Kameel Ahmady

Conformity and Resistance in Mahabad

Media Consumption, Conformity and Resistance : A Visual Ethnography of Youth in Iranian Kurdistan

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Introduction

The field research for this research began in May 2006 in West Azerbaijan province in north-west Iran, the southern of this province also referred to as 'Kurdistan', in the town of Mahabad. It was undertaken in cooperation with the 'Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults' (*Kanoon Fakri o Parverashi Kodek o Nojavan*). During a three month period working with children and young adults as well as members of staff at the centre, parents and local leaders, photographic, textual and interview data was collected.

The initial aim of this work was to examine the factors which shape a sense of belonging and place among young people in Mahabad, a town on the north-west periphery of Iran. I wanted to look at their consumption of local, national and transnational forms of media, and how this influenced their view of events, their local environment, and the ways they chose to narrate these. I used reflexive visual methods, asking them to take their own photographic pieces dealing with themes they saw as relevant to local current events and their place within these processes. The works they produced were then placed in a week long public exhibition in Mahabad, where further data was gathered in a Guest Book of reactions to the event, as well as participant observation notes taken at the time.

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The work produced by the young people shows the multiple and sometimes competing forces at work in the lives of young people in Iran, where idealised images about 'the west' can serve to challenge or reinforce their own sense of place. Conventions of media and popular culture 'story telling' - that is the discourses used to describe current affairs and social conditions in satellite television from Asia and Europe, films, print media such as newspapers, as well as vernacular trends – have shaped not only the choice of themes which are given priority by young people, but also the ways in which they view these themes and the relevance to their lives. Particularly with respect to issues of gender, there appears to be a strong desire for more public debate, but an ambivalence about the role of hybrid influences as positive or negative. Additionally, local forms of identity based on Kurdish resistance to a dominant nationalism are sometimes discernable, as is the overarching context of recent global events drawing Iran into direct political confrontations with western powers.

The Setting: Mahabad and *Kanoon* Institute

Mahabad is a city in north-western Iran with an estimated population of 168000 inhabitants. The city lies south of Lake Urumia in a narrow valley 1,300 metres above sea level, in West Azerbaijan Province. The name of 'Mahabad' (mah+abad) is the Persian translation of the ancient Mannaean name meaning place of moon, which is also a cognate with the Kurdish word mang. Mannaeans were a branch Mahabad has a colourful history, and is still known today for its leading role of resistance in Kurdish nationalist movements and some historical and political significance, along with producing some of the most well known poets and writers in the Kurdish literary tradition, (Van Bruinessen, 1992:28), Mahabad is marked by modernisation and is leading other Kurdish towns in the Mukrian region, also well ahead of west Azerbaijan province. Partly because of this, the city struggles with its local identity,

and there is a tension between this modernity on the one hand and struggles to keep the traditional Kurdish lifestyle and identity markers. With large migrations of Mangor and Mahal tribes to Mahabad from surrounding rural areas, in search of work and the conveniences of city life, the town in many ways is becoming not only diverse, but polarised in terms of socio-economic make-up. Rich and upper class Mahabadis, well established urbanites, coexist with poor migrant families whose agricultural skills are useless in a context where even educated citizens face high rates of unemployment. These rural migrants are more likely to become involved in black market economic ventures to stay afloat, including smuggling alcohol and cigarettes across from the Iraqi Kurdish border to Mahabad, where they will then be sold on to larger urban centres in Iran. An area called *Pashet Tap*, on the margins of Mahabad, has a reputation of leading most of the uprising and originating any government demonstrations led by young people and the unemployed. It is also seen as a place of informal autonomy for Kurdish movements, because fear among government security forces of strong and sometimes violent revolt within the young population makes it a 'no go area' in many respects. This has also extended to the lack of government investment, however, which leaves the region largely underdeveloped.

One notable exception to this is the educational institutions where I eventually based my work. Mahabad has two branches of "Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults", or *Kanoon.* Both were built at the time of the Shah and before the 1979 revolution which brought the Islamic Republic of Iran. The first is run by a gentleman previously working for the Office of Islamic Guidance before moving to Kanoon as a staff sixteen years ago, and he has been managing both centres since 2000. He gave the impression of being conservative in his ideas about male and female gender roles, and was careful to get clearance from the head office in Urumia for most things. He was sensitive about girls and in particular new members (some of them my students) wearing certain cloths or behaving in certain ways. Kanoon number two was managed by a young woman from a prosperous Mahabad family, who was well educated and well respected. Working along with her were another two members of the staff, both of whom were professional and had good rapport with the young adult clients.

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I was informed, as with any other government organisation in Iran, that in order to undertake such work I would need to obtain permits which could be got by visiting the Kanoon headquarters in Urumia, in the centre of West Azerbaijan province. Although Kanoon is not officially listed as a government establishment, 50% of its funding comes from the *Majles* (Iranian parliament). Outside of Iran, Kanoon is well known through its links to UNICEF and participates in international events for youth workers. To establish a good working relation with the organisation, I arranged a meeting with the Head of Kanoon in Mahabad, the Director of the West Azerbaijan Kanoon, and the Head of Arts Planning, as well as one of their consultants in the offices in Urumia. There is a complex system of monitoring in such institutions in Iran, almost all closely watched by *Harssat* services watchdogs*,* charged with overseeing work and ensuring that 'un-Islamic' behaviour does not occur. Ironically, these are also the people charged with taking complaints on corruption or mismanagement. The Kanoon staff were cautious but supportive of my proposed work, and with some false starts, I received the permission I needed to carry out my research. Initially, the headquarters in Urumia informed me that do undertake storytelling workshops with young children was acceptable for both boys and girls,

but that photographic workshops for older children and young adults could include only boys. Luckily, when we returned to Mahabad, the local Head of Kanoon took an approach of silent permissiveness, perhaps seeing that boys alone would make numbers insufficient. This was fortunate, since the classes would have been a failure without the participation of young women – both in terms of the numbers attending and in the rich data that they produced.

In order to get a good turnout and reach the wider communities, I agreed along with Kanoon staff to leaflet most parts of the town. Through Kanoon's relations with the Education Ministry all the schools were also faxed copies of the purposed programme, and a number of large banners were placed in prominent locations in the town centre and near the University of Mahabad. My plan was to start the work two weeks after my arrival in Iran, but that never happened, as I learned that the Iranian Education Ministry was ordered for an early closure of all schools in Iran for the summer holidays, as they did not want the school examinations to clash with the World Cup football tournament. This plan was backed by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinajad. I was amused to see the high levels of interest in football among Iranians, which resulted from such measures being taken by the government.

Given the case that Iran has very large young population, with near to half of Iranians under age 25, I still experienced some trouble to find a cross-range of the public to attend the workshops I had arranged to collect my data. Cultural norms mean that anonymous advertising did not gain much response. Direct interactions with community leaders and educators proved the most effective in gathering support and interest, and I also made several visits to more working class neighbourhoods, such as *Pashet Tap*, in order to engage with families and young people who tended to be more alienated from educational establishments, due to the demands of work and the decreased time and value this placed on educational or youth leisure pursuits. Unsurprisingly, the most responsive group of registrants were Kanoon's own regular users, then came others who heard about it through their friends and relatives, and through my own efforts in the wider community. The classes began with twenty eight students, eighteen females and ten males most aged between 14-17. There were also older students in separate classes, including the Kanoon staff members, but their data has not been included in the final dissertation analysis.

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The classes were divided between boy and girls and at the beginning of the course the Kanoon manager made sure that there were not to be any mix ups, although I was left to choose the times and shifts of the classes. However, the sensitivity around this issue was no longer evident in the 2nd and 3rd week, as I start mixing up the classes since I did not have enough boys to run separate classes for them, and at the same time I was interested to observe their young adult reactions to the opposite sex, as all boys and girls have divided schools. There were four classes per day, two in the morning and another two in the afternoon for males and females who were in school in different shifts of the morning and afternoon. Subsequent to those classes I had four hours a week for Kanoon staff and adults dealing with the impact of image and media on young adults and how to analyse painting and images produced by young adults, trying.

Within the population of girls three distinct subgroups could be observed: the first group were members of the Kanoon number one, who were regular visitors to the centre and familiar with extracurricular activities provided by the institute, as well as the rules and norms for behaviour within Kanoon. The second group were from Kanoon number two; they expressed greater interested in the course rather than seeing it as an obligation, and their different exposure to and attitudes of the Kanoon relative to the first group were visible. It was also noticeable there was intensive competition between the two groups when they were working in small groups or setting up the exhibition. The third group were those who heard about the programme through word of mouth. While the regular Kanoon users were uniformly middle class, the final group represented a cross section of the local population, some coming from wealthy families with educated parents, and several also from working class and poorer areas of Mahabad such as *Pashet Tap*.

I conducted a series of informal 'focus group' style discussions, to break the ice with the young participants and also in order to situate their perceptions prior to actually undertaking the photographic work. I found the girls were more interested in learning and getting involved in what the course were asking of them. Most girls had a clear idea of what they wanted to do for their projects and as to how they would approach the issues. At the same time, they were well aware of the cultural barriers and difficulties they may encounter. Most young females expressed a frustration with established norms of societal behaviour, and were discriminated against as girls or women, while boys were much freer. The common ideas were that boys were free to go out without supervision of the family and were able to do most things which would not require permission, simply because they were boys. They also believed in some cases that if girls went out by themselves (out of the school times and particularly in late evenings) it would not be viewed as inappropriate and would be referred to as *hayb* (inappropriate or shameful). They were concerned about the frequent practice of girls being labelled as not "good" by the boys.

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Most of the boys were either unaware that the concept of gender equality could exist, or did not take any interest in exploring the issue in the class while girls were present. Out of the twenty eight visual projects produced by the students, five girls decided to do theirs on gender differences and gaps between male and female freedom and opportunity. They also focussed on themes such as Islam or *hijab*, while none of the boys took an interest in gender issues and concentrated more on school conditions such as hygiene, for example.

For their part, parents were unquestioning in their acceptance of Kanoon as a safe and responsible organisation for their children to attend, and did not question the methods or the things they were being taught. This is in spite of the growing sense of fear about potential 'dangers' that can befall their children, as is discussed later. While Jones and Wallace (1992) talk about the growing trend to have government institutions take on the 'traditional' role of the family in the lives of young people, there is also a certain prestige to be derived for working class families to have their children participate in such programmes if they aspire to middle class educated values. As later discussion shows, the informal pressure of family social prestige and reputation tends to have a far greater influence on regulating behaviour within acceptable norms, than government interventions or direct legal sanctions. In the light of family pressures, such government pressures are unnecessary.

Methodology

The methods used in this field research involved participatory approaches which worked directly with the community, their resources, and encouraged participants to identify their own themes of interest about local identity and representation. From there, I used focus groups and workshops, as well as informal interviews and some brief survey work to gain the data I needed while incorporating these local 'terms of reference' into the shifting focus of my study. I also collected detailed notes about my observations during the exhibition in the Town Hall, as well as of my informal observations about pop cultural influences in public spaces in the city. The workshops were divided between two courses - photojournalism and visual story telling. In order to get the permission from Kanoon to run these I had to offer voluntary teaching work towards producing results leading children to learn new skills and for the Kanoon to claim it as activity to be put down in their annual reports, as well as raising their profile. Therefore the research methods also encompassed working with organisations and finding a mutually beneficial arrangement for the work which would produce results for all parties. I felt there was competition between Kanoon and Education Ministry, who run their own Kanoon (*Kanoon Parvarshi*). Most school children were taken to *Kanoon Parvarshi* in terms of day trips, and most were obliged to participate in their daily and sometimes weekly programmes such as camping style activities. While it is well-run and staffed directly by Education Ministry, it was really difficult to obtain information or work with their young adults without fully confirmed permission from the Tehran Education Ministry. I tried to participate in their organised storytelling and painting day programmes but I was referred to Mahabad's Head of Education, who needed to have confirmation from the head office in Urumia, which in turn needed approval from Tehran. Although I never made it inside their Kanoon, it was clear how protected schools were and how much the government puts importance on education which can be exclusively monitored by them.

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The young participants, ranging in age from 14-17, were asked to complete photographic reports on a social issue of their choice as part of their activity for the workshops. I provided brief introductions to the possible uses of visual methods for story telling, what can and cannot be said with photographs, and interviewing skills, as well as introducing ethical considerations and how to avoid provoking the authorities. Given that news media is so restricted as an actual platform of debate in Iran, there was a keen interest from the young people in the power of photographs to tell stories and shed light on current affairs in a way which spoke to their experiences. The multivocality of the photographs was also therefore important, since the messages could be interpreted differently and therefore also less subject to scrutiny from the authorities. I felt the participants were unfamiliar with working in small groups, so I intended after half way through each lesson to divide the students in to several small groups in order to work together. After a while they quite liked the format and found it very useful as they could work as a team, they told me that in school they either don't work as groups or in much larger groups, where there is not such opportunity to put in their ideas and opinions as much as they can in small groups like this.

Another interesting thing was that the participants were so much enjoying laughing, feeling free to speak their minds, and most of them and in particular the girls were

stating that they cannot laugh as much in schools and most of their teachers are very strict and uptight, there were always boundaries and barriers when it came to discussions with the opposite sex. Our classes, in contrast, were much more informal and the students could express their opinions to a much larger extent; as well I was joking and trying to make them laugh about some of the social taboos and issues I knew it would be fun for teenagers to discuss. Talking and remarking about the opposite sex was the most "hot" topic of the classes, a popular issue which we returned to again and again. The very interesting thing was that there were no remarks or discussions made when the Head of Kanoon would drop by for short visits to check on the classes; almost all the children were well aware of his presence at the class and would suddenly censor themselves, with all discussion becoming "appropriate". This was something which was never discussed or formally agreed between me and the students but they were all aware of their behaviours without me pointing it out.

The fact that the young people could use our workshops to test and transgress the boundaries of appropriate behaviour was helped by the fact that they trusted both Kanoon as an organisation and my presence within it. In Kurdish culture, there is typically a lot of deference towards educated elites, perhaps more so among those who have joined the diaspora in the west. My role as an 'anthropologist at home' posed certain complications but also opportunities in the conduct of my research. Therefore, although it may also have led to private suspicions, my role as a researcher afforded me almost automatic prestige in the eyes of parents at least. The ethical dilemmas this raised in terms of my responsibilities to the families I tried to deal with through open and clear communication with parents as well as the organisations I worked with. I was also careful to caution the children about the possible implications of their work, providing them with training on how to avoid problems or causing offence with the authorities. I made sure to clearly indicate that during my teaching of the classes I would be taking notes and gathering data on related questions, that this would be used for the purposes of my study, and what my aims were in undertaking the research. Parents and Kanoon staff were also invited to observe or participate as they wished.

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The Importance of Visual Techniques

As stated earlier in the methods section, this work was undertaken with the aim of carrying our participatory action research which would both identify and draw on existing skills in the community, as well as looking at the local perceptions of what constituted useful 'research'. Within Iran's media, there is little opportunity for independent voice to discuss pertinent social issues, and it is especially true that young people feel they have no voice or investment in state infrastructures. Young women are particularly voiceless, and marginalised or excluded altogether from public spaces. Therefore, photography, and particularly the participatory methods which I incorporated with photography, became a way for the young people this research deals with to reflect on public space in a new way which they may not have done before. It also was an alternate means of them expressing themselves which was less intimidating and more accessible than simply interviews, which they might not relate to. It gave girls especially a chance to participate in and narrate public space from which they feel excluded. The young adults were encouraged to develop their own themes from what they felt was relevant. The pioneering work of visual

anthropologist Jean Rouch (2003) was developed through a passion for the everyday life worlds of his subjects of study, which would capture the intricacies, complexities and imperfections of their experience. His advocacy of a strictly non-professional approach to film-making and visual technique, in which technical skills take a back seat to the realist colour and movement of the everyday helps us to understand the ethnographic value in seemingly amateur photographs produced by the young participants themselves.

Because I wanted to work directly with young people in this way, and to increase their sense of ownership over the process, it was important that the photographs taken in the course of conducting fieldwork were 'clear' in their intent and meaning. Although photographs can have many meanings for different audiences, making their ethnographic worth also multifaceted, and as Pink argues that 'the meanings of photographs are arbitrary and subjective' (2001:51), I wanted precisely to draw out those subjective interpretations as the young people allowed the photographs to 'speak' for their experience in the course of our interactions.

But beyond the interaction between myself and the young people, the exhibition which was then held at the Mahabad Town Hall gave the photographs a new life, as they came to be interpreted and given new meaning by the audience. These images, about themes relating to community and public space, now on display in public space, revealed understandings of local culture – those of the children – which had previously been obscured from the adult dominated public domain. This allowed the viewers to see their surroundings in new ways, and therefore opened up dialogue between different segments of the population. From the perspective of young people, the 'ethnographic meanings' of the photographs contribute to an understanding of youth culture in Mahabad, not only for me as the ethnographer, but for the wider community. Collier and Collier (1986) have referred to this approach as a specific fieldwork method, 'photo-essays': "When the photographic essay ahs been read by the native, it can become a meaningful and authentic part of the anthropologist's field notes" (1986:108). Such was the experience of helping to organise and observing the exhibition. For example, one attendee wrote in the Guest Book for the exhibition:

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> "This was very interesting. It showed me a different way of seeing the town; the streets we cross every day have a different meaning. It is interesting to see the different vision of Mahabad among the young people. For me, poverty is the thing that comes out most, how they view this theme"
> *(See appendix 16)*

Lydall and Strecker, (2006) talk about the ability of the visual in ethnographic work to create "an awareness and incorporation of gendered perspectives both in front and behind the camera" (2006:138). For the young girls involved in the projects, the chance to express their vision of things, and the injustices they experienced within the local culture and social traditions, was a unique experience which represented a brave act of resistance. That this was the case is proven by some of the apparently extreme views expressed by visitors to the exhibition:

> "This was a very interesting exhibition, although in my opinion the work dealing with gender differences was not appropriate. I believe that women should not be given a more public role in society because their place is to

maintain the home and it is for men to take work that earns the bread. I enjoyed the photographs which showed the importance of family and respect for your parents"
(See appendix 16)

Interesting, and perhaps as a commentary on the nature of gender relations in the public domain, the Guest Book for the exhibition became appropriated in an unexpected way. Young men began to use it as a means to communicate romantic and amorous messages to prospective partners in public without having to deviate from the accepted boundaries of gender relations see (appendix text 19). After the completing of the exhibition, I in fact learned that several couples had 'paired off' as a result of these largely prohibited exchanges. The buzz which this exhibition generated in the town resulted in large groups of young men turning up at the Town Hall to gain opportunities to flirt with the young women. In the context of this, others also used the opportunity to further critique the nature of male/female relations, either as represented in the photographs or in the behaviour of the young people during the exhibition itself. For example, two young girls wrote the following comments in the Guest Book:

"Seeing such work produced in Mahabad really shocked me, especially as it is presented mainly by women and it talks about the lives of us as girls, its really good. but I beg you please, please, please don't overdo or be extreme in your relations with boys, because that will lead you into inappropriate relationships with boys and sexual relationships for short-term pleasures, as you will later be judged for it"
(See appendix 16a)

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"I think there is no problem. The only problem that we have is that there is lack of freedom, and because there are so many restrictions on our lives people find ways to cheat. If we didn't have these restrictions, we wouldn't be discussing these issues. If you put a person in prison for doing something, and they really want to do it, they will find a way to do it even under the stones. In regards with relationships between boys and girls, I believe teenagers would need to be more vigilant, as they don't have the same experience as the grown ups to" (See appendix 16a)

The work that they produced through this method included twenty eight photojournalism projects, focussing on themes such as the management of and contestations over public space and expressions of gender and identity within this.

Ethnography: The Youth Photographic Projects
Below, I have chosen seven of the more detailed projects which I see as emblematic of the concerns in the lives of the young people in Mahabad who I worked with. They direct critiques at government, the family and the opposite sex, and in some cases find subtle ways to avoid the restrictions of censorship. In the final section, I will analyse their content in more detail and attempt to draw out the themes connecting their work and to see what conventions of 'current affairs' reporting and story telling have influenced this. For the sake of accessibility, I have divided the projects into three main themes; 1) those dealing with consumption, 2), those dealing with community

welfare and government services and 3) those dealing with gender. In fact, these themes have much in common and seem to move into one another, particularly with overarching issues of imposed sanctions on behaviour and youth freedom of expression from the family and/or the state.

1) Consumption

One girl decided on a piece of reportage that discussed the significance of gold in Kurdish culture and the economy, specifically wedding exchanges. Traditionally, being a woman in Iranian Kurdish culture is somehow considered as equivalent to how much gold you have. Traditionally in Mahabad and like towns, each family has a regular jewellery shop and regular relations with it – they would go regularly to swap the pieces for newer models. It is very important for women to wear gold at public events, especially weddings, showing the central role of this commodity in social life and the prestige of families. The newspapers publish the market price for gold daily, and at present there is much discussion in the media about how this, and more generally economic stability or inflation, might be affected by international events including proposed UN sanctions on Iran. Socially speaking, in the evenings when girls and women go out even to casually socialise with one another, they invariably stop in front of the gold shops for window shopping, and are aware of the prices of gold in their conversations and interactions. In images (Appendix:1) we see a mother and daughter shopping for gold, and the lavish window displays of consumer goods, with all their references to feminine ideals and romantic love, such as the heart-shaped display case. The young women looking reverently at the objects on display highlight the prestige value of gold items. One woman who was interviewed by the young girl conducting this project said that she liked to have gold to look stylish and prove she was in a good social position, especially at social gathering such as weddings, but she also indicated that for her gold is a form of security and financial independence.

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Figure 1: '*A beautiful bride's chain worth around £360* '

In the next photograph (Appendix:2) we see a girl in a red dress, her head absent from the image, and her hands placed prominently on her lap, revealing the many gold

rings and bracelets she wears. On the one hand the demure gesture and the hidden identity of the portrait gives a conventional view of feminine behaviour, but at the same time, the bright red of the dress is an obvious contrast to the more sober styles of dress in the public realm, a point to which other photographs from different youth also referred. One can conclude from this series of images that the place of gold, while supporting traditional family roles in the marriage ritual, also functions to give certain independence to women.

The theme of traditional relations and their limitations in style and consumables is repeated in the photographs of another girl, who decided to do her project by conducting a number of interviews with parents, teacher, and some young persons in regards to what people choose to wear and why. She also tries to find out about why, in her words, *hijab* is such a centrally important part of clothing for women. The questions implicit within her piece however are dealing with the erosion of traditional identity through the expression of fashion, versus the adoption of modern 'western' style dress. She has taken a number of photographs of people wearing Kurdish clothes, and follows by asking them why they have chosen to wear this rather then western style. The choice of photos is telling, in that it might have been difficult for her to find people who were wearing Kurdish dress, which is a cultural or political statement in itself. In photograph (Appendix: 3), a father sits with his son, who is wearing Kurdish clothes. The father is in western dress, a simple pair of jeans and shirt. She interviews the father, who tells her that he likes his son to 'wear Kurdish clothes in order for him to know that he is Kurdish'. The student notes that it is interesting to see that the father himself is wearing trousers and shirt, pointing out the subtle hypocrisy from the perspective of parent/child relations. Although she is critical of enforced tradition in this theme, her next photograph shows a more positive image of traditional culture and its impact on young people's lives.

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Figure 2: *'this is a photo of a wedding, everyone wearing Kurdish clothes and they made themselves beautiful, they are happy and dancing'*

In photo (Figure: 2) she is taken photograph of a family wedding, where she argues the point that everyone is wearing Kurdish costume and doing traditional Kurdish dance, and that there is mixing of men and women which is allowed in Kurdish culture in the context of such traditional practices. Young boys and girls hold each others' hands, and there are no restrictions such as *hijab* or even covering the hair of women, which in normal circumstance they must do. As with the photo of the girl showing off her gold jewellery, there is an underlying contrast between the state-imposed culture of conservative attire for women, and the Kurdish tradition of colour and gaiety as seen in the traditional dress and dance in this image.

In photo (Appendix: 4) we see teenage girl who is wearing long sleeves, jeans and *hijab*. The subject states that she like modern cloths and not so much Kurdish costumes, as her western cloths are much more comfortable. She also points out that in the case of going onto the streets she would need to wear *chador*, while she doesn't need to if wearing western clothes. She also thinks that having *hijab* is good for her because it will cover her hair and 'preserve her dignity' in public. The presentation of tradition versus modernity as expressed by fashion is therefore ambivalent, as is shown in the above example, the girl wearing *hibaj*, for example, sees this as appropriate to her public image, but prefers modern western dress to what is perhaps viewed as 'old fashioned' Kurdish folk costume. On the one hand, the practicalities of modern dress are highlighted, and this seems to be related to a perception of more liberal freedoms for women that this symbolises – such as the comfort of wearing jeans, and the freedom of not having to wear *chador*. At the same time, we see the portrayal of the same women as a rather 'wonton' image where they don't cover their hair. Although the Kurdish dress is seen as uncomfortable and unfashionable, it also holds associations for this young photographer of happy and nostalgic images of social mingling, and even some measure of liberality, as against the state imposition of Hijab in more public contexts.

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Interestingly, four of the young girls chose to do their work with a focus on Mahabad's local 'celebrities'. The two art centres in the city are professional home to a few well known young men. The centres run music and theatre classes and produce short music videos which are featured on popular Kurdish satellite TV stations and else where. As there are no satellite TV stations for Iranian Kurdistan (at the time this research was conducted) their work where mainly broadcast from Iraqi Kurdistan or channels based in Europe. Some of their clips are about the history of the Kurdish region of Iran, local poets and young singers releasing new music clips. As the town's young celebrities are know to locals and in particular the girls, four of the students decided to interview the artists, film makers and musicians of these arts centres, "Mokrayan" and "Sirvan". These are both important sites of cultural production in the Kurdish region, and their products, although produced locally and on quite a small scale, are widely distributed and consumed, and their artists take on the character of 'local heroes'. As the girls felt the Kanoon project gave them a formal and 'adult' status, I suspect they used this in order to have access to the local celebrities, which would make them the envy of their peers. They were also proud to boast their work and exposure to the celebrities through the Town Hall exhibition we later staged. The girls chose to run five days of interviews exclusively with males, asking them personal information about their life, work, habits and interests. It is noticeable in their photographs as to most the young men interviewed meet the criteria for smart, good looking, with fashionable hair styles and proud of their privileged positions in

Mahabad society. As the days passed, the girls grew very self-confident in dealing with these boys, and on one occasion invited their "subjects" to attend the Kanoon workshop as a way to 'show off', as well as at the time of the exhibition, when they were noticeably pleased to be in their company, guiding them through the hall as other girls watched. (*See appendix text/Kurdish 18)*

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Figure: 3 *Young girls (right) interview some local celebrities (left). The performers wear the latest Bollywood styles of dress and hair, and the room in decorated with posters of pop stars*

In photo (Figure: 3) you see the group of celebrities being interviewed. The fact that the girls have used the opportunity to show off about their work is evident by the fact that, rather than take the photograph themselves, they have asked someone else to take a picture which shows them opposite to their 'subjects' (the girls appear on the right hand of the photo, seated and adulating). The style of the hair and clothing of these celebrities is very similar to the Bollywood actors who are so popular among young adults in Iran. In the photograph, we see the walls are covered with posters of famous Iranian film stars and music groups, mainly Persian. It is uncommon to come across pictures of Kurdish stars, as there are not many well known figures due to the fact kurdish cinema is relatively new who are popular among the young Kurds. You do however see the images of popular Kurdish musicians in music shops throughout the town, but these are mainly older artists who reach the middle age group rather then young people. Cultural production, and the images of 'trendiness' or fashion that they influence, all come from the Persian dominated culture, including film and television stars, and musicians. Only the older people in the Kurdish region, who make an active point of choosing Kurdish over Persian artists, do not admire the mainstream Persian popular culture. Persian actors like Hadeia Tehrani are very popular among girls in Iran, and her picture appears in most shops along with girls' collections, alongside popular Indian male and female stars. The Hollywood film *Titanic* remains another popular motif in youth popular culture consumption and ideas about celebrity, with posters appearing in shops, homes, and even cars.

Photo (Appendix: 5) depicts two men from the 'Sirvan' Centre who are known to be some of the most successful Mahabad musicians, well respected among the girls in particular. Their manner in the photographs is self assured and confident, they gaze directly at the camera, holding their instruments as marks of their status. The girls have accompanied these portraits with 'vital statistics' style interviews, in which they are asked their names, ages, professions, and brief questions about their views on family, work, art, etc. These interviews, and in fact the entire piece seems to treat the concept of 'celebrity' in such a way that is heavily influenced by the teen magazines produced in Iran which are similar to western style girls magazines, but focussing on Persian popular culture. Their style of interviews is closely parallel to the type of 'five minute' interviews in entertainment magazines, and their photographs of the performers suggests something of the style of film and celebrity posters which adorn public billboards and their own rooms at home.

Photo (Appendix: 6), for example, shows a group of boys at a park in the centre of Mahabad where one of the interviews took place. The boys depicted are actors who play in the town's only theatre troupe. They normally perform for official events such as Iran Art Week, religious events such as *Eid* and the annual Week of Unity between Shi'ia and Sunni ordered by Imam Kuhmeini, *Haftai Wahdet*. The photograph, which is informal and less in style of portraiture than the previous photograph, shows the group of men casually arranged on the grass, gesturing and chatting to one another in a show of easy camaraderie which could emerge from the opening credits of a popular television sit-com. The boys, in their interviews, say they are pleased with their lives and they get lots of attention from other young people especially from girls. As one of the boys says, "there are so many that I can actually choose and pick my one". Again, as with the Town Hall exhibit discussed, the nature of the exercise in celebrity adulation is slightly subversive in nature, a bit of an excuse to be cheeky and flirtatious. But there is also a subtext of social commentary. Their social positions as local 'celebrities', and their status of ideal masculinity give them, in the eyes of their interviewers, the freedom of choice and opportunities. The caption below their photograph, written by the female interviewers, reads, "we wish we were boys just like them, that would have enabled us to enjoy our life as much as they do".

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2) Community Welfare and Public Services

In the next project, a young girl chose to focus on the plight of street beggars and discuss their place within the state. Mahabad, like other towns in Iran, has a growing and more visible problem of street beggars, due in large part to recent rural/urban migration. These ubiquitous characters on the street have their usual spots mainly at or around town centres, and particularly at the doorsteps of Mosques during the time of the prayers in order to beg for donations form the worshippers there. In response to this growing phenomenon, Iranian print media and television have turned their interest to street beggars in Iranian society. The widespread belief within these documentaries, and often supported by Iranian public, is that beggars are a nuisance not to be trusted, and are often in fact quite well off .There have been some cases where media reports suggested that beggars are in fact wealthy, their riches discovered after they died. The common perception is that you cannot trust street beggars as they are lazy, rich people who take advantage of their 'disabilities'. Several popular stand-up comedians have even incorporated this popular mythology into their routines in recent years. But there is also a large section of the community who sympathise with the situation of the beggars, and in particular with women and

old beggars. The Imam Khomeini Charity which was set up in order to help poor widows, and the elderly who do not have any income, provides clients with small amount of cash and food rations. This photographic project was no doubt inspired by such public debates which have emerged not only in the news media, but have become a part of popular culture and wider perceptions about public space and street maintenance.

The young participant who prepared this piece conducted a number of interviews with police, the Imam Khomeini Charity staff, social services staff and members of the public. However, instead of incorporating this work visually into her project, she chose to photograph the phenomenon as it is visible in Mahabad's streets. In photo (Figure: 4) you see a blind couple who work in a pair in Mahabad's busy high street. They are positioned next to a bank. Opposite them, on the left-hand side of the image, is a blue charity box from the Imam Khomeini Centre, where people are asked to donate by dropping coins. The young photojournalist argues the point that passersby do not trust the charity because they believe that donations will not be spent on poor people but instead goes to the government to be used for other purposes. She has asked police officers, in her interviews, why they do not deal with the 'problem' by removing people from the streets according to the law. She seems to be suggesting, with this ironic critique, that the state does not do enough to ensure the issue is dealt with, which results in very public displays of poverty that are unpleasant for middle class residents. At the same time, she describes how prospective donors don't trust the beggars; however despite this, as matter of choice, residents would prefer to give money to the beggars themselves rather than the government system, although they may trust neither.

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Figure 4: '*In this photo you see a blind couple begging. Opposite them, on the left-hand side of the image, is a blue charity box from the Imam Khomeini Centre. The photo caption reads 'If people are helping the street beggars why do we need the boxes?!?!'*

In photo (Appendix: 7) we see an elderly woman, she is looking directly at the camera, her dress is very worn and scruffy looking. Her direct gaze and the look of apathy in her face seems intended to draw sympathy from passers by. She has displayed in front of her on the pavement a small cloth where she rests the money she has received, several coins and notes. The caption written by the young participant reads: "look at this woman who begs on the street, because she is a woman she can not find work and also she is old. In order to live she is forced to beg on the street and put her hand out to any person, bad and good". What seems to be evident from this very direct and almost confrontational image is that she has a feeling of sympathy for this woman above the other beggars, who she sees as being placed in such a difficult and above all humiliating situation on the street. Culturally, for a woman to be publicly appearing so desolate and needy robs her of all humility. While the young photojournalist is critical and mistrustful of both the other beggars, the state and the charity, she offers explanation for the reasons why a "woman" because of her age and gender cannot find work, and suggests the moral that this is the outcome.

In photo (Appendix: 8) we see a long qeue at the Imam Khomeini Charity centre, which is regularly attended by a large number of mainly women and elderly, who must be registered with the organisation as unemployed or elderly, and therefore unable to work. The young girls says in her accompanying commentary that many of the beggars are among these registered charity users, who change their clothes and join the qeue to receive their rations. This photograph shows charity recipients as much more anonymous and orderly than the other portraits of the beggars on the streets, many of who become known by the public, she suggests, for the regular location where they occupy the pavements years after years. She says that the issue has not been dealt with by the government, and they have become a part of the local landscape in central Mahabad. The underlying message of these photos when taken together seems to be a critique of state in addressing the problem, which also reveals a 'deviant' and inherently untrustworthy segment of society. While in some respects the plight of the beggars is treated sympathetically, they are equally presented in the images as suspicious figures. The critique is also that sufficient interventions have not been taken by relevant authorities to manage the problem. This is shown as emblematic of the general malaise of poor development and resources in the region of Mahabad, far removed from the central power and privilege of Tehran.

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One of the few boys who maintained a presence in the class conducted his photographic project on the state of Mahabad's parks and local schools, in which he criticises the local authorities for failing in their duties to maintain public space. He also questions where the use of funds which should be available to repair and maintain the parks.

As perhaps with teenagers everywhere in the world, there seems to be a general sense of mistrust of the council and government officials on the part of the young people I worked with and that mentality is reflected in this particular project; in particular the boys believe most of the officials do not conduct the work they are supposed to and some also that public funds are frequently stolen by them. This theme emerged in my conversations with the young people; as one young boy told me "there is money there, it may not be much but the money there is they take it and use for something else or just keep it themselves". However the general idea of corruption is a widespread

across Iranian society and is a favourite topic to be talked about openly in the public as well as in homes. This topic of conversation is considered a ‘male’ domain for discussion in homes; typically, when guests are entertained in a home the young boys will be expected to serve tea to the male social party, and in this way they overhear from an early age the topics which are considered appropriate to occupy men in groups. Thus, for the young boy to focus his photographic work and critique on such themes may be a mark of his establishing himself in a male public world.

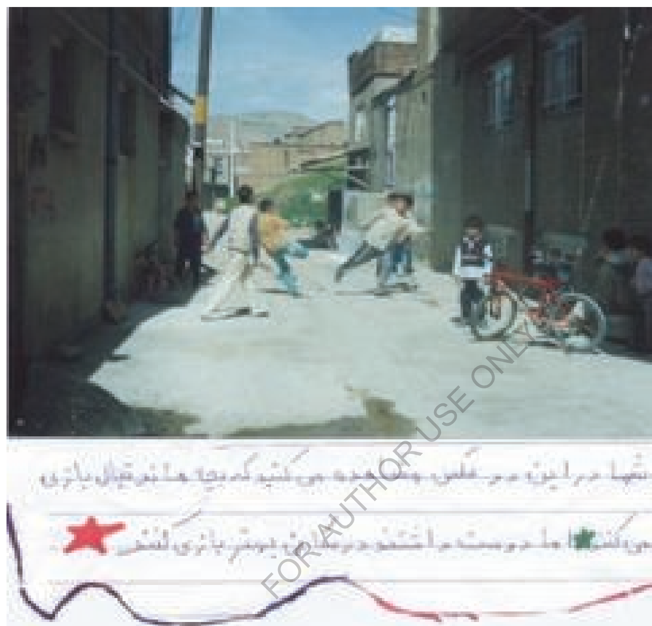

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Figure 5 : ‘*Here you see children playing football on the road, but they would like to have a better place to play’*.

His first photo (Figure: 5) deals with a group of children who are playing on a residential road. He argues that because there is no suitable playground for children in the town they have no choice apart from playing in roads, although this is very dangerous. He explains, for example, that in the previous month a boy age twelve was killed by a car when he was playing football outside his home. He continues by saying that in large towns and cities each area has their designated playground, citing the state television programme *Jonge Jewan*, a daily current affairs broadcast aimed at young adults. However, this programme depicts a rather middle class existence of Tehran’s northern suburbs, with green playing fields for the sporting segments, and the children of Mahabad, while they aspire to this lifestyle, find it inconsistent with their own realities. Playing football is an important part of youth culture in Mahabad, with football closely followed by Iranians to the extent that the national exam schedule was changed by four weeks due to the start of the World Cup at time I was doing my field research. Most young boys play football outside their doors and their

parents prefer them to stay as close to home as possible to reassure them of their safety; also they can be reached in case some last minute shopping needs to be done or bread from the bakery collected for the evening meal. The photograph itself depicts a group of boys, various ages, kicking a ball on the road. The scene is cramped and dusty, and the onlookers sit on bits of broken concrete. I guess that there is an underlying comparison between the conventions of youth lifestyle as depicted by programmes in Iranian state television, which show affluence, and the vision of decayed and perhaps rather underprivileged life and public space his own photographs show.

The same is true in the following photographs. In photo (Appendix: 9) he shows a local park in Mahabad and writes in angry tones: "where is all this money and funding the council gets to maintain the parks and playgrounds? Why the government pays no attention to the life of young people, can you call this a playground?". The photograph shows a derelict play park, the ground muddy, the play equipment destroyed and piles of debris around. The caption he has given the photograph says that the broken swings and other play equipment are very dangerous for children, and makes reference to an accident which occurred in a Mahabad amusement park when a large wheel (similar to the London Eye) collapsed, killing and injuring hundreds of children and their parents and which since 2003 has been closed. He asks why such an accident should happen and that the local council must pay much more attention to improving the status of parks and playgrounds.

Photo (Appendix: 10) was taken in the neighbouring town of Urumia, the regional capital, when he was on a day trip with his family. Here, he contrasts the image of the Mahabad play spaces with the clean, shiny and new equipment here. In the photograph, the grass is freshly planted, and the swings and other pieces are brightly coloured with a new coat of paint. The playground and the play equipment although simple and ordinary seems to be new and well maintained. The boy writes caption saying: "why shouldn't our town's park be like this, nice and well maintained?". The caption also says that the town authorities are "not up to their jobs, and the government spends more money on Urumia because it is the centre of west Azerbaijan province".

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Iranian state television constantly plays traditional and modern music of the sanctioned performers, which feature clips of nature and green lush waterfalls, as well as of urban Tehran street life, mostly families on days out in parks or children playing in amusement parks. This shows a very different image of life in Iran, and such representations of the country and public services in more privileged areas like the capital and large cities means that young people do not see their own realities depicted, but a version of reality which they feel expected to emulate and also feel excluded from.

3) Gender Differences

One of the girls has done her project on other young girls, focussing on the question of how girls view boys. In her introduction to her project she says "my aim to do this photojournalism project is to say girls and boys should not have relationships. If they really like it then it is 'ok' but if they don't want to give away the honour of themselves and their families, then they should not". I don't know why a boy or girl who was brought up in a family with comforts would have to do such things. Is it just

for fun? Or is it for pleasure? Why don't they do their homework and respect their parents? Aren't they scared of their parents? I know, they are not. Well at least they should be scared of God. All these things are a sin. I would like you to take my points into consideration. If you benefit form this, it is good, if not…"

Figure 6: *A girl is comforted by her friends after the 'tragedy' breaking up with her boyfriend*

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Although these views are clearly quite extreme, and one might think they represent a conservative and traditionalist perspective far removed from any form of modernism, the young photojournalist clearly has quite a flair for the dramatic in her work, which is deeply informed by modern popular cultural conventions of Iranian television. She has approached the issue by asking pointed question with very short and limited spaces for replies. There is a range of questions, some quite personal by conventional standards such as; do you have a boyfriend? Where and how did you meet? Does he love you and how much?" Then she goes into asking their opinions as to why they 'needed' to have a boyfriend and if they parents are aware of this. In almost all the cases she asks "why did you split up?" and "would you like to meet someone else and why?" The underlying message seems to be a morality tale of sorts. She finishes each interview with questions about their advice for other girls who do not have a boyfriend just yet.

The images go even further and are more direct in their cautionary tale – here is the fate that awaits you if you behave with 'dishonour'. The interesting thing about the photographs which make up this piece is how staged and dramatic they seem. They immediately reminded me of the depictions of female emotion in Iranian popular soap operas, in which women react to every tragic event with an exaggerated sense of drama and sadness. In such scenes on these television programmes, there is inevitably a close up on the actress's face, twisted with emotional turmoil. In (Appendix: 11) we see such a close up of a young woman, victim to the exploitations of a boy and now morally and emotionally bereft. While her face is covered, the camera focuses in on her hung head, with discarded tissues all around from her bouts of crying. In photo

(Figure: 6) we see another girl being comforted by her friends. It is interesting that she has chosen as the subjects for each photograph girls who dress in conservative, all black attire, though this too may be a sign of the staged nature of the pictures as much as anything. Whatever else they tell us about actual norms of gender relations in Iranian society, the images are striking in their depictions, perhaps a bit tongue-in-cheek, of 'appropriate' attitudes towards unsanctioned romantic relationships and the results of deviating from this. The lesson, and conclusion of each interview, highlighted by the photographs, is that going out with a boy will inevitably lead to sadness, embarrassment, and loneliness. The entire project plays heavily on theatrical notions of female vulnerability, both that which is produced in popular cultural forms like television, and also encouraged in real social interaction.

Another participant addressed her work to the question of why girls are treated so differently from boys in the context of family life. She has done a comprehensive photojournalist work, taking a large number of photos and a lot of written text and captions for each photograph, as well as very detailed interviews with parents, teachers, boys and girls.

In her introduction she says "If they (parents) see boys outside of girls' schools they simply say 'that's ok he is young', but it would a disaster if they see their girl looking at boys, she may even be forced out the school and kept at home. Well anyway, girls are always kept inside home to learn all the housework, while boys and men spend most of their time in open air and streets, and at the end the turn out to be *shab gard* (in Persian a kind of 'night prowler'). Girls however, because they are prisoners, they run away from home when something bad happens. Boys are entitled to most of the family fortune and husbands hold the rights of divorce. I think all women's rights are just written in terms of text and none appear in practice. There are less work opportunities for women and they are constantly told to watch there surroundings". She further adds to substantiate her point that when observing the Town Hall exhibition boys often came alone while girls were accompanied or in large groups.

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This entire piece seems to belie a kind of ambivalence about the place of 'moral' and independent women in society, and the real or imagined dangers that face those who take up their independence. For example, while she seems to be advocating for the free movement of girls, at the same time she indicates that even men and boys who spend their time in the 'open air and streets' will turn into shady characters, 'night prowlers'. Interestingly, she seems to have chosen images, which she uses in pairs to compare the roles of men and women, in which males are situated in decidedly 'western', or modernist kinds of scenarios, while the females appear in traditional contexts. But although this comparison is directed through the photographs, we are not actually sure on viewing them if she is aiming her critique more at the relegated position of women within Iranian society, or at the *too liberal* place afforded to men.

In photograph (Appendix: 12), for example, we see a young man on a motorcycle, with a style and composition that looks almost like it is emulating a film of pop idol poster. She argues that all boys interviewed were very comfortable with themselves, wearing what they want such as "bracelets, earrings and chains". The caption reads "look at this picture the young man on the motorbike even posed for my camera. He was very self-assured and confident to speak to me and express his points of view".

She also tries to show the ‘fear’ faced by women in public space, for example in photo (Figure: 7), taken possibly on a hot afternoon when most people are resting after lunch. The image is striking and has a certain poetry to it, with the empty street and the backs of the *chador* clad retreating women facing us down the grey and desolate road. Her caption reads “Young girls cannot appear in public at times like this, as it is not regarded as safe and they should be accompanied by another person. Boys however do not face such limitations”. In photo (Appendix: 13) she continues with this line, noting that girls did not allow her to show their faces in the photograph while she was interviewing them. Here we see a small huddle of the photographer herself asking two more girls questions, again their backs to the camera and wearing all black. She comments that “girls don’t allow you to take their photos because they feel they need permission from their families”.

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Figure 7: *Girls are discouraged from going out in public alone, especially on ‘dangerous’ empty streets*

Photo (Appendix: 14) on the other hand shows a group of young boys, small children, playing in the street. Their appearance is quite posed, and although one looks and smiles directly at the camera, the one on the right looks serious, his eyes downcast. The smallest of the children, in the middle, sports a ‘monster movie’ type mask, but we get no contextualisation about why this is. She has however chosen to focus on this unusual imagery, which also catches our eye, in her own telling of the picture; the caption reads: “Look at this little boy wearing an animal mask. If I wear this and go to the street, god knows what people would say behind my back”. Again, we are not entirely sure if she is outraged at the lack of freedom for women in a place which she seems to see as full of potential dangers – whether social or material – or at the audacity of even the smallest boys behaving ‘inappropriately’.

Further, although she has generalised the status of women in Mahabad, saying all girls are not allowed to go out by themselves or have their photos taken without permission, she and some of her friends in fact enjoyed these ‘privileges’; but she tries to bring our attention to the everyday difficulties that women encounter in

Mahabad. Despite the proclaimed focus on treatment of women within family life, which may have revealed more entrenched inequalities, none of her photographs even allude to this.

Finally, one young girl, whose sister was also in the class, focussed her project on *hijab,* and why it is considered necessary that women should wear it. She did a large number of interviews across a range from young and old woman, family, and even local clergymen at the mosque which asked about this issue. The interesting thing about her orientation, perhaps which influenced the work, was that her mother was Iraqi Kurdish, who fled to Iran with her family in 1980s then married an Iranian Kurdish man. The girl chose to interview her mother as part of the project, who responded by saying that she wasn't obliged to wear *hijab* in Iraq, as the government did not enforce it. She further said that she did not like wearing the headscarf but she has to do so in Iran because it is against Islamic law not to. She also said that if she had the choice she would not let her daughters wear *hijab*. The young photojournalist says in her introduction to the piece that she too didn't like *hibjab,* but has to wear it in school and in public, "but if I ever have the opportunity I will remove the scarf, such as at home or at and weddings". She also interviewed other girls who had similar points of views.

The most interesting thing about this piece was the way it was received by the Kanoon Head, and the subsequent response from the young girl herself. This unspoken dialogue that developed showed the difficulties in circumventing sanctioned and permissible behaviour and public statements. At the opening of the Town Hall exhibition, our entire project was watched closely by the Kanoon Head, who was agitated about some of its content and said we might get in 'trouble' for displaying at least three projects. He demanded that some photos and comments be removed, including her work. Eventually, with my intervention she took the project home and started anew, taking more photographs and changing some of captions and interview details, probably falsifying them. When she brought back the work its entire focus was very different. In photograph (Figure: 8), for example, she has photographed one of the same girls who was originally critical, saying she dose not like *hijab*. Here, she is shown wearing her *hijab* in a non-committal manner, falling back from her head and with hair exposed (as is common among women in particularly Kurdish parts of Iran). The photograph appears intentionally contrived, with an almost *Mona Lisa* smile on her face, the subject is quoted in the caption: "I like *hijab*, all girls and women must wear *hijab*. She also substituted one of her original works with an old photo from her album at home (Appendix: 15). This image shows a group of school girls celebrating a school traditional event called *Jashna Golha*, or 'flower party'. In the photograph the girls are all wearing full Islamic *hijab* and *chador,* decorated with wreaths of flowers on their heads. She obviously strove to find the most antithetical image to her intended statement, and has captioned photo as: "All my friends say not wearing *hijab* is *haram"*. She also replaced her mother's comments with a statement saying "We should wear *hijab* because its gives us honour" and showing her in her in a new photograph wearing a scarf and unlike her original photo, in which she sported makeup and no *hijab,* which was taken at a wedding party.

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Figure 8:
A girl wears her hijab noncommittally, along with a sardonic smile. 'I like hijab; all girls and women must wear hijab'.

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This girl's project, which changed in trajectory so much, is delightful in its ironic use of images and sarcasm as a means to subvert the hegemonic order which she aims to critique. Even given the limitations placed on her, she found a way to allow the photographs to speak for themselves, and to get her voice and her message out there. This is one reason why the dissertation project, and my work with the children at Kanoon, was so important. To this extent, the written report and the exhibition which preceded it, are secondary as outcomes to the process I undertook along with the children.

Analysis of the Images

It is clear from a studied analysis of the projects that the young people are influenced by a number of cultural forces, which sometimes enter their lives as contradictory processes. For example, stereotypical images of 'western culture', with its inclusive democracy and gender equality, are discussed and emulated, but with mixed sentiments. There seems to be a genuine ambivalence about the west, as a symbolic device against which these young people measure their own society, and as a source of emancipation and privilege versus immorality and loss of values. This is not a dilemma that has been exclusive to Iranian society, but it may be increasingly at issue with the perceived rise in drug use and alcoholism in contemporary Iran and Kurdistan. As Jones and Wallace (1992) have pointed out, there is a general sense of youth behaviour and socialisation as being understood in terms of 'risk' and 'pathology' in European countries as well in recent years

> revitalized under the 'new right', who have quoted rising numbers of births to teenagers, increased delinquency and violence, or teenage drinking and drug-taking, as indicators of a moral decline which has its roots in the breakdown of the traditional values, normally inculcated in traditional family life through

> parental authority. The 'logic' of this argument has led to policies designed to uphold 'traditional family values', to prevent family breakdown, and to maintain the authority and family obligations of parents (1992:45).

In light of this, practices that may be considered 'traditional', including the increased restrictions on youth or especially female freedom of movement outside the domestic sphere, can be seen not as any assertion of traditional family values but as a new and growing response to the perceived threat of modernity in youth culture. Even though in the Kurdish areas of Iran parental controls on youth and in particular on girls have always tended to be stronger and more direct, they are now on the rise for exactly this reason. During my time in Mahabad, when I had the opportunity to chat with some parents as they escorted their teenagers to my classes during the day, there was always much discussion about the spiralling problems of drug and alcohol abuse in kurdish society. This is seen as a new phenomenon, and many I spoke with believed that it was an active policy of the Iranian state to import cheap drugs to the Kurdish areas in order to control the feared uprising by the young population in the region.

Political conspiracy theories aside, with the exception of youth pregnancy, the issues facing teenagers as discussed by Jones and Wallace (1992) are now emerging in Iran as well, although they may in social discourses continue to be presented as problems of 'modern', 'western' immorality. Discussion programs on local news media are also devoted to this topic, contributing to a 'culture of fear' mentality which is bound to rub off on the young people themselves, particularly those whose self-perception is of mature and socially critical young adults. This is evident, for example in the work dealing with female freedoms in public space, (particularly Fig. 7), in which the young girl describes the lack of safety perceived in an empty street, and in her own depictions of young men who spend time hanging around in public spaces as turning into shady 'night prowler' figures. In the piece dealing with girls and their boyfriends, all of whom ended up being 'lied to' and 'exploited' by boys, (see Fig. 6, Appendix 11) it is the opposite sex itself that is perceived as posing the greatest threat, though again in the context of 'modern' gender relations outside marriage. As LeBlanc (2000) shows us, the relationship between domination of /exclusion from public space and gender entitlement becomes 'encoded' in ideas about fear and 'public safety' for women (2000:201).

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In relation to material consumption the tensions between 'modernist' and 'traditional' influences also emerge, as mediated by the awareness of a distinct Kurdish minority identity and cultural influence. This is evident in the projects dealing with clothing (traditional Kurdish as well as orthodox Muslim), and local celebrities in Mahabad. For example, girls in one of the projects (see Appendix 4) advocate for the use of *hijab* but in conjunction with western style dress, rejecting traditional Kurdish attire, even though it might give a rare opportunity to free oneself from the dress restrictions of Islamic attire. In photos (see Appendixes 12-14, Fig. 7), the work is again a critique of the restrictions of Islamic dress and appropriate female behaviour, but alongside this we see a sense of disapproval for the perhaps too liberal attitudes of boys and men as they display accessories of modernity (motorcycles and monster masks). With reference to Iranian society, Tohidi (1994) shows how presumed 'traditional' aspects of society, and particularly with opportunities for women's emancipation, have in fact been introduced and forwarded since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. She suggests that the resistance to forms of western interference make reference to 'Westoxication'

(*Garb Zadagi*), an excess of too-liberal or foreign values that leads to moral degradation. This was introduced as a part of political rhetoric by the Ayatollah. The fact that such ideas have only been furthered in recent years leads us to question straightforward oppositions between east/west, tradition/modernity, and helps us to understand the ambiguous attitudes of many of the young people when they presented their photographic projects and the themes they raise. This idea is countered in the vernacular concept of '*mahwarai* girls', a term which can have both complimentary and denigrating implications for the description of young women. The word *mahwara* means 'satellite', and *mahwarai* girls are those whose personal style seems inspired by the modern and global influences of satellite television. They are seen as chic and sophisticated, but also more open, and 'easier to get' among young boys. There was much use of this slag term in conversations between young people I overheard.

However, ideas about gender in Iranian society are inevitably influenced by ideas about the treatment of gender in a sometimes idealised 'west'. In the current situation this also happens to be juxtaposed with beliefs about the 'freedom loving peoples' of the US and UK in relations to international media discourses about the War on Terror. An example of this can be seen in the comments of a young boy who attended the exhibition:

> "In my point of view in Iranian society women = slave and in a society when there is no democracy you can't actually call this a country. I believe that you have to separate religion from the state and this will allow us to have equality between the genders"
> *(See appendix 16)*

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In his comments we can see the parallel drawn between 'democracy', which alludes to the west, and more specifically the US, and ideas that secular states enjoy gender emancipation. Such statements are certainly informed by news media to which young people are exposed in Iran, particularly in the case of young Kurdish people, who may receive Kurdish diasporic satellite media in the home, and whose parents are far less likely than the majority population to be critical of western or 'American' values in light of recent headway made by their fellow Kurds in Iraq.

The project on celebrities in Mahabad also shows the hybrid influences of various media forms. Although Persian popular music is the most common form consumed by young people, (Shay, 2000:69), even in the Kurdish regions, the celebration of Kurdish successes which are both local in nature and also consumed transnationally through satellite media shows the mixing of regional, national, and international cultural forms. In referring to the relationship between consumption and local culture "we are in effect speaking about a space that is crossed by a variety of different collective sensibilities each of which imposes a different set of expectations and cultural needs upon a space. In doing so, such sensibilities also construct the local in particular ways

> ….which begin by utilising the same basic knowledge about the local, its social and spatial organisation, but supplement such knowledge with their own collectively held values to create particular narratives of locality. From the point of view of the young, one of the key resources in the facilitation of such narratives is popular music and its attendant stylistic resources" (Bennett, 2000:66).

For the Kurdish youth I worked with, some of these ‘knowledge’ were about Kurdish identity combined with admiration and occasional resistance to western influence, with relations to Iranian state polity, and with more hybrid influences. For example, young people are more attracted by Persian popular music. It is only in the context of communal events such as family weddings that they would listen to Kurdish music. If you ask young people about whether they will attend a local wedding, one of their primary concerns is which of the local musicians (*teap* is Kurdish for band), will be performing. This is a big source of discussion prior to such community events. Events of communal Kurdish identity provide momentary forms of resistance to and freedom from the hegemony of Persian (Iranian) state ideologies, such as the public sanctions on wearing of *hijab* for women. Having said that, the state rarely needs to enter into enforcing conservative ‘Muslim’ values, since with few exceptions, the role of the family, particularly in relation to the idea of protecting family honour, ensures through social pressures that people ‘behave appropriately’.

There are other cross-cutting influences at work which reorient our perspectives from a straightforward comparison between ‘east’ and ‘west’, even if stereotypes of these are present at the visual level in the youths’ work. For example, particularly in the project dealing with Kurdish dress, and that dealing with the maintenance of parks, (see Appendixes 3, 9&10, Fig. 2), we can see an undercurrent of identity formation from the perspective of a minority population in a repressive Iranian state that subdues ethnic identity. The discussion about parks shows a burgeoning feeling of a peripheral ethnic population having been forgotten or discriminated against by central authorities, while the work on *hijab* (see Appendix 15, Fig. 8) and the reference to the Iraqi Kurdish mother who migrated to Iran, conversely indicates a sense of oppression of distinct ethnic ways by the central authority. Thus, the influences and pressures to conformity come not only from a dichotomised east/west divide, but equally from a pervasive sense of politically constructed ethnic minority status. Recent work on the social and political significance of the veil as an indigenous symbol of resistance to ‘western’ hegemonic influences overlooks the plurality of meanings the practice holds for various groups *within* Muslim societies. Although analyses such as el-Guindi’s *The Veil* (1999) rightly point out that the use of the veil within Islamic revivalist movements in recent decades is informed by “liberation from imposed, imported identities, consumerist behaviours, and an increasingly materialist culture” (1999:189), this can be true only for people who were empowered within the centre of such a movement. For young Kurdish women whose perception of their place in society is informed by political statements about Kurds as a minority in Iranian society, there might be a subtle hypocrisy in women ‘at the centre’ critiquing western materialism when they themselves are beneficiaries of this privilege. Kurdish women, on the other hand, are peripheral and do not enjoy the same material privilege as their Persian Muslim ‘sisters’. In any case, the use of *hijab* is largely enforced, and not voluntary in Iranian society, and amongst Kurds the form of resistance to this is to wear the veil in the loosest possible way, with little respect for convention of dress, or to divest it altogether in unwatched communal settings of Kurdish cultural expression, such as the wedding (see Fig. 2).

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Conclusions

While situated within these cross-cutting perspectives, Kurdish youth employ various kinds of images in different contexts, a practice they may share with young people around the globe (see Baumann, 1996). One of the examples is the very fixed use of male/female gender stereotypes, which are no doubt mediated by ideas about western gender assumptions as much as by constructions of gender in a Kurdish, Iranian, or Islamic context. Nader's (1999) discussion about the relationship between various stereotypes shows their impact on women's roles. She argues that Said's traditional view of Orientalism should be rethought, "to include the notion that the West also exists 'for' the Islamic world and serves as an important contrastive comparison which restricts and controls women's resistance…and explains gender construction as a result of interactions between two large world regions—the European West and the Arab East" (1989:325).

This is also an important point because it shows how the opposed view of east/west 'Arab' and 'European' ignores the many cultural and minority influences in peoples daily lives. However, the theme of gender is a pervasive one running through virtually all the young people's projects. The moral centre of the piece on street beggars, while again primarily addressing government mismanagement, also shows a tendency to draw lines between appropriate male and female roles in public and private space. Of course this is not a view that is exclusive to Muslim or Iranian society; as Passaro notes of welfare provision in US society "the celebration of the nuclear family and the ideologies surrounding gender converge to make homeless men an object of scorn rather than empathy" (1997:159), which is certainly the case here, given the tendency to view beggars as dishonest and even rich. The woman beggar, on the other hand, is explained in terms of the role she must occupy in Iranian society, and the challenges she would face being a woman. Is the critique one of social mores on gender behaviour or of government provisions for an impoverished region?

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The relationships of young people to authorities – family, community or the state – are not fixed, and this might be one of the reasons they express a kind of ambivalence towards their place in society and the 'proper' opinions they can and should express as part of these roles. Mead has argued in her classic work of youth ethnography, *Coming of Age in Samoa,* (1964) the transition from childhood to adult status need not be marked by angst and histrionic emotion. In fact, the she believes that this is constructed by cultural norms which in western society are unclear about the social roles and responsibilities that come with adulthood. From an early age, Kurdish youth are very active participants in duties in the home, which is in keeping with Mead's point about clearly defined responsibilities and exposure to these in youth. Young people are appointed specific duties in looking after the household or shopping, usually divided according to gender. For instance, girls learn how to prepare the food and set the lunch and dinner table, clean the house, etc, while boys have more outside duties such as buying and queuing for bread from the local bakery, as well as shopping for meat and other foodstuff. It seems the different roles of males and females have been fixed and practiced. Young boys also tend to have more responsibilities – but also more freedoms – which bring them outside the home, therefore connecting them early on with the space of the street and outside the home. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that the theme of public space and its domination by men runs through much of the work of the young women in particular. As LeBlanc has shown, "semi public and private recreational areas such as clubs and

bars enforced regulations designed specifically to exclude women. Although these overt forms of gender discrimination have been largely overturned, public space retains a masculine imprint. Today, public areas such as streets and parks remain male territory. Most of these areas are 'governed' by males, as males make more frequent and freer use of public areas" (2000:207).

However, in societies which are neither completely pre-industrial as the Samoa she described, and also shaped largely by Islamic values, we see a similar attitude towards adolescence as a time of turmoil, stress and potential calamity. Mead's point about the open attitude towards adult sexual and romantic relationships, and the freedom to experiment in early adolescence among Samoans, makes an interesting counterpoint to the experiences of young people in Iranian Kurdistan, where the divisions between the sexes and prohibitions of relations perceived as sexually dangerous are strictly enforced. From this perspective, attitudes about the dangers in premarital male/female interactions are perhaps unsurprising. The 'ideals' of female behaviour as equally theatrical, dramatic and also shy and reserved, (see Fig. 3, 6 & Appendixes 11, 13), are perhaps a result of this, and can be compared to the feelings of anxiety associated with 'western' adolescence and its everyday performance. There may also be an interesting point to observe about the ongoing infantilisation of female roles in adulthood, as would be epitomised by the coy antics of Persian actress Hadeia Tehrani and the soap stars mentioned earlier.

In contrast, boys are socialised in a uniform process through their two year military service, through which the state directly intervenes in this status transition from youth to adulthood (Sinclair-Webb, 1992; Kaplan, 1992). After this, if they have not chosen a profession or higher education, they are typically absorbed into the family business, or open a small shop with family help, as is often the case in the Kurdish region. Modernisation has tended to have a destabilising effect more on the questioning of female roles. Traditionally they would only transition to adulthood through marriage, though now many are leaving home in their late teens or early twenties to pursue education as a means to gain some degree of economic independence. Although the problem with unemployment remains high in Kurdistan generally, there are much fewer, and have been decreasingly, opportunities for women to find work in the public domain or private sector, which is mainly considered the territory of men (Tohidi, 1994).

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However, in all cases we can argue that the role of the state in socialising young people into adulthood, as is widely assumed (Jones and Wallace, 1992; Kaplan, 2000; Sinclair-Webb, 2000) is mediated in Mahabad by the experience of young people, and the indoctrination they receive from the politically charged influence of their parents, as ethnic minorities needing to resist state intervention. The adults who attended the Town Hall exhibition were able to see new visions of local culture through the photographs of the young people, but they also used this as an opportunity to interpret their own messages through the images. While for young people it was a chance to socialise and have fun in a transgressive way, one middle aged gentleman who attended the exhibition left the following comment in the Guest Book:

> "This is excellent work, and I am surprised, how did you do it publicly? This shows only a small part of Kurdish life and we have been discriminated against not only by the state, but within our own people, with respect to

> women's rights. Also, when you see the pictures of rubbish in the streets and the way the schools are not maintained you can see the state doesn't care about the people or the region, and also that we do not care about each other. The Kurds have not been given roles in public administration. The work shows how our young people are going to waste, and end up addicted to drugs"
> *(See appendix 17)*

One could also say that the 'smooth transition' described by Mead is not tenable in a quickly globalising world, where young adults regardless of their geographical location try to catch up with all the advances taking place around them through modern tools of technology. In Mahabad, young people are influenced by a local version of Kurdish, and Mahabadi identity, but they are also exposed to transnational influences of Persian and Kurdish diaspora media, Indian Bollywood and American Hollywood film, and Iranian versions of Islamic identity and resistance to foreign (i.e. American) domination. This has a great impact on the things they wear, the way they listen to music, and communicate with each other, even if from a distance. Media of course also plays a part in this, as "Iran under the Islamic Republic remains torn between two apparently conflicting cultural pulls, toward the indigenous and the religious or towards global popular culture stemming mainly from the West" (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1994:187). In fact, the media influences in a globalising world, and the conflicts they can stimulate, are far more than simply indigenous versus western media inventions. Kanoon is seen as a permissible and sanctioned space by parents and local authorities.

Young people in a marginal region of Iran are nonetheless caught up in and fascinated by larger issues of regional and global politics, as is seen in the pieces dealing with gold (a commodity whose price is affected, so the suggestion is, by both traditional gendered institutions and by events facing Iran in the global arena), and with public sector mismanagement for the poor and green spaces, as well as with the more pervasive undercurrent about paranoia and fears of neglected and 'dangerous' public space. The theme of fear for the safety of children which shapes parents' thinking, and in turn influences how young people perceive their social and physical environments, is developed in the context of state level discourses about 'suspect' elements (beggars, political dissidents, predatory men) and potential risks. I believe that this in turn, and the ideas about conspiracy and degenerate 'modern' or 'external' influences, can be directly linked to the immediate atmosphere and talk of conflict with the west, and especially expected sanctions or potential invasions of Iran by the US since the rise to power of President Ahmedinejad. Although this may be viewed with ambivalence by Kurds in Iran, in light of the recent advances made by Iraqi Kurds as American allies, there are other times in which they feel a defensive sense of solidarity with Iran.

Finally, even in cases where reference to 'appropriate' behaviour and codes of Islamic or traditional Kurdish conduct is made by the children themselves, daily forms of resistance to this exist. The visual images themselves show ideals of proper behaviour, but also various deviations from this, what we might call the 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1990) of a group whose interests and voice are subordinated both within family and gender structures, social mores in public, and state sanctions. Therefore official versions of 'appropriate', 'traditional' or 'modern' may actually be contradicted in practice and behaviour. The open laughter and flirtatious interaction between boys and girls in the transgressive space of the classroom during my time of

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fieldwork were direct evidence of this. While the text which accompanied the photographs sometimes referred to such themes as 'dignity', 'honour', the photographs themselves might have different readings, both for their producers and within the public domain. Again, we are reminded of the multivocal power of images. As Pink says, "the same photograph may be put to a range of different personal and 'ethnographic' uses; it may even be invested with seemingly contradictory meanings" (2001:151). Of course the young people in Mahabad are influenced by the news circulated by the authorities and the books they read in school, and in the context of a project in which they were given a voice in the public domain, they were perhaps bound to replicate the voices of power; at the same time, they resist these designations in subtle and sometimes unexpected ways.

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Appendix 1:

Quotes of the fluctuating prices for gold in the daily national newspaper, collected by one photographer

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Appendix 2:

The demure gesture and the hidden identity of the portrait gives a conventional view of feminine behaviour

Appendix 3:

'A man with his son. The son is wearing Kurdish clothes in order to understand he is Kurdish'

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Appendix 4:

A girl in western style clothes; she finds it easier to wear than chador or Kurdish dress

Appendix 5 :
The 'five minute interview' technique, as appropriated from teen magazines, and applied to interviews with local celebrities.

نام : چیا
نام خانوادگی : رمضانپور
سن : ۲۴ سال
تحصیلات : دانشجو
رشته تحصیلی : [illegible]
رشته هنری : موسیقی و خوشنویسی
مدت فعالیت : ۷ سال
موفقیت : [illegible]
[illegible]
جوانی : [illegible]
زشت : دروغها
زیبا : انسانیت - (خوبیها)
آئینه : انعکاس خوبیها و بدیها
هنر : [illegible]
بزرگترین آرزو : رسیدن به قله
الگو : اساتید فن
کلام زیبا : سلام
مادر : [illegible]

زندگی : [illegible]
ورزش : قدرت و نشاط
رنگ دوست داشتنی : آبی - سیاه
عشق : علاقه شدید قلبی [illegible]

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Appendix 6:

The introduction to another project on local celebrities; 'I have done this project about your lives and work. I would like to thank you for your assistance'

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...ناحیه های خود را

با چند هنرمند این عرصه از گروه نمایش سیروان مهاباد که در برنامه ها و

جشنواره های مختلف شرکت داشت اثر ارائه خواهم داد، در ادامه با چندین

از هنرمندان ها نیز هم صحبت شوم .

• شهرام ایرانپرست

• سید سامان پاک

• فریار ذهابی

• خضر رشتی احمدی

• سرگل کیانفر

• هه‌ژار ساروای

و

مادر مهربانم

با تشکر از گروه نمایش سیروان مهاباد و همه آنهایی که ما را دوست داشتند .

Appendix7:

'*Look at this woman who begs on the street, because she is a woman she can not find work and also she is old. In order to live she is forced to beg on the street and put her hand out to any person, bad and good'*

نی که در عکس مشاهده می شود با این سن و سال به متکدی گری پرداخته است و

ین نکته روشن است که یک زن آن هم در این سن و سال قادر به اختیار شغل برای کسب

ر آمد و در نتیجه تهیه ی مایحتاج زندگی نیست ، اما با این وجود این فرد برای تامین

نیاز های مادی خود باید دست به سوی هر کس و ناکس دراز کند ؟

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Appendix 8:
At Imam Khomeini Charity centre charity, recipients queue for services

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Appendix 9:
'where is all this money and funding the council gets to maintain the parks and playgrounds? Why the government pays no attention to the life of young people, can you call this a playground?'

Appendix 10:
'*I wish all the play areas had things like this'*

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Appendix 11:
A close up of a young girl;' victim' to the exploitations of a boy and now morally and emotionally bereft.

Appendix 12:
A symbol of modernist masculinity: 'Look, boys even pose for you. They are comfortable if you take their photograph'.

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Appendix 13:
'Girls need permission from their families for a photo, all this for no reason'.

Appendix 14:
'*If I wear this mask on the street people will talk behind my back. God knows what they will say about me'*

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Appendix: 15
'*All my friends are saying: not wearing hijab is Haram!!!'*.

Appendix 16*:*

Contrasting views of women's roles in Iranian society, in the Guest Book for the exhibition.

به نام خدا

با عرض سلام

در این نمایشگاه عکس های خیلی زیبایی وجود داشت ولی ترتیب آن ها خوب نبود

و اکثر کارها هم از یک سو تکراری شده بوده . .

با تشکر

[illegible]

اول از این نمایشگاه واقعاً جالب بود به خصوص تابلوهای نقاشی شده

بعد از همه جالب تر برای من عکسهای آقای احدی بود که در میان آن تفاوت بین

دختران و پسران بود که در حد جالبی بود ولی نظر و عقیده شخصی من این

است که اولاً نباید دختران هیچ گونه آزادی بیان و نظری داشته باشد

چون در میان [illegible] این است که مرد برای کار و تلاش و زن مخصوص خانه

و خدمت به همسر و فرزندانش است . موضوع جالب دیگری این عکسها

نزدیک به یکدیگر و [illegible] طبق تغییر نسل می باشد .

[illegible] یزدانی

۹۵،۲،۲۲

من بسیار به نظرم در جامعه ایرانی امروزه زن = کنیز، کلفت، و رعیت . در جامعه ای

دمکراسی وجود نداشته باشد نمی توان آن را به نام کشور حساب کرد به نظرم باید

اسلام را از دمکراسی جدا کرد تا بتوان همه افراد چه مذکر و چه مونث را با یک دید و یک

نگاه مقایسه کرد

من یک مشتری معمولی هستم من یک پسر هستم من که در منطقه های فقیر نشین زندگی

می کنم ما نسبت به [illegible] قرار داریم آن هم به دلیل سیاست های

نادرست و غلط ایران . حکومت حاکم است و هم اکنون در تحریم اقتصادی به سر می بریم

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Appendix 16a

A young girl responds emotionally when she sees her experience reflected in the exhibition images: 'This exhibition made me cry, I could relate to what has happened it my own life. The injustices and inequality…'

Another woman expresses fundamentalist values: 'I urge you to be cautious in your dealings with boys. There are wolves in our society waiting to prey on innocent people like you'.

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Appendix 17:

Complimentary comments in Kurdish and Persian for the Mahabad Town Hall exhibition. The Kurdish comments are patriotic and nationalist in nature: 'Freedom for Kurdistan'

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Appendix 18:

A comment in the Guest Book written in Kurdish: '*I was unhappy to see that some of the written Kurdish was full of mistakes, and this is an insult to Kurdish the language. Also, your views on women are one- sided'*.

Appendix 19:
1st comment: '*Many thanks for presenting our work to the public'; thanks from the arts centre staff;*

2nd comment*: Emblems of teenage life: flirtatious exchanges written in the Guest Book, ('Beautiful work, beautiful girls. Here is my yahoo ID chat username, contact me') alongside football slogans.*

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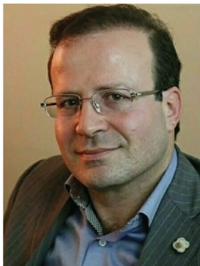
Conformity and Resistance in Mahabad

The initial aim of this research was to examine the factors which shape a sense of belonging and place among young people in Mahabad, a town in Iranian Kurdistan. This research is to look at the consumption of local, national, and transnational forms of media, and how this influenced the view of events, their local environment, and the ways they chose to narrate these. Reflexive visual methods was used, asking the youth to take their own photographic pieces dealing with themes they saw as relevant to local current events and their place within these processes.
The work produced by the young people shows the multiple and sometimes competing forces at work in the lives of youth in Iran, where idealised images about 'the west' can serve to challenge or reinforce their own sense of place. Conventions of media and popular culture 'story telling' – that is the discourses used to describe current affairs and social conditions.



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