

From Self-Rule to Self-Immolation: Kurdish women's past and present

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Western travellers have marvelled at the fact that Kurdish women were governors and rulers during the Ottoman and Persian Empire where Kurds had self-governing regions, a fact that was not heard of in the neighbouring territories at that time. Well-known scholar in Kurdish studies, Martin van Bruinessen points out that 'In certain districts of Kurdistan, rule by women was in fact so common that it was explicitly referred to in the records of customary law (qanunname) compiled by the Ottomans.'¹ The constitution or qanunname for the area of Shahrizur contained provisions allowing succession by a daughter; common enough and apparently, according to van Bruinessen, quite well accepted.

Today however, the alarming rate of self-immolation among Kurdish women in Iran is highly concerning not only for this nation, but should be for all feminists and human rights activists around the globe. Suicide by burning makes up 0.06-1 per cent² of all suicides in developed countries. In Iran, up to 71 per cent³ of suicides are conducted via self-immolation, most of which are committed by women in the Provinces of Kermanshah, known as Kermashan among Kurds, and Ilam. The majority of victims are women between the ages of 18 and 27.⁴ This article will look at how Kurdish women have lived in the past, what has caused the social tragedy today and what preventative measures can and should be taken to improve their situation today.

History

Two contradictory images of Kurdish women float around in international media. They make headlines for being the brave female fighters fighting one of the most vicious groups of our time, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Kurdish women have also been seen as rulers of tribes and territories. They are the unveiled women of the Middle East who wear colourful dresses, dance hand in hand with men, and comfortably associate with them openly at work, war, and within the family.

On the other side of the spectrum, Kurdish women have been battered and even killed for honour, have been victims of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and most strikingly self-immolation, among other forms of visible and invisible violence. To understand the paradox, it is important to provide a historical context.

No matter what country Kurds have found themselves in, they have been perceived as a threat for the territorial integrity of the ruling states. This risk has been dealt with through annihilation and elimination—be it gassing, executions and arbitrary detentions—or assimilation through the destruction of their language and culture.

Despite the borders that have separated the Kurds across four different countries, the bitter history and tragedies they have in common has created a deep affinity among them and brought them closer together. Regardless of the dividing geo-political factors, what happens to Kurds in Turkey, for example, affects Kurds in Iran, Syria and Iraq. These experiences have affected Kurdish women and their position in both Kurdish society and the ruling societies of the territories they live in. Keeping this interconnection in mind is important in understanding the cross-country cultural influences that have shaped and continues to shape the realities of life for Kurdish women.

Kurdish women as rulers and governors

Kurdish history is rippled with examples of powerful women, including but not limited to Adele Khatun of Ardalan family (in present day Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province, Iran) who married Osman Pasha of Halabja who instituted a court of justice and became its president. Up to her death in 1924 she exercised her influence. In 1920, Hapsa Khan (in Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan) married the ruling family of Sheikh Mahmud's autonomous government. She valued education and pursued an agenda for women's literacy. Another example is that of Leyla Zana who started from humble beginnings and at 14 years old was pushed into a forced marriage to a distant relative who was almost 20 years her senior. He was also a Kurdish political leader but she outgrew her husband and became one of the most prominent Kurdish personalities. She is currently a member of parliament in Turkey.⁵

¹ Martin van Bruinessen, 'From Adela Khanun to Leyla Zana: Women as Political Leaders in Kurdish History' in: Shahrzad Mojab (ed.), *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2001, pp. 95-112, http://www.let.uu.nl/~martin.vanbruinessen/personal/publications/Bruinessen_From_Adela_Khanun_to_Leyla_Zana.pdf

² Zainab Suhrabi, Ali Delpisheh, and Hamid Taghinejad, *Tragedy of women's self-immolation in Iran and developing communities: a review*, September 2012, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3462521/>

³ Ibid Suhrabi, Delpisheh and Taghinejad

⁴ Ibid Suhrabi, Delpisheh and Taghinejad

⁵ Martin van Bruinessen, 'From Adela Khanun to Leyla Zana: Women as Political Leaders in Kurdish

Kurdish women's organizations

The second ever official organization for Kurdish women in Iran was established in 1945 during the Kurdistan Republic (also known as Mahabad Republic). The first such organization was established by the elite in Istanbul in 1919. During the period of Kurdish autonomy, the Women's Party Hizbi Jenan started its activity, encouraging women to step out of their homes and participate in public life. Chapter 4, Article 21 of the constitution states that, 'In all political, economic and social affairs women should enjoy equal rights with men.'⁶ Two out of the 16 leaders who spoke on 18 January 1946 were women. Their names were Khajijay Sediqi and Ismat Qazi, both called for women's education.

In the modern day, Kurdish women in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Northern Iraq have been successful at building women's shelters, assigning a hotline specifically for victims of domestic violence, and raising awareness about women's rights. Despite such bright spots in Kurdish history- also reflected in Kurdish folklore -many Kurdish traditions, some outlined above, have been and are at their heart incompatible with modern feminist ideas. Never in Kurdish history have women been perceived as independent individuals with equal rights but rather they have been valued in their roles as mothers of the homeland. Nonetheless, understanding the history is important to realize that for Kurds statelessness goes hand in hand with gender oppressions.

Self-immolation in Iranian Kurdistan

In Iran misogynistic laws have affected all women regardless of their religion, ethnicity, disability or sexual orientation but oppression is multi-layered for non-dominant groups, namely women who are not 12- Imam Shia Persians who make up the majority of the Iranian population. Kurdish women in particular have experienced a variety of levels of discrimination: national chauvinism of the ruling nations, male chauvinism of own nation, misogyny of Islamic groups, and continuing war. Statelessness has also caused Kurdish women to be ignored and excluded in Middle Eastern and Western studies.

Today Kermashan Province has some of the highest rates of female self-immolation around the world. Research undertaken in Kermashan Hospital showed that victims of self-inflicted burning were often female, older, little educated (illiterate or only educated to primary school level) and married. In Kurdistan Province, another research showed, 58 per cent of burn patients were under the age of 20, rates of mortality were 76.5 per cent, with higher mortality in female than in males. The common causes that patients stated were: spouse's addiction, polygamy, lack of spouse's understanding and age difference.⁷

Mental disorders

The taboos surrounding mental health have made it difficult for people to understand depression for example, which is a common cause of suicide. Research shows 22 per cent of those who commit suicide suffer from depression, 6.3 per cent from panic disorders, and 6 per cent from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). In most of the patients, a family history of suicide exists.⁸ Thus, a lack of awareness about mental health results in a lack of diagnosis and prevention, so affected individuals do not receive the help they need. On top of the social stigma, Kurds generally distrust the authorities, including the social and healthcare system, which adds to the challenge of being able to ask for help when it is needed.

Economy

One of the problems most self-burn victims had in common was poverty. In the Kurdish region in Iran unemployment or underemployment triggers a sense of vulnerability and can cause individuals to worry about their future; it also creates a sense of loss and loneliness, especially because of reduced social support; and the lack of health insurance coupled with the deteriorating situation aggravates the consequences of stressful life events.

Some women whose duties are unpaid and underappreciated - usually household work and taking care of children - experience social and financial dependence. This in turn can cause a negative sense of self and have negative impacts on self-esteem. The chain reactions can lead to, for example, having poor problem-solving skills and an inability to consider the consequences of an attempted self-immolation which include

History' in: Shahrzad Mojab (ed.), *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2001, pp. 95-112, http://www.let.uu.nl/~martin.vanbruinessen/personal/publications/Bruinessen_From_Adela_Khanum_to_Leyla_Zana.pdf

⁶ Shahrzad Mojab (ed.), *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2001 and *Women and Nationalism in the Kurdish Republic of 1946* http://sites.utoronto.ca/wwdl/publications/english/mojab_03.pdf

⁷ Groohi, Bahram, et al. 'Suicidal behaviour by burns among adolescents in Kurdistan, Iran: A social tragedy.' *National Center for Biotechnology Information*. U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2002.

⁸ Mehdi Ghazinour, Naser Mofidi, Jorg Richter, *Continuity from suicidal ideations to suicide attempts? An investigation in 18-55 years old adult Iranian Kurds*, October 2010, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19756339>

disfigurement, embarrassment, and disability. Use of fire in this context can also be an impulsive choice since the elements required for self-burning can be readily available in most households.

Culture

In a strictly male-dominated society where masculine identity is defined based on a man's level of control over women, the female body is considered the property of male members of the family. For these women using fire is the loudest cry for help given they feel that their only act of control over their body is burning it. Self-immolation, when repeated too often becomes part of the culture as well, in Iranian society people have frequently heard the phrase 'I will burn myself' since childhood and no longer shudder at hearing it.

Ethnocentrism of mainstream feminists

An unacknowledged source of division among feminists in Iran is the ethnocentrism of the dominant group. Most female activists are either unaware that ethnicity and feminism intersect, or are simply too afraid to discuss this important subject, which has become taboo. Iran has long strived to assimilate the ethnic and religious minorities within its borders.⁹ Discussing the individuality of various groups frightens Iranians who believe that diversity would endanger their land by instigating separatist outlooks. Separatism in Iran is not seen as a political term; it equates with 'treason'. Kurdish women, therefore, are not recognized as a nation with legitimate rights. Thus, the ethnically oppressive policies of the government which directly affect women are denied or overlooked.

In their denial of intersectionality, women activists have turned into agents of patriarchy and reproduce national chauvinism. This is also true of some feminists born and raised outside of the capital. They strive to help the mainstream voice become the only voice addressing women's plights. Since they feel it is the only powerful voice acknowledging the plight of women, they feel they should give the mainstream their allegiance and attention.

My Stealthy Freedom campaign, during which women posted pictures of themselves on social media platforms without a headscarf, gained tremendous support.¹⁰ As did the campaign to allow women to enter sports stadiums - a space which is usually off-limits to female fans. While these are worthwhile causes, activists need to understand that in a country where women suffer from the severe injustice of polygamy, suicide, FGM and honour killing, campaigns need to go beyond awareness-raising and challenge the structural and institutional issues which create an enabling environment for all forms of violence. However giving priority to such issues would mean airing the dirty laundry of an already demonized nation that tries too hard to show the world it is westernized despite its theocratic government.¹¹

Additionally husbands and fathers who are oppressed themselves tend to be more violent with their female counterparts.

Overall, Kurdish women in Iran suffer from a combination of ethnic, political, economic and gender-based oppression. While marginalized activists acknowledge that all women in Iran are subject to discrimination, they believe that focusing only on the situation of the dominant group means turning a blind eye to the realities suffered by millions of women who live outside of Tehran, or in its slums, and thus further ostracizing the plight of neglected women. As long as dominant Iranian feminists fail to acknowledge the ethnocentrism in their own backyard and the simultaneous oppression that underserved women experience, they are (unwitting) agents of patriarchy by reproducing national chauvinism.

Conclusion

The history of the Kurdish women's emancipation movement, like the Kurdish people, is suppressed. But a liberated progressive society needs free, educated, and active women. Nationalism should not remain a watchdog for feminism. Regardless of where the culture got contaminated by misogyny, ensuring women can claim and exercise their rights is a process of unlearning. Self-immolation, one of the loudest protests, creates a vicious circle: becoming a familiar and common event so much so that the gravity of this act might be lost upon potential victims. Education, awareness and prevention can reduce this social tragedy. By travelling to girls' and boys' high schools, using the media and social media, activists and health professionals can generate much-needed discussions about gender equality, suicide, prevention and consequences.

⁹ Ava Homa, Ethnocentrism, the weakness of Iranian democratic movements, Kurdistan 24, February 2016, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/opinion/9b053ced-46cf-44bb-aabb-96849f67052a/Ava-Homa>

¹⁰ My Stealthy Freedom, <http://mystealthyfreedom.net/en/>

¹¹ Christopher Thornton, The Iran We Don't See: A Tour of the Country Where People Love Americans, Atlantic, June 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/06/the-iran-we-dont-see-a-tour-of-the-country-where-people-love-americans/258166/>

