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## Feminism, gender and power in Kurdish Studies: An interview with Prof. Shahrzad Mojab<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*In this interview, Prof. Shahrzad Mojab reflects on her longstanding personal, political, and intellectual engagement with Kurdish women. Twenty years after publishing the ground-breaking edited volume *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds* (Mazda Publishers, 2001), Mojab assesses the complex relation between Kurdish Studies and feminism and evaluates current discussions regarding gendered power relations in Kurdish scholarship. Gender relations in Kurdish society and in Kurdish Studies can only be understood, she insists, when taking into account how gender intersects with capitalism, class, colonialism, nationalism, and patriarchy. Through her personal trajectory, the interview offers insight into the historical developments that have facilitated Kurdish women to increasingly be included in Kurdish Studies as both researchers and research participants.*

**Keywords:** Capitalism; Feminisms; Gender and class relations; Kurdish Studies; Kurdish women; Nationalism; Patriarchy

### Abstract in Kurmanji

#### **Femînîzm, zayend û hêz di Xebatên Kurdî de: Hevpeyvînek li gel Prof. Shahrzad Mojab**

*Di vê hevpeyvîne de, Prof. Shahrzad Mojab eleqeya xwe demdirêj a şexsî, siyasî û entelektuel ya li gel jinên kurd nîşan dide. Bîst sal piştî weşandina *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds* [Jinên Neteweya Bêdewlet: Kurd] (Weşanên Mazdayê, 2001), Mojab têkiliya tevlihev a di navbera Xebatên Kurdî û femînîzmê de; û nîqaşên nûjen yê di derbarê têkiliyên hêzê yê reng-zayendî yê di akademiya kurdî de dinirxîne. Têkiliyên zayendî yê di civaka kurd û Xebatên Kurdî de, ew îdia dike, ew ew çax dikare were fehmkirin ku bê qebûlkirin ka çawa zayend bi kapîtalîzm, sinif, kolonyalîzm, netenperwerî û bawalariyê re tevlihev e. Bi rêgeha xwe ya şexsî, ew hevpeyvîn pêşkêşîya fehmeke bîyêrên dîrokî dike ku rê vekirin jinên kurd bi hejmareke zêde, hem weke lêkolîner hem jî weke beşdarên lêkolînan bikevin nav Xebatên Kurdî.*

### Abstract in Sorani

#### **Fêmînîzm, cender û hêz le twêjînewey kurdîda: Dîmaneyek legell profîsor şehrezad mocab**

*Lem dîmaneyeda, profîsor şehrezad mocab tîşk dexateser têkellîye kesî û siyasî û bizîrîye dîrudrêjekanî xoy legell jinanî kurd. Bîst sall dway billawîkîrdnewey bergî pêşenganey "jinanî netewey-nadewletî: kurdêkan (deşgay*

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*bllawkirdnewey mazda, 2001), mocab peywendî allozî nêwan twêjînewey kurdî û fîmînîzm belldesengênê û gjftugoy êstaş derbarey peywendîyekani cenderî le twêjînewey kurdîda denrixênê. Ew pêleser ewe dadegrêt ke tenba katêk detwanîn le peywendî cênderî le komelgay kurdî û le twêjînewey kurdîda têbgeyn ke ewe leberçaw bigrîn ke çon cênder legell sermayedarî, çîn, kolloniyalîzm, nasîyonalîzm, we pyansalarî yekdebrêrê. Le ruwaney rêrrewî şexsî xoyewe, çawpêkewîneke tîşk dexate ser ew peresendne mêjîyyaney ke karasanî bo jinanî kurd kîrduwe ta zîyatir bixêrêne naw twêjînewey kurdî hem wek twêjer û hem wek beşdarbûy twêjînewe.*

### **Abstract in Zazaki**

#### **Kurdnasîye de femînîzm, cinsîyet û hêz: Prof. Şahrzad Mojab reyde roportajêk**

*Nê roportajî de Profesore Şahrzad Mojab angajmanê xo yo kesî, sîyasî û roşwîrîyo derg ke cinîkanê kurdan ser o da, ey ana ra zîwan. Vîşt serrî weşanayîşê eserê xo yê înovatîfî *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds (Cinîkê Neteweya Bêdewlete: Kurdî, Weşanê Mazda, 2001)* ra pey, Majob têkilîya kompleksê mabênê kurdnasîye û femînîzmî de û munaqeseyê ke no taw zereyê cigêrayîşanê kurdan de derbeqê têkilîyanê cinsîyetkerdeyan de yenê kerdene, înan erjmena. A îsrar kena ke têkilîyê cinsîyetî yê komelê kurdan û kurdnasîye tena fehm benê eke merdûm çatrayîrê cinsîyetî bi kapîtalîzm, sinîfe, kolonyalîzm, neteweperwerîye û patriarkîye kî tey bibesibno. Pê raywanîya Majob a şexsîye no roportaj roştî dano averşîyayîşanê tarîxîyan ke cinîkanê kurdan rê rayîr kerd ra ke ê hîna zêde hem sey cigêrayoxan hem zî sey hetkeranê cigêrayoxan tenrê kurdnasîye bibê.*

*In memory of Amir Hassanpour, Mirella Galleti, and Maria O'Shea. The remarkable contributors to *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds* who left us far too early!*

## **Introduction**

In July 2020, a group of female scholars in Kurdish Studies published an anonymous letter in which they denounced the prevalence of male violence and sexual harassment in academia, including in Kurdish Studies, and called for solidarity with and support for women targeted by those in positions of power. The letter set in motion wide-ranging discussions about the difficulties (Kurdish) women scholars face within Kurdish Studies, the power relations that pervade this field of scholarship, and the steps that need to be taken to make Kurdish Studies more equitable and inclusive. At the journal of *Kurdish Studies*, these discussions have forced us to reflect in depth about how our editorial decisions and processes play a role in the construction and maintenance of gendered power relations – and about how we may turn them into a force for change.

One person who has been central to what she calls the “Kurdish #MeToo movement” that ensued after publication of the anonymous letter is Shahrzad Mojab, Professor at the University of Toronto and one of the leading scholars on Kurdish women and feminism. Professor Mojab not only circulated the anonymous letter on behalf of women scholars, but she has also played a lead role in devising an action plan to address the issues raised by the letter. One core element of this plan has been to (re)launch the Kurdish Women’s Studies Network, which has led to a year-long (and still ongoing) series of online panels showcasing the scholarship of women in Kurdish Studies that has been convened and chaired by Mojab over the course of the academic year 2020-21.

As much as these initiatives respond to current developments, they build on a much longer legacy of feminist struggle both within and outside of Kurdish academia. It is to shed light on

these historical trajectories that *Kurdish Studies* has invited Shahrzad Mojab for this written exchange with associate editor Marlene Schäfers. An over four-decade long history of doing research with and on Kurdish women allows Mojab to add historical depth and critical reflection to the ongoing discussions on gender and sexual harassment in Kurdish Studies. Twenty years ago, she published the edited volume *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*; a ground-breaking book that would establish “Kurdish women” as a recognizable subject area within English-speaking feminist scholarship and initiated what has since become an entire field of knowledge production. As Mojab insists, this field is an inevitably politicized one, as it is forced to reckon with Kurdish women’s (often marginal) positionality within power relations dominated by capitalist, colonial, nationalist, and patriarchal forces. Together with Amir Hassanpour, Shahrzad Mojab has also been involved in meticulously documenting and archiving the knowledge produced by and about Kurdish women, resulting in the remarkable volume *Women of Kurdistan: A Historical and Bibliographic Study* that has been published by Transnational Press London earlier this year. Twenty years after the publication of *Women of a Non-State Nation* and with this decades-long bibliographic project on Kurdish women recently published, it seems only pertinent, then, to assess the place of gender and feminist scholarship in Kurdish Studies.

**Kurdish Studies:** Twenty years ago, you published *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, an edited volume that was the first to devote sustained attention to the place of women in Kurdish politics, society, and culture. Could you tell us about what motivated you to put the book together back then and what kind of an impact you think it has had?

**Shahrzad Mojab:** The “story” of this book, so to speak, is the story of me and the Kurds; a personal encounter which began in the mid-1970s with life transforming consequences: personally, politically and intellectually. It began when I met Amir Hassanpour on the campus of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, where he was a doctoral student and I was in my first year of graduate school. Let me first briefly describe the political milieu of the campus to contextualize the significance of this encounter.

The campus hosted one of the most radical chapters of the Iranian Student Association (ISA), a member of the World Confederation of Iranian Students (WCIS). In my second term of study, I began attending reading groups organized by ISA members, including Amir, on Iranian history, national liberation movements, communist movements, and Marxist philosophy. In these reading circles I learned the Marxist dialectical, historical, and materialist method of analyzing, synthesizing, dialogue, debating, and presentation. The ISA was not preoccupied with Iran only. Growing in the context of the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1960s and contributing to it, the ISA turned away from a nationalist movement into an internationalist one. The ISA was an active participant in the anti-Vietnam war movement, the struggles of workers, civil rights, Indigenous peoples, women’s and national liberation movements especially in Dhofar (Oman) and Palestine (Matin-Asgari, 2002). It was in the reading groups of the ISA that I learned about a radically different version of Iranian and world history that I had never been exposed to before. The dynastic and violently nationalistic history that was taught in the educational institutions of Pahlavi Iran was replaced with a history in which people became the makers of their own destiny. I learned about the history of the Kurdish Republic of 1946, the Azerbaijan Republic of 1945-1946, the CIA-Coup of 1953, the class and gender nature of nation, state and nationalism, and on capitalism, colonialism and imperialism. Neither these historical events nor the vocabulary to speak with

and address these world conditions existed in my previous educational experience. Truly, I was marked by this experience for the rest of my life.

Amir and I returned to Iran, like thousands of other Iranian students, to join the 1979 revolution. As I have written elsewhere, “Esmail Khoi, an Iranian poet, has beautifully, meaningfully, and metaphorically captured my experience of participating in the 1979 revolution in Iran:

The joy of a raindrop  
and the sorrow *of it* in a swamp.”

That is, “joyously watching the life-giving raindrop [revolution], only to abruptly recognize its horrid fall into the abyss”—the coming into power of the Islamic regime in Iran (Mojab 2015, p. 7). The Islamic State embarked on its brutal suppression immediately after assuming power. The suppression included the imposition of the veil on women, military aggression against national minorities such as Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmans, the persecution of followers of the Bahá’í faith, the detaining, imprisoning, and killing of the left, both secular and religious Mujahedeen, banning the publication of newspapers and books expressing dissenting views, brutally censoring art in all its forms, and finally closing down the universities with a massive purge of academics, students, and staff to “purify” the nation through the Islamicization of knowledge and thought.<sup>3</sup>

I went to Kurdistan soon after the ceasefire between the Islamic regime and the resistant Kurdish forces in November 1979 and stayed there until the summer of 1980. This was my first trip to this region of Iran. I was born in Shiraz, but mostly raised and went to school in Tehran. Although I came from a middle-class, educated, and enlightened family inspired by the ideas of democracy, secularism, rights, and equality, they nonetheless remained deeply vested in the monarchical national modernity of “Iranianness.” Therefore, my original conception of the Kurds and Kurdistan was constructed by the official Iranian state narrative of the Kurds as “pure” and “original” people of Iran and as “brave fighters,” though deeply “tribal,” “primordial,” and “traditional.” The hegemonic ideological superiority of “Persianness” made us complicit in cultural and political suppression of all nationalities in Iran, in particular the Kurds. I have not yet fully written about my experience of being in Kurdistan, though while being there, I kept detailed daily notes of my observations, in particular of gender relations. Those notes were lost as we had to move around due to the ongoing war and security concerns. Only a few hand-written pages are left. Neither have I written about my short-lived *peshmerga* year, including participating in the resistance movement of the city of Sanandaj, also known as Sine, in early 1980. This resistance lasted for 24 days; it has been registered in the annals of political history in Iran as “The 24 Days of Resistance in Sine,” when the city was renamed “Red Sine” or the “Brave Sine” by the people. This was an entry into lives, aspirations, history, and culture of the Kurdish people with no return for me. It was an encounter that became the basis for understanding the entanglement and contradictions of nationalism and feminism. I learned the Sorani Kurdish language and immersed myself in the culture and history of Kurdistan to overcome my Persian national chauvinism and embraced the ideals of Marxist feminist internationalism.

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<sup>3</sup> For the suppression of universities, see my doctoral dissertation *The State and University: The “Islamic Cultural Revolution” in the Institutions of Higher Education of Iran, 1980-1987* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1991).

The Islamic regime conducted a gradual, but unyielding, suppression of revolutionary opposition throughout the country. Thousands of activists were arrested, and many were executed, which marked the 1980s massacre of political prisoners in Iran (Mojab, 2007; Mojab, 2019; Mohajer, 2020).<sup>4</sup> We were forced into exile in 1983 and returned to a chilly academic environment on the campus of the University of Illinois. It was a depressing return to a place we had left with much revolutionary hope. The ISA office was no longer there; friends were gone, some had been executed in Iran or were in prison. I began my doctoral program in Educational Policy Studies and a newly established Women's Studies program.<sup>5</sup> It was in Women's Studies that I found a space to think through my experience of a "defeated revolution," to reflect on the question of nationalism, emancipation, and feminism. It was in that program that I got to know Ann Russo and Loides Torres, the co-editors with Chandra Mohanty of *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991). It was through them and a group of radical Black feminists that I learned about patriarchal racism, colonialism and capitalist imperialism. They encouraged me to speak to and write about the relationship between state, ideology, patriarchy, religion, class, ethnicity, nationalism, and feminism as lived and resisted by Kurdish women and women in Iran following the revolution of 1979. One of my first graduate course papers, *Women in Politics and War: The Case of Kurdistan*, was published as part of the Women in International Development Publication Series (Mojab, 1987). This paper marked the beginning of a distinct research trajectory in my scholarly pursuits.

Steadily I started building a catalogue of literature on Kurdish women in the 1990s; a method that I learned during my graduate studies in the Women's Studies program. This reference work progressed with ebb and flow due to complex personal and professional lives of both myself and Amir, who also enthusiastically collaborated with me on this project (Mojab & Hassanpour, 2021). It was in the context of compiling, documenting, and archiving this body of literature that the *International Kurdish Women's Studies Network* (IKWSN) was initiated. As was stated on its inaugural brochure, the IKWSN was founded in the fall of 1996 "...as a response to a growing need for opening a space for Kurdish women in international debates on women's rights, women's studies, and promoting gender justice among the Kurdish communities in the diaspora and the Middle East". The story of this collective effort is still untold, although I reflected on its rise and demise in two articles (Mojab, 1997 and 2000). Nonetheless, reviewing my meticulous archive of the letters and folders of this unique experience makes me realize the need for a deeper historical contextualization of this initiative. It was envisioned during the era following the First Gulf War of 1991, the rise of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and the 2003 occupation of Iraq by Western imperialist forces, led by the US. These events had, and still continue to have, an immense impact on the Kurds, in particular Kurdish women, throughout the region. Therefore, it is important to revisit the achievements and challenges of this network while we are (re)trying to (re)build a new one.

Thus, to address the core component of the question, that is, the "motivation" for editing *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, I had to rush through this unwritten account of my encounter with the Kurds, their history, culture, and struggle. As is evident, the "motivation"

<sup>4</sup> See also my research website on political prisoners in *The Art of Resistance in the Middle East*: <http://www.womenpoliticalprisoners.com>.

<sup>5</sup> Bernice A. Carroll was my supervisor and mentor who edited the seminal book *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays* (1976, Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press).

was not circumstantial, it was a political and scholarly commitment. I stated in the introductory chapter of the book (pp. 12-13),

...there is a cycle of exclusion which prevents the formation of a tradition of research on Kurdish women: no faculty members specializing in Kurdish women's studies, no students to write papers and dissertation, no library collection, no research grants, and no publishing interest.

In spite of the formidable obstacles to the development of Kurdish women's studies, individual researchers of very diverse backgrounds, women and men, Kurds and non-Kurds, have engaged in research in this area. This book provides access to some of this literature...

Therefore, the book was not an isolated effort. It was, rather, a component of a cohesive politicized knowledge production on Kurdish women which needed a reference work and a network of scholars. The book has been influential and well-received, well-read, and well-cited. Yet, it continues to be the only anthology in the English language. It was translated into Turkish (Mojab, 2005a) and several chapters were translated into Persian and Sorani Kurdish. Nevertheless, I only have a partial list of the translations as some were even translated without my knowledge or permission. The book made "Kurdish women" a recognizable "subject" in the field of women's studies in the Middle East and North Africa. For instance, in 2000 I was invited to join the newly formed Editorial Board of the *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures* not only for my work on women and revolution in the Middle East but also for my research on Kurdish women. I wrote the main entry on "Kurdish Women" for this encyclopaedia (Mojab, 2005b) and was invited to write the entry of "Layla Zana" in the *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa* (Mojab, 2004). The book was also introduced in *Al-Raida Journal* published by the Arab Institute for Women at the Lebanese American University, in Beirut, Lebanon.

While working on *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, I was also co-editing *Of Property and Propriety: The Role of Gender and Class in Imperialism and Nationalism* (Bannerji, Mojab, & Whitehead, 2001). This book aimed at a more robust feminist critique of postcoloniality and subaltern studies by focusing on the relationship between gender, nationalism, class, colonialism, and patriarchal moral regulations. It also covered diverse historical periods in distinct places such as India, Kurdistan, Ireland, and Finland. We wrote in the Introduction that the book is (pp.4-5)

...intended as an implicit—and often explicit—critique of post-structural and post-colonial approaches to Third World nationalism, most of which tend to erase all forms of social inequality except for an overarching divide between colonizer and colonized. These gaps in post-structural and post-colonial approaches are especially apparent in the way that culturally mediated class and status relations have been ignored in the constitution of gender relations in the domestic sphere.

My chapter in this book, "Conflicting loyalties: Nationalism and gender relations in Kurdistan" (pp. 116-152), employed a Marxist feminist approach to delineate the dialectics of property relations, social formations of feudalism and capitalist modernity, gender relations and nationalist movements in different historical periods in Kurdistan. The chapter, therefore, frames a broader understanding of nationalism, feminism, class, colonialism, and anti-

colonialism. The process of concurrent editing and co-editing of these two books primarily taught me that there is no monolithic nationalist thought nor an undifferentiated women's experience of society, history, and culture. From a Marxist perspective, as is discussed by Amir Hassanpour (2015, p. 253),

...the diversity of “nations” or “patriarchies” is inevitable owing to their socio-historical nature, each formed or created under particular conditions; however, human thought, enabled by language, is capable of grasping universals in the midst of particulars. Every patriarchy is inevitably particular in the sense that it emerges in a distinct historical context owing to variation in consciousness, culture, geography, class system, ethnicity, and so on... It is possible, however, to depict universality in the particularity of patriarchies.

I hope that with the proliferation of research and publication on/by Kurdish women in the near future, there will be more writings on gender relations, sexuality, and areas related to visual and performing arts, film and literature such as memoirs, novels and poetry. Nonetheless, I think a careful, creative, and well-thought thorough theorization of the relationship between gender, class, colonialism, capitalist imperialism and the politics of everyday resistance and encounter of Kurdish women with patriarchy, poverty, and the state should constitute the core of future research.

**KS:** One thing that stands out from today's perspective when looking at *Women of a Non-State Nation* is that while it features a good number of women authors, none of the female authors are Kurdish or from Kurdistan. What were the reasons for this and what does it tell us about the gendered power dynamics within Kurdish Studies?

**Mojab:** The interdisciplinary nature of the book is best represented in the eleven chapters of the book. The connecting core of the collection is the subject matter of “women in Kurdish society.” However, authors approached this generic topic from various historical, anthropological, linguistic, legal, and cultural frameworks. Therefore, the book was thematically organized around three “perspectives” of Historical, Political and Legal, as well as Social, Cultural and Linguistic. As was stated in the introductory chapter, “I did not suggest any framework, theoretical or methodological, for the contributors to follow. The chapters reflect, to a large extent, the state of research on Kurdish women at the turn of the century” (p. 13). Indeed, the gender and national identity of the contributors implied who was studying Kurdish women and gender relations in English. Knowledge of English and capability to produce research and scholarly writing in this language was a key requirement. Eight of the contributors are women and three are men and of the total of eleven contributors, three are from the Middle East region and only two are Kurds.

Who is writing what and for whom or, put it differently, “whose voice,” “whose experience” or “who is being represented by whom” are important epistemological and methodological considerations in all strands of feminism. However, my approach is not to fetishize “identity” and I have always searched for a method of inquiry to explicate the dialectical relationship between feminist consciousness, ideology, praxis, and positionality (Mojab & Carpenter, 2019). No doubt, the feminist theoretical approach focusing on the “identity” of a speaker as presenter of experiences has made important contributions to our understanding of patriarchy. Politically, however, this identity-based approach has mostly fragmented women's movements on the basis of “identity” lines and inevitably propagated the idea of cultural

relativism. This cultural relativist fragmentation on the basis of the particularization of women's identity-based demands has contributed to the (re)formation and (re)production of oppressive and exploitative relations of power, including nationalism.

So, the question of who is writing, representing, or speaking for/on/with Kurdish women in this anthology, for me is more a question of epistemology than identity. Twenty years ago, these authors were rigorously researching gender relations in Kurdish society, history, and culture. The Europeaness of some of the authors facilitated access to fieldwork in the region, to archival materials, and to available knowledge in Western languages. This is a privilege that could potentially be addressed in the realm of the politics of knowledge production, in particular when a study is conducted in a geographical space where a nation lives under the condition of genocide, linguicide, and femicide.

**KS:** The last decade or so has seen an increasing presence of Kurdish women scholars in academia. How do you think this has changed the scholarship on Kurdish women, including the kinds of questions that are being asked, conceptual approaches taken, and topics focused on? How might this also have changed the way in which scholarship itself is conducted, in terms of methods of inquiry, forms of dissemination, and the very forms of scholarly interaction?

**Mojab:** I recently wrote in the introduction of *Women of Kurdistan: A Historical and Bibliographic Study* (Mojab & Hassanpour, 2021) that,

I am not a Kurd. I claim neither internal or external researcher relations to Kurdish women, nor the “informant” of the culture and lived experiences of Kurdish women. I have, however, developed a long and lasting solidarity with the struggle of Kurdish women. I have been in this movement for more than three decades, and over the years have conducted extensive research with, and among, Kurdish women in the mountains of Kurdistan with women peshmergas, in the women's community centres in Kurdish cities of Bakur and Bashur,<sup>6</sup> and in the Kurdish diaspora in Europe and North America. I recall vividly when I presented my first paper on Kurdish women at the 1994 MESA annual conference (Mojab 1994b). Professor Nikki Keddie, a prominent historian of the Middle East with expertise on women and Iranian history, dismissed my paper and commented that “Kurdish women's experience can't teach us anything new.” I decided to dedicate my intellectual and political life to a struggle whose longevity, perseverance, and vitality continues to marvel us all to this day.

It is in this context that I argue Kurdish women, as a *subject* of inquiry and as an *agent* of social change, are no longer dismissible or ignorable in most disciplines of social sciences or humanities. The most relevant instantiation of this point is the study of women in the Middle East, where the experiences of Kurdish women, even if we only focus on the last three decades, are folded into all forms of social and historical challenges and contradictions, ranging from capitalist-imperialist wars, to the rise of authoritarian theocracies and religious fundamentalism, continuous genocide, heightened nationalism, or massive displacement internally, regionally, and internationally. These are larger structural forces which are maintained and (re)produced by internal patriarchal, class, and nationalist political forces, including the neoliberal capitalist ideologies of most Kurdish political parties. The ways in

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<sup>6</sup>North and South Kurdistan, used in Kurdish to refer to Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan.



which Kurdish women live through, resist, and survive these conditions continuously and simultaneously should give us a lot to think through the theoretical and political consequences of our analysis of these violent composites of forces. I have often mentioned that under these regional and global conditions the study of Kurds and Kurdish women should go beyond its framing as a “question,” which is dominant in male-centred political science and international relations discourses and the title of many scholarly contributions. Indeed, we can perceive of Kurdish women’s experience as an “answer” to crucial questions of how to free the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) from the subjugating local, global, and transnational forces of patriarchal capitalism. Kurdish women constitute the hub of all contradictions in this globalizing world. Subjected to the brutal violence of the nation-states of the Middle East and their genocides and ethnic cleansing projects, suffering from the violence of “their own” national patriarchy, and dispersed throughout the world. Thus, Kurdish women are in a unique position to distance themselves from male-centred ethnic, nationalist, and religious politics, and to join forces which do not compromise with patriarchy. I know that Kurdish women and Kurdish women’s studies are at the margins of transnational feminism and the international feminist movement, even though there is considerable potential for forging solidarity if we can overcome all forms of identity-based fragmentation of the movement.

The proliferation of knowledge production by Kurdish women, even though only a limited sample is available to us in English or other Western languages, is exciting. The presence of a dynamic and creative Kurdish female intelligentsia in diaspora, their connection to the “homeland,” the way technological innovations have facilitated an instantaneous communication, all have contributed to the revitalization of the debate on gender relations, sexuality, democracy, and freedom in Kurdish Studies and Kurdish societies. As someone who is interested in the use of arts as a method of knowledge dissemination, I am inspired by the methodological originality in recent research work by emerging Kurdish women scholars. These include films, animations, photo-story, poetry, short stories, and memoirs. My hope is that emerging Kurdish women scholars will contribute actively to a newly initiated series on Kurdish Studies with Peter Lang where I am the series editor,<sup>7</sup> as well as enthusiastically participating in the recently re-instituted Kurdish Women’s Studies Network.

**KS:** How do you think Kurdish Studies need to change in order to be more accommodating to Kurdish women and their scholarship? How do you see new developments in Bakur and Rojava<sup>8</sup> and the involvement of women in the armed struggle impacting scholarship by/on Kurdish women? And in this context, what are your thoughts on *jineoloji* as a science of women as it has been developed by the Kurdish movement over recent years?

**Mojab:** My response to this question is organized under two interrelated sections of *Kurdish Studies and feminism* and *Kurdish Studies and Jineoloji*.

**Kurdish Studies and Feminism:** Feminist knowledge has effectively challenged all previous knowledge systems as androcentric undertakings. It has also established that knowledge production is a site of struggle under conditions of unequal power relations. Thus, Kurdish Studies is no exception. *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds* is framed on the basis of this understanding, hence my emphasis on the dialectical co-determinacy of nationalism and feminism. This conceptual analysis is further developed in the forthcoming book, *Women of*

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the book series see <https://www.peterlang.com/view/serial/KPHP>.

<sup>8</sup> North and West Kurdistan, used in Kurdish to refer to Turkish and Syrian Kurdistan.

*Kurdistan: A Historical and Bibliographic Study*, which archives and details more than a century (from the end of the 19th century to the first few years of the 21st century) of Kurdish women's history, life, and struggle. The book clearly depicts the ways Kurdish women's lives are embroiled in webs of contradictions, which have yet to be recorded and understood in all their complexity. We wrote (Mojab & Hassanpour, 2021),

While disruptions of their [Kurdish women] lives within the twentieth century are spectacular, continuities are equally startling. They went through the disintegration of the Ottoman empire, several genocides, ethnic cleansing, unbridled sexual violence by the state, the permanency of patriarchal rule, the rise and fall of socialism in Caucasia and Central Asia, the destruction of rural life, large scale displacements, the coming to power of theocracy, direct Western colonial rule, and new rounds of dispersion throughout the world. One trend in the lives of Kurdish women is the failure of the modernizing projects of the nation-states to transform them into the "Iranian woman," "new Turkish woman," "new Iraqi woman," or "Muslim woman." Decades of forcible assimilation have, in fact, contributed to the formation of the polity of "Kurdish woman."

The historical sketch, in conjuncture with the proliferation of knowledge on/by Kurdish women, challenges the Western Orientalist view of Kurdish women, and women in the Middle East and North Africa, in general. The male-centred nationalist gaze on gender relations and sexual orientation should be contested in Kurdish Studies. No discipline in the social sciences and humanities can ignore the feminist canon. The interdisciplinary nature of Kurdish Studies makes it even more crucial to draw and borrow, theoretically and methodologically, from feminist bodies of knowledge. Yet, feminism is not a unified body of knowledge, each presents distinct epistemological and methodological approaches. I have built my scholarship on Kurdish women on the basis of Marxist feminist analysis (see Mojab, 2015; Mojab & Carpenter, 2020; Carpenter & Mojab, 2011; Carpenter & Mojab, 2017). Marxist feminism, as a body of knowledge and praxis for the transformation of social relations of power, offers us theoretically, methodologically, and philosophically powerful analytical tools to study Kurdish language, history, culture, literature, films, politics, sexuality, geography, family, architecture, etc. Conceptually, it can also shape our analysis of state, nation, borders, class, race, ethnicity, coloniality, and sexuality.

I would like to suggest two concluding points here: First, feminist analysis should be considered as an integral component of social analysis regardless of what strands of feminism are being employed. The depth and the breadth of analysis are determined by the power of theory. For instance, liberal feminism produces partial analysis of gender relations and offers limited legal reform within existing patriarchal racist capitalist relations, hence politically is only capable to *reform* certain aspects of oppressive gender relations. Second, we should refrain from feminist theoretical instrumentalization in Kurdish Studies. By "instrumentalization" of feminist theories, I mean using theories to only name an experience without thoroughly analyzing the relations that constitute the experience. For example, the use of feminist "standpoint theory," "intersectionality," "abolitionist feminism," "transnational feminism," or "decolonization" theories are a *naming* exercise and not an *exploring* one. As Cynthia Enloe argues, we have to develop a habit of "feminist curiosity" to be able to observe, explain, and resist oppressive and exploitative relations of power (Enloe, 2004).

*Kurdish Studies and Jineoloji*: In Rojava, as well as in the diaspora, a host of activities are underway to implement and promote *Jineoloji* as a theory and method to achieve gender equality and gender representation.<sup>9</sup> Rojava women put up a valiant resistance against the dark forces of theocratic misogyny. In the realm of theory, however, their idea is ambiguous. No doubt, one cannot expect the newly established Rojava cantons to abolish patriarchy and private property while their very existence is threatened by ISIS, Turkey, Iran, Iraq (KRG), and other adversaries such as China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia. Certainly, there is much to celebrate in every advance that women make in overcoming patriarchy in Rojava and elsewhere. Nonetheless, I do not see in *Jineoloji* any critique of feminist body of knowledge that warrants its advancement. *Jineoloji* as a pedagogical method or radical praxis to transform gender relations in family, community, and society is an innovative tool. But it will be a nativist or nationalist politics if we argue that Kurdish women can only advance in their struggle for emancipation if they can create their *own* theory, knowledge, history, and consciousness. In my understanding, Kurdish women's struggle, like that of women all over the world, is both rooted in their patriarchal society and in an international patriarchal regime with ties to colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, and fundamentalism. Resistance to this global order and to the states carved up by imperialist powers out of the remnants of older empires continues in our time. Serious analysis of *Jineoloji* in Kurdish Studies can make valuable contributions to feminist praxis. It should be done though not as a nationalist or nativist women's project nor on the basis of a constructed myth in the evolution of Kurdish history, society and culture.

Let me end the response to this question by raising another complex issue in the relationship between Kurdish Studies and feminism. Recently, it is common to evoke the notion of “decolonization” as a theoretical possibility or a radical gesture of solidarity with Kurdish women. But I understand decolonization as both a process and an outcome. Colonization instated so much structural, psychological, and cultural harms over the centuries and in various geographies that de/anti-colonization requires considerable structural transformation supplemented by robust forms of conscious political agency. If we understand colonization as a relationship to (re)produce the condition of enduring subordination and as a system of patriarchal racialized class collaboration, what a de/anti-colonial approach can unravel is the inextricable forms of the liveability of life in order to support our radical feminist efforts to become active seekers in de/anti-colonial resistance struggles in the realm of knowledge production and praxis.<sup>10</sup> I know that this is a tall order, and therefore I just added this here in order for us to ponder on the true project of “decolonization” of Kurdish Studies, in particular through the prism of revolutionary Marxist feminism.

**KS:** You supported and circulated the recent anonymous letter about sexual harassment and male violence in Kurdish Studies, and the action plan taken thereafter. What are your ideas about ways to counter sexual harassment in Kurdish Studies and creating an atmosphere in which sexual harassment and violence are actively countered? How would you respond to some of the reactions which say that Kurdish Studies is politically vulnerable and its reputation could be harmed by the letter?

<sup>9</sup> For more information on *Jineoloji* and further resources see <https://jineoloji.org>.

<sup>10</sup> For a Marxist analysis of de/anti-colonization see Glen Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minnesota: University Minnesota Press, 2014). James Le Sueur's *The Decolonization Reader* provides a useful general overview (New York: Routledge, 2003).

**Mojab:** When I was approached by a group of Kurdish women scholars to join them to discuss, strategize, sign, and advocate for confronting sexual violence in Kurdish Studies, I did not hesitate. It was heart wrenching to hear their stories, it was painful to observe the toll abuse and sexual harassment has taken on their physical and mental well-being as well as their academic work. Regrettably, I was not surprised but certainly was outraged and disturbed. My reaction was based on two factors: One was that some of the egregious cases discussed by these colleagues were known among a small circle for years but remained a “hushed” matter. Second, I have participated in debates on sexual harassment policy over the last three decades in Canadian universities and have contributed to drafting these documents. However, I have also witnessed the ways institutions have the ideological and political capacity to reinvent themselves through the very policy mechanism designed to disrupt sexist and racist relations of power.

The reaction to the well-articulated statement on sexual harassment in Kurdish Studies was comparable to other such cases ranging from expression of strong support and commitment to work towards the eradication of all forms of harassment in Kurdish Studies to challenging the “anonymity” of the statement or expressing some discursive challenges which on its own was an act of perpetuating forms of violence. These positions were expressed by both men and women. However, I consider the rationale of the political “vulnerability” of Kurdish Studies as a form of violence in itself. This is an old and tiring reasoning refuted in other cases such as male violence in communities of color or among Indigenous or Black populations. These are ideological “tricks” to mask the existing reality of patriarchal violence and its inner relations with other social forms and institutions of power. Kurdish Studies can and should play a leading role in combating male violence, *in spite* of not *despite* its “political vulnerability.” Fighting male violence in Kurdish Studies is a mode of resisting the dominant nation-state’s patriarchal, colonial, and nationalist domination.

However, there is another related issue that I think is important to be addressed here. I was personally confronted on my involvement with this important matter. I was told “leave the Kurdish Studies to the Kurds and instead advocate for a similar cause in Iranian Studies!” This position is another form of racist, nationalist, and male violence. Again, with much regrets, this was not the first time that my scholarly work in Kurdish Studies has been dismissed in such a harsh racist manner. My extensive research on “honour killing” among the Kurdish population in the region and in diaspora has received a similar treatment (Mojab, 2012; Mojab & Abdo, 2004). In this world view of particularized individuals, cultures, identities, or nations, patriarchy remains untouched. In the name of challenging the “othering” of cultures, this theoretical and political approach is “othering” oppositional views which confront the exercise of power, male power in particular. In other words, the proponents of this nationalist/racist view prefer to remain silent about patriarchal violence, especially when it is perpetrated by “men of their own.” There is, thus, an attempt to isolate “honour killing” or sexual harassment from the patriarchal culture of Kurdish society and Kurdish Studies. This is done by, among other things, reducing violence to an isolated incident, an individual behaviour not rooted in patriarchy as a regime or system. This view does not even allow for a serious theoretical departure from orientalism or colonialism in Kurdish Studies. A radical departure requires the abandoning of the epistemological and theoretical dictates of nationalism, racism, cultural relativism, and sexism.

The statement on “Male Violence and Sexual Harassment in Kurdish Studies” was followed by some concrete “Proposed Plan of Actions” which included six recommendations: 1) Reinstitute the Kurdish Women’s Studies Network. 2) Actively invite women to take different roles in academic conferences such as chairing a session, be a discussant or a commentator. 3) Mentor junior scholars in publishing, teaching, research projects, and journal review process. 4) Host seminars/webinars to discuss gender relations in all areas of Kurdish Studies. 5) Host seminars/webinars for women students and researchers to present their work. 6) Recruit women as editors and reviewers, in particular in the journal *Kurdish Studies*. I know that some of these recommendations are well underway, however, we still have a long way to go to create a Kurdish culture of research, study, and knowledge production free from fear of male sexual harassment. Therefore, it is admirable that women scholars took this first and necessary step to begin the Kurdish “Me Too” movement. There should be unwavering support for them, and it is our responsibility to cultivate a culture of care and cooperation free from all forms of violence.

**KS:** You are also an important contributor to the Kurdish Women’s Studies Network and the lecture series that has continued throughout the academic year 2020-21. How do you evaluate the series and its impacts?

**Mojab:** As stated above, the idea of reinstating the Kurdish Women’s Studies Network (KWSN) was a proposed concrete action following the circulation of the statement. The response was overwhelming and exciting. In a short span of time, I received more panel and paper presentation proposals than could even fit in a year-long lecture series. This level of encouraging response was only realized through an informal network of those who participated in the initial planning of the lecture series. I should emphasize the key role of Kurdish women scholars in the work of KWSN.

The lecture series included nine panels with 32 paper presentations covering a wide range of topics such as politics, state violence, literature, ethnography, language, religion, diaspora, art, stories, love, sexuality, resistance, trauma, war, and prison. Sessions were attended by 40 to 100 participants. A dynamic scholarly collaboration among presenters and participants has been established and ideas of new research partnership are being cultivated. This burst of knowledge production is remarkable. It is a new beginning to push the boundaries of Kurdish feminist knowledge production and with it, the entire canon of Kurdish Studies. This work should be sustained and certainly needs to be expanded. It can take different forms beyond lecture series such as method workshops, or a theory reading circle, art club and story café. We all should contribute to the vitality of the KWSN’s efforts.

**KS:** How do you think scholars based at academic institutions in Europe and North America that have a lot of economic and cultural capital can or should be productively engaging with scholarship developed by women in Kurdistan, who are in many ways in structurally much more vulnerable positions?

**Mojab:** There is a lot that can be done. It requires hard work to convince academic institutions to allocate adequate resources to build, promote, and advocate for Kurdish Studies and Kurdish women’s studies. Though this is not only a financial matter, as with anything related to the Kurds or the Palestinians, it is deeply political too. For instance, Amir Hassanpour and I on several occasions received copies of letters written directly to the President of the University of Toronto from the Turkish embassy opposing our effort in

inviting scholars to campus or organizing panels, workshops, or seminars on this matter. The University, invoking the academic freedom policy and its commitment to freedom of expression and ideas, has always defended us. Several factors also contribute to the position of the University: the enormous popularity of Amir as a teacher who never compromised on his political and intellectual views on the right of the oppressed nations to defend themselves and fight for their rights, including the Indigenous people of Canada, Black peoples, Kurds and Palestinians as well as his international reputation as an outstanding Marxist Kurdish scholar, which was a major consideration in housing his unique archive at the University of Toronto's library, the first multilingual archive at the Robarts Library. I have continued Amir's legacy, and with the steady support from Toronto's Department of Near and Middle East Civilizations in the last three years, I have organized lecture series, arranged for the first course on "Introduction to Kurdish Language and Literature" (taught by Professor Jaffer Sheyholislami in the summer of 2020) and the course "Kurdish Women: History, Resistance, and Popular Culture" to be taught in the summer of 2021. I think it is safe to claim that the University of Toronto is becoming a hub of Kurdish Studies in North America. I have initiated conversations with the Women and Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto to sponsor the Kurdish Women's Studies Network Lecture Series as well as the course on Kurdish women.

In addition to programmatic efforts, we also should advocate for graduate level scholarships, post-doctoral opportunities, visiting scholars' programmes, and co-designing projects to provide research training for Kurdish women. Mentorship in surviving and thriving in academia is an essential component of these initiatives. Finally, the Kurdish community in diaspora certainly can play a major role in partnering with academic institutions to advance Kurdish Studies.

Having outlined these possibilities, let me end by reminding ourselves of the colossal destructive forces that Kurdish women, much like women in the entire MENA region, are facing today. Women are subjected to the harshest forms of national, religious, and gender oppression as well as being dispossessed and displaced by capitalist imperialism. However, Kurdish women have already made their own history by resisting these forces. This universal encounter of women in MENA (with all its particularities) with colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism should and could constitute a common/collective feminist narrative and praxis of revolutionary resistance where Kurdish women could play a vital role.

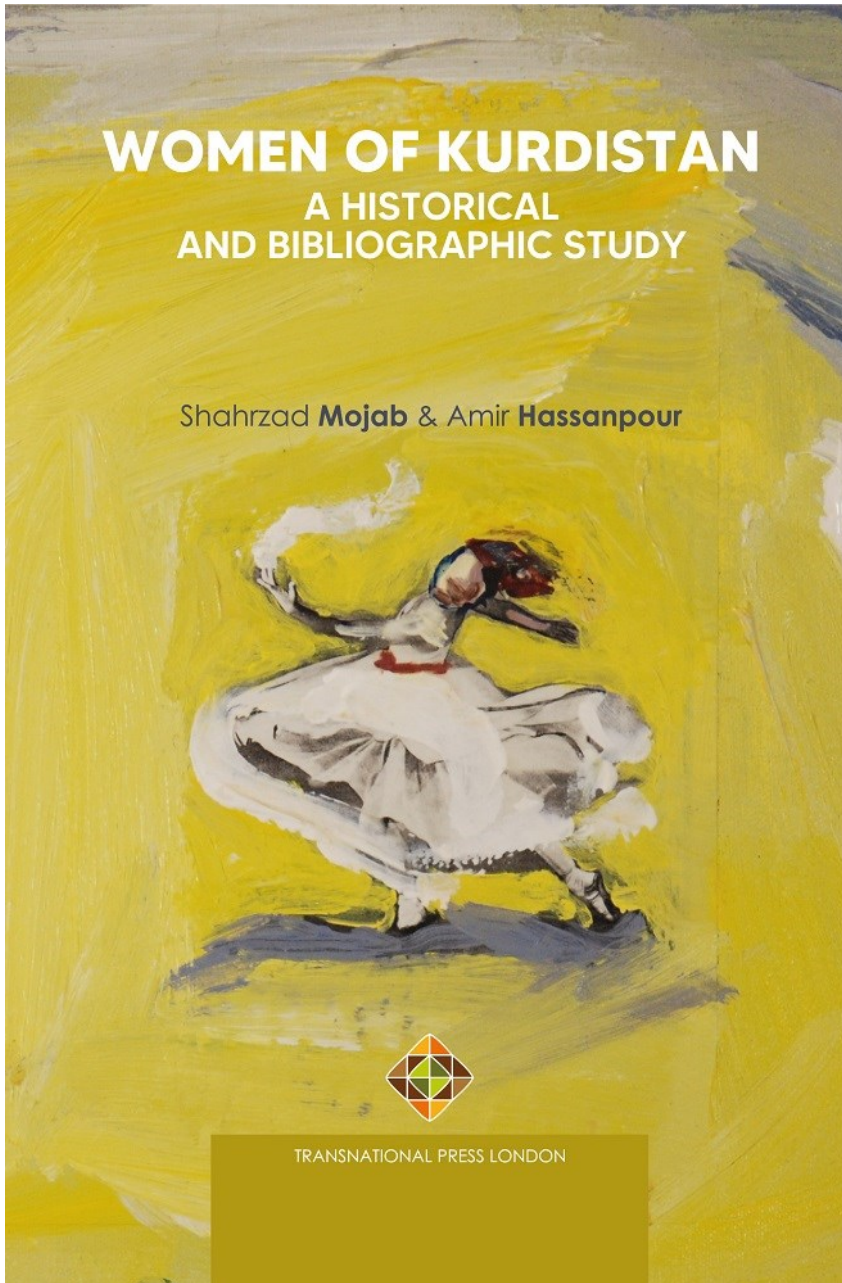
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