LSE Middle East Centre

ART AND ACTIVISM IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

FEMINIST FAULT LINES, BODY POLITICS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SPACE

Isabel Käser
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LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series | 70 | September 2023

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Abstract

In recent years, a new generation of young artists and women's activists have emerged in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), who through their work and artistic production address issues around body politics, (religious) conservatism and intimacy. This paper analyses how women's initiatives, youth activists and (feminist) artists develop alternative discourses and practices beyond prevailing party politics and regional rivalries in a post-ISIS KRI. The paper maps out and portrays the main actors behind these emerging dynamics and asks how social and political change is imagined and enacted amidst ongoing political, military, and economic crises in the region. Drawing on transnational and post-colonial feminist literature on gender, conflict, feminism and non-state nationalism, we contend that a young generation of artists and activists are tapping into a global conversation of justice and equality, and in doing so are demanding and creating new modes of engagement. However, due to the failings of the 'would be' state system of governance, the ongoing economic crisis, the impact of past wars and ongoing insecurities, their space for art and activism remains scarce and their reach is limited. Nevertheless, there are fragments of art, youth and women's activism, spaces where visions of a more gender-equal Kurdistan free of violence are developed.

The research informing this paper was supported by the Academic Collaboration with Arab Universities Programme, managed by the LSE Middle East Centre and funded by the Emirates Foundation; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Emirates Foundation. The partner institutions were the University of Kurdistan Hewlêr and Culture Project.

The authors would like to thank Dr Bayar M. Sevdeen, Co-Principal Investigator, and Midya Khudhur, research assistant on the 'The Kurdistan Region of Iraq Post-ISIS: Youth, Art and Gender' project, for their contribution.

Introduction

Images of war and destruction, alongside reports about corruption, economic crises, and gender-based violence (GBV) have dominated the knowledge production of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Especially since 2014 – the start of the economic recession and the war against the so-called Islamic State (or Daesh) – and 2017 – the referendum for Kurdish independence – the region is finding itself in a perpetual state of crisis. Alongside the protracted conflicts and ongoing political and economic uncertainties, another more subtle shift has occurred: a new generation of young artists and activists have emerged, who in their artistic production portray issues around body politics, (religious) conservatism and intimacy. Their work employs a powerful visual and literary language to address patriarchy, misogyny, the onslaught of Daesh, and how these interconnections impact women's understanding and sense of space, identity and sexuality. Women, and an increasing number of men, are painting, performing and critiquing conservative gender norms and relations in their work.

This paper maps out and portrays the main actors behind these emerging dynamics in the KRI, and asks in what way young artists and (feminist) activists are imagining and creating alternative artistic and political discourses – beyond nationalist art and established political party structures and NGO activities.[1] To what extent do these have the potential to create more gender equal and transparent spaces and practices that challenge conservative gender norms and relations? And lastly; how are the youth dealing with the NGOisation of women's activism and limited resources and funding for the arts? The overarching themes that emerged from our interviews, the workshops, and the conference we organised[2] – GBV, fear, a lack of space, conservative backlashes, disillusionment, all in a context of a 'not-yet' or 'would-be' state[3] – guide this paper.

Over the span of 18 months (2021–23), our research team[4] conducted 48 semi-structured

[1] We focussed on youth (15–25 years of age) who are partaking in activism that is not affiliated with one of the dominant parties (PUK, KDP, Goran, United Islamic Party, Islamic Movement Party), and young independent artists who are producing artistic work that speaks to prevailing social and political issues in the KRI. We left out the many path-breaking older artists, artists in the diaspora, artists who benefit from the patronage of party functionaries and their galleries, and artists who produce work 'for art's sake'. Clearly, 'independence' is prone to shift; unaffiliated artists and activists might sometimes still get funding or an exhibition space for a project from a municipality or an international NGO.

[2] As part of this project, we conducted three 'Feminist Art Workshops' in Duhok, Sulaymaniyah and Erbil in April 2022, as well as a conference titled: 'What is Moving? Youth, Art, and Women's Activism in the Kurdistan Region' at the University of Kurdistan Hewlêr in November 2022, where many our research participants took an active role either as workshop facilitators or participants. Alongside the conference we organised the exhibition 'Imagining Things Differently: Contemporary Art in Kurdistan', where some of our respondents exhibited their work.

[3] A concept used by Umut Kuruuzum (based on the work of Martin Deman Fredriksen, 2014), expanded on further below. Umut Kuruuzum, 'In Search of Futures: Uncertain Neoliberal Times, Speculations, and the Economic Crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan', in *Comparative Kurdish Politics in the Middle East: Actors, Ideas, and Interests*, edited by Emel Elif Tugdar and Serhun Al (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 190.

[4] The authors are grateful for the contribution of the Co-PI Bayar M. Sevdeen and our research assistant Midya Khudhur for their invaluable contribution to this project. For critical and careful comments, we thank the anonymous reviewers, as well as Paniz Musawi Natanzi, Mairéad Smith, Nadje Al-Ali and

interviews with young artists and activists based in the governorates and cities of Duhok, Sulaymaniyah and Erbil.[5] Approximately half of our interviews took place in person, whereas the other half was conducted online, while a few participants chose to respond in writing. Some of those who we met in person showed us their studio (often at their house) or met us in popular cafés. Due to limited public space in the KRI, or the fragility and regulation thereof, much of the art and activism we were interested in was happening online, which is why we also monitored the social media output of our respondents.

Methodologically, our research is embedded in transnational and post-colonial feminist scholarship that looks critically at the intersections of women's activism for gender-based equality and justice amidst nationalist efforts and ongoing wars and insecurities. In our analysis we centre how structures of neoliberal development, militarisation and political violence inform young artists' modes of production and their notion of self in a context of insecurity, 'stuckedness'[6] and 'waithood'.[7] We contend that a new generation of artists and activists are tapping into a global conversation on justice and equality, however, due to the 'would be' or quasi-state structure of the KRI,[8] with very few checks and balances in place between authorities and citizens, the ongoing economic crisis, and the fragile security situation in the region, their space for activism, art making and exhibiting remains scarce and their impact is limited. We found that due to limited funding opportunities, a lack of art education, limited public space and interest, most visual art is produced in people's private spaces, such as apartments and bedrooms — both before, during and after the pandemic. While this differs from city to city (Duhok, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah),[9] most exhibitions that do take place are self-funded or organised by international donors,[10] and only a handful of artists gain wider visibility.

Hawhzin Azeez who read earlier drafts of this paper. The arguments (and their possible shortcomings) presented here are entirely our responsibility.

[5] The interviews were conducted in Soranî, Bahdinî, Arabic and English, translated and transcribed.

[6] Ghassan Hage, 'Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality' in *Waiting*, edited by Ghassan Hage (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2009), pp. 97–106.

[7] Bahar Baser and Shivan Fazil. '"They Hear Us But They Do Not Listen to Us": Youth Narratives on Hope and Despair in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq', *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 16 (2022): p. 11.

[8] Denise Natali defines the 'quasi-state' as a political entity that has internal but no external sovereignty, seeks autonomy or independence, can be state-like or a rebel movement with some territorial control, though lacking the juridical status of sovereign governments. Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), p. xxi.

[9] Sulaymaniyah is often called the 'cultural capital' of the region and has more spaces and initiatives dedicated to the arts, such as the Tobacco Factory, Esta Gallery, Vim Foundation and Art Frosh, or Kashkul at the American University of Iraq Sulaimani, see Joshua Levkowitz, 'Iraqi Artists Transform Derelict Tobacco Factory into Culture Hub', *Al-Monitor*, 2018. Available at https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/05/tobacco-factory-finds-second-life-as-culture-center.html; Winthrop Rodgers, 'Artistic Heart of Iraq's Kurdistan Thrives, but Wants More Public Engagement', *Al-Monitor*, 2023. Available at https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/02/artistic-heart-iraqs-kurdistan-thrives-wants-more-public-engagement; Kashkul Project, available at http://www.kashkul.com/#/; Esta Gallery, available at https://www.facebook.com/Esta-Gallery-107957462121822 (all accessed 8 March 2023), Art Frosh, available at https://artfrosh.krd/ (accessed 20 June 2023).

[10] In Erbil the French Institute and the Goethe Institute are the most visible with concerts, exhibitions and collaborations, e.g. Helan Project; a collaborative art exhibition project between Sêv Gallery, the Framing Photojournalism School and the Goethe Institute.

In what follows, we sketch out the conceptual debates this paper speaks to, before tracing women's activism and art making in the region. We then discuss the key obstacles and themes that shape the artwork and activism of our respondents – and how those link to the larger socio-political shifts in the region. We demonstrate that most of the young activists are organised in independent reading groups, literary and cultural circles, and argue that this marks an ongoing shift away from traditional party politics and the cultural establishment, and towards a diversification of spaces for critical engagement.

Im/Mobilities in a 'Would Be' State

Art as resistance and youth activism as a catalyst for change have taken up a prominent space in scholarship about the SWANA (Southwest Asian/North African) region, following the creative eruption that accompanied the so-called 'Arab Spring',[11] the early years of the Syrian Civil War,[12] and then again during the uprisings in 2019 in Iraq and Lebanon.[13] Since then 'popular culture' or 'cultures of the public'[14] have been theorised as a key 'site of struggle over gender, sexual and national identities, as a means for building political solidarity and reimagining citizenship [...].'[15] The work produced by our respondents does not necessarily fit the category of 'popular culture', as what they are producing is more nascent and often lacking the necessary funding or political momentum to be publicly visible. Yet, the young people featured here do problematise issues that plague the current-day KRI.

Recent work on youth in the KRI clearly indicates that a majority of the young population are disillusioned and dissatisfied with the authorities, particularly so since 2014 and the beginning of the economic recession. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) offers very few avenues for political participation, and the government fails to tackle corruption, ease the high levels of unemployment, manage the financial crisis or the widening political divisions.[16] As a result, many of our respondents talked about a sense of 'stucked-

[11] Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Charles Tripp, 'Art, Power and Knowledge: Claiming Public Space in Tunisia', *Middle East Law and Governance* 8/2–3 (2016): pp. 250–74; Ruba Salih and Sophie Richter-Devroe, 'Cultures of Resistance in Palestine and Beyond: On the Politics of Art, Aesthetics, and Affect', *The Arab Studies Journal* 22/1 (2014): pp. 8–27.

[12] Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution. Available at https://beta.creativememory.org/ (accessed 20 June 2023).

[13] Balsam Mustafa, 'All About Iraq: Re-Modifying Older Slogans and Chants in Tishreen [October] Protests', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58/3 (2022): pp. 401–20; Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed, eds. *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022).

[14] Charles Tripp, 'Political Thinking Performed: Popular Cultures as Arenas of Consent and Resistance', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48/1 (2021): pp. 7–23.

[15] Dalia Said Mostafa, Nicola Pratt, and Dina Rezk, 'New Directions in the Study of Popular Culture and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48/1 (2021): p. 2.

[16] Shivan Fazil, 'Understanding the Roots of the Younger Generations' Despair in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq', *Arab Reform Initiative*, 2023. Available at https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/understanding-the-roots-of-the-younger-generations-despair-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq/ (accessed 19 June 2023); Sajad Jiyad, Müjge Küçükkeleş and Tobias Schillings, 'Economic Drivers of Youth Political Discontent in

ness',[17] and find themselves in an extended state of 'waithood'; waiting for better days, tied to the anticipation for an independent Kurdistan, where things would improve.[18] Umut Kuruuzum uses the concept of a 'would be' state in his work on the KRI; an entity that is not yet, but that is already promising a brighter future after an unspecified time in this current transition period. However, this idealisation of the future (where many of the current problems will automatically be solved, thus need not be addressed now) as a technique of governance,[19] does not match the lived experience of many of our respondents, whose day-to-day is marked by uncertainty and precarity, rather than the belief in a hopeful future.[20]

Despite this general sense of stagnation, there is no movement as such in the KRI that fights for political change in an organised manner and uses creative means to do so. Instead, many young people attempt to migrate to Europe, or become active in non-political settings, smaller civil society initiatives or 'micro-politics',[21] and express their grievances through art. As part of these initiatives, young activists and artists are creating artistic work that often employs a feminist lens and puts forward a feminist critique. The term 'feminism' or 'feminist activism' are contested terms or identity markers in the KRI, as well as the wider SWANA region,[22] where it is often seen as something alien to 'culture' or as part and parcel of imperialist politics, invasions, and occupations.[23]

Iraq: The Voice of Young People in Kurdistan, Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar', *Global Partners Governance*, 2020, p. 50. Available at https://gpgovernance.net/publications/economic-drivers-of-youth-political-discontent-in-iraq-the-voice-of-young-people-in-kurdistan-baghdad-basra-and-thi-qar/ (accessed 6 March 2023); Kamaran Palani, 'Youth Radicalization in Kurdistan: The Government Response', *Youth Identity, Politics and Change in Contemporary Kurdistan*, edited by Shivan Fazil and Bahar Baser (Transnational Press: London, 2021), pp. 223–37.

[17] Ghassan Hage, 'Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality'.

[18] Baser and Fazil, '"They Hear Us But They Do Not Listen to Us"', p. 11.

[19] Kuruuzum, 'In Search of Futures', p. 190.

[20] Cale Salih and Maria Fantappie, 'Kurdish Nationalism at an Impasse', *The Century Foundation*, 2019. Available at https://tcf.org/content/report/iraqi-kurdistan-losing-place-center-kurdayeti/ (accessed 20 June 2023).

[21] Jiyad, Küçükkeleş and Schillings, 'Economic Drivers of Youth Political Discontent in Iraq'.

[22] Deniz Kandiyoti, 'Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Islam and Women's Rights', *Third World Quarterly* 28/3 (2007): pp. 503–17; Nadje Al-Ali, 'Feminist Dilemmas: How to Talk About Gender-Based Violence in Relation to the Middle East?', *Feminist Review* 122/1 (2019): pp. 16–31; Diana Alghoul, 'Interview: On the Shaming of Arab Feminists', *The New Arab*, 16 August 2017. Available at https://www.newarab.com/analysis/interview-shaming-arab-feminists (accessed 28 February 2023).

[23] Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Nadje Al-Ali, *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

Moving Away from '2003-Feminism'

Women had played crucial roles in the fight for Kurdish independence throughout the second half of the 20th century, both in political and military structures.[24] However, their demands of gender-based equality and justice were largely marginalised post-1991, when the process of institution-building began.[25] In the 1990s, after the no-fly zone was established, the region was ravaged by yet another war, this time between the rival Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). This was a time in which GBV was rampant, 'honour'-killings became a daily occurrence and women's visibility in public space was limited due to a lack of security.[26] Despite ongoing wars and instabilities, women have continuously and successfully organised around issues such as the personal status code, particularly so after 2003, when Saddam Hussein's regime fell, and liberal feminism came to Kurdistan as part and parcel or the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Today, the KRG officially pledges support to UN Resolution 1325, CEDAW and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, however, as Zeynep N. Kaya argues, this is also because '[b]y showing this kind of commitment to international standards of gender equality, the government aims to gain a positive image among key potential international allies.'[27] This resonates with many of our respondents, who feel that their government and its institutions only pay lip service to 'women's issues'. Nevertheless, feminists or non-feminist identifying women have been pushing for gender-based equality and justice from many different vantage points, but it is liberal feminism with 'gender mainstreaming', 'women's quotas', 'women's empowerment', and 'women's entrepreneurship', that now plays the most prevalent role; in policy making circles, and among the international organisations and NGO active in the KRI. This is also the kind of feminism that is now viewed most critically, often by young activists themselves, who feel alienated by the language, practices, and lack of long-term impact.[28]

Thus, aside from a wider anti-feminist backlash, which is a global phenomenon, we are also witnessing a 'not-feminism-anymore' moment in the KRI, where many young activists are reorienting themselves towards more 'local' or 'indigenous' ways of organising and

[24] Nazand Begikhani, Wendelmoet Hamelink and Nerina Weiss., 'Theorising Women and War in Kurdistan: A Feminist and Critical Perspective', *Kurdish Studies* 6/1 (2018): pp. 5–30; Choman Hardi, 'Women's Activism in Iraqi Kurdistan: Achievements, Shortcomings and Obstacles', *Kurdish Studies* 1/1 (2013): pp. 44–64.

[25] Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, 'Between Nationalism and Women's Rights: The Kurdish Women's Movement in Iraq', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4/3 (2011): pp. 339–55; Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*.

[26] Shahrzad Mojab, 'No 'Safe Haven': Violence Against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan', in *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, edited by Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 108–33; Minoo Alinia, *Honor and Violence against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[27] Zeynep N. Kaya, 'Outperforming Baghdad? Explaining Women's Rights in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq', *LSE Women, Peace and Security Blog*, 2017. Available at https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2017/02/08/outperforming-baghdad-explaining-womens-rights-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq/ (accessed 28 February 2023).

[28] This is not to say that women have not achieved a great deal in the KRI, but we found that most people do not attribute these successes to foreign-funded or government-endorsed women's organisations.

mobilising, or towards artistic and cultural knowledge production to make their voices heard. For many of our respondents, this is also a reaction to the elitist and corrupt structures and practices of women's organisations in the KRI, commencing in 2003:

> I think the women's and gender issues organisations have a negative impact here. When I say I am a feminist and I have a feminist message, I face criticisms. They say 'what are you talking about, in these organisations they sell and buy women'. There is a very negative image about them in society, and really, they are like that, they don't have impactful activities, [they organise] only meetings and spend the budget they have, meet there, talk about this and that, all the time the same old issues. They do not offer any new ideas to people.[29]

Lana Shekha, a young feminist, translator and member of Minerva,[30] shared a sentiment that we encountered many times during our research: young feminist activists no longer feel represented by mainstream organisations linked to one of the political parties, government institutions, or international funders. 'We need a different kind of feminism here, the one that we have had since 2003 did not do anything and does not fit with our culture' we were told on numerous occasions – indicating a critical engagement with liberal feminism, its links to neo-conservative politics and donor agendas, and the way these were deployed in the region.[31] This begins with a re-evaluation of the language that people can relate to. It also needs to be done in a way women – those meant to feel empowered – are then not left isolated or stigmatised in society because of it, insists Vajeen Shawkat, a sociologist at Duhok University who co-founded an NGO in the midst of the war against Daesh. She also brought up the issue of speed and planning: 'I feel that we are running too fast. [...] This whole going fast, it is not in any specific direction, it is just going. Nobody knows where we are going, we are just going!'[32]

This realisation that 'we have to take a step back and revaluate' is linked to the growing awareness among our interviewees that the rapid neoliberal development of the region post-2003, has led to a huge disconnect between language and practice, vision and actual impact, beneficiaries and those left behind.[33] Another reoccurring sentiment was that the '2003 generation' – perceived as corrupt, unprofessional and superficial – had ruined feminism for young people now, who wish to reclaim it but feel like they have to debunk so many misconceptions first.[34]

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[29] Online interview with translator and activist Lana Shekha, 28 December 2021.

[30] Minerva is an online platform and publisher founded in 2021 by a group of young people based between the diaspora and the KRI, promoting art, feminism, critical thinking and analysis. Available at https://facebook.com/profile.php/?id=100069211967237 (accessed 7 September 2023).

[31] This rethinking and challenging of Western or liberal feminism also resonates with Jineolojî (Kurdish for 'women's science'), led by the Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement, put in practice across different parts of Kurdistan, Europe and Latin America. See also: Eleonora Gea Piccardi, 'The Challenges of a Kurdish Ecofeminist Perspective: Maria Mies, Abdullah Öcalan, and the Praxis of Jineolojî', *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 33/1 (2022): pp. 46–65; Nadje Al-Ali and Isabel Käser, 'Beyond Feminism? Jineolojî and the Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement', *Politics & Gender* 18/1 (2022): pp. 212–43.

[32] Interview with sociologist Vajeen Shawkat, Erbil, University of Duhok, 21 June 2022.

[33] Kuruuzum, 'In Search of Futures'.

[34] Aside from being 'alien' such misconceptions include the feminist=prostitution link, as some women's

Aside from misguided speed, and alienation, fear was another reoccurring theme during our interviews: of bad gossip, of transgressing certain lines, of the backlash one might face when they do take a public stand as women. Raz Xaidan, a now London-based multidisciplinary artist who previously moved back to the KRI and worked in Erbil for many years, explained:

> That's why you do have little start-ups here and there, but there is no movement because ultimately no one wants to deal with the backlash. No. We have such a toxic, toxic relationship towards women. A woman can't even be featured on the news without receiving thousands of comments under her video. [...] We degrade our women so much that even if there was a feminist movement, it would not last for more than a few hours or a few days at most, because our women would be too afraid to join.[35]

It is not our aim here to analyse the state of feminist activism or the (in)effectiveness of state organisations working on women's issues, but to pinpoint some of the reasons why many of our respondents have distanced themselves from women's organisations and NGOs, and turned towards other forms of engagement. In the following section, we briefly look at women's art making in the KRI historically, before focusing on some of the new spaces and initiatives. We outline the challenges of (semi-) independent art production or activism, and ask what kind of discourses, organisational practices and artistic work are produced in those emerging spaces.

Contemporary Questions, Old Dilemmas: Art Making Post-2014

In June 2021, an exhibition called 'Zherzemin' (basement) took place in the former Red Prison in Sulaymaniyah, showcasing the works of a young generation of artists who addressed questions around gender and sexuality in Iraqi Kurdish society. The Red Security Prison known as *Amna Soraka* in Kurdish was a notorious prison where countless political prisoners were subjected to torture and execution during Saddam's reign, and which was transformed into a museum after 2003. The exhibition's curator Niga Salam talked about the exhibition as being part of a 'new movement', a 'new perspective', as the artworks on display put the spotlight on issues affecting the female body: the rise in plastic surgeries, conservative gender norms, GBV and the question of ownership of women's bodies.[36]

This form of artistic knowledge production can be traced back to the aftermath of the 1991 Kurdish uprising, when artists started problematising topics such as identity, violence, war, freedom and gender in their work. In the 1990s, female artists in Kurdistan may not have used the term feminism – and some continue to be wary of the term – but used art to express the injustices and violence inflicted upon them because of their gender and ethnicity.[37]

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organisations have been accused of trafficking women. Other young activists struggle with the accusation that if they engage in feminist activism, this is just to gain the freedom to have pre-marital sex. Interview with Vajeen Shawkat; interview with feminist activists Hevî and Rezhwan, Erbil, 28 April 2022; online interview with student activist Srusht Birani, 1 July 2022.

[35] Online interview with multidisciplinary artist Raz Xaidan, London/Erbil, 8 September 2022.

[36] Khazan Jangiz, 'Zherzemin: Womanhood and Its Place in Kurdish Culture and Society', *Rudaw*, 2021. Available at https://www.rudaw.net/english/world/27062021 (accessed 6 March 2023).

[37] See the work of Sakar Faruq and Shilan Jabar, Fatima Barznge, available at https://fatimabarznge.nl/blog/,

It was after 2003, and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, that the younger generation in Kurdistan was increasingly exposed to different knowledges and ways of producing art. The generation born in the 1990s grew up amidst the Kurdish uprising and subsequent civil war, as well as enduring economic and social upheavals and a lack of stability. Their art is reflective of the issues that defined this era. Artists such as Rozhghar Mustafa, Poshya Kakil, Avan Omar, Kani Kamil, Avan Sadiq, Sakar Sleman, Shilan Jabbar, Sakar Faruq and Rezan Betullah, among others, created art that addresses and problematises issues such as nationalism, freedom, the plight of female prisoners, unemployment, poverty and GBV.[38]

In 2008, Poshya Kakil organised a performance in front of the Emergency Hospital in Erbil, in which women who committed self-immolation were brought for treatment.

Figure 1: Poshya Kakil, *Tied Up*, Erbil, 2008

and Chiman Ismail, available at https://artfrosh.krd/artist/chiman-ismail/ (both accessed 20 January 2023).

[38] This part of Kurdish art history is little researched. Interviews in Kurdish, conducted by artist Avan Omar with some artists from that era can be found in *Culture Magazine*. Available at http://cultureproject.org.uk/kurdish/author/avan-omer/ (accessed 5 March 2023). Overall, Kurdish cultural and artistic heritage has only recently been given more scholarly attention, zooming in on topics such as women's voices, (Yezidi) poetry and the linkages between art and nationalism in the different parts of Kurdistan. See for example: Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah, 'Art and Agency: Transforming Relationships of Power in Iraqi Kurdistan', in *Handbook of Research on Promoting Peace Through Practice, Academia, and the Arts*, edited by Mohamed Walid Lutfy and Cris Toffolo (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2019), pp. 320–42; Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah, 'Constituting Histories Through Culture In Iraqi Kurdistan', *Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies* 2 (July 2018): pp. 65–91; Joanna Bocheńska, ed., *Rediscovering Kurdistan's Cultures and Identities: The Call of the Cricket* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Marlene Schäfers, *Voices That Matter: Kurdish Women at the Limits of Representation in Contemporary Turkey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022); Mairéad Smith, '"We Are Rich in Mass Graves": Representing a History of Violence through Êzîdî Poetry', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (March 2020): pp. 1–21; Alireza Korangy, ed., *Kurdish Art and Identity: Verbal Art, Self-Definition and Recent History* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2020).

Poshya's act was daring and bold, and it marked the first time that art was used as a form of public protest and intervention, expressing despair and opposition to the rampant violence against women in Kurdish society. Poshya's work also still resonates today; much of the artwork we analysed centres around GBV. In what follows, we outline some of the main challenges and themes that shape and occupy the work of the new generation producing work post-2014 and the war against Daesh, which we read as a critical event in the way Kurdish youth assess their lifeworld.[39]

During our research it became evident that most young artists feel isolated, undervalued, and underfunded.[40] Many of them produce their art or write their stories in their bedrooms, self-curate, and self-fund their exhibition, and organise their own reading groups or movie screenings. Almost every one of our respondents emphasised that their society, or sections of it, don't value art or the role of artists enough. Vajeen Shawkat found that: 'Art in general is not very supported. Business brings money in a capitalistic mindset, and art is just one of these things that disappears. People can see it and enjoy – they can see a beautiful painting, but they wouldn't pay anything to get that painting because it's yeah...whatever'.[41] Aside from being undervalued, artists have to take into consideration the sensitivities of a socially conservative society they live and create in. Rooz Mohamed, a multidisciplinary artist from Sulaymaniyah says that:

> When I do work, I have to take into account the society's psychology. Here you have to be careful, if you are direct, you face a lot of obstacles. I have worked around religion, cultural problems, gender and some other themes, but indirectly, like in the graphic novel *Between Two Rivers*.[42] I think it is better this way, because then people can think about it. But if say directly this is against ISIS – before they understand – they will reject it.[43]

Women not only have to tread carefully in a context of social and religious conservatisms, but also have to work extra hard to be taken seriously as artists. Raz Xaidan, who also wanted to support local businesses with her work, recounted:

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[39] Lana Askari, 'Making Heaven in a Shithole: Changing Political Engagement in the Aftermath of the Islamic State', in *Youth Identity, Politics and Change in Contemporary Kurdistan*, edited by Shivan Fazil and Bahar Baser (Transnational Press: London, 2021), pp. 185–200.

[40] The comparative lens is not our focus here; however it is important to note that each part of Kurdistan (Rojava, Bakur, Rojhelat, Başur) has its own history of cultural and artistic knowledge production in Arab, Turkish, Syrian, or Persian central states, which all have their own strategies to oppress, police and marginalise their Kurdish population. Compared to other parts of Kurdistan, artists and activists are relatively free to produce work in the KRI.

[41] Interview with Vajeen Shawkat.

[42] Rooz's graphic novel is available at https://www.roozmm.info/copy-of-between-two-river-ku-1 (accessed 6 March 2023).

[43] Online interview with multidisciplinary artist Rooz Mohamed, 27 December 2021.

> I wanted to make sure a lot of my prints were made in Kurdistan, printed in Kurdistan. The frames were handmade in Kurdistan, but who's gonna do all of this? So, I had to go into a lot of the bazars on my own. And unfortunately, these are predominantly male bazars. I've been to the pits of the bazars in Hewlêr, just to find fibres for the back of frames [...]. I'm going out of my way to make sure everything's locally sourced so that you get the money, not someone in Turkey or Iran gets the money, you get the money. So, I keep it here in the economy and it's locally produced but because I'm a woman ordering it, it's about 25 extra steps I have to take to get what I want. Yes. So that was a horrible experience, which is why I stopped doing frames. [...] It depleted me completely making art [in Kurdistan]. [It is a] lack of care. It's lack of respect. It's a lack of dignity for artists. It's a lack of questioning. It's lack of appreciation.[44]

Raz Xaidan's experience mirrors that of many creatives who start off with an ambitious vision of how to merge different knowledges and create something new in the KRI, particularly women in this field. Nawras Hadi, an Erbil-based poet and teacher, faced similar pushback against her work: 'As a female, people do not believe that you can be a poet, and don't believe in you and your abilities. Most of the time they say that you didn't write these poems yourself, they belong to someone else.'[45]

These challenges, and the above-mentioned standing of feminism more broadly in Iraqi Kurdish society, mean not many young women who participated in our research identified as such. Some participants deliberately omit that part of their (political) identity from their work. Bala Ahmed, an Erbil-based artist, does not call herself or her art 'feminist' as she believes it would limit the reach of her work. 'Because my work is about women, religion, and conservatism in Kurdish society, I have received a lot of pushbacks from the Islamists, even without calling it feminist art.'[46]

[44] Interview with Raz Xaidan.

[45] Online interview with poet Nawras Hadi, 12 March 2022.

[46] Interview with painter Bala Ahmed, Erbil, 16 April 2022.

Figure 2: Bala Ahmed, *Social Obstacles*, Acrylic on canvas, 2022

Like Bala, a number of our respondents noted the increasing influence of Islamic parties in their spaces of work and activism. After the independence referendum in 2017, and the political crisis that followed it, Islamic parties attempted to fill the political vacuum and targeted youth, especially young girls. Artists, feminists and LGBTIQ+ activists,[47] who in recent years have gained some ground, are directly impacted by this Iraq-wide conservative backlash,[48] with concern mounting over the way in which conservative forces are increasingly dominating the already limited public spaces and debates about women, gender and sexuality.[49]

[47] LGBTIQ+ artists and activists do not feature in this paper, due to their precarious situation in the KRI, which currently does not allow for overt activism.

[48] Dana Taib Menmy, 'Iraqi Parliament Discusses Bill to Criminalise Homosexuality', *The New Arab*, 18 August 2023. Available at https://www.newarab.com/news/iraqi-parliament-discusses-bill-criminalise-homosexuality (accessed 4 September 2023).

[49] Rasha Younes, 'A Push to Silence LGBT Rights in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq', *Human Rights Watch*, 7 September 2022. Available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/07/push-silence-lgbt-rights-kurdistan-region-iraq (accessed 3 March 2023); Dilan Sirwan, 'Sulaimani's LGBT+ Community "Terrified" after Security Forces Launch Crackdown', *Rudaw*, 2 April 2021. Available at https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/02042021 (accessed 3 March 2023); Hawzhin Azeez, 'Constructing Their Own Liberation: Youth's Reimagining of Gender and Queer Sexuality in Iraqi Kurdistan', in *Youth Identity, Politics and Change in Contemporary Kurdistan*, edited by Shivan Fazil and Bahar Baser, Peace, Conflict and Violence Series 1 (London: Transnational Press, 2021), pp. 75–95.

Another obstacle for young artists is the lack of art education. Every major city has a fine art department at the universities,[50] but the quality of teaching, exposure and exchange varies widely. She Barani, an artist from the Bardarash District, recounted during our interview how she had to struggle to get into art school in Duhok in the first place, despite her 96 percent high school average – and perhaps because of it. Not only did school administrators refuse to believe that she would want to study art with such a high mark, later she also faced opposition to her final graduation project, a piece showing women in the nude which was banned from being exhibited in the final show. 'Because I did not want to get a low mark, I tried to cover the sensitive places but still everyone knows that that used to be a nude woman who I captured in my drawings.'[51]

Solin Nirvana, a young artist originally from Amudê in Northeast Syria (or Rojava), who came to Erbil in 2013 as a result of the Syrian Civil War, also has a number of paintings that expose the female breast. She decided to take them out of her first exhibition at the French Institute in Erbil, which was showcasing her work in celebration of International Women's Day in 2021. 'I didn't know how the community will react to them, or if they would accept such kind of art. So, I cancelled the nudes'.[52]

For many young artists, getting the support of foreign funders is the only way to gain a certain visibility, though naturally only very few of them are chosen, mentored, and exhibited by international cultural institutions, such as the Goethe Institute or the French Institute, which dominate the cultural scene, particularly in Erbil.[53] These funds sometimes come 'with strings attached'. Raz Xaidan observed the ways in which the process of allocating funding to 'Iraqi artists and arts' is politicised and linked to bigger goals of Iraqi nation-building:

> A Kurdish graphic designer would create this logo and win the competition as an 'Iraqi graphic designer'. Well actually this graphic designer has been working non-stop to be labelled a Kurd. But because your funding only allows it for Iraqis. So, these little things as a creative really pisses you off. And you see so many examples of it, with many consulates.[54]

Not just foreign funding is political, but also the scarce local funds require an alignment with one of the political parties. Hardi Sabah, a Sulaymaniyah-based artist originally from Kalar explained that if an artist seeks to receive funding from the KRG, it is usually conditional: 'For artists who aren't part of any political parties, their living condition or their art work is not supported. The Artists Syndicate, and the relevant art directorates in KRI will not support anyone who isn't affiliated with their ideologies or parties or doesn't work according to their will'.[55]

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[50] College of Fine Arts (Duhok), College of Fine Arts (University of Sulaymaniyah), Institute of Fine Arts (Sulaymaniyah), College of Fine Arts (Salahaddin University, Erbil). Find images of one of their most recent exhibitions on 'women's art' here: 'Erbil Art Exhibition Spotlights Political Realities and Women's Voices', *Shafaq News*, 16 May 2023. Available at https://shafaq.com/en/Kurdistan/Erbil-art-exhibition-spotlights-political-realities-and-women-s-voices (accessed 31 May 2023).

[51] Interview with visual artist and teacher She Barani, Duhok, 7 June 2022.

[52] Interview with painter Solin Nirvana, Erbil, 23 April 2022.

[53] During our interview, Mutaz Abdulrahman, project manager at the Goethe Institute in Erbil, bemoaned the fact that 'we are everywhere', hinting at the dominant role the Goethe Institute plays. He also outlined their goal to build an independently viable infrastructure for artistic and cultural production, which had been destroyed by years of war and ongoing instabilities. Interview with the Goethe Institute's Mutaz Abdulrahman, Erbil, 23 June 2022.

[54] Interview with Raz Xaidan.

[55] Online interview with painter Hardi Sabah, 3 January 2022.

Not everyone interviewed found fault with the government or international organisations – some took a more 'do it yourself' approach. Lanah Haddad, an archaeologist, entrepreneur and founder of the board game brand *Urbilum,*[56] considered the region open to innovative ideas:

> I feel that there is not much of direct restriction in Erbil, when it comes to pushing for development in different fields to improve the life of the society. As long as you are not working on political ideologies [...]. If you are not crossing those borders, you are very safe here to do anything you want. Especially in the creative fields. It is very welcomed.[57]

Within the framework of start-ups and young entrepreneurship Haddad's assessment certainly rings true. This has created a new and somewhat vibrant industry of co-working spaces, emerging brands and new services in cities like Sulaymaniyah and Erbil.[58] However, these are often transient and mainly by and for the middle- and upper class who have access to the relevant education, technology, and language to attract funders – as such these initiatives remain within the 'ecosystem' of neoliberal development and progress.

Aside from (the lack of) funding and space, dominant party politics, controversies around nudity, or questions surrounding who controls which body, the main themes depicted in the artwork we saw can be categorised as: 1: Violence, trauma and isolation, 2: Women's solitude, or women reclaiming their time and space, 3: Re-envisioning intimacy, 4: Modernised Kurdish folklore and tradition, 5: Body politics post-2014.

These categories are not intended to oversimplify the work and intentions of the artists themselves, but to organise our reflections on the artworks and describe larger trends.

1. Violence, Trauma and Isolation

Much of the art that we saw bears witness to the injustices Kurds as a nation, and particularly Kurdish women, have endured and continue to endure: from being victims of GBV, to the isolation and suffocation in private spaces,[59] to the sense of hopelessness and powerlessness that many of our respondents spoke about. We saw countless depictions of women curled up in darkness, suffering their abuse alone, or of violent male gazes and groping.

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[56] Joshua Levkowitz, 'New Iraqi Board Games Revisit Cultural Heritage, Create Common Ground', *Al-Monitor*, 27 October 2019. Available at https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/10/iraqi-boardgames-reclaim-cultural-heritage-and-create-common.html (accessed 3 March 2023).

[57] Interview with archaeologist and entrepreneur Lanah Haddad, Erbil, 15 March 2022.

[58] Azeez, 'Constructing Their Own Liberation', p. 82.

[59] Feminist geographers have problematised the division between public (political) and private (apolitical), by illustrating how the 'home is a complex and complicated space and one that offers important insights for social, cultural, and political epistemologies'. Jennifer L. Fluri, 'Feminist Political Geography', in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Geography*, edited by John Agnew, Virginie Mamadouh, Anna J. Secor and Joanne Sharp (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 237. Despite this fluidity, spaces such as bodies, homes, streets, universities, workplaces, or cafés were still often seen by our respondents as public and private, safe and unsafe, feminine and masculine. See also Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji, 'The Feminization of Public Space: Women's Activism, the Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2/2 (2006): pp. 86–114; Martina Rieker and Kamran Asdar Ali, eds, *Gendering Urban Space in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Mona Fawaz, Mona Harb and Ahmad Gharbieh, 'Living Beirut's Security Zones: An Investigation of the Modalities and Practice of Urban Security', *City & Society* 24/2 (2012): pp. 173–95; Farha Ghannam, 'Mobility, Liminality, and Embodiment in Urban Egypt', *American Ethnologist* 38/4 (2011): pp. 790–800.

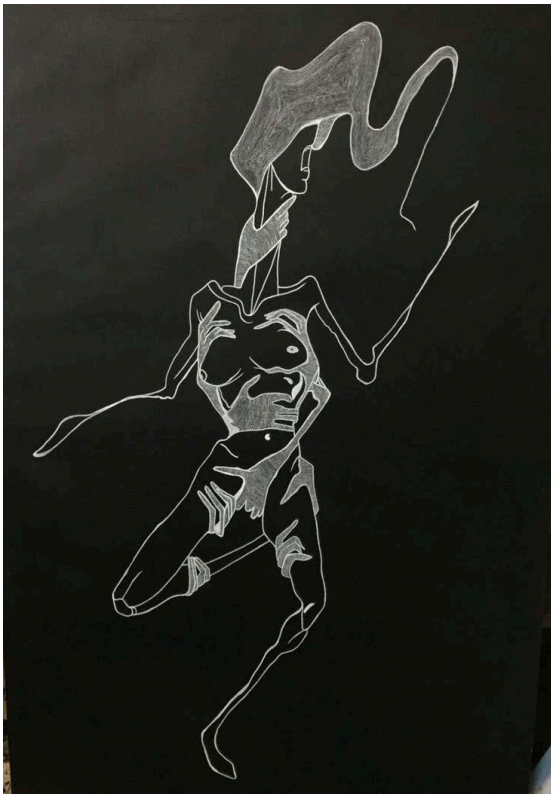

Figure 3: Lareen Aram, *Sexual Abuse*, highlighter and glue pen on paper, 2019

Two works of installation art that problematise GBV caught our attention during our research. Firstly, Tara Abdullah's 2020 project 'Meina' (feminine): an installation consisting of a 4,800-metre-long wash-line covered with the clothes of almost 100,000 female survivors of GBV. The installation stretched across the city from Nali Park to the public court of Sulaymaniyah. The installation immediately stirred controversy; it was damaged on the night of its public unveiling and shortly after taken down by the artist and her team.[60] Despite how short-lived the installation was, it was nonetheless a powerfully visible symbol of how rampant GBV continues to be in Iraqi Kurdish society, and perhaps also pointed a finger at the ways in which official institutions are failing to protect women.[61]

Secondly, Diyako Xatun's installation 'Honour Is A Membrane' was a public performance in 2019 in Sulaymaniyah, problematising the role of virginity and the continuous and violent attachment of honour to women's bodies. The audience was part of the performance, witnessing the artist doing the cutting of the membrane (big sheets of fabric), and could then walk through the different layers of bloodied 'folds'.[62]

[60] Savan Abdulrahman, 'A Women's Art Project in Sulaymaniyah Arouses Controversy', *Medya News*, 2020. Available at https://medyanews.net/a-womens-art-project-in-sulaymaniyah-arouses-controversy/ (accessed 17 May 2023).

[61] Haje Keli, '"There Is Always a Reason for the Beatings": Interrogating the Reproduction of Gender-Based Violence within Private and Public Spaces', in *Geographies of Gender-Based Violence: A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective*, edited by Hannah Bows and Bianca Fileborn (Bristol: Bristol University Press 2022), pp. 200–12.

[62] Find video of the artwork and performance here: 'Honour Is A Membrane', *Culture Project for Art, Feminism and Gender*, 2019. Available at https://cultureproject.org.uk/honour-is-membrane/ (accessed 3 March 2023).

2. Women's Solitude, or Women Reclaiming Space

Another theme that was apparent in the art that was shown to us was women's solitude. We read this as an expression of women claiming space, time and individuality within a society that upholds the importance and centrality of the (extended) family. As illustrated by the artwork of Sonia Basheer on the cover of this paper, some women are simply gazing into the distance, longingly, or with eyes closed, focussed inward or exhausted, others are smoking and drinking, sometimes alone, sometimes with a friend. These paintings depict women who exist on their own terms, temporarily removed from their boundedness to the family, or the social realm more broadly.

3. Re-envisioning Intimacy

Pairs were also frequently painted; friends gently leaning on each other, or couples resting on the other's lap. This body of work illustrates what intimacy does or could look like; an intimacy away from society's norms and its conservative regulations around shame/honour; free of violence, with each in their power.

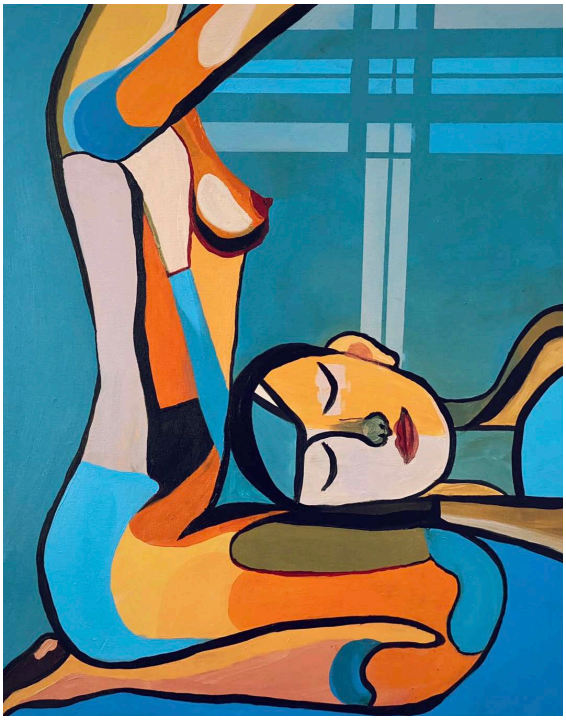

Figure 4: Solin Nirvana, *Intimacy*, acrylic, Acrylic on canvas, 2020

Given the focus of our research, a lot of the art we looked at depicts women. A notable exception is the work of Hardi Sabah, whose paintings feature Kurdish men in the nude. This would have not been possible in the 1980s and 1990s as removing clothes from men was often associated with imprisonment and torture – acts of humiliation in Saddam's prisons. Sabah's works challenges prevailing notions around masculinity, and particularly militarised masculinity, which is still prevalent in Kurdish society after decades of military struggle and wars. The men in Sabah's paintings do not embody heroism and strength but are vulnerable and pensive, bound in intimate moments to others.[63]

[63] Artworks that problematise (Kurdish) masculinity are few and far in between, and masculinity is

Figure 5: Hardi Sabah, *No Title*, oil on canvas, 2022

4. Modernising Folk Art

A breadth of younger artists delve into the customs and literary legacies of the Kurdish cultural canon; poetry, mythology, tattoos,[64] clothing, and archaeological and cultural traditions. They use collage,[65] illustration and digital art to add a 'modern twist', bringing history into the present. In their ongoing search for an 'identity' – not just Kurdish but also other ethnicities living in the KRI such as Yezidis – they are exploring the question of 'who are we?' and 'where do we come from'?[66] They present this as a move to decolonise art, language, heritage, and themselves – from the impact of Arab, Turkish, Persian, and 'Western' influences.[67] In this process, women are put centre-stage, perhaps in an attempt to rediscover a 'collective life', where power was distributed more equally and communal ties of support and solidarity were stronger.[68]

understudied not only in Kurdish studies but also in the study of Kurdish art. Notable exceptions are: Ahmet Serdar Aktürk, 'Female Cousins and Wounded Masculinity: Kurdish Nationalist Discourse in the Post-Ottoman Middle East', *Middle Eastern Studies* 52/1 (2016): pp. 46–59; Andrea Fischer-Tahir, 'Gendered Memories and Masculinities: Kurdish Peshmerga and the Anfal Campaign in Iraq', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8/1 (2012): pp. 92–114.

[64] See Khizan Khasro's work, available at https://www.instagram.com/p/ChujF1eMERQ/ (accessed 21 June 2023)

[65] See Raz Xaidan and the Darling Beast, available at https://www.instagram.com/thedarlingbeast/ (accessed 21 June 2023).

[66] Online interview with designer Haron Younis, Co-founder of the Cinema Club in Duhok, 7 October 2022.

[67] Online interview with visual artist Diyako Xatun, 14 March 2022.

[68] Interview with Rooz Mohamed.

Figure 6: Halala Abubakir, *Star Dust*, digital, 2022

Arjun Chowdhury calls this the 'colonial episteme', customs through which postcolonial subjects present themselves and their seemingly unchanging traditions.[69] On the basis of these culturalist views, political claims can be made or refuted, which is often the case when it comes to (liberal) norms around gender equality and justice. We found these 'colonial epistemes' not only in some of the art we analysed, but also in relation to the rejection of certain feminisms, that do not fit 'Kurdish culture'. This is an argument that was made by some of the women we interviewed, who are critical of 'Western feminism', as well as reactionary forces, such as Islamic parties, who oppose 'Western values' regarding women, gender and sexuality being imposed on Kurdish Muslim society.

5. Body Politics Post-2014

The attack of Daesh and the speed and violence with which they took control over large parts of Syria, Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan sent shockwaves through the region and had a tremendous impact on Kurdish youth, who not only saw their very existence in jeopardy, but also opposed the way in which Daesh used Islam and women's bodies to demarcate

[69] Arjun Chowdhury, 'International Norms in Postcolonial Time' in *Against International Relations Norms: Postcolonial Perspectives*, edited by Charlotte Epstein (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 106–22.

their reign. The horrific crimes Daesh committed were not the first time women in the KRI, Iraq and the wider region experience the ways in which political parties and movements use women's bodies as markers of 'us' versus 'them', however, it was perhaps one of the most brutal and most spectacularly staged instance in recent history. [70]

Artists and activists in the KRI, like those taking part in the Zherzemin exhibition, have since then increasingly taken on the larger questions of 'body politics'; looking at the way in which gender and sexuality are at the heart of many major rifts in Kurdish society, which were further exacerbated by Daesh's attack.[71]

Figure 7: Gasha Kamal, *This Is Not Me*, photo installation, 2021

This polarisation is marked on one hand by an increasing Islamisation of society, with powerful political and cultural organisations – having felt empowered by Daesh – now dominating the discourse around shame and honour, and demonstrating their popularity by organising huge 'hijab wearing festivals',[72] among other things. On the other hand,[73] public images and discourses about femininity are also influenced by the so called

[70] Nadje Al-Ali, 'Sexual Violence in Iraq: Challenges for Transnational Feminist Politics', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25/1 (2018): pp. 10–27.

[71] See also Poshya Kakil's exhibition 'The Shadow of ISIS' (2025), available at https://cultureproject.org.uk/the-shadow-of-isis/ (accessed 21 June 2023).

[72] 'Iraq — 1357 Girls Decided to Wear the Hijab At Once', *A24 News Agency*, 2021. Available at https://a24na.com/archives/32394 (accessed 8 March 2023); Music Upscale, 'Xadidja — Hijab (Islamic School in Halabja)', *Youtube*, 2021. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMZbDJVoSJs (accessed 8 March 2023).

[73] Clearly, for Kurdish youth it is not a case of either increased Islamisation or becoming models on Ins-

'models': scantily clad Instagram personas posting about their luxurious lifestyle, often sponsored by powerful men. Many of our respondents bemoaned that these 'models' are giving young women the wrong idea what it means to be 'free' (focussed on money and looks, and dependent on men). This, Vina Sherzad, an Erbil-based student activist cautioned, can lead to the 'honour killing' of those who try to imitate the models, because they lack the backing of powerful men.[74]

Independent Initiatives: Reading Circles and a Cinema Club

Aside from visual art production, there are several creative initiatives which bring together young people around shared interests in literature, poetry, or arthouse movies. The Cinema Club in Duhok, for example, was established in 2022 by Haron Younis, a Duhok-based designer and his peers, under the tutelage of the renowned Kurdish artist Walid Siti. The idea behind the club was to establish a platform for local film makers and to create a community where people could exchange ideas after screenings. After a humble beginning with a make-shift set-up, the club quickly grew in size, was able to attract some funding from Youth Speak, an international NGO, and now hosts weekly screenings for film enthusiasts at the Duhok Youth Centre.[75]

Other youth initiatives are centred around literature and outreach, such as the Sofia Girls Group in Sulaymaniyah or the *Komela Ronahî* (Ronahi Group) in Akre. Both are girls and women-only groups that promote critical engagement with literature through reading circles, hosting seminars and conferences.[76] Fatma Haji, the founder of the Ronahî Group, describes how she established the group to not only motivate women to read, but also create a friendly space for women to exchange their thoughts, thus forming both a support and intellectual network. However, both clubs face push-back from families resistant to the idea of girls reading, or who do not want their daughters' participation made public when the club advertises its activities.[77] Despite these challenges, the Sofia Girls Group, which started in 2015 in Sulaymaniyah and later expanded to other cities, has recently branched out beyond literature and opened 'Pana'; a Sulaymaniyah-based shelter for elderly homeless people.

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tagram; post-2014 many young people have also turned away from religion completely or found a new spiritual home in Neo-Zoroastrianism, a trend that continues to date and has gained considerable media and scholarly attention: Edith Szanto, '"Zoroaster Was a Kurd!": Neo-Zoroastrianism among the Iraqi Kurds', *Iran & the Caucasus* 22/1 (2018): pp. 96–110; Saad Salloum, 'Zoroastrianism in Iraq Seeks Official Recognition', *Al-Monitor*, February 2016. Available at https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/02/iraq-kurdistan-religious-minorities-zoroastrianism.html (accessed 16 May 2023).

[74] Interview with student activist Vina Sherzad, Erbil, 5 September 2022.

[75] Online interview with designer Haron Younis, co-founder of the Cinema Club in Duhok, 7 October 2022.

[76] Culture Project, 'An Interview with Lanja Khawe, One of the Cofounders of Sofia Girls Group', *Culture Project for Art, Feminism and Gender*, 2016. Available at http://cultureproject.org.uk/an-interview-with-lanja-khawe-one-of-the-cofounders-of-sofia-girls-group/ (accessed 3 March 2023).

[77] Online interview with translator and activist Fatima Haji, 14 February 2022.

Jiyad, Küçükkeleş and Schillings describe this as 'micro-politics': a single-issue focused mode of organising at the grassroots to 'create change'. Though limited in scope and scale to young, educated adults in urban centres, these initiatives allow youth to gather and bring issues around education, women's rights, the creative industry or the environment into focus, in a way that does not directly criticise or oppose the dominant political parties.[78]

Conclusion

The KRI is currently in an 'would be' state; a moment of transition, in which a better future hinges on the aspirations for an independent Kurdish state. In this context, a young generation of artists and activists is revisiting the past, so to not forget the atrocities committed, but also to unearth a Kurdish identity free from colonial domination. Violation and injustices are chronicled, and complaints are registered about the ways in which women's bodies are being used as a battlefield of 'honour' and 'shame', or how male bodies are expected to police women and uphold hegemonic norms of masculinity. Rather than organised resistance against the 'here and now', in which many of our respondents feel stuck, we found there to be a more subtle shift: a gradual reimagining of space, body, and sexuality; projected into spaces where women are safe, autonomous, and equal. This is done by a mobilised, educated, and connected youth that is no longer convinced by party politics or women's NGOs, but is actively seeking to build alternative ways of engagement. These initiatives to date remain small, local, self-funded and transient, yet they mark a major shift towards a diversification of spaces for critical engagement.

[78] Jiyad, Küçükkeleş and Schillings, 'Economic Drivers of Youth Political Discontent in Iraq'.

LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series

Abdelrahman, Maha, 'Social Movements and the Question of Organisation: Egypt and Everywhere', *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 8 (September 2015).

Abdolmohammadi, Pejman, 'The Revival of Nationalism and Secularism in Modern Iran', *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 11 (November 2015).

Al-Ali, Nadje and Tas, Latif, 'Dialectics of Struggle: Challenges to the Kurdish Women's Movement', *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 22 (March 2018).

Alhashel, Bader S. and Albader, Sulaiman H., 'How do Sovereign Wealth Funds Pay their Portfolio Companies' Executives? Evidence from Kuwait', *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 24 (June 2018).

Al-Kaisy, Aida, 'Disinformation in Iraqi Media', *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 55 (October 2021).

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