

Pockets of Feminism, Art and Activism in Iraqi Kurdistan

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2022/07/30/pockets-of-feminism-art-and-activism-in-iraqi-kurdistan/

July 30, 2022

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 Sonia Basheer

Sonia Basheer, 'Telepathy', oil on canvas, 2021.

'In our society women are socialised to believe that we have to live with a man otherwise we are incomplete.' (Sonia Basheer, Erbil, 16 April 2022)

The work of Erbil-based painter Sonia Basheer portrays women's defiance and claiming of their body, space and time. The women in her last exhibition are depicted with a glass of wine, smoking and often alone. Basheer facilitated one of the workshops we organised

in April 2022, bringing together around 35 feminist activists and young artists and activists in Duhok, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah for a day of collaboration and exchange. At the workshops the participants were invited to explore aspects of feminist art in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and were then split into working groups, to experiment with the added value of collaboration between different spheres of activism. Poets worked with performance artists, student activists and musicians, and jointly they created installations, wrote short stories, or drafted political campaigns around themes that shape their everyday lives and work. In each city different topics emerged, but key challenges brought up and problematised in the collaborations and ensuing discussions included neoliberal development/privatisation and the region's prevailing nepotism, the divisiveness of the label feminism, the rise of religious conservatism, and male control over women's bodies, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

'There is nowhere for us to have fun!', a student activist bemoaned during our Erbil workshop. 'No youth, art, or community centres, no opera house', he continued, speaking to the limited investment into the cultural sector and public space. Linked to that, an important topic of discussion was the rampant capitalist development and privatisation of the public sphere in the KRI, as well as the nepotism that underwrites it. Much academic research and journalistic work has gone into uncovering the different ways in which the democratic deficit, patronage networks and corruption work in the KRI ([Cornish 2021](#); [Mamshai 2022](#); [Saleem & Skelton 2020](#)). In the KRI, perpetually plagued by wars and conflict, art, culture, and language are not fully recognised as important elements of societal development and nation-building. Thus, the cultural sector remains underdeveloped and while this differs from city to city, overall, very few public or gallery spaces are available for young and aspiring artists to display their work. As a result, many of the artistic projects and exhibitions are self-funded or supported by international organisations, such as the [Goethe](#) or [French Institute](#).

Despite our project's focus on feminist art and activism, not everyone who attended the workshops identified as a feminist, and in fact some participants deliberately omit that part of their (political) identity from their work. [Bala Ahmed](#), an Erbil-based artist, doesn't 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 pushback from the Islamists, even without calling it feminist art' (Bala Ahmed, Erbil, 16 April 2022). Two young artists and film makers we interviewed after the workshops emphasised that their work is informed by their experiences as women but that they do not call themselves 'feminists'. Some mentioned the loaded associations of the term in the region, others no longer consider it credible due to the NGO-isation ([Jad 2004](#)) of feminism in Iraqi Kurdistan, which saw women's organisations close to the ruling parties absorb huge amounts of money with little visible effect for women themselves ([Mojab 2007](#)). Hevî and Rezhwan, two proud feminist activists involved in the quickly dispersed student protests in autumn 2021 ([Yuan & Menmy 2021](#)) recounted how they would be regularly criticised and called 'lesbians who hate men' at their university, because they call themselves feminists – the young activists told us that 'there is no feminism here, just elite women's organisations' (Interview, Erbil, 28 April 2022). Clearly,

different forms of feminisms coexist in Iraqi Kurdistan. Vienna Salam, an Erbil-based feminist activist, teacher and translator, drew the feminist landscape for us on a piece of paper, illustrating how 'party feminism', 'government feminism', 'NGO feminism', as well as independent activists (inside and outside of the KRI) and artists compete or collaborate in a divided socio-political landscape.



Bala Ahmed with her painting 'A tespih wants to cover me', acrylic on canvas, 2021.

The workshop participants also 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 such as the Kurdistan Islamic Union, Kurdistan Islamic Group/Justice, and the Kurdistan Islamic Movement attempted to fill the political vacuum and targeted the youth, especially young girls, through organising group marriages in different cities and towns in Kurdistan, as well as headscarf-wearing festivals, which hosted more than a thousand young girls. Religious advocacy is also

spreading on social media, where live broadcasts of mullahs and youtubers are spreading Islamic conservatism. Artists, feminists and LGBTIQ+ activists, who in recent years have gained some ground, are directly impacted by this conservative backlash and are worried by the way in which conservative forces are increasingly dominating public spaces and debates about women's rights.

Above all, the participants were concerned with the different and very often violent forms male control takes in the KRI; from mansplaining and the policing of women's bodies and sexuality to the increasing number of women killed. In March 2022, Maria Sami was killed by her brother near Erbil International Airport. She was an artist and advocate for women's rights through both social media platforms and art. Her first song titled 'Never Forget / تەخت لەبیرت نەچۆت' was aired for the first time days after her killing. Her murder sparked huge outrage against femicide in Kurdistan, not just because of its brutality but because Maria was in many ways a typical young person in the KRI – she smoked, sang, posted videos online (some with a political message), and defied conservative social norms. Shokhan Hamarashid Ahmed, legal advisor and director of the Women's Legal Assistance Organisation in Sulaymaniyah confirmed that around 50 women have been killed in the first half of 2022. 'The reasons for this dramatic increase is because government institutions and the relevant authorities do not give importance to women's cases, for example, a case takes at least 2 to 3 years to be heard in court. The high level of guns available to civilians and the negative role of the media [are also factors], where the public salute the killers and blame the victim' (Shokhan Hamarashid Ahmed, 5 June 2022).

Many artworks and forms of activism in the region deal with this topic, some mentioned in our previous blog post. Artist Ahmed Nabaz also problematised femicide in the KRI in his most recent exhibition 'Untitled' – his installation showed headstones with numbers but no names, referencing the unnamed graves of victims of SGBV. This issue was also picked up by the Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani a year ago, who ordered victims' names be added to these graves. Though some politicians have expressed dismay when a woman is killed, more often than not the words of condemnation remain empty and any actions are inadequate to tackle the problem in the KRI – a terrifying reality for our workshop participants.

During our workshops and interviews, we captured a sense of ambivalence; between a crippling sense of hopelessness and stagnation, to bursting creativity and the continuous push for more spaces for youth, art and feminist activism. There is a move towards the creation of autonomous networks and platforms for like-minded youth. An example of this is the website Minerva, a diaspora-based initiative founded in 2021 that has strong links with young artists and intellectuals in Kurdistan. Shadyar Shorish, one of the initiative's members, and a student and translator during the final discussion in our Sulaymaniyah workshop, stated that 'The Kurdistan Regional Government is not changing, and they are not doing anything to improve the situation. It is us the youth and society that should change our ideas, conservative worldviews, and the ways in which we organise' (Shadyar Shorish, Sulaymaniyah, 21 April 2022).

This blog post is part of the Academic Collaboration project 'The Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Post-ISIS: Youth, Art and Gender', carried out in collaboration with the University of Kurdistan Hewlêr and Culture Project. Isabel Käser is Principal Investigator on the project and Houzan Mahmoud is a Consultant.

Header image credit: Rooz Muhamad, 'healing and scars', acrylic and charcoal on MDF, 2017