

# Women's activism in Iraqi Kurdistan: Achievements, shortcomings and obstacles

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## Abstract

This paper discusses women's activism in Kurdistan- Iraq since 1992. It aims to find out whether 21 years of struggle against gender discrimination has led to notable changes in the status quo. It concludes by arguing that as a result of the patriarchal system's resilience and the women's movement's internal shortcomings, achievements have been limited. The paper draws on 7 in-depth interviews with women activists, written sources, personal communications and my observations while participating in activities organised by women's groups.

**Keywords:** Iraqi Kurdistan, women's movement, achievements, shortcomings, patriarchy.

## Çalakgeriya jinan li Kurdistana Iraqê: Destxistî, kemaşî û asteng

Ev xebat niqaş dike li ser çalakgeriya jinan li Kurdistana Iraqê ji sala 1992ê ve. Armanca wê ew e ku vebibine bê tekoşina jinan ya 21 salan li dijî cudakeriya zayendî rê daye guherînê sereke di rewşa-heyî da an na. Ev xebat di niqaşa xwe da digihe wê qenaetê ku destketiyên di vê qadê de bisinor in ji ber berhelistiya pergala patriarkal û kêmasiyên navxweyî yê bizavên jinan. Ev xebat xwe dispêre heft hevpeyvînên berfireh li gel jinên çalakger, çavkaniyên nivîsî, peywendiyên kesane û herwisa çavdêriyên min ên çalakîyên jinan yê jî aliyê koma jinan ve hatin rêkxistin ku ez bi xwe jî têda beşdar bûm.

### چالاکوانی ژنان له کوردستان- عێراق: دهستکەوت، کەموکووڕی و رێگرهکان

ئەم وتارە باس لە چالاکوانی ژنانی هەریەمی کوردستان دەکات لە ساڵی ۱۹۹۲-۱۰ جۆه تا ئێستا. هەرلەدەمات لەو بەکۆلتێمۆه کە ناخۆ ۲۱ ساڵ خەبات دژی جیاکاری جێنەدری بۆتە هۆی گۆرانکاری بەرچاو لە دۆخی باودا. وتارەکە نەجەمگێری ئەمۆ دەکات کە بەمۆنەمی سەر سەختی و خۆگۆنجانندی سێستەمی باوکسالاری لەلایەک و کەموکووڕییە ناوکیەکانی بزوتنەوی ژنان لە لایەکی ترهوه، دەستکەوتەکان سنوورداریبون. ئەم لێکۆلتێمۆیه پشت بە ۷ چاوپێکەوتنی تیزوتەسەل دەبەستێت لەگەڵ ژنانی چالاکوان و هەروەها سوود لە سەرچاوه نووسراوەکان و گفتوگۆی تایبەت و بەشداربوونی خۆشم دەبەستێت لەو چالاکیانەدا کە رێکخراوەکانی ژنان سازیانداوه.

وشه سەرەکییەکان: هەریەمی کوردستان، بزوتنەوی ژنان، دەستکەوت، کەموکووڕی، سەر سەختی پیاوسالاری

## Introduction

This is an empirical study which provides an overview of the history, achievements and limitations of the women's movement in Iraqi Kurdistan. In doing so, it aims to highlight the struggle against a historically specific patriarchal system which has survived major social, economic and political changes. In Kurdistan it is commonplace to blame the system's failure to protect and provide better opportunities for women on the incompetence of the women's movement. This study aims to question the dominant narrative regarding the women's movement and to emphasise women's on-going struggle to achieve change despite the obstacles.

Judith Bennett (1989: 263) argues that we need to understand patriarchy through studying its various forms. She identifies three strategies to achieve

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this:

*“first, that we undertake case studies to analyze the many mechanisms of patriarchy in specific historical contexts; second, that we examine times of exceptional crisis to determine how patriarchal institutions adapted and hence, survived; third, that we risk generalization... to identify the most common mechanisms of patriarchy.”*

By highlighting the resilience of this specific patriarchal system which has adapted itself and survived, it is hoped that this article will promote a better understanding of patriarchy. The article also contributes to the theoretical debate about the NGO-isation of women’s movements across the Middle East (Jad, 2007; Mojab, 2007 and 2009; Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011), specifically whether small and project-oriented organisations can be effective agents of change.

This article focuses on combating gender based violence, securing political representation and changing women’s public image because the participants of this study highlighted these as their main achievements. It would be interesting to compare this case study with the women’s movements in other Kurdish regions or with the Iraqi women’s movement to discover parallels and discontinuities. This, however, is not within the scope of this study. While focusing on the internal dynamics of change in this region, the impact of transnational feminism on women’s activism has not been investigated.

Here, I will briefly address my own position in the current research and the choice of research methods before I go on to talk about the historical context, the achievements and shortcomings of the women’s movement.

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### **Positionality and research methods**

I was born in Sulaimaniya and I lived in Iraq and Iran before coming to England as a refugee in 1993. I came to research the women’s movement rather indirectly when I started researching about women survivors of Anfal.<sup>1</sup> In 2005 I went back to Iraqi Kurdistan and contacted various organisations who acted as my gatekeepers and helped me reach survivors.<sup>2</sup> I also interviewed women caseworkers about the services they provided for the survivors. Through my Anfal research I met resourceful women activists working in extremely difficult circumstances. I found the widespread negative perceptions of the women’s movement unfair and unjustified. In 2009 I conducted the first in depth interview with a woman activist, with the specific intention of finding out about the women’s movement. By this time I had already established a good relationship with some of the women that I interviewed for this study. Another factor that facilitated research, especially with women who did

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for a two year scholarship which made it possible to start this research.

<sup>2</sup> I am particularly grateful to the Women’s Media and Education Centres in Sulaimaniya and Serqella, the Xatuzin Centre in Erbil, and New Life for Anfal Women in Kerkük.

not know me personally, was my family's cultural capital. My father was a well-known poet,<sup>3</sup> my two brothers are well respected writers<sup>4</sup> and I myself am known as a writer.

The power imbalance was clear to me from the beginning as I was the privileged woman who asked the questions and they were the women who were being researched. I tried to address this issue by being open about my own life and by supporting their work in any way I could.<sup>5</sup> I also chose research methods that are potentially empowering for participants (Aron, 1992), giving them an opportunity to feedback into the system. Between 2009 and 2012, I conducted semi-structured in depth interviews with 7 women activists associated with different political parties. This method was chosen because of its usefulness to the study of social relations (Flick, 2002) and to investigate sensitive and complex issues (Bowling, 1997). I have also drawn on my observations and engagement in the field while taking part in meetings, demonstrations, vigils, debates and seminars between 2005 and 2010.<sup>6</sup>

### **The historical context of the women's movement**

Kurdish women were involved in the national liberation movement in various capacities.<sup>7</sup> Like other women in the world, however, (Moghadam, 1994; Pillai, 2000, Jad, 2007), they only started advocating gender equality when a form of national liberation was attained (Mahmud, 2012). Before the First Gulf War individual women may have been active in promoting women's rights, but it is only after 1992 that we can talk about a women's movement in Iraqi Kurdistan. Here, I will talk about the political and historical changes that paved the way for this movement's foundation.

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 led to the First Gulf War in 1991. This was followed by the short-lived Shiite and Kurdish uprisings which were brutally suppressed by the Iraqi army. Fearing the use of chemical weapons by the state, about two million Kurds fled to neighbouring Turkey and Iran. Eventually, with the establishment of the No Fly Zones in 1991 and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992, the Kurdish region started to enjoy a degree of autonomy (Stansfield, 2003). In the early days of Kurdish

<sup>3</sup> My father, Ahmad Hardi, has had many of his poems turned into classic songs which are widely sung.

<sup>4</sup> Asos Hardi was editor-in-chief of Iraqi Kurdistan's independent weekly papers (Hawlatî and Awêne) and Rebin Hardi was one of the founders of *Rehend*, Iraqi Kurdistan's first academic Journal.

<sup>5</sup> I took part in meetings, protest demonstrations and vigils. I facilitated two trips for Dr. Jennie Williams, who provided gender and mental health training workshops to women caseworkers in Erbil and Sulaimaniya. I also defended the woman's movement in the various interviews I gave.

<sup>6</sup> Between these years I conducted fieldwork for my research about Anfal survivors.

<sup>7</sup> Women were mostly messengers, members of the underground movement and supporters and nurturers of the *peşmerge*. Some of them were imprisoned because of their political activities and some were killed.

self-rule, scores of women were killed under the pretext of alleged collaboration with the Baath government and/or alleged “dishonour” (bêşerefi). The latter was a loose term which included prostitution and sex outside marriage, but also refusing to accept an arranged marriage or wanting to leave an abusive marriage.<sup>8</sup> The murders were presented as cases of “honour”-killing, which were punishable leniently according to the Iraqi Penal Code.<sup>9</sup> They are named “gendercide” by Shahrzad Mojab (2003).

### Rise of violence against women

Various factors contributed to increasing gender violence in Iraqi Kurdistan, here I will talk briefly about three of them. Firstly, decades of political violence committed by the Iraqi state led to the overall brutalisation of society (Makiya, 1994 and 1998). Widespread imprisonment, torture, executions, extensive chemical attacks, destruction of villages and the glorification of violence through broadcasting images of the Iraq-Iran battlefield left behind a legacy of violence (Tomas and Villellas, 2009) with consequences for women and children. Secondly, the Iraqi state revived Kurdish tribalism in the 1980s by taking advantage of the tribesmen who deserted the army (Black, 1993; van Bruinessen, 1997; Hardi, 2011). The state armed these tribes (who no longer played a major role in Kurdish society) and called them National Defence Battalions (commonly known as *jash*<sup>10</sup>). They were used against the pêşmerge forces (Kurdish freedom fighters) and the civilian Kurdish population. Later, the *jash* forces took part in the 1991 popular uprising against the Iraqi state and they were officially amnestied by the Kurdish parliament in return for their cooperation. They then aligned themselves with the ruling parties, namely the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and secured significant support and protection. Thirdly, conflict and division between the ruling Kurdish parties and competition over resources and votes meant that women were regularly compromised in the various negotiations. Later, the civil war between 1994 and 1998 followed by a split in the Kurdish administration (KDP and PUK zones)<sup>11</sup> led to further insecurity and violence. Important concerns such as combating gender discrimination took a back seat in the minds of politicians. It is obvious that in a brutalised society which has regressed back into tribalism, where there are

<sup>8</sup> This was confirmed by Chrw Sabir (the previous director of Kurdistan Women’s Organisation/ the Labour Party), Snawbar Ismail (director of Kurdistan Women’s League/ the Communist Party of Kurdistan), Runak Faraj (director of Women’s Media and Education Centre/ PUK and editor-in-chief of Rêwan newspaper), Nishtiman Kemal (previous director of Kurdistan Women’s Organisation/ the Labour Party and current member of Labour Party’s executive committee).

<sup>9</sup> Articles 111 and 409 of Iraq’s Penal Code, 1969.

<sup>10</sup> *Jash* is a Kurdish word literally meaning a donkey’s foal, but is widely used to mean collaborator or a traitor.

<sup>11</sup> Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Sulaimaniya and Germian and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Erbil and Dihok.

many armed men and no accountable government, women are likely to be one of the main groups that are victimised. The large-scale victimisation forced women into action.

### Women's activism

In response to the deteriorating situation in the early 1990s, women started to mobilise. Runak Faraj, the director of Women's Media and Education Centre and editor-in-chief of the *Rêwan* weekly newspaper, stated that "it was necessity"<sup>12</sup> that made women like herself take action, because things were desperate and something had to be done. In addition to the already existing organisations<sup>13</sup> new groups were established to defend and protect the countless numbers of women who were at risk of being killed or mutilated (getting their nose or ear cut) under the guise of "honour" (Mahmud, 2013). Each organisation was affiliated with and financially supported by one of the political parties. Between 1992 and 2003 they also benefitted from project-based funding by international NGOs.<sup>14</sup> After 2003 they took advantage of State Department funding which targeted specific issues (Mojab, 2007; Fischer-Tahir, 2010).

In time the aims and objectives of such organisations developed. On the micro level they provided services to endangered women, represented them in court (for custody of children, inheritance, the right to divorce, etc.), and offered literacy and sewing courses. On the macro level they disseminated information about gender based violence (through their publications),<sup>15</sup> facilitated awareness-raising seminars and workshops, pressurised the government for change and pushed for legal amendments.<sup>16</sup> Women across the political spectrum, from right-wing to left-wing, from Islamic to secular, got involved in these organisations. Pluralism has been one of the positive features of this movement such that no political orientation alone can take credit for or claim to represent it. Additionally, even though the majority of activists were urban

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> KDP's Kurdistan Women's Union was established in 1952, PUK's Kurdistan Women's Union was established in 1989 and the Kurdistan Women's League was initially part of the Iraqi Women's League (the Iraqi Communist Party) which was established in 1952.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Ekrama Ghaeb, director of the Women's Media and Education Centre in Serqalla, Iraqi Kurdistan.

<sup>15</sup> Some of these publications include: *Dengî Afret* (Kurdistan Women's Union, KDP), *Tawar* journal and *Jiyane* newspaper (Kurdistan Women's Union, PUK), *Dengî Afretan* journal (Kurdistan Women's League), *Peyam* (The Islamic Women's Centre), *Rêwan* newspaper (Women's Media and Education Centre), *Rasan* newspaper (Kurdistan Women's Organisation-the Labour Party), *Zîn* magazine (Khatuzeen Centre).

<sup>16</sup> The profiles of women's organisations published in *Serdemî Jin*: profile of PUK Kurdistan Women's Union, *Serdemî Jin*, No. 1, Autumn 2012, profile of Women's Media and Education Centre, *Serdemî Jin*, No. 2, Summer 2013. Also interview with Chrw Sabir (previous director of Kurdistan Women's Organisation), Snawbar Ismail (director of Kurdistan Women's League), Bekhall Abubakir (director of Sisters of the Islamic Union).

and middle class and there was a social divide between them and those they represented (Mojab, 2009; Fischer-Tahir, 2010), women from across the social strata joined the process either through becoming directors or senior members of these women's organisations,<sup>17</sup> or through establishing their own organisations which concentrated on addressing their own specific needs.<sup>18</sup> This same pluralism, however, has been a barrier to progress. Despite the initial enthusiasm to cooperate at the beginning of the 1990s,<sup>19</sup> the relationship between women's organisations mirrored that of the political parties they were closely affiliated with. There were periods of little or no communication during the Kurdish civil war (1994-1998) and it was a long time before real collaboration could take place again. In 1998, the Mutual Centre (Nawendî Hawbeş) was established as an umbrella organisation bringing together dozens of organisations in Erbil and Sulaimaniya. One of the major achievements of the Mutual Centre was pressurising the Kurdish authorities into amending articles of Iraqi Penal Code and Personal Status Law which were discriminatory against women (see below). Recognising the importance of women's collaboration, the Mutual Centre addressed a petition to the KDP and PUK administrations under the name of: Freedom of work for Kurdistan's women's organisations (Mahmud, 2013).

In 2005 the Stance Group (Grupî Helwêst) was created encompassing 44 different organisations in Sulaimaniya. In response to changes in the new Iraq they launched a campaign called: "Defending women's legal and civil rights". This group was followed by many more umbrella-type organisations that joined campaigning across the Kurdish region. Even though initially the majority of established organisations were aligned with one political party or another,<sup>20</sup> later independent and semi-independent organisations were also established.<sup>21</sup> However, Shahrzad Mojab (2007) is sceptical about the existence

<sup>17</sup> Ekrama Ghaeb (director of the Women's Media and Education Centre in Sargalla), Kalsum (director of Women's Media and Education Centre, Ranya), Bafraw Fakhradin (organiser in the PUK's Kurdistan Women's Union) and Taban Germyani (previously a senior officer in PUK's Kurdistan Women's Union), etc.

<sup>18</sup> New Life for Anfal Women (Jînî nwê bo jinanî Anfal).

<sup>19</sup> According to Mahmud (2013) the first mobilisation to demand amendments of the Iraq Penal Code and Personal Status Law started in 1993. The organisations that were involved were: Kurdistan Women's Union-PUK, Kurdistan Women's Union- KDP, Kurdistan Women's League- the Communist Party, Women's Independence Organisation- Communist Workers Party, Sisters of the United Islamic Party, Women's Union- Socialist Party, Kurdistan Women's Organisation- Labour Party. In May 1994 they organised a protest march against the civil war to parliament in which a few hundred women from Sulaimaniya and the surrounding regions took part and were joined by women in Erbil and the surrounding towns.

<sup>20</sup> Besides the KDP, PUK and the Communist Party's women's organisations (see endnote 3) The Labour Party's Kurdistan Women's Organisation (Rêkxrawî Afretanî Kurdistan), the Workers Communist Party's Women's Independence Organisation (Rêkxrawî Serbexoyî Jinan), PUK's The Women's Media and Education Centre (Senterî Roşinbîrî ul Rageyandinî Jinan), Sisters of the Islamic Union, Sisters of the Islamic Movement, the Conservative Party's Women's Union of Kurdistan (Yekêti Afretanî Parêzgaranî Kurdistan) were also established.

<sup>21</sup> For example Khanzad, Asuda shelter, Sabat, Runahi, Khatuzeen, Saya.

of “independent” women’s NGOs in Kurdistan because even when some of them are “not relying organisationally or financially on any particular political party” the political parties have representatives in the executive boards of these NGOs and this tends to facilitate accessing “the resources they need”. In response to the question of claiming to be independent while supported by the PUK, Runak Faraj stated: “What is important is that you use the party to serve the women’s movement and you do not dissolve the movement in the party.”<sup>22</sup> She argued that because the governing structure in Kurdistan is monarchical, it is difficult for NGOs to function without political connections. She also stated that throughout her work at the Centre she has never promoted the PUK and nor has she been warned or told to be silent by the PUK, not even when she criticised the party. To the extent that an NGO genuinely promotes women’s rights and the political party does not further its ideology through the organisation or hinder its progress, backing from a party is not an obstacle. The issue is, however, the likelihood of continual non-interference. Another issue is the inequity of access to resources by the different groups. Organisations that are supported by the larger ruling parties can access the necessary resources to expand compared to those supported by the smaller parties.

Mojab (2007: 178) also criticises these organisations on the basis of the “limited” and “short term” aid they provide. She argues that these organisations fight violence against women “in very limited forms” through building shelters, for example. This, the author argues, “does not achieve the desired results” because the narrow focus, limitation and short-termism of these projects contribute to “directing this struggle away from its main targets.” These projects, she points out, are “not part of a long-term all-around effort towards eliminating patriarchy” and they do not aim to launch a social movement. Similarly, Jad (2007) makes a distinction between NGOs “as a form of organisation” and other organisations that aim at social change, “namely the social movement”. One important difference between the two, Jad points out, is that the cadres of a social movement are able to mobilise and organise the masses because they have strong beliefs and strong connections with the public, they are trusted and accessible. The NGO staff, on the other hand, may not necessarily have strong beliefs or be in touch with the public. Additionally, NGOs identify target groups for specific projects (e.g. victims of “honour”- based violence or female genital mutilation). Hence both the projects and the target groups are temporary. This is why, Jad argues, they are different from “a ‘mission’ based on conviction and voluntarism.”

Jad (2007: 177) also refers to the NGO-isation of the women’s movement in the Arab world. This is defined as “the process through which issues of collective concern are transformed into projects in isolation from the general context in which they are applied and without taking due consideration of the

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<sup>22</sup> The profile of Women’s Media and Education Centre, Serdemî Jin, 2, 2013.

economic, social and political factors affecting them.” Similarly, Mojab (2007) states that the women’s NGOs in Kurdistan are involved in the “bureaucratisation”, “professionalisation” and “institutionalisation” of the women’s movement. Hence decision making is bureaucratic and centralised and some women financially and professionally benefit from their positions in these organisations.

It is important to remember, however, that “a large number of small associations, even with very diverse agendas, can in cumulative terms come to constitute a women’s movement” (Jad, 2007: 186). In the last fifteen years cooperation between the various women’s organisations in Kurdistan and the pressure they have exerted to end gender discriminatory legislation, achieve greater participation in the public sphere and combat the dominant image of women as powerless, hopeless and dispensable, makes it possible to call them a women’s rights movement.

### **The achievements and their limitations**

The patriarchal system in Kurdistan responded to this sustained pressure by changing laws and granting women increased representation in the public sphere. These attempts at modernising and appearing progressive were in line with the KRG’s attempt to create a democratic self-image. However, as Caprioli (2004: 416) points out “there often exists a gap between a state’s laws and its actual behaviour.” The same authority which took theoretical steps towards combating gender discrimination has in practice found a way to impair the process. In this section I will highlight three achievements, namely legislative reform, participation in the public domain, and women’s position and image in the media, alongside the limitations of these achievements.

### **Legislative reform**

Amending gender discriminatory articles in the Iraqi Penal Code and Personal Status Law as well as the creation of new laws to protect women are largely due to these women’s efforts. Over the years, umbrella organisations and mutual campaigns proposed various “legal projects-proje yasa” to the parliament. Chrw Sabir, the previous director of the Labour Party’s Kurdistan Women’s Organisation, stated that:

*“If you go through the Parliament’s archives you will doubtless find the various important legal projects which we submitted to the Parliament. If we haven’t done anything at all, we have at least put together a few projects like that, even if they were largely ignored.”<sup>23</sup>*

Najiba Mahmud (2013) points out that the organisations started pushing

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<sup>23</sup> Interview, May 2012.



for legal amendments in 1993. The civil war started in 1994, however, and it temporarily put an end to their efforts. In 1998, the year the war stopped, the organisations mobilised once again at the Mutual Centre. They campaigned against “honour-killing” and polygamy and for equality before the law. In some ways this battle has been similar to western women’s 70 year old struggle for the vote. Kate Millett (2000: 83) argues that “[b]ecause the opposition was so monolithic and unrelenting, the struggle so long and bitter” suffrage became the focal point around which other important issues such as education, legal equality and equal pay were marshalled. Similarly women activists in Kurdistan have spent ample energy fighting for legal equality and in so doing they have been distracted from other important issues such as education, culture and socialisation.

The women I interviewed believed that it was due to pressure from them that Iraq’s President, Jalal Talabani, through Resolutions 59 and 62, suspended the use of Iraq’s Penal Code’s article 111 regarding “honour” killing and applied further restrictions on polygamy in 2000.<sup>24</sup> This, however, was only effective, if at all, within the PUK administration. The KDP administration followed in 2002 and suspended article 111. Polygamy, however, was not addressed by the KDP. In 2008, as a result of another effort and in collaboration with the women’s committee in parliament, a new bill was introduced. Once more the desired total ban on polygamy was not achieved, only further restrictions were applied.<sup>25</sup> Women were given the right to prohibit polygamy in their marriage certificates and to claim the right to divorce. Other achievements included recognising women as the legal guardians of their children in case of husband’s death or absence. The bill also won women witness-status equality before court. It was largely due to the opposition of the Islamic factions and the more conservative members of parliament that polygamy and unequal inheritance remained sanctioned. Chrw Sabir pointed out that the religious leaders have been a strong opponent to the women’s movement, because they “sabotage” what the women manage to achieve.

Also in 2008 and as a result of widespread misuse of mobile phones to record and distribute indecent images of women,<sup>26</sup> the Kurdish parliament issued another law: “the Law Forbidding the Misuse of Communication Channels”. This new law recognised distributing private pictures of others as a

<sup>24</sup> There is competition over claiming credit for these Resolutions. Different women’s organisations argue that it was due to their own organisation’s pressure. It is most likely, however, that pressure from various groups led to this change.

<sup>25</sup> The man must have a reason for wanting to have a second wife, either because his first wife cannot have children or because she is ill. He must be capable of supporting two households and his first wife must agree to the second marriage.

<sup>26</sup> This led to the murder of some women by their own relatives, they were mostly young women who within the safety of a relationship had agreed for their photos or video to be taken but later when the relationship ended, or because the girl’s family did not agree to their marriage, the man distributed the images to defame the girl and her family.

punishable offense. The lawyer, Miraban Ahmad,<sup>27</sup> pointed out that the changes address a gap in the Iraqi Penal Code and “women are the main beneficiaries from this change”.

In 2011 the “Law of Combating Violence Within the Family” was issued which sanctioned the establishment of a special court for this purpose. Family violence, be it used by men against women or by parents against children, was recognised as a punishable offense. Female genital mutilation was also recognised as a form of violence against women. After incessant complaints about lack of implementation by women’s rights activists the new law recognised the need for monitoring the court’s proceedings by women’s organisations and the Women’s Council. Unfortunately this special court is yet to be established and female genital mutilation continues to be practiced without punishment.<sup>28</sup> Overall there are problems of implementation and much is dependent on the goodwill of the presiding judge. As Caprioli (2004: 413) points out: “Although laws can be changed, such change does not necessarily alter societal values that are deleterious to women.” A misogynist judge can release a criminal dismissing evidence or accepting a false alibi.<sup>29</sup>

Another major problem is the judicial system’s lack of independence. The KDP and PUK’s tribal, religious and local alliances mean that there is intervention in court proceedings and women are generally compromised. On 8th March 2013 the One-Voice group (grupî yekdeng) presented a letter to the KRG demanding law enforcement in cases of violence against women. They pointed to the 2011/2012 statistics where 74 women were killed and only 16 people were punished, 709 cases of suicide were recorded and only 3 were investigated, 1681 cases of domestic violence were recorded and no one was charged, 279 women were raped and only 2 men were punished. In other words, a total 2743 cases of violence against women were recorded and only 21 people were brought to justice.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes, after tireless campaigning by activists a man is finally convicted only to be released soon after. The KRG’s 2012 General Amnesty, for example, meant that the few men who were charged for “honour”- crimes were released from prison. The amnesty did not exclude killers of women.

<sup>27</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>28</sup> Personal communication with lawyer Razaw Ahmed.

<sup>29</sup> On 5<sup>th</sup> February, 2012, a young teacher called Sakar Mohammad Amin was shot in her sleep. Her father was accused of the murder. He was released before the investigation was completed because of a general amnesty. After protest demonstrations and lengthy campaigning by women activists the man was arrested once again. Activists who attended the trial were shocked by the sexist nature of the judge’s questioning: “Was your daughter chaste? Did you see a man mounting her?” The judge also dismissed evidence provided by women activists: [http://www.chawdernews.com/Article\\_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=42](http://www.chawdernews.com/Article_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=42)>. For the details of the case in Kurdish and the role of women activists see also: <<http://www.chatpress.com/%28A%285k03Alh-zgEkAAAAODk3ZWYzNWMtNzg3Ny00YTJjLTgyNzEtNGNIMWY1MzUwMWI2WGh0yGrVBk9CRSzc7b-77KHTmM1%29%29/Detail.aspx?id=10019&LinkID=3&AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1> (last accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Rêwan paper, 1st April, 2013, No. 272.

The lack of implementation of new legislation is a major obstacle to progress. The message sent out to potential culprits is that they can most likely escape punishment and there is no deterrence for violence against women. Additionally, the judiciary's partiality and the government's lack of interest wear down the spirit of campaigners. Activists complain that sometimes all their work seems pointless as no real change occurs or change is "not according to our expectation".<sup>31</sup> For change to take place, Blas et al. (2008: 1688) point out, it is important that the government responds to the NGOs demands, involves them in policy development, implementation, and monitoring.

Statistics of violence against women in Kurdistan indicate that violence has merely changed shape. According to the Sulaimaniya General Directorate to Address Violence against Women,<sup>32</sup> between 2007 and 2012 killing women has generally receded while beating and threatening have steadily risen, leading to a rise in suicide rates (see table 1). Hence one form of violence, which is legally considered an offense, has decreased while others have increased. Now women are put under undue pressure and experience more violence so that they themselves take their own lives and no one is legally responsible for their deaths. This indicates the patriarchal system's flexibility and its ability to find new ways to oppress and control women. It is also possible that some of these suicides are in fact murders. As the One-voice group has indicated the majority of these cases are not investigated.

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**Table 1.** Violence against women in Kurdistan

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Murder	32	10	5	5	8	9
Beating	176	365	381	460	586	667
Threatening	185	321	417	485	506	555
Suicide	62	65	106	117	109	94

### Participation in the public domain

A major achievement has been breaking the dichotomy of men-public sphere and women-private sphere. Women campaigned for access to decision making in the parliament, government and political parties. In 2003, women activists in Kurdistan joined Iraqi women activists to promote gender equality (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011; Mahmud, 2012). Despite opposition from Iraqi politicians and the Bush administration (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2006; Fischer-Tahir, 2010) they managed to establish a 25 per cent quota, securing participation in decision

<sup>31</sup> Chrw Sabir, Snawbar Ismail, Runak Faraj and Nishtiman Kamal.

<sup>32</sup> This directorate was established in 2007, after mass protests against the stoning to death of Du'a Khalil Aswad (whose murder was filmed and broadcast on Youtube). I am grateful to Yousif Hama from the Sulaimaniya directorate who emailed me the data. Sulaimaniya has been chosen because it is considered to be progressive and liberal compared to the other cities.

making. Chrw Sabir has talked about the absence of women in senior positions prior to 1992. She states that now, unlike the past “in every meeting we are talking about the quota. We ask why are women not represented in the media? Why are they not represented in the courts, in the ministries and parliament? This in itself is progress because if we had waited for the party men nothing would have happened.” Snawbar Ismail,<sup>33</sup> director of the Communist Party’s Kurdistan Women’s League, has noted women are politically more ambitious than in the past: they participate as voters and candidates, and they occupy administrative, governmental and political posts. Similarly, Bexal Abubakir, director of Sisters of the Islamic Union, argued that:

*“It is true that women took part in the liberation movement but that was mostly through their social relationships to men, through their fathers, husbands and brothers. Now women’s political awareness as voters and candidates, as senior members of the political parties has increased. The majority of party supporters are women but the further up the hierarchy the fewer women there are.”<sup>34</sup>*

The latter is confirmed in a 2011 study by the Civil Democratic Organisation (CDO).<sup>35</sup> The percentage of women in the senior executive committees of the political parties was as follows: the PUK: 18 per cent; the Islamic Movement: 13 per cent; the KDP: 12 per cent; the Socialist Party: 10 per cent and United Islamic Party: 9 per cent. Interestingly the percentage of women in the high committees of the secular and “progressive” parties is even lower: Gorran: 5 per cent; the Communist Party of Kurdistan: 5 per cent and the Labour Party: 4 percent. The study also showed that even though women constituted 30 per cent in the parliament, in 2011 the distribution of women in parliament committees was as follows: the Women’s Committee solely consisted of women, there were no women in the Security and Internal Affairs Committee, the Economics Committee contained 9 men and 1 woman, the Legal Committee consisted of 10 men and 1 woman, the Pêşmerge Affairs Committee consisted of 7 men and 2 women and the Education Committee consisted of 6 men and 5 women. Hence, except for the Women’s Committee and the Education Committee, women are by far a minority in all the other groups. This guarantees that their influence will be kept to a minimum. It is also no surprise that there are no men in the Women’s Committee because women’s issues are considered women’s problem and they are left to deal with them. The burden of combating gender discrimination is put on women activists who are blamed every time a woman is killed. This mentality fails to recognise that the responsibility of securing better rights for the various social groups (women, the poor, people with disabilities, ethnic and sexual minorities, etc.) must ultimately lie with the government.

The situation is worse when it comes to KRG ministries. In both the cur-

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<sup>33</sup> Interview, May 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, May 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Special thanks to the director, Mr Atta Muhamad, for emailing me the results of their study.

rent and previous cabinets (6th and 7th), only one of the 19 Ministers has been a woman.<sup>36</sup> The fifth cabinet, which was announced in 2006 was along the same lines. There were 35 ministers and only two of them were women. At the time, women's organisations campaigned against the side-lining of women in government despite the 25 per cent quota. Together they prepared a list of suitable women candidates for senior governmental positions.<sup>37</sup> Responding to the large protests the KRG added a Women's Affairs minister, Dr Jinan Qasim, who was an affiliate of the PUK. The new minister had no connection to the women's movement; she had no power, no interest and no funding.<sup>38</sup> Chrw Sabir and Nishtiman Kamal,<sup>39</sup> previous director of the Labour Party's Kurdistan Women's Organisation, pointed out that despite the small percentage that is given to women, the majority of governmental and parliamentary quota posts are allocated to women based on their political affiliations or familial and tribal connections and not because of their suitability or interest in women's issues and gender equality. These women are specifically chosen because they are not a threat to the system.<sup>40</sup> Nishtiman Kamal argued that these women have "inflicted the largest blow" to the woman's cause because they are specifically chosen for their ineffectiveness and disinterest. In this way, the KRG engages in an invisible war against the women's movement. It finds a way to avoid change and curtail women's achievements. However, as one of Fischer-Tahir's (2010: 1389) informants points out, despite all its shortcomings the quota system is important: "we need our society to see women in decision-making positions". The presence of women "in decision-making positions" may counter the image of women as hopeless and incapable human beings.

### Women's position and image in the media

Reclaiming voice and becoming visible is something that women's organisations have strived for through their publications and their participation in debates in the public media, recognising the importance of media in influencing public opinion. Saywan Rostam,<sup>41</sup> a trustee of the PUK's Kurdistan Women's Union and editor-in-chief of *Jîyanewe* newspaper, argued that through addressing women's issues in the media: "What was under the carpet came over

<sup>36</sup> Ms Asos Najib Abdullah, a former judge, has been the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs in the last two cabinets.

<sup>37</sup> I was present in some of their meetings while preparing the list and I also observed some of the interviews they conducted to choose the candidates.

<sup>38</sup> Famously, in 2007 when Du'a Khalil Aswad was stoned to death, the Minister was asked about her reaction to this tragedy. She replied that she had cried, indicating her powerlessness and ineffectiveness.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, May 2012.

<sup>40</sup> In 2010, at the Kurdistan Women's Conference in Dîyarbekir (Turkish Kurdistan) we were discussing female genital mutilation. One of the women MPs told us that she found the issue embarrassing and should it be discussed in parliament, she would walk out.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, May 2012.

the carpet”.<sup>42</sup> Publicising women’s oppression and gender based violence were effective in bringing these issues into the public domain. What was considered “private” is now “public”. These issues are now largely seen as social problems due to the unequal distribution of power. Rostam pointed to this example: “In the past it was really difficult for a woman to go into a shelter and then be accepted back into her family. Now sometimes a father brings his own daughter in fear that his relatives may kill her.” She believed that, through the media, people are generally more aware of the injustices women face.

Chrw Sabir highlights the role of women’s organisations in cultivating women journalists through their media departments: “We have a hand in training women cadres in the media, we have a hand in creating women’s media.” Some of these women who started out in the women’s organisations are now presenters and analysts on the Kurdish national and satellite channels.<sup>43</sup> Women’s organisations have acted as stepping stone for some women writers and journalists. This sentiment is echoed by Runak Faraj,<sup>44</sup> one of the founders of the Women’s Media and Education Centre, who remembers the challenges faced in terms of shortage of women writers, reporters, journalists and designers in the 1990s. She also maintains that the level of progress made in the media has been partly due to women’s organisations providing a platform for women but also as a result of training and support provided by international NGOs and media foundations. Leading on from this, Snawbar Ismail believes that the Kurdish community is now more receptive to women in senior positions because there are more women in the public eye, presenting political and cultural programs, taking part in debates on TV, and writing and publishing.

Bexal Abubakir agrees that some progress has been in media and journalism, however, she points out that despite these achievements at times the media plays quite a negative role: “Sometimes all the hard work by the women’s organisations is timed zero by a clip or a drama series.” Discussing the sexual objectification of women in the media and pointing to video clips where male singers are surrounded by dancing and sexualised women she asks: “Are these women dolls? Are they just decoration?” Fischer-Tahir (2009: 137) confirms that: “The demand for erotic and even pornographic representations in the Kurdish media to satisfy masculine phantasies of power is increasing, and driven by the dynamics of Internet access, satellite television, access to the international black market for pornography and the development of prostitution in Iraqi Kurdistan.” In addition, Abubakir has noted that Kurdish drama series portray women as bad, evil, and deserving of the violence inflicted on

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<sup>42</sup> A Kurdish saying meaning the secrets were revealed.

<sup>43</sup> For example Koral Noori (KNN satellite channel- news analyst), Shokhan Karim (KNN news presenter) and Parwa Ali (who had a socio-political program on Geli Kurdistan called: Sipi).

<sup>44</sup> Interview, May 2012.

them. This is confirmed by Sara Qadir's (2012) study which addresses symbolic violence against women in four Kurdish drama series. Bexal concludes by talking about the dual image of women created in the public media, either as a hopeless and brutalised victim or as a sex object:

*"The image of women is not that of a human being like a man, she is a female whose concerns are to look good, to beautify herself, to show herself off... her concerns are small, limited in love and passion, she craves relationship with a man and nothing else. This sets back the women's cause once again... Women in Kurdish media are either a broken personality, you know, what happened to so and so? She was killed. The other? She killed herself. And the other? They hanged her. Women are seen as incapable of facing life's problems, or they are just an object on show."*

Women's organisations have played a role in bringing forth women writers, journalists and speakers through their work and their media departments. They have also used the public media to raise awareness about women's issues. On the other hand the public media has retaliated by dichotomising the image of women either as hopeless victims or as sex objects. Hence what activists achieve is being countered by the rapid changes in the region which have added women's sexual subjugation and objectification to the realm of women's oppression.

Women's efforts in this region have faced major barriers and setbacks. The majority of the public and some scholars (Mojab, 2007 and 2009), have come down very harshly on the women's organisations. It is important, however, to understand the socio-political context in which they function so that their achievements can be appreciated for what they are. Mojab (2007) points out that like other NGOs in the Arab world, the women's NGOs in Kurdistan have not been able "to play a fundamental role in the political environment there." She also states that "at best these organisations will promote the liberal feminism favouring a series of officially authorised reforms, and even these have been very limited so far." It is true that the achievements are limited. This, however, is not merely due to the deficiencies of these organisations but also to the external obstacles in the larger socio-political context.

### **The internal shortcomings of the women's movement**

I have already spoken about the limitation associated with the political affiliation of women's organisations and how it hindered collaboration. Here I would like to address two other shortcomings, namely problems associated with staff training and the intellectual weakness of the movement.

### **Lack of training and monitoring services for the staff**

In the 1990s the shortage of workforce willing to work in the women's organ-

isations<sup>45</sup> and the low salaries offered meant that they could not be selective about who they employed. The majority of staff who started working in these organisations were inexperienced and many lacked feminist consciousness. As a result, mistakes were inadvertently made. Some women who turned to these organisations for support were disrespected, choices were made on their behalf, they were forced to speak about sensitive issues (Hardi, 2011), and sometimes even physically and sexually abused (Jaza, 2007). In these instances women's empowerment, which is a basic feminist principle, was not promoted, in fact the women were further disempowered. Lack of monitoring services meant that such practices carried on without the staff responsible being warned or sacked.

In response to the question of NGO staff disempowering women service-users, Runak Faraj explained that those who started working as women's rights activists in the 1990s had nothing but their own dedication, knowledge and abilities. Sometimes, for example, they persuaded an unwilling woman to speak about a sensitive issue because they felt it was important for the truth to be known. In another interview<sup>46</sup> Faraj argued that it is unfair to use current methods to criticise what happened 20 years ago. She confirmed that, in the last ten years, through training provided by International NGOs this shortcoming has been addressed. Nowadays staff are put through various training courses and contribute to seminars, workshops and conferences that help them do their jobs better. Mojab (2007) argues that the training that is provided to staff aims to enable women "to manage a service-provider organisation, and not with the aim of launching a social movement." It would be interesting to investigate the kinds of training and workshops that staff are put through in these organisations. Indeed, training to become an administrator does not quality staff to support and empower women in society.

In my personal experience there are two kinds of staff in these organisations. There are women like Ekrama Ghaeb,<sup>47</sup> a working class woman, who is the director of Women's Media and Education Centre in the difficult district of Germian.<sup>48</sup> While accompanying her to various towns and villages I observed that she was very well connected to the public. She was liked and respected by men and women who knew about her dedication and hard work. She also had a good relationship with the police, security forces and the court and this enabled her to help women who were in danger of death, forced mar-

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<sup>45</sup> These organisations had a bad reputation in the 1990s. The women who worked in them were regarded negatively. They were also seen as troublemakers who encouraged good women to rebel against the system.

<sup>46</sup> Profile of women's organisations. The Women's Media and Education Centre. Serdemî Jin. No. 2. 2013

<sup>47</sup> Interview, October 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Germian suffered the most during the Anfal campaign and the largest number of Anfal surviving widows and children are found in this region. It is also the most neglected region in Iraqi Kurdistan in terms of development and infrastructure.



riage, destitution, abuse, loss of custody of children and disempowerment.<sup>49</sup> She naturally knew what was fair and right without training or further education. There are other women in these organisations who, despite their good intentions, do not have the same natural understanding and predisposition. These are the people who need support and education. The latter is unlikely to be achieved through short-term training courses and workshops. There is need for an on-going flow of information alongside supervision and support. Staff must have a good understanding of the extent of women's disempowerment in this community, the mechanisms used to keep women in their place and women's internalisation of dominant norms and values. In other words, there is need for research and knowledge production to strengthen this movement.

### Intellectual weakness

Perhaps the largest shortcoming of this women's movement is its intellectual weakness. The majority of the newspapers, magazines and newsletters produced by this movement contain news, data and information about the various campaigns. Little research has been carried out about women's situation in Iraqi Kurdistan (e.g. Faraj, 2004; Faraj and Shwan, 2004; Jaza, 2007; Ali, 2006) and even these contain more data and less analysis and interpretation.

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The fact that this is an equal rights movement, as opposed to a women's liberation movement, is largely due to the weakness of feminist knowledge. It is this shortage that lies at the heart of the movement's other problems. Effective activism must be informed through the recognition of women's oppression as a political issue. It must also be informed by an understanding of the structures and mechanisms of oppression. Stressing the importance of research for activism, Sally Haslanger (2013) argues that research: "offers insight into the mechanisms for social change and where our activism is best directed." Similarly, Annemie Halsema (2013) argues that changing the dominant normative structures of society: "implies in the first place seeing and understanding these normative structures: how is power produced, what kind of subjects are allowed in the culture you live in, and which ones cannot exist, cannot come into existence? In other words, who counts as subject, and who not, and why? Finding that out implies taking a distance from concrete actions, and reflection upon the structures in which we can become woman."

Mojab (2007) points to NGO's lacking an "established program to struggle against patriarchy." She argues that organising projects to target specific and "acute social problems" is like pouring water "on the fire of religious and feudal patriarchy." She then goes on to say that: "these fires will not die out so easily." This absence of an established program, however, is largely due to the

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<sup>49</sup> Between 2005 and 2010, I spent a long period visiting Anfal survivors in Germian with Ekrama Ghaeb. She was my guide and gatekeeper and I spent a few memorable nights in her house with her family. I also conducted an in-depth interview with her in 2009.

intellectual flaws of the movement. The women's movement in Iraqi Kurdistan needs to address this weakness if it aims to become a liberation movement. The intellectual and linguistic isolation of this movement,<sup>50</sup> its limited awareness of other women's struggles for freedom and the inability to exchange and produce new ideas has meant that this movement is moving within a relatively small circle of demands. While working on more pressing issues the movement has spent less energy on producing knowledge, analysis and theory about women's oppression in this region. This is precisely why the *Serdemî Jin* (Women's Era) journal was founded.<sup>51</sup> This bi-seasonal journal consists of three sections: "Theory and Research", "Art, Literature and Culture" and "History and Archive". It aims to serve as a platform for Kurdish women's academic research and creativity and to document women's contribution to society by including biographies and profiles of women's organisations. It is hoped that the journal will help invigorate the women's movement by providing analytical and creative texts and by archiving women's individual and group achievements.

## Conclusion

The events around the First Gulf War concluded a violent Arab nationalist dictatorship in Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurdish men came to power and soon proved to be uninterested in protecting and sharing power with the women who supported them during the revolution. In the post-dictatorship era, however, the political space was opened up for suspended issues to be addressed and sidelined voices to be heard. Women rapidly mobilised in response to the widespread gender based discrimination, marginalisation and violence. Even though initially they were preoccupied with more urgent issues, such as protecting women from violence, gradually their aims and objectives broadened.

After a period of working in isolation the women's organisations founded umbrella organisations to consolidate their efforts and exert greater pressure for change. The patriarchal system responded to the on-going pressure by making cosmetic changes. The legal reforms that promised protection and equality to women have not been implemented and the majority of women who reach decision-making positions are chosen because they do not pose a threat to the system. In this way and despite 21 years of hard work, women's efforts are "sabotaged", real change is prevented and the achievements are "not according to expectation."

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<sup>50</sup> In the past, Arabic was the second language in the region and most people had good knowledge of this language. After the Anfal genocide and the gassing of Halabja, however, followed by the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government, many people abandoned Arabic, rejecting the language of "the oppressor". This has meant further isolation for the people as they are deprived of important texts in the social sciences which have been translated into Arabic but not Kurdish.

<sup>51</sup> *Serdemî Jin* Journal. editor-in-chief: Choman Hardi. Editorial Assistant: Bayan Salman. Journal Manager: Najiba Mahmud.

So far this is a women's rights movement and has not become a women's liberation movement. This may be partly due to the difficulty of the socio-political situation in Kurdistan but also to the intellectual limitation of the movement. Achieving equal rights has proved to be a lengthy and difficult process and has diverted attention away from the need for a revolution in culture, socialisation, language and the structures of power. To make progress there is need for a strong, independent, unified and intelligent women's movement that comprehends the dynamics of the system and responds in appropriate ways. I believe that in Iraqi Kurdistan, we are at the beginning of this process.

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