

## Kurdish women's life stories, feminism, and activism: A conversation with Houzan Mahmoud

Wendelmoet Hamelink<sup>1</sup> and Houzan Mahmoud<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

In this article Houzan Mahmoud (editor of the book *Kurdish Women's Stories*, published in 2021), talks with Wendelmoet Hamelink (researcher on gender, migration, activism, and conflict at the University of Oslo) about the collection of the stories making up the book, about the writing process, and how the participants felt about being part of this project. The book contains 25 self-written stories by Kurdish women from all regions, including the diaspora. The conversation also touches on Mahmoud's own life experiences and how this eventually led her to start Culture Project and the work for this book. It gives insight into empowerment, hope and resilience of women living in desperate circumstances; into the development of feminist ideas and projects; into the interconnections between life in Kurdistan and in the diaspora; and into the alienation and uprootedness that life in exile can bring about.

**Keywords:** Life story; Kurdish history; feminism; women's history; empowerment

### Abstract in Kurmanji

#### *Çîrokên jiyane, femînîzm û çalakvaniya jinên kurd: Gotûbejêke li gel Houzan Mahmoud*

Di vê gotarê de Houzan Mahmoud (edîtora kitêba *Kurdish Women's Stories*, di 2021an de çapbûyî) li gel Wendelmoet Hamelinkê (lêkolîner li ser xeynda civakî, koçberî, çalakvanî û pevçûnan li Zanîngeha Osloyê) li ser herberkîrîna çîrokên ku kitêbê pêk tînin, li ser proseya nivîsandîne û hîsên beşdarîna a li ser beşdarbûna vê projeyê diaxivîn. Kitêb 25 çîrokan dihenîne ku jinên kurd ên ji hemû herêman, tenê diasporayê bi xwe nivîsandîne. Gotûbêjê herwiha diçe ser tecrûbeyên jiyana Mahmoud bi xwe û vê çawa rê li ber wê vekirîye ku dest bi Culture Projectê û xebata ji bo vê kitêbê kirîye. Nêrînekê dide ser bêzdarkîrîna/teşwîqkîrîne, bêvî û berxwedêriya jinên ku di şert û mercên bêhêvî de dijîn; ser pêşveçûna bişx û projeyên femînîst; têkiliyên di navbera jiyana li Kurdistanê û diasporayê; biyanîbûn û bêkokîya ku jiyana sirgûnê dikare bi xwe re bîne.

### Abstract in Sorani

#### چیرۆکی ژبانی ژنانی کورد، فیمینیزم، و چالاکوانی: گفتوگوییەک لەگەڵ هۆزان مەحموددا

لەم وتارەدا هۆزان مەحمود، (سەر نووسەری کتێبی چیرۆکی ژنانی کورد، بڵاوکراوە لە ساڵی ۲۰۲۱)، لەگەڵ ویندیلموەت هەمەلینک، (تۆیژەر لە بواری جێنەدەر، کۆچکردن، چالاکوانی، و مەملانی، لە زانکۆی ئۆسلۆ)، گفتوگۆ دەکەن سەبارەت بە کۆکراوەی ئەم چیرۆکانەیی که کتێبەکە پێکدههێنن، و دەربارە ی پرۆسەی نووسین، وە چۆنییەتی هەستکردنی بەشداربووان لە پرۆژەکەدا. کتێبەکە پێکهاوتووە لە بیست و پێنج چیرۆک که لەلایەن ژنانی کوردەو هەممو ناوچەکانەر، بە تارەگەشەر، نووسراون. هەر و هەر گەشتوگۆکە تیشک دەخاتە سەر ئەزمونەکانی ژبانی مەحمود خۆی و چۆن بوونەتە هۆی ئەوەی دەستبکات بە پرۆژە ی کەلتور و کارەکانی ئەم کتێبە. وە روشنابوون دەخاتە سەر بەهێزیبوون، هێوا و خۆراگری ئەم ژنانهی که لە باروودۆخی ناھەموار دەژین؛ وە بەرچاو روونیش دەدات سەبارەت بە گەشەسەندنی بیر و پرۆژە ی فیمینستانە؛ وە دەربارە ی

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پهيو مەندىبە تىكەمەل كىشەر او مەكانى نىوان ژيان له كوردستان و له تارموگدا؛ وه ئەر نامۆبوون و لەرەگ هەلەكەشەنەى كه ژيان له دەر بەدەر يدا دەتواننیت بەر هەمى بەننیت.

### **Abstract in Zazaki**

#### ***Hîkayeyê heyatê cinîkanê kurdan, femînîzm û aktîvîzm: Hozane Mehmûd reyde xoşebere***

*Na meqale de Hozane Mehmûd (edîtorê kitabê "Kurdish Women's Stories" (Hîkayeyê Cinîkanê Kurdan), 2021 de weşanîya) Wendelmoete Hamelink reyde (çîgêrayoxa cînsîyet, koçberîye, aktîvîzm û têkentişî ya Unîversîteya Osloyî) arêdayîşê hikayeyanê kitabî, prosesê nuştîşî û hîsanê beşdarîyanê projeyî ser o qesey kena. Kitab de 25 hikayeyî est ê ke hetê cinîkanê kurdan ra ke pêro herêman ra yenê, dîaspora zî tede, nusîyayê. Xoşebere de galê tecrubeyanê Mehmûd zî beno ke badê cû ê senî hîyê sebeb ke aye dest bi Projeyê Kulturî û xebata nê kitabî kerdo. Na xoşebere çim çarnena hem hêzdarbîyayîş, hêvî û xoverodayîşê cinîkanê ke binê şert û şurtanê zehmetîyan de yê, hem averşîyayîşê fikir û projeyanê femînîstan, hem pêragirêdayîşê cûya Kurdistanî û yê dîaspora û hem zî cûya xerîbîye senî eşkena bibo sebebê pêşbîyayîş û kokê xoradûrîkewtîşî.*

### **Introduction**

In this conversation we reflect on Houzan Mahmoud's book *Kurdish Women's Stories* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), which was published in English and Sorani Kurdish as part of the Culture Project. The book contains 25 self-written (or self-told) stories by Kurdish women. The stories are unique testimonies of female experiences of life under oppressive regimes, war, imprisonment, as well as of gender-based violence, and the book is the first of its kind in collecting so many women's stories, written from their own perspective and from different areas of Kurdistan, into one volume. It includes 15 stories from Iraqi Kurdish women, 5 stories from Iranian Kurdish women, 2 stories from Turkish Kurdish women, and 3 stories from Syrian Kurdish women. In total, 14 of these women still live in their region of origin, whereas 11 live in the diaspora, mostly in Europe.

The book was one of the projects carried out under Culture Project, a platform for Kurdish writers, artists, and activists, consisting of a web-magazine in Sorani Kurdish and English. It was initially founded in 2016 by Houzan Mahmoud, Ismail Hamalaw, and Miran Abraham. It aims to give space to Kurds in Kurdistan and the diaspora to spread new ideas, feminism, to break taboos, enhance gender equality, develop critical analyses of art and literature, and to "challenge and change Kurdish culture".

Wendelmoet Hamelink initiated this interview as part of the ALCITfem research project<sup>3</sup> and as an editor of *Kurdish Studies*. She visited Mahmoud in her current place of residence in Germany where they spent a weekend together and had ongoing conversations about both their projects related to Kurdish women's lives. Through her questions, Hamelink provided her own reflections on the book as well as on the many life story interviews she has conducted herself with Kurdish women. The conversation also touches on Mahmoud's life experiences and how this eventually led her to start the Culture Project and the work for this book.

In *Kurdish Women's Stories*, the women's stories are arranged by age and cover several generations; the eldest participant was born in 1950 (first story) and the youngest in 1995 (last story). The stories focus on one or some important and often life-changing events in the authors' lives. Many women write about how they were affected by conflict and political

<sup>3</sup> "Activism and its Moral and Cultural Foundation: Alternative Citizenship and Women's Roles in Kurdistan and the Diaspora". This is a collaborative project of researchers from Jagiellonian University, Cracow, University of Oslo, Cracow Economic University, and the Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research in Oslo. It is funded by Norway grants.

oppression and by the execution of relatives; had to migrate under force or escape to other countries; and lived in continuous insecurity about their own and their relatives' safety. Others write about their experiences as women's activists, political leaders, or as female fighters, and about being part of political families whose members took great risks in the struggle for Kurdish rights. Some talk about early struggles for education and independence as girls, violence or pressure within the family, and about their efforts to become professionals such as lawyers, artists, psychologists, teachers. The stories also show disillusionment with Kurdish leadership, corruption and political parties; and the difficulties women face who had to build up a new life in the diaspora. Despite being told by women from different ages, different ideological, religious, and class backgrounds, as well as from different geographical areas, the stories demonstrate a resemblance in how Kurdish women struggled with societal and political limitations and exclusion, and often displayed a remarkable resilience and endurance through times of ongoing conflict and violence.

The interview took place in July 2022 and was fully recorded and transcribed by Hamelink. She shortened it in some sections, and Mahmoud read it for final corrections. Apart from some minor changes, no adaptations were made to the use of spoken language. The commonly used Kurdish terms *Bashur/Başûr* (South), *Bakur* (North), *Rojhelat* (East), and *Rojava* (West) are sometimes used to refer respectively to Iraqi, Turkish, Iranian, and Syrian Kurdistan.

## Conversation

*Wendelmoet Hamelink (Wendy): You collected so many stories. What about your own story?*

*Houzan Mahmoud (Houzan):* That is a good question. I was born in Iraqi Kurdistan and I grew up there. Then I left Kurdistan with my former husband to the UK, and I have lived there ever since. I grew up in a very political family. They were all peshmerga fighters fighting against Saddam's regime. I had a very, very difficult and dangerous childhood and teenage years as well. Dangerous in the sense: the dangers from the government. I spent a lot of time in hiding. My mother would send us to different places, and distant relatives to stay with them so that, if we get arrested, it would not be all of us at the same time. My mother was very worried about us, me and my sisters, because in Saddam's prisons they were very brutal. So that was the situation, the first eighteen years of my life was all fear, danger, government terror, dictatorship, fascism. And growing up not knowing why we are suffering.

It was really weird that you are born in a country where your parents and grandparents and their ancestors were all born on this land, but you are an outsider and you are treated as a danger to that country and that place. And you are subjected to all kinds of persecution and genocide and chemical bombardment, it was too much for me to articulate why this is happening. Really to be honest I have only started in the past ten years to make sense of what happened to me and to my family and why we went through all of that. Obviously politically you know things, but on a personal level it is very difficult. And I think sometimes that the reason why I didn't write my story so far is probably because I was running away from all of it, you know you just don't want to go back there, it is a dark place, full of violence, killings, full of blood, of terror and fear, and witnessing my own brother being killed near our family home, by the regime. Hearing about all their friends, and the news about all their wonderful peshmerga friends being killed in government ambushes or in the mountains was difficult to comprehend at the time. I grew up with all these horror stories and sometimes I feel like:

from where do I start and where to end? And these were the questions of the women in the book, asking us: where do I start? I have gone through a lot, I have seen a lot. And I think for a young person and for a child, this was too much to witness.

I tried to use my existence in the UK to learn the language, go to university, everything that I did was to provide a platform for everyone else who is in a similar situation. I think in the book *Kurdish Women's Stories* there is also me, my voice and my suffering, experiences, pain and wounds as well, through the women's stories. At this point I think it was important for me to have this collective endeavour so that maybe one day, I have the guts and the courage to think about going there and writing my own story.

*Wendy: How did the women who wrote the stories respond after they received the book?*

*Houzan:* They were really happy. From the feedback that I got, some of them felt like “wow, we have now entered history”. Some of them shared it on their Facebook, and for some, their sons and daughters were surprised to see all this about their mothers, published in Kurdish and in English and they told their mum: why you never told us about this? Imagine, we don't even talk about these things to our children. My daughter doesn't know so many things about me. Because sometimes we feel that it is a burden and that we don't want to put it on someone else, especially on our children, who grew up here, and were born here. I think that there was that element as well [for which the book was important], for the second generation. Our children who got the book, they made it into a gift for other people, they talked about it and wrote about it on Instagram, Facebook and social media. I think it has generated a good momentum, both between first and second-generation Kurds, here and in Kurdistan, but also among the women themselves and how they felt relaxed after getting that off their chest. Some women said: “It was like a therapy because I never knew how to talk about this, let alone write about it.” So it was really good. Especially writing for me was very important because traditionally speaking, Kurdish women and writing were two separate things, where writing is a luxury and education is a luxury as well. Not so many women could afford getting educated, even in my generation your family would prevent you from getting educated. And for me it was important to have that text, for Kurdish women to have their own text.

*Wendy: If I think of the women, I can also imagine that because their story is one out of 25, they are part of a larger historical context which gives meaning to their own story as well.*

*Houzan:* Definitely. When I published the book in Sorani in Kurdistan, so many of the women who had their story in the book came and they started telling their whole story again. It was so sweet! And I have pictures that they are holding the book and took photos together with me and they were hugging me and kissing me, saying, “wow you gave us this opportunity that our story is in the book and even when we die, we will have this story living on”. For the older generation who has no education, I made sure that we get their stories too. We sent someone to talk with them, record it and transcribe it. Then they went back to read it to them to make sure that everything they have said is what is reflected in the text. We only sometimes restructured it, for example things about childhood we put it at the beginning. But everything, every single word was theirs. I made sure that their stories are included, because their lives are so important. Having received no formal education and their inability to write their own stories shouldn't mean their erasure from history. These women had a heroic role to play in society, despite not being educated, despite all the problems, the social conservatism and so on. And yes, I was really inspired by their lives.

*Wendy: The stories are mostly talking about suffering and about very difficult situations. It was striking to me that most of the women focused on such topics. Did you get any idea about why the women chose to write about this?*

*Houzan:* Women who wrote about the loss of loved ones, they really wanted to make sure that their story is included. Especially two of the women who had no education, they were at the book launch and they loved it. They said, “if we die now, we are happy”. Trust me that is how they were talking. There was another woman who was an ex-member of the parliament, her father was executed and in her story, she talks about the last hug in the prison, she was also extremely happy because she wanted that story to be somewhere in a respectable book with a high standard.

They felt that the book was a serious project and an entire team was working on it: translators, editors, proof readers, and myself, working with the team and also with most of the women. I was always there for them myself and that was really important, in terms of that collective work but also in terms of seriousness of such a project, to make sure that it gets published here in Kurdistan but also worldwide. And when I sent them the English copies, they couldn't believe it. One thing I heard a lot is that people go there and take their stories and that they never hear about it again, that was one of the concerns. Or that newspapers or magazines in Kurdistan take their stories and they never hear about it, they don't even get a copy. But I made sure that every one of them got two copies, one in English and one in Kurdish so that they have it for their record. They liked the seriousness of the project and talking about it in the media and everywhere, they felt that it is something serious.

*Wendy: One of my friends who started reading the book, she is a Kurd from Turkey and she said: “I cannot read it because I feel overwhelmed, I feel so connected to the stories that I feel like I'm drowning in it.” The stories are very heavy, it is about suffering.*

*Houzan:* Yes, even for me when I got the stories, I cried over so many of them. Especially for those of us who have suffered as well, it brings back all the memories of loss, of sadness, horror, fear, dictatorship, prison etc. I know that people who have endured this, they would really feel the emotional heaviness of it. But I know that it will also make them think: “Why did we never write our own stories as Kurdish women?” How many generations have gone through this, probably many for the past 100 years. How many stories do we have from them? Almost none! So I felt that, yes it can get to our heart, it can make us cry and feel sad, but it is also a record. And it was setting the scene for other projects, other books, better projects and books. It was just a stepping-stone for anyone to come forward with their story. And there is also a sense of pride and love and caring, sacrifice and solidarity, and it tells us a lot about these concepts as well.

*Wendy: Yes indeed, and what I was trying to find out is whether the suffering shown in the book is also in some ways empowering. Then I thought that the empowerment lies in the fact that these people have lived through these stories and they're still there, and they have told their own stories.*

*Houzan:* That is why for some of them it was like a therapy. They said that they felt relieved and happy and lighter after telling it and making sure that it is written. Sometimes I got a story that was very short but full of important events. And I would go and speak to the women and ask them: “Can you talk more about this and that?” and then I got the story back with another five or ten pages. That is how we evolved with them. And so often I said to them: “This might be difficult for you to go back into your memory, to dig in, to bring all these things in front

of the readers. But this is also a chance for you to write. And if you ever feel that you do not want to do it, just drop it. And if you want to talk about it, I am always there.” So I was almost doing a counselling as well. But I also needed to talk with someone myself about how I felt about these stories, because I was crying with all of them. At the same time, it made me proud as a Kurdish woman: how they have endured all this and live. The women who came to the book launch, the ones who were in their sixties and seventies, they are so beautiful, they always have a smile on their face and they talk about these things with pride, that they did not bend to the dictator. If their husband or brother or son was killed by the regime, they are proud that they did not collaborate. My generation also suffered a lot but I still learned from them this love for life, despite your loss, your tragedies, but that is out of your control. And still you have so much love for life. I really appreciated that, it was a valuable lesson for me.

*Wendy: You have also been working on the Culture Project, can you say more about that?*

*Houzan:* We launched Culture Project in 2016, it started as a digital magazine in Kurdish and English, and we also produced a printed magazine in Kurdish in Kurdistan. Half of every issue was entirely dedicated to feminism and gender. We publish a lot online for young aspiring writers, feminists and artists as well as for the more established ones. It is mostly online but we have also done seminars and conferences in London and many in Kurdistan at the universities, talking about gender and art, feminism and art, cultural productions from a feminist perspective. We were introducing feminism into everything, even the artists looked at us as if we were mad. Because unfortunately the women organisations who have been there for thirty years, they have never managed to either call themselves feminists, or translate a text, have a seminar about any of these things, so the whole concept of feminist critique of art and literature and culture was totally new. We kind of injected it into the scene and we got lots of people from the diaspora and Kurdistan who were interested in writing for us and reviewing poetry, art and literature. And we tried to translate to both sides, from English into Kurdish and from Kurdish into English, to make that cultural bridge between Kurdistan and the outside world, and also the second-generation diaspora. So I think we attracted many good readers but also writers and others.

And the book was one of the projects of the Culture Project. I started the idea in 2018. I made a call on the Internet that we have this book project, I called it a self-writing project. It was then realised in 2020 and launched in 2021. Because of the corona pandemic, it was delayed.

*Wendy: If you think back to your own life story, how do you think your experiences have led you to set up the Culture Project and the book?*

*Houzan:* I grew up in a political family and there was always talk about the big things: changing the system, and the working-class struggle. I am from a leftist background and I am a leftist myself. And later on, when I saw all the problems with politics in my country and what it led to, I hated politics for so many years. But then I was very active in London and I realised that without a political party, even if you are doing a lot, you cannot channel it. So, I joined the Worker Communist Party from Iraq. It was both a Kurdish and an Iraqi party, the main founders of the party were Kurdish and it was established in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1993, but it was pan-Iraqi. I thought, at least it is a leftist organisation, they are talking so big about women's rights, working class etc. And because I was so active, after one year I was elected into the leadership of the party and then into the Politbureau. But it wasn't what I expected, then I resigned from everything.

So I resigned, that was the best decision of my life, and I gave myself some years to take a break from all of that and I started reading a lot of feminist literature. Then I realised that a lot of things that I was going through, and saying and doing, were so feminist. I thought, this is what feminism should do. So I started reading whatever I could find. And because women organisations don't have a great reputation in Kurdistan, I didn't want to create another women's initiative. And I think that you have to have a holistic approach, you have to question women's rights in political systems, politics itself, within cultural production, cultural values and norms, everything. And I thought we could be effective in bringing these issues to debate via a cultural initiative, so that is why we co-founded Culture Project and it has been ongoing for six years now. We have done a lot of projects and seventy percent of our work is voluntary. We all work for a living and if we can get funding we spend it on projects, like this book for translation, proofreading fees etc. So I try to do unique projects of which I know that there is a gap, to fill those gaps.

*Wendy: I think over the last decade women have emerged more in the public domain, such as singers, politicians, the focus on female guerrillas in Rojava, women writers, poets, academics, artists. Do you see a reason why this happened now at this point in time, that Kurdish women became so visible?*

*Houzan:* I think that Kurdish women always had some role to play, but they came more to the attention of the media because of the Rojava revolution. And also because of refugee waves. In the 1990s we came to Europe, we educated ourselves and some of us tried to use, at least I tried to use my presence to do things for Kurdish women. In Iraqi Kurdistan since 1991 we have been semi-autonomous, there is oil and all these things, obviously it is very different from what we were like under Saddam's regime. In every political transformation things change. And with capitalism, consumption, marketisation of everything, women have to work as well to be able to live. They have expectations, aspirations. So there are more women in the public space, in the media, singing, music, art and literature. And there is an exposure. Because of social media and technology people see a lot from outside, they know what is happening in Asia, America and Europe etc. Especially the young people have learned new languages like English. They all have access to Internet and they know how people live in other places. I think that has changed a lot of things. In my time under Saddam's regime, we had absolutely no contact with the outside world. I never travelled even to another city, that is how isolated we were. The education was in the service of Baathism. When I see people in North Korea, I think, "this was our situation under Saddam's regime". I really relate to that. I never knew even how other people live in other cities, in Baghdad for example. We had to read books in hiding. People were caught with books and were executed for that. But nowadays everything has opened up and people travel, they go to Europe to study. In our time there was none of this unless you were in good terms with the regime.

*Wendy: I think the book also shows an increased connection between women from different areas of Kurdistan, the diaspora plus Kurdistan. And some of the women I interviewed in Bakur also travelled to Rojhelat, to Bashur, to Europe for festivals and meetings. What have you yourself learned from the stories of women from other regions of Kurdistan and how do you think these connections could contribute to a better situation for Kurdish women?*

*Houzan:* I think that Kurdish women have been so divided and so isolated from each other, you might not believe it, for example, I met Bakuris and Rojavais [for the first time] in London. There is no connection, no communication because of the imposition of borders, because of limitations placed on us, all these artificial borders. So I thought that it is very

important to reconnect through a book, through our text. When the division happened and we were placed under all these dictatorships year after year, but you have all these women at the other side of the borders. Their experiences might differ a little bit, but still they lived like Kurdish women, they go through things like Kurds. So the sufferings are also very similar. Before you didn't know about these things, but now, because of the media, because of some communication and exchange, we know a little bit more whereas in my time I never met anyone from Rojava, Rojhelat or Bakur. You simply cannot travel there and they could not travel to us. Even now, because of all political problems and borders, that is still difficult. So I thought that it is a great idea to cut through all these political borders and to reconnect through art, writing, literature.

*Wendy: The stories show on the one hand a lot of similar experiences when it's about political oppression, gender-based violence, diaspora, forced migration, war, things that women have experienced in all parts of Kurdistan. Was it difficult for you to find women from Rojava, Rojhelat etc., since they are still underrepresented in the book?*

*Houzan:* Yes, it was very difficult and especially because it was also my first project. It was difficult because I would find women, but they were not willing to write. They would just say, "you know everyone has gone through the same things, why would I write about it?" That is the thing everyone would say. And obviously I never wanted to convince people to write. I wanted them to totally freely volunteer to write about themselves or not. I spoke with a couple of women from Rojhelat and they had particularly important stories but they were too traumatised to even talk about it. And I had no access to go to Rojava, Rojhelat, I have really done it from abroad. And for me it was not about equal numbers, that is not possible. Bashur is my place and I know people there; I can get many stories if I want to. But we had zero budget for this book. So, we could not ask someone from Rojava, give them some money and go and collect stories. And there are so many people who are not willing to do such things for free. And sometimes women think that they will be given money if they are in the book. Because unfortunately the international funding has corrupted everything. Funding is good, to do good projects, but it has also corrupted people's way of doing and seeing things.

*Wendy: Yes and it is very important that people do this because they like it, not because of the money.*

*Houzan:* Exactly, because then the focus becomes about money rather than about the actual project. For me this is a political project, it is not just about stories, it is a political, historical, and a feminist project as well. You have all these men's biographies in Kurdistan and autobiographies. From all these ex-peshmerga fighters and we don't know how much of it is true or not. That's another question. They all turned themselves into heroes but they are all corrupt now. And you hardly see any women's stories out there, but why? I have met a woman prisoner from Bashur, I remember her story from when I was a child. Her story was so famous, she went through hell, and she was imprisoned. But when I asked her to write about her story, her husband was there and he responded before her. He said: "Oh there is no need for her to write about herself, lots of women went to prison." I said: "But her story is different. I remember her story from my childhood." The man had not been in prison or anything, okay he had been active in politics. I don't want to analyse people but I think that there was some kind of jealousy: why would my wife's story get published and get credit but not mine? And I looked at the woman and I said, "what do you think?" I felt so sad at that moment. She said, "I'm not sure, I will think about it, it's not easy." And I said, "yes, I totally understand that it's not easy. But you don't even have to write it for this book, I urge you to do it for your own



book. Write your own book. We need that story, your children should be able to have your life in front of them, written.”

So obviously you have men who feel like that, and then women who think, so many people have gone through hell, why should I write mine? That sentiment as well is difficult. Whereas it is so important. So many women who lived through hell died and we don't know their stories. So our women's history is lost. Or in Bashur for example, because of the political rhetoric, they turn certain women from the nineteenth or twentieth century into national heroes. Obviously, some of them were stooges of British colonialism or Ottoman colonialism but because they had accumulated wealth and social prestige they're turned into national heroes. I hate that and I wrote about it. These are not the women who represent me. They managed to get all this wealth and their children or grandchildren are multi-millionaires whereas people lived in total poverty. Because they were stooges to the British Empire or the Ottoman Empire before that. So why would you turn them into heroes? They are not, they are simply collaborators. It is their stories that are being written, glorified and taught, and not others, because there is a lack of narratives. Probably there were many brave women in that time, but because they were not part of the networks and elites, their stories are buried. I don't want that to happen to the women of this generation as well.

*Wendy: Do you think that it helps that there is a diaspora where stories can be told more easily? Do you think that that will happen or do you think that people would rather want to forget?*

*Houzan:* Actually, the Kurdish diaspora, for a big part of us, we still have our hearts and minds there. We cannot live here without Kurdistan. Kurdistan is here, in my opinion. It is with me everywhere, wherever I go. Because of my attachment to that people, to that land. To the story, to the history, to the revolutions that took place, to my family, my loved ones, to everyone. And the reason that I speak up and that I do something and that I want to help, is not because I want to live there. I am totally uprooted right now, I know that even if I go back, I will not make it home. I know that deep down. Because I have also changed, and Kurdistan has changed too. But I want that place to be a better place for those who live there. Whoever, Kurds, non-Kurds. I want Kurdistan to be an inclusive place, land, where everyone can live peacefully and freely. It doesn't matter if I want to live there or not want to live there. And that is why in the past twenty-five years I've been doing all I can, next to a full-time job for living, to at least contribute in some ways to the struggle. Lots of Kurdish diaspora are totally forever involved in things about Kurdistan. And so many times when some injustice happens in any part of Kurdistan, we are the first to speak out, to put pressure on governments. So, I think the Kurdish diaspora is very vital to the existence of Kurdistan as well.

*Wendy: Thank you so much. I don't know if there is anything you would like to add, something that has not been discussed?*

Everywhere in Europe, Canada, America, everywhere Kurdish people are doing initiatives independently of political parties. And they connect to Kurdistan. This interconnection between diaspora and Kurdish people is very important for people on the ground in terms of cultural and political exchanges. And this is how from the beginning we made feminism a debate, we made it known. Through translations, debates, seminars, both online and offline. And I think that helped to shape a lot of things. The Culture Project and other projects out

there really helped a lot. And for us in the diaspora, for our existence, it is a breath, it is oxygen for me to be connected to Kurdistan.

*Wendy: Some of the stories in the book of people who live in the diaspora now, I felt that it also speaks through the stories how much they have lost and how disconnected they feel. It is a big contradiction that they have given so much of their lives for the freedom of women, of Kurds, of Kurdistan and then they have to live outside of it.*

*Houzan:* Yes, that is also very true. When you arrive in this country you only arrive with your small baggage of clothes and endless trauma. You have to rebuild your life from scratch. From pots and plates to bigger furniture, you even need to rebuild yourself. It's like you're born again, you have to learn a new language entirely and to work, to live, to integrate. In my generation there was a lot of pressure on us to even assimilate in European countries. We thought that the more we would become Anglicized the more we are accepted in the society to live among Europeans. We would even eat sandwiches instead of our own food, we would drink, go to clubs and try to have white friends. Those who integrated and did these things felt more advanced than those who were slow in "integrating". But now I think it is nonsense and I wonder why we did that, why on top of all the trauma and uprooting we had to put up with this too.

In the past ten years I've just been reflecting on my two lives: one in Kurdistan and one in the diaspora. It tells you how much effort we had to make to fit in, but we still never do, both at home and here. Under Saddam's regime, Kurds could never fit in anywhere. And even here we had to try so much. And sometimes I feel really tired and shattered.

*Wendy: And probably also as a woman, that you try to fit in...*

*Houzan:* Yes, it is double! Kurdish women are doing much better in terms of learning languages etc. And I think that sometimes we even take that burden on: working outside, working inside, raising children, caring for Kurdistan. As Kurdish women in the diaspora we have very tough lives. (...) I have some really wonderful intellectual Kurdish female friends who I can really count on. We share also personal experiences, and experiences with our children, with our husbands, with the Kurdish community. Because we also have problems with the Kurdish community, we do not even fit in the Kurdish community. People like me, we have to fight on many fronts. And also, racism on top of everything.

So sometimes I feel that I need five more lives for each front, it's not easy. And sometimes I just decide to switch off from everything, then I don't want to hear racism, I don't want to see the Kurdish community blaming me, criticising me for saying this or doing that. They judge you day in and day out. And how much can you really care about that? Not much really if you want to live. They judge you on everything: the way you wear clothes, the way you talk etc. But there is also a section of the Kurdish community who are proud of you, which is nice. They would want other women to be like you, to follow in your footsteps, build themselves, become independent and fight. I appreciate that but I also don't want to be a role model for anyone. I think every Kurdish woman has the potential to be someone they want to be. But the restrictions and the fights are so much that many just decide altogether not to go for it. I have seen Kurdish women doing that: let's just leave everything, let's just not bother. That's why I'm saying: the multiplicity of problems, of burdens, of fitting or not fitting, of losing everything, being uprooted affects our lives. Sometimes I feel like I live in suspension, that I'm not really anywhere.

*Wendy: Do you think that it's very different for your daughter or do you think that she has similar experiences?*

*Houzan:* We always have this conversation; she thinks that she is Kurdish but I say: "You are more English than Kurdish!" (Laughing.) Because of the culture in school and how she was brought up. And also, when she was a child, I didn't want her to have this identity crisis. But it just happens, you cannot help it.

*Wendy: She was born and raised in London?*

*Houzan:* Yes. She is more of a Londoner to be honest. And I don't mind, she was born there. Obviously from a Kurdish parent, but she has the right to choose the identity that she wants in terms of belonging. But she loves Kurdistan and I take her there from time to time. As the second generation she also has her own problems of fitting in. No matter how much they want to belong to the London environment there is still all these class divisions and ethnic divisions and racism as well, institutional racism. So many times, she had problems in school because of racism. And this is London, we thought that it is so multicultural. So obviously they have their share of the burden as well. But we did a big part of it. She would often come home and say: "Mom I am so happy you are not like other people's mothers." So I would say: "What do you mean like other mothers?" And she used to say: "You don't make me wear a veil, you don't make me pray, you don't talk about Islam, you are an atheist, that is so good." For her this was an incentive to grow up free from all of that, from all of these dictatorships. But there are other issues that concern her as well.

*Wendy: What do you envision is the next step? I know you're still working on some projects...*

*Houzan:* In terms of my future projects, currently I am working on another book. This one is specifically on female political imprisonment and their stories and life stories. So far, we have collected fifteen stories from all parts of Kurdistan. I know that it will make everyone cry when they read the stories because of the amount of torture and psychological and physical pain and scars these Kurdish women have experienced, but also the heroism and the struggle against fascisms both throughout the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. Because some of the women who wrote their stories for us are still in Turkish prisons where they wrote it and someone smuggled it out for us. So we are working on that book and I hope that it will come out next year, if not sooner.

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