Yazidi in 1938, 2014 respectively.
- Minorities not recognised, lack access to education and services.
- May claim to be Muslim
- Fundamentalists may justify VAWG in the name of religion.
- Festivals include:
 - Sunni Kurds – Ramadan, Eid Al Fitr
 - 21st March – Newroz
 - British Alevi Festival
 - Alevi Aşure (Ashura) festival



Food

- Great importance.
- Will seek out Kurdish food stores/restaurants.
- Muslims will not eat pork.
- Meat focused – often Halal, grilled meats such as lamb.
- Often avoid alcohol.
- Rice or bulgur (Turkey) a staple food item
- Stews, soups and bean dishes.
- Kofta.
- Gipa and Patcha – traditional offal dishes.
- Dolma – stuffed vegetables or vine leaves.
- Often tea as opposed to coffee.
- Yazidis will not eat lettuce – associated with divine power.
- Make good money from food industry.



Interaction with authority

- Deep mistrust - past persecution and state control.
- Strong respect for hierarchy, authority and family honour.
- Influence of religious and community leaders.
- Clothing and symbols carry meaning (e.g. plain black associated with intelligence services in Iran; linked to mourning).
- Uniforms strongly associated with authority, role identification.
- Importance of reassurance, respectful engagement, emphasis on safety.
- Family reactions may shape victim responses.
- Family obligations, debt and honour influence decision-making.
- Reporting to police vs. risk of retaliation or revenge.
- Feelings of victimisation and social ostracism.
- Police contact may be viewed as intrusive – covert disruption
- Clear communication - police provide protection and rights
- May not self-identify as victims; exploiters may be viewed as “providers”

Interaction with authority cont.

- Use of interpreters in a 2nd or 3rd language.
- Trusted intermediaries, community leaders, and NGOs.
- Officers from non-Kurdish backgrounds.
- Fear of reprisals, threats, intimidation; withdrawal or regret of statements.
- Provide reassurance, empowerment, and clear information.
- Confidentiality essential – risk of honour-based or family reprisals.
- Awareness of women's treatment in Iraqi judicial systems.
- Understanding Iranian security processes (e.g., herasat 'gozinesh' screening).
- Knowledge of charges and detention experiences ("waging war against God").
- Recognition of disproportionate risks: torture, sexual abuse, death penalties.
- Belief in ongoing monitoring by foreign intelligence even in the UK.
- Emotional expression is key to communication.
- Trauma-informed approaches for safety and trust.



Do's & Don'ts

Do's	Don'ts
Be polite, smile and be friendly. Show a measure of hospitality such as a cup of tea, asking if they are comfortable.	Be judgmental, they will tend to close off.
Be trauma informed.	Neglect gender issues – females would likely prefer female officers, interpreters and advocates.
Provide reassurance where possible, to create more openness and cooperation.	Assume political or religious views, for example that all Kurdish people are Muslim
Wear alternative clothing to plain black uniform where possible. Or clearly state your role to protect them from harm and how the authorities here are under different regulations to those in home countries. Remove epilates, if unable to wear plain clothes.	Assume that family members are supportive of victim's circumstances. Do not send the victim back with the family unless you are completely confident that they are not complicit You may be risking the victim's well-being.
Use Kurdish greetings to break the ice but ensure the correct dialect.	Do not mediate with family members or religious/community leaders; they may not be empathetic to the victim and attempt to discredit them.
Be aware that male family members may try to discredit female victims in particular.	Use emotive language such as honour killings, keep your terminology neutral where possible or describe situations instead.

Thank you for listening

Q&A Session

Scan the QR or use
link to join



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