



## **Final Research Report**

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### **Female Iraqi Academics In Iraqi Kurdistan: Roles, Challenges & Capacities**

#### **I. Introduction**

This report is based on research carried out by a team of researchers based in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, supervised and coordinated by Professor Nadje Al-Ali, Centre for Gender Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. The research team consists of Muzhda Muhammed (Department of Social Work, Salahaddin University), Hataw Kareem (Sociology Department, Salahaddin University), Dlaram Salih (Sociology Department, Salahaddin University) and Kawther Akreyi (independent gender consultant). The project is part of and funded by the wider DeIPHE Iraq programme that has encouraged cooperation between British and Iraqi universities for capacity building purposes.<sup>1</sup>

The research presented in this report aimed to study the specific problems and challenges faced by female academics in Iraqi Kurdistan. In addition, the research project was intended to introduce a group of Iraqi Kurdish academics to qualitative research methods as well as gender as a concept of analysis. More broadly, the partnership between SOAS and Salahaddin University is meant to develop and modernize the curriculum and research capacity at Salahaddin University. Additionally, through developing policy recommendations based on the research findings as well as capacity building the project hopes to contribute to improving the opportunities for and representation of female professionals in the Iraqi Kurdish Higher Education (HE) sector. Finally, the project aims to increase sensitivity and awareness about gender issues both within the HE sector as well as within society more widely. The report will provide the main research findings as well as recommendations.

#### **I.1. Background & Context of Research**

Several local and international commentators, academics, education experts and policy-makers have already discussed the problems and challenges

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<sup>1</sup> DeIPHE-Iraq is a DfID funded programme that supports partnerships between higher

faced by higher education in the Kurdistan region.<sup>2</sup> The need for reform has been addressed at conferences and workshops, and has been integral to the Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG) agenda, particularly through the policies of the Ministry of Higher Education. It is beyond the scope of this report to discuss in any depth the range of challenges linked to politics, lack of adequate facilities and resources, a limited research culture as well as insufficient innovative teaching methods. Without doubt, many senior administrators and academics at universities throughout the region agree that reforms are needed, particularly in terms of the need to encourage critical thinking amongst students and lecturers, the need to introduce new teaching and research methods and to try to find more transparent ways of decision-making and resource allocation. One crucial aspect that has not received sufficient attention so far relates to the role and challenges faced specifically by female academics. Female post-graduate students, teachers, lecturers and researchers have been increasing in numbers and make up substantial percentages of university life in the KRG ruled areas as well as in Iraq overall. While the numbers in general have been increasing, women are still very marginal in publishing, in decision-making posts, in international networks of specific fields of study, and in representing Iraqi Kurdish HE institutions in the global arena.

The situation of women in the Kurdish region in general has been changing rapidly over the past years in the context of political and economic transition entailing democratization, the growth of civil society organizations and the rule of law. At the same time, economic development, investment and globalization have also had a huge impact on Iraqi Kurdish society in terms of life styles, consumption patterns and attitudes. While there are still huge challenges with political authoritarianism, corruption and nepotism, the region has clearly been undergoing drastic transformation. In this context, women and gender issues are often at the centre of conflicts and tensions between those constituencies promoting reform, modernization and change and those advocating traditional norms and gender roles and propagating against globalizing influences. Without wanting to fall into a simplistic and misleading dichotomy of modern vs. traditional, it is obvious that women's roles and social and cultural attitudes towards women are very polarized in Iraqi Kurdish society and source of conflicts, tensions and violence.

The government and politicians of the main parties are officially committed to improve women's rights and to increase women's education, labour force participation as well as socio-economic rights while trying to challenge harmful attitudes and practices around honour- based crimes, FGM and wider gender-based violence. Yet, women's rights activists in the region agree that there are gaps between legal stipulations and actual practises and that gender-based discrimination is still commonplace. Gender-based violence, for example, does not exist in a vacuum in any part of the world but is embedded in specific gender ideologies and relations. In order to adequately study and address structural inequalities, social injustices and gender-based forms of discrimination and violence, researchers need to be properly trained. It is within institutions higher educations that gender norms and relations first need to be recognized, discussed and possibly challenged

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Salman Ahmed Rasul (2012), <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/1/state5768.htm>; Mariwan Hama-Saeed (2010) <http://iwpr.net/report-news/iraqi-kurdistans-universities-need-reform>.

both amongst members of staff but also in relation to the engagement with students.

## **I. 2. Research Objective & Aims**

The research carried out explores the Iraqi-Kurdish HE sector through a gendered lens by focusing on the specific roles, challenges and problems of female academics. The main objective is to document the specific social, cultural, political and economic challenges female academics face within the current context.

At the same time, the research aims to assess gaps and needs in terms of qualifications, teaching and research skills, administrative and organizational abilities as well as resources. In addition to providing an analysis of the current situation of female academics, we have drawn up a concrete list of suggestions to contribute to skill development and capacity building.

## **I. 3. Research Methodology**

Our research methodology is qualitative and based on the recognition of the importance of the subjective, experiential “life-world” of human beings (phenomenology). Qualitative research is not merely interested in gathering “facts” and asking “what happened” but tries to uncover the “how” and “why” and the meanings people attach to certain events. The qualitative researcher seeks to discover the meanings that participants attach to their behaviour, how they interpret situations, and what their perspectives are on particular issues. Qualitative research is generally used to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviours, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture or lifestyles.

Gender is a key analytical category for our research. The concept gender in the first instance denotes the social and cultural construction of what it means to be a woman and a man. What it means to be an ideal man or woman and the roles attached to it has been historically specific and has varied over time, in addition to cross cultural differences. Secondly, gender refers to relationships characterized by power differences. The concept of gender points to processes, in which hierarchies are established, reproduced and challenged (Al-Ali, Pratt 2009: 8). Gender is a structural feature that pervades all aspects of domestic and national lives. Common to a wide range of contemporary gender analyses is the view that the differentiation and relative positioning of women and men is an important ordering principle that, ‘is seen to shape the dynamics of every site of human interaction, from the household to the international arena’ (Cockburn, 1999: 3).

In our research methodology, we combined poststructuralist and materialist approaches to gender: In terms of poststructuralist approaches we explored gender ideologies in terms of norms, values and ideas inherent in discourses by and about Iraqi female academics. In terms of materialist approaches, we studied the specific sexual division of labour within academia, access to resources, such as scholarship, research grants and training, access to decision-making processes and positions as well as qualifications and skills of female academics.

#### **I. 4. Research Methods**

We have used a variety of qualitative methods to include semi-structured and open-ended interviews with 70 female academics within Hawler (Erbil) and other cities in Iraqi Kurdistan. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a relatively small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation. In-depth interviewing is a type of interview, which researchers use to elicit information in order to achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewee's point of view or situation. This type of interview involves asking informants open-ended questions, and probing wherever necessary to obtain data deemed useful by the researcher.

The interviews took place over a period of 12 months from October 2010 – October 2011. Academics interviewed were working at the following universities: Salahaddin University, Sulimaniya University, Dohouk University, Hawler Medical College and Cihan University. We tried to identify a cross-section of female academics with respect to generation, discipline, university affiliation as well as political party membership (or lack thereof). We tried to also include the variable of religious and ethnic background, but most of our respondents were Kurdish Sunni Muslim.

In terms of sampling, we identified potential respondents through a 'snow ball method', commencing with established contacts and networks. Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initial respondents to generate additional respondents. It is not an ideal method in terms of variables and representability, but works in contexts where access might be difficult and time and resources limited.

Interviews were transcribed and translated. In order to protect our respondents and to keep the confidentiality of our respondents, we have anonymized our research findings by not mentioning names, positions or affiliations. As part of the research process, Professor Al-Ali commented on the interview scripts after 3 months, then 6 months, and suggested ways to improve the team members' research techniques.

## **II. Main Findings**

### **II.1. Attitudes and Practices of Exclusion and Marginalization**

Our research findings indicate that there are no legal or official policies that discriminate between male and female members of staff. Moreover, individual academics have received support from their male peers, colleagues and senior administrators on several occasions. However, based on the interviews we detected systematic practices and attitudes of exclusion and marginalization of female academics. The main complaints expressed by academics of different departments, disciplines and generations relates to lack of transparency with respect to a) training, b) scholarships, c) attendance at conferences, and d) appointment to administrative and senior management posts.

Many of the female academics we interviewed stated that there was no proper system or process in place that would assure equal opportunities for all members of staff, but that the allocation of resources and access to training and scholarships very much depended on personal and political connections. A small number of respondents stressed that they had been supported greatly by a male colleague or senior manager, but even in these situations, it was felt that it was one specific sympathetic and supportive person as opposed to a more systematic and transparent process. If the sympathetic man or woman were to leave a certain position, the female academic would start to feel more vulnerable and unsupported.

While most of the academics we spoke to acknowledge that the lack of transparent processes and proper guidelines also affect their male colleagues, the majority of our respondents felt strongly that they were systematically disadvantaged because of being women. For instance, with respect to scholarships, conditions linked to age tend to discriminate against women who often have to take a career break due to maternity leaves and childcare responsibilities. For example, one respondent told us:

*When I wanted to apply for a PhD, they put difficult criteria like age, which does not make sense. The regulations says that for a PhD, the candidate should not exceed 40 years while for a Masters, the person should not be more than 35 years old. I am not eligible to apply for a PhD because of my age, which does not make sense. I am confident that I can pursue my study and I do not feel that I am that old and I am incapable of making changes.*

Fortunately, this regulation has been amended recently and is no longer in place officially. However, older academics with children do still feel that they are being sidelined due to their age and career break.

Maybe even more significantly, cultural and social attitudes about women's lack of competence, assertiveness and ability to lead clearly play an important role in shaping the behaviour and practises towards female academics on behalf of their male colleagues, Heads of Departments and Deans. In fact, most of the interviewees complained that female academics were ignored in terms of the various management and senior administrative posts involved in university life. The majority of respondents stated that there still exists suspicion and lack of confidence about women's capabilities. As one lecturer put to us: "*We are not even trusted to run an exam hall*". On the other hand, several academics who did get appointed to do certain administrative roles were convinced that they were not chosen for their skills but due to the fact that there was no male colleague willing to do the job. Several of our respondents stated that women tend to be appointed to the less prestigious but more labour intensive administrative roles as opposed to roles associated with decision-making and strategizing.

A common experience relates to women's voices being ignored or marginalized in meetings and committees. Authoritarian and hierarchical structures within some departments and committees create an intimidating atmosphere, which does not encourage women's full participation. One lecturer stated: "*Women wouldn't like to be heads of department since they have their own suffering as they deal with a number of male instructors from the department committee. Men always impose their opinion and women are only perceived to be a complementary figure of men during the job*".

Another respondent put it the following way:

*I can feel discrimination very much within the college and university atmosphere. For instance, when the department meeting is held, they seldom emphasize the attendance of the women academics. If women attended, their suggestions and proposals will be hardly listened to. And if the suggestions are listened to, they will not be put into action and will be neglected with the justification of being "unreasonable and unconvincing".*

Yet, it is not only the perceived treatment of women by male colleagues that prevent women to put themselves forward for certain positions. Other female colleagues are also seen as potential threats and obstacles to the academic developments of some academics we interviewed. Competition and envy are powerful sentiments that clearly present obstacles to greater cooperation and solidarity amongst colleagues, even amongst female academics. This was expressed by various respondents along similar lines:

*When someone is very skilful and intelligent, especially if she is an active woman, they will not allow her to continue. The discrimination is more about women. If someone is not intelligent, no one gets in your way, but the other way around when someone is progressing academically, you will get broken, sometimes even by a friend.*

Moreover, as we will elaborate later on in the report, social and cultural attitudes about women's capabilities and roles are not only held by many male academics and senior administrators, but also by wider society, including many female academics themselves. Several of our respondents conceded that they would not put themselves forward for any administrative or management position as they did not have the confidence to do so and/or would prioritise family responsibilities.

Negative cultural attitudes and obstacles even affect those women who have managed to get into more senior posts. As a former Dean of a College in Hawler Medical School put to us:

*I felt the discrimination against me because of being a woman, especially when I was a Dean. During 6 years, the President of Hawler Medical University informed me only once about a training course in London. There were lots of courses in the fields of leadership, but only male Deans were participating. The only time they asked me to go was to the one course in London. Even that time, they told me to my face that they did not want me to go, but the organizers of the course in London wanted some female participants. The higher positions you get and the more promotions, the more you will feel the discrimination.*

## **II. 2. Promotions**

The issue of promotions appears to be more complex than the widespread discriminatory practices with respect to training, scholarships, conference attendance and administrative posts. Most interviewees stressed that the guidelines to promotion are clearly laid out, i.e. 3 publications of research. Several of the women we interviewed agreed with the statement by one

lecturer: *“I personally have not faced any discrimination with regard to my promotion as I have published publications and it was my right to get promoted”*. However, a small number of respondents thought that the promotions committee and promotions process was also linked to personal relationships and that there was scope for interpretation in assessing and establishing whether certain publications were eligible and of high enough quality. This, it should be stressed, however, is a problem common to promotions processes throughout the world as a level of subjectivity is not avoidable. The question is a matter of degree and of the kind of procedures in place to decrease the possibility of biased treatment, whether positive or negative.

The more significant issue with respect to promotions and the required publications is the difficulty for female academics to juggle their teaching responsibilities with research, especially since many also have childcare and/or family responsibilities. The following was a frequently expressed argument:

*I haven't published the research papers because they are not complete yet. This is because I am burdened with many duties of preparing lectures at the college, and to take part in English and computer training courses, as they are conditions to be admitted in PhD. I am also taking a course of methods of teaching too, which is a condition for promoting to assistant instructor.*

What emerged throughout the interviews is the lack of a developed research culture within universities. Teaching does not tend to be research-led, and many instructors and lecturers are able to spend many years at university, focusing only on the teaching aspect of education without engaging in any serious research themselves. Several of our respondents, especially those working in the natural sciences that require labs and updated technology, stated that they do not have the actual resources to engage in meaningful research. Those working in the social sciences only have limited access to updated internationally recognized research material and theoretical literature. Language constitutes a significant barrier here as some academics are able to only access Kurdish sources, which to date, are relatively limited. A greater percentage has access to Arabic sources, although many are outdated, and a small percentage of our respondents are able to read English sources. The inability to access international libraries, which provide electronic journals, E-books etc. is another obstacle in terms of research scope and opportunities. While these various issues affect all academics, whether male or female, for women the added obstacle are childcare and domestic responsibilities as well as lack of encouragement and mentoring. These seriously undermine a female academic's ability to engage in research.

### **II.3. Lack of support structures**

Childcare and domestic responsibilities are the most frequently mentioned barriers to women's career developments by the academics we interviewed for this research. Aside from social and cultural attitudes, which are often internalized by academics themselves, it is the lack of adequate support infrastructure that impedes women's greater involvement in higher education. Private nurseries are expensive and not available to all academics due to

limited places and specific locations. Erbil and Sulamaniya have both private and governmental nurseries, yet the demand is bigger than what is on offer. Only those academics of good financial standing are able to afford private childcare in the form of nannies or maids. Several of our respondents bemoaned the absence of subsidized nurseries, especially a nursery located within the university.

Childcare appears to be particularly pressing as maternity leave is fully paid for only 72 days, and then mothers are entitled to half pay for up to a year. The issue is particularly pressing due to the fact that there is currently a mismatch between women's economic and academic contributions within higher education with increasing numbers of female students and lecturers, and the social and cultural expectations in terms of gender roles, namely that women are solely responsible for childcare and domestic responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of the house. Our respondents reported that picking up children from nurseries and bringing them to their in-laws is a task often shared between husband and wife. But while some men do get engaged in childcare, the main responsibility of childcare and domestic duties lies with the wife. This is an issue facing women in other professions as well as employment and family structures are changing rapidly, especially in urban contexts, however gender norms and cultural notions are still linked to the traditional division of labour between men and women.

In addition to lacking support with respect to childcare as well as domestic responsibilities, female academics are lacking structures of support in relation to academic mentoring. Aside from personalized systems of support, universities tend to not provide organized support in terms of career development, training and time management. Several of the junior academics who participated in this research wished that the university would provide them with more structured information about how to develop their research projects, how and where to publish, how to combine teaching and research, as well as how to combine work and family responsibilities.

The only available structural support relates to political party affiliation or family networks. Yet this was perceived to be a problem for several women we spoke to, as they would prefer a system based on merit and competence rather than personal and political connections. This particular lecturer, who aspired to do her PhD but has not managed to do so yet, was not alone in feeling resentment about the significance of "wasta" (connections) within the university environment:

*There are many cases that people get additional chances through wasta. With the help of the political parties, unqualified people get chances to study, but that was my right, and I didn't want to get a study offer or chance by wasta. My self-respect does not allow me to ask someone I know to help me get a study offer. My father taught us at home to get everything through our own work and qualifications. We never depended on wasta, because it is not fair. Why does a person who belongs to a special political party get chances and help, while a non-political qualified person loses the chance to improve and study? So, I thought a lot about the reason of not getting that study chance, but didn't find any reason but politics and wasta.*



Another more positive point mentioned in the interviews relates to friendship and support networks amongst colleagues who are valued greatly. For every story of tensions, conflicts and envy, there is a story and experience of support, encouragement and friendship amongst colleagues. Especially younger academics tend to feel more at ease with each other, including male and female colleagues. Some tensions existed within generations, but most tension and distance appears to exist between generations, with the younger generation perceiving the older generation to be more authoritarian, more distant and more formal.

#### **II.4. Social and cultural impediments to female academics' career**

Families could be both a great source of support and encouragement as well as an obstacle and impediment for young women who are starting out an academic career. The interviews provide evidence of parents, particularly fathers, being extremely supportive and inspiring to women seeking postgraduate degrees and careers within higher education. This support is emotional and financial as well as social in terms of allowing their daughters a relatively independent life, allowing them to study abroad or to attend conferences and training courses.

However, parents and siblings could pose a great obstacle to a young woman's ambitions in terms of education and employment. Many families do not accept the idea of an educated workingwoman. Traditional norms that place women firmly within the realm of the home and childcare and domestic responsibilities continue to be widespread. Some women face these obstacles and try to convince their families, while others accept what the family decides and arranges for their future. For example, one of our interviewees desired to study engineering, but her family perceived this to be a man's job and convinced her to mathematics instead. Now, being a PhD student, her family continues to try changing her mind and ask her to leave her studies. She said: *"My family does not support me. They always say: why are you working and studying that much? Eventually you will retire and stay at home like us. My parents were both teachers but now they are retired."*

Unmarried female lecturers are frequently taking over responsibilities at home, such as looking after elderly parents, running errands and helping with domestic tasks. Some respondents stated that their parents were disabled or have illnesses, which take a lot of time from them. Subsequently, they are unable to dedicate time for research or participating in different activities. Many of the single respondents said that they do engage in these caring and domestic tasks because all other siblings got married and live independently. However, single brothers who live at home tend to be exempted from many of these roles. For some of our respondents, marriage is perceived to be a step to greater freedom and social mobility away from the restrictions of their parental home.

At the same time, most of the interviewees are convinced that unmarried women, who hold university degrees or are university lecturers, will have less marriage opportunities since there are few unmarried highly educated male counterparts: *"Women's position has changed and they do not accept someone with lower cultural and social status. Men also do not accept women as wives who have higher qualification than them, as they think*

*women ask for their rights which is unacceptable for them*". Moreover, there is a widespread perception that single men tend to not want to marry a woman with the same academic qualifications assuming that these women would be too conscious and strong, and that men cannot easily control them. There was a consensus amongst the academics we spoke to that the more women get educated, the less marriage chances she has.

Despite these sentiments, marriage is an aspiration amongst many of the women we interviewed. Yet some respondents clearly stated that they do not feel that they would be able to combine a serious academic career with having a family on their own in the current cultural and social climate. They felt that they had to make a choice between marriage and children on the one hand, or career on the other.

Those who are married had a range of experiences and relations with their husbands. A small proportion of our sample clearly stated that their husbands posed an obstacle and did not support their work. They felt constrained and controlled by the men they married. A larger group of women, however, stated that their husbands were supportive. What supportive meant in practise was quite wide-ranging: in many instances it translated into the husband simply not objecting to the wife's work, while only in few cases it meant more pro-active help with childcare and domestic tasks. Overall, it was clear that female academics are burdened with more childcare and domestic duties and responsibilities and are struggling to keep everything going. The attempt "to strike a balance" was a common theme:

*I try to strike a balance between my job and my home affairs. My family understands my situation and supports me greatly. However, trying to create this balance is at the expense of my health and psychological situation. Also, I sacrifice lots of family issues for which I feel that I am neglectful toward my family in terms of doing my job and to properly care about them.*

Several of our respondents reported stress and continuous exhaustion in the struggle to try satisfying everyone around them while pursuing their work and educational aspirations and ambitions. Others were very clear in terms of their priorities, and stated that they are not as much interested in furthering themselves academically if this would mean neglecting their husbands or children. It comes to no surprise that many married female academics with children would pursue PhDs only if they would have more support in terms of childcare.

In addition to the role immediate families play, wider social norms and attitudes also impinge on female academics' experiences, possibilities and limitations. Families who are more open to women's education and labour force participation, often struggle with more conservative norms amongst extended family members, neighbours and friends. A woman's reputation and the family's honour are powerful cultural notions that influence female academics' mobility, particularly their ability to travel abroad.

## **II.5. Job versus career**

Throughout our research, it became obvious that some respondents perceive their work as a means to an end rather than something they love to do and feel passionate about. A small number of our interviewees directly acknowledge that teaching at university was a way to get an income, and that economic circumstances forced them to engage in waged labour. If given the choice, they would prefer to stay at home and be full time mothers and housewives. As previously stated, some of the women we interviewed were clearly reproducing prevailing social and cultural norms about gender roles, and felt inconvenienced by their work, which prevented them to fulfil what they perceive to be their proper roles.

Others, however, very much value the opportunity to teach and engage with students, but do not feel that they either have the time, opportunity or energy to work beyond what is immediately requested from them. Many of academics in this category feel that lack of support structures and prevailing attitudes discourage them to engage in research and develop their expertise and careers beyond that of classroom teachers. Given the lack of an organized, supported and widespread research culture and inadequate research facilities and equipment, i.e. labs, offices, computers and access to updated literature, engaging in research activities and publications, is not seen to be a priority amongst the majority of our respondents. Moreover, many female academics also feel discouraged due to prevailing attitudes and practises within universities, which they feel are not fair and tend to marginalize women.

Yet, a number of female academics we spoke to were clearly passionate and enthusiastic about their work, and expressed their great commitment and determination to develop. These academics have taken initiative and engaged in research, tried to improve their teaching skills, enrol in English and computer classes and link up with international networks. This has clearly been easier for those without families; yet, married academics with children who have pursued careers have managed to do so due to their own discipline, rigour, commitment and passion, but also with the help of the support of individual family members and/or colleagues.

### **III. Conclusions:**

The interviews shed light on the important progress and positive developments made so far with respect to women's involvement with and roles within higher education in Iraqi Kurdistan in comparison to several decades ago. When comparing the accounts of the older generations of female academics with that of the younger generations, it becomes clear that the obstacles and challenges experienced by older generations were severe: political oppression by the previous Ba'th regime, wars, lack of security, limited facilities of higher education within the Kurdish region and widespread restrictive gender norms and relations. As one lecturer told us:

*My family did intervene in my choice of study because I wanted to study English Literature or Law but those departments were only based in Baghdad at that time. I was forced to choose a section, which is available in Sulimaniya, so that I would not have to move. They were concerned about me staying in a dormitory or staying by myself. This meant that I was deprived from studying*

*the field, which I love. I constantly tell them and I am still interested in English.*

In the past, studying for postgraduate degrees generally meant travelling to Baghdad or other cities in central and southern Iraq. This was particularly challenging for the families of the young women at the time and often perceived to be inappropriate by society. With the political context changed, greater security and an economic boom, the HE sector has also been booming in the region which has made both studying and employment within universities much easier.

Many of the challenges and problems experienced by the female academics today are shared by their male colleagues across the sector. The lack of transparency with respect to access to resources, scholarships, training and conference attendance also poses a problem for many male Kurdish academics, especially those without political party support. A reoccurring theme was the personalized system of support as opposed to a more depersonalized systematic structure of support with procedures and clear guidelines. Lack of resources and equipment, restricted access to new literature and the overall limited research culture within universities is also a general problem that needs addressing in order to maximise the potential of universities in the region. Finally, the need to encourage critical and independent thinking, engage in innovative teaching methods and research while assuring quality and international standards appears to be one of the biggest challenges for the HE sector.

However, our research findings leave no doubt that in addition to these general problems and challenges, there are gender-specific issues that deserve attention and require discussion and action. While there was definitely a range of views, opinions and experiences amongst the female academics we spoke to, we could detect an overall trend that amounts to systematic marginalization and exclusion. The different experiences we came across can be explained with respect to generational variability, family circumstances, personality, political party affiliation (or not), but also specific departments being more friendly and supportive environments than others, and specific Heads of Departments and Deans who might or might not be supportive of departments and individual academics.

The marginalization and exclusion of women in terms of training, scholarships, conference attendance and decision-making posts appears to be a consequence of prevailing cultural attitudes, social norms and accepted practices that have gone unchallenged. Many female academics themselves often lack the confidence and assertiveness to put themselves forward, and some have internalized prevailing cultural assumptions about women's lack of competence, rigour and determination. Societal expectations in terms of women's caring roles for parents or children pose practical obstacles to female academic's career development, given the lack of systematic support structures.

It is important to stress that many issues related to the marginalization of female academics are not unique to Iraqi Kurdistan. Professor Nadjie Al-Ali has carried out similar research with a team based in central and southern Iraq, which indicates similar challenges and problems, except that the problems are exacerbated by lack of security and political instability. Yet,

even within western institutions, like British universities for example, there are on-going challenges related to gender pay gaps (women earning less than men while carrying out the same tasks), the limited number of women in senior management posts and the relatively small yet growing number of female professors.<sup>3</sup> However, while it would be unrealistic to expect fast solutions and immediate equality, the important point is to recognize inequalities, different forms of marginalization, unhelpful social attitudes and norms and to try to address and change them.

Clearly, there is and will be some resistance on behalf of those people who have been invested in the old system and are worried about change. As everywhere in the world, change and transformation is linked to anxieties and tensions, but where more appropriately could vision, innovation, creativity and brilliance thrive than in the context of universities? It is universities globally and in the region that have produced thinkers and ideas that might have been unpopular and unwelcome in the beginning, but, on the long run, have forced us to rethink and shift what we thought of as “the truth” whether in the natural or the social sciences.

Finally, we would like to comment on the need for passion within academia: We were struck by the fact that a number of our respondents were lacking in determination and passion about their work, and perceived it more like an income generating activity. Obviously academic positions are jobs and provide incomes as any other job as well. However, it is passion and commitment that creates top-notch academics, researches and intellectuals all over the world. For passion and commitment to flourish, the right working conditions need to be established. This would involve better facilities, equipment and resources, greater access to training, more time to engage in research, introducing new teaching methods and providing support structures for research. Yet, academics themselves will have to take initiative and shape their environments according to their needs as the creation of good academic working conditions can not just happen from top down but needs to be developed at the level of departments, networks of colleagues and postgraduate students, within committees etc. Solutions cannot merely come from the government, the Ministry or even the University Presidents. They also have to come from individual male and female academics working together to jointly create and develop institutions of learning, teaching and research that will help to develop and modernize the region as a whole.

#### **IV. Recommendations:**

Based on the findings above, there is a list of recommendations we would like to put forward:

##### **IV.1. For universities to create equal opportunities in terms of training, scholarships, conference attendance, allocation of administrative and decision-making posts & promotion. This would involve the following:**

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<sup>3</sup> The analysis of the Higher Education Statistics Agency's staff record for 2006-07 shows that 17.5% of professors in higher education institutions (HEI) were female, up from 16.7% the previous academic year. This equates to 2,885 women, compared with 13,600 men. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/feb/28/educationsgendergap.gender>

- a. Establishment of more transparent criteria, guidelines and procedures that replace the personalized forms of support as well as politically based support.
- b. Provision of university-based and state sponsored childcare centres and nurseries.
- c. Until equality of opportunity is fully established, introduction of quota to guarantee certain percentage of women's participation.
- d. More proactive encouragement of women's involvement in administration and decision-making.
- e. Establishment of Equal Opportunities officer within each university to monitor guidelines and procedures.

**IV.2. For universities to more actively and systematically support a research culture and encourage female academics to engage in research and publications:**

- a. Introduction of academic mentoring schemes to coach junior scholars in terms of research and publications.
- b. Introduction of regular research seminars in which members of staff share their work in progress.
- c. Encouragement of engagement in international networks and conference attendance.
- d. Provision of university-based and state sponsored childcare centres and nurseries.

**IV.3. For universities to encourage culture of critical thinking, social inclusion and innovation, particularly with respect to research and teaching methods.**

- a. Encourage new methods of teaching and learning by putting on courses and engage in exchanges with international scholars
- b. Organize debates and seminars for members of staff and postgraduate students
- c. Encourage both theoretical and empirical research
- d. Provide research methods training (quantitative and qualitative)
- e. Organize informal meetings within faculties to discuss academics' concerns and suggestions

**IV.4. For female academics to be more pro-active and take initiative in terms of career development:**

- a. Seek out opportunities and pursue with determination, i.e. training, PhD, conference attendance, research & publications
- b. Take English language acquisition seriously and take advantage of courses offered at universities
- c. Establish networks of female academics to work collectively
- d. Seek out experienced male & female colleagues to ask for advice in terms of research and publication
- e. Establish links with international professional organizations and networks
- f. Create professional organization or trade union for academics

- g. Encourage other family members, including husbands, to get more involved in childcare and other domestic responsibilities

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