

## **Sulaimaniyah Beauticians in Demand**

**Author:** [Sanger Jamal](#)

With no Islamic militants to threaten them, beauty salons in the Kurdish north are attracting droves of customers.

Fahima Sleman left her job as a beauty salon manager in Baghdad eight months ago, after six similar shops in the same al-Adil neighbourhood were bombed out by insurgents.

The 37-year-old hairdresser relocated to the Kurdish city of Sulaimaniyah, known as the safest in Iraq, where she found work at a hairdresser's shop.

Although her family is moving to Syria to escape the sectarian violence now commonplace in other parts of Iraq, Sleman is planning to stay in Sulaimaniyah, where she reckons she can survive on her wage of 350 US dollars a month.

Security and economic growth have created a boom in the beauty business in Sulaimaniyah, in contrast to the rest of the country where Islamic extremists see such shops as dens of iniquity to be attacked. There are now close to 450 salons operating, which industry observers say represents a big increase on 2003, although there are no comparative figures.

The industry has also been fuelled by the increased earning power of women, who hold many of the civil service jobs in a public sector that is the largest employer in Iraqi Kurdistan.

While the salaries are miniscule, women are willing to shell out cash to have their hair, make-up and nails done.

Lanja Ibrahim, a 25-year-old civil servant, makes only 164,000 dinar (about 110 dollars) a month but goes to the salon twice monthly to have her hair cut, dyed or styled. She hates the fact that she has to wait, even when she has made an appointment.

"Visiting the salon feels like going to a medical clinic," she said. "I have to wait at least an hour every time."

Ibrahim also doesn't like the price. She pays about 13,500 dinar (nine dollars) to have her hair cut and dyed black – but she said that she and other women are more willing to invest in "taking care of ourselves, as well as following the latest fashions".

Women are in fact more likely to complain about prices than they are to express concerns about salons being attacked in Sulaimaniyah, even though hairdressers here have faced threats in the past.

In 1993, Nashmeel Mohammad received an anonymous threatening letter against the hairdressing business she ran in her home. Then her house was hit by a hand-grenade. Mohammad, who has worked in the business for over two decades, accused Islamists of being behind the attack and refused to quit her work.

Osman said that since 2000, there have been three cases of attacks against salons. In the 1990s, she said, the rate of attacks was much higher. Radical Islamists tried to gain control of Sulaimaniyah and surrounding areas then but have little presence now.

One of the most modern hair and beauty salons is Style Centre, which is run by beauticians and hairdressers from the rest of the country. Dhiya' Abdul-Sattar, a manager at the centre, said it has about 50 customers a day and charges upwards of 125,000 dinar (about 85 dollars) for brides getting their hair and make-up done.

The centre is also one of many salons that have men doing hair and make-up. This was a taboo just a few years ago in Sulaimaniyah and is rarely seen in many parts of the country, according to Osman.

Abdul-Sattar employs four men and one woman in his salon and said it hasn't caused any problems.

"It's normal to have men do our customers' make-up," he said. "Many [female customers] even demand that the male employees do their make-up and cut their hair."

Sanger Jamal is an IWPR trainee journalist in Sulaimaniyah.

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