

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

by *Shabrizad Mojab*

*Cet article examine les démarches pour établir un réseau européen et nord-américain d'études féminines kurdes.*

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*Kurdish women provide a typical case of a feminist movement in need of solidarity.*

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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 round. 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.

## 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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## Network

cially Germany and Sweden. The largest group were the ones hired by Germany as guest workers in the 1960s. The continuing wars in Kurdistan since 1961 sent waves of political refugees to Western Europe,

North America, and Australia.

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Westerners who have visited Kurdistan since the seventeenth century have claimed that Kurdish women enjoy more freedom

than their Turkish, Arab, or Persian sisters. This claim is based on the observation that Kurdish women do not usually put on the veil and some of them have ruled tribes and territories. Kurdish women are, however, subjected to forms of oppression similar to those experienced by their neighbours (Mojab; van Bruinessen 1993).

The first Kurdish women's organization, "Society for the Advancement of Kurdish Women," was founded in 1919 in Istanbul at a time when the Turkish state was not in full control of the population. The organization aimed at "enlightening Kurdish women with modern thinking and promoting fundamental social reforms in the life of the family," and helping Kurdish orphans and widows of the forced migrations and massacres (text reproduced in Tahir Sharinf 23). The founders were apparently members of the Kurdish aristocracy in exile. Thus, Kurdish initiatives for changing gender relations preceded the state sponsored reforms in Turkey (late 1920s) and Iran (1930s). Forced unveiling in these countries was largely irrelevant in Kurdistan where the majority of people lived in rural areas and were always unveiled.

By the mid-1920s, Turkey and Iran, where most of the Kurds lived,

implemented a policy of linguistic and cultural genocide. In Iraq (under British rule between 1918 and 1932) and Syria (under French rule between 1918 and 1946), the Kurds were struggling for autonomous rule. Although there were a few prominent women in Iraqi Kurdistan, the political and intellectual environment dominated by nationalism and feudal patriarchy was not hospitable to feminist consciousness. During the brief life of the Kurdish Republic established in 1946 in the Soviet-controlled areas of north-west Iran, a "women's party" was formed as an affiliate of the Kurdish Democratic Party which led the autonomous government. The women's party tried to promote literacy and rally support for the government. It was inspired by the "achievements" of women in the USSR and Europe but the members were not familiar with the modern feminism of the time.

During the latter part of the century, Kurdish women did not enjoy any freedom to form their own organizations in any Middle Eastern country although they could join the official-sanctioned women's groups. The nationalist political parties pursuing autonomy or independence were clandestine except for brief periods in Iraq (1958-61, 1970-74). Although male dominated, they usually put gender equality on their agenda. In practice, however, they failed to organize women. Even when they had a women's organization (e.g., in the Kurdish Democratic Party-Iraq), it was primarily ornamental with only a few female activists. These political parties were often involved in guerrilla war against the state; women in villages and the cities were expected to support the military and political work of these parties, but they were not recruited as active members and very rarely joined the members of the leadership team. The nationalist parties relegated women's

emancipation and class struggle to the future, after achieving autonomy or sovereignty. Many women willingly accepted the nationalist agenda. One factor was the brutality of national oppression which rallied every one to the nationalist cause. The other was the general absence or weakness of feminist consciousness. The communist parties, too, were generally clandestine and favoured party-controlled women's activism only. Radical and socialist feminist literature was not readily available.

In the 1980s, two radical Kurdish political parties mobilized women and recruited a substantial number into their ranks. "Komala, the Kurdistan Organization of the Communist Party of Iran," and the "Kurdistan Workers Party," better known in its Kurdish acronym PKK, were both involved in guerrilla war, the former against Iran and the latter against Turkey. Young women, mostly from the urban areas, took up arms and engaged in political and military operations. However, the leadership of the parties are made up of men only. In their military camps in the mountains, Komala allowed women to engage in non-tra-

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ditional work (e.g. military and political training, broadcasting, etc.). Moreover, traditional work, e.g., cooking and child care, was equally divided between males and females. Men were taught about gender equality. The nationalist agenda was dominant especially in the PKK.

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, two nationalist political parties, the

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdish Democratic Party, together with other minor groups participated in parliamentary elections and formed a Regional Government of Iraqi Kurdistan in the "safe haven" protected by the United States and its allies. Although a few women were elected to the parliament, the two parties became the major obstacle to the unfoldment of women's struggle. They argued that Kurdish society was

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*Kurdish women are generally ignored in the literature dealing with the women of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.*

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Islamic and thus, that all women should respect the traditional way of life. The few Islamic groups in Iraqi Kurdistan, which were supported by Iran's Islamic regime, have imposed the veil on women in the areas bordering Iran, and engaged in numerous killings of women who had been raped and sexually assaulted by the Iraqi army and security forces before the Gulf War. The two nationalist parties have generally ignored or supported this internal war against women.<sup>1</sup> Kurdish women today face a host of obstacles including the retrogressive nationalist parties, the pressures of Islamic groups, the central governments, and a largely disintegrated economy and society. While this situation attracts many women to political and military activism, a growing tension between feminist awareness and patriarchal relations of domination is visible.

#### **Kurdish women's studies**

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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, travellers, 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.<sup>4</sup> Doctoral research is pri-

marily 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

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*No country has enough interested researchers or financial means to build a Kurdish women's study centre.*

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### **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

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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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<sup>1</sup>The 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.

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

<sup>3</sup>To cite only a few examples, 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 I. 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).

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

<sup>5</sup>Some of the journals are: *Jina Serbilind* (Ambitious Woman, No. 4, 1993), published in Germany by Yekîtiya Jinên Welatparêzên Kurdistan (Union of Patriotic Women of Kurdistan), is pro-PKK; *Jiyan* (Life, No. 1, March 1991), published in Germany by Yekîtiya Jinên Kurdistan or KOMJIN (Union of Kurdish Women); *Yekbûn* (Unity, No. 2, 1990) published in the Netherlands by Yekêti Afretanî 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 Yekêti 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.

<sup>6</sup>The 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.

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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.

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