



Kaziwa Salih

# POOR DAD, RICH DAUGHTER

Gender Regimes, Citizenship, and  
Women's Entrepreneurship in Post-ISIS  
Kurdistan

Middle Eastern Studies

Collection Editor  
**DR. KAZIWA SALIH**

LIVED PLACES  
PUBLISHING





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First published in 2026 by Lived Places Publishing

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781917503488 (pbk)  
ISBN: 9781917503501 (ePDF)  
ISBN: 9781917503495 (ePUB)

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Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy  
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design

Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK  
Lived Places Publishing  
P.O. Box 184547  
Echo Avenue  
Miller Place, NY 11764

[www.livedplacespublishing.com](http://www.livedplacespublishing.com)

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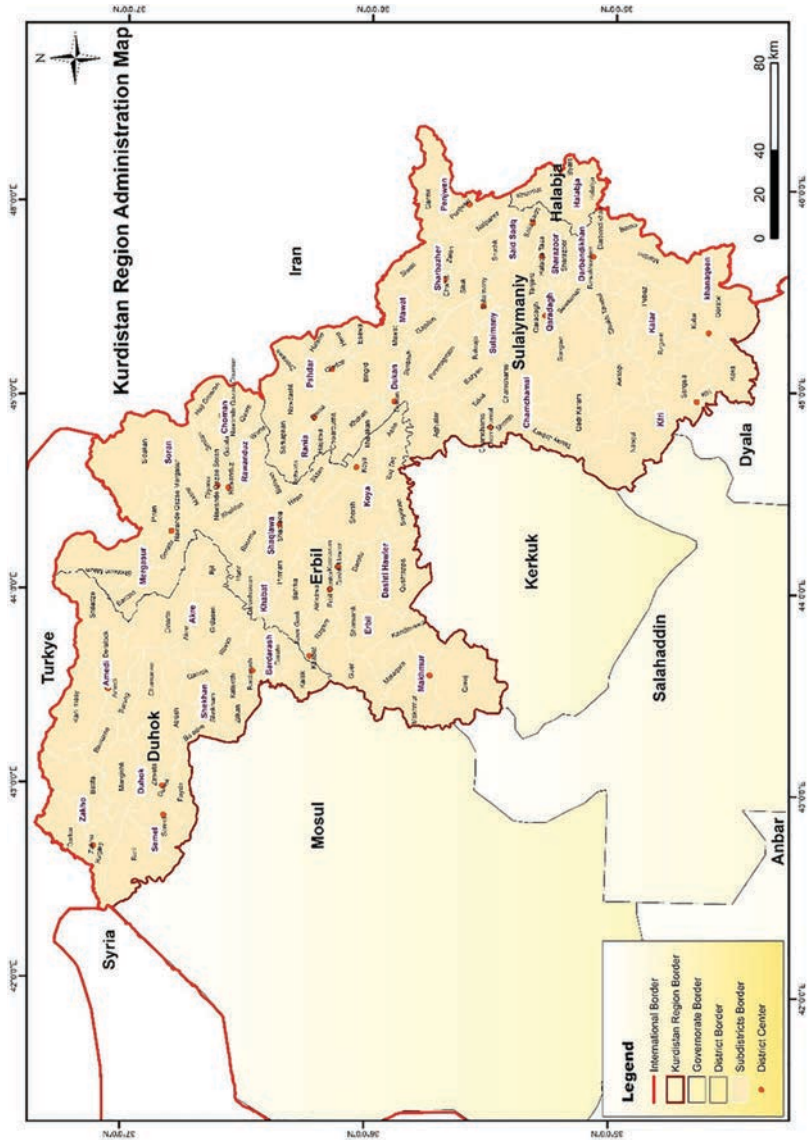
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**Figure 1:** Başûr (Kurdistan Region Administration), Iraq

**Source:** Ministry of Planning, Kurdistan Regional Government. <https://krso.gov.krd/en/map/kurdistan-region>. This study was conducted within the region marked by the red frame.



# Inspirational Quote

*“Don’t betray your wisdom, my daughter. Regardless of how people may think of you, do not become someone who is not yourself.”* Father of R.H.<sup>1</sup>

The above quote is from the father of R.H., a 56-year-old woman, the owner of two big restaurants. This profound statement offers a glimpse into the complexities of a man who, despite being barely educated, speaks with remarkable insight and depth. Hailing from an oppressed nation with a history marred by the killing, rape, and enslavement of their women at the hands of colonizers, his words carry layers of meaning shaped by a legacy of suffering and resilience. In a society grappling with the internalized trauma of prolonged colonization and genocide—where practices like honor killing<sup>2</sup> are deeply rooted—this quote challenges the prevailing norms and reflects a rare, empowering perspective. One could write an entire book unpacking this wisdom, disobedience, and cultural significance embodied in this statement.

A father encouraging his daughter to accept her wisdom and integrity is a subtly rebellious move in a world where patriarchal traditions frequently govern family ties. He recognizes the repressive systems in their environment and wants his daughter to overcome them. The father’s usage of “wisdom” alludes to a combination of moral courage, intuition, and intelligence.

This remark provides a vision of optimism and fortitude in the face of social and patriarchal constraints by capturing a father’s

love, insight, and awareness of the repressive structures surrounding them. His parental advice would have been in vain if his daughter hadn't become the person you'll learn about in this book among her peers. This serves as a moral injunction against conforming to oppressive social norms, aligning perfectly with the book's themes of ethical agency, dignity, and selfhood. This book takes that injunction seriously, tracing how Kurdish women translate inherited wisdom into ethical, economic, and social action within the constraints of post-conflict Kurdistan.

## Notes

1. This quote is translated from Kurdish Sorani. In English, the word "betray" is rarely used in conjunction with "wisdom." Typically, one might say "betray yourself," "betray your principles," or "ignore your wisdom." The intended meaning here is to not forsake your wisdom; never turn your back on your wisdom or abandon your integrity. However, poetically, the phrase works well and conveys a profound moral and spiritual tone that aligns with the cultural voice of this book and of a father who is offering philosophical advice. Therefore, I will retain the original word "xîyanet," which means "betray," especially since his daughter is poet too.
2. An honor killing is the murder of a family member, usually female, by other family members, motivated by the notion that the victim has brought dishonor to the family's name or reputation by actions deemed morally or sexually wrong (Chesler, 2010).

# Note on Conventions

In this study, I conducted the interviews in Kurdish and utilized several books published in Kurdish as secondary source materials. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

To honor the trust and struggles of the oppressed and colonized Kurdish populations, this book avoids using colonizer language and instead employs the terms used by the victims, providing common names in brackets the first time they are mentioned. For example, “Kurdistan Region” (KR), “Southern Kurdistan” or “Başûr” (Kurdistan of Iraq); Silêmanî (Sulaymaniyah), Hewlêr (Erbil), and Duhok for the names of the region and cities, and Êzîdî (Yazidi) for this particular group.

# Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who participated in this study, as well as to those who connected me with the participants: Muhsin Ali Akber, Azad Twefiq and his two employees, Hasso Hurmi, Dr. Muzfer Hussein, Hawzhin Ziba, Sama, Jalal Bramo, and other members of the Êzîdî camp staff in Duhok. Your assistance was invaluable in facilitating this research.

# Acronyms

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
BCF	Barzani Charity Foundation
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
GEM	Global Entrepreneurship Monitor
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
FLFP	Female Labor Force Participation
FYF	Free Yezidi Foundation
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ILO	International Labour Organization
IGO	Intergovernmental Organizations
KIG/Komal	Kurdistan Islamic Group
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KIU	Kurdistan Islamic Union
KIM	Kurdistan Islamic Movement
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government

LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer
MP	Member of Parliament
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NOCs	National Oil Companies
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
POV GP	Poverty and Equity Global Practice
REACH	Resource for Education and Advocacy for Community Health
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
IOM	International Organization for Migration
WFP	World Food Programme

# Synopsis

*“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime”* (Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu)

In a society where survival has long been written in the language of men, women continue to script their own stories of resilience; stories that challenge silence with creation and loss with agency. This book emerges from a question that haunted the author’s childhood: How do Kurdish women turn oppression into agency and endurance into a quiet form of power?

Drawing on empirical fieldwork in Kurdistan, this book investigates the rise of women entrepreneurs in post-ISIS Kurdistan and the gender-related obstacles they encounter in Başûr. It addresses social problems and the way these women are creating social value rather than simply generating profit. This method is necessary to promote a culture of social responsibility and to expand the definition of entrepreneurship beyond personal gain. However, the book argues that constructing social entrepreneurship within rentier economies is significantly more challenging than in non-rentier contexts, given the structural dependence on state-controlled revenues and limited support for private or civic enterprise.

The empirical focus is on two distinct groups: women who receive assistance from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to establish their businesses—illustrating the transition from aid

to capacity-building as NGOs and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) “teach them how to fish”—and self-funded women, the majority of whom are micro-entrepreneurs. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2019), rates of female entrepreneurship are often higher in low-income countries, not because of empowerment but as a response to economic necessity. The economic crisis that followed the Islamic State from Iraq and Syria (ISIS), along with a serious lack of jobs, forced many Kurdish women to start small and medium-sized businesses to support their families.

This paradox points out the importance of avoiding the romanticization of entrepreneurship as inherently liberating. Nevertheless, it is equally important not to diminish the efforts of Kurdish women who engage in entrepreneurial activity within a traumatized society. In a context where many aspire to become doctors or professionals—and where even men often feel shame in taking non-office jobs—women who run small enterprises challenge what this study terms the rentier citizen complex: a mindset in which citizens expect to be served rather than to create value, which is developed fully in Chapter 4. As a 50-year-old male interviewee, M.L., explained: “When we return to Kurdistan, people mock us, saying that those who were doctors back home have become taxi drivers or laborers in exile.”

Within this context, the book explores several key questions: To what extent do NGOs support women-led business ventures? Do they perceive these ventures differently from those runs by men or by women without NGO support? How conscious are these women of the forms of agency they exercise through their

entrepreneurial practices? What are the primary challenges they face in navigating their social environments?

The findings suggest that NGOs have enhanced women's agency, enabling them to determine and pursue their objectives. Nevertheless, both NGO-supported and self-sponsored women demonstrate a notable degree of ethical agency in their relationships with other women. Although NGOs have helped many women launch their businesses, they have often departed without imparting crucial knowledge in technology, marketing, and long-term business sustainability—leaving some enterprises vulnerable.

The book also examines how entrenched gender regimes continue to structure women's professional and domestic lives. Often, women's economic participation challenges traditional family roles, while in others it reinforces existing hierarchies. The research indicates that mothers frequently have a beneficial effect on their family dynamics due to their economic contributions. Conversely, women who delay or forgo marriage due to the demands of their businesses frequently face social pressure or rejection from potential spouses, who may insist they abandon their work to prioritize family life.

Ultimately, the book highlights the persistence of traditional norms and knowledge systems that continue to constrain women entrepreneurs in post-ISIS Kurdistan. These structural and cultural barriers have slowed progress and, in some cases, contributed to business failure. Nevertheless, through their endurance, innovation, and quiet defiance, Kurdish women continue to redefine what agency means within a rentier and patriarchal society.

This book advances a relational understanding of women's entrepreneurship by situating economic activity within gender regimes, moral economies, and post-conflict governance. Rather than treating entrepreneurship as empowerment or market participation alone, it analyzes women's business practices as ethical labor shaped by structural abandonment, cultural surveillance, and political economy.

# 1

## Introduction

Entrepreneurship is a relatively new field within Kurdish society, shaping the lives of both men and women. In Başûr/Iraq, this sector developed leisurely after the 1991 uprising and the subsequent establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This partial political autonomy also created new, though uneven, spaces for women's visibility, organization, and claims to social and economic participation. Entrepreneurship delay resulted from their historical struggle, oppression, genocide, and limited opportunities for Kurds. Historically, Kurdish lives required prioritizing safety and physical protection over personal growth and business establishment. For over a century, Kurds have faced systemic restrictions on property ownership, with much of their land and assets confiscated or seized by the governments of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria (Salih, 2024).

Another reason for the business advancement delay in this particular part of Kurdistan was Iraq's economic rentier system, which means the state relied heavily on foreign rent revenues, in this case from oil exports, and not on productive domestic sectors. In addition, a redistributive and centralized state apparatus hindered private sector development, discouraged entrepreneurship, and fostered a culture of dependency among citizens.

However, the half-title “Poor Dad, Rich Daughter” is not intended merely to reflect the two reasons mentioned above. Rather, it also serves as a metaphor for courage not to betray one’s dreams and for the freedom that has emerged in the post-Ba’ath era, where a new generation is reclaiming its indigenous cultural practices and becoming richer in social and cultural capital. Since both their poverty and their resilience have shaped the Kurdish historical struggle, it is worth mentioning to offer a brief overview of that history for readers who may be less familiar with it.

The Kurds, as one of the native nations of Mesopotamia. Their indigenous cultural practices derived from their origins. In ancient history, Kurdish women occupied relatively higher social positions compared to their counterparts in nearby societies (Galletti, 2001). A status mostly ascribed to their enduring traditions of multicultural coexistence and pluralistic cultural and linguistic practices. Historically, Kurds have been one of the most multi-religious societies, maintaining this diversity from ancient times to the present. Their language, rooted in the Indo-European family, is among the region’s richest, encompassing three primary dialects and 24 subdialects (Salih, 2019). It is the 40th most spoken language in the world (Gunter, 2010, p.214).

In antiquity, the Kurds were instrumental in civilizations like Babylon and Sumer, and historically, they founded and administered various emirates. However, the conquest of the region by the Ottoman Empire resulted in the progressive erosion of Kurdish political autonomy and influence. Their homeland, called Greater Kurdistan, was divided twice. The first division occurred in 1639 with the signing of the Treaty of Kaser Shireen or Kasr-i Shirin in 1639 between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires (Salih, 2024; Talabany, 2008).

On July 24, 1923, additional aggressive colonization occurred through the partitioning of Kurdistan as stipulated by the Treaty of Lausanne. This treaty was officially a peace treaty between interests associated with the former Ottoman Empire and the allied countries of Great Britain, Japan, France, Italy, Greece, Romania, Slovenia, and the Kingdom of the Serbs and Croats. Under the Treaty of Lausanne, Kurdistan was divided among three allied countries: Syria, under the French mandate; Iraq, under the British mandate; and Turkey. The eastern part of Kurdistan remained under Iran's control, with smaller parts in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Russia (Salih, 2025; Natali, 2005). These historical ruptures did not only fragment Kurdish territory and sovereignty; they also shaped economic potentials, delaying the emergence of entrepreneurship as a viable livelihood, especially for women.



Figure 2: Map of Greater Kurdistan

The Kurdish people have engaged in a prolonged struggle for freedom and independence since the division and occupation of their homeland. They have initiated numerous uprisings and political movements to liberate themselves. While most of these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, some resulted in the establishment of temporary Kurdish entities in specific regions of Kurdistan. In Başûr (Southern Kurdistan/Iraq), Sheikh Mahmud Barzanj emerged as a pivotal figure in the early twentieth century. His most ambitious attempt to create an independent Kurdish state occurred in 1922 when he declared himself the Sultan of Kurdistan in the Silêmanî (Sulaymaniyah) region of modern-day Iraq. This brave act was a direct challenge to both British colonial rule and the new Iraqi government (Ahmad, 2001; McDowall, 2004).

Likewise, in Rojhelat (Eastern Kurdistan/Iran), the Republic of Mahabad briefly existed in 1946 in the northwestern region of Iran, with Mahabad as its capital. Led by Qazi Muhammad, a respected Kurdish nationalist leader, the Republic represented a significant but short-lived attempt at Kurdish self-rule, ultimately falling to Iranian forces after only a year (Bozarslan et al., 2021).

In Başûr, the Kurdish population instigated an uprising in 1991, which became one of the most consequential insurrections in the region's contemporary history. The Kurdish population had endured decades of genocide under Saddam Hussein's administration, which ignited this insurrection following the Gulf War. This uprising was pivotal in advancing Kurdish political autonomy in Iraq, laying the groundwork for the formation of the KRG and

the subsequent emergence of a de facto independent Kurdish territory within Iraq (Gunter, 2004; McDowall, 2004). Despite the absence of complete independence, it is noteworthy that Kurds in this part of Kurdistan do not face violence simply for being Kurdish. This book examines how women establish and sustain businesses in this region; notwithstanding the absence of complete independence, currently, it is the only part of Kurdistan where Kurds are not killed because they are Kurds. These historical conditions explain why entrepreneurship in Kurdistan emerged late and unevenly, particularly for women—a theme developed further in Chapter 2.

Regarding the theme of this book and women's position, this constructive environment has contributed to advances in women's rights in the Kurdistan Region (KR). Mino Alinia (2013) asserts that "women were the first to take the opportunity to organize themselves, raise gender equality issues, and mobilize against gender-based violence" and were "significant in the emergence of civil society" (pp. 83, 92). Whereas one can argue that before the 1991 uprising, women's rights were subordinate to Kurdish rights and national liberation and often neglected, the establishment of the KRG created room for women to organize themselves. Women's organizations "have affected gender politics, brought about reform in the law, and helped women who are under threat of violence and killing" (Ibid, p. 92). However, this positive tide gradually changed for the Kurds in general and especially Kurdish women due to misadministration and political antagonism in Iraq and neighboring countries, as well as the war against ISIS.

The controversies of the KRG began with the launching of a civil war between two major political parties, namely the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), in 1996, which then divided the Kurdistan region geographically and politically between two families: the Barzanî, who led the PDK, and the Talabanî, who led the PUK. Both parties have been strongly criticized for their division into two stateless groups, ruling “their respective sections of the region as personal fiefdoms” (Smith, 2018, p. 1046); corruption; and “new tribalism,” through which the political elites employed and enriched their extended families and allies. Businesses remained tied to these two parties, and therefore, private owners needed close ties with one of them to succeed. For women entrepreneurs, this politicized economy translated into heightened vulnerability, restricted access to markets, and dependence on male- and party-mediated networks.

As a result, Kurdish women’s business activity has come to a halt, and the community is increasingly adopting traditional religious rituals and beliefs. These dynamics form the empirical core of Chapter 7, where women’s encounters with religious authority and moral surveillance are examined in depth.

However, “with a strong presence of Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) and international (non)governmental organisations (I[N]GOs), particularly since the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and reinforced with the conflict against Daesh, there has been a commitment to ‘support’ the country’s nation-building” (Marques, 2023, Para. 2). Within this program, several NGOs assisted women in Kurdistan in establishing businesses, while rising poverty and unemployment rates compelled many

women to launch their own enterprises. It is within this contested terrain of aid, necessity, and aspiration that the central questions of this study take shape, as critically examined in Chapter 5.

This historical and political trajectory shaped Kurdish identity and set the conditions under which Kurdish women navigate the contemporary entrepreneurial landscape explored in this study.

## **Theory and Methodology in Context**

Understanding women's entrepreneurship under these conditions requires an analytical framework capable of capturing not only economic performance, but also moral reasoning, structural constraint, and ethical agency.

This qualitative, interdisciplinary study draws on semi-structured interviews and fieldwork notes to investigate the socio-cultural, political, religious, and gender-based challenges confronting Kurdish women micro-entrepreneurs. It further considers the ethical agency that enables them to recreate themselves within the entrepreneurial sphere. In practice, ethical agency appears in women's decisions to sustain family dignity, resist dependency, negotiate moral respectability, and create livelihoods despite limited institutional support.

As summarized in Table 1, for this study, 43 interviews have been conducted. Thirty-four business owner women were interviewed, twenty-six of whom own businesses in public, and the others operate from home, utilizing social media and word-of-mouth as sales mediums. A professor who specializes in social work and women's issues, an economic expert on women's

economy, and an advisor of the Kurdish Regional Government were also interviewed. Furthermore, interviews were also conducted with a philanthropist who facilitated suitable venues for women to establish flea markets, two politicians to understand the policy discourse surrounding women's economic participation and post-conflict reconstruction, and a representative from the United Nations headquarters in Hewlêr. In addition, two participants living in Europe (the diaspora) reflected on how the rentier complex and cultural expectations may have shaped their sense of transnational shame and economic restraint. It is worth mentioning that many of these business owners, especially Êzîdî women in the Duhok region, have comparable experiences. A detailed overview of participants and methods is provided in Table 1.

Chapter 7 employs a case study methodology to analyze in greater detail the experiences of a select group of women whose narratives exhibited variations in intensity and specificity compared to the larger interview sample. These women either encountered more significant constraints or received more substantial forms of support, particularly in relation to religious pressures and expectations. Their narratives offer substantial empirical data for investigating the lived experiences of entrepreneurship, the performative aspects of religiosity, and the inherent contradictions within the gender norms advocated by Islamic organizations.

The interviews took place in several cities in the three main provinces of Kurdistan: Silêmanî (Sulaymaniyah), Hewlêr, and Duhok, in 2022 and 2023, and several online interviews in 2025. These interviewees were given the freedom to use their true names or select a pseudonym for themselves. To respect the privacy