Crossing the Boundaries of Nationalism,
The Struggle for a Kurdish Women's Studies

by Shahrzad Mojab

Historical context

It is no accident of history that the struggle for the emancipation of women and women's studies both originated in the West. Capitalism and its bourgeois democratic political system provided favourable conditions for women's organizing and their intellectual and political advances. Although women were brutally oppressed in agrarian, pre-capitalist societies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, they were not in a position to challenge, politically and intellectually, the rigid sexual division of society. Mass illiteracy, dispersal in small rural and tribal communities, and despotic political systems were all inhospitable to the rise of feminist consciousness. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the feminist wind from the West, in its liberal and suffragist forms, reached the largely colonized non-western world. Inspired by their sisters in Europe, women of the upper and emerging middle classes demanded the right to education, ownership of property, equality, and suffrage. The communist movements, too, regularly put women's rights on their political agenda, and tried to spread the message among working-class women and men. We may claim, therefore, that, by the late nineteenth century, feminism had emerged as a global political and intellectual movement.

The socialist congress of 1910 which declared March 8 as "international women's day" took the first radical step toward a more conscious globalization of the struggle. Today, women have been able to put their demands on the agenda of governments, international bodies such as the European Union and the United Nations, and non-governmental organizations. In spite of these gains, many declarations and decisions made by international bodies remain on the paper. There is need for more grassroots involvement and solidarity among numerous women's movements and organizations. Feminist movements in the South will gain substantially from modest cooperation with the more experienced movements in the North while the latter will enrich their practice and knowledge. Kurdish women provide a typical case of a feminist movement in need of solidarity. Equally important is the unique Kurdish experience which will, in turn, enrich the world feminist movement.

Kurdish women in the nationalist agenda

Enumerated between 25 to 30 million, the Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic people of the Middle East, outnumbered by Arabs, Turks, and Persians. Their homeland, Kurdistan, was forcibly divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the former USSR in 1918. They have been involved in an armed resistance movement for autonomy in Iraq (since 1961), Iran (since 1979), and Turkey (since 1984). Although they are often branded as a tribal or nomadic people, Kurdish social organization has been complex, comprising rural, tribal, and urban ways of life. Today, half of the Kurdish population is urban, a few cities have a population of over a million. The governments which rule over Kurdistan pursue a policy of assimilation of the Kurds into the dominant language and culture. This is especially the case in Turkey, where until recently it was illegal to speak in Kurdish. These centralist states do not allow the Kurds to form their own cultural, political, or educational institutions. An important development since the 1960s is the migration of a substantial number, estimated at about half a million, to Europe, espe-

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A gulf of two centuries separates the first declaration of women's rights (by Olympe de Gouges in 1791) and the rise of women's studies programs in the academic centres of the West. This gap between women's political activism and feminist scholarship highlights the uneven course of the struggle for democratization of gender relations. In spite of remarkable gains resistance to the feminist project is all around. This is especially true in the non-western world where a contradictory mix of pre-capitalist relations, nationalist movements, religion, and continuing western domination combine to constrain the unfolding of feminist practice and theory.

This article examines the state of feminist practice and scholarship of the Kurds, who are known as the largest stateless nation of the world. The Kurds are engaged in a bitter struggle for self-determination in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Their nationalist movement has overshadowed the nascent feminist undertaking among educated women and political activists. Examining the dynamics of domination and resistance in the Kurdish case demonstrates the largely spontaneous and non-organized nature of the internationalization of feminist practice and scholarship, as well as the need for forging global solidarity through networking and other means, and for bridging the growing gap between academic studies and feminist practice.

The Struggle for a Kurdish Women's Studies

Cet article examine les démarches pour établir un réseau européen et nord-américain d'études féminines kurdes.
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Kurdish women are generally ignored in the literature dealing with the women of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. One can rarely find in this growing literature reference to the women of Kurdistan. The literature about Kurdish women, produced by the Kurds and others, is quite limited in both quantity and quality.

The institutions of higher education in Europe and North America offer numerous Arabic, Persian, and Turkish studies programs. Kurdish studies programs are, however, virtually non-existent. Until the early 1990s, there was not a single Kurdish studies journal in any western language, and the few journals that appeared in recent years are not produced by major publishers. This is to a large extent related to the status of the Kurds as a stateless nation; the governments of Turkey and Iran have in the past extended their repression of the Kurds to western academic centres. They often make financial contributions, directly or indirectly, to Middle Eastern studies programs, provide books and journals to the libraries, and invite academic and university administrators to visit these countries. In the four countries which rule over Kurdistan, researchers, especially non-citizens, need research permits issued by the government. One important means of suppressing Kurdish studies is the policy of denying research permits to students interested in studying the Kurds. Another problem is the limited scope of teaching about the Kurds. Academics who are interested in doing research on the Kurds may not be able to find any teaching on the subject.

The dominant orientalist framework in Kurdish studies has also limited the scope of research on women. Most of the literature produced by westerners since the nineteenth century was written by members of embassies and consulates stationed in or near Kurdistan, missionaries, travelers, and philologists working on written texts. They were generally not interested in gender relations. However, the decolonization and democratization of Kurdish studies has been in the making in recent decades. Politically conscious social scientists have begun to study the Kurds (Hasanpour). Moreover, the formation of a Kurdish diaspora in the West has allowed more contact between the Kurds and the academic community in the West. The number of Kurds who study in various degree programs is rapidly increasing. However, graduate theses produced by these students rarely deal with gender relations. Doctoral research is primarily focused on linguistics, politics, history, and society.

In the western diaspora, Kurdish women become familiar with the struggle and achievements of women. In spite of language problems and the absence of an organized feminist movement to recruit immigrant women, some of them are attracted to and influenced by feminist ideas. At the same time, however, traditional Kurdish male domination continues in the new countries of residence and this leads to numerous conflicts. This conflict is especially visible in the adversarial parent-daughter relations, high incidence of divorce, and the tendency among some immigrant and refugees to select their wives by "mail" or "video." Gender related controversies are often reported in the immigrant media and the exilic literature.

While feminist organizations in the West may fail to reach the new immigrant communities, Kurdish political parties and immigrant cultural organizations also show interest in recruiting women. However, women's organizations affiliated with Kurdish political parties aim at recruiting women to the nationalist cause. A survey of the women's journals published by party-affiliated groups clearly shows the primacy of the nationalist agenda.

In spite of these limitations, a considerable number of individuals have conducted research on Kurdish women in recent years. They are scattered in different countries and have very diverse disciplinary interests. In the absence of adequate reference sources, it is difficult to locate these individuals or their published work. I became interested in studying Kurdish women after joining their movement in the early 1980s. In 1982, while working on a Persian language bibliography of women in Iran, I noticed the absence of research on gender relations among the national minorities which comprise half of the population of the country. Also noticeable was the dearth of feminist research, literature, movies, documentaries, and reference works.
This intellectual poverty was in sharp contrast with the demand or, rather, hunger for resources on women and feminism. Even in the West where more research is conducted there is considerable demand for research on the Kurds. It seemed that there was an unbridgeable gap between the unfolding of the women's movement and the rich body of feminist thought and consciousness.

The need for a network

Under the circumstances, the need for introducing a gender perspective into Kurdish studies has been felt in recent years. In the first conference on Kurdish urban life convened in Paris in September 1996, a number of women had been invited to present papers, and thereby add a gender dimension to the event. None of the women participants claimed to be specialists in urban studies although each had an interest in either women's life in Kurdistan and/or feminism. During the conference, we discussed the possibility of forming a network of those interested in studying Kurdish women. Another proposed project was the editing of a collection of papers by those who have conducted research on the topic.

In spite of the progress in communication technologies, building a network needs at least one coordinator with enough time and resources to maintain contact between members of the group, and engage in some planning. Email connection is not yet widely available even in the technologically advanced European academic institutions. An indispensable means for the progress of the project would be a well-funded conference to be convened in Europe with the participation of people from the Middle East, Europe, and North America. As the coordinator the network, I have been able to maintain contact between the members of the initial group and to spread the message steadily. Within the short period of a few months, a number of researchers have joined us. Meanwhile the book project is in the making. I have proposed the compilation of a multilingual bibliography, which has received support. Each researcher will focus on the bibliographic sources in one language or country. The Internet, too, provides other opportunities such as the creation of a Web site and chat group.

At present, no country has the human resources (i.e. enough interested and feminist researchers) or offers financial means for building a Kurdish women's study centre. We can, however, form a vigorous network by turning our dispersal throughout the world into strength. Differences of language and disparities in technical services should not be seen as obstacles. Most people engaged in academic work have enough fluency in English, which works as our international medium of communication. The diversity of languages is in fact an asset. The Anglophone world, especially in North America, is often poorly informed about the richness of research traditions and knowledge systems in the rest of the world. Colleagues in Europe and the Middle East will balance the unequal distribution of power in which the American research establishment maintains a dominant position in many fields including women's studies.

The establishment of women's studies programs since the early '70s was a direct outcome of the social movements of the '60s. Many feminists today feel that there is a wide gap between this body of knowledge and the practice of the feminist movement. In other words, the struggle has been "co-opted." It seems that one of the challenges of any academic effort will be its ability to avoid elitism. This is especially true in the case of the feminist movement and the Kurdish nationalist movement. Kurdish women should not be solely the objects of our research. They should also be active subjects. So far, we have only one Kurdish woman in the group. Others will no doubt join later.

Another limitation for most of us in the network is the nature of our professional commitments. In my case, I have had to limit my work on Kurdish women in order to write a dissertation, look for a position, and go through the struggle for tenure. All of this leaves little time for a project that may not be valued professionally because it might not be directly related to our teaching.

One asset is the diversity of perspectives in our network. Some are interested in studying aspects of women's life but are not committed to feminism. Males and females both can join the group. Today, theoretical and methodological struggles are prominent in all disciplines especially in feminist studies. I am sure some of us will be engaged in lots of critical debates about questions of theory.

Conclusion

The Kurdish case demonstrates the continuing internationalization of feminism both as a political movement and a process of knowledge creation. We see here a complex interaction between the West and the East or the North and the South. The Kurdish women's demand for emancipation had its origins in the feudal patriarchal system of oppression. It was, however, encouraged by the struggle of western women. Much of the knowledge about the feminist movement in Europe came indirectly through the print media and, to a limited extent, by contact with Europe and by word of mouth. It was a process of learning and acting based on a spontaneous, uncoordinated, and uneven contact between the two worlds. There were no conferences,
no networks of activists, and no political freedom for forging solidarity. There is hunger in the South for radical knowledge and action on an international scale. Western feminism can also revitalize its own unfinished projects by learning from the women's movements in the South. At the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, a host of conservative forces ranging from the Vatican to the Islamic Republic of Iran coordinated their efforts to oppose the demands of women for serious reforms. The need for solidarity has never been so pressing.

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1The story of the murder of these women by Islamic zealots and traditionalists must yet be written. The opposition press in Iraqi Kurdistan and some human rights organizations have uncovered some of the evidence.

2In recent years, Uppsala University in Sweden has expanded its Kurdish courses to the level of a MA program; in Paris a two-year diploma program in Kurdish is offered at the Institute National des Langues et Civilization Orientales. Kurdish language courses have been offered, irregularly in some European and American universities.

3To cite only a few example, D. N. MacKenzie was not allowed to study the Kurdish dialects of Turkey in 1954–56 (MacKenzie); Martin van Bruinessen's important research on primordial loyalties in Kurdistan was seriously restricted by the refusal of Iranian, Turkish, and Syrian authorities to issue him research permits (van Bruinessen 1992). The Turkish sociologist 1. Besikçi was sentenced by the Turkish government to serve a 13-year term in jail for publishing his sociological and political study of the Kurds (van Bruinessen 1992).

4My bibliographic survey of theses written in Britain, the U.S., Canada, and France has revealed only one MA thesis (Eftekhari 1984).

5Some of the journals are: Jina Serbilind (Ambitious Woman, No. 4, 1993), published in Germany by Yekti'ya Jinê Welaşparêzê Kurdistan (Union of Patriotic Women of Kurdistan), is pro-PKK; Jyan (Life, No. 1, March 1991), published in Germany by Yekti'ya Jinê Kurdistan or KOMJIN (Union of Kurdish Women); Yekbân (Unity, No. 2, 1990) published in the Netherlands by Yekêêl Aferêan Kurdistan (Union of Women of Kurdistan). In Turkey, a Kurdish women's journal, Rosa, was published in Istanbul in 1996 but was later banned by the government. Several women's journals have appeared in Iraqi Kurdistan.

One is Tewar (Origins, No. 8, 1994) published by Yekêêl Jinanî Kurdistan (Union of Women of Kurdistan). The publication of a feminist journal, Dengê (A Voice), announced in 1996, is a joint work by women in Kurdistan and Europe. The latest journal is the feminist Jin (Woman), published in Swedish by a group of Kurdish and Swedish women.

6The suppression of Kurdish culture and language in the Middle East has not allowed the Kurds to maintain archives and museums or even private collections of letters and documents. Thus, archival and published material maintained over the past few centuries in Europe provide an indispensable source for studying Kurdish society.

References


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LORNA M. REDDICK

Earth Catcher

Here I stand firmly grounded into the earth.

The tiny bells ringing on clothing that I wear.

I swirl and stir my arms down towards the ground then push these strong arms up into the air.

I jump, and jump with Joy! running faster feeling the earth catch my feet as I land.

Lorna M. Reddick is completing an MA in dance at York University, Toronto. Some of her poetry has been published in Abafazi, Sapphic Ink, and Siren Magazine.