

# How Kurdish Immigrant Parents in the United States Think about the Formal and Informal Education of Their Sons and Daughters

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## Abstract

The study addresses how Kurds who currently live in the United States think about and manage their children's education. Of particular interest is the ways in which the gender of their children influences how parents engage with their children's education. Based on interviews with Kurdish parents who live in Nashville, Tennessee, the study reveals that, in general, they feel more responsible for and take a much more proactive role in their children's education than is typical of Kurds living in Kurdistan. This is so because the parents are not only concerned with securing an education for their children but also making sure their children adopt a Kurdish identity. The study also found that gender plays an important role in parental investment, albeit not in a straightforward way. That is, even though parents support the education of both their sons and daughters, they are nonetheless guided by deep seated assumptions that, once they grow up, their sons and daughters will live very different lives. More specifically, the parents operated on a taken-for-granted assumption that their daughters would live more circumscribed lives than their sons and hence needed a somewhat different educational investment during childhood.

## Keywords

Gender, Education, Immigration, Parents, Kurds

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## 1. Introduction

Given that future socioeconomic status is partially determined by educational attainment, education in the United States is often viewed as the primary insulator against poverty and social inequality [1] [2]. The more parents invest in the education of their children, the better the chances that their children will excel in

school [3] [4]. Given the existence of racial and ethnic differences across multiple academic outcome measures in the United States [5] [6], it is important to examine whether there is racial and ethnic variance in parental investment. To this end, prior research has been conducted on cultural differences in home socialization practices with regards to education [7], and some existing differences are now well-known to scholars. However, language-minority immigrant groups are under-examined in the scholarly literature and some groups are essentially ignored in academic research [8], including the Kurdish immigrants who are the focal group of this study. Most of the studies on parental investment among immigrant groups have focused on Latinos and Asians. There have been a few studies about Middle Eastern immigrant groups but none have examined Kurdish immigrants in this regard. Given this omission, this study enriches the literature about parental investment among language-minority immigrant groups in the United States.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Kurdish immigrant parents invest in their children's education, and how they think about and manage an educational environment that is fundamentally different from the one that characterize their home country, especially when it comes to gender. Hence, and more specifically, we examine the role the children's gender plays in parental educational investment and seek to learn something about the difficulties that Kurdish parents may face when managing and investing in their children's education.

## 2. Parental Investment in Their Children's Education

The literature on parental investment in education has addressed a number of factors that impact parents' ability and willingness to invest in the children's education, including socioeconomic background, family structure, race, and gender [9] [10] [11] [12] [13]. For instance, Aschaffenburg & Maas [9] found that cultural socialization affects children's educational attainment, and that parents who have higher education have children who have higher cultural capital. Occupational discrimination also may shape parental investment decisions among minority groups. Schneider & Lee [7] found the investment in science-oriented education among East Asians is a strategy to overcome discrimination in the labor market. Bonesrønning [14] found that parental allocations—at least to some extent—are responses to their children's efforts, and *vice versa*. In order to invest resources in their children, parents must believe that there is a connection between those investments and their children's futures [4] [15]. In addition to the influence of parental attitudes about education, studies examined the links between household resources and children's educational success. Scholars have found that family educational resources are significantly associated with academic success [4] [10], although Teachman [13] suggests that the benefits of educational resources may vary by race. Different variables have been used by scholars to measure household educational resources, including things like computers, reference books, a daily newspaper, or a dictionary/encyclopedia in the home and saving accounts for children's educational futures [10] [12] [13]

[16] [17].

Since educational resources play a role in academic success, the amount of these resources in minority group families and the factors that shape the tendency to invest these resources must be examined. According to Min Zhou [18], “Although a portion of today’s culturally diverse children comes from middle-class backgrounds and are well protected by resourceful parents, the majority still face considerable risk”. And this may impede the ability of parents in minority groups from providing the educational resources that children need for their studies. Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell [16] found that racial disparity in socioeconomic background and family structure are among the reasons why African-American children have access to fewer educational resources in their homes than their white counterparts. But they also found that even though socioeconomic status is a predictor of racial disparity in educational resources, there is racial inequality in educational returns as well. Another study found that even though parents across three immigrant groups (Cambodian, Dominican, and Portuguese) reported the same commitment to education for their children, they differ with regard to providing educational resources (materials and objects) to their children [19]. Roscigno and his colleagues [4], in a study about place and its effects on educational inequality, found that inner-city adolescents, who are more likely to be minorities, have less educational objects and worse educational outcomes. Families in the inner-cities are also likely to have lower income, less parental education, more children per household, and hence fewer resources to invest in their children’s education. Taken together, socioeconomic background, family size, and parental education are the main factors that shape parental investment in educational resources among minorities. Anticipated educational returns can encourage or discourage parents from minority groups to provide educational materials for their children. Moreover, the impacts of various educational investments may vary by race and ethnicity.

### **2.1. Parental Involvement and Parental Investment**

Parental involvement, as a form of investment, is defined as a process of activating the potential ability of parents both at home and in school for the benefit of their children [20]. How often parents contact their children’s school, the extent to which they take part in organized school activities, and how much they interact with their children about academic coursework and performance are the indicators that scholars have used the most to measure parental involvement [21] [22] [23] [24]. But the extent to which parental involvement enhances children’s academic success is subject to some debate [25]. Some studies have failed to demonstrate its positive effects whereas others not only have showed its positive impacts on children’s educational success [21] [23] [24], but also demonstrated other favorable consequences of parental involvement [26] [27]. Also, there is some evidence that when parents are involved in their children’s education, the children subsequently develop higher levels of educational and career aspirations [27] [28] [29].

A meta-analytic study about parental involvement among racial/ethnic groups in the United States found that although the effects of parental involvement are apparent for all the racial groups under study, it is also clear that the effects of parental involvement were greater for some groups than for others [22]. Lee and Bowen [30] found that there are no racial and ethnic group differences in parents' educational expectations or in their involvement in children's homework, but other studies have shown that parents structure their involvement differently. Schneider and Lee [7], for example, found that East Asian parents focused more on the children's learning environment than on helping with homework or visiting their children's schools. Another study found that there is a gap between parents' and teachers' perception about parental involvement; while teachers of Arab students perceived that their parents are not involved or do not want to be involved, the mothers of the students reported that they are involved and they want more advice from teachers about how to be even more involved [31]. Garcia and her colleagues [19], in a study about parental involvement among different immigrant groups in the United States, found that while parents from all groups value education and have high aspirations for their children, they nonetheless display different patterns of parental involvement [21]. Another study found that race, parent's gender, and household income all affect parental involvement in children's education [32].

Taken together, studies have demonstrated that different ethnic groups display different patterns of parental involvement in children's education. Such differences stem from a variety of factors, including school barriers, English issues, cultural expectations, and socioeconomic background. Thus, different ethnic groups develop their own strategies for how be involved in their children's education, and the more we learn about such strategies the better can the educational system meet the needs and expectations of diverse groups of parents.

## **2.2. Gender Differences and Parental Investment**

While the scholarship on the links between parental investment and educational attainment is fairly extensive, we know less about the extent to which parents treat their sons and daughters the same way or if gender disparities in parental investment may produce gender inequality in education. Pasqua [33] argues that investing in women's education has high social returns in terms of fertility reduction, better child health conditions, and a more equal distribution of resources within the family. Thus, it is important to examine how parents invest their resources in their daughters and sons and seek to understand how, if at all, they take gender into account when they make investment decisions [34]. This is especially important since different immigrant and other minority groups, while facing similar kinds of obstacles when it comes to navigating their children's education, are positioned very differently when it comes to gender. It is reasonable to expect that different cultural perspectives about gender may result in very different parental decisions when it comes to educational investment. As of yet, however, we do not know enough about such processes. That is, gender has not

been a central focus in studies about parental investment among immigrant groups, while other studies on parental investment either do not address gender at all, or do so without reference race or ethnicity [3] [12] [17] [35]. Several studies that have examined how parental investment is affected by race and ethnicity, but many of these do not address potential gender differences [36]. In other words, studies examining parental investment typically focus on either race/ethnicity or gender [9] [16], but not the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity.

It is therefore not surprising that there is no consensus among scholars about gender differences in parental investment or how it might impact the academic success of daughters and sons differently. A study by Bogenschneider [21] shows that mother and father involvement are equally beneficial for sons' and daughters' academic success. But she also found that educated parents were more involved in their children's school than uneducated parents. Xu [17] found that, in most countries, sons receive more parental investments in technical skills, whereas daughters receive more social and cultural capital. Even though a meta-analysis showed that gender is not significantly associated with parental involvement among minorities (Jeynes 2003), a study about educational resources at home and their effects on the level of schooling found that educational resources might be less important in determining educational outcomes among blacks than whites. Other studies have found that, for women, the effects of parental investment operate mostly indirectly, through educational expectations [13]. In a study of Arabs in the United States, Read and Oselin [37] found that "immigrants are less likely than U.S born Arab Americans to share schemas that promote women's public-sphere activities". They also found that even though Arab families in the United States support education for their daughters, daughters have lower educational returns in the labor market.

Some scholars suggest that, in some cultures, it may be rational for parents to favor sons over daughters when it comes to investing in education, and this is so because sons reap greater returns in the labor market [38]. Alderman and King [39], for example, found a significant relationship between gender discrimination in educational investment at the family level and family income. Hence, in environments where educational returns to boys are higher than to girls, parents may invest more in their sons' education. Others argue that parental decisions about how to invest in their sons and daughters are more cultural than instrumental in origin, and are linked to patriarchal gender traditions. According to Pasqua [33], "very little can be done in the short run when traditional social values are strong and parents have a preference for boys". This insight raises important questions of how families from traditional gender societies respond when they encounter a very different gender environment in the United States.

Given limited scholarship and inconsistent findings pertaining to how immigrant parents adjust to an education system that is formally organized around principles of gender equality, it is imperative that scholars turn their attention to the different experiences and aspirations associated with the gender of their

children that different immigrant groups bring to the United States. A particularly under-studied group is the Kurdish community in the United States<sup>1</sup>. Even though female education rates (along with education rates overall) have steadily increased in Kurdistan, education disparities between men and women are conspicuous. This is so, research has shown, because parents have traditionally invested much less in the education of girls than boys [40] [41] [42]. School attendance for all Kurdish children has been negatively impacted by decades of war and displacement, but girls have been disproportionately affected. Approximately 40% of women in Iraqi Kurdistan are illiterate, compared to 20% of men. In some rural areas and among the uneducated part of society, it is still not unusual for families to end the education of their daughters early, so that they can either get married or help with the household. This problem is decreasing, but it still exists [43] [44].

### 3. Methodology

In order to gain a more thorough understanding of how Kurdish parents think about and manage their children's education in the United States this study takes a qualitative interview approach. Such an approach is appropriate when it comes to examining people's thoughts and perspectives on their experiences and the ways in which they navigate the circumstances of their lives [45]. The analyses presented in this paper are based on 18 interviews with 20 participants, which are enough participants to establish emergent patterns [46]. We used a semi-structured interview guide to collect the data. The areas pertaining to parents' investment in their children's education that we explored in the interviews include educational resources (e.g., books, computers), cultural resources (e.g., extracurricular activities, museum visits), direct parental involvement in their children's education (e.g., home work, parent-teacher conferences), and parents' perspectives when it comes to the education and gender.

Researchers studying immigrant populations have noted that people from under-enumerated and socially excluded populations, such as refugees and isolated immigrants, are especially difficult to engage in research projects [47] [48]. Hence, to gain access to such populations, the most productive way to gain entry into the population is to be an insider of sorts, which the first author is as a Kurdish student studying in the United States. Once inside, the most effective method for recruiting participants is snowball sampling [49] [50], which is the method we used as well.

A Kurdish acquaintance of the first author recruited the director of the Salahaddin center in Nashville to help us find the first few participants. In addition to being a Kurdish immigrant, all participants had to have children of school age

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<sup>1</sup>The majority of Kurds in the United States first arrived as refugees (in four waves from 1976 to the present) as a result of recurrent military conflict, political instability, and ethnic genocide. Kurds do not have a nation of their own, but live Kurdistan, which encompasses eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northwestern Iran, and northern and north-eastern Syria. Most Kurdish people follow Sunni Islam, but there are also minorities of Shi'a Muslims, Jews, Christians, Alevis, Yezidis, Yarsans, Zoroastrians, Babis and followers of different Sufi and Mystic orders.

(K through 12) and have lived in the United States for at least 3 years. The interviews were all done in Nashville, TN, and were all conducted by the first author<sup>2</sup>. The interviews took place in locations chosen by the participants, including the Salahaddin Center, their homes, and their workplaces. The interviews took place in August, 2014. The sample included 20 Kurdish parents. While the mother and father were interviewed together in two interviews, the rest of the interviews were performed with either mothers (2) or fathers (16) (see **Table 1**). All participants preferred to conduct the interviews in the language spoken in their country of origin, which is Kurdish. The interviews lasted on average about 45 minutes, were tape recorded, and transcribed and translated by the first author. All participants were given fictitious names.

**Table 1.** Participant's characteristics.

Participants		Marital status	Age	Children		Educational level	Time spent in the U.S.	Class
Father	Mother			girl	boy			
Dana		Married	43	2	2	Bachelor	4 Years	Middle-class
Mardan		Married	49	2	2	Bachelor	22 Years	Middle-class
Hassan		Married	52	2	2	High-school	13 Years	Middle-class
Rebaz		Married	43	1	2	High-school	22 Years	Middle-class
Hiwa		Married	44	3	2	Bachelor	22 Years	Middle-class
	Nasrin	Married	49	2	4	Illiterate	22 Years	Middle-class
Bakhtyar		Married	52	3	4	Bachelor	22 Years	Middle-class
Wshyar		Married	63	4	3	Master	17 Years	Middle-class
Hazhar		Married	53	2	2	Diploma	22 Years	Middle-class
Aram		Married	62	3	4	Primary-school	23 Years	Middle-class
	Sahwnm	Married	41	1	1	Master	15 Years	Middle-class
Dler		Married	50	3	2	Primary-school	21 Years	Middle-class
Rzgar		Married	45	4	3	Bachelor	23 Years	Low-class
Wrya		Married	45	2	2	High-school	23 Years	Middle-class
Zana		Married	29	2	0	Diploma	6 Years	Middle-class
Karwan		Married	44	1	4	High-school	22 Years	Low-class
Hemn		Married	47	2	3	High-school	22 Years	Low-class
	Heshu	Married	47	3	4	Middle-school	22 Years	Middle-class
Bashdar		Married	37	1	2	High-school	22 Years	Middle-class
	Nazanin	Married	46	2	2	Primary-school	13 Years	Middle-class

<sup>2</sup>Even though it is difficult to determine the exact number of Kurds in the United States (because they come from different countries, estimates suggest there are about 40,000 Kurds (most coming from Iraq) currently live in the United States [56], and about a quarter of them has settled in Nashville, Tennessee. In 1998, Muslim Kurds established the Salahaddin Center of Nashville, which includes a community mosque and a center to promote religious studies and education. The center also serves as a meeting space for the Muslim community [56].



## 4. How Kurdish Parents Invest in Their Children's Education

Based on the analysis of the interviews, three themes pertaining to parental investment emerged. These themes are inter-related but since they address somewhat different analytical issues, we present them one by one. The first theme, *Education is Important*, captures the participants' commitment to their children's education and highlights the parents' efforts at making it possible for their children to succeed in an educational environment that not only is unfamiliar to the parents but also indifferent to the cultural values the parents adhere to. The analysis of the second theme, *Educating Boys and Girls*, illustrates the tension that characterizes the parents' ideas about gender and shows how they simultaneously try to adhere to principles of gender equity and hold on to assumptions about fundamental gender differences. The final theme, *Cultural Education beyond Schooling*, focuses on how parents try to compensate for an educational system that, in their view, teaches, but does not educate. Here the parents' struggles to ensure that their children's education is not simply about skills and degrees but also about culture and values. These themes align fairly well with existing scholarship, especially when it pertains to the role of education when immigrants settle in a new country, but also extend knowledge in important ways, especially when it comes to the intersection of gender, education, and culture.

### 4.1. Education Is Important

Most of the Kurdish parents we interviewed described how they were actively investing time, efforts, and money in their children's education. It is clear that they thought education was important and valuable, and also that they had high educational aspirations for their children. They also understood that their responsibilities as parents involved taking an active interest in their children's education. This understanding of education clearly affected their decisions to invest resources in their children's education, and they did so in a variety of ways, ranging from helping with homework, talking to teachers, and providing encouragement. Their investment in the children's education, in other words, looks fairly similar to the ways that non-immigrant parents take part in their children's schooling.

The parents' aspiration for their children was a strong motivator for their investment and they hoped that their goals for their children would inspire them to do well in school. That is, the parents saw a clear link between their educational aspirations for their children and the children's ability to do well in the world. Rebaz (43, one daughter and two sons, 22 years in the US), for example, said that he hoped his children would do well in school "in order to help themselves and other people as well." Some, like Dana (43, two sons and two daughters, 4 years in the US), linked their educational aspirations for their children to their coming to the United States:

Education is important for everyone. In fact, when I came to the USA, one of my goals was to provide better education for my children...it was my goal. And thanks to God, they are successful so far.



Hiwa (22, three daughters and two sons, 22 years in the US), similarly, wanted his children to “at least finish college and obtain a bachelor degree” and kept encouraging them to “become a doctor, scientists, and even astronaut because we Kurds do not have an astronaut”.

Taken together, the parents’ ambitions for their children expressed both instrumental and symbolic goals, but no one linked educational achievements primarily to monetary rewards. On the contrary, they were much more concerned with respect, status, and social position both in relation to their own culture and in relation to their host country, as we discuss more below. In other words, their aspirations for their children are entangled in their immigrant status in a variety of ways. Apart from the general concerns that broadly capture parental investment in education (homework, resources, encouragement, etc.), the parents we interviewed grappled with two issues that are more directly linked to their immigrant/minority status. The first of these refers to their efforts to establish good relationships with the schools, especially teachers, and the second refers to their ambitions to avoid discrimination.

#### **4.1.1. The Importance of Good Relationships with Schools**

The parents’ efforts to establish good relationships with their children’s teacher signal not only their investment in their children’s education, but also their unfamiliarity with the American school system and their awareness of their children’s potential marginality. That awareness simultaneously increased their reliance on teachers to support their children and strengthened their own sense of responsibility for their children’s educational successes. One of the mothers, Nasrin (49, two daughters and four sons, 22 years in the US), was herself illiterate but nonetheless strongly committed to her children’s education; in fact, she considered it her most important goal in life to ensure the educational success of her children:

In fact, in my entire life I have been a supporter of them, and their father as well. We provide the support because we want them to be successful and achieve good degrees...Our entire life is about helping them [and] we do anything we can for them to be successful.

Several of the parents emphasized how important it was for parents to take an active role in the children’s education. Bakhtyar (52, three daughters and four sons, 22 years in the US), for example, thought that parents should serve as the primary guides of their children’s education. To that end, he would sit down with his children at the beginning of each school year “and talk to them about schooling and education...and tell them about the important role of education for their future”. Rebaz 43, one daughter and two sons, 22 years in the US), similarly, emphasized that it was the parents’ responsibility to ensure that the children do well in school; in his view, parents “should put efforts into their children’s education” and should not just leave it to the teachers.

Nonetheless, the parents also recognized the importance of maintaining good relationships with their children’s teachers. Many of the parent, like Aram (62,

four sons and three daughters, 23 years in the US), saw a direct connection between their efforts to stay in touch with teachers and the quality of education their children received.

I ask the teachers to let me know if my children do anything wrong...If parents keep in touch with their children's school, the teachers and the school will take better care of the children. When they communicate with their children's school, schools do their work, and parents can monitor their children as well. The children will be under school and parental control. In this way students are obliged to study.

His points was not so much that parents should pressure schools to teach their children but instead to ensure the teachers that they were on the same side and together they could make the children study. Other parents too emphasized the importance of parent-teacher relationships. Sahwnm, for example, a mother with a master's degree who taught mathematics in Kurdistan before she came to America in 1999, says:

I participate in every meeting [with the school]. I do not miss out a single of them. I even sometimes know what will be discussed in the meeting but I still choose to go. I think there may be something new that I should know. I always interact with their teachers, whether emailing or making phone calls. Specifically this year, I have all their phone numbers and a list on my refrigerator's door. They answer all of our calls.

With evident pride, Hiwa, too, talked about his engagement with his children's school (he has three daughters and two sons):

They invite us when there is an event in school. They call or send a letter with our kids. We go to those events. I myself go to the school with my children at the beginning of every year. I like to see the face of the teachers and to talk to them. There is a meeting every two or three months. I go to those meetings as well ... the teachers are happy about it and say, "we wish every parents were like you".

To the participants in the study, in other words, an active involvement in their children's education represents the most basic parental responsibility and a necessity to ensure that their children have a successful life. But it also captures their uncertainty around American education and their efforts to ensure that their children's teachers think of them as good and respectable parents. In this sense, their efforts resemble the respectability strategies of other minority groups [51], and reflect ongoing worries among parents about how their children will be received and treated in majority environments.

#### **4.1.2. How the Parents Think about Discrimination**

Somewhat surprisingly, most parents said that they had not experienced discrimination in the United States and did not think that discrimination was an obstacle to their children's educational success. Rzgar (45, four daughters and 3 sons, 23 years in the US) put it this way:

Actually, this country is different from other countries...Educational institutions do not discriminate between original Americans and those who came from other countries...I do not see any difference between Americans and Kurds here...even companies, when they need employees, they do not look at you to see whether you are a Kurd, an Arab, or an American. In fact, they look at your educational level; they look at your résumé. They accept those who have good résumés...I am quite sure of what I say that companies look at people in this way.

Given the scholarship in this area, which clearly demonstrates the persistence of discriminatory practices in the educational system, Rzgar's insistence that discrimination is rare in the United States is noteworthy. And he was not the only one thinking this way. Hassan, for example, invoked the idea of America as an immigrant nation and concluded, like Rzgar, that the opportunities for immigrants are the same as for native-born Americans: "whatever is possible for American children, is possible for my children as well...Everything here depends on the individual's capacity".

This same sentiment also captures their experiences with the educational system. Far from complaining about the schools, the parents expressed appreciation and praised their children's teachers. Wrya (45, two sons and two daughters, 23 years in the US), for example, thought that "most teachers were good and he especially praised the teacher of one of his sons, who does not differentiate between a Mexican, a Kurd, and Somalian." Zana (29, two daughters, 6 years in the US), similarly, praised his children's schools for being "very open-minded towards minorities".

Despite this overt commitment to the American Dream by most of the participants—that is, the idea that anyone who works hard can make it—and the insistence that discrimination plays no part in the educational prospects of their children, there is nonetheless tension and contradictions in their thoughts and experiences. That is, even though Kurdish parents conclude that they have not been discriminated against, it is evident from their comments that they focused mostly on the absence of formal discrimination. Hiwa (44, three daughters and two sons, 22 years in the US), for example, observed that discrimination "is banned in America by law". As evidence of the absence of discrimination he offered that "when I go to somewhere and stand in a line, Americans and others come and stand behind me". The passionate way in which Hiwa and others emphasized the legal prohibition against discrimination in America suggests that the unspoken measure they use to evaluate their experiences is not a society free of discrimination but instead one where discrimination is everywhere. That is, their views of discrimination have been formed in relations to a very different social system than the United States. From an American perspective, the bar the Kurdish parents set for discrimination seems excessively high, but in being so it most likely says more about the historical treatment of Kurds in Iraq than the current treatment of them and their children as immigrants in the United States.

Moving beyond these proclamations about the absence of formal discrimina-

tion in the United States, it is evident in a few of the interviews that something looking like discrimination occasionally intrudes upon daily life. Karwan (44, four sons and one daughter, 22 years in the US) appreciated his life in the United States but still recognized that there is discrimination against Kurds in some cases. As he said: “There are people who discriminate against us but legally there is no difference. There may be people who ask ‘what you are doing here?’” Wshyar too acknowledged that there was some discrimination against Kurdish students in schools: “Of course there are some cases of discriminations; I do not say that all of them love Kurds and immigrants, but due to the active law, they cannot discriminate against students”.

Taken together, then, the parents’ refusal to think of discrimination as an obstacle in their educational aspirations for their children does not as much signal ignorance of how discrimination enters the educational trajectories of many minority students in the United States as it suggests parental appreciation for the absence of the kind of formally sanctioned discrimination that would make it impossible for their children to become doctors and scientists and live good lives. Given that absence, they are convinced they can ensure their children’s future success by their own efforts to encourage and support their children.

## **4.2. Educating Boys and Girls**

There is ample evidence that children’s gender plays a big role in how parents bring them up. And, although most formal barriers against gender equality have been removed, educational and economic institutions are still gendered in fundamental ways. But when it comes to parents’ educational investment in their children, it is no longer clear that parents automatically favor boys over girls. Because the Kurdish parents we interviewed come from a culture that is much more gender traditional and much more clearly demarcated by gender, it is important to explore the extent to which the gender of their children influences how the parents think about and enact educational investments. We discuss the findings here with the help of three sub-themes that illustrate somewhat different aspects of the parents’ concerns. 1) Equal education for boys and girls; 2) But boys and girls are still different; and 3) How to navigate friends and dating.

### **4.2.1. Equal Education for Boys and Girls**

According to the parents themselves, they do not differentiate between their sons and daughters when it comes to their educational pursuits. Almost all the participants articulated that, when it comes to education, what is good for a boy is also good for a girl. Rzagar (45, 4 daughters and three sons, 23 years in the US), for example, claimed that, for him, “they are both the same”. Hiwa (44, three daughter and two sons, 22 years in the US), similarly, said that he does “not differentiate between boys and girls, they are my kids, and we visit their schools equally”. Yet another parent, Heshu (47, 3 daughters and four sons, 22 years in the US), also emphasized that she treats her children the same: “There is no differences between boys and girls. What is the difference if they have problems?” And, when we asked Bakhtyar, Heshu’s husband, whether he would sup-

port his daughters taking music lessons outside of school, he indicated that he would, “because my daughters are free like my sons”.

When it comes to their children’s homework, several of the parents thought that girls are more interested in their studies than boys and also have better study habits. Wrya (45, two sons and two daughters, 23 years in the US) said that his daughters are both more serious and curious than his sons when it comes to studying and doing homework:

Girls care about their studies more than boys and they are better at doing schooling...boys also do their schooling well, but they are not like the girls...girls are not engaged in playing games, boys do play games and watch more TV, that is why I think girls do better at schools...My [youngest] daughter is curious, she likes her school, she comes to me so I listen to her while she is reading but the boys hide themselves (laugh)...they do not like their schools. I have to tell them to study.

Judging from comments like this, Kurdish parents do not differentiate between their children when it comes to educational encouragement and investment. It would be a mistake, however, to therefore conclude that they do not differentiate at all between their sons and daughters. On the contrary, as we discuss below, it is precisely because they are so thoroughly committed to a cultural arrangement that rests on the taken-for-granted assumption that men and women are fundamentally different that they so easily conclude that they treat their sons and daughters the same way when it comes to education.

#### **4.2.2. Boys and Girls Are Still Different**

When it comes to educational investment, the participants indicated that they support their children equally and make no differences among their children based on gender. Given the fairly traditional gender culture they come from, this was a somewhat surprising finding. But as we probed further, it became evident that the parents were nonetheless guided by a taken-for-granted assumption that their sons and daughters would live very different kinds of lives. Dana (43, two sons and two daughters, four years in the US), for example, talked about which kinds of jobs were appropriate for women and which kinds were not:

I encourage girls to become teacher, especially in elementary schools because it is better for them. I think they cannot do other jobs like working in Kroger and others like Walmart.

When we asked him why American women can work in the places he mentioned, but not Kurdish women, he replied that:

We are not American. And I believe that we should be fair about the equality between men and women. But it is impossible to provide one hundred percent of equality between men and women because God...umm how should I say it, it is impossible to see men and women as similar. Their capabilities are not similar.

It is a revealing answer in that he is simultaneously expressing support for gender equality and concluding that such equality is not possible because men and women are fundamentally different. His answer is also telling in that he sees no contradiction in his observation that American women have the capabilities that he says Kurdish women do not. It is based on statements like these that we conclude that the parents do indeed differentiate between their sons and daughters, despite their own assurances to the contrary.

Another father, Hassan (52, two sons and two daughters, 13 years in the US) plainly articulated that he loves and supports his daughters more than his sons because girls are weaker. When he talked about parents' responsibilities to support their children in education, he said that "I love my daughters more than my sons because girls need their parents more than boys do. We always say girls are weaker, therefore, we should help girls more than boys". His assumption that girls need their parents more than boys is clearly rooted in a Kurdish culture that takes gender differences for granted. His further elaboration makes this very clear: "If there are people who say boys and girls are equal, it is just theoretically true, in practice it is not true".

It is in large part this deep-seated assumption about difference that fuels the parents' unease around their children's cross-gender relationships with American children and youth (to be discussed further below). As long as their children are surrounded by other Kurdish children, it is as if this assumption provides enough protection for their daughters. Shawnm (41, one son and one daughter, 15 years in the US), for example, mentioned that she has sent her daughter to participate in sports activities at the mosque even though she was one of only very few other girls among many boys. She did it in order for her daughter to be exposed to Kurdish "culture, religion, language and those issues". In some ways it is noteworthy that she let her daughter be alone with boys but, given the context of the Mosque and the shared commitment to preserve Kurdish culture (to be discussed further below), she concluded that this was a safe and healthy environment for her daughter.

Other parents more clearly expressed concerns around the gender mixing and lack of oversight in American society, especially the schools. Hazhar (53, two sons and two daughters, 22 years in the US), for example, was clearly concerned about sending his daughters to school without a guardian; he said:

Both boys and girls should be taken care of by parents. Actually, girls should be more protected because as you know the American system here...especially at high school, they have a mixed system, boys and girls study together. Actually, if boys or girls make a small mistake, it can destroy their future. If we look at boys and girls from our culture's perspective, girls are different from boys.

It is evident that Hazhar struggles with the "mixed system" which in his view poses dangers to his daughters, but he also struggles a bit with articulating how he thinks about gender differences. He is neither invoking God nor nature, but

still emphasizes that “from our culture’s perspective” boys and girls are not the same. Even parents that proclaim to treat their boys and girls the same, still confirm the ambivalence that marks so many of the parents’ decisions and conclusions regarding their children’s gender. Karwan (44, four sons and one daughter, 22 years in the US), for example, said that when his son asked to participate in boxing, he let him, and he also said he would do the same if his daughter asked.

My son likes to participate in boxing, I allowed him to go. It is the same for my daughter. There is no difference between boys and girls. I love my daughter more than all four my sons. Whatever she likes to do, even if it is sport, I support her.

But when he say that he would let his daughter do whatever she likes “*even if it is sport*” he reveals and reinforces the assumption that sports is a questionable activity for girls to engage in.

The findings in this section shows that Kurdish parents’ insistence that they treat their sons and daughters the same when it comes to their education, cannot be taken at face value but needs to be examined in relation to their experiences and expectations when it comes to gender arrangements. It is not so that they are disingenuous when they say they support their daughters as much as their son. Rather, their commitment to gender equality is filtered through deep-seated assumptions about the kinds of lives that men and women in their community live. From this perspective, the emphasis on equality is more about equal value and equal love than it is about equal capacities and equal aspirations.

#### 4.2.3. How to Navigate Friends and Dating

While the participants insisted that they did not differentiate between their sons and daughters when it comes to supporting their educational pursuits, it is readily evident that they considered the school system a major challenge to their understandings of appropriate gender relations. Above we briefly mentioned Hazhar’s concerns with an educational system that indiscriminately mixes the genders, and in this section we expand on this issue. All participants, albeit in somewhat different ways, expressed some fear in relation to the lives their children were exposed to in America. Therefore, they tried hard to monitor their children and implement firm rules about what their children could and could not do. And it is here that the school system, where the children spend a significant amount of time away from the parents’ supervision, emerges a particularly challenging institution that threatens the parents’ gendered ambitions for their children.

The primary concern the parents expressed does not involve the educational content their children are exposed to but instead the other children. Hence, most parents tried to control their children’s friendships. Hazhar (53, two sons and two daughters, 22 years in the US), for example, cared very much about who his children were friends with and tried to ensure they did “not become friends with everyone” and instead encouraged them to find friends among “ourselves”, that is, the Kurdish community. Nasrin (49, four sons and two daughters, 22 years in



the US), similarly, worried that her children would end up with “bad friends”. It is clear from her comment that her worries are not simply about normal parental worries about bad influence but instead are linked to the fact that, in the United States, they do not “live among [their] own people”.

Such concerns for American friends were particularly pronounced when it comes to potential romantic relationships. Hemn (47, three sons and two daughters, 22 years in the US) spoke about his efforts to prevent his children from forming romantic attachments with Americans and proclaimed that his son had not had a girlfriend yet despite studying at college for eight years. As Hemn said: “I told him you are not allowed to bring a girl to this house. I do not allow any girl to come to this house because I do not allow my daughter to bring any boy to this house.” He also talked about his requirement for his daughter to get married with a Kurdish boy if she wants to get married:

It was my requirement for my daughter to get married with a Kurdish boy and she did it. It was my requirement and I told her if you want me to keep your relationship with me as your father, you have to get married with a Kurdish boy.

It is evident, then, that Kurdish parents not only restrict their children’s friendship with others, but also have strong concerns about who they date and marry. Hemn’s threat to deprive his daughter of his fatherhood if she did not marry a Kurdish boy was unusual only in its severity, but several other parents expressed similar concerns. To justify his efforts to limit his children’s relationship, another father, Karwan (44, four sons and one daughter, 22 years in the US), said:

When they were small, I told the kids to not have American friends...I told them [that] Americans are not like us, American girlfriends, as you know, if they are married with you and not agree with you, even over small things, they get divorced.

Another father, Dler (50, two sons and three daughters, 21 years in the US), went further and tied his concerns around his children’s romantic relationships to his own status and dignity as a parent; to allow his daughters and sons to have boyfriends and girlfriends would undermine his own position:

I am not talking about the legal things, but I do not accept things that people do. For instance, I do not accept that my sons and daughters have boyfriends and girlfriends. No person with dignity accepts that.

It is very clear that this father is not just concerned about his children, but also about how his children’s actions would reflect back on him as a father. The prospect of their children leaving their culture behind, starting dating and acting like Americans, and in the end marrying a regular American was one of the greatest concerns that the parents had about raising their children in America and sending them to American schools.

### 4.3. A Cultural Education beyond Schooling

The final theme to emerge from the data analysis is the importance of a cultural education beyond formal schooling. We have already briefly touched upon this issue above, both in terms of the meaning of education and around gender issues, but here we discuss it in greater detail. At its most fundamental level, this theme captures the strong sentiment expressed by the participants about the limitations of formal schooling when it comes to preparing their children for adulthood. The parents' concerns fell into two inter-related sub-themes: 1) School is not enough; and 2) How to transmit culture and national identity.

#### 4.3.1. School Is Not Enough

As immigrants, the Kurdish parents we interviewed were not simply concerned with making sure their children were successful in school, but also about the quality of the education their children received. It was evident when they talked about their role as parents in America that they thought their responsibilities were different here than they would have been at home. Several of the participants talked about the challenges involved in both teaching their children about their cultural values and ensuring that they attain an education. Back home, they emphasized, these two goals do not conflict with each other, but here they do, since the cultural values that permeate the American educational system are different from those the parents want to teach their children. Hence, they were more concerned with and more alert to the education process here than they would have been at home. Mardan (49, two sons and two daughters, 22 years in the US) expressed it this way:

There is a huge difference between here and Kurdistan. In Kurdistan we do not call it “teaching” alone, we call it “teaching and educating” which is quite more meaningful and sacred, but here it is solely about the teaching...So, this is a huge difference.

What he means by the distinction between teaching and educating is that schooling in Kurdistan involves more than just the teaching of facts; it also addresses ethical, cultural, and civic issues, thus making Kurdish education as much about basic human (Kurdish) values as with practical schooling. Thus, Mardan could *not* model his involvement in his children's education on his own father's actions; rather, he was trying to find a way to honor his commitment to education in a system that, according to him, teaches but does not educate:

When I was a student (in Kurdistan), I don't think my father visited the school more than two times [for parent-teacher meetings]. And despite of this, thanks to God, both the “teaching” and the “education” went well.

Another participant, Wshyar (63, three sons and four daughters, 17 years in the US) expressed a similar concern even as he praised the American educational system:

American education is the top one but if you do not educate your kids yourself, they are going to be deprived since in the schools they only teach,

not educate. Here there is only teaching, not educating, but in Kurdistan there is both.

It is against this background that we can understand the sense of responsibility that pervades the Kurdish parents' accounts of their children's education and the ambitions they have for their sons and daughters. It is not that they do not trust the American schools to teach their children, on the contrary, but instead that they consider that education to be insufficient.

Several of the participants mentioned that they send their children to a mosque which also serves as a community center; there the children can engage in not only religious studies but also a number of other educational activities. As Hazhar (53, two sons and two daughters, 22 years in the US) said:

On Saturdays and Sundays my kids have activities at the mosque...[There] they have classes, take field trips, have picnics, visit churches, and they volunteer for the mosque as a group.

To the parents who send their children to the mosque, which was most of them, it is evident that it serves an important educational and cultural role in the parents' efforts to ensure that their children are well educated.

Thus, while the parents we interviewed all thought their children's education was their responsibility, and generally agreed that the American educational system for the most part did what it was supposed to do—teach their children—their emphasis on the distinction between teaching and educating inspired them to take a more active role in their children's educational pursuits than their own parents had done for them. As we discuss further below, the most significant aspect of the difference between teaching and educating is the importance the parents place on transmitting their Kurdish cultural/national identity to their children.

#### **4.3.2. How to Transmit Culture and National Identity**

In light of scholarship in this area it is not surprising that immigrant parents are worried about retaining their culture and holding on to national identity. This is so especially in relation to their children, many of whom were born in the United States. More than half of the participants directly mentioned their concerns for national identity and culture, including especially religion, language, food and, as we discussed above, gender relations. When we asked the parents if there is anything that makes them especially concerned about their children as a result of living so far away from their homeland, they had lots to say. Bashdar (37, one daughter and two sons, 22 years in the US) observed that “If you lived in Kurdistan, you would not be worried about what your children learn. But our concerns here are religion, and for our children to learn the Kurdish language”.

Most parents spoke Kurdish at home with their children to make sure they learned the language. It is not so that they are trying to prevent their children from speaking American English, on the contrary, but instead that they want to ensure that their children remain Kurdish in a cultural sense. Shawnm (41, one daughter and one son, 15 years in the US), for example, linked language skills to

their cultural heritage:

We are Kurdish, our fathers and grandfathers are Kurdish, we came from Kurdistan and lived in different culture...I have not done anything if my children grow up here and not know the Kurdish language. If they do not know Kurdish, it means that I am a failing mother because in my opinion my language is essential.

Hemn (47, four sons and three daughters, 22 years in the US), similarly, shared his concerns for his children children's language but also lamented that it can be difficult for parents to prevail in their language ambitions for their children. As he said "they speak with each other in English at home but when I am there, I tell them [to use] Kurdish". He was so concerned about the language issue that he said: "If there was a Kurdish school, I would send them to that school to learn Kurdish language".

Given how long many of the participants had lived in the United States—most more than 20 years—it is perhaps a bit surprising to see how committed the parents were to raise their children as thoroughly Kurdish. Even though there was no indication in their statements that they ever planned to move back to Kurdistan, about half of them nonetheless talked about their children's success in America as a way to help their own nation, that is, Kurdistan. Nasrin (49, two sons and four daughters, 22 years in the US) put it like this:

We do not want anything from our children, just for them to be successful in their schooling and help their nation...It is a good thing for children to study and achieve a degree in America, which helps them manage their lives...This degree can be useful for them to be successful in their own country.

When asked to clarify what she meant by their own country, she said:

By country I mean Kurdistan. It is useful for America as well because we live here. But when they go back to Kurdistan, it would be very useful, and we will help them so they can be useful for our country.

Although she did not specify exactly how the children's success would benefit Kurdistan, she talked about her children's going "back to Kurdistan" as if it were a self-evident future development. Hassan (52, two sons and two daughters, 13 years in the US) too made a connection between his son's aspiration to become a doctor and the needs of Kurdistan; he said he was "happy with it because doctors are important and they serve people". We can use it in our country in the future...[to] help our people in our country. It is my hope that my children will serve my nation. "It is remarkable to see how this father integrates his dual ambitions for his son and for his nation. It is as if the ambitions were the same, and if one was possible, so was the other".

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study has contributed to our general understanding of how Kurdish parents

in the United States, as immigrants, think about, manage, and invest in their children's education. Generally speaking, the parents all value education and do what they can do to support and encourage their children's educational inspirations. In this sense, they are similar to many other parents [15] [25]. Because they are immigrants, however, the issue of education takes on additional importance [52] [53]. It is not primarily that they have difficulties understanding the education system in the United States, or that they are worried about what their children are taught in American school, but instead that they are concerned about what is *not* taught. They understood the American education system to be about merely teaching, not educating; in other words, the parents distinguished between teaching, which they saw as technical training, and education, which was more about nurturing personal growth. Hence, they felt obliged to be more engaged and involved with their children's schooling than they would have been in Kurdistan. Even though the Kurdish parents did not report experiences with direct discrimination, it is evident nonetheless that they are concerned with the issue. Moreover, their emphasis on the absence of legally sanctioned discrimination in the United States suggests that their expectations in this regard are modest, at best. It is likely, then, that they do not report discrimination because they are less persecuted in the United States than they were in their home country.

The major findings of this study refer to how Kurdish immigrants approach education from a gender perspective. According to the participants, they do not differentiate between sons and daughters when it comes to education, and they say they invest the same amount of resources in all their children, regardless of gender. Considering that both their culture and their religion propel them in the direction of more traditional gender arrangements [33] this was at first a surprising finding. Further questioning, however, revealed that despite a commitment to gender equality in education the participants were guided by a set of taken-for-granted assumptions concerning what they thought of as fundamental differences between men and women. Thus, the study lends support to the possibility that support for women's education does not necessarily challenge patriarchal gender relations [37].

This study also revealed that Kurdish parents are concerned about their cultural and national identity when they invest in their children's education. According to Cote and Bornstein [54] it is imperative for researchers to recognize that immigrants do not willingly relinquish their cultures of origin and adopt those of the dominant ethnic group. Rather, Kurds, like other immigrant groups, try to hold on to and transmit to their children their original ethnic and national identity [55]. Since Kurds do not yet have an independent country, it is possible that the Kurdish people are especially intent on keeping their national identity as a reaction to the desire for national independence. This sentiment was quite clear among the interviewees, who frequently made references to the importance they attached to skills and aspirations that could be used in the service of their homeland.

Taken together, then, the findings of this study make a few important contri-

butions to our understanding of parental investment in their children's education. One such contribution refers to the study population—Kurdish immigrants—which has hitherto been understudied. The findings reveal that, as parents, they are both similar and dissimilar to native-born Americans, whether minority or not, in their commitments to their children's education. They are similar when it comes to their general commitment to their children's education and their willingness to invest in it. As a minority group, however, they are perhaps less discerning than one would expect when it comes to the content of schooling. In this context, another important contribution of this study refers to the strategies the parents use to navigate a school system they know will not provide a sufficient education and that possibly might discriminate against their children if they do not work hard to show the teachers that they care about their children's success. The parents' solution to these dilemmas was to make a sharp distinction between teaching, which they viewed as the responsibility of the school, and education, which they saw as their own responsibility. Finally, and most importantly, the study contributes to our understanding of how immigrants that originate in gender traditional cultures navigate a school system that is designed on the basis of formal gender equality. The parents in our study did so, again, by emphasizing a distinction between the formal education that schools deliver (degrees and marketable skills) and a more comprehensive cultural education that is the parents' responsibility and that includes adherence to a set of cultural dictates that clarifies and instructs how men and women are to act in the world and in relation to each other.

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