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Challenges for Female Academics in Contemporary Iraq

Due to the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, wars (1980-1988, 1991, 2003) and UN sanctions (1990-2003), Iraq experienced decades of international isolation and academic decline. The crisis of Iraqi academia in the post-invasion period since 2003 has been wide-ranging. There has been targeted assassinations of Iraqi academics, a high rate of academic refugees who have fled violence and lack of security, the destruction of related infrastructures, increasing corruption within academic institutions, the lack of research and teachers' training and the impact of sectarianism on both students and members of staff. At the same time, research carried out in the post-invasion period suggests that women's labour force participation and general position within Iraqi society has been negatively affected

Given both the severe crisis in higher education and the extremely difficult situation for women within contemporary Iraqi society, we asked ourselves: how do female academics manage in this context? And what specific challenges might they be facing? We, a team of female Iraqi academics of different disciplinary, and generational backgrounds, based in different locations (Irada and Inass in Baghdad; Huda in Amman and Nadjé in London) have carried out qualitative research on this issue. In addition to our own experiences and participant observation, we have interviewed over 90 female academics based mainly inside Iraq, but some now living in neighbouring Jordan. It has not been easy to carry out empirical research in an unsafe, insecure and non-trusting environment, where people tend to refuse

to talk to strangers, and perhaps not always provide the correct information. Gaining the confidence of our respondents was one of the main challenges during the research process.

Being conscious that we are addressing a western readership, the first point we should stress is the fact that Iraq has a long history of women's participation in both the education sector and the labour force more generally. While women have historically been present in all sectors of higher education, Iraq, like most other countries, also has a history of gender-based discrimination within its universities. One common point of discrimination is related to the fear of female academics getting pregnant and requiring maternity leave. This continues until today, as Zina, one of our respondents who has been working at the University of al-Nahrain since 2008, told us: 'I remember when I put an application to work, the assistant university chancellor for administrative affairs asked me if I was married or engaged. That day I was very

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disturbed and astonished by his question. When I started to work in the university, I came to know that they prefer to hire the unmarried. Had I been married, I might not have been able to get a job.'

Yet, unlike many western countries, there is no systematic gender pay gap within higher education as men and women doing similar jobs are paid the same money. However, our interviews showed that there were institutional, cultural and social obstacles for women to obtain equality within universities. Very few women have made it to positions of senior management and senior administration while a large number of the teaching staff without PhDs is female. This is also not unique to Iraq as Nadje notice parallels with institutions based in Britain, like SOAS, for example, where part-time and fixed-term contract staff are disproportionately female and of BME (black and minority ethnic) backgrounds as opposed to people with permanent positions and staff in senior management.

What is different about the Iraqi context is the extent of the crisis of higher education: the dangers and insecurities, the corruption inside and outside universities, sectarianism and political tensions that have crept into academia. Many of our respondents bemoaned the lack of academic freedom and the lack of transparency in terms of appointments, promotions and access to scholarships, training and conferences.

Development and training opportunities are severely limited for all Iraqi academics. Dr Far'iah told us in an interview: 'Attending conferences and participating in research projects is open to everyone inside Iraq. Often, names of participants are decided in advance for the benefit of senior academics. However, when the training course or the conference falls outside their specialisations, they choose their own students whom they supervise, or they might select academics who might be able to pay them back in particular matters.' In other words, there is no transparency in choosing training or conference

participation, and this is part of wider thriving systems of patronage.

While these issues hold true for both male and female academics, women face a number of social and cultural constraints as well. A female academic's family plays a very important role in opening up or closing doors. Several of our respondents praised their parents, particularly fathers, for supporting their daughter's education and labour force participation. Yet others remarked that it was their parents and siblings who made a career very difficult as they objected to long working hours and travelling abroad for training, conferences or studies.

Husbands are also playing both supportive and debilitating roles. Several of the female academics we interviewed praised their husbands for their encouraging and supportive role. But very few men seem to translate this verbal and emotional support into practical sharing of household responsibilities and child caring. Most husbands expect female academics to continue with these tasks and engage with what has been coined the double-burden of work inside and outside the home. Unfortunately, some husbands are taking a more pro-active stand to prevent a woman's career by objecting to long working hours, extra-curricular activities, training or any

kind of work-related travels. For those respondents who are unmarried, it was clear that MA and PhD degrees have a direct relationship to their marriage prospects: the higher the degree, the less the likelihood for them to find a suitable spouse or even to identify any potential husband.

We realised that some of our interviewees did not seem to be very much interested in staff development, research and an academic career. For them, teaching at a university was mainly a job to pay the bills. This is not surprising given the economic climate and general level of insecurity. However, what was really heartening for all of us was to see a small number of female academics of different generations forging ahead with passion and conviction despite the great number of challenges and obstacles. Women take great risks and make great personal sacrifices to fulfill their dreams of gaining PhDs, doing research, writing and introducing new methods into their established teaching routines. Seeing these brave and dedicated female academics work in Iraqi universities today is humbling and inspiring to us all.

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(Opposite) Work from the Open Shutters photography project, 2006, where women from five cities in Iraq learned about photography

(Right) Women at work on the Open Shutters project, 2006



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