

THE ROLE OF KURDISH WOMEN IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST ANTI-FEMINIST CURRENTS AND THE PURSUIT OF FEMINIST REVOLUTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Carola Bader¹

ABSTRACT

This article examines the pivotal role of Kurdish women in the Middle East, highlighting their resistance to anti-feminist Sharia currents and their commitment to promoting feminist revolution and political self-determination. The Kurdish population, scattered across countries such as Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, has historically faced political challenges. In this context, women have emerged as formidable forces of resistance. The paper highlights the importance of Kurdish women in combating extremist entities, particularly the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and the Islamic regime in Iran. It also navigates the complicated landscape of Sharia law, analyzing its impact on women's rights and drawing comparisons with other monotheistic religions. A striking observation from the study is the proactive and robust participation of Kurdish women in political and civil society movements. Through their advocacy, they not only stand up for their rights, but also challenge and disrupt entrenched patriarchal norms. Through a variety of strategies, initiatives and organizations, Kurdish women have been instrumental in bringing about tangible changes in laws and policies. The findings of this article underscore the transformative potential of Kurdish women's activism. Their efforts have profound implications for the advancement of gender equality and political empowerment in the region, and offer valuable insights for policymakers and civil society organizations committed to advancing women's rights and promoting greater political engagement.

Key words: Kurdish women, Gender equality, Middle East, Sharia influence.

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¹ SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw. Poland.
E-mail: carola.bader@jcloud.com.

1. Introduction

Kurdish women's activism in the Middle East has become a major topic of interest in contemporary academic and political discourse. This article aims to elucidate the impact of Kurdish women in the struggle against anti-feminist Sharia currents and to raise awareness of their role in promoting feminist revolution and political self-determination among the Kurdish people.

Different aspects such as Kurdish settlements and their political interdependence, the role of women in Islam and the meaning of Sharia for women, Kurdish women's strategies, initiatives, organizations and political movements as well as their influence on changes in laws and political decisions will be considered.

In particular, the role of Kurdish women in the fight against the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria or against the Islamic regime in Iran has shown that women in this region can make a crucial contribution to liberation from anti-feminist and even extremist forces.

The findings have the potential to contribute significantly to the advancement of gender equality and political empowerment of the Kurdish population in the region. In addition, they will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers and civil society organizations in developing strategies to strengthen women's rights and increase women's political engagement.

2. The Kurdish People and their Political Interdependence

2.1. Kurdish Settlements and Political Situation

The Kurdish population is the largest ethnic group without its own state and is mainly distributed in four countries: Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey (Gunter, 2004, p. 197). It is estimated to be between 25 and 30 million, although figures can vary due to the political sensitivity of the issue (Britannica, 2023). The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but there are also Shiite and Alevi Muslims, as well as other religious minorities (Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker, n.d.). The Kurdish language belongs to the Indo-European language family and has several dialects (Indiana University Bloomington, n.d.).

The political situation of the Kurds varies greatly from country to country: The Iranian state has exerted a strong influence on the Kurdish party landscape, especially since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The relationship between the Iranian government and the Kurdish population has historically been tense, marked by discrimination, repression, and struggles for autonomy (The Kurdish Project (Iran), n.d.).

Kurds in Iraq have a long history of discrimination under Saddam Hussein's regime. He was notoriously brutal toward the Kurds, using chemical weapons

against the Kurdish population in the late 1980s (Muhammad, Hama & Hamakarim, 2022). In Iraqi Kurdistan, the population has gained some autonomy over time, especially after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 (Kurdistan Institution for Strategic Studies & Scientific Research, n.d.), see *The Special Status of Iraqi Kurdistan and its Significance*.

Syrian Kurds have faced significant challenges and oppression under the Syrian government. The situation changed following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, which created a power vacuum and allowed the Kurds to establish de facto autonomous regions. However, the civil war led to the rise of various resistance groups, most notably IS, against which the Kurds played an important role (Minority Rights Group International, 2018), see *Syria: Kurdish Women in the Fight Against IS and its Impact on Women's Rights*.

In Turkey, the Kurds have long been oppressed, and their struggle for recognition and autonomy has led to a long-running armed conflict with the Turkish government (Van Bruinessen, 1984). A major player in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict is the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), a militant group fighting for Kurdish autonomy and listed as a terrorist organization by the European Union, among others. In recent years, the Turkish government under the AKP (Justice and Development Party) and President Erdoğan has adopted an increasingly nationalist, conservative and authoritarian religious stance that negatively affects the rights of the Kurdish population (Walker, Gill & Curtis, 2021).

2.2. The Special Status of Iraqi Kurdistan and its Significance

Iraqi Kurdistan is an autonomous region in northern Iraq. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the region has had a special status within the country and is largely independent of the central government in Baghdad (Kurdistan Institution for Strategic Studies & Scientific Research, n.d.).

The special status of Iraqi Kurdistan has created both opportunities and challenges for the Kurdish population. On the one hand, it has led to a stronger political and cultural identity and made Iraqi Kurdistan a major political and economic force in the region. The Kurdish autonomous region has become a major strategic player, a place of stability and a reliable partner in terms of security for the West (Gürbey, 2020).

On the other hand, the special status is also perceived as a threat and has created tensions with the central government in Baghdad and neighboring states (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.).

The autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan also has implications for women's rights and the role of Kurdish women in society. For example, compared to central Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan has much stricter laws in cases of violence against women. In 2011, a law was passed to combat domestic violence, including life sentences for so-called honor killings (Schaer, 2023). Moreover, as far as politics is concerned, there is a 30 % quota for women in the Kurdistan Regional Parliament (Middle East Research Institute, n.d.).

3. Sharia and Anti-Feminist Laws in the Middle East

3.1. Sharia: Definition and Background

Sharia is an Islamic legal system that influences the legal codes of most Muslim countries and is based on the teachings of the Quran and Sunna, the traditions and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. It emerged several centuries after the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632 CE. The Prophet's life and practices served as a model for Muslims, and were compiled by scholars into a collection called the Hadith.

Sharia covers a wide range of topics, including marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance, while also providing guidance for various aspects of Muslim life, from daily habits to religious and family duties, and financial matters.

Its implications for personal status and criminal law have generated considerable debate. Certain interpretations have been used to rationalize harsh punishments such as stoning and amputation, and to perpetuate gender inequality in matters of independence, dress, and inheritance. In particular, extremist groups such as IS have gained notoriety for using brutal methods such as stoning and crucifixion, that have rarely been used in the history of Islam. Additionally, vigilante justice occurs, with honor killings being a global issue. Other controversial practices associated with Sharia debates include female genital mutilation, polygamy, child and adolescent marriage and gender-biased inheritance laws (Johnson & Sergie, 2014, pp. 1–2).

3.2. Women's Rights under Sharia and in Monotheistic Religions

In many Islamic countries, Sharia law is used as the basis for legislation, with varying implications for women's rights (Johnson & Sergie, 2014, pp. 1–2). It can be noted that almost all countries with predominantly Muslim populations have signed international agreements to promote women's rights (Heyzer, n.d.). However, this can be countered by the fact that Muslims who support Sharia as the law of their country are often, though not always, less supportive of women's rights and gender equality and more supportive of traditional patriarchal gender roles (Pew Research Center, 2013, p. 99).

Compared to other monotheistic religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, there are both differences and similarities in terms of women's rights. While all three religions have certain patriarchal structures, they differ in the way they interpret and practice women's rights. Each of the religious codes has different interpretations, and in some areas of Christianity and Judaism, reform in interpretation has already led to major advances in women's rights. In Islam, while there is no institutionalized branch of reform, there are calls for new

interpretations from women's movements and individual activists, intellectuals, and even religious leaders (Raday, 2012, p. 213).

Sharia plays an important role in determining women's rights in many Islamic countries, but it is also important to consider the impact of local cultural practices and traditions. There is considerable disagreement as to which practices are sanctioned by the Quran and which derive from pre-Islamic local customs (Johnson & Sergie, 2014, p. 2).

3.3. Anti-Feminist Trends in the Middle East and their Impact on Women's Rights

Anti-feminist currents in the Middle East are often the result of cultural, political, and religious factors that undermine women's rights. Women's rights and gender equality are repeatedly challenged by religious fundamentalism and conservative, anti-feminist positions to advance political goals. In doing so, religion and culture are used by the extremists to justify violence and misogynistic laws and practices (Heyzer, n.d.).

Another factor contributing to the emergence of anti-feminist currents in the Middle East is an extreme view of Islam that rejects Western values, which are often perceived as a threat to cultural and religious identities. As a result, some political and religious groups, particularly extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and IS, have developed a hostile attitude toward Western feminism and women's rights, which they view as incompatible with Islamic values. Accordingly, however, these views are not representative of the majority of the Islamic population in the Middle East (Voke, 2018, p. 8).

4. Recent Events in Syria and Iran: The Role of Kurdish Women

4.1. Syria: Kurdish Women in the Fight Against IS and its Impact on Women's Rights

This article focuses on the role of Kurdish women in Syria and Iran, as these countries have been of particular interest in recent years due to their political dynamics and the resulting impact on the Kurdish population.

During the conflict with the IS, Kurdish women, especially members of the Yazidi religious minority, were systematically abducted, raped, and enslaved (Deutscher Bundestag, 2022).

One of the most striking developments has been the active involvement of Kurdish women in the resistance against the IS in Syria, more specifically the Kurdish region Rojava. The People's Protection Units, or YPG, gained global recognition when they defended the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobane against the IS. They serve as the military arm of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which was

founded in 2003 and is the Syrian branch of the Turkish PKK. Due to a gender quota, 40% of the People's Protection Units in each region belong to its female branch, the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) (O'Driscoll, 2015, pp. 1–2).

The YPJ have played a very important role in retaking control of Kobane from IS. Since female fighters know what awaits them if they are captured by IS, the only way to escape is to succeed in battle or commit suicide. For this reason, the YPJ is feared by IS because, according to their interpretation, being killed by a woman is a disgrace that will keep you out of paradise.

Through their active participation in the fighting in Syria, the YPJ have attracted the attention of feminists around the world and raised awareness of the plight of the Kurdish people both in Syria and beyond (The Kurdish Project (YPJ), n.d.).

But the YPJ are not only fighting against IS, they are also fighting misogynistic norms and structures in society. Their goal is to put an end to any policy of extermination against women as a systematic means of war and to defend their homeland. By fighting for a free life and for women's liberation, the YPJ have become a symbol of resistance against patriarchal oppression worldwide and an inspiration for many feminist movements (Women Defend Rojava, 2023).

4.2. Iran: The Kurdish Opposition to the Islamic Regime and its Ideology

In Iran, the Kurdish communities also have a long history of resistance against the regime of the Islamic Republic. In particular, Kurdish political parties such as the Democratic Party of Kurdistan-Iran (PDKI) and the Komala Party have fought against the oppression of the Kurdish population (Van Bruinessen, 1986).

Kurdish women have been active in political and civil society movements in Iran, advocating for their rights. The current protest movement in Iran, sparked by the death of Jîna Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish Iranian woman, is undergoing a revolutionary process. The protests quickly spread throughout the country and beyond its borders, taking on a political dimension. The core slogan of the movement is Jin, Jiyan, Azadî (Woman, Life, Freedom).

The protests have a broad social base in terms of class and ethnicity. In particular, women, youth, students and marginalized ethnic groups are participating in the protests against unemployment and discrimination. Especially women face structural discrimination in the Islamic Republic, as evidenced by the fact that they are twice as likely to be unemployed as men, and their participation rate in the labor market is only one-fifth.

The regime has brutally cracked down on arrested protesters, with reports of both physical and psychological torture and rape by security forces in Iranian prisons (Fathollah-Nejad, 2023).

These movements make an important contribution to strengthening women's rights and challenging the conservative and misogynistic ideologies promoted by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

5. Kurdish Women as a Counterweight to Anti-Feminist Currents and Laws

5.1. Strong female Kurdish Figures then and now

Kurdish society and street life are notoriously male-dominated. However, there are strong female figures in Kurdish history who have held high political and even military positions. For example, the Kurdish leader Adela Khanum and the politician Leyla Zana are well known and an inspiration to many Kurds when it comes to the role of women in society (Van Bruinessen, 2000, pp. 9, 11–12, 27–28).

In addition, the displacement and diaspora of Kurdish women has led them to draw global attention to themselves and to advocate for their rights. Düzen Tekkal, for example, represents strong Kurdish women as a role model at the international level and uses her influence to ensure that German politicians, among others, focus their attention on the Kurds and especially on Kurdish women and the development of their universal human rights (ZDF, 2022). She runs a non-governmental organization (NGO) that provides protection and assistance, particularly to Yazidi women in northern Iraq who have been cruelly persecuted by IS (Hoffmeyer, 2023). The recognition of IS crimes against the Yazidi people as genocide by the German Bundestag is also due to the efforts of the NGO (HÁWAR.help, 2023). Furthermore, as a result of the efforts of Middle Eastern women, including those in the diaspora, the United Nations Human Rights Council, at the request of Germany and others, addressed the situation in Iran and adopted a resolution at a special session of the UN Human Rights Council calling for an independent investigation into the ongoing violence against peaceful demonstrators in Iran (Die Bundesregierung, 2022).

5.2. Kurdish Women's Strategies and Initiatives to Strengthen Women's Rights

Over the years, Kurdish women have developed various strategies and initiatives to strengthen women's rights within their communities and to counter anti-feminist tendencies. One of the most important strategies is to promote women's political and social participation and increase their presence in political decision-making processes. In recent decades, socioeconomic and political

changes have led to an improvement in the social status of Kurdish women, and they have even become a symbol of a fundamental change in the perception of gender roles in the Middle East (Alizadeh, Kohlbacher, Mohammed & Vaisi, 2022).

In the Kurdish region of Rojava in Syria, an autonomous democratic administration led by democratic communes and councils emerged in 2012. Through the commune and council system, women have made significant progress, playing a crucial role in organizing the communes and reconciliation committees. Their social standing has evolved due to their active involvement in public life (Rojava Information Center, 2022). In addition, a system of co-chairs has been adopted, whereby each political post is held jointly by a man and a woman to ensure gender equality and fair representation (Siwed, n.d.).

Similarly, Kurdish women in Iran have advocated for more equitable participation of women in political parties and civil society organizations. Despite historical progress and reforms, such as educational reforms or the introduction of women's voting rights, women's presence in politics and the labor market remains low. Nevertheless, women have increased their presence in the public sphere through cultural and social developments, higher education, and social media. In addition, a number of women's advocates have launched campaigns aimed at increasing political participation through the implementation of gender quotas and changing the male-dominated composition of parliaments (Alizadeh, Kohlbacher, Mohammed & Vaisi, 2022).

5.3. The Role of Kurdish Women's Organizations and Political Movements

Kurdish women's organizations play a crucial role in strengthening women's rights and challenging anti-feminist tendencies in the region by providing direct support and education to women as well as raising awareness.

For example, in addition to the commune and council system in Rojava, women have established their own institutions and organizations. One notable example is Kongreya Star, formerly Yekîtiya Star, a women's organization that acts as a coordinating body for various institutions focused on women's empowerment in northeastern Syria (Rojava Information Center, 2022).

It is the umbrella organization of the Foundation of Free Women of Rojava (WJAR), which was founded in 2014 by seven women and focuses on education, health, press and public relations, economy, projects and research. Specifically, WJAR aims to support women in the process of emancipation, for example by working on the health and psychological care of women and children, including the possibility of coming to terms with traumatic experiences of violence.

In addition, through its preschools, children receive an education based on equality regardless of gender, religion or ethnicity. Women also receive training and work in different areas thanks to various collaborations (Nüdem, n.d.).

In Iran, Kurdish women's organizations such as the East Kurdistan Free Woman Society (KJAR) work for gender justice, the empowerment of women both within the Kurdish community and in Iranian society at large, and resistance to discriminatory laws and practices (The East Kurdistan Free Woman Society (KJAR), 2016).

5.4. Kurdish Women's Influence on Changes in Laws and Political Decisions

Kurdish women's efforts, involvement and influence in strengthening women's rights and demanding equality have in some cases led to changes in laws and policies. In Rojava, for example, new legal frameworks allow women to claim inheritance rights previously denied to them. Furthermore, violence against women is largely no longer accepted. Communes and committees assist both women and men in addressing issues of violence, with reconciliation committees offering particular support (Rojava Information Center, 2022).

In Iran, political change is less visible, but while there are no obvious cracks in the elite, there are signs of divisions within the regime over the current movement. High-ranking regime officials have expressed serious concern about the ongoing protests - especially given the leading role of women and the powerful symbolism of abandoning the state-mandated hijab, or Islamic veil. The protests have shown that Iranians are raising the same revolutionary demands as during the Arab Spring, and that there is an irreversible rift between the state and society (Fathollah-Nejad, 2023).

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the findings show the diversity and complexity of the situation of Kurdish women in the Middle East. The various political, social and cultural factors at play in different countries and regions affect both the rights of Kurdish women and their role in society.

The application of Sharia, other discriminatory laws, and patriarchal mindsets and structures have left women in many Middle Eastern countries disadvantaged and struggling to assert their rights. However, Kurdish women's activism against anti-feminist trends and laws has demonstrated that women are a critical force for political and social change in the region. For example, through their participation in political movements and the establishment of women's organizations, Kurdish

women have helped to challenge gender inequality and misogynistic practices, ensure that feminist demands are heard, and thus can serve as an inspiration for other women's movements.

By understanding these factors and their interactions, policymakers, civil society organizations, and researchers can develop more effective strategies to improve women's rights and status in their communities and beyond, as well as their ability to act as a counterbalance to anti-feminist trends and laws. In particular, governments and political parties in the Middle East should recognize the importance of strengthening women's rights and promoting women's political and social participation, and include this in their policy programs and legislation. Civil society organizations should continue to support initiatives and programs that address gender inequality, for example by working with Kurdish and other regional feminist organizations.

Future research can focus on further examining the role of Kurdish women in strengthening women's rights and challenging anti-feminist trends and laws, as well as the effectiveness of strategies and initiatives to promote women's rights in different countries in the Middle East.

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