

Reshaping Boundaries

Negotiating space among middle class women in Kurdistan

Written by

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Kurdistan

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Abstract

This thesis is based on a 6 month ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2018 in Hawler, Kurdistan. I explore the concept of agency of young urban middle class women within the structural frames of a patriarchal society in a largely Muslim country in the Middle East. By following young urban women to the public social spaces they occupy, as well as being invited to their homes and hearing their stories of domestic life and marriage, this thesis will focus on how young Kurdish woman in urban areas create and negotiate social spaces. It will also discuss their perception of being modern and progressive, versus being modern and conservative. Through these topics I will discuss the debate around resistance in anthropological literature, and some issues surrounding this debate. The discussion on space and power structure will serve as a takeoff to a reflection on women's agency within a largely patriarchal society and power structure, both within the domestic and the public sphere. Finally, this thesis will be a contribution to anthropological literature in a country that is relatively understudied, and the ongoing debates about women and agency in the Middle East.

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Innholdsfortegnelse

ABSTRACT	I
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	II
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER OUTLINE.....	2
METHOD, THEORY AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	3
THEORY	3
<i>Anthropology and the Middle East</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Feminist anthropology.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Power, agency and space</i>	<i>5</i>
METHODOLOGY	6
<i>The field and access.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Data collection.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Positioning.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Ethics.....</i>	<i>8</i>
BACKGROUND	9
<i>Genocide and mass relocation</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>The flight to Iran.....</i>	<i>11</i>
HAWLER.....	13
GLOBAL MEETS LOCAL	16
<i>Super-diversity and transnational movements.....</i>	<i>17</i>
BEING KURDISH	20
GENDER ROLES AND THE STRUCTURE OF POWER.....	21
<i>Gender in Hawler</i>	<i>22</i>
CHAPTER 1 LIFE IN MIDDLE CLASS HAWLER	24
REPUTATION.....	25
<i>Consumption and a focus on appearance</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Creating a group distinction.....</i>	<i>29</i>
FAMILY LIFE.....	31
<i>Economy of the middle class.....</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>Importance of education</i>	<i>33</i>
MOVING AROUND THE CITY.....	35
<i>Depending on a driver</i>	<i>37</i>
WORK.....	38

CHAPTER 2 GOING OUT AND HAVING FUN	43
CREATING SPACE.....	44
<i>“But there will be no men here, right?”</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Creating a women’s sphere</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Being Connected.....</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>Internet as a social space</i>	<i>51</i>
THE PROBLEM WITH RESISTANCE.....	52
CHAPTER 3 LIFE IN THE HOME.....	56
<i>“Modern” or “traditional” homes.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Just for women</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>Kinship and family.....</i>	<i>62</i>
NEGOTIATING DOMESTIC SPACE	64
CHAPTER 4. MARRIAGE	66
TWO WEDDINGS	66
DELAL – NEGOTIATING MARRIAGE	70
SARA – DIVORCE.....	72
CONCLUSION	76
BIBLIOGRAFI	78



Figure 1: Map of Iraq and Kurdistan. Source: Al-Jazeera

Introduction

“The ongoing importance of feminist scholarship on women’s agency cannot be emphasized enough, especially when one remembers that Western popular media continues to portray Muslim women as incomparably bound by the unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression” (Saba Mahmood, 2012, p 7)

The first time I traveled to Kurdistan was in 2012, the Iraqi parts of Kurdistan had been safe for many years and we decided to go on a 10 day long trip to see my Kurdish family. Without any notion of what it would be like I went there with keen eyes to see what the city of Hawler had to offer. My family who initially lived in Baghdad, but had now moved to Kurdistan, were the only people I knew, and my grandmother who had studied at Cambridge in the 50s didn’t seem to me as the stereotypical Muslim women portrayed by a post 9/11 media. Having visited Kurdish family in the United States without ever being exposed to gender inequality, I didn’t think that I had any pre judgments about Kurdistan and Iraq, but I realize now that all the media coverage from the area had had an impact on me too. The stereotype of Middle Eastern society hit me in the face the first morning, when someone rang our doorbell at 7 am to greet us with fresh yoghurt for breakfast. After that first encounter with Hawler and its people the picture painted by news outlets started fainting, and a new picture arose. The city seemed familiar, the malls, restaurants, cafes and hotels could just as well have been in Oslo or Fairfax as in Hawler, and so could all the people I met. Therefore the generalization of Muslims seemed even more obscure to me now than ever.

This is where my interest for the Middle East started, with Kurdistan and Iraq as my main interests. I had never read any anthropological work from Hawler, only from the villages around Kurdistan, which I found to be a completely different world to the Hawler that I knew. The young women I met in Hawler in 2012 seemed to have much more in common with me, than with other young women outside the cities in Kurdistan. So that’s where my project started, I wanted to explore the everyday life of young Hawleri women living in Hawler. To this end my research question is: How do young urban Hawleri women negotiate and navigate daily life in Hawler?

Chapter outline

I will begin by presenting my theoretical framework and my methodological choices, and next I will present the historical background of Kurdistan and give context to the region.

Additionally I will go deeper into the city of Hawler by presenting some topography, power structure and gender roles, and describe the city in which I conducted my fieldwork. The topic for chapter 1 is the life of young middle class women in Hawler, I will describe the meaning of reputation in the life of young urban women, and how mobility and work has impacted their lives. Chapter 2 concerns young women who are creating and negotiating space outside of their homes, and the part connections and the Internet plays in this negotiation of space. I will also use my own empirical data to discuss the issue of resistance in anthropological literature. In chapter 3 I am examining the domestic life of young urban women in Hawler, and I will present my own experiences from Kurdish households as well as telling the stories of others. The issue of negotiation of space will continue in this chapter, as I use my own empirical data and theories about kinship and gender in the Middle East to discuss young women's creation and negotiation of -and agency within- domestic space. Chapter 4 brings up the topic of marriage and divorce. By describing two weddings I attended, and by telling the stories of my interlocutors I will discuss issues connected to marriage and divorce. In the conclusion I will give a summary of my thesis' main topics and present my arguments.

Method, theory and historical background

In this thesis I want to contribute to the growing literature of agency and resistance among young women in a largely Muslim country in the Middle East. By resistance I do not mean a collective effort for women to resist power and subordination in society, rather I will examine how young women with a middle class background in the Kurdish capital Hawler negotiate and position themselves, and how they negotiate agency in the presence of resistance.

Theory

Anthropology and the Middle East

“(a)nthropological writing shapes a Middle East of its own, fashioned out of conventions, standards of relevance, imaginative and political concerns, and zones of prestige.” (Abu-Lughod, 1989, p. 278)

In anthropological literature the Middle East has been an area of fascination for many decades, but Iraq in particular has been relatively understudied as opposed to other Middle Eastern countries. Marcia C. Inhorn has illustrated the differences in ethnographic work in the Middle East by tracking work from 60 years back in time of 2014. She presents what she calls the “main-stream” locations, Israel and Palestine, Egypt and Morocco have each had 69 writings or more each, while Iraq has only had 11 published ethnographies (Inhorn, 2014, p. 69)

In 1989 Lila Abu-Lughod wrote an article where she argued that there are three major zones of theory in anthropological research from the Middle East and North Africa; segmentation, the harem (the woman’s sphere) and Islam. Not only has these “zones of theory”, and maybe particularly segmentation theory, made up an overwhelming amount of the literature, it is also often presented in a way to be representative of the region, without properly considering any other history and context.

With the basis of the “zones of theory” presented by Lila Abu-Lughod, she argues that three more zones of theory should be added to the list. “First, numerous “ethnographies of place,” namely, villages, towns, urban quarters, ethnic enclaves, migrant neighborhoods, and new cities; second, and related to this, minority studies, often of particular ethnic or religious

minority groups living in particular enclave communities; and finally, a large corpus of scholarship on politics and the Middle Eastern state, including older studies of tribal politics and new, emerging scholarship on the state and nationalism.” (Inhorn, 2014, p. 69). This makes up 85 per cent of all published ethnographies from the Middle East in the last 60 years (up until 2014), and she proposes that the anthropology of the Middle East should broaden its horizon by going down the roads less traveled. One of these roads is class in the Middle East. Inhorn calls for anthropology with a categorical focus on class and human dignity. She wants to see anthropology moving towards the formal economies of the Middle East and the accumulation of wealth and professional development in the middle class (Inhorn, 2014, p. 75). Of “the roads less traveled”, this is what fascinates me the most, the somewhat understudied middle class that exists as a strong force in the Kurdish economy. Inhorn also proposes expanding the research of men and male sexuality, the studies of the different spheres where “women are talking to women” and “men are talking to men” is overruling the understanding of Middle Eastern masculinities and the interaction between the sexes, especially in marriage (Inhorn, 2014, pp. 71-72). But as she lays out the different categories which she would like to see expanded in anthropological work, the nuances in Middle Eastern societies are fragmented in a way that in my opinion should be more fluid. Although her article is obviously written as to include more “zones of theory” in the Middle East, and therefore presents them in a categorized way, I would argue that there is also a need to entangle the “zones of theory” in a way that will give more insights into the topics that have already been studied. It is my intention with this thesis to contribute to the existing literature with an analysis of ethnography that considers gender, class and power relations within the historical context of Kurdistan today.

Feminist anthropology

“Feminist anthropology is more than the study of women. It is the study of gender, of the interrelations between women and men, and the role of gender in structuring human societies, their histories, ideologies, economic systems and political structure.” (Moore, 2003, pp. Chapter 1, Section 4, Para. 1)

The focus on women in anthropology was in the earliest days of the discipline a non-existing thing. Although women have always been a part of ethnographies, through descriptions of kinship etc., it was not until the 1970s that the representation of women in anthropological literature became a main focus. As Henrietta Moore writes in the quote above, feminist

anthropology is the study of gender. Sherry Ortner's "is female to male as nature is to culture?" (1974). Ortner's essay inspired a framework to studying women's subordination to men through gender symbolism. As Henrietta Moore writes, a significance of feminist anthropology is the analysis of gender symbols and stereotypes, and to show the complexity of previously taken for granted categories.

Power, agency and space

The Foucaultian tradition of understanding power and subjectivation leads us down the road towards the creation of agency. Foucault discusses the possibility to understand power on the subject, and argues that the historical framework needs to be taken into account, to be able to constitute the subject within it (Foucault, 1980, p. 117). Further, power must be understood as something other than simply a judicial repression. Meaning that power is not just a force that "says no", it also produces things, for example knowledge and discourse. Power is therefore a "productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression." (Foucault, 1980, p. 119). He connects power to the individual by describing power as a technique that marks and attaches the individual with his or her individuality. Thereby a law of truth has been created, where the individual recognizes him or her self, which other people also recognize in him or her. This form of power turns the individual into a subject (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

Saba Mahmood refers to Foucault's theory on individuals and power, also including "moral subjectivation" as a mode of subjectivation. Foucault does not see subjectivity as something happening in a private place, rather it is the effect of this form of power that makes the subjects behave in accordance to their perception of the moral codes. It is within this understanding of power and the subject that Saba Mahmood finds her concept of agency. She writes that "Foucault's work encourages us to think of agency: (a) in terms of the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral action; and (b) as ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed." (Mahmood, 2012, p. 29). Saba Mahmood thereby understands agency to be a creation of the power relation in which a person finds herself or himself, instead of it being something preexisting of the power context in her situation. Ergo, agency is not the same as resistance against power, but the capacity to act within a context of a power structure.

Agency as a concept in progressive politics has been locked into a notion of resistance against power, which is limiting the meaning of everything agency is. Mahmood writes that “if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally (both in terms of what constitutes “change” and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity.” (Mahmood, 2012, pp. 14,15).

Hence, we need to understand that agency can be found also in what seems to be passivity from a progressivist perspective. Resisting norms is not a requisite for agency, because the many ways one can inhabit the norms can also have capacity for agency. It is this understanding of agency that I will use as an analytical perspective in my thesis.

Methodology

The field and access

Finding interlocutors for my research went fairly easy because of my already existing contacts in the city. Having family who could introduce me and bring me along on social events was a clear advantage at the beginning of my fieldwork. I didn't seek out my interlocutors through going out and trying to meet people, rather I was introduced into the field through my contacts. Since I never went to places my interlocutors did not take me to, I got a clear perception of what places they spent time in, and observed them accordingly.

I chose to conduct my fieldwork in Kurdistan because of my own personal connection to the place, and the most natural place for me to go was to Hawler. But determining my field in a city of more than a million inhabitants was challenging before my fieldwork. I was prepared to move around, and because I had already been in Hawler I knew I would face challenges in determining my field. I did not know where I would go beforehand and I did not have a bounded field, rather I followed my interlocutors to the places they went to. We often met at cafes, restaurants and bars all over the city, and my fieldwork is limited to the places they showed me. I also spent time in people's homes, visiting some on a regular or daily basis. Therefore, maneuvering Hawler as a field was of lesser importance because I knew who I would get the opportunity to meet, and was therefore prepared to follow where they took me, rather than determining beforehand where I would physically go.

Visiting my interlocutors showed me some of the differences in the city and within the middle class. I visited one of my interlocutors almost every day for several months, and although she was friends with a lot of women from a strong financial background she had studied and worked her whole life for her money. Other than her, all my interlocutors were women born into the middle class.

Data collection

The classical social anthropological method of participant observation became my main method of data collection. I joined my interlocutors in outings and visits to restaurants and cafés with their friends as well as spending time with them one on one for casual conversations. All the names of my interlocutors have been changed, and they were aware of my role as a researcher. Interviewing someone about their relation to tradition and norms, and their aspirations and social life would be difficult, while more casual interaction and participant observation gave me more nuanced and useful data.

As I explained earlier, I followed my interlocutors to create my field. My observations were largely made possible by family members and connections who invited me along to social events and introduced me to others. I did try to contact someone at the university to see if there was anyone who might be interested in meeting with me, but none of this came to anything. Sending out e-mails gave me nothing, it was not until I was personally introduced at the university by someone, that I got access to the university and the library.

Positioning

I lived with my grandparents, and I was the youngest woman in the house, which gave me a certain role in the household. Figuring out how to navigate that role took a long time, and I am still not sure if I got it right by the time I left. The small, but important, things like how to serve tea to visitors, when I should do it myself and when I should call the housekeeper, and even just how to ask if our guests wanted tea, would prove to be an issue for me. But at least I could make our guests laugh as I tried to navigate the difficulties of hosting, and my kind cousins helped explain to me a few rules.

Outside the home was difficult as well, although I believe I learned faster among my younger interlocutors and friends, than among my old relatives. When arriving in Kurdistan I was certain that I would fit in as a young Kurd, with my family connections and my Kurdish

name. But I was told many times that I do not look Kurdish at all, and people always assumed I was European, not Kurdish. But here is also where I found my family connections to be extremely valuable. I do not think it would have been possible for me to conduct a fieldwork like I did without having those kinds of connections. Living as a Kurd in a Kurdish household gave me very valuable insights to that role, and made it possible to meet interlocutors through connections that otherwise would have been off limits. In addition to that it gave me access to interlocutors in a way that would have been a lot more difficult had I not had a lot of family connections, I also felt what it was like to be young and having to always consider my family in everything that I did. I will go a lot deeper into this later in the thesis, because it turned out to be one of the most important things to young Kurdish women. Had I been a complete outsider I would have never understood the meaning of having a reputation as a young Kurdish woman, and how it was so deeply connected to the family.

Many foreigners in Hawler live in a specific neighborhood, one that is arguably the least conservative part of the city. It is where most bars and nightclubs are located, and you do not stand out if your clothing is light and shows skin. By living with my family, which is the normal thing for an unmarried young woman to do, I separated myself from other foreigners.

Diane King explains her research method as “embodied” research, where the researcher undergoes a complete as possible immersion into local daily life (King, 2014). She stayed with local families, slept on the same floor cushions and ate the same food, and avoiding as much as possible to distance herself from her interlocutors by staying at hotels et cetera. I found value in this as well, following the local norms around living arrangements gave me a different “in” than living alone in a different neighborhood would have.

Ethics

All my interlocutors were made aware of my project and were aware of why I was there. Some of my observations were noted while I was in their company, but mostly I wrote my field notes at home. My interlocutors have been anonymized in all my field notes and in this thesis. Their names have been changed, and any personal information, like occupation and place of origin, that could compromise their anonymity has been altered.

Background

Iraq has had several forms of government and has gone through different regimes during the past 100 years. The Kurdish areas in Iraq (hereafter called Kurdistan) have been affected by this throughout the years, and the history of Kurdistan is necessary knowledge for anyone who wants to understand the present.

Lets begin with the creation of Iraq at the end of the First World War. When the war was coming to an end, and the allies were victorious, the Ottoman Empire was sure to be dissolved and the borders redrawn. Three political groups emerged among the Kurds, pro- Turkish, pro- Allies and pro-independence, with mainly Turkey and Great Britain negotiating over the Kurdish areas around and north of Mosul. Turkey, on its side, stood by the national pact of the last Ottoman parliament that claimed all non-Arab parts of Ottoman Turkey. They also feared that if the British got Mosul, the Kurds there would develop a strong national feeling that might undermine their process of “Turcification” of the Kurds on their side of the border. Britain, on the other hand, had realized the vast oil resources in the Kurdish areas and was not willing to compromise on the land. Although many factors had to be considered, the League of Nations commission decided that the territory was to be a part of Iraq, and therefore under British rule (McDowall, 1996). Thus, when the borders were drawn, and the major powers had settled their negotiations, the Kurds were spread over four countries, Turkey in the north, Syria in the west, Iraq in the south, and Iran in the east. At this point, the Kurds were not unified as one people with a drive for independence, they were many different groupings with shifting tribal alliances and trade connections with each other. The different interests and opinions within Kurdistan has been a significant factor in Kurdistan up until today, and keeping the Kurds divided would prove to be a very useful tactic for the Baath party¹ (McDowall, 1996).

While I was in Hawler I soon realized the differences between generations. I understood that the time in which one grew up was extremely influential, especially because of how much society changed over a few decades. To be able to properly present the generation I spent time with, I will begin talking about the previous ones. And through insights from the different

¹ The Baath party was the political party that ruled Iraq with an iron fist from 1968 to 2003 (Faust, 2016)

generations I will try to give a brief introduction into Hawler's history, and how it evolved into the city that it is today.

When the Baath party came to power after a coup d'état in 1968 they were weak and in true Iraqi government tradition they made peace with the Kurds because of their weakness and signed the 1970 11th of March agreement, promising the Kurds cultural and political rights and self-governance. Also in true Iraqi government fashion, they reneged on the agreement in 1974 when they felt strong enough because of the rise in oil prices that gave them better economic self-confidence. Iraqi forces attacked Kurdish military positions, but could not advance against the Kurds who were supported by Iran. The Iranian support was stopped when Iraq agreed to give a large part of its border region to Iran as a price. Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein never forgave Iran or the Kurds for that, and with the support of the Gulf states and western powers he attacked Iran in 1980 (Gunter, 2016).

Genocide and mass relocation

The conflict with Baghdad grew more severe as Saddams regime targeted the civilian population, often to pressure peshmerga members through targeting their family members (McDowall, 1996). During the Iran-Iraq war, 1980-1989, the coalition of Kurdish political parties got support from Iran and in retribution for that, Saddam Hussein started a genocidal campaign against the Kurds known as the Anfal campaign. As the Iraqi military moved through Kurdistan, thousands of villages were destroyed, often by the use of chemical weapons, and, although we will never know the exact number, approximately 100 000-200 000 people were killed. As well as killing thousands of people, even more people were being relocated and had to flee the country over to Iran and Turkey.

After Saddam Hussein had lead a genocide on the Kurds he decided to invade Kuwait in 1990, a mistake which would turn the international community's attention towards Iraq, thus making the killings of the Kurds impossible to overlook by international actors. After Saddam was forced out of Kuwait by the coalition forces led by the Americans, the Iraqi people revolted against Saddam. The Kurds joined the revolt in their own areas after hearing the American president George Bush (sr.) ask the people of Iraq to topple Saddam. Saddams republican guards put down the revolt with extreme brutality, starting in the south of Iraq and then moving north against the Kurds. Thus causing a massive population flight towards

Turkey and Iran. Facing a lot of critique and media coverage, the international community had to act. To protect the Kurds from the Iraqi military, a no fly zone was put in place in 1992 (McDowall, 1996), which was instrumental to the development of the Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) we see today. Not only did it stop the killings and destruction of Kurds and Kurdish villages, it also led to Saddam Hussein cutting the Kurds out of the Iraqi economy. He stopped paying salaries to Kurdish workers, and cut off all their supplies of foods and medicines, trying to starve them out. What this led to was that the Kurds were left to themselves and thus forcing them to deal with administrating their affairs. The generation that grew up during this time is the generation that I have been spending most time with and will focus on in my thesis.

The flight to Iran

Everyone I met who lived in Kurdistan during these events had his or her story about the genocide and escapes, some I met had grown up outside of Kurdistan because their family had fled, others had stories of the escape. One of the people who had fled to Iran was Zozan who had fled from Hawler with her family.

Zozan came by this afternoon for a visit, we touched on the subject of Saddam and what the city was like several decades ago. She told me about her fleeing to Iran when Saddam attacked the Kurds. Her voice was shaking slightly and she looked me either right in the eyes or up towards the ceiling. I know that for many, their stories of this event are hurtful to talk about, as so many people lost their lives, either in attacks from the Iraqi military, or on the road while fleeing to safety. She and almost the entire city of Hawler had fled to the mountains in the northeast and over to Iran. During the travel they had no food or water, and some died on the way. "We had no clean water or food, so we ate whatever we came across. We were all sick from it, and some died from it". Of the few that stayed in Hawler, my friend Dîana and her husband were two of them. The Iraqi military had knocked on her door, and when they saw her they were a little bit surprised and asked her if she was there alone. She had told them, with a little bit of an attitude, that yes, she was alone, and they were welcome to come inside and check if they wanted. They did not, and Dîana and her husband were fine.

Many of the people who fled came back to Hawler, but many would move to other countries, especially in Europe and America, all with the knowledge and memory of fleeing for their

lives. Everybody I met had been somehow affected by it, either through their own parent's experiences, their own memories, or the fact that they had to grow up in another country because of it. But there is a huge difference in mentality between the generation that experienced it and the generation who grew up after the fact. The people who grew up in the 90s and later have been living their lives in a Kurdistan that is entirely different from the Kurdistan of their parents.

The hard times that followed the Iraqi sanctions against the Kurds lasted until the oil for food program was established by the United Nations. A program that provided the finances needed by the Kurds to survive and try to rebuild the villages that were destroyed during the Anfal genocidal campaign. The situation remained like that until the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, after 2003 the Kurds had more control over their natural resources and were open to investments from international companies, especially from Turkey, and the security in the region made them an attractive hub for international companies and organizations that wanted to invest in the rest of Iraq.

Hawler

The city of Hawler is the administrative center and capitol of Kurdistan. In Arabic, and internationally, it is called Erbil, but I chose to use the Kurdish name Hawler. When the Iraqi military offensive ended in 1992 many of the villages were in complete ruins, which led to many villagers moving into the city. The city grew from a population of only a few hundred thousand to the approximately 1,5 million that it is today. But it was not only the population that grew, the economy grew and made life in Hawler a lot more prosperous than it had been before. In addition, the Hawler International Airport opened in 2005 and they have daily flights to many major cities in Europe and the Middle East, which makes traveling very accessible.



Figure 2: Map of Hawler. Source: Google maps

Hawler is a city designed as circles within each other. The inner circle is the citadel, which is a 7000 year old settlement and the old bazar is at the foot of the citadel. It then continues with bigger circles in the form of highways built in rings around the city, the inner one is called the 30 meter road, because it is 30 meter wide, the next is the 60 meter road, then the 100 meter road and the last one is the 120 meter road. My house is next to the 60 meter road, and it is in an old residential neighborhood. Personally I found the old neighborhood very charming and comfortable, but the most popular places to live were the new neighborhoods, the tall luxurious apartment buildings, or the villas in the gated communities. In one of these gated communities they were even building a replica of the American White House for someone to live in. Restaurants and cafes with a younger clientele as their target would often open around or within these neighborhoods. When I went out to eat with friends we would go to these places. A part of town called Ainkawa is a Christian enclave, this is also the neighborhood where expats² usually reside. It is in this area many of the bars and nightclubs are located, Ainkawa is a much less conservative area than the older neighborhoods, for example this was the only place I ever saw bare shoulders. As for places to hang out, other than the restaurants and cafes I mentioned, shopping malls are very popular, with several quite large ones that contain shops with brand names.

Getting around in Hawler is almost exclusively done by car, there are buses, but none of my interlocutors takes the bus. There are taxis as well, which I used from time to time, but one should preferably not take taxis, rather one should have a driver or drive one's own car. Personally I would walk to the supermarket, which was less than ten minutes away on foot, but people always reacted with surprise when I said I walked to the store, "you have someone to drive you, you don't have to walk", they would tell me. Although I tried to explain that I liked to walk, it was clearly not appropriate, but since that was the one place I could get to without anyone driving me or having to take a taxi, I continued walking to the supermarket, at least as long as the dust and temperature allowed it. As long as you have a car or a driver, you can get around the city easily. Gender norms in the Kurdistan region have prevented women from going out without a male companion, and there is still a stigma around women walking alone. Therefore, the preferred mode of mobility is by car.

Another factor that has had an impact on the youth of Hawler is the safety that they have been enjoying while growing up. Kurdistan is one of the regions where armed police and military

² The word expats refers to people who have moved transnationally and relocated in another country.

have made the area safe. People trust the security forces in the Kurdistan region, and the Kurdish military *peshmerga*, had attained legendary status as defenders of the people. The security agency, *asayish*, does not need to spy on their own people, because the population contacts them if anybody or anything suspicious is seen or heard. This symbiotic relationship between the people and the security services have made Kurdistan one of the safest places to live in in the Middle East. Based on data collection from Numbeo, Hawler ranks as the fifth safest city in the world (Kurdistan24, 2018). Although the region has been affected by conflict, recently by the war with *Daesh* (the Islamic State), Hawler has been able to stay safe. It was evident from the heavy military presence in the streets and around crowded areas and buildings that they took precautions regarding safety. While driving one would often drive through checkpoints where military were checking cars, not only within the city, but also on every road in Kurdistan. To enter a mall or a hotel you had to go through security, and the parking lots had guards. To me this felt intimidating as I am not used to seeing anyone heavily armed in the streets of Oslo, but the Kurdish military, *peshmerga*, are highly respected in Kurdistan and their presence was not as unnatural or intimidating as it would have been if they were not trusted the way they are.

When I came to Hawler I traveled by plane and arrived at the local airport, traveling directly from Istanbul, which connects Hawler to one of the biggest points of connection to the world. At the airport they give you a 30 day visa directly on entering the country, as opposed to other places in Iraq where getting a visa can be a long and difficult ordeal.

During my first few days in Hawler the first thing I had to do was pay my visits to everyone I'm connected to. I wanted to get to know the city, but as we were driving around I realized that it was very hard to get oriented in Hawler. The way the city is organized with the different circles around the citadel made it difficult to know which direction we were driving in. To me, this was a little bit stressful because I prefer to have some control over the directions that we are heading if I had to take a taxi alone. Getting around by taxi could be difficult, no one knew any street names, only neighborhoods, and from there you have to explain the way by landmarks or cafés and well known buildings. Although almost all my interlocutors were fluent in English, the taxi drivers usually did not speak a word of English, which led to some confusing conversations in the beginning.

My impression of the city changed a lot as I stayed there, mostly because of my interlocutors' comments and discussions about Hawler. So many of the people I knew had lived outside of Kurdistan and moved back, and yet they had very few good things to say about the place. On one of my first days we had some visitors, one of them an American Kurd who had come back to Kurdistan to get married. He told me that he hoped I had brought a lot of books, that's how he got time to pass here, by reading a lot. The young women often complained about the fact that it was a boring city, especially if they didn't have a job or studies to go to every day. At the same time, everyone is drawn to the place. One afternoon I was making dolma with two of my friends who had moved to Kurdistan from America and we were talking about some of the things that annoyed them about Kurdistan versus America. Yet, they had both moved back. One of them exclaimed, "*why do we do this? There's something about this place, why do we always come back?*" For whatever reason we had all decided to leave our home country to live, either for a specific timeframe or indefinitely, in Hawler. That is not to say that my interlocutors didn't like Hawler at all, many expressed fondness of the city itself, even though they found certain parts of society in Hawler to be very unpleasant. They expressed discomfort by men approaching them in improper ways, the fact that they were often subject to gossip and felt pressured by their families and extended family members. Male domination and gossip could make them feel suffocated. These are issues I will come back to in my thesis.

Because Hawler is the capitol and a big city in an area where global actors have been active for centuries, there have been, and still are, many global influences in the city. The fact that Hawler has so many connections to the rest of the world creates a specific context for the locals, and I will present some aspects of Hawler and the global scale that is creating the environment of the city today.

Global meets local

I have already described how the history and economy of Kurdistan has made social interaction with and influence from international actors more accessible to the Kurds, but what does it mean when the local meets the global? And how does that affect people in their everyday lives?

When affluence in a population raises, the lifestyles of some becomes more involved with the expansion of transnational brands that gains access to the new market (Andrews, Batts, & Silk, 2014). Robertson explains the phenomenon as glocalization, transnational actors like fashion brands or film and TV production enterprises seek the global market and reaches locals (Robertson, 1995). As Kurdistan's economy rose and affluence in the region rose with it, it opened the possibility for international investments and businesses to open. Which again turned parts of the Kurdish population into actors in the flow of transnational culture and capital and the new brands and products available on the marketplace that would stimulate new shopping behavior and practices. This is similar to the effect that's been described by Andrews et al based on data from the Indian middle class (Andrews, Batts, & Silk, 2014).

The middle class in Kurdistan developing along with the transnational involvement in Kurdistan has had an impact on the women growing up within this context. And along with the different security situation, the autonomy that Kurdistan has gained and their changing relationship with Baghdad, the Kurdistan that the young women are growing up in today is very different to the Kurdistan that their parents grew up in. This includes the legal rights they have gained, and the general investments that have benefited the Kurdish population, which has made education and health services accessible to many. But commodities and ideas do not travel alone, they go hand in hand with people. This leads me to discuss aspects of human transnational movements and its impact in Kurdistan.

Super-diversity and transnational movements

A friend of mine invited me to a dinner at her house, she lived a way outside the city, and my driver could drive me there, bringing his wife with him for the ride. I had arrived a little bit early to help with the food, but, as usually, it was all under control when I arrived and I ended up sitting down and chatting with her and her friend instead while they were doing the last preparations. As people arrived we sat down in the living room, and when everyone was there we started eating. The food was placed on the dining table, while we were sitting on chairs and couches in the living room, so we served ourselves and sat down again in the other area. I got to talk to almost every guest, and I realized the diversity of the group, except for one they were all Kurds, but from many different countries. At first I sat down next to my Danish friend, and another man from Denmark was sitting next to me. He told me that he was here on vacation, and sometimes he would bring his daughters as well, but they were getting

older now, and wanted to spend their vacation other places. By now they found Kurdistan to be quite boring. I then talked a lot with a friend of mine from Canada, he had lived parts of his life in Canada and the United States, but had now moved to Kurdistan where his parents also lived. We were sitting with Rona, an American woman, a woman from the Kurdish part of Iran, and her American boyfriend (he was not Kurdish, but lived in Kurdistan because of his job.)

What is interesting in this paragraph from my field notes is the many different backgrounds gathered in one room, which is not unusual. Steven Vertovec lays forth research from the United Kingdom, showing the immigration into the country throughout the past century (Vertovec, 2007). He does a thorough break down of who the immigrants are through statistics, what country they originate from, on what basis they have immigrated, their languages, religions, gender et cetera. He explains how the migration of the 1990s and 2000s has brought about a more diverse migration population, they are arriving from more countries and are of more varied socio-economic backgrounds. Further, they are to a higher extent keeping the link to their places of origin. This phenomenon is what he calls the “super-diversity”, which is now all around the United Kingdom. Vertovec in particular highlights the political challenges the United Kingdom faces in regards to super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007).

Now, looking past the arguments he makes for policy adjustments, and rather considering the concept of super-diversity in England, as well as making an assumption of super-diversity, or at least diversity, being an existing phenomenon in many of the Western countries, in Kurdistan, this concept can be turned around. Kurds are spread out all over the world, with no definite knowledge of how many Kurds there actually are, the numbers vary from 20 million to 35 million, and only 5 million of them reside within Iraqi Kurdistan. But like Vertovec explains, migrants are now to a higher extent keeping the link they have to their place of origin, in this case Kurdistan, as well as other Kurds in other diasporas. And the amount of Kurds who either visit Kurdistan regularly or move back to Kurdistan from the country they had immigrated to or where their parents had immigrated to is also quite high. Using the argument of super-diversity, these people have experiences and influences from the countries they have been living in, and the people they have known there, which they again bring back

to Kurdistan³. Therefore they bring with them information and ideas that are affecting the local Kurds they meet and spend time with. In this analysis I am not including the big community of expats in Hawler, but they are as well creating diversity in the city. The empirical example I presented earlier is just one of the many times where Kurds who had lived outside of Kurdistan and come back to Kurdistan were mixing with local Kurds in social settings. In many settings there is no distinction made between “local” and “foreign” Kurds, but in others it is a way to signify someone’s “modernity”. The local women I spent time with would mix a lot with people of other nationalities, saying that they are more modern and the sentiment being that they reflect their own values and aspirations more than the locals, who are more traditional. I have heard stories about Kurds who disliked these “impats” as well, but never among my interlocutors. The issues tied to this is not a topic in my thesis, instead it is a big part of my observations and therefor important knowledge to understanding the context of the city. So the reason I bring this up is because of the significance it has for the local women to receive influences from different places. It shows how they in many ways relate stronger to foreigners than to locals, and I will discuss this further in chapter 4.



Figure 3: View of a city park and the bazaar from the Citadel. Source: writers private photo

³ Many returnees who arrived during the economic boom before Daesh both brought with them ideas, and were met with difficulties in reintegration. More on this is written by Erlend Paasche (Paasche, 2016)

Being Kurdish

The history of the Kurds has created a very strong feeling of Kurdish identity. This knowledge is also something I found to be important to understand the context of the life of the young women I spent so much time with. I found that defining what a Kurd is was close to impossible, everyone had different opinions on this, but a simple way to put it is someone with ties to the Kurdish region, who does not belong to any other ethnic group. Because of the recent bloody history of Kurdistan, people still remember the past times with sorrow and bitterness. Thousands of people fled, many to Europe and North America, a large number of which have been moving back to Kurdistan during the economically prosper times. I was talking to two women who had fled Kurdistan during the 70s while they were both children, and their pride of being Kurdish is striking.

Despite the fact that the national feeling of the Kurds is so strong, differences within the Kurds are maybe just as strong. One of the women I was talking to about this said “*The Kurds nationalism is as strong as the Turkish, but conflict between Kurds stops them from forming the nation.*” This correlates with my experience in the field. The loyalty to political parties are substantial, the Kurdish territory is divided into territories of the different parties. While driving around the country I would see where we went from the KDP⁴ territory to the PUK⁵ territory, the guards at the checkpoints changed to the PUK Peshmerga⁶ and the colors of the political posters changed from all yellow to all green.

Another thing separating Kurds from each other is the connections they have to the family name. These names often stem from different areas Kurdistan where the family initially moved from. After the genocide during which many villages were destroyed, a lot of families moved in to Hawler. Although a big international effort during the 90s to rebuild the villages saw many people moving back, the metropolis of Hawler became a melting pot of families. The division can still be seen in that many families want their children to marry people from the same area. My interlocutor says that one of the reasons for this is the economical interest. Properties are often wanted to stay within the family.

⁴ KDP - Kurdish Democratic Party

⁵ PUK- Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

⁶ Pesmerga is the term used about the Kurdish military, the PUK and the KDP each has their own peshmerga forces, for more on the Peshmerga see Dennis Chapman’s report (Chapman, 2009)

The sense of Kurdish identity is also a generational matter. The younger women I met told me how their parents talked to them insistently about being proud of being Kurdish. One of my interlocutors, Baler, who is an American Kurd who was living with her family in Hawler for a while, told me that she always said she was Kurdish before American. She told me this while we were filling out a form in Turkey, and she was unsure if it was secure enough to write down Kurdish under “nationality” because she thought they might discriminate against her. I asked her why she didn’t write down American and she looked at me a little bit confused, she said that she always wrote Kurdish because she is Kurdish. To me this suggests that the Kurdish identity is important, not just as an internal identity, but as an identifier as in showcasing, in meeting with others, Kurdish and non-Kurdish. I say this because their parents reminded them the whole time that they have a heritage to be proud of, and although their parents grew up in a different Kurdistan to their children, they still have the same strong sense of Kurdish identity.

Gender roles and the structure of power

“Idealized Kurdish women’s roles (...) are relatively straightforward: a woman is charged with maintaining a home and with upholding the honor and purity of her and her husband’s patrilineages through her proper behavior” (King, 2014, p. 113).

This quote is taken from Diane Kings book “Kurdistan on the Global Stage: Kinship, Land, and Community in Iraq”, a vast ethnographic work on Kurdistan based on several field works in the region. I will draw on some of her descriptions of gender roles in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. She describes Kurdish women as the homemaker, the women she met spent most of their day in the kitchen, and the women in the city as confined to their homes (King, 2014, p. 113). Further King explains the lineal masculinity model she finds in Kurdistan, a man’s masculine qualities are inherited from father to son. “It is *not* individualized or automatic in the sense that it depends for its maintenance on the proper behavior of the lineage members, most notably the sexual restraint of the lineage’s female members. It *is* individual, however, in the sense that each individual man builds on, maintains, or diminishes whatever lineal masculinity he has received from his lineage at birth” (King, 2014, p. 116).

The female sexuality and reproduction in Kurdistan is controlled by men in the patrilineal kinship systems, this borders outside the act itself and also includes any actions women might

take that could lead to inappropriate affiliation with men. An example King offers is that a woman who is seen going to the market two days in a row might spark some gossip because others could think she had alternate motives (King, 2014, p. 123). The same thing was mentioned to me by one of my interlocutors, except she talked about it as something from the past. She had experienced it when she moved back to Kurdistan in the 1990s and had to shop for furniture at the market a few days in a row. She explained to me that her visits to the market had sparked rumors that she might be meeting someone there in secret. Therefore she always brought a relative with her after that, but in her opinion that had changed now. Although some people would never let it go, and it might still make someone talk, she didn't see it as that problematic anymore. But at the same time she was now almost 50, and if the issue was still existing she probably wouldn't feel it as much herself.

To understand the reasoning behind one of the most obvious forms of power relations, what we have to understand is the imagery and expectation held to Kurdish women, whether it is how she dresses or who she marries, the opinion of the elders are setting the standard. Numerous of my interlocutors felt the pressure to marry someone from the same lineage, often because of interests tied to real estate and money. Yet the desires of the women themselves were often different, marriage was not the most important thing to them, and marrying a Kurd from Kurdistan was for some of them out of the question. The established gender role of the woman being in charge of the home is common in Hawler, although to many it is a grievance in their everyday life. My attempt in this thesis is to understand the reasoning behind power relations, which does not only exist between men and women, but also between young women and older women.

Gender in Hawler

While young women often try to distance themselves from the gender norms in Kurdistan, they are still a part of society, and those norms are affecting them. Gender roles is a tainted subject in Kurdistan, especially Hawler, because of the state of the gender roles before the 21st century when they were a lot more limiting to women. I was first made aware of this by a book about the Kurdish language, and with that in mind I found that gender roles through history was not a popular topic in Hawler. My interlocutor Cara who moved back to Hawler in the 90s, after having lived in the US since she was four years old, spoke about Hawler 20 years ago as very oppressive. Women were covered a lot more than today, they were not

allowed to drive, and the fact that she smoked cigarettes raised eyebrows because, in her words, *“it reminds men to much of a woman sucking on a penis.”* Covering up was necessary for women, she told me that some men carried water pistols with acid that they sprayed on women whose ankles were visible. I am also aware that Hawler was a much more conservative society back in the 1940s and 1950s. An old woman who grew up in Baghdad, which at the time was a monarchy and, in terms of general freedoms, a completely different city from today, told me about the summers she spent in Hawler when she was young. She went with her friends to hotels and resorts in the mountains, but never dared put on a bathing suit and jump in the pool in case anyone from her family would hear about it.

I was often warned about Kurdish men by my female friends, they warned me that I should never marry a Kurdish man and they would all rather marry someone from “the outside”. This could mean both a Kurd who grew up outside of Kurdistan, an expat working in Kurdistan, or someone they could meet while studying abroad. I will discuss this further in chapter 4.

Legally the Kurdistan Regional Government (hereby referred to as the KRG) has moved towards a law that is less discriminatory to women. They have changed or abolished some of the discriminatory Iraqi laws, although not all of them. At the same time, after the no fly zone of 1991, the KRG invested in health and education for the Kurds, which benefited both men and women. One of the reasons for this can partly be found in their strive towards statehood. In an effort to gain legitimacy as a state the, KRG has incorporated laws and policies that are internationally recognized and can be found in many western states. This is not to say that discrimination and violence against women is abolished, there are still issues connected to gendered violence like honor killings. The laws are in place, but are not always implemented (Kaya, 2017). The fact that the KRG have focused on an international recognition as a modern region is in part a reason for the changing sentiment towards modernity among youth. But there are many different processes at play here, and I will look a bit closer at some of them in the next chapters.

Chapter 1 life in middle class Hawler

Cara had invited Baler and myself out for dinner. We went to a popular restaurant in a posh part of the city, the gardens outside were green and the flowers were blooming. They must have used a lot of water to keep their gardens so colorful. The interior was dark wood and clean surfaces and the waiters and waitresses were quite young. Cara noticed a man come in and said he's her cousin and she had to go say hi. Our waiter came and Cara, being the wine expert among us, decided on a red wine. When the wine came she told Baler that her cousin is cool, with a tone that was implying that she did not need to worry. The issue here was that if someone who knows Balers parents sees Baler drinking alcohol they would tell her parents. Baler told me that it was not really a problem, as her parents knew she drank, but she didn't want her parents to be put in that situation where others are telling them that their daughter is drinking in public. Cara turned to me, "your family is pretty well known, you should be careful too". Cara had picked out the restaurant particularly because she knew that people who might care that we were drinking alcohol and tell anyone about it would never come to this restaurant.

Later the same evening Cara and Baler took me for a drive to show me around the city. At one point they decided to show me a special street, which on arrival seemed extremely chaotic. Restaurants on both sides of the road were empty because the guests had taken the chairs outside to sit on the street while smoking shisha and playing backgammon. People were wandering and shouting to each other from across the street. None of the people were women. We stopped by a juice cart to get some drinks, Cara rolled down her window. As we got our juices someone catcalled us from the sidewalk. Cara and Baler both looked a bit uncomfortable before Cara said that she did not see anyone they knew, but we should get going just in case. I asked what the big deal was, other than stupid men being annoying. They explained that we should not put ourselves in a situation where we could be catcalled, that's on us as women and you don't want a reputation for going to the kinds of places where you can get catcalled.

Cara and Baler were both annoyed when they told me about how to behave around the city, and Cara explained that the way she saw it was that women were being held responsible for the fact that men can't control themselves. Men can say and do whatever they want, but the

woman will face backlash from her family because she had put herself in that situation. Therefore, my interlocutors are rarely seen on the streets or in places like the local bazaars, shisha bars or “traditional” cafes. But, they do not stay at home, they go to places where they know they will not be seen by anyone they don’t want to be seen by, or where they know they won’t be catcalled. They often went out in groups, then being both men and women, but they rarely went out with just one man, as dating is (to call it lightly) frowned upon by many families, and absolutely something that would give a woman a bad reputation. I will go deeper into this in one of my later chapters.

In this chapter I will present the lives of young middle class woman like Cara and Baler who live and move around in Hawler. My main interlocutors were four different women from the same socio economic background, and one from a slightly less “privileged” background, and they would bring me places where I met and spent time with their friends as well. Let me first repeat that my fieldwork was conducted among (mostly) young women who were the children of middle class parents, all of whom had grown up with money and possibilities that are not available for all women of Hawler or Kurdistan. The traditional way of parting social classes can be seen as somewhat outdated, but in lack of a better term, I will refer to them as middle class. Although there were of course differences between them and their backgrounds, they could all be classified as a privileged group. Among themselves, the term middle class is not used frequently, rather I would hear them calling themselves and their families “modern” or “progressive”, opposing themselves to others who are “traditional”. At the same time, the word traditional is often used about the older generations regardless of family connections. Hence, to many there exists a tension between the norms and expectations connected to being a young woman and the identity they are creating for themselves and their peers. To better be able to understand my further analysis I believe a short introduction into the aspects of life that are part of creating the frame and context is important.

Reputation

The situation above is from my first night out with friends, and they were explaining to me some of the things I had to be wary about while I was in Hawler. One aspect of social life in Hawler that has an impact on the lives of young women is their reputation, and how much

“gossip” they experience in their social circles⁷. I was warned by several of my interlocutors about the high amount of gossip that happens in this city, and to be careful because people would talk about me too. During this restaurant visit with two of my friends, Cara and Baler, they warned me about some of the ways in which a woman’s reputation is affected. Everything a woman does is under scrutiny by her extended family as something that can harm the family name. There are many different topics that have to be considered to be able to understand reputation, and I will continue with the observations I have made, although there is certainly more that could be further studied.

Consumption and a focus on appearance

In Hawler, a person’s identity is closely tied to the way they look, how they dress and present themselves. Very rarely did I see a woman out in a restaurant or at the mall that did not look well put together, hair, makeup and clothing was usually done nicely and with an obvious consideration to fashion or trends. I made a comment to Laila about it, saying that I almost never saw a young woman who did not look like she put effort into her appearance. She answered that looking good and wearing the right clothes are extremely important in Hawler. She told me *“women here will spend hundreds of dollars on clothing and bags, they would rather spend their money on things than to go travel. Personally I would much rather spend my money on traveling.”* Her attitude towards the whole thing was that she thought it was quite silly, but she was also a part of it as she dressed appropriately for school with high heels and nice makeup. When meeting me for bowling she told me she had to go home after school to change before meeting me because I would think she looked ridiculous showing up for bowling in high heels. I found this to be a common thing, many women talked about dressing up and spending a lot of money on their appearance as something a bit silly, and yet, they all took part in it.

As I said, I rarely saw any woman who was not dressed nice and proper, wearing make-up and had her hair done. If she wore a hijab she would make sure it matched her clothing and she would still wear make up. Going to waxing salons frequently, or using other means to remove hair from their bodies or faces was common. For example, while I was getting ready

⁷ While one could make a connection to the honor concept, I have decided not to include it here because the middle class women do not talk about neither honor nor shame. They talk about good and bad reputation.

with Baler and another friend of hers before going out, Baler said she had to shave her arms really quick. I also noticed that no young woman had hairs on their arms. Now again, these women are representative only of the middle class, I am sure that women of different backgrounds did not have the same beauty regime. Our housekeeper, a woman from a small village who lived with us and her family, dressed and kept her appearance very differently than these young women.



Figure 4: A woman outside one of the city's malls. Source: Emilie Eriksen Photography

Dressing certain ways and wearing certain brands is a way of showing one's identity. Nita Mathur presents the “new middle class” in India as a fast growing part of the urban population who now has the financial means to adopt a lifestyle similar to the “western”. “Consequently, the social standing of middle-class Indians becomes a matter of more avid concern and is more and more characterized by possession and use of consumer goods for communicating

style and individuality and by the possibility of engaging in leisure enclaves and playing with fashion styles that were previously not within reach. These are used as a means for entrenching one's own position and estimating others' position in society." (Mathur, 2010, p. 220). As in India, the middle class in Hawler is not a homogeneous group of people, and it is important to consider the individual differences within a certain social group. However, like Nita Mathur explains about India, consumption is a method to produce and reproduce individuality and at the same time establish a social position in society. Leisure enclaves, public places being frequented by the middle class youth in Hawler for socializing, will be further examined in chapter 2.

I was having lunch at one of the universities in Hawler, arguably the most esteemed university in the city, where I sometimes would use the library, and the director of the university told me that most of the students were from the middle class. He said, "you can see that almost none of the girls here cover their hair, it's because these are mostly middle class girls". And he was right, very few girls covered their hair, and all of them wore modern clothing and had done their hair and makeup.

How women dress, including whether or not and how they cover their hair is a form of identity marker as in class and education. The different fashions are markers of social standing and identity, as is the choice to wear Kurdish clothing or imported fashion. Lila Abu-Lughod makes the connection between the "the tyranny of fashion" in the US and the pressure women there faces on how to dress in specific situations and how to use fashion as an identifier and the way the veil is used in the same way in Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Because very few people I spent time with wore any kind of veil I cannot comment too much on the use of the veil in Hawler, but it was a polarizing subject in some cases. An older quite wealthy man told me to stay away from women who covered their hair, because they might try to indoctrinate me. Other than that time and the day at the university, it never came up in conversation, but we did see some people wearing outfits like the overhead Abaya⁸. It was pointed out to me during my first visit in Hawler in 2012 that the women wearing the overhead Abaya were not Kurdish, they were either tourists or refugees from southern Iraq. During my recent fieldwork I was told that many of these women in Kurdistan had stopped wearing them because they were too similar to the clothing worn by female members of Daesh

⁸ A long garment that covers the body except for the face and hands

(Islamic State). The meaning of the garment had changed in a way that was no longer in terms with the believes of the women wearing them.

Some people would dress in traditional Kurdish clothing, but they were usually older and more traditional in other ways than just their form of dressing. One day I was driving with one of my friends and we saw two men walking in my neighborhood in Kurdish clothing and I made a comment about it. He expressed a fondness of the Kurdish clothing, but he did not want to wear it himself.

Iran, similarly to Kurdistan has had a structure of control over the female body and how she presents herself. When Iranian women got access to the Internet, and globalization filtering into society with consumer capitalism, the socio-cultural changes were contributing to a new consciousness of gender and femininity. Further that would lead to a remaking of feminine identities (Abdmolaei, 2014), which is comparable to the Kurdish women of my study. Shirin Abdmolaei points out that these women cannot be seen as passive consumers of Western fashions, rather there needs to be an understanding of the fact that young Iranian women got the opportunity to reflect on other women's reality through such venues (Abdmolaei, 2014 , p. 45). Of course, Internet is not the sole reason for this change, advancement in education and women's rights were also essential, which she also specifies. In her study she has found the way dress in Iran has been used by women as a form of standing up for themselves. The small acts of resistance, like choosing their own fashion, is a transgression in the Iranian power structure which gives women autonomy to play out their femininities (Abdmolaei, 2014). In regards to young urban Kurdish women, the tendencies are similar. Ongoing inventions of femininities are transgressing the gendered power structure, as they are moving away from what has previously been the expected fashion for young female Kurds. This autonomy to chose one's own fashion and style is also an opening for differentiation between groups. For example the fashion of the middle class in Hawler is expensive and influenced by Western trends. While fashion and dress is a part of creating a group distinction, there are many aspects connected to this creation.

Creating a group distinction

While reputation is important in every Kurdish woman's life, there are certain ways in which young women distinguish themselves from others in a socially constructed category. How they dress is an element in doing so, but it is also done through a created discourse of others,

in this case the others are people who lack modernity the way they value it. Not wanting to get an education and a professional life, keeping “traditional” values is considered rural and backward. This collective creation of a social identity signifies a desire to be dissimilar to others, often meaning the older generation, rural women and men, and their more conservative peers.

While class is a complex and complicated topic, Sara Dickey writes that class has been used to study “big” topics, the dramatic and the monumental, and the object of the research is life changes and class movements et cetera (Dickey, 2013, p. 217). But Dickey also argues that “class is also lived in and through highly mundane processes. Examining the everyday ways in which class identity is negotiated and enacted allows us to scrutinise the symbolic meanings that underlie ‘larger’ class systems.” (Dickey, 2013, p. 218). Without making class the main topic in my thesis, understanding how it signifies these women is important in this study. I therefore follow Dickey in that it should be studied as an issue in people’s everyday life. I would say that everything I have described in this chapter until now are some parts of what contributes to creating a group distinction. And while class is a part of it, the issues being described to me are not only based on class. Rather, my interlocutors presented Kurdish people in terms of modern and traditional. Whereas the women I met looked at themselves as much more modern and progressive as opposed to other people who are traditional. Although my interlocutors often talked about the concepts of traditional as an opposition to modernity, scholars (like Foucault and Mahmood) find that they are not dichotomies.

Foucault presents the notion of tradition as being perceived as a group of phenomena from the past, something permanent that can be isolated from the new, which falls into what he calls a “discursive formation” (Foucault, 1972). As Saba Mahmood states it is “a field of statements and practices whose structure of possibility is neither the individual, nor a collective body of overseers, but a form of relation between the past and the present predicated upon a system of rules that demarcate both the limits and the possibility of what is sayable, doable, and recognizable as a comprehensible event in all its manifest forms.” (Mahmood, 2012, pp. 114-115). Tradition can be seen as a necessity to understanding reformulation in the past and the present (Mahmood, 2012, p. 115). In the discourse of my interlocutors, tradition is used as a distinguisher to others, it creates an identity which allows them to be different. So while living within a society that is traditional in norms and rules, young urban women can lay down a sense of modernity in their perception of their acts and ideas. But modernity does not

replace tradition, it is all a part of a historical processes which is creating a current historical context.

“I don’t really know that many married women, except for you there are only a few I see regularly” I said to Cara, we were in her car and she was driving me home from her house where we had had a sleep over. “That’s because many of them just stay home all day waiting for their husbands!”

This conversation points to the distinction created through the dichotomy of the modern/tradition discourse. A traditional woman gets married and stays at home, while modern women still go out, they work and meet friends. That is not to say that they exclude the discourse of tradition from their own lives, many are conscious of the fact that they are still part of a “traditional” society, as they would say. And they are fully aware that their reputation and the reputation of their family is still something they have to respond to and negotiate. To be able to further analyze this I will now give an introduction of some aspects of family life and go through some of the important factors of the backgrounds of young urban middle class women.

Family life

The norm in Kurdistan is that unmarried women live with a relative of some kind, that can be their parents, siblings or aunts and uncles. Some might live with further extended family, but I never met anyone. I know a few girls who live alone, but none of them had any close family in the city that it would be natural for them to live with. It is first when a woman gets married that she moves out of her family’s house and moves in with her husband. I only heard about one woman who had moved in with her in-laws when she got married, everyone else had moved into their own house or apartment when they got married. One young woman, who lived alone because she was studying in Hawler while her family lived in another city, told me that she missed living with her family. She now had to do everything herself, which usually results in her buying take out for dinner or eating in restaurants, while with her family she would get homemade food everyday. In her family’s home they have a maid who helped her with cleaning, but now she had to do everything herself.

I talked to a young man about living situations and he understood from the context that I didn't live with my parent's in Oslo, even though we lived in the same city. I told him that I had lived both with friends and alone previously, and that I preferred it that way. He was very surprised and after having contemplated it for a little while he asked me if I didn't get lonely when I lived alone. The question caught me a little bit off guard, it was simply not the reaction I was expecting, so I told him I didn't get lonely and that I spent a lot of time with friends or with my family anyway. But he didn't let it go, and asked me if I didn't get scared to live alone, so I answered that I lived in a safe neighborhood where there was no reason to be scared. Apparently I hadn't understood what he meant with his question, because he said that anything could still happen when I was alone, what if I got really sick and had no one to help me. The discussion continued as I said that if I got really sick my parents would come get me so I could stay at their house for a while, and disagreed because if I got so sick that I couldn't call them but needed help immediately I had no one to help me. I didn't really have a good answer at that point, so we ended the topic there.

Thus, young women live with their relatives, and they are also expected to spend time with them and with their guests. Sometimes I felt pressure to socialize with guests and to visit others, and after spending a few days without seeing any one, our help commented on it, asking why I didn't want to go see any one. I had a conversation with a friend about it, she was a Kurd from Scandinavia and she too liked to have some time alone every now and then. But, as she told me, that was very difficult in Kurdistan “*if you ever stay alone in your room they think you're crazy, like actually, they think something is wrong in your head. I have tried saying that I just want some space, but it's not possible, they think you're crazy*”. I did not get the impression that they thought I was crazy, but definitely a bit weird, but I understood her sentiment, not socializing was not normal in a Kurdish home.

Economy of the middle class

My interlocutors grew up in wealthy families, or at least in families with financial security, which has a great impact on their lives. Having a financially secure background impacts so many aspects of their lives, which sets them apart from young women without that advantage. I saw clearly that having a maid in the family household was an important factor in their lives, as well as my own. Having a maid will give women more spare time, which is something many other women never had. They didn't participate in the home keeping as many other

girls do, and therefore had a lot of time to distribute in other ways. With more spare time came the opportunities to spend more time on their studies, and more time to spend with friends.

Further, being born into an economically strong family gives an opportunity to be more independent, as living at home is not a drain on their parent's economy. A woman in a family with less economic strength will feel more pressure to get married and move out, since it will be more problematic for their economy to have her at home. I got to know two married women in Hawler, they were sisters, and 35 and 27 years old. This does not mean that there is no pressure to get married, or that their families are not getting involved in the women's lives and interests around marriage. Rather, I would say many women experience involvement from their relatives into their lives, if not out of necessity, out of the need to keep up appearances outward. I will come back to this a bit later in the chapter.

Importance of education

I attended the opening of a research network that was intended to initiate research collaboration between universities in Europe and North America and Kurdistan. It was held in the presumably best university in Hawler, and several professors and researchers had come from other countries to attend the opening. It was exactly like one would imagine an opening like this, with speeches and some small talk. Afterwards I went to have lunch in the cafeteria with a friend of mine and the dean of the university. The cafeteria was an open space with both young women and men socializing. Some groups consisted exclusively of either just young women or just young men, but mostly it was a mix. I was given a tour of the library on campus, it was run by an English woman who had lived in Kurdistan for 15 years, and they gave me an admittance card so that I could use the library as much as I wanted. There was a big focus on language, all classes at the university were taught in English, and they had posters around campus encouraging students to speak English among themselves for practice.

As Linda Herrera points out, the youth in the Middle East is the highest educated generation ever. In Iraq, education among children is rising every year, and illiteracy is now rare among children. She also sheds light on the fact that the Middle East and North Africa has a very high youth unemployment rate of 25 %, with some obvious national differences.

While higher education is extremely important for a young woman's possibilities, the advantages of good education starts in elementary, middle, and high school. Most of my interlocutors who grew up in Kurdistan went to private schools. They were taught in other languages than Kurdish, often English, with a focus on additional languages like Arabic or Turkish as well. Therefore, many of them were fluent in several languages from childhood, which opened possibilities to work in international businesses. This is a huge advantage for them as opposed to youth who only spoke Kurdish. While I was spending time with young Kurds I found that it was often just as natural for them to speak English amongst themselves as Kurdish. In a group, two people could speak Kurdish between themselves, but then change to English when they turned to the rest of the group. In the group settings I was part of there were always impats⁹ present, and English was the natural language to converse in.

Having an education was not something special, rather, it was taken for granted that you should have an education. I did not ask further about their reflection on education, as it was implicitly clear that it was an obvious part of their lives. There is a pressure to get good grades, as it determines which studies you will continue with. It was explained to me that if you were in the top percentile you had to go to medical school. Although you were technically also qualified for example for law or engineering, you were obliged to attend medical school if your grades were good enough. I am still not sure exactly how this works, as someone else told me it was only because becoming a doctor was the most prestigious profession and their families would pressure them to continue on to medical school if their grades were good enough.

Both my interlocutors' financial background and their opportunities of education put them in a position of opportunity. How this opportunity is used and being carried out is tightly connected to their mobility. My interlocutors had their own means of transportation, which I will argue that helps opens up physical spaces to them.

⁹ Kurds who have lived a longer period of time outside of Kurdistan and have now moved back to Kurdistan.

Moving around the city

“In many contexts, gender as a social hierarchy means unequal access to public spaces”

(Renard, 2014, p. 52)

I visited an older couple, who had lived in Baghdad until the war with the USA, and in some ways I could tell that they had not always lived in Hawler. The house was big, they had a lot of art on the wall, some of it was by new up and coming artists, and others were by established well-known names. We were served Nescafé and tea and I was talking to Rewan, the lady of the house, about walking in the city. Clearly annoyed she proclaimed that in Baghdad she loved walking and that in Baghdad she walked all the time. But if she went for a walk here in the neighborhood her neighbors looked at her as if it was extremely weird. As opposed to most of the other people I met who thought it was odd that I wanted to walk to the supermarket when I had someone who could buy the food for me, or at least a driver who could drive me to the store, she understood perfectly well why I wanted to walk there from time to time.

Maneuvering around Hawler and having the opportunity to move around freely distinguished the middle class women from women from lower income families. “No one walks in Hawler”, these were words I came to hear numerous times during my fieldwork in Hawler. I am so used to being able to walk around cities with ease, so entering a city where walking was difficult and looked down on was quite an adjustment to me. The difficulties of walking was not only due to it being “not ok”, but distances were often long and the polluted and sandy air and the heat were uncomfortable obstacles for anyone who wanted to walk outside. Sandstorms covering the city in a layer of dust was a quite frequent phenomenon, and, although not as frequent, rainstorms flooded the streets and made them impossible to walk on.

The layout of the city is also one of the reasons why walking is so difficult. All the “places to go” are spread out across the city, there is no “downtown” where young women move around. In the summer the heat kept people inside as well, the thermostat hitting 40-50 degrees Celsius made sure that any walking from place to place was unpleasant. The only times I didn’t walk to the store was when the heat was unbearable, if the air was too full of dust and sand and after dark. I did walk after dark once and had a relative on the phone with me the

entire time. The reason why I didn't walk in the dark was because I simply was not allowed to, but I never understood why it was so dangerous. When I posed the question, it was always answered with vague and uncertain answers, so I asked whether it was because I could stumble and fall in the dark, or because I could get kidnapped. The answer was "a little bit of both". I didn't argue the point any more, if the electricity were to go out after dark it would be too dark to walk around anyways.

Amélié Le Renard writes that "constraints on mobility are revealing of contemporary family configurations" (Renard, 2014, p. 57), and she explains that in Saudi Arabia her interlocutors often spoke about "what people would say" when talking about moving around the city of Riyadh. When she asked whom these "people" are they were usually talking about members of their extended family. Therefore, the constraint on their mobility was not directly inflicted by their parents (Renard, 2014, p. 57). I witnessed a lot of the same sentiments in Hawler. I explained the issue of a woman's reputation in chapter one, and the gossiping they were afraid of was usually from extended family members. For some this is what is most constraining, keeping up appearances to the extended family to keep the outward image of a good family. Women I met often told me that their parents knew that they went out, but they still didn't want people talking and gossiping about it. Some members of their extended families were more "traditional" than their parents, which was one of the reasons they gave me for their gossiping and condescension.

So because people in Hawler are dependent on a car to move around, the limitations on the movement of women are greater than that of men. In lower income families it was unusual to have a driver and they normally have only one car, which was used primarily by the man in the household. For a woman to be able to move freely in Hawler she either needs to have a car at her disposal or to have a driver to drive her. I asked several of my interlocutors about transportation around the city, and all of them either had drivers, was driven around by family members, or drove themselves. I took taxis by myself sometimes, but I was warned against this by other women, and they told me horror stories about women being raped or kidnapped by their taxi drivers. I went to the mall one day with my friend Liyan, she picked me up at my house in a taxi. Due to the fact that I was so used to people warning me against taxis I asked her about it. She told me that she although people had warned her against it too, had no problem taking taxis alone. Once had she felt uncomfortable in a taxi alone, owing to that the driver had asked her questions about her age and marital status. I experienced this as well, but

like Liyan I usually lied to get out of the conversation. Along with the fear of being harassed or worse, was the underlying thought that taking a taxi alone with a strange male driver was inappropriate, although no one told me that explicitly. Tela, who I sometimes went out with to the cinema or gym, never took taxis. When I asked her about it she told me that there was no need to take taxis because we know drivers, and if none of them were free, her mom could drive us. To her, taking a taxi alone was unnecessary, her uncles and aunts all had private drivers who she could use whenever she wanted, so the thought of getting in a taxi seemed ridiculous. While I was in Hawler she was finishing her studies and after graduation the first thing she did was start studying for her drivers exam so she could get her own license. That would make it even more convenient for her to get around.

Depending on a driver

Arya invited me to go out with her and her friends one evening, and I was eager to go, but uncertain on how to get there. She lived in Ainkawa, which is known as the Christian part of the city, where many places that sell alcohol are located. I knew she didn't drive, and I didn't know her friends so I wasn't eager to ask her to get them to pick me up. I knew our driver would drive me if I asked him, but because of his religion I also knew that he was not very fond of being in Ainkawa. It was already getting dark, and I was even less eager to take a taxi by my self all the way, so I decided that asking our driver was the best option. He was happy to drive me, and did not express any discomfort when we were there, but it still made me uneasy.

As shown in this example I also had a driver, but I found it more difficult to ask him to drive me around than my friends did. He often drove me to Delal's house and picked me up after, something I was fine with because I knew he didn't mind. To me the problems would occur if I wanted to go somewhere that he might not be comfortable with. He was a very religious man and I avoided asking him to drive me to Ainkawa, even if it was just to visit a friend, because I knew he was uncomfortable driving in that neighborhood. Only twice did I ask him to drive me there, all the other times I went I had friends come pick me up. To me it would have been a lot more convenient to have my own car so I could drive myself.

Amira, a young woman from Sulimaniya who lived alone in Hawler because of her studies is one of my friends who had her own car. I told her that I envied the ability to drive and the convenience it must be for her, but her reaction was not quite what I had expected. She used

to have a driver who took her everywhere, but he had moved away so she found it easier to just get her own car than find another driver. But she missed him a lot, she could go anywhere she wanted without the bother of having to drive herself, and now she had to think about parking and knowing where to get the good gasoline.

This shows that, the ability to move freely is a distinguishing factor of the middle class women. They have the financial means to hire help or get their own car, and thus outmaneuvering the constraint of immobilization of women. In addition to the drivers, many had their own cars, so wherever we were going someone could pick us up and drop us off without it being inappropriate. Considering these observations it is clear that the ability to be mobile in Kurdistan gives the women an advantage in a society that is in other ways constraining for women. And while to others having a driver may seem more constraining than driving oneself, to Amira it was a freedom from having to keep her own car, with all the inconveniences that brings. These two excerpts about myself and Amira highlights how different our experiences in having a driver was, and that individual freedom of mobility is not something general, but individual. While I have always depended on public transportation to move around in my hometown, none of my Hawleri friends would consider taking a bus around the city. And while it for me was uncomfortable to ask someone to drive me or pick me up, my Hawleri friends' sentiment towards drivers was the opposite of mine.

Work

In the paragraphs above I explained the significance of mobility, now I will take a closer look on women in the workforce. Numbers from the Kurdistan Region Statistics Office shows that of the active labor force, meaning individuals above the age of 15 who are either working or “meet the international definition of unemployed”, in Kurdistan only 13,8 % are female (Kurdistan Region Statistics Office, 2019). This is the lowest number of female participation in the labor force in the region. The report also says that out of the unemployed women in Kurdistan, 54% would like to be employed. These numbers cannot be read in a vacuum though, the employment rate of the entire Kurdish population was higher in 2014, and dropped drastically in 2015 because the economic crisis of 2014 rendered many Kurds unemployed. Even though these numbers are general and for the entire population, I still find them interesting for my analysis, especially because all my interlocutors were either

employed or students. I never heard anyone talking about working as anything other than something taken for granted.

I visited Delal again, she served me juice and some biscuits in her living room. Her son who I had now become quite close to, joined us, but he was mostly playing games on Delal's phone. Her townhouse was in a different part of town than where my other friends lived, she didn't have decorations by well known artists or a maid to keep her house, she did everything herself. It was hot, more than 40 degrees Celsius outside, and her air cooler was a pipe connected to a machine on the roof and pulled through the window. Her garden was small, but it was well kept, and I never saw anything but her garden, hallway and living room. It was very cozy, as a guest I felt comfortable in her house. We talked about her career life and the choices she had made in regards to her work and family life. She was born in a small town outside of Hawler, her mother was the third wife of her father and the family still had property in the village where many of her relatives still lived. As a young woman she wanted to get a job and work in the city, where job opportunities were easier to find, so she had studied Kurdish in one of the universities and became a teacher. She told me she had refused to get married before she was 30 years old because she wanted to have a career before she started a family. She got a job at one of the most prestigious international high schools in the area, starting as a Kurdish teacher and working her way up to become the head of the Kurdish department at the school. Although the work was exhausting and she worked long hours, she also made a good living, about \$900 a month. She went out with her friends all the time, going to cafés and restaurants after work with her best friend. Now she was working at a public school close to her house, she worked fewer hours and the pay was much lower. She had gotten married at 30 as she had told her family she would, and now, at 35, she had a son who was four years old. She did all the work at home, cooking, cleaning, pumping water and keeping the garden. A job like the one she had before was impossible to keep alongside her schedule in the home. Delal's husband had a fulltime job, and he often went out at night, while she stayed home with their son. Her sister Lilan didn't join us that morning, she was at her work as a doctor's secretary and her son, who Delal was watching, was sleeping in the other room. Lilan was 26 years old and Delal told me that she herself would never have taken the same path as her sister, referring to getting married right after her studies and having a child at the age of 24.

My conversation with Delal opened my eyes to the choices she had made, negotiating with her family about her future. She had her goals, wanting a career and living in the city with all the possibilities that comes with that, at the same time as she acknowledged her family's eagerness for her to marry and to establish a family. Her family is following the norms of Kurdistan, expecting their daughter to prioritize to marry and have children over having a career, but Delal on the other hand wanted something else. By considering her own aspirations and her parents' expectations she was able to negotiate a solution to their disagreements.

Having aspirations for oneself, and finding a method of action to strive towards these aspirations has been described in the works of Renard. Amélie Le Renard describes a trend among young urban women in Riyadh, the "self help", a form of personal development. It entails that women are seeking to improve their personal life, often through having a satisfying professional life. Delal wanted to establish her career before getting married and she was strategic in her choices for professional progress. She had initially wanted to get accepted to a different school, but because of limited language skills she decided that her best option for a career was to study Kurdish and become a teacher. With great eagerness to advance in her professional life she could climb the ladder and get promoted to the head of the department at her school.

All my interlocutors either went to school or had a job, to them it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to want to have a career and earn money for themselves. Along with the notion of a self-fulfillment it was also a generational and class distinction in women working. Staying at home and having a husband who could provide for the family wasn't the ideal among these women, rather that was something for the "traditional" women. These women could show their belonging and class identity in their professional accomplishments and their high quality education. I talked with my friend Cara about women who get married at a young age and stays at home as opposed to having a job, as I had never met anyone. She told me that I never met anyone because they never leave the house, all they do is sit at home and sometimes visits their friends who also spend all their time at home. They go out only to go to the market, no one ever sees them. My interlocutors' way of distinguishing themselves from these traditional gender norms shows an identity created through the self-help-narrative. Women are differentiated through their possibilities for professional and personal development, and the opportunities they gain through their mobility, education and financial

means. Amélie Le Renard describes self-help classes to improve interpersonal skills, and lectures like “how to be a positive woman” (Renard, 2014, p. 66). Among the urban middle class youth in Kurdistan, their social skills can rather be explained through the “habitus” theory of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977). He argues that an individual’s position in structures and classes are being embodied in the individual, mainly unconsciously. For example through private schools where they meet their peers from the same socioeconomic background they learn skills that are not available to other lower class women. Included in this is the global influences on the Hawleri middle class, which extends the identity and social belonging of these young urban women.

Karen Kelsky describes how a small portion of the female population in Japan uses “‘narratives of internationalism,’ to construct an ‘emancipatory’ turn to the foreign/West in opposition to gender-stratified corporate and family structures in Japan.” (Kelsky, 1999, p. 229). These women look to the “West” for professional advancement, they study abroad and get jobs in transnational firms and NGOs like the United Nations, many also stays in the country they studied in after they are finished with their degree. Towards men their sentiments are strict and degrading, the Japanese women characterize them as “backwards” and privileged by the domestic system in which women stay at home and don’t work.

Hawleri women are prepared to take highly valued jobs, and their studies and schooling from a young age is in part preparing them for it. However, the internationalization in Hawler regarding men and family is similar to that of Japan. The women look to the “West” as an indication for how they want their lives to develop, with the modernity of Europe and North America in the center.

I find Kelsy’s research very interesting, especially considering the glocalization argument from chapter 1 which entailed Kurdistan being a part of a global scale, while at the same time drawing global trends down to the local, and making it their own. I would not say that women in Hawler are looking at the “West” as some kind of ideal for their lives, rather there are aspects that they recognize and relate to, and therefore find appealing. Moreover, it is not something very foreign to them, many women are traveling and are fluent in English, which makes the Internet and social media accessible, more so than to women who can only speak and read Kurdish. They meet and befriend the expats in the city, and to a higher degree, they befriend the Kurds who have come back from other “Western” countries. It is not necessarily

the Western-ness of the globally spreading trends that make them attractive, nor does it mean that they are inherently modern, but it is a tool for identifying themselves from “others”. This way of distinguishing themselves goes with them as they enter public space, which I will focus on in the next chapter.

What I have shown in this chapter is that first and foremost there are huge differences within the Kurdish society of Kurdistan, and I have simply put forth some factors that determine the frames of the lives of the women I have spent time with during my fieldwork. I have argued that their contexts are a part of long and historical processes as well as more recent economical and political ones. Reputation is a concept that to many is thought about, either conscientiously or not, while going about their days. They often consider the reputation of their family, but also themselves among their peers. The stories told in this chapter shows how these grander processes can be seen in everyday life and is showing how the growing “modernity” has influenced young women, while at the same time they are concerned with traditional values from their families and from society over all. This tension is something that is in one way or another touching all of my interlocutors and it lays ground for further research on how they maneuver it. There are obviously many other individual factors that make up every persons individual life and context, but to be able to draw some conclusions, these are the biggest factors I have chosen to present to be able to suggest that there is a generational difference and a tension between the modernity young women are adopting and the traditional way of the society. In the next chapter I will discuss further how women maneuver this tension when it comes to going out with their friends.

Chapter 2 Going out and having fun

“I’m meeting some friends of mine later, they are taking me out to eat”, “good, I’m glad you get out, it would be boring for you if you just stayed at home”

The quote is from a conversation with one of my older relatives, I visited him quite a lot and he was worried that it was boring for me in Hawler, and asked me if I ever went out. I told him reassuringly that I had friends that would take me out to eat or just spend time with and have fun. He was relieved and recommended a few restaurants to me, I had already been to most of them, and they were all places where most guests were middle class Hawleri’s or expats.

All people live their lives within their frames of contexts, which both enables and limits their actions. In the previous chapter I presented a few of the significant facts that together are part of creating their context. As I have previously explained, the reputation of a young woman is very important, but this is mainly connected to family, either older family members or members of the family who has a different view on for example alcohol and socializing. Therefore, when going out at night there are certain places to go where it is easier to go unnoticed by the people they want to go unnoticed by. In other countries in the Middle East, the restriction of women is directly implemented by law, but as I have pointed out earlier the KRG does not control women’s actions in as strict a manner in Kurdistan. But the gender roles in the society are still bearing on the women through norms and tradition. Hence, their actions are all to be considered within this framework.

Diane King writes that women in the cities are “confined to their homes, and complain of boredom.” I am not questioning her experience, but I had a very different one. Many complained, but not of boredom, neither were they confined to their homes. I know that there are certainly women who are staying at home while their husbands are out, and that is why I never met any of them. When the malls started popping up, they were not just a place to buy new fashion and commodities imported from other countries. They were also safe. Which meant that it did not take long before it became a place for women to go by themselves. The fact that the malls had security and were a lot more open than the bazaars gave them a safe quality that was perfect for young women, as they did not need to bring a male relative

anymore. Previously many of them would have had to wait for a brother or another male relative to go out, but at the mall they can go because their families know that they will be safe there. Although you can find anyone at the mall, and many malls are attended by families, the young female customers going with friends are often trendy and fashionable. It seems that the people who used the bazaar before have not stopped going to the bazaar, rather more women are now able to go out and shop. The clientele of the more high-end stores are typically the young people you can find at these malls, therefore it is also in the malls you can find the high-end shopping. Additionally, the malls have many popular places to eat, so going to a mall simply just to eat is not uncommon. The malls are thereby creating a special social sphere of their own. I found that this is not unique to the malls, and it opens up for an analysis of the concept of space, which I will now present.

Creating space

Limited access to public places and a constraint on mobility of women as part of a structural power in a patriarchal society is not as black and white as it's often made out to be. Again, this aspect of "life of the Muslim women" is as nuanced as anything else. In this part of the chapter I will present some ideas about agency among the women I met, as well as look at it comparatively with other literature from the Middle East and North Africa.

Baler invited me for lunch/dinner with some of her friends and some people they had met when they went out the night before. I went over to her apartment first where she was making food with her friend Rona, the dolma¹⁰ had already been cooking for several hours and we started getting ready to go out when I arrived. We were all going to have Ronas dolma, but we were bringing it to a restaurant to eat with a big group. Rona was trying on several pieces from Balers wardrobe to borrow some of her clothes, and she found a skirt she wanted to wear. It had a high split that she at first thought might be too revealing, but decided it was fine because we would drive to the restaurant where she knew everybody. She joked about it.

Being aware of the space one is entering defined a lot of the actions my interlocutors made. There is definitely a class aspect to this, as women from the different classes will enter different spaces and they move around the city differently too. I have already explained the

¹⁰ Dolma is a popular Middle Eastern dish.

way in which these arenas have entered Hawler, but the more interesting aspect to them is how they are being socially constructed and used. Because of the ability to move around freely, and the safety of the places to go, living a social life with friends and without relatives is increasingly easy for young women.

The easiness with which Rona considered her clothing, and the precision with which she chose her outfit, not to reviling and yet not completely covered up made me think that she was pushing limits. We also knew exactly where to go to eat, she knew the owner and she knew who would be there, both regarding her friends and the clientele in general. The use of clothing and style is for many a means to create a belonging to a certain social group or shaping of identity. The most notable in Hawler is the covering of ones hair, which none of my interlocutors did. The comment from the dean at one of Kurdistan's best universities can be enlightening, he said *"you can see that almost none of the girls here cover their hair, it's because these are mostly middle class girls"*.

To call into question the creation and sustaining of a physical space as a sphere viewed by people to have a certain quality, such as being safe from onlookers, you have to consider the social aspects of that physical space. Bourdieu explains the social space as a space in which there is a space where distribution of a particular kind of capital takes place (Bourdieu, *Social Spaces and the Genesis of Appropriated Physical Space*, 2018). And, like Anna Secor states, no space is created in a vacuum, rather it is made through processes of power relations that are further created by local and global scales (Secor, 2002, p. 7). Also in Kurdistan there are norms surrounding how to dress in different places, spatialized dress codes, and that was no different in Hawler. Anna J. Secor has done research on how women dress, specifically regarding the veil, in Istanbul. With an aim to study women's negotiation of public space through dress, specifically veiling, in their particular context of power relations in Istanbul. She found that women of immigrant status (from rural areas in Turkey) felt that veiling was both liberating and constraining depending on the situation. In Istanbul the veil was to many a way to avoid harassment on the street, and covering their hair while in public became a safety from that harassment. The veil was also tied to identity, it showed their class and immigrant belonging. But on the other hand, some young women expressed that they were being excluded from parts of the city if they veiled because of the assumptions that veiled women don't go to certain places, for example in zones of entertainment, like the cinema. Considering this notion, that veiling, or dress in general, has an impact on the spaces a person

can occupy, the layout of public spaces in Hawler are similar; there is an (although less explicit) understanding of modernity in not wearing a headscarf. The spatiality of Hawler is visually clear through observation of how people dress. Bourdieu's understanding of a social space can therefore be further understood to also be created with dress as a factor. Secor's interlocutors' description of veiling in Istanbul, that women wearing a veil are secluded from the elites and the middle class, can to an extent be seen in Hawler as well. The Head Master of the university saying that you can tell the students are from the middle class because they don't wear a headscarf indicates an underlying notion of the veil being connected to the lower classes. "In sum, the study of dress as situated practice requires moving between, on the one hand, the discursive and representational aspects of dress, and the way the body/dress is caught up in relations of power, and on the other, the embodied experience of dress and the use of dress as a means by which individuals orientate themselves to the social world." (Entwistle, 2000, p. 34). As Goffman argues, everyone wants to fit into the situation they are in (Goffman, 1956), which can be highlighted through dress.

There are several reasons for the attraction towards certain spaces, and I have already explained some of these reasons in my first chapter. The way in which transnational economic interests have made Hawler a very attractive city for investors and businesses is one reason for the expansion of open public locations. Economic prosperity in Kurdistan over the last few decades has increased the affluence in the population, which drew the attention of transnational companies. They, with the influence of global "pop culture" and trends in mind, established businesses with an image of "modernity". The example I have used before is the shopping malls, where the shops are targeted towards a young audience or families. They are safe, as in the fact that they have security guards and metal detectors at all entrances and the risk of harassment is very low, and therefore the need for young women to bring male relatives with them became obsolete. This is not exclusive to the shopping malls. Many of the places we went to, cafés, restaurants, bars etc. were located in "safe" areas. They were easily accessible by car, and were in neighborhoods that were considered as nice neighborhoods. Sometimes they were in gated neighborhoods, where no one who didn't "belong" could enter.

Bourdieu's theory on social spaces to this effect explains the possibilities of a space created and negotiated by youth to suit their needs. Bourdieu's focus is often on how the space creates itself by people locating and catering to certain cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu, *Social Spaces and the Genesis of Appropriated Physical Space*, 2018). However, the people going

there are equally part in this creation by it being used for specific reasons. In my first chapter I described a situation in a restaurant, the restaurant was picked out for the specific reason of being “safe” to drink in if we wanted to have a glass of wine. Occupied with many expats, youths and people of means would again draw others who were looking for the same qualities in a restaurant. But the human relations should not be overlooked, I also experienced that going to places owned by someone they knew gave a sense of security.

We carried Rona’s dolma outside and Ali picked us up and drove to the restaurant. Rona chose the place because she knew the owner and we could sit undisturbed on the second floor and eat our own food. We sat there for a while waiting for the others, Rona and Baler had met them just the night before and told them that Rona made amazing dolma, which she was now going to prove. I was seated at the end of the table opposite Baler and next to Rona, and Ali was sitting next to Baler. The others arrived and we started eating right after everyone was seated. During our conversation it became clear that one of the women had an affair with a married man, something that was not appreciated by the others at the table. Her friend was shocked, staring at her and telling her what an awful situation she had put herself in. Yet another woman told me about her boyfriend of one year who had just ended their relationship on really bad terms.

It is not merely the fact that having boyfriends and affairs is a difficult ordeal among youth that is interesting in this situation. Rather, openness of the conversation is significant because of the other ways constraining society that does not accept boyfriends. Having a place to converse about these matters creates another kind of intimacy between the friends that they wouldn’t have if they only saw each other in the company of their families. It seems that new spaces are participating in developing intimate relations, such as friendships, in a different manner.

“But there will be no men here, right?”

It was Tela who suggested that we should go to the Zumba classes. One of her relatives had tried it for some time and recommended them to her. I thought it was a good idea to go, I felt like all I did was sit around, never walking anywhere, except a few times to the store. It seemed like a great idea to get some exercise. Tela picked me up at my house, she didn’t drive herself, but she knew several drivers through her family. The gym was located inside one of

the city's gated neighborhoods, but it was not a problem for us to drive in and attend the classes, we just had to explain to the guards why we were there. The neighborhood was quite big, the houses were big, and the gardens green. The gym was situated by the exit of the neighborhood, across the street from a few restaurants and a café, which was great because our driver had somewhere to wait for us. This gym's policy was that it was open to women in the morning and men in the afternoon. Inside the gym was clean and white, a little bit of a contrast to the beige colors outside. The staff were foreigners, most of them eastern European, and the language spoken was English, both in the reception and in the classes.

The Zumba classes were popular and attended by around 30 women each time, the attendees were a mix of locals and foreigners. The class was just like any other class I had attended in any country, the lighting was less than flattering and the air-condition was only half working, making the smell of sweat even more distinct. Looking around the room I tried to notice the clothing and style of the other attendees. The women there wore exercise clothing, many had their shoulders uncovered.

Although the separation of the genders were not a very common procedure among youth, there were certain places where women and men did not mix, at least not local women and men. One of them was in the gym. I went to the gym a few times with one of my interlocutors, Tela, and took some exercise classes and it was very important for her to go to a gym where there were no men allowed at the same time as women, and in the gym we attended they had divided the times so that women could come in the morning, and men in the afternoon. As we arrived, the receptionist showed us the timetable and one of the classes was in the afternoon. Tela reacted to this, as the genders were supposed to be separated, and asked "there is one class in the afternoon, but there will be no men there, right?" as to which the receptionist explained how they made sure that no men could see the class. The class was held on the top floor with a closed door that was locked during the class.

The classes we went to were Zumba dancing classes, so not at all like the kind of dance young women would do at other social events like for example a wedding, where men are also guests. Zumba dancing involves a lot of hip shaking and moving in a way that would have been inappropriate in other places. The way many of the girls dressed was also most likely not how they dress on other occasions or in their day-to-day life. I saw a lot of skin, and girls wearing tank tops and shorts. So, some women were wearing fancy training clothes and

showing skin, and at the same time others were wearing baggy clothing that looked old and worn out. My impression is that at the gym women were free to wear whatever they wanted without worrying about the public setting, weather that meant wearing baggy old clothes or showing skin. While some spaces might open up possibilities for relations, as I showed previously, the gym is an arena for exercise and exploring one's own body.

Creating a women's sphere

The structural separation of genders in the home is based on a traditional understanding of the gender roles. In the case of the gym, the separation of the genders is a policy of the gym to cater to the wishes of their costumers based on the local norms of gender roles, but there are other instances where women create the separation themselves:

Pelin picked me up at my house before we went to Ase's house to pick up her and her mother. Pelin's cousin had invited everyone to a Ramadan party in the restaurant of the Divan hotel, one of the nicest hotels in the city. When we arrived about half of the guests had arrived before us, and I went around and greeted everyone, some of them I already knew, and some of them I met for the first time. At this point I didn't know that many, and everyone I knew were old, so I put my purse down on a random chair hoping I could talk to someone. As we all found our places I ended up sitting next to Ase, everyone else at the table were strangers to me. The dinner was a buffet, so we got up to get our food, some of the food was local, but they also served imported foods like salmon. Opposite to me were a woman and her daughter. They both spoke perfect English and the daughter had now switched from the American school to the French school to learn French. I was sitting at a table with young women, the older women were sitting at a table behind us, which caused our table to be quite loud and filled with laughter. One of the girls was on her phone most of the evening, and not participating in conversations. I didn't ask, but Ase saw me noticing it and told me that she was having some trouble with her boyfriend. I was talking mainly with a woman named Zahera and her daughter, she worked at a university and told me about the social sciences department there. After a while another woman asked us if we wanted to come sit outside to have our coffee or tea, so we joined her and a few others. We sat down at the patio in the garden, a beautiful place with a pond in the middle. Someone ordered a nrgila and the women changed places to talk to everyone while exchanging news and laughing at inside jokes. Pelin came outside to sit with us. It became a topic of conversation that she had changed her shoes,

she was now wearing a new pair of Chanel shoes that she had bought abroad. We then looked at vacation pictures at her phone. At the end of the evening I asked Ase if this was a regular thing during Ramadan and she smiled at me and said, “yes, it’s like this every day!”

To this party, no men were invited, which was an active choice made by the women. There were men in the restaurant, but our party was just for women.

Being Connected

Anyone who wants to get something done quickly in Kurdistan needs a network and connections. The bureaucracy can be overwhelming, and the easiest way to deal with it is to jump over a few steps and to the front of the line by having someone who knows someone to help you. I would personally come to experience this several times. In Kurdistan, this is called “wasta” and means “connection”.

As well as using connections for conveniences, connecting goes further than that, specifically the way people are connected now. I spent many weekends traveling around all corners of Kurdistan, and every road had fiber optic cables on the side, carrying Internet connections to everyone in Kurdistan. Only one place I visited did not have Internet, neither did they have electricity or water in their houses, but the project to get electricity had started, and some houses had got it already. In addition to the Internet, the mobile network is expanding throughout Kurdistan, most areas now has access to the mobile network and can use cell phones. Therefore, everyone now has at least one cell phone, as one of my travel mates said, “you see a shepherd watching his sheep in the middle of nowhere, and he is on his phone”

While the cellphone is a great tool for contacting people, making life more convenient and definitely easier in a way, for many young women it opens up their world. Fashions that used to take time before it reached Kurdistan can now be seen instantly through their phones, and social media is used to connect with people in a way that wouldn’t have been possible only a decade ago.

Iraqi women are often seen and portrayed as oppressed and secluded by the European media, this can be understood as a consequence of religion and traditions in the area. Although there are huge differences within Iraq, Kurdistan, and within the city of Hawler, the discourse has been set and the room for nuance is limited. Amélie Le Renard writes from Saudi Arabia that

such a portrayal of Muslim women, Saudi women in particular in her case, fails to consider several important factors. It neglects the fact that the state has a role in their lives and that urbanization and global capitalism is affecting them and shaping society (Renard, 2014, p. 2). But, as a young woman in Hawler, there are many aspects of life that is being influenced by all sorts of external forces. I found the tension between the lives lived with friends and peers and the lives lived with family to be quite distinct. There is a balance that has to be upheld, and one tool in this regard is the Internet.

Internet as a social space

Using social media was extremely common with the women I met, their phones buzzed regularly and everyone was part of multiple groups and networks online.

Not only are trends from the rest of the world accessible in Hawler now, the trends in themselves can be found anywhere on the Internet, and contact with people all around the world can be initiated. As I traveled around in Kurdistan the most evident observation was the difference in the way people dress. Urban youth wear brand names and follow transnational fashion trends, contrary to the traditional clothing some young women and men wore in the small villages and Bedouin families.

Additionally to the Internet being a gateway to endless information and an easily opened door to the global modern society, it is used as a social arena where people can keep in contact with each other without any supervision. One night I went out with Amira and her phone lit up with notifications the entire evening. She had several group chats, one with her best friends, and one with a bigger group of friends and one with her classmates. Through the medium of social media on a cell phone, they created another space that was free from onlookers and where social interaction was easily available at all times. Many times did I talk to my friends and interlocutors through social media on the Internet at all hours of the day. And the conversations were private, no one could listen in on our conversations so there was no need to censor our conversations accordingly.

Le Renard presents in her ethnography the use of the Internet as an access to public space outside of the family among young urban Saudi women. In my fieldwork I also observed that including the public spaces young urban Hawleri women have access to, their phones are always with them, and being used to stay connected to their friends on social media.

The problem with resistance

Resistance within feminist literature and feminist anthropology has found its grounds as an opposition to the power structure of the patriarchy, and the domination and oppression of women. Although widely applicable, the theory of resistance in the Middle East is often used as an analytical tool in the studies of agency and power resistance. Lila Abu-Lughod reflects on the issues of resistance theory in her article “the Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women”. Criticizing her own previous works on Bedouin women’s resistance through song and poetry, she proposes some concerns that can be found in this understanding of resistance. Attributing women a consciousness of resisting power can be at best misguided or straight out wrong because of the fact that their own experience might be something completely different. Further, explaining the resistance of power would need a follow up of an analysis of the actions that keep the power structure in place, which cannot be done without contributing them with a false consciousness, in turn dismissing their understanding of their own situation. Lastly, if resistance through song and poetry is a form of collective cultural phenomenon, that sentiment is a dismissal of the possibility that the song and poetry can also be a personal expression. Ergo, at the time of her writing she observed the form of resistance as an analytical tool to be incomplete in understanding the full picture of peoples lives (Abu-Lughod, 1990). She therefore proposes a new perspective on resistance, “With the shift in perspective I am advocating, asking not about the status of resistance itself but about what the forms of resistance indicate about the forms of power that they are up against, we are onto new ground.” (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

Discussing the same issue, Saba Mahmood proposes a further understanding of resistance in feminist anthropology and its applicability. In her view Abu-Lughod opens up possibilities for analytical research of resistance, but she also calls attention to the implicit understanding in Abu-Lughods arguments that defining something as resistance is something fairly easily done. Consequentially we can attribute resistance to actions of people that are in fact indifferent to the power structure in which they find themselves. Mahmood writes “I believe it is critical that we ask whether it is even possible to identify a universal category of acts—such as those of resistance—outside of the ethical and political conditions within which such acts acquire their particular meaning” (Mahmood, 2012, p. 9).

I can easily draw lines to the ethnographic example used by Lila Abu-Lughod in her article “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women”.

She illustrates how the use of lingerie among young Bedouin women was a form of resistance to their older female relative's more conservative view of this kind of sexualizing. The older women saw new beauty products as an immodesty and sexualized form of pleasing their husbands. In their opinion the young women should, like they did themselves, keep a good home to stay in their husbands' good graces. Abu-Lughod explains their resistance as something cultural, it is dependent on their specific situation, as well as being double sided. These acts are resistances against the Bedouin structure of power, but they are also taken out of their original contexts of urban Egypt, where they are not considered resistances, rather wearing lingerie there is completely normal.

The resistance in the actions of the young urban women in Hawler should not be understood as a collective defiance to the structure of power, it is rather a way to circumvent the structure and a practice of agency within that structure. If the behavior is categorized as transgressions of the social norms, it can be problematic to understand them as resistance, they do not involve speaking up against a structure or mobilizing in any way. Rather, they are transgressions towards the structure of female discretion and reputation and a possibility to withstand these. Amélie Le Renard recounts in her research that women in Riyadh do not organize or make collective claims of resistance, but their transgressions in public spaces are common and accepted between them. The individual might not be participating in the transgressions had it not been for the collective acceptance. She explains that the women in Riyadh participate in coordinated actions, they are not collaborative, but they are coordinated. Specifically she points to women defying the rules of how to dress in a shopping mall, because they know there is a very small chance of repercussions and the fact that many women do it, it does not harm the reputation of the individual (Renard, 2014). I do not see it as the exact same in Hawler, but parallels can be made here. Rona finding the exact balance for her clothing to not be deemed inappropriate is one example from Hawler where women are transgressing their clothing away from stricter norms on how to dress and towards transnational trends of modern clothing. But to regard it as resistance would be hasty, her natural manner while trying on clothes does not signify a conscientious act of resistance. It can simply signify an act in which she is expressing her identity, both her own and a collective identity.

The transitions acted out by way of dress, mobility and work, was to me expressed as a natural part of their lives, and none of my interlocutors mentioned an opposition from their

parents in regards to these things. In so far as Amélie Le Renard's observations can find similarity in Hawler it is in the way that women go out to have fun. They do not go the same places as "traditional people", but are bypassing norms and traditions through going together to "their own" places, where a collective identity is created which differs from the traditional norms that they are trying to avoid.

Young urban Hawleri women negotiate how they present themselves according to the situation. They do not wear the same thing when they go out with their friends as when they visit their grand parents. They follow the norms of presentation in every social setting, which is negotiated between its members. Le Renard presents this in the context of a university campus in Riyadh, where it was normal for women to dress in a way that transgressed the norms of modesty that was part of the religious discourse as well as regulated in rules by the institution (Renard, 2014, p. 125). She argues that although those might be individual actions, they are so widespread that they contribute to deregulate the norms and rules of the institution.

Amélie Le Renard argues, "If the transgressions do indeed include a dimension of protest, it is important to correctly identify what is contested." (Renard, 2014, p. 121). Laying forth a certain conclusion of what in this instance is in so case being contested needs further research, but I do have some observations. What is most commonly being articulated is that my interlocutors are doing "what they want", when talking about doing things that go against the expectations of women. They do not talk about the government or any governmental institutions as a force to struggle against, rather they are happy with the way the government are looking towards the West for progressiveness. But society in their opinion is far behind their own values as young modern women, for one of my interlocutors that meant her own close family as well. For others it was their extended family or they talked about it in vague terms, not really pinpointing whom exactly, but referring to the Kurdish society in general. This annoyance with society came up in conversations quite often, and one could argue that transgressions by the young women are forms of resistance towards it. But that would entail interpreting their actions as resistance in a way that does not necessarily include the individual's sentiments of resistance. Still, this does not exclude a greater discussion of resistance, as the individual acts are still collectively transgressing the social norms of society, as long as one is careful in the use of resistance as a term and concept.

So, continuing with Amélie Le Renard's argument,, she adds that, "young women justify their practices of transgression on two ways: (1) In recognizing a gap between their convictions and their practices, and (2) In questioning the way in which official religious institutions define Islamic principles, affirming a difference between official principles and their own convictions." (Renard, 2014, p. 121). Her second justification in this argument can also be seen, not towards official religious institutions, but rather societal norms of gender and tradition. Young women are aware of the general norms, but do not agree with them. In many ways they distance themselves from them by the way they dress and their expectations for a career and to marriage. The collective identity they are creating is a source for distinguishing themselves from the part of society they don't agree with.

In this chapter I have suggested that young urban middle class women in Hawler are, through mobility and to some extent joining the workforce, creating spatiality in society. With several ethnographic examples, such as social events at restaurants and going to the gym, I have proposed that these women are negotiating and at the same time creating spaces in which they can transgress norms and traditions, to circumvent the issue of their reputation. The gendered power of structure is negotiated by the use of social spaces and space creates opportunities for relations, not only to others but also to oneself. Using comparative ethnography from other countries in the Middle East I have shown the similarities and differences of the societies. In this chapter I have also added my observations to the ongoing discussion on resistance and transgression.

Chapter 3 Life in the home

In Kurdistan the expectation of women is that they are in charge of keeping a home. In consequence that means that many Kurdish women spend a lot of time at home doing housekeeping, and have limited access to public places. I have previously explained how middle class women navigate and negotiate the role as housekeeper and spend a lot of time outside. In this chapter I will focus on the life at home and I wish to take a critical look at the women's life at home. I will now present my own observations and the sentiments expressed to me by my interlocutors, but first I will describe my own experiences as a young woman in a Kurdish household.

The doorbell rang in the afternoon, I was sitting in my room upstairs trying to listen to who was coming. It was one of our extended family members, he had an important job in the government before he retired and had a security escort of military men with him who waited on the street outside. I went downstairs and sat down with him and my grandmother, he had already been given a bottle of water in front of him so I didn't ask him if he wanted something to drink. Soon after I had sat down and joined the conversation my grandmother looked at me and pointed (trying to be discreet but failing) at the little bowl of chocolates at another table. I got up and offered him chocolates at once, a little bit embarrassed. I contemplated if I should go ask our housekeeper if she could make us some tea, but then he said he could only stay for a short while so I decided against it.

I was lucky enough to have housekeepers, a Kurdish family living in our guesthouse who took care of my grandparents and looked after the house. They helped us clean, cook food and drive us, and they did all the shopping, and in the afternoon we often went to their house and had tea with them. As opposed to many other households who had help in Hawler I considered us lucky to have a Kurdish family who although they worked for us were also their own entity. Unlike many others who had "maids" (what they called the south eastern Asian women who worked for them), they were not as included in hosting and serving when we had guests. If someone "important" visited us, Naza (our female housekeeper) would make tea that I didn't know how to make and cook some food that we could offer, but for regular visits I was the one to serve our guests. A friend of mine taught me how to serve our guests, first asking what they would like to drink, not if they wanted something to drink as I did in the

beginning. When I asked if anyone wanted something they always said no, just to ask for something later. When serving the drinks, and later offering out chocolates it should go in the order of oldest to youngest, I often didn't know who was the oldest so to avoid offending anyone I served them from right to left. I am not going to dwell a lot on my own feelings around the issue of "hosting", but I will give some of my thoughts around it. I felt an obligation to go down stairs and greet our guests every time someone came, which could be at any time, if I had slept in I had to dress and get ready in a hurry, and make sure no one felt that their visit was an inconvenience. Sometimes our visitors spoke only Arabic, which meant that I was excluded entirely from any conversation, and not knowing what to do I sat with them and had an occasional question translated by my grand mother. In some cases people would call ahead to see if we were home, but I found it much more common that relatives just show up. Personally I preferred to call ahead. And in addition to receiving our visitors, there was always an expectation of a reciprocal visit. Whenever my grandmother visited someone without me she came back with their greetings and questions about why I didn't visit them. The reason why I bring this up is because of the general knowledge of the Middle Eastern society and the significance these visits have had in literature. Literature from Kurdistan has shown that the tradition and significance of reciprocal visits are long and deep¹¹. I will not go further into the significance of these social exchanges, nor any analysis on the meaning of this particular social phenomenon, rather I will tell the stories of young women who found themselves in this particular context.

Islam allows men to take more than one wife (Stone, 2010, p. 190), and in certain cases that might be the case in Kurdistan, but the norm was the nuclear family. I knew one woman whose father had more than one wife, other than that it was never mentioned as a significant factor in domestic life. Previously I have written about Delal and her dreams and goals in life that has been connected to life outside the home. But she was a woman that I visited on many occasions in her home, and I will now focus on her story about domestic life.

I was sitting in Delal's living room, as always we were drinking orange juice and she had served some refreshments on a tray that was sitting before us on her living room table. After many mornings and afternoons in her house we had gotten to know each other quite well. On

¹¹ For more on the social organization in Kurdistan, see Fredrik Barth (Barth, Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan, 1955).

this particular day I was feeling worn down by all the visitors who had stopped by the last few days because of the Eid celebration. I told her that I was tired of visitors coming to the house unannounced at all hours of the day, and having to entertain every time, serving tea and chocolates. Delal looked at me understandingly and said that she too hated that people arrived unannounced at her door, never considering that she could be busy or tired. It was exhausting, her husband sat down with them while she had to ask for their preferred drinks and prepare refreshments. She told me about all her work in the home, cooking food, washing, doing laundry and keeping the garden. She was not from a family of high income, and even though she worked and previously had had a very good job she could not afford help in the home. Neither did she have a private generator for electricity, so when the government electricity went out she only had the mediocre generator that was shared with the whole neighborhood. Having no help in the house also meant that she had to pump up the water when ever the water was accessible, which could be at any hour of the day. Later in the week her family in law was coming for a visit, which she was dreading because of the extra work. She was clearly bothered by the fact that she was expected to cook food for all of them, as if she had nothing better to do.

That was the first time we spoke about subjects like that, but it would not be the last, talking about what she disliked became somewhat of a relief to her when I visited her. The paradox is the dismay she articulates towards her “duties” and the fact that she is still carrying them out and thereby upholding and reproducing the structure.

On the weekends Delal and her family often visited her family in the village she is from. She went there a lot especially now because her mother had gotten an injury and Delal and her sister wanted to go there and help her. This particular weekend she had been there to help her mother host a big party with all their relatives. She and her sister were the youngest of the daughters and were therefore put to work in the kitchen. The exasperation in her voice and body language full of frustration gave me the impression that it was more tiresome than relaxing in her village that weekend.

What became clear to me the more we talked about this was the ambivalent relation Delal had to hosting her guests. She never expressed anything but a loving relationship to her friends and family, but at the same time she disliked the “duties” she always had during their visits.

Ariman, a 40-year-old unmarried woman who lived with her mother and sisters talked about her many visitors. She was also the one who taught me how to offer beverages and serve snacks.

“I work all day every day and when I finally come home I want to have a rest, but my uncles come visit and I cannot stay in my room, I have to go socialize with them”, this was one of the few occasions I got to spend a whole day with her, she had a job with a lot of responsibility that kept her very busy. She had come over to my house to have some tea, and we were sitting in our living room talking. In her opinion it was easier for me, because people would understand that I am not used to their culture and can excuse myself if I wanted to be alone. I was glad to hear her say that, but at the same time I did not share her sentiment. During Ramadan they had, like us, had a lot of visitors, and her mother had sent her and her young sisters to the kitchen, “you know what she told me? She said, I’m done with this now, it’s your turn to make the food!”

Hence, I was not the only one disliking the role I got in the home when visitors arrived. I have already suggested that women are negotiating public spaces when they go out together, so what is it that makes the home different regarding such negotiations? Before discussing this further I will describe the differences and similarities of the homes I visited.

“Modern” or “traditional” homes

After several hours of trying to maneuver the all-consuming bureaucracy of Kurdistan we finally had found the office we were looking for. The one closest to my house was closed because the man working there was on vacation and his substitute could only answer the phone to tell people that they had to go somewhere else, so we went to the office in another neighborhood. But we soon realized that no one was there either, there was only a sign with a phone number. Cara called it and reached the man who worked there, he was at home today because his son was sick, so he asked us instead to come to his house. We met him on one of the main streets where we could park and he showed us in to one of the side streets where we entered the gate to his front lawn, it was quite small. He wore beige Kurdish clothing including a jamadani¹². As in many traditional homes we took off our shoes before entering

¹² A traditional scarf of cotton that is worn on the head by men

the house. There was no hallway, we entered directly into his living room. There were no chairs and only a small coffee table next to a wall, so we sat down on a large cushion that was laid out next to the wall furthest away from the door. His wife came out with water bottles for us right away, she was wearing Kurdish clothing as well.

In this extract is a description of what is by many defined as a traditional Kurdish home. With no sofa or chairs to sit on, rather you sit on a big cushion that is taking up much space on the floor, often placed by a wall with smaller cushions put against the wall to lean on. I never saw the inside of a home like this before, and would not for the rest of my fieldwork. In comparison I visited many whose interior design was well thought through, looking like it was taken out of a magazine. Economic strength has allowed for luxurious consumption, also within the inside of the house.

My grandmother and I visited Ferman on a regular basis, usually in the mornings after breakfast. We sat down in a beige sofa, my grandmother had her spot where she always sat and I sat down next to her. Their maid served me coffee and my grandmother tea while we were conversing. Ferman, Cambridge alumni from the 50s, asked me if I wanted to listen to some music. I said sure, but I didn't mind what kind of music. He asked my grandmother, another Cambridge alumni, what she wanted. We ended up listening to a Mozart opera for two hours.

While there are quite distinct differences between traditional houses and the houses furnished in more accordance with western interior trends, I will look at how the modern houses are still incorporating the Kurdish norms.

What I witnessed was that among older Kurds the norm was to visit each other, the place for socializing was in each other's homes. Normally that meant one or two living rooms, only women who were close (either closely related, or close friends of the family) to the owner of the house would enter the kitchen to help. Social norms like always welcoming visitors into your home and serving something to drink are still current in all the homes I visited, whether it was among the urban middle class or not.

On a trip in the Kurdish mountains we drove past a nomadic family and their sheep herd. My friend who is a photographer wanted to ask them if she could take pictures of their herd, so

we stopped and approached them. The shepaerd and head of the family was happy to be photographed and invited us down to his camp so we could see all his animals. His wife and daughters saw us and stepped out of the tent with glasses of water that they offered all of us. None of us spoke their dialect of Kurdish, so we could not communicate with anything other than smiles to show our gratitude, but they were well received.

Regardless of language barriers and the fact that we were tourists, the family was still showing us hospitality. Hence, wishing to keep up the norms of hospitality is strong regardless of socio-economic background.

Just for women

My first week in Hawler was mainly filled with us doing our “mandatory” greeting rounds, visiting our family relations and connections was a form of courtesy. We arrived at the house of a man who previously had a high ranking position, thereby being quite a respected man and one we had to visit. When we walked in the living room, was full of men sitting in a large circle. I followed my dad and went around the room to say hi to everyone. We were then shown to the next room, a smaller living room where the man we visited was sitting with an older woman and a woman about 40 years old. We sat there for a while talking, we were served tea by a young man, when all of a sudden my dad was invited to come into the other living room again. Assuming I should come with him I got up, but he told me it was just for the men, but we wouldn't stay long, maximum 10 minutes. He was wrong, we were there for about another hour. The old lady didn't speak any English, and I did not speak Kurdish well enough yet to be able to have a conversation with her. But she smiled at me, made sure I had tea and expressed her happiness to see me. She knew my family and was happy to finally meet me as well. The other woman, Arjin, had lived many years in England, so I spoke mainly with her. Our conversation started out a little bit awkwardly, with simply small chat about our lives, she told me about her life in England and when she and her sister had moved back to Kurdistan. When the conversation started stagnating I looked at a photograph and told her it looked nice. Her eyes went blank, and her voice started trembling while she told me about her mother who had passed away a few years before. She told me about what kind of woman she had been, and the importance she had had in her life, while tears started forming in her eyes.

My initial reaction when my dad got up and left me was a little bit of shock and a little bit of feeling left out, it was my first experience with separating men and women in such an explicit way. I was also uncertain as to what my role was, now that I was no longer in the comfortable company of my dad. But having thought about it for a little bit, I do not believe that I would have been able to have an intimate conversation with another woman upon our first making acquaintance if we were not alone. I later came to notice that there was several occasions where we were just women and the men were sitting somewhere else, without me knowing that they were even there.

As we had done so many times we were sitting in the living room in Irem's house, I was sitting on the divan next to Irem who was sitting in her usual chair. The television was on, and her maid served us juice and fruit. Her husband wasn't with us this time, but when we had been there for a while he arrived at the door and sat down with us. He said that he had been in the other living room with the men, which all of a sudden made me realize that there was another living room next to the one we were sitting in, and that there were men sitting in there.

I had this experience of being separated from men a few times. Within a home, there can be created a distinction between the male and female social interaction. This is tightly connected to the gendered social structures of Kurdistan, and to me that opened up for a more intimate conversation with a new acquaintance.

Kinship and family

To be able to do an analysis of the intricate topics of domestic life there is no getting around kinship theory and the making of family. The subject of kinship has a long tradition in anthropological literature, and at the center of the debate has been the issue of how to study kinship. Michael G. Peletz writes about the development in kinships studies that during the last decades of the 20th century anthropologists called for a reconceptualization of kinship and gender, moving towards studies that “are most usefully analyzed as components of more encompassing systems of distinction and hierarchy that are variably grounded in cosmology and political economy” (Peletz, 1995, p. 360). He continues by laying forth the development of anthropologists turning to their own societies and to the study of “new” kinships, taking a look at surrogacy and donor conceived children for instance, which has a comparative value in the study of kinship other places (Peletz, 1995, p. 362). But, like Mercia Inhorn argues,

these phenomena are not exclusive to the west, and should not be overlooked in the Arab world (Inhorn, 2014). What Peletz concludes with in his article is that the study of kinship in anthropology is still relevant and ongoing, but often under different rubrics and aliases. And this new form of studying kinship has opened up for new possibilities to study and theorize about for example gender and power. (Peletz, 1995, p. 367). Linda Stone writes that moving towards a focus on gender in kinship studies is illuminating, and she emphasizes reproduction, and she sees it as a cornerstone in both concepts of marriage and divorce (Stone, 2010, pp. 1-2). She refers to David M. Schneider's criticism of the beginning of kinship studies in anthropology as a study of a society's structure because of the Eurocentric approach, which slowed down the focus on kinship in anthropology for a few decades. It was not until feminist anthropology brought it up again as a way to study a structure of gender and kinship together within separate societies that kinship came back fully as a richer and more complex topic of study.

Jane Carsten argues that as well as combining gender and kinship studies, it is important to integrate kinship into gender studies. Studying gender without considering kinship leads the analysis down an abstract and vague road (Carsten, 2012, p. 59).

The family is one of the key institutions of the Middle East, Suad Joseph writes that women as citizens in the Middle East often are located within patriarchal structures and been given the roles as subordinate mothers and wives (2000). Joseph writes that "(i)n the escalating contests for authenticity, the family as a backbone of "tradition" often emerges symbolically, if not juridically and socially, as a site where women's "authentic" place in society is shaped." (Joseph, 2000, p. 19). Joseph also writes that it is the woman that legitimizes a home, it is not a home without a woman. King refers to this observation and writes that the same is true from her observations in Kurdistan. King also writes "(t)he vast majority of the Kurdish women I know spend most their waking hours preparing food and cleaning their homes. Most girls do as well, when they are not in school." (King, 2014). Now, the vast majority of the women I know in Kurdistan did not spend their waking hours preparing food and cleaning their homes. But, as I have shown, some of them do, and a common denominator in their homes is that they do not have help. Delal is married and has a child, Ariman is not, but they both have jobs. although Delal has cut down on her hours to be able to do everything needed in her home. The sentiment expressed to me by my interlocutors suggests that they are not happy with their domestic position, while they are still enacting their role in the home. This

would mean that they are upholding a power structure that they are unhappy with. I cannot say why this is so, but my analysis of the social interaction in public spaces would suggest that transgressions, either conscious or not, are pushing the limits of norms regarding public behavior. I will therefore present some thoughts on why social behavior regarding norms is so different in the domestic and public spheres.

Negotiating domestic space

Foucault's understanding of subjectivation leads the individual or the subject to gain a special relationship to him or her self, which is dependent on the practices of subjectivation that is producing the subject. Foucault's meaning of ethics is that it is part of what different techniques of forming a subject is based on (Mahmood, 2012, p. 32). In Saba Mahmood's analysis she argues that the agency she is talking about is not belonging to the individual, but it is created by the specific historical context of discursive traditions that they find themselves in. The individual is thereby created by the discursive tradition she enacts (Mahmood, 2012, p. 32). By understanding the production of the self and the agency of women through the discursive tradition she enacts, it can broader be understood as the discursive tradition she relates to as she finds herself within it.

If we consider the work of Erving Goffman, his theory of frontstage and backstage can be considered here (Goffman, 1956). In a Kurdish home, there are one or more living rooms that are considered frontstage, where the visitors are welcomed in to sit, but kitchens and bedrooms are often private to the visitors. Because of the socially determined norms of Kurdish society is often said to be connected to elders and extended family by my interlocutors, the frontstage of the home becomes an arena in which breaking these norms are difficult. He explains the individual's performance as behavior intended to give a certain impression of the individual to the individual's audience. He also argues that time and place are factors in human interactions. (Goffman, 1956). Thereby, space, time and audience are elements creating the frame of social interactions. When the impression a young woman wants to give in the social interaction in the frontstage of her home is to live up to the expectations of a young Kurdish woman, acting in terms of the norms is necessary. This is in contradiction to the performance among friends, where the expectations are not the same as those of her extended family. In conversations with me, a friend, my interlocutors' freedom of

expressing their grievances towards expectations and norms can be executed in a way that is not possible elsewhere.

Diane King's descriptions of the home makes it clear that it is the arena of women, and where, for many, their socializing for the most part happens. The transgressions being made by the young women when they go out, and their possibilities for negotiating public social spaces do not apply to their domestic lives. My observations and experiences from Kurdish households suggests that the production of individuals within a home, where young women are often subordinate to their older close relatives, is different to the subjectivation outside the home. I experienced that myself, while at home with visitors or while visiting others, especially older relatives, behavioral patterns that were nonexistent in other spaces were in the domestic space much more evident. The participating actors who are part of creating a social space is in a varying form determining and making possible negotiations of space for the young urban women.

So if we assume that the sociality within spaces is a part of the transgressions in certain spaces and not in others. That can suggest that different subcultures and the ability to move around in public spaces open up many more possibilities to negotiate one's identity and space. Looking back at my observations on the tension between young women and their older relatives, my observations from the home suggests that this is the space where this tension is most evident.

In previous chapters I have shown how my interlocutors have busy social lives outside their homes, but in this chapter I have looked closer at their busy domestic lives. I first presented the many different forms a Kurdish house can have, and the similarities, like hospitality, they still keep. Through my own experiences and the stories of my interlocutors I have shown the different expectations held to young women in the household. Even though they feel grievances regarding their roles, they are reproducing the power structures through enacting their domestic roles. I have presented my observations on the negotiation of space within the domestic sphere and the issues connected to it.

Chapter 4. Marriage

Marriage is something that exists in virtually every society, in some shape or form. It usually entails some kind of religious ceremony, but there are many variations to complete a marriage (Stone, 2010, p. 189). Kurdistan is not an exception to this, marriage has a high standing in society. I previously examined kinship and its significance in Kurdistan, which is an important factor in marriage. I will here present parts of my research that highlights especially the differences I saw regarding marriage, and give some ideas on how to understand them in a broader context including class, urbanism and modernity.

Two weddings

A close friend of mine called me one day asking if I wanted to come with her to two different weddings the next day, one was a day time wedding and the other one was at night time, so we could make it to both of them. They were two very different weddings, and the fact that they were both on the same day highlighted the contrast even more.

I was standing in front of the mirror trying on dresses, I had no idea what to wear for a wedding, what would be appropriate, should it be a long dress? Did it have to cover my arms? Would covering my shoulders be enough? Or could I go with bare shoulders? What kind of shoes do I wear? I don't have any high heels, should I run to the store or will some nice flats do? I texted Cara, I sent her several pictures of my clothes and she picked the nicest dress I own, it wasn't long, but covered parts of my knees, and it covered my shoulders. She then picked me up a little while later and we drove to the reception hall. On a coincidence we met some other women we knew outside the entrance and walked in with them. Only one of them spoke English, and my Kurdish at the time was limited so I couldn't talk a lot with them, but they were still very forthcoming and inclusive. This was a women only wedding, thus the guests were all women, except for a few young boys. The women we sat down with were all wearing traditional Kurdish dresses, and many of them covered their hair with hijabs or scarves. I asked my friend why they covered their hair when we were only women, and she pointed out to me that there were three men in there who worked there, as well as the fact that the groom was there, which led some women to prefer to keep their hair covered up.

As I looked up at the bride and groom I noticed that the bride didn't smile once, it seemed a bit odd to me, so I asked Cara about it. She told me that it was all an act, the bride is supposed to look sad that she is leaving her family, if she looks too happy it's supposedly a bad thing for her family.

We were the bride's guests so we sat down on her side of the room and I got to have a good look around. The room was lighted by artificial light, and the windows were covered by curtains. In the corner the furthest away from the entrance was a small podium decorated with a lot of white draping's. In the middle of the podium were two chairs, one for the bride and one for the groom. The guests were seated so that the bride's guests were sitting on her side and the groom's guests were sitting on his side. The groom was from Sulimaniya, a city everyone had told me was more liberal than Hawler, and it now became very clear to me why. On the other side of the room I only saw a few older women who covered their hair, and the way they dressed was completely different. The dresses were "modern", one woman wore a tight fitted, one shouldered, red satin dress, everyone had high heels and their side of the room was much livelier than on ours. We were all having a good time though, we got sandwiches and some assorted desserts after a while, and then the dancing started. It was the "Suli side" as my friend called it, who were dancing, almost all of them entered the dance floor and danced traditional Kurdish dances. Before long the family of the groom walked up on the podium and we all gathered around it. A woman came forth with a small chest filled with gold that she started dressing the bride in. Cara turned to me and said "this is the part where the bride gets sold", she had a sarcastic undertone to her comment, and she explained to me that the bride was gifted with gold from the family of the groom, as is tradition. The last part of the wedding was the bride and groom cutting a big ring of red ribbon and dancing inside it while the rest of us danced around it. After it had gone on for a while the couple left together and the rest of us left shortly after.

The bride here was a woman in her late 30s/early 40s, and according to my friend she had gotten married now not through pressure but on her own account. My impression is that marriages are not usually forced. A woman I talked to had been engaged at the age of 16 to her second cousin, set up by the two mothers, but because of personal differences and desires they broke off the engagement. Diane King (2014) has also made the observation that marriages are often consensual, although there are family interests in the picture. Further, the differences here are huge, for some their families will stay out of their choice of marriage

completely, while others experience more that their families have an opinion, rather than feeling pressure. One of my interlocutors came to find that her family advised her against getting married, but I will come back to that later.

The second wedding was a completely different ordeal. It was not a gendered wedding, both men and women were attendees. The reception hall was a lot bigger, and they had many more guests, the hall was big and open and decorated in white and blue with colored lights on the ceiling. In the previous wedding they had worn off the rack dresses, but in this one the women wore tailored Kurdish dresses, only a few of us had store bought dresses on. We all sat down and I was sitting at a table with my friend and one of her acquaintances that I didn't previously know. As more people arrived I greeted the people I knew and were introduced to the people I didn't know, but the woman I was sitting across the table from and had just met was overlooked by many. We were there to celebrate a wedding, but the conversation at our table turned grim. The woman I had just met told me that she was in the middle of a divorce. Her family who were very religious and traditional had cut her out, and some of them refused to look at her, even the ones I was acquainted with and had kissed hello just a few minutes earlier. Her husband had been treating her badly and she refused accept it any longer, even though it meant cutting contact with parts of her family. She continued to talk to Cara about it, but carefully and in Kurdish that was harder for me to understand. I decided to let the deeply conflicting subject alone, if she had wanted to tell me more she would have continued in English. But this was something she wanted to share details of only with her close friend. The ethnographic value of her experiences was not as important to me in this situation as her trying to feel comfortable in such a difficult situation as it must have been to be at this wedding.

We were served sandwiches again, people moved between the tables to catch up with their friends and family, the atmosphere was much more lively than at the other wedding. After the food we all started dancing, almost everyone danced this time. It lasted for a long while and we were lined up around the room dancing in a big circle, everyone following the dance of the man at the front of the line. And then, gradually the feel of the room started changing, the lighting was turned down and a few men came in with a red ribbon with a big wedding cake in the middle. We all gathered around it as the bride and groom entered the ring of ribbons. The groom was given a knife that he used as an artifact as he was dancing. Holding it up in front of his forehead as he moved. The bride was dancing along with him, following his

movements. Then they cut the cake with the knife and fed each other. All the young women were given henna in the palm of their hand and a fake rose on an elastic band that we put over the henna. I got mine on my left hand as I was not married, the married women including the bride got theirs on the right hand, or not at all. After the dancing had calmed down and the volume of the music was lowered, I was introduced to the bride. She was a lovely Kurdish girl from England and we had a short chat with congratulations and well wishes before she turned to some of her other guests. This was the last thing that happened and the newly weds left. After they were gone I thanked my friend for taking me to weddings, and commented on how lovely the bride I had just met seemed. I was then told by a third party that she was 17 years old, her father had brought her back to Kurdistan from the UK to find a husband because she was caught having a boyfriend in England. As that was unacceptable she had to come to Kurdistan and find herself a respectable Kurdish man to marry. Because of rumors about her life in England her now in-laws had been very skeptical of her, but after several assurances that she was a virgin and the promise of showing the sheet from her wedding night to the mother of the groom, she had been accepted.

In my previous chapters I have many times mentioned young women's aspirations regarding marriage. But this is perhaps the aspect in life where tensions between their own aspirations and their families' expectations are at its strongest. Getting married was for some of my interlocutors a difficult topic, many had dreams to marry someone "from the outside", someone who didn't grow up in Kurdistan. I was warned against Kurdish men who had lived their whole lives in Kurdistan several times, but few were able to answer when I asked them why. But mostly they expressed distrust towards Kurdish men from Kurdistan, they didn't treat their wives the way they should, and cheating was a common problem. Therefore they wanted to meet men who weren't from Kurdistan, either foreigners or Kurds who had grown up outside of Kurdistan, according to the Kurdish women they had learned to treat women better. But as far as my experience goes, they often ended up with Kurdish men from Kurdistan anyways, unless they didn't marry at all. I only met two Kurdish women who had married someone from the outside. The information I learned about the 17-year-old bride whose wedding I attended was second hand information, therefore I am considering it with that in mind. Yet, her story is not unique, it is not uncommon for Kurdish women to marry out of her family's interests.

Marriage in Kurdistan is tightly connected to the female sexuality, and the control over it by the patrilineal system. Diane King states that she believes kinship studies were abandoned in the Middle East too soon. King points out that some trends in contemporary Kurdistan, for example the increase of education for girls, could make one think that the significance of the patrilineality would decrease. But her observations are rather that the patrilineal organization is still important, and having a patrilineal belonging is a significant creator of collective identity (King, 2014). I too noticed the connections Kurds have to their patrilineal names, and some found pride in belonging to certain families. At the same time, I don't know the patrilineal belonging of most of my interlocutors, and it never occurred to me to bring it up, because of the insignificance of it in every conversation I had with my interlocutors. As a structural and collective identity, like King describes, it might be of importance, but in an urban setting among friends it was not a topic of conversation. That is, except for describing others, if a man were from a high status patrilineality it would be mentioned if he were talked about. King also describes that the significance of a lineage was individual, to some it was of no interest and to others it was very important. She observed that lineages with sayyid status, meaning that the patrilineality claims to be of descent of the prophet Mohammed, sees their lineage as of high importance, which is something I too observed.

Delal – negotiating marriage

Excited to tell Delal that my family was coming to visit me I told her about everyone who was coming, including my brother's girlfriend. I was a little bit uncertain about telling her that my brother had a girlfriend that he lived with but was not married to, but she had previously expressed knowledge and acceptance that "things are different" in Europe. Her sister lived in France now and had told her about the norms there. She asked me about how long they had been together and how long they had lived together. As I answered she told me that our "system" in Norway was considerably better than that in Kurdistan. Having a boyfriend and living together before getting married was more sensible than meeting and marrying her husband the way she had done, not really knowing whom you're moving in with seemed to her to be stupid. She told me that before getting married to her husband they had visited each other's families several times, but they didn't spend time alone together, and they always went home before nightfall.

I already knew the normal procedure some couples went through before getting married. Another friend of mine had told me that for her it was not acceptable to spend time alone with a man without being engaged to him. She wanted to get to know him through appropriate meetings with him and his or her family first. She was in her 40s and unmarried, having gone through an unsuccessful engagement with her cousin when she was young made her certain that she would not get engaged with anyone before being sure he was the right man. But I found this procedure to also be dependent on the woman's family, the more traditional families sees marriage in a different way, it is often a means to an interest, for example keeping real estate in the family.

Looking back to Karen Kelsky's ethnographic work in Japan (Kelsky, 1999), the Hawleri women's perception of local Kurdish men is similar to that of the Japanese women's perception of Japanese men. They characterize them as not treating women right, they cheat and expect women to be housekeepers, while the women themselves have aspirations for a career and to travel. The narrative of internationalism in Hawler is apparent in my conversations with Delal. She was perfectly aware of the differences in norms and traditions between Kurdistan and Western Europe, and admiring the possibility to have a boyfriend instead of going straight into engagement. Kelsky presents cases in which Japanese women that are pushing 30 and are unmarried and with no possibility of moving abroad find themselves in a situation of pressure and despair. They might lose their job because of their age and marital status, and they are losing the opportunities to realize their dreams of meeting a man from the West (Kelsky, 1999). Women in Hawler feel pressure from their families to get married, often it was not from their parents, rather it was from extended family. Delal had decided to wait with marriage until she was 30, she wanted the opportunities of having a career before getting married.

The knowledge of how Europe and Kurdistan has "different systems", as she put it, came from her sister who lives in France with her husband and children. Kurds are currently spread out across the world, and it is very common to have relatives abroad in Europe and North America. Additionally, many of the Kurds who grew up outside of Kurdistan are either moving back to Kurdistan or traveling and spending a good amount of time there. So the concept of internationalism is also developing through the movement of friends and family to and from Kurdistan. Delal's reflections on her family life and the opportunities she wished she had in choosing a husband is a furthering of the concept of "self-help" described in

chapter two. Her negotiation for her own interests and her family's wishes can be seen as her way of enacting her agency within her particular context.

Sara – divorce

Sara and I were spending some time together one evening and she told me about her aspirations in law, she was now studying in Hawler, but she had wanted to study abroad. She then told me that she was actually divorced, she had gotten married in her hometown to a man that she did not feel like she could refuse because of his social status. Her parents had told her that it would be wise to wait until after she was finished with her studies, because then she could go abroad and study if she wanted to. Sara explained that it was not appropriate for a married woman to live alone abroad while her husband was at home. But she had cleared all that with him before the wedding, they had planned for him to come with her abroad and they were going to live there together until she was finished her studies. But after the wedding he had changed his mind, he no longer wanted to move abroad, making up all kinds of excuses why he couldn't go. So she had ended up not studying abroad, instead she had stayed in Kurdistan with him. The marriage did not go well, and a year later she had filed for a divorce. I asked her if she felt any backlash from getting divorced, her family obviously didn't care, not did anyone of her friends. She said that men are pigs, and now that she is divorced they treat her in a completely different manner, married men can ask her to come with her to hotel bars and fancy places. "I ask them, do you take your wife to these places? No? Then why would you take me? Why would I go with you?" clearly upset she continued, "Just because I'm not a virgin does not mean I want to sleep with you!"

I find her story interesting in many different ways. Not only does it contradict the general notion that women are being pressured into marriage, it also contradicts the other stories I heard from other women where getting a divorce has caused serious conflict between her and her family, and often also within the family.

I have previously touched upon the topics of kinship and gender, especially using Diane King's research and conclusions to explain the Kurdish gender and kinship structure. She is not the first to study kinship and marriage in Kurdistan, Fredrik Barth has also done extensive research in the region (1954). His approach to Kurdish kinship and marriage is analyzing the marriage tradition between daughters and their father's brother's son, while King observes

further the role of women in marriage. However, there are aspects around marriage and divorce that King does not touch upon. Also, her description of the pressure for women regarding marriage is generalized in a way that was not in accordance with everything I was told by my interlocutors. My impression is that it is much more varied and nuanced, factors like class and the individualism of different families made my perception to be that we cannot ignore the particularities. King writes a thorough description, based on several fieldworks over decades, but it is short of the intricacies of kinship related to class and power, which is needed to describe such a diverse society as I found myself in. Take for example my conversation with Sara, her story directly contradict the notion of a woman's family pressuring their daughter into marriage. Now, in many cases one can argue that pressure is not merely applied for a woman to get married, but just as much who she marries. But in this case there was no pressure what so ever, she portrayed a situation where her parents advised her to consider herself and her studies before deciding to get married. Perhaps Delal's story would fit better into a discourse of pressure from the family, but I think her story shows that this was also her choice. Because the concept of freedom is often carrying the weight of a liberalistic understanding, which in the meeting with others often disregard their actions as free if they are a consequence of customs and traditions (Mahmood, 2012, p. 11).

Diane King writes, "Plenty of marriages in Kurdistan are happy, and I would not be surprised if a poll would show that more married couples in Kurdistan are happy with their marriages than American couples." (King, 2014, p. 128). This sentence is the only thing she writes regarding happiness or any kind of sentiment in marriage, and my data seems to indicate that it is not always that way. I had many conversations with women who showed skepticism towards Kurdish men because of how they behave in marriage and how they treat their wives. I heard stories about cheating and controlling that my interlocutors found enraging. It is also important to remember that happiness is not necessarily bound to marriage, but can also be found elsewhere. Sara who, although she had gone through a difficult divorce, was non-the less content with her life. She is still her own person. We talked about being approached by men in an improper manner, me as a European and her as a divorced woman, Sara said "*they invite me for things they would never invite their wife's to, like cocktails at a rooftop bar, but I'm like, just because I'm not a virgin does not mean I want to sleep with you!*" While the power structure of the patriarchy places a divorced woman in another position than unmarried women, Sara does not surrender to that position. On the contrary, she sees men who treat her differently as backwards and not belonging to the same modernity as herself.

The stories I have presented here indicate that there are many aspects of a broader context to which we should be observant while studying marriage. Transnational influences tend to hit the urban areas first, which naturally has an impact on the young women living there. This is all connected to the arguments I have made throughout this thesis, that the context in which these women live is much more nuanced, although many of the core aspects can fit into a general structure.

What is often perceived as dichotomies is through my observations suggested to be more fluid, “traditional society” versus “modern society” is not something black and white, it is filled with nuances. The Middle East has been generalized in the Western post 9/11 media world. The intense public discussion on Islam, and more specifically Muslim women and gender in Islam is well described in Lila Abu-Lughod’s article, *The cross-publics of ethnography: The case of “the Muslimwoman”*. While discussing public anthropology, she brings up the reactions she saw regarding her 2013 book “*Do Muslim Women need Saving?*”, which was somewhat surprising to her. The audience she was expecting to react to her work, the US liberal mainstream, remained silent about her ethnography, while right wing, often outright islamophobic, actors on the blogosphere voiced harsh critique of her work, and accused her of lying and having a hidden agenda, while others, on the opposite side of the polarized discussion praised her for telling the nuanced truth. She goes on to describe some of her critiques and their writings, for example Bruce Bower’s review titled “*Saving Islam from Its Victims*” (Abu-Lughod, 2016). I will not go deeper into the criticism of her book, but her article portrays a highly polarized debate on the “Muslimwoman”, where the nuances that she herself offers in a very thorough and accessible way are discredited. This polarization is often also tied to discourse of tradition and modernity, which is something I have touched upon in my thesis. Through my ethnographic data I suggest that tradition and modernity are more fluid.

In this chapter I have described two different weddings, and told the story of Sara who went through a divorce, and Delal who found room for negotiating marriage with her family. Marriage as an institution in Kurdistan is an aspect of life in which female oppression might be the most present. But as I have shown in this chapter, and the former chapters, oppression and agency is not a matter of one or the other, it works on a continuum and cannot be separated. To understand how, you have to take into account the contextual circumstances. As

my empirical examples shows, the particular stories and experiences of individual women vary greatly. Women are in a continuous negotiation with the family in regards to marriage. In this regard, women's experiences and the outcome of negotiation differ. Delal managed to use the opportunity of climbing social status, through acquiring a professional degree and later a career, to postpone her marriage to later in life. This means that within what seems as an oppressive institution there is still room for negotiation of agency. This also goes for Sara, who had experienced a divorce, and lived with the consequences of that, was still a happy young woman with the individual choice of what to do with her time.

Conclusion

I followed these women in different places and stages in their lives, and the chapters are organized to show the different stories they have shared with me. I have drawn on the theories of Michel Foucault and Saba Mahmood about power and agency to further understand women's agency and resistance within the framework of a patriarchal society. Additionally I have considered the class relations and belonging of my interlocutors.

Chapter 1 is about how class and social standing are affecting young urban women's everyday lives, and how they use their mobility to gain access to different parts and spaces in the city. I presented the day-to-day lives of the young middle class women, and how they create a distinction between themselves and others through concepts like modern and traditional. And explaining through empirical data how a young woman's reputation is being used and understood in many different ways, I have shown how it often comes back to extended family. Drawing on chapter 1, chapter 2 is focused on young urban women creating and negotiating public space. As new social spaces are being created, so are social relations, and the possibilities for transgressions in the existing power structure in Hawler. As such transgressions are happening, I have discussed the concept of resistance and whether individual actions can be understood as a form of resistance if it is collectively changing gender norms. Chapter 3 focuses on domestic life, and how negotiation of space in a domestic setting is different to that of public spaces. Kinship and family, being a part of the gendered power structure in Kurdistan, and the connection to expectations of young women is more present in the home, which can suggest that the room for transgressions is more limited. Furthering family connections, chapter 4 elaborates on the role of marriage in young urban Kurdish women's lives. By recounting two weddings and telling the stories of two young women I have shown how marriage can be very varied, and the sentiments around it are as varied.

Throughout telling the stories of my interlocutors I have used Saba Mahmood's understanding of agency to suggest that agency exists in the negotiation of space being conducted by my interlocutors, both in public- and domestic spaces. As the reader has understood, I have been inspired by Amélie Le Renard's work on young urban women in Riyadh while working on this thesis, as she is the only anthropologist to have done extensive work on an urban middle

class in a Muslim country in the Middle East. I suggest that this shows an opening in anthropological literature, where studies in Iraq are scarce and focus on the middle class is even scarcer. Going back to the opening quote in my thesis,

“The ongoing importance of feminist scholarship on women’s agency cannot be emphasized enough, especially when one remembers that Western popular media continues to portray Muslim women as incomparably bound by the unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression” (Mahmood, 2012, p. 7).

In light of Lila Abu-Lughod’s observations described at the end of chapter 4, Saba Mahmood’s call for feminist scholarship on women’s agency above seems even more pressing. And I believe that, as Lila Abu-Lughod and Mercia Inhorn has argued, anthropologists need to broaden their horizon in the study of the Middle East. This thesis is about young women, but while living with my grand parents I realized that people like my grand mother are not represented in anthropological literature either. Older women (and men) who have traveled and studied abroad is a topic that to me would be excellent for research. Along with Amélie Le Renard I have been highly inspired by Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood, but they don’t write about the middle class. I strongly believe that this is an area of research that deserves further investigation, and I hope this thesis can be a contribution to such research.

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