

## Kurdish women's issues and Kurdish nationalism in Southern Kurdistan

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### Abstract

This study is a sociological theoretical perspective that aims to respond to the primary issue, which illustrates the relationship between Kurdish nationalism and women's rights in Southern Kurdistan. This article relies on analytical criticism of the relationship between feminism and nationalism in Southern Kurdistan from the Intersectionality theory. Through this theory, efforts are made to show the struggle of Kurdish women to achieve their rights and their identity through Kurdish nationalism in Southern Kurdistan, in which the main obstacles to participating in society have been gender inequality or other issues, for example, ethnic minority, social class or other issues as intersectionality theory emphasis on it. The study's results demonstrate how nationalism and anti-authoritarian movements paved the way for women to participate alongside men in all areas, such as political, economic and social. As can be seen in this study, Kurdish nationalism has been important for the affirmation of social and political freedom of the Kurdish nation by women in Southern Kurdistan. However, Kurdish nationalist leaders in Southern Kurdistan have not entirely given the rights that women demanded.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality theory, Feminism, Gender, nationalism, Southern Kurdistan,

### Introduction

A critical and dynamic area of focus in modern academic studies is the interaction between nationalism and women. While many academics have examined the complex interactions between sexual, gender, and race orientation in the context of nationalism, another aspect of this nuanced connection puts masculinity in the spotlight. This aspect reveals a historical narrative in which men have traditionally held the position of the nation's protectors, holding the power to protect its sovereignty, whereas women have traditionally been revered as the nation's nurturing mothers, holding the power to ensure its survival and continuity.

It set out on a quest to uncover the tremendous influence that gender roles and identities have on the country's creation and maintenance as it explores the complex terrain of gendered nationalism. It explores the many layers of perception, identity, citizenship, and the changing roles of men and women within national identity. In order to understand the complex and frequently disparate experiences and contributions of men and women in the context of nationhood, it must critically study and interrogate the intersections of gender and nationalism as it navigates this diverse environment. [jzsb.univsul.edu.iq](http://jzsb.univsul.edu.iq)

Furthermore, it needs to consider how these processes relate to more significant problems like citizenship, social justice, and equality, opening up a more exhaustive discussion beyond academia's conventional confines.

In the modern world, which is characterised by shifting concepts of gender, identity, and nationhood, this academic study emerges as a crucial conversation. As it explores this topic, it will interact with a rich tapestry of historical viewpoints, modern discoveries, and varied voices from inside and beyond the academic community. By providing a thorough and nuanced knowledge of the role of gender in establishing, testing, and rewriting the parameters of national identity, this comprehensive research aims to uncover the complexity and contradictions present in the interaction between women, men, and nationalism.

In this article, we will endeavour to discuss the feminist movement in Southern Kurdistan between the struggle for the liberation of Kurdistan and its participation in the solution of national problems and work to achieve freedom and restore women's deprived rights in society, especially after the establishment of the KRG in 1991. Moreover, this paper relies on analytical criticism of the relationship between feminism and nationalism in Southern Kurdistan from the Intersectionality perspective.

### **The Status of Kurdish Women in History**

Marx's statement that the "accumulation of wealth" is the first step towards the occupation of man and the seizure of all energy and wealth, a way of oppressing man by man, and the beginning of the creation of class society (Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2017). The role of the economy in maintaining strength and balance in all areas of society is significant. Therefore, based on Marx's statement, human beings try to gain power and impose that power on all creatures and all the wealth and capital of the earth. Even though women have been subjected to economic, cultural and even political violence throughout the history of societies but, it can be mentioned that since the struggle of Kurdish nationalist political parties, especially after 1945, it has been claimed that women's rights have been given full attention alongside the nationalist struggle for independence in Southern Kurdistan. This is due to the establishment of women's organisations affiliated with the political parties in Southern Kurdistan, where women can also fight for their rights in society alongside men for the right to independence. Indeed, among the writings of missionaries, travellers, historians and researchers, there is a debate regarding the image of women in historical works and the role of Kurdish women in society. Some of them believe that Kurdish women have increased their freedom and played a more significant role in Kurdish society than women of other neighbouring nations; regarding Turkish, Arab and Persian women in terms of behaviour, the hijab is freer (Bengio, 2016). According to Joseph and Najmabadi's claim, Kurdish women were particularly distinct from other Muslim or Oriental women because they enjoyed more independence, according to European travellers and researchers. Moreover, they claim that "Kurdish men act equally with women. Kurdish women are jokingly looking at Turkish women who are seen as slaves to their husbands. There was a kind of family independence in Kurdistan, and this phenomenon was wrong from the perspective of the Ottomans (2005:360).

Historical evidence reveals that women's place in Kurdish history illustrates that sometimes women have played leading roles in Kurdish society. For example, they rose to leadership positions in social, religious, political, in certain circumstances, the military, a phenomenon not observed or documented in other Middle Eastern societies (Bengio, 2016), such as the Khanzad Sultan (Meer

Khanzad), who reigned over the Soran region to the east and northeast of Erbil in Southern Kurdistan in the middle of the 17th century, which is an example of a female monarch (Grabolle-Çeliker, 2018:241).

From a theological standpoint, Asenath Barzani, who lived in Southern Kurdistan in the 17th century (1590-1670) and took over as the leader of a yeshiva following the passing of her husband, might be mentioned as a spiritual figurehead of the Kurdish Jewry. She was chosen to lead the Yeshiva in Mosul, making her the first woman to hold such a position in the Jewish community of Kurdistan (Bengio, 2016:31-32).

If a sociological analysis of the position of Kurdish women in society in all four parts of Kurdistan, especially in Southern Kurdistan, it can be said that according to the above information, the Kurdish nation's culture is an entirely different culture compared to the dominant nations such as Turks, Arabs and Persians. They have occupied Kurdistan's land, religion and culture. The Kurdish nation has been seen throughout history that before modernity and the capitalist system left their influence on the society of Southern Kurdistan, Kurdish women had always respected Kurdish women and women and men have worked side by side in their daily lives regardless of gender differences. However, in addition to the influence of modernity and the global economic system, it becomes clear that the dominant nations mentioned above have always tried to adjust the culture of the Kurdish nation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Chapman (2019), many perspectives have been used to analyse nationalism, but the gender component has received less attention than it deserves. Today's populist nationalism, mainly developed by men, will respond directly to complex issues such as economic upheavals and migration and is secondarily focused on gender issues. Its underlying message is that males must protect their nation from actual and fictitious attacks, and women must bear the children who will make up the following generation to secure the country's survival.

According to proponents of the social learning perspective, children learn their gender because they are rewarded for acting appropriately for that gender. For instance, parents, especially mothers, shape their children's conduct by treating females and boys differently based on societal norms (Anthias and Davis, 1989; Holmes, 2007:43). In such projects, women are built as signs of national existence, unity, and liberation, and as border guards of ethnic, racial, social class and national differences, and femininity constructions are often as resources for national relations. As a result, women play an essential role in nation-building and ethnic-national identity in various ways, including generation, cultural reproduction, identity reproduction, and citizenship reproduction (Anthias and Davis, 1989).

Based on this information, although the Kurdistan political parties have tried to pay attention to the position of women in Southern Kurdistan alongside the national struggle, if we look at the situation of women in Southern Kurdistan, we see that their position is after men's position. This study shows that men are fighting for the country's defence and women's survival in continuing the national struggle, especially in children's birth. The nationalists of Southern Kurdistan believe that when their society achieves complete freedom, women can demand their rights like Western society. After the formation of the KRG in 1991, when the Kurdistan people achieved semi-independence, the struggle of women's organisations has been more for the sake of women's rights than national rights.

However, suppose we look at the relationship between nationalism and feminism from another perspective. In that case, it can be seen that both are closely linked in many Third World contexts, not only in the sense that nationalist movements frequently contributed to the emergence of feminism but also in the sense that both frequently collaborated to pursue a common objective—national independence from a colonial power. Nevertheless, in this partnership, developing countries' male nationalists always saw feminism as a second-class issue, delaying feminist project implementation until the nationalist cause had been victorious. However, as evidenced by their early stage of profound entwinement, the relationship between nationalism and developing nations' feminism cannot be permanently separated. This is demonstrated by the effort of other feminists and activists to maintain their tenuous links to nationalism; some even choose nationalism above feminism (Herr, 2003:135).

From the point of view of social sciences, especially sociology, we understand nationalism as an ideological movement for independence, unity and national identity, which is an analytical concept based on permanent reproduction and reappearance. Also, national identity is born of the concept of nation and the understanding of nationalism; that is until the idea of nationalism is created, national identity is not formed. Of course, depending on how a nation is defined or reacts to the concept of nationality, nationalism can be a positive mechanism that puts the country with the above all social attachments; in a way, the individual searches his or her knowledge of national identity. The discourse of nationalism seeks to establish the relationship between the essence of imagination within the national-political boundaries of a country and to reproduce and continue this process by resorting to a nation's common symbols and cultural and spiritual traditions. So, all sections of society have a sense of shared identity and temporarily ignore distinctions such as race, gender, religion and social stratification.

As Al-Ali and Pratt (2011: 343) point out, the reproduction of a sense of national identity without mobilising all social forces would not go anywhere, nationalism and anti-imperialism, bringing women into public action, the emotional and symbolic elements of these gender structures were used to create and build internal and external threats; Because the nation and nationalist leaders need them. Their freedom is a public mission before being an individual right, and one must find the fulfilment of his abilities in the nation.

### **Intersectionality Perspective**

We set out to study how the intersection of many elements, such as gender, ethnicity, religion, patriarchy, and social class and cultural practices, impacts the embodied experience of females in Southern Kurdistan in this paper, according to the intersectionality Perspective.

Intersectionality entered the feminist research literature in the socio-political context that black women often assumed that to be called a feminist, and they had to ignore the racial discrimination they experienced. At the same time, they felt that to gain their civil rights as blacks, they had to give up their gender (Mojab and Carpenter, 2019).

The origin of the term intersectionality goes back to the critical tradition of radical feminism, especially black feminism, and multiracial feminist movements in the first and second half of the 20th century in which feminists tried to show how the inferior position of a black woman it is intertwined with the identity of being a woman and being black so that it is not possible to understand these two in a separate way from each other. Thus, they challenged the idea that gender is the most important or the only determinant of women's destinies. Nevertheless, at the same time, intersectionality is a

method and trend and an innovative and analytical tool that aims to show how forms of oppression and categories such as gender, race, class, migration, sexual orientation and even disability and other dimensions of identity Constructed, social at the same time have internal relations with each other and play a role in the formation and reproduction of all kinds of discriminations and systematic social inequality (Mojab and Carpenter, 2019; AleAhmad, 2023).

It can be said that Intersectionality, as one of the key feminist concepts, seeks to show racial diversity in gender and gender diversity in race and is used to explain the multiplicity of differences in the social structure. From the point of view of the Intersectionality theory, we can say that the problem of women in Southern Kurdistan is not only gender inequality problems but a relationship with the national issues such as the dominant nations such as Arab, Persian and Turkish nations, territories with Iraqi Government, ethnicity and language. Until Southern Kurdistan can achieve its independence, women in Southern Kurdistan cannot demand their rights like women in Western societies because they have not been captured in colonies.

Intersectional feminism is a branch of feminism claiming that all the discriminatory aspects of social and political identity, gender, race, class, gender, disability, etc., overlap. For example, a black woman is simultaneously subject to racial and gender discrimination. Intersectionality feminism, confirming that all women have different experiences and identities, separates itself from whites. Intersectional is an intellectual framework that examines the interruption of power relationships in more vulnerable strata of society. This approach suggests that it is not enough to explain where the oppression of women comes from, just a single-centric analysis, because people belong to different social, ethnic, religious, racial, and gender groups, leading to action. Furthermore, the reaction of social relations is with each other. As a result, the analysis must be multi-dimensional (Liasidou, 2013:299).

The main concepts of intersectionality theory are identity and experience, which are closely linked to mental experience and individual thought. The Intersectionality viewpoint states that multiple identities create new experiences that are distinct and necessary to minor identities or experiences that are not divided. So the cornerstone of Intersectional theory is that some individuals or groups differ from other individuals or groups based on their different experiences, so theorists of different identities such as race, gender class, and sexual orientation necessarily have the owners of these identities; they do not have identities, on the other hand, people with shared identities such as blacks or women who have different nationality and religions in Southern Kurdistan have a shared experience that can unite organically. It is an analytical framework to identify the intertwined power systems that affect those most marginalised in society. The intersectional considers that there are no different social layers such as ethnic minority, class, sexual orientation, age, religion, ritual, disability and gender. The theory, which began as an exploration of colourful women in society, is today an analysis likely to be dominated by all social categories, including social identities commonly seen when considered independently (Atewologun, 2018:13). In light of this, adopting this strategy makes it easier to comprehend how Kurdish female experience inequality with the patriarchal social and cultural practises that are ingrained in their community and family, as well as with the discriminatory legal system and gender discourses of their country and region.

### **The Goals of Feminism in Southern Kurdistan**

The patriarchal culture of Southern Kurdistan society served as the foundation for conventional gender roles. It can be claimed that the neighbouring societies' cultures and faiths also had a significant direct effect on Southern Kurdistan's gender relations. However, given their sociocultural history and relative tolerance, Kurdish women's standing was considered reasonable compared to their neighbours (Walby, 1990:20; Hassan, 2013). There have been examples of Kurdish women rising to high positions and becoming political, sometimes even military leaders and religious of their communities throughout Kurdish history (Grabolle-Çeliker, 2018:245).

Additionally, Kurdish women have historically had more freedom than their neighbours as Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran in terms of being able to wear bright costumes, dance with males, and not having to cover their hair (Bengio, 2016:33). A slogan of "moral superiority" over other cultures in the Middle East emerged in recent decades due to socioeconomic and political changes that raised the status of Kurdish women. This was especially true after the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was established and the start of the Rojava revolution (the Eastern Kurdistan) in 2014 which the involvement of Kurdish women in the guerrilla battle for national independence is the finest illustration of how certain women rose to political importance in Kurdistan (Bruinessen, 2001). In addition, we can mention an example: in agriculture and livestock, women in Southern Kurdistan often worked alongside men in the past, and the gender gap had not been enormous, especially in rural areas. Regarding the division of labour, there is still an increase in the number of women employees in institutions.

However, many women have devoted their lives to national liberation alongside the struggle for equality. The Kurdish national movement has had good and bad experiences dealing with women's issues. Women's activists, especially Kurdish feminists, are strongly critical of the Kurdish movement's agenda and its patriarchal design, while the National Front is somewhat critical of the behaviour of women activists (Aghaei, 2017). The main question is who benefits from this confrontation and polarisation of nationalism and feminism and whether these two movements' unity can ensure both sides' rights. On the one hand, women's freedom can open the potential of half of society for national struggle; on the other hand, the victory of the democratic national movement can change the situation of women as a legitimate political and legislative power.

In Southern Kurdistan, some views about the achievement of women's rights can be mentioned, such as those who agree and disagree with the equality of women's rights to a large extent, mainly composed of traditional people and religious. Another front that belongs to nationalism and Kurdish issues is that they believe the Kurdish nation does not have such issues. The history of Kurdish society has shown that it has been the protector of the rights of minorities, particularly such as women's rights. Several examples have been presented on this view that women in Kurdistan have played an influential role in the military, social and religious aspects throughout history. The opposite opinion has a Kurdish feminist view of women; some women activist and feminists see Kurdish nationalism as backward and believes that the national issue not only does not solve women's problems but also prevents women's activities and rights.

Despite these arguments in Southern Kurdistan, there is no doubt that the link between women and the Kurdish national movement has generated debate within Kurdish nationalism research. There is a lot of debate among academics about describing the role of women in nationalism and showing their relationship to nationalism. These arguments' origins may be traced back to the overt and covert roles that gender plays in nationalism. As nationality and citizenship are viewed as male problems, the

proportion of women and the gender component have typically been ignored in nation-building. In this sense, the "homeland" is typically associated with femininity. In modern literature, the invasion of Kurdistan is typically portrayed as a rape of the country, in which case males struggle to preserve women, children, and honour. For instance, Kurdistan, the name of the Kurds' homeland, has always been a female name in Kurdish (Aghaei, 2017: 29).

The article "The Effects of Political Parties on Women's Organizations" (Ali, 2020) illustrates that the political parties in Southern Kurdistan, alongside their national struggle for the liberation of Southern Kurdistan, have also established several women's organisations but at the same time, both the work of these organisations and members of these organisations. Their direction is the first part of the participation for the sake of the independence of Southern Kurdistan alongside men, then the struggle to defend and achieve women's rights.

Kurdish women from Southern Kurdistan have long been active in the fight for Kurdish rights. However, up until 1991, the fundamental goal of their battle was to secure national rights for the Kurdish nation, not to advance any gender-specific agenda. This has prompted some academics to assert that Kurdish nationalism mobilised women without altering the patriarchal relationships in Kurdish culture. Establishing the safe zone in 1991 made it possible for new political organisations to be formed, for women to return to participate in social life alongside Kurdish men in society, and for international NGOs to be established, giving Kurdish women new venues and chances to advance the cause of women's rights (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011; Mojab, 2004).

Based on the Intersectionality theory, we see the situation of women and compare the views of the nationalists of Southern Kurdistan (men and women) that women's problems are not just gender problems. The Intersectionality theory believes it includes several dimensions, such as political identity, ethnicity, race, and social class, especially with the position of the nation's dominant women. Therefore, the liberation of Southern Kurdistan has the potential for liberation of the Kurdish women too. This can be seen after establishing the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 1991.

Nevertheless, in some Western countries such as North America, Western European countries, and Australia, women's rights are guaranteed to some extent, and females are no longer worried about the fundamental right to life and fear of killing and cutting but strive for equality in most areas and be active. It can be said that today, the activities of women and feminists have entered another stage. However, in developing areas dominated by non-Western cultures, such as Asia, especially the Middle East, African and Latin American countries cannot be seen; for example, women in these countries are still deprived of their fundamental right to leave, receive the inheritance, stoning, dress, and drive, and dozens of such and thousands of cases of daily beatings and violence against women (Cohen, 2006:261).

Therefore, women have become victims of the masculine and nationalist policies of the dominant nations and the nationalism of the subjugated nations. Simultaneously, Kurdish nationalism is also one of the reasons for the liberation of women and the development of the feminist movement. Because the primary goal of the Kurdish national liberation movement is to liberate all Kurdish nation and Kurdistan land from all forms of oppression. So, feminism, like all other movements, emerged alongside the Kurdish national liberation movement (Randall and Waylen, 2001; Aghaei, 2017).

Many scholars, particularly in the nationalism field, believe that women's freedom depends on the freedom of the people and the country. Women are the most important and inseparable part of the people's struggle for freedom against colonialism. In another way, the liberation of any nation is when

women and girls are active in society and can influence society and play a role in decision-making (Jayawardena, 1986; Al-Ali and Tas, 2018). Therefore, it is challenging to distinguish feminism from nationalism in Southern Kurdistan because Kurdish nationalism is mixed with the goals of individuals, which is a universal humanitarian movement to achieve its political, administrative and cultural rights, not a racist and chauvinist nationalism.

Kurdish women often, for the sake of the success of the Kurdistan State project in all four parts of Kurdistan, especially in Southern Kurdistan, are ready to cooperate with the nationalists' project and simultaneously retreat from their feminist work and even the legitimate demands of women. The issue of national liberation is the main priority, which is significantly linked to the ruling political parties, especially national political parties; therefore, women's issues are placed as the second issue duty of the national liberation movement (Al-Ali and Käser, 2022). Despite this, nationalism in Third World countries is seen as one of the reasons for the backwardness of the feminist movement; joining the national liberation movement in Southern Kurdistan made it easier for women to find themselves alongside this work and take another step out of women's homes and performing another duty different from that of motherhood and child-rearing, upholding the role of women in struggle and politics, and demonstrating the importance of their presence within the general system of society (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011).

Suppose it looks at the struggles from the perspective of the intersectionality theory. In the case of the feminists, it can be seen that the nationalist struggle and the struggle of feminists vary from society to society. Society is the achievement of the right to independence and determines a specific map for Southern Kurdistan. Because Kurdish feminists know that their rights cannot be achieved without an independent country, and their problems can be resolved due to cultural influence, customs, policies and the economy of dominant nations such as Arabs, Persians and Turks who influence Southern Kurdistan. In any society, as the Intersectionality theory believes, women's problems cannot be viewed only from one dimension but also from several dimensions.

In the region and particularly in Southern Kurdistan, it is true that the violence and news of honour killings, which are supported by a large part of society, still exist. However, we must recognise some positive points: the number of ministers and responsible women in women's political participation is high in Southern Kurdistan institutions, especially after the regional government was established, unlike neighbouring women. Women's participation in positions and ranks is a norm and a step against gender discrimination, and they act as representatives of patriarchal thought. For example, Kurdish women's living conditions have improved compared to the rest of Iraq after the Kurdish area gained complete autonomy in 2005 under the KRG. It can be claimed that this is related to the KRG's ambition to increase its legitimacy abroad and independence and the engagement of NGOs, trade, politics, and diplomacy globally. On its official website, the Kurdistan Regional Government notes that it has lifted its gender quota from 36 members of parliament, which is around 30% currently serving in the 111-member Southern Kurdistan Parliament (Grabolle-Çeliker, 2018:245).

## Conclusion

It is clear that the Kurdish nationalists acknowledged the importance of women's role and their position for the survival and happiness of the Kurdish nation; they insisted on the fundamental role of Kurdish women in the field of national consciousness and national life in general. Differences or attempts to be different from other nations created some characteristics for Kurdish nationalism; it

can be claimed that this difference was due to the inability of other occupying nations of Turkish, Arab and Persian to consider the Kurds as having a different identity. They interpreted them differently and believed that Kurdish women were freer than other women in the countries, and even Islam, as the dominant religion in the region, could not restrict these freedoms in terms of education, hijab and many other things it is given.

The critical point is that Kurdish nationalism has devoted most of its efforts to achieving national rights and Kurdish authorities, which, at most stages, have tried for a suitable opportunity to provide Kurdish women so they can participate in Kurdish national liberation and society's daily affairs. Nevertheless, these attempts from Kurdish nationalist men were made for Kurdish women, but they thought it was nationality, not gender consciousness, and they expected women. Additionally, the difficult task of raising identity and national children is closer for Kurdish women to reading and idealistic discourse as religious people say there is a good woman behind every man; heaven is under the feet of mothers. Consciousness is for the sake of the ordinary mind of society or the central pillar of family strengthening.

According to the national struggle of Southern Kurdistan to achieve their legitimate national rights, for most feminists in Southern Kurdistan, this goal has been mixed with their demands; therefore, Kurdish feminism has developed within the national liberation movement. Although feminists can consider nationalism as a subject of men's hands, the struggle of feminists, along with women's freedoms and rights for the issue of the nation, is not a non-authentic act, even if they have criticism on this issue.

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