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The Struggles of the Kurdish Women's Movement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Abstract

This thesis explores the understudied topic of the Kurdish women's movement in Iraq. The study takes a critical look at institutionalization of the struggle for gender equality. Drawing on the ten interviews conducted with women activists in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, this study describes and analyzes their concerns about how institutionalizing the struggle has not only weakened the Kurdish women's movement, but has also narrowed their vision. Furthermore, it demonstrates how institutionalizing the struggle for gender equality has marginalized Kurdish women. In terms of theoretical framework, this study uses transnational and postcolonial feminist theories to look into the exploitation of Kurdish women who aspire to create gender equality through governmental and non-governmental institutions. Finally, this thesis illustrates the ways in which institutionalizing the struggle for gender equality has destroyed the potential for there to be a feminist identity in Kurdish politics.

Keywords: Kurds, women's movement, institutionalization, neoliberalism, gender equality

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Abstract | 2 |
| Acknowledgements | 3 |
| Table of Contents | 4 |
| 1. Introduction | |
| 1.1 Note on Terminology | 7 |
| 1.2 Research Purpose | 7 |
| 1.3 Disposition | 8 |
| 2. Contextualization | |
| 2.1 Brief History of the Kurds | 11 |
| 2.2 The Kurds in Iraq | 11 |
| 3. Literature Review | |
| 3.1 Against the <i>Nation</i> : Feminist Critiques of Nationalism | 14 |
| 3.2 Women's Movement in the Middle East | 15 |
| 3.3 Women's Movement in Iraq | 17 |
| 3.4 Kurdish Women's Movement in the KRI | 19 |
| 3.5 Conclusion | 22 |
| 4. Methods | |
| 4.1 Research Paradigm: Constructivism | 24 |
| 4.2 Qualitative Approach to Inquiry: Narrative Research | 24 |
| 4.3 Data and Data Collection | 25 |
| 4.4 Sampling: Convenience Sampling | 26 |
| 4.5 Individual Interviews | 26 |
| 4.6 Interview Participants | 27 |
| 4.7 Qualitative Research Questions | 29 |
| 4.8 Thematic Analysis | 29 |
| 4.9 Self Reflexivity | 29 |
| 4.10 Ethical Considerations | 30 |
| 4.11 Limitations and Delimitations | 30 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 5. Theoretical Framework | |
| 5.1 Transnational Feminism | 32 |
| 5.2 Postcolonial Feminism | 34 |
| 5.3 Conclusion | 36 |
| | |
| 6. Findings | |
| 6.1 Nepotism and Women in Power | 37 |
| 6.2 Women’s Organizations as an Offshoot of Party Politics | |
| 39 | |
| 6.3 The Myth of Law | 43 |
| 6.4 Nationalism, Patriarchy, Religion and Tradition | 46 |
| | |
| 7. Analysis | |
| 7.1 Kurdish Women’s Anti-History | 50 |
| 7.2 Privatization of Women’s Struggle for Gender Equality | 54 |
| 7.3 The New Understanding of Gender Equality | 56 |
| 7.4 Conclusion | 58 |
| | |
| 8. Conclusion | 59 |
| | |
| References | 60 |

1. Introduction

A few months ago I was surfing Facebook when I came across a live video of Khanim R. Latif,¹ the Executive Director of Asuda Organization, a woman's rights organization that battles violence against women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). She was talking about the causes of violence against women and advising young girls to behave themselves, that the Kurds live by tradition and that young women must learn to respect their families.² The comments on the video were mostly positive. People were thanking her for advising young girls to know their boundaries.

Women's organizations in the KRI have existed since 1991 when it became an autonomous region in Iraq and a safe haven for international organizations (David 2004, 155). However, the 1990s were a difficult time for Kurdish women due to the discourse that Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) used in order to ignite nationalism in the masses, but this changed after 2003. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) adopted UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Al-Ali, Pratt 2011). Nonetheless, murdering women in the name of honor is on the rise (Alinia 2016).

I found Khanim's discussion as representative of the discourse women's organizations have on the struggle against gender violence. Since 2003, there has been a mushrooming of women's organizations in Iraq as a whole and particularly in the KRI. Yet women's organizations have failed to represent a strong case against honor killings. The problem does not stop at women's organizations. In 2005, the KRG also adopted a 30 percent gender quota to all branches of governmental agencies. However, women in the government have also failed to pressure the government to implement laws that protect women from violence. In this regard, one can conclude that neither women's organizations nor the gender quota system have been able to become a backbone for the Kurdish women's movement. In fact, they have become another

¹ Khanim R. Latif was honored with the Vital Voices 15th Global Leadership Award for Human rights in 2016. Vital Voices is a non-governmental organization based in Washington D.C that focuses on training women activists throughout the world on areas such as human rights, economic development and women's political participation. To see more, go [here](#).

² Unfortunately, the video is no longer available on her page since it was a live video which is why I could not directly quote her.

platform in which the struggle for gender equality evaporates into thin air. With the aim to investigate the impact of institutions such as women's organizations or the gender quota system for the struggle for gender equality, I seek to answer the question provided below:

How has institutionalizing Kurdish women's struggle for gender equality caused grievances among the Kurdish women's movement in the KRI?

1.1 Note on Terminology

One of the first questions I asked myself was whether I could use the term "women's movement" for women's struggle for gender equality in the KRI. There are disputes between Kurdish women activists on whether there is a Kurdish women's movement. I decided to use the term for convenience. I use the term to refer to Kurdish women's struggle for gender equality. Secondly, I use the KRI and the KRG separately. The difference of usage is based on whether I am talking about the Kurdish government, or the Kurdish region as a whole. KRI is an acronym for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, while the KRG is Kurdistan Regional Government.

Most importantly, I use "institutionalization/institutionalizing" to refer to institutions built by the KRG and the international community in the KRI to work on women's issues. This includes women's organizations; gender quota system in governmental agencies; and women's centers and unions. Additionally, I use "Kurdish women activists" to refer to women who work outside of these institutions. Lastly, I use the term "white feminism" to refer to the feminist understanding of gender oppression that grew out of the US which does not take into account historical factors such as colonialism, ethnic oppression, and class oppression.

1.2 Research Purpose

This study investigates the ways in which institutionalizing the struggle for gender equality has created obstacles for Kurdish women activists. I seek to explicate the ways in which political parties in the KRI have set obstacles for the Kurdish women activists through turning the struggle into a private matter. Furthermore, I analyze the neoliberal feminist influence on the struggle for women's rights. I aim to convey the ways in which international organizations and

political parties work together and suppress grassroots movements for gender equality. I argue that Kurdish women's oppression is structuralized not only through patriarchy but also through institutionalization of the struggle for gender equality. The theoretical framework of this study develops from economic and political history of Iraq as a whole.

1.3 Disposition

Following the introduction, the next chapter aims to contextualize the question. I provide a short summary of the Kurds as an ethnic group, the Treaty of Lausanne that divided them into four countries and their struggle for independence that continues to this day. Then, I move on to give a brief summary about the Kurds in Iraq and their struggle for national independence from 1920 to today.

Next, the literature review is divided into four sections. First, I engage with the literature that examines the influence of nationalism on women's rights. I briefly point out how nationalism was extended to the Middle East as a whole and also to the Kurds. Second, I talk about how the national struggle for independence in the Middle East created an opening for women to take part in the fight against colonial powers. Then within the same section, I engage with the literature that discusses women's movement in the Middle East. I break women's movement in the Middle East into two parts. First, I discuss women's movement from 1900-1945, then from 1945 to the present day. In the third part of the literature review, I engage with the literature about women's movement in Iraq and their struggle with the modern nation-state of Iraq. Fourth, I move on to talk about Kurdish women's movement in the KRI. Finally, I provide a conclusion.

In the next chapter, I discuss my research methods. I describe why I use constructivism as a research paradigm. Then I move on to talk about how narrative research as a research technique fits my data collection. Furthermore, I discuss the process of collecting information and how I got access to the interviewees. Then I introduce the interviewees and briefly discuss the types of questions I asked during the interview. Afterwards, I move on to talk about the thematic analysis of the data collected from the interviews. In the last three sections, I talk about self reflexivity, the ethical considerations and the limitations and delimitations of the study.

I build my theoretical framework on two main perspectives. First, I talk about transnational feminist theory and its opposition to neoliberal feminism. I provide a brief history and development of both transnational feminist theory and neoliberal feminism. The reason I talk about neoliberal feminism is because it is the approach used by the KRG and the international community to institutionalize the struggle for gender equality. Secondly, I talk about postcolonial feminist theory and how it developed from postcolonial theory. It discusses the influence of colonialism and postcolonialism on gender oppression.

The sixth chapter is the findings chapter. I identify four main themes that developed from the interviews with the ten participants. First, “Neptotism and Women in Power” illustrates that women who have access to positions of power are related to men in power. I show the ways in which the interviewees argue that this has destroyed the possibility of feminist identity in politics. Then, in “Women’s Organizations as an Offshoot of Party Politics” I argue that the domination that PDK and PUK have over women’s organizations have turned them into extensions of party institutions which has also become another problem for the Kurdish women’s movement. The third theme “The Myth of Law” discusses how the KRG has failed to implement laws that protect women from violence and discrimination. Finally, “Nationalism, Patriarchy, Religion and Tradition” demonstrates how men in power use these concepts against women’s rights.

In the analysis chapter, I analyze my findings in relation to my theoretical framework and the existing literature. The chapter is broken down into four sections. In the first section, “Kurdish Women’s Anti-History,” I argue that the recorded Kurdish history does not portray women’s participation in the national struggle for independence. This manipulation of history has resulted in marginalizing Kurdish women and depriving them of their right to join governmental institutions. In the second section “Privatization of Women’s Struggle for Gender Equality” I claim that the privatization of Kurdish women’s movement into institutions such as women’s organizations has depoliticized the struggle for gender equality. In other words, it has emptied the movement as a political movement. In the third section, “The New Understanding of Gender Equality” I argue that women’s organizations and the gender quota system have created a new understanding about gender equality which is that the root of gender equality is economic

instability. Finally, a conclusion is provided. The final chapter of the study is the concluding remarks.

2. Contextualization

2.1 Brief History of the Kurds

The Kurds are an Indo-European people who make up the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East (Yildiz 2007, 7). The Kurdish population consists of approximately thirty million Kurds (Meho 1997, 4). The region that is referred to as Kurdistan, ‘land of the Kurds,’ is located between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The majority of the Kurds are mostly Sunni Muslim although there are Shia Muslims, Yazidis and Christians (McDowall 2007, 10). In terms of language, the Kurds use a variety of dialects. Kurmanji and Sorani are the two largest spoken dialects (Yildiz 2007, 8).

The Kurds enjoyed autonomy under the Ottoman and Persian Empires. They organized in hierarchies of “tribes, sub-tribes and tribal confederations with strong primordial loyalties” (Alinia 2016, 14). Their tribal structure was the basis of their social system which is founded on “a mixture of blood ties and territorial allegiances associated with strong religious loyalties” (Meho 1997, 4). Each tribe had its own territory and its armed group (Yildiz 2007, 8). These same groups of tribes organized during colonial rule in the early 20th century and led an armed resistance.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire created complexities for the Kurds. Modern nation-states challenged their structural organization. The tribes mobilized in armed struggles and demanded independence and self-rule. In 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne which divided the Kurds among four different states was signed (Alinia 2016, 16). The Kurdish aspiration for a nation-state has weakened the tribal structures although tribal ties is still an important aspect of Kurdish society. Today, the struggle for independence continues in all four parts of Kurdistan.

2.2 The Kurds in Iraq

The region of Iraqi Kurdistan is located in northern Iraq. It is comprised of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk provinces (Ibid., 13). One of the earliest tribes that revolted against colonial rule was the Barzani tribe. They are now organized in a political party called PDK. Jalal Talabani founded PUK in the 1970s. Although it was founded on Marxist beliefs, it eventually organized in tribal

ties. The Talabani tribe became the most influential (Bruinessen 1992, 28). The two parties are now the strongest in the KRI and dominate the government.

The Kurds of this region became subjects of the Iraqi state after 1920 when Iraq gained independence from Britain. After the fall of pro-British monarchy in 1958, and the rise of nationalism in Iraq, the Kurds continued their rebellion (Alinia 2016, 21). After the 1968 coup that brought the Baath Party to power, ethnic minorities and Shia Arabs were oppressed by the regime in Baghdad (Ibid.) The period from 1968 to the collapse of the Baath regime in 2003 was the most challenging period for the Kurds. The regime's oppression of the Kurds through genocides such as the Anfal Campaign,³ the chemical attack on the Kurdish city of Halabja and mass executions resulted in an increasing number of armed conflicts (Yildiz 2007, 25).

After a decade of war with Iran which lasted throughout the 1980s, and a failed attempt at invading Kuwait in 1990, Iraq found itself in a countrywide uprising, the *rapareen*.⁴ The depressed economy, a displeased population and the subsequent sanctions led to an inevitable division in Iraq (Ibid., 34). In 1991, a diverse group of people mostly the Kurds and Shias encouraged by a declaration by the United States president George HW Bush rose against the regime (Wright 2007, 123). There were religious and ethnic minorities, including groups of different political affiliations. Within the first month, millions joined including the Kurds (Yildiz 2007, 34). This resulted in a massive displacement. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) among other organizations were able to arrive to the KRI and provide humanitarian aid (Gautier, Francia 2012, 1-6). The KRI was a safe haven for international organizations since the US and its allies established a no-fly zone over northern Iraq (David 2004, 155). The KRG was officially established following the elections of May 1992 which was led by PDK and PUK (Yildiz 2007, 44). It was the first time Kurdish people enjoyed autonomy.

The 2003 Iraq War changed the course of history in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. Within three weeks, the regime collapsed (Ibid.). As a pro-US group in Iraq, the Kurds welcomed US intervention but Kurdish lands were not affected by the war. In 2005, the Kurds

³ The Al-Anfal campaign began in 1986 and lasted until 1988. An estimate of 180,000 people were killed. So far, only Sweden, Norway, the UK, and South Korea have recognized Al-Anfal as a campaign for ethnic cleansing.

⁴ Kurdish term for uprising.

supported the new Iraqi Constitution as it met their demands of federalism and the formal creation of a Kurdish government. Within Article 113, the three Kurdish provinces were legally assigned to the KRG. Kurdish was also recognized as an official language in Iraq (Ibid., 8).

3. Literature Review

3.1 Against the *Nation*: Feminist Critiques of Nationalism

Nationalism aims to create a protected territory, usually a state, based on the unity of the nation and the social identity of an ethnic group. Nation-states construct institutions to perform the objectives of the state such as maintaining a favorable economy and political influence. Kurdish struggle for independence was shaped by nationalism (Gunter 2013, 15). Similar to Iraqi nationalism which grew out of the belief that nationalism could save people from sectarian and tribal division, Kurdish nationalism aimed at unity in order to lead a stronger rebellion for independence (Kremer 1993, 171-82).

Nationalism emerged as a political project in the 1800s in Europe fostered by the industrial revolution as a method to protect and expand a nation-wide economy. However, nationalism in the Middle East was founded on an anti-colonial ideology. It became the basis of national liberation movements against colonial powers and the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century in the Middle East in a struggle for independence and statehood (Young 2009, 37). Feminists label nationalism as a masculine political project that strengthens patriarchy as it builds itself in patriarchal frameworks (Nagel 1998, 242-69).

Sheila Rowbotham, a renowned feminist, defines patriarchy as “a universal and historical form of oppression which returns us to biology - and thus it obscures the need to recognize not only the biological difference, but also the multiplicity of ways in which societies have defined gender” (1983, 209). Nationalism goes hand in hand with patriarchy and distributes labor between genders (Nagel 1998, 242-69). It restricts women’s participation in society and the labor force by limiting their contributions to the symbolic role of mothers who create offspring. In contrast, nationalism projects the man as the defender and proprietor of the nation (Ibid.). The feminist theorist Cynthia Enloe maintains that “nationalism typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope” (2014, 93). However, Deniz Kandiyoti finds that in some systems the division of labor by gender is a “fact that informs marital and marketplace strategies for women” such as in some African societies (1988, 277).

In the early 20th century, the Middle East witnessed a profound change in political ideology. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and national struggle for independence which was

based on nationalist ideologies changed the dynamics of socio-economic life (Baban 2018, 351). Struggles for independence in the region encouraged national identities that were “entangled with modernization, colonialism, and imperial redrawing of boundaries” (Ibid.). Women’s rights became a symbol of a modern society. Paradoxically, women adopted nationalist sentiments and joined national struggles for independence (Keddie 2007, 75-101).

3.2 Women’s Movement in the Middle East

Women’s movement in the Middle East share several historical factors, such as fighting colonialism, imperialism and facing tensions between sectarianism, secularism and religion (Al-Ali 2008, 1). Women’s struggle for gender equality in the region share similar obstacles that hinder their activism. For the past few decades, however, feminists have focused on the influence of colonialism, war and imperialism on women’s social position and the converging intersections of race, gender, and class (Kandiyoti 1995).

In the early 20th century to 1945, the Middle East saw much change in socio-economic life due to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the building of modern nation-states. Within this period, there was a rise in nationalist movement such as in Turkey and major Arab countries that invited women into the national struggle. For example, Ataturk’s nationalist movement included many women who helped in the military struggle that drove out the Greeks from Ankara. Similarly, the women who worked for national independence in Lebanon and Syria established Women’s Union in Syria and Lebanon which encouraged women to become political subjects and join political institutions (Keddie 2007, 95). Likewise, Algerian women fought alongside the National Liberation Front in their struggle for independence from colonial France between 1954 to 1962 (Turshen 2002, 69). During this period, the women’s organizations focused primarily on women’s access to education, and healthcare (Ibid.). Nonetheless, women’s participation in national struggles prepared them for a greater gender struggle which they took on after independence.

Since 1945, the Middle East has seen developments in women’s rights and state policies, but it also witnessed a lot of drawbacks. The creation of nation states gave rise to authoritarianism such as in Iran, Iraq, and Tunisia which limited women’s organizations to those

run by the state (Keddie 2007, 75-90). But, there has been much demonstration against authoritarian regimes, for example the Arab Spring resulted in a regime change in Tunisia in 2011 (Saidin 2018, 70). However in the past few decades, the region as a whole has seen a rise in Islamist nationalism. This has become a challenge for women's movement since Islamist nationalism attacks the notion of gender equality as a western extension of colonialism (Turshen 2002, 104). However, the most challenging factor has been a change in economic policies and the expansion of oil industries in the region which has resulted in other crises.

The increase in oil exports reshaped socio-economic life and created resistance towards women's participation in the labor force due to the new economic structures and hostile work environments (Ibid. 62). However, in 1975, CEDAW was signed and several Middle Eastern countries ratified it but "mostly with reservations based on their interpretation of Islamic laws" (Keddie 2007, 104). The reservations were mostly made when it conflicted with Islamic law, for example, Libya made reservations on the Personal Status Law which is a set of laws that govern marriage, divorce, inheritance and child custody while Syria made reservations on the Penal Code. However, Tunisia for example created the fewest reservations (Ibid., 140-48). Different networks of working for women's rights in the region such as UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo were also established following 1975 (Fraser 2004, 11).

Women's organizations have seen much proliferation in the past two decades in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) due to neoliberalism (Keddie 2007, 104). Neoliberalism is a multidimensional process which aims to project free market capitalism (Jessop 2012, 1513-25). Its objective is not only to mobilize capital, but also "organizations, ideas, discourses and peoples' take on an increasingly global, transnational and integrated form" (Moghadam 2003, 75). It does so in order to mobilize capital. Some of the major contributors to fighting gender inequality through neoliberalism are World Bank, Department for International Development (DFID) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Prügl 2014, 614-31). This branch of neoliberalism is called neoliberal feminism.

This new approach to making social transformations has changed the structure of women's movements. Although the struggle for gender equality through institutions such as women's organizations has been beneficial to women's rights, competition over funding and lack

of autonomy have become a major problem (Keddie 2007, 104). This has weakened women's organizations to an extent that it has resulted in quarrels between them. For example, women's organizations have failed to make changes to the Personal Law status with the exception of Turkey, Morocco and Tunisia; most countries do not punish sexual harassment; and have lenient laws on rape although in 2014 Egypt introduced new laws that define sexual harassment and sentence harasser to six months to five years in prison (Abdelmonem, Galan 2017, 154-67). Additionally, marital rape is not recognized in most countries. Furthermore, women in most countries cannot marry non-Muslim men (Keddie 2007, 105). However, Tunisia has amended the law that deprives women of her right to marry a non-Muslim man in 2016 (Fassatoui 2016, 4).

Furthermore, women's organizations have failed to pressure governments to implement laws. In most countries, customs and family laws are still above the sovereignty of law. There has been little campaigning against honor killings in some countries including Jordan and Palestine (Ahmed 2011, 189-207). Additionally, in the rural areas of some countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Egypt Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is still a common practice (El-Showk 2018.) Tribal and cultural customs are more powerful than state laws, where for example, child marriage is still common practices (Keddie 2007, 26-44), In fact, child marriage is a growing phenomenon due to the growing number of wars such as the Syrian War (Arab, Sagbakken 2019). Although women have more access to education and are more present in public life, the struggle for gender equality is still ongoing.

3.3 Women's Movement in Iraq

The 1990s was a difficult period for Iraqi women. Millions of women became widows because of the decade long Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Women became the largest group of displaced people (Brown, Romano 2006, 51-70). The 1991 uprising and UN sanctions⁵ destroyed all possible gender projects that emerged after the fall of the monarchy in Iraq. For example, in 1959, Iraq's Personal Status Law ensured legal rights to women in marriage, such as consent and

⁵ The UN sanctions on Iraq was a trade embargo. It began after the Kuwait invasion of 1990 and lasted until 2003 Iraq War. The purpose of the sanction was to force Iraq to retreat from Kuwait. See:

- Watson, Fiona. *Sanctions against Iraq*. London: House of Commons Library, 1994.

the right to choose a spouse as well as eliminating child marriage but after 1991 it was abolished (Efrati 2012, 161).

As a way to legitimize his power, the President of Iraq Saddam Hussein turned to religion and sectarian politics after 1991 sanctions (Al-Ali 2011, 99-113). One of the most devastating influences were on women since it resulted in a return to patriarchy and customary laws. He amended Article 128 of the Penal Code which sentenced killing women committed under the name of “honor” from eight years to six months, increasing the rates of such murders considerably (Ibid.). He also amended the Personal Status Law and deprived women of their rights in marriage, and divorce. Furthermore, due to financial shortcomings created by the UN sanctions, millions of children especially girls dropped out of school (Keddie 2006, 128).

The UN sanctions, however, was not the first time women’s movement in Iraq decelerated due to political struggles. Noga Efrati, the author of *Women in Iraq: Past Meets Present* demonstrates the ways in which women were established as second class citizens in Iraq’s modern history. Efrati argues that sanctioning customary law through the Tribal Criminal and Civil Disputes Regulation (TCCDR) by the British officials became part of the regime’s discourse on gender equality. She writes, “the experiences of imposing order and maintaining the status quo in a society perceived and constructed as tribal were repeatedly favored over women’s wellbeing. Such considerations actually required that detrimental customs affecting women be sanctioned because, it was argued, any intrusion into these customs would cause resentment among the tribes” (Efrati 2012, 50) Throughout the period in which colonial Britain meddled in Iraq’s affairs (from the early twentieth century to the fall of the monarchy in 1958) Iraqi women fought for national liberation (Al-Ali 2012, 106). After 1958, Iraqi women’s priorities shifted to women’s access to education and suffrage. However, it was not until 1980 that the Baath regime gave women the right to vote as a “gift” (Ahmed 2010, 1-35). But for every step taken, Iraqi women’s movement was pushed one step back. The 1980s was a difficult time for Iraq as a whole due to the Iran-Iraq War that destroyed the economy and once again, women’s movement decelerated. Nonetheless, to women’s dismay, what followed after 2003 was imperial war and further displacement.

The devastation of the 2003 Iraq War and the rise of Islamism throughout the country particularly in the south proved detrimental to women's rights (Brown, Romano, 2006.) Like the 1990s, there was a rise in poverty among women due to an increase in the number of widows and the growing displacement rates. The war further destroyed the education system which created a "cultural climate" for harassment and the "large number of qualified women [...] have been largely sequestered to their homes by lack of security" (Ibid.,61). Nonetheless, Iraqi women have mobilized politically and have campaigned for women's political participation, against Islamist intrusion of politics, and against gender violence of political women (Al-Ali 2012, 115).

After the US-led forces invaded Iraq, the central government and the KRG adopted the CEDAW standards of gender equality (Kaya 2017, 6). These include recognizing discriminatory legislation; criminalizing honor killings; women's political representation; creating openings for women in the labor force; and maternity benefits (Neshat 2003, 61). However, they have failed to protect women from gender violence and discrimination. Although the KRG has proved safer than the rest of Iraq, Kurdish women are still marginalized in Kurdish society and politics.

3.4 Kurdish Women's Movement in the KRI

The 1990s were a difficult period for the Kurds, especially for Kurdish women, although it was the first time that they had the opportunity to join the parliament (Mojab 1996, 65-73). Unlike the rest of Iraq, the Kurdish women's movement was established only after 1991 (Begikhani, Hamelink, Weiss 2018, 5-30). Prior to 1991, the conflict had led to "limited government provision for infrastructure, education, and health services, and general economic deprivation" consequently, no attention was given to women's rights. The rise of poverty debilitated Kurdish women's freedom in the 1990s (Kaya 2017, 8). Oil for Food program and the use of nationalist discourse as a way for PDK and PUK gain popular support resulted in greater marginalization of Kurdish women (Al-Ali, Pratt 2010, 230).

The Kurdish national struggle provided openings for Kurdish women, but it also silenced women's voices by blurring gender inequalities and making national rights the focal point of the Kurdish struggle (Begikhani, Hamelink, Weiss 2018, 5-30). During the national struggle Kurdish women took over responsibilities such as "passing on secret messages, working as couriers,

transporting and distributing leaflets but also fighting themselves as peshgermas and providing political leadership” (Al-Ali 2012, 113). However, although promised positions of power, Kurdish women found themselves alienated. In the first elections which took place in 1992, the ratio between women to men in the Kurdish parliament was five to 105 and there was no system that encouraged women’s political participation (Al-Ali, Pratt 2011, 341).

Kurdish nationalism controlled the public domain and women’s rights were violated. Women’s rights activists were publicly opposed by male politicians and women’s activism was looked upon suspiciously (Al, Ali 2012, 111). In the 1990s, the rates of honor killings were so high that Shahrzad Mojab calls it “gendercide” (2003, 20-25). She argues that the Kurdish leadership is authoritarian and takes no stance on gender equality. Minoo Alinia argues that honor killing is one way of controlling women’s sexuality enhanced by an “intersecting oppression of class and ethnicity, as well as the political, historical and structural specificities” (2016, 3), a point also demonstrated by Efrati (2012, 20-40). Alinia furthermore demonstrates the influence of modern nation-state on the rise of the phenomena.

Both KDP and PUK “claimed that women’s oppression, including ‘honor killing’, was part of the Kurdish ‘tribal and Islamic culture’” (Al-Ali, Pratt 2011, 342). Consequently, people became suspicious of women’s activism. Not only did Kurdish leadership encourage gender stereotypes and chauvinism, but they also “gave sanctuary to and protected abusers and killers of women who had fled to them from the opposing side” (Alinia 2016, 28). Due to the rise in misogyny, women’s organizations focused on building women’s shelters to protect women from honor killings. This was mostly done with the help of international organizations. But the political parties opposed this to the extent that in 1998, PUK shut down one of the largest women’s shelters called the Independent Women’s Organization in Sulaymaniyah (Al-Ali 2012, 113). Regardless of women’s efforts in helping reconstruct Kurdish cities, there is still a lot of opposition to women’s rights.

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003, the involvement of the United States, and a tactical shift in Kurdish political agenda in pursuit of independence and a possible Kurdish nation-state, more women participated in social and political structures (Begikhani, Hamelink, Weiss 2018, 5-30). The KRG similar to the central government in Baghdad took on a

25 percent gender quota in parliament in 2005. However, the KRG was pressured by Kurdish women's organizations to amend this percentage to 30 percent and within all governmental institutions (Kaya 2017, 8). This percentage was determined in order to make sure the interest of gender minority was presented. This became the beginning of a new struggle for gender equality in the KRI.

First, Kurdish women activists began to demand amendments to the legalized oppression of women especially after the Iraqi-Constitution overrode the KRG's constitution (Al-Ali, Pratt 2011, 340-344). In 2008, Kurdish women activists forced the Kurdish parliament to amend the Personal Status Law (Ibid.). For example, in the KRI a man needs his wife's permission to have a second wife, whereas by Iraqi law, a judge gives permission. Furthermore, the KRG does not deprive a woman of alimony if she cannot provide a tangible reason but the Iraqi Constitution in Article 25 of the Personal Status Law does (Alinia 2016, 80). The most important amendment is the change to Article 128. Unlike in the rest of Iraq, in 2003 Kurdish women were able to force the KRG to amend Article 128 of the Penal Code which convicts murder committed with the excuse of honor (Ibid.). However, the KRG has proven inadequate in implementing them and the practices of honor killings continues unabated.

The Kurdish women's movement still campaigns against gender violence, and honor killing in particular because the KRG has failed to implement laws (Ali 2018, 210). There are different causes for that failure in implementation, among them is that the KRG has not taken a necessary step in constructing "better communication and implementation of the law. The legal reform needs to be accompanied by changing attitudes, and production of new and empowering knowledge based on women's and oppressed groups' experiences" (Ibid., 80). Furthermore, nepotism and corruption are two of the major obstacles that hinder the implementation of law. For example, criminals with close relationship to government officials can be given amnesty even after confessions (Ibid., 81).

To combat gender inequalities, there are national women's organizations such as Asuda Organization for Combating Violence Against Women, the Breeze of Hope Organization, Rasan Organization, and the Kurdistan Social Development Organization (Al-Ali, Pratt 2011, 340). Although, they claim to be independent, these women's organizations suffer tremendously from

party dominion. This has led Kurdish women activists from different political parties to view each other with suspicion because of the rivalry between the parties (Ibid., 344). The rise of nepotism has also shaped women's organizations and has become an extension of partisanship (Al-Ali, Pratt 2010, 150). Furthermore, US and European funding have also contributed to this situation. It has as the availability of funding has created competition within these political parties over the money that goes to women's organizations (Ali 2018, 206).

Members of women's organizations argue that tradition and Islamic culture have become obstacles to gender equality. However, women activists who work outside of women's organizations argue that there is a "political barrier" (Ibid.). There are different opinions on the implications of these political barriers. Mojab remains highly critical of US funding strategies and nationalism that PDK and PUK utilize in support of their authoritarianism (Ibid., 204). On the other hand, however, Al-Ali and Pratt argue that it is not support of Kurdish nationalism that has become a political barrier, but rather the lack of political independence that women's organizations suffer from (2011, 350). They further argue that the dominance of the political parties over women's organizations does not only influence their activism, but also who gets employed in these organizations (Al-Ali, Pratt 2010, 150). Nonetheless, the existing literature fails to present the experiences of women outside of these institutions.

In the last few decades, researchers have looked at the influence of colonialism and nationalism on women's rights in the Middle East as a whole. They have also examined women's participation in national struggles. The existing literature also covers the works of women's organizations and the obstacles they face. This has also allowed scholars to study the causes of gender violence in the Middle East as a whole and also in the KRI. However, the literature lacks an examination of how Kurdish women activists are marginalized outside of these institutions.

3.5 Conclusion

The UN sanctions and the Oil for Food program resulted in devastating poverty that destroyed Iraq's economy in the 1990s. The country as a whole suffered from a stepping back to patriarchy, tribalism and nationalism. Laws that had been changed in favor of women's rights were

abolished. The period between 1991 to 2003 was difficult, but the Iraq War did not bring new opportunities and certainly not to women. Although the central government in Baghdad and the KRG adopted international standards of gender equality into governmental institutions, and there was a mushrooming of women's organizations, gender inequalities remain. In this regard, this study hopes to contribute to filling the gap in existing literature by looking at how the institutionalization of the Kurdish women's movement has led to more obstacles for Kurdish women who wish to mobilize outside of women's organizations. The study examines the origins of the grievances of Kurdish women activists who feel marginalized in their activism because of the institutionalization of the struggle for gender equality.

4. Methods

4.1 Research Paradigm: Constructivism

I utilize constructivism as a research paradigm to orient this study. Constructivist analysis of reality is that it is a product of human interactions and meaning-makings (Bryman 2012, 34). In fact, constructivism does not postulate that there is an objective truth or reality, but that humans are constantly remaking meanings and bargaining with the truth of their surroundings (Ibid., 21). The construction of meaning is said to be subjective because it is perpetually molded by individual's experiences (Creswell 2009, 8-10).

By using constructivism, I explore how historical events have shaped the understanding of reality for the interviewees in their activism for women's rights. For example, I investigate their experiences with hostility, physical or verbal harassment, or social rejection. I construct meaning of their cases as political subjects in a society where political domains are controlled by men. Furthermore, I examine how cultural norms have constructed meaning in their lives and how they determine their form of activism and the platforms they use due to the meanings they have created through their experiences as women activists. Moreover, I aim to investigate the subjective meaning that women activists have made of their experiences in working within institutions or outside of institutions that work on women's rights. Through this process, constructivism allows me to build a storyline that can help answer the question of the study.

4.2 Qualitative Approach to Inquiry: Narrative Research

I employ narrative research with the assumption that women who are participants in the Kurdish women's movement have personal and shared experiences (Creswell 2009). Narrative research studies a phenomenon by focusing on the personal experiences of the individual, privileging them as the source of meaning-makings (Ibid.). In this study, the interviewees will narrate their stories as women activists in the KRI and their experiences with discrimination and negligence. I examine the influence of neoliberal feminist policies have created and how this hinders the struggle for gender equality in the KRI. Narrative research conceptualizes narrating of stories as a temporary understanding of a phenomenon, demanding continuous study of the subject at hand.

Narrative research is “the paradigmatic mode in which experience is shared and that experience itself is storied, or it has a narrative pattern” (Sandelowski 1991, 162). In the context of this study, the interviewees narrate their stories as women activists by providing specific examples of experiences in the political domain, as individuals who have faced social rejection and verbal or physical abuse. They narrate the ways in which neoliberal institutions such as women’s organizations have failed at creating gender equality and have controlled the discourse on the subject. The reconstruction of the lived experiences of Kurdish women activists reveal their identity negotiation, through a process of selecting which stories they choose to share. It puts forth the complexity of their experiences as a marginalized group in the KRI.

4.3 Data and Data Collection

I conducted ten in depth semi-structured interviews to collect data that would allow me to clarify ambiguities about the experience of Kurdish women activists in the KRI. These interviews were done between February to May 2019, and were mostly conducted via telephone, Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp and Skype. All the applications used to conduct interviews were audio, except for Skype which was a video call. This was because I could not travel to the KRI. The only interview I conducted in person was with Najiba Mahmud who also lives in Stockholm. Before the interviews, I explained the topic of my thesis, then we set up a time which suits them. All parties, including myself, were in quiet places to avoid distraction and to have an intimate interview. With the consent of the participants, I recorded their answers so that I could later transcribe them.

In order to verify the information that the interviewees provide, I use news articles and opinion pieces as other forms of primary source. I use articles by other women activists in the KRI to expand the number of primary sources and to ensure a fuller set of collected data. Furthermore, I also make use of articles written in Kurdish by the participants of the interviews themselves to expand on their interviews. I also use the Iraqi Constitution to analyze discriminatory laws regarding women’s rights as citizens of Iraq.

4.4 Sampling: Convenience Sampling

My interest in the field is initiated by the experiences of women friends who are employees of international or local women's organizations. A close friend assisted me in finding potential interviewees. We researched the most active women who work independently for women's rights. Through her, I got in touch with Nasik Qader, the head of UN-Women who did not want to be interviewed but helped me get in touch with Najiba, Chro, and Parween. Parween helped me get in touch with Shirin whom she had worked with in the 1990s. I follow Houzan, and Khanda on Facebook due to their involvement with the Culture Project, a research platform so it was easy to contact them. I was able to reach Samira through an old family friend.

Another friend helped me reach Naçiba whom he knows through her activism in Germany. I also wanted to include a woman member of a political party and I learned that Kner was a good person to interview. She is a member of PUK but has also been vocal about her complaints on the KRG's passive attitude towards women's issues. I contacted her on Facebook and she was willing to be interviewed. This form of sampling is called convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is when chosen individuals are accepted as representative of the subject group and who are accessible, hence making it convenient for the researcher to interview them (Etikan 2016, 1-4).

4.5 Individual Interviews

The interviewees of this study include women activists who are involved in politics, academia, journalism, and former employees of women's organizations. The women who are former members of political parties worked to advocate for women's participation in politics. They have all been active in campaigning for women's rights or are active researchers who are/were battling gender violence. They have experience in working with civil society, women's organizations or governmental institutions dealing with women's rights. Each of them identifies and is recognized as an active woman in the KRI. I included a former member of PUK, Rezan Saleh who is known for her opposition to PUK's involvement with women's organizations. Unfortunately, except Chro, I could not reach more women in Erbil.

Additionally, I included women who live in the KRI, and Kurdish diaspora in Europe. I wanted to take into consideration the possibility that life in Europe might provide more freedom

for women to become political subjects. Similarly, I have varied marital status as this could also be a contributing factor to women's political activism. Additionally, the interviews were mainly conducted in Kurdish because it is my first language and that of all the participants. I did not hire a trained translator, but translated interviews myself. As I am not a professional translator, there could be much lost in translation. However, the most important factor is that the translated texts are representative of the original text (Temple, Young 2004, 161-78).

4.6 Interview Participants

Kner Abdullah is 49 and lives in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. She is chair-woman of Women's Union and editor-in-chief of Tawar Magazine, a women's magazine.

Date of interview: 18/2/2019

Duration of call: 59 minutes

Samira Abdullah is 39 and lives in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. She is a freelance women's rights researcher and trainer. She is a member of the Kurdish Women's Network and International Journalists' Network.

Date of interview: 1/3/2019

Duration of call: 61 minutes

Houzan Mahmoud is 41 and lives in London, UK. She is co-founder of Culture Project Magazine and a member of Iraqi Women's Rights Coalition and Organization of Women's Freedom.

Date of interview: 24/3/2019

Duration of call: 60 minutes

Khanda Hameed is 30 and lives in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. She is head of Culture Magazine and a freelance researcher in gender studies.

Date of interview: 31/3/2019

Duration of call: 71 minutes

Naçibe Qaradakhi is 48 and lives in Brussels, Belgium. She is a freelance journalist and founder of The Free Life newspaper, one of the first all women's newspaper.

Date of interview: 12/3/2019

Duration of call: 73 minutes

Najiba Mahmud is 50 and lives in Stockholm, Sweden. She is a freelance journalist and former member of the Socialist Party of Kurdistan.

Date of interview: 10/4/2019

Duration of recorded in-person interview: 68 minutes

Chro Sabir is 45 and lives in Erbil, Iraq. She is a freelance researcher, translator and journalist and former president of Rasan Organization, a non-governmental organization that battles gender violence.

Date of interview: 1/5/2019

Duration of call: 32 minutes

Rezan Saleh is 48 and lives in Oslo, Norway. She is a former member of PUK and a Ph.D candidate.

Date of interview: 15/4/2019

Duration of call: 59 minutes

Parween Mahmud is 54 and lives in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq. She is a former member of Asuda Organization for Combating Violence Against Women.

Date of interview: 30/4/2019

Duration of call: 48 minutes

Shirin Ahmed is 52 and lives in Malmo, Sweden. She is a former member of Independent Women's organization which was established in 1993 and shut down by PUK in 1998.

Date of interview: 11/5/2019

Duration of call: 35 minutes

4.7 Qualitative Research Questions

The types of questions asked were based on the history of the individual. The interviews started with a general question on their activism. Then, I proceeded to ask them if they believe there is a Kurdish women's movement. Usually, the answer to this question led to a question on the influence of political parties. Through this, I was able to ask them about their experiences with the political parties and how they have created challenges for women. Except for Kner who is a member of PUK, everyone openly talked about their issues with the political parties. Kner also mentioned her problems with political parties, but did not elaborate. I asked all my interviewees whether they felt they were heard and most of them expressed discontent. The interviewees who work within women's NGOs usually spoke about the influence of neoliberal institutions that hire expatriates who do not fully understand the cultural contexts. They also pointed to the dominance that PDK and PUK have over women's organizations and governmental agencies.

4.8 Thematic Analysis

To analyze the data, I used open ended coding as a manual coding technique (Wicks 2017, 160-170). The transcripts of the interviews were read and coded manually to find common themes. Open ended coding allows for modifying the codes in order to understand the phenomenon under study (Ibid.) It allowed me to identify common ideas projected through the narrated experiences of the participants. Some of the themes and sub-themes were noted down during the interviews, but going through the interview transcriptions helped me find more of them.

4.9 Self Reflexivity

As a researcher, I am aware that my interpretation of the data is influenced by my cultural experience, identity and understanding of Kurdish women's struggles. First, as a Kurdish woman, I am aware of the hardships that the institutions and political parties have created for

women who want to advocate for women's rights. I grew up in Sulaymaniyah and that makes me aware of the ways in which the political parties have dominated the public sphere. But I also understand the complex relationship Kurdish women have with the political parties due to their continuous struggle for independence. During the interviews, most of the participants showed their aspirations for an independent Kurdistan. Some of them expressed no discontent towards nationalism *per se* but towards party politics.

Secondly, I understand that I have biases towards women's organizations because of my experiences with sexual harassment when I worked for these organizations. I understand that I am most critical of women's organizations because of my own experiences as a Kurdish woman. Thirdly, my choice of data collection influences the ways the study will present the data on Kurdish women's struggles. I understand that the ways I formed questions which were shaped by my biases towards these institutions direct the interviews towards more criticism of these institutions. More importantly, I am aware that I spoke to the participants once and their opinions could change even from a day to day basis. I am aware that I am presenting one version of the obstacles that Kurdish women activists face. Finally, my experience of war, especially the 2003 Iraq War makes me examine imperial influence in any context with a grain of salt.

4.10 Ethical Considerations

I am aware of the importance of informed consent. Prior to starting the interview, I let each participant know that they are free to stop the interview at any point, and to skip over questions if they did not feel comfortable answering. I assured my participants that no judgement will be held against them. I let them know the scope of the research and the overall idea of the study. I also asked for their consent to record the interview so that I can transcribe them. Additionally, I let the participants know of the confidentiality of their interview and offered them anonymity. They all consented and had no issues using their real names and allowed me to record the interviews. However, ahead of time Chro told me that she is not willing to answer more than five questions because of her lack of time. Besides her, everyone answered all my questions.

4.11 Limitation and Delimitations

There are factors that limit to this study. First, the type of sampling used for this study posed a challenge. Due to my inability to travel to Iraq, the interviewees are Kurdish women I could access via internet or Kurdish women activists who live in Sweden. As a result, I had to interview women I could access. Furthermore, this type of sampling attributes the study of the grievances caused by the institutionalization of women's struggle for gender equality to middle-class educated women. Therefore my sampling process makes me rely on a group of women who share a similar social capital. I was unable to research women from different social and cultural backgrounds due to my limited connections. This approach controls the scope of my questions which is an inevitable part of the research process and shapes the answers the interviewees give. Some of the participants asked me to send them the questions ahead of time in order to prepare. Since most of them know each other since they have worked together, there is a possibility that they have spoken to each other before speaking to me.

There is also factors that delimits the study. First, I needed to have a certain number of women to interview in order to control the scope of the study. Second, during the interviews, I tried to focus on their experience with women's organizations and political parties in order to understand how these institutions have created obstacles for women activists although it would have been interesting to study the ways in which they are challenged in the platforms they use for their activism such as conferences, workshops and newspapers. Third, it would have been important to look at the discourse on gender equality that Islamic parties such as the Islamic Party of Kurdistan have, but I decided not to include them. The reason is that it would have required looking into the rise of Islamic parties in the KRI and that history would have been challenging to include in this study. Finally, I also had the option of including male activists who fight for women's rights. However, I chose not to do so, as I found it more convenient to compare women's experiences to each other.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Transnational Feminism

In an attempt to reclaim feminism from neoliberal feminists who believe in a utopian global sisterhood (Baksh, Harcourt 2015, 4), transnational feminism aims to see the influence of globalization on gender, class and sexual minorities. Neoliberal feminism developed from the US and the UK as a struggle for gender equality. It incorporates the struggle for gender equality into democratic institutions such as women's organizations and unions where women can work to battle gender inequality. In this regard, it makes gender equality a private affair (Stambaugh 2015).

Neoliberal feminism is a branch of white feminism which believes in a global sisterhood; a unified women's struggle against gender inequality regardless of culture, history and religion (Rottenberg 2014). Neoliberal feminism is compatible with "neoliberal and neoconservative political and economic agendas" (Ibid., 9) because they shape policies that assist neoliberal agendas such as military advancements. The neoliberal feminist does not take class, race, colonial history or war into consideration in analyzing the experiences of women worldwide. Although neoliberal feminism claims to promote gender equality, it deregulates any movement or political or economic activity that poses threats to its interest (Ibid., 11). It erodes the use of collective action and institutionalizes them by transforming the logic of collective action (Lerner 2000, 5-10).

Neoliberal feminism portrays women of the former colonized regions as particularly subjugated to violence and oppression. In an attempt to solve women's issues, neoliberal feminists believe that equal opportunity such as access to decision-making positions through gender quotas and institutions to battle gender inequality empower women (Sandberg, Scovell 2016). Through this, they believe that "women can change themselves" through fighting the obstacles that hinder their success (Rottenberg 2014, 63). However, neoliberal institutions value masculine identity and depreciate characteristics associated with femininity (Fraser 2013, 159-70). This ideology and approach to women's issues is inadequate since it provides a superficial solution to much entrenched gender issues that result not only from patriarchy, but also from colonialism, postcolonialism and imperialism or neocolonialism (Ibid.).

Transnational feminism emerged within the context of UN sponsored women's conferences between 1975 to 1985, and was highly critical of western feminists projecting their understanding of gender oppression. Transnational feminism focuses on "globalization-from-below," a term used to pose a challenge to hegemonized politics and economy and globalization-from-above (Moghadam 2015, 53). It criticizes neoliberal feminism as a white feminist approach which simplifies the struggle of women from the former colonized world and dominates feminist knowledge production by emptying these women's experiences of intersectional complexities (Carty, Mohanty 2015, 82-90). Transnational feminists emphasize the experiences that are inherently part of globalization for the previously colonized regions or war-torn countries, a view also shared by postcolonial feminists.

The antiracist struggle of black feminists in North America brought a new understanding to gender oppression. Interlocking oppressive systems was circulating in black feminist thought through conceptual expressions or pointing to "intersections" of oppressive structures (Carastathis 2014, 304-14). Intersectionality is a term used to explain women's oppression based on gender combined with race and class (Patil 2013, 847-67). Arguably, the antiracist feminist movement in the early 1980s in the United States sparked by black, Latina and other women of color moved forward the notion that one form of subordination does not make that same group immune to another form of oppression. For example, a black woman who faces discrimination based on her gender is not immune to racial discrimination. Transnational feminist theory was marked by intersectionality (Conway 2017, 209) Transnational feminists looked into all sides of the intersectionality of women's oppressions worldwide. In this respect, transnational feminism rejects the notion of *global* as an analytical tool. Two renown feminists of transnational feminist theory Amanda Swarr and Richa Nagar argue:

Transnational feminisms are an intersectional set of understandings, tools and practices that can: (a) attend to racialized, classed, masculinised, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies, and the multiple ways in which they restructure colonial and neocolonial relations of domination and subordination; (b) grapple with the complex and contradictory ways in which these processes both inform and are shaped by subjectivities and understandings of individual and collective agency;

and (c) interweave critiques, actions, and self-reflexivity so as to resist a priori predictions of what might constitute feminist politics in a given place and time (2010, 5). In this regard, transnational feminists want to uncover the complexities of gender oppression that are worsened by globalization-from-above.

Transnational feminist theory attempts to subvert the idea that global sisterhood is the approach that finds solutions for women throughout the world. It uses a feminist lens to look at the effect of globalism and capitalism on nation-states, even more importantly, on the economically disadvantaged regions (Conway 2017, 205-27). Transnational feminists conceptualize history of feminism by accepting the multi-layered struggle of women worldwide and by pinpointing to the manipulation of knowledge regarding women of the former colonized world as a marginalized group. They argue that neoliberalism uses the basis of discourses of gender equality to further its political agendas throughout the world (Dubois, Oliviero 2009, 1-3).

This form of knowledge production which many feminist regard as racist and discriminatory, also resulted in much resistance (Rupp 1997). Transnational feminist reject the notion that women share a singular cross-cultural experience. Some feminists such as Uma Narayan argue that transnational feminism should accept both gendered experiences and cultural essentialism; (Narayan 1998, 86-100) while other feminists such as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan assert that feminism should “compare multiple, overlapping, and discrete oppressions rather than to construct a theory of hegemonic oppression under a unified category of gender” (Grewal, Kaplan 1994, 17-18). Nonetheless, transnational feminists highlight similarities of gendered experiences that are heightened by neoliberalism.

5.2 Postcolonial Feminism

In response to the universal analysis of gender issues by western feminists of the west, postcolonial feminism seeks to understand the impact of colonialism in the previously colonized world (Rajan 2007, 53-71). It uses a female perspective in analyzing the influence of colonialism and postcolonialism. It rejects the notion of a female experience that does not take into consideration social class, sexuality, ethnicity, race and the political experience of previously

colonized regions and postcolonial struggles (Ibid.) Postcolonial feminism looks at the gendered colonial and postcolonial experience by incorporating the experiences of slavery, oppression, resistance and race (Mohanty 1984, 333-58). They have constructed a postcolonial feminist theory by deriving it from postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial theory is grounded in the idea that colonial rule promotes its economic advantage through exploitation and assimilation of the colonized peoples and lands (Rukundwa, Aarde 2007, 1171-94). Postcolonial studies look into the depth of identity formations through constructing the self versus the *other*, history, discourse, and language (Gilroy 2009). Postcolonial studies is still relevant for various reasons. First, globalization has resulted in a top-down-domination of local economies which leads to economic exploitation. Second, it creates cultural appropriation which results in marginalizing people in the former colonized regions (Ashcroft 2013). This new form of exploitation is sometimes referred to as neo-colonialism or imperialism. Consequently, it recognizes people's fixation on building a national identity in a stable nation-state in the aftermath of colonialism (Ayubi 1995).

Feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty argue that neoliberal feminism sustains the over sexualization of women of color and portray them as subjects of cultural and religious violence while claiming that white women have some form of autonomy (Mohanty 1984, 333-58). This is a colonial legacy in which the colonized people were viewed as exotic or primitive. Postcolonial feminists are critical of the goals of neoliberal feminism. For example, Lila Abu Lughod's book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* highlights the weaknesses of western feminism as a scholarship and their orientalist approach to analyzing gender inequality in the Middle East. She writes, "why was knowing about the culture of the region - and particularly its religious beliefs and treatments of women - more urgent than exploring the history of development of repressive regimes in the region and the United States' role in this history?" (Abu Lughod 2013, 31). She argues that this analysis fails to look into the roots of the issues of not just gender oppression but of "human suffering," in the Middle East (Ibid.) Postcolonial feminism takes into account the historical diversity and local experiences of members of colonized regions, not only in the process of colonialism, but also in the aftermath. Postcolonial

feminist theory allows us to investigate the influence of colonialism on the present and how it has manifested itself to disparage the identities of women of the former colonized world.

5.3 Conclusion

By utilizing transnational and postcolonial feminist theories we can understand external factors such as capitalism, neocolonialism and neoliberal feminism on gender oppression in the Middle East. These theories help us contextualize women's struggles not only as an outcome of patriarchy, but also as part of a larger exploitation of people. It helps us look into the depth of the oppressive structures that have been formed during colonial and postcolonial eras. Taken together, these theories will help us understand the context in which Kurdish women activists are working and how and why they are marginalized.

6. Findings

6.1 Nepotism and Women in Power

Following the uprising of 1991 and the establishment of the KRG, Kurdish women expected a share of the decision-making posts since they participated in the struggle against the Baath regime. However, in the 1990s only five out of 105 members of the parliament were women. After 2003, the KRG adopted a thirty percent gender quota in all governmental agencies,⁶ but gender relations remain unchallenged and inequality persists. According to my interviewees, the gender quota system has created a superficial solution. It has resulted in more nepotism and marginalization of women in power.

The interviewees believe that the gender quota system has depoliticized women's struggle for political participation. The political parties have conditioned women who want to be in power to compromise their identities. In other words, women fall under the shadow of their political parties and lose their aspirations for gender equality. The gender quota system is a neoliberal approach to solving the intersectionality of women's experiences with a homogenous perspective. Kner who is still a member of Women's Union and a member of PUK argues that gender quota has strengthened nepotism which in turn strengthens women's oppression. She claims, "nothing is more important than knowing men in power." This is a common concern shared by all of the interviewees as a form of exploitation of the system although it was important to hear it from Kner. Kner has been working for PUK since the early 1990s. During the last elections in 2018, she was a candidate for the Kurdish parliament. However, she believes that because she was not willing to use her connections, she did not win a seat. Nonetheless, she is still a PUK member.

Rezan, a former member of PUK, argues that the 2003 Iraq War strengthened family ties and increased corruption due to the large oil revenues that PDK and PUK have access to. She

⁶ In an article published by Kurdistan24, a PDK news agency, only one out of 21 ministers are women. This indicates KRG's failure to implement the gender quota outside of its parliament. For more, see: - Ali, Sangar. Kurdistan24. "Women Demand More Roles in Kurdistan Regional Government's New Cabinet." Kurdistan24. December 19, 2018. Accessed May 1, 2019. <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/192d7e3e-b44c-4690-b324-059f4458ee98>.

asserts, “capitalism⁷ in Kurdistan has strengthened tribal ties and this has damaged women’s place in politics even more.” Houzan asserts that the gender quota system is a “a top down approach to solving women’s lack of political representation,” however, she argues it has destroyed the possibility for feminist politics. Due to the imposition of gender quotas, the system has created social stigmas. Samira argues that gender quotas are regarded as a form of charity for women; in other words, men believe that women are enjoying positions that are inherently spaces for men.

The interviewees claim that the solution to women’s lack of political participation is not the implementation of gender quotas because it does not take into account the cultural or historical essentialism nor the interlocking of oppression in Kurdish society due to decades of national struggle. Samira argues that women who join political parties also become fixated on national identity more than gender identity and accept the patriarchal political environment. She argues that women in power are once again forced to prove that national politics and resistance are more important than gender issues. Similar to pre-1991, political parties are forcing women to focus on the national struggle since the KRI is still fighting for independence. Samira claims, “the struggle for independence [has caused] any feminist struggle that has taken one step forward, to take two steps back.” The participants do not perceive the gender quota system as a genuine element of gender equality nor as a solution for women’s oppression in the KRG. They consider it as an imported proposition that does not fix the root of gender oppression. Houzan argues that the gender quota system is like the “missionaries who brought the Bible.” She uses this metaphor to demand acknowledgment of the continued influence of external politics.

The singularity of the mindset that believes gender quotas can lead to genuine political representation of women has resulted in new forms of gender violence. Najiba claims that women within any political party that challenge narratives or criticize Kurdish nationalism immediately face verbal threats. She argues, “I used to work hard, but I was never supported by

⁷ Throughout the interviews, capitalism was a term used to replace neoliberalism. When the participants discussed the privatization of all sectors of the government and non-governmental institutions, they pinned the term capitalism. However, neoliberalism is the correct term which is a resurgence associated with privatization, and among them, the struggle for gender equality through women’s organizations and institutions. See:

- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

my party [the Socialist Party], and on top of everything, I was facing harassment and threats.” Samira asserts that the solution is so superficial that even women in power do not have authority to make decisions, “they [women in power] say when we want to work for women’s rights, they reduce our budget; or when we want to take a risk and work, or come up with a new way to work on an issue, there is a rise of masculine jealousy.” She further adds that the gender quota system is perpetuating the narrative that women were not participants of the national struggle which is why they do not deserve to have a place in political institutions. This is a major reason why Samira uses the term “charity” to describe how men feel about sharing power with women. She claims, “when we demand our rights, we are told ‘we built the gender quota system, what more do you want?’ and when we use the gender quotas or demand increasing the percentage, they say, ‘oh you are asking for charity again.’” Naçiba argues that unless there is a grassroots movement for gender equality women cannot be “women’s representatives in governmental institutions.” She concludes that even the gender quota system safeguards masculine politics.

The interviewees argue that it is not only women in governmental institutions that are confined in their activism, but also women’s organizations. The political parties have dominated women’s organizations through means of funding in order to monitor women’s activism.

6.2 Women’s Organizations as an Offshoot of Party Politics

Women’s organizations in the KRG were established after 1991 following the Iraqi uprising against the regime in Baghdad. Most of the interviewees argue that there was much opposition to women’s organizations that were established in the 1990s, however, violence against women left women no choice but to continuously fight against gender violence. During this period, due to the increasing rates of gender violence encouraged by both PDK and PUK, women’s demands for political participation declined and the history of women’s participation in the national struggle was erased. PDK and PUK did not include women’s participation in the recorded history. Houzan argues that no one resisted this manipulation of history, not even male intellectuals. The interviewees also claim that the international community played a role in further marginalizing women’s political participation in the 1990s by centering Kurdish women’s movement on women’s victimhood in Kurdish society.

Women who had participated in the struggle against the Baath regime expected political positions in the KRG after 1991. Houzan argues that political parties encouraged women to participate in the national struggle, but after the KRG gained autonomy, they did not want to share power with women. However, as a US ally in Iraq and after the establishment of the no-fly zone over the KRI which created a safe haven for international organizations, there were initiatives for creating women's organizations by international organizations as well as Kurdish women. Yet, she believes international organizations weakened the Kurdish women's movement by overly victimizing Kurdish women. She argues that although there was gender oppression, "there was also a lot of women's resistance." She also maintains that the UN's involvement in creating national women's organizations to stop violence against women also created a stumbling block for women's movement. She claims, "by establishing institutions to deal with women's issues, they depoliticize women's movement and struggles." She believes this is a method used by the hegemon such as the US to stop "political visionary groups" which continues to this day.

However, Shirin maintains that women's organizations were necessary for the 1990s. She argues that women's organizations had shelters and without those shelters, more women would have been killed. Shirin does not believe that it was international organizations that weakened Kurdish women's movement in the 1990s, but instead the movement was affected by "the continuous battle against PDK and PUK." She claims that when PUK shut down the Sulaymaniyah branch of Independent Women's Organization in 1998, the 12 women who lived in the shelters were sent back to their families by PUK where they were killed in the name of honor. She says, "one of them was 50 years old and a mother of five." However, she points out that none of the international organizations took a stance when those 12 women were killed.

After 2003, the KRG witnessed a proliferation of women's organizations. Chro believes that women's shelters are necessary but women's organizations are not "born of Kurdish society" but are rather agents of cultural imperialism which is why they fail to "challenge the status quo." Chro uses cultural imperialism to explain the unequal relationship that exists between people of the developed world and people of former colonies. In the case of the KRI, she believes that international organizations are sustaining that unequal relationship within these

institutions. As a matter of fact, she believes that in the past 16 years, women's organizations have hindered all works for gender equality and are perpetuating male dominance by continuously victimizing Kurdish women. This is a concern that Khanda also shares.

Khanda believes that one of the reasons the west is interested in creating women's organizations is to continue to cause women in the Middle East to believe they need saving. This she believes is to maintain the unequal relationship between western and eastern civilizations. She says, "they want Middle Eastern women to stay as victims so they can continue to save them. [...] They see themselves as saviors while actually they are invaders and are part of the oppression whether that is cultural, political or economic, even social." She argues that this narrative gives leeway to political parties to depoliticize Kurdish women's movement by constantly referring to their social problems. She further adds that women's organizations have created a class difference between women, an argument confirmed by Shirin, Parween and Houzan. Women who work in these women's organizations have good salaries and the victims are from working class backgrounds which is why women's organizations fail to examine how a factor such as class can lead to further gender oppression. Therefore, women's organizations are now being criticized by women activists as another form of class-stratified women's exploitation.

Rezan is known as a fighter against PUK dominance of the women's organizations in Sulaymaniyah. She argues that after 2003, PUK and PDK created women's organizations to monitor their activities. Put simplify, she believes that political parties want to control the scope of women's activism. She further questions the reasons why women's organizations never take a stance against social injustice outside of the scope of gender, for example, why they did not take a stance regarding freedom of speech when Kawa Garmanyani⁸ was killed. She believes that this is because women's organizations fail to treat women's rights as human rights, and human rights as

⁸ Kawa Garmanyani is said to have been killed by Mahmud Sangawi, a renown PUK member. He is not the only journalist who has been killed in the past decade in the KRG. Of the murdered journalists, Kawa Garmanyani, Sorani Mama Hama and Zardasht Osman remain as the most brutal forms of murder. Many associate the rise of murdering journalists in the KRI to the rise of absolute power. For more information, see:

- Kurt T, Haider Al-Abadi, and United States Marine Corps. "Assassinated Journalists in Kurdistan and a Call for Justice." NEWSREP. May 06, 2018. Accessed May 1, 2019.

<https://thenewsrep.com/102849/assassinated-journalists-in-kurdistan-and-a-call-for-justice/>.

a social issue which is why they have learned to view women's issues as though they exist in a distant culture.

In a campaign against gender violence, Houzan raised over sixty thousand signatures after a woman was killed in the name of honor. The signatures were collected to force the KRG to implement Article 406 of the Iraqi Penal Code.⁹ Houzan visited Pakhshan Zangana, the general secretary of the High Council of Women's Affairs, to present the signatures to her in order to ally with her in hopes of working together to force the government to act. However, Houzan was shocked to see the secretary general showed no sign of concern. Houzan claims, "I said look, I have a list of demands on what needs to be done. [...] She replied, 'do you see that cabinet over there? That is full of signatures from people about different issues and they are all just there.'" Houzan believes that women in the KRG have stopped taking honor killings as a serious issue. This is an indication of the failure of top-down approach to solving social problems.

Kurdish women activists are suspicious of women's organizations. Samira believes they only collect data while Parween believes that women's organizations in the KRI are another platform for corruption. She argues that during her time working at Asuda Organization, the amount of money stolen from budgets sent to be spent on the women living in the shelter was unbearable. She claims that she quit because she "could not stand the level of corruption."

Khanda argues that international funders contribute to the monopoly political parties have over women's organizations by working directly with them. She argues again the funding goes into the hands of men in power and then a portion of it is divided among women's organizations.

⁹ Article 406 of the Penal Code gives capital punishment for capital crimes. The KRG abolished Article 128 which punished murder committed with the excuse of honor to six months and instead, uses Article 406 to convict the offense of murder.

Article 128 of the Iraqi Institution: legal excuse either discharges a person from a penalty or reduces that penalty. Excuse only exists under conditions that are specified by law. Notwithstanding these conditions, the commission of an offence with honorable motives or in response to the unjustified and serious provocation of a victim of an offence is considered a mitigating excuse. Iraq Const., Penal Code art. 128. For more, see:

- "Death Penalty Database." The Death Penalty in Iraq. Accessed May 1, 2019. <http://www.deathpenaltyworldwide.org/country-search-post.cfm?country=iraq>.
- *Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) Women and Men in Honour Related Conflicts*. Issue brief. Ministry of Immigration and Integration. Danish Immigration Service, 2018. Accessed May 1, 2019 <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5beacadd4.pdf>.

This has created another form of class and gender exploitation and is another indication of neoliberalism's disregard to regulations that could work towards gender equality. Parween argues that no one really knows what happens "behind the curtains" when it comes to the relationship between women's organizations, international organizations, and political parties. The merging of party politics, international funders and women's organizations is an indication of neoliberal politics and that adapting to neoliberal feminist politics has indeed strained the Kurdish women's movement.

6.3 The Myth of Law

According to the participants, Kurdish women's movement amended some gender discriminatory laws in the KRG such as Iraq's Penal Code Article 128 that gives lenient punishment to murder committed under the name of honor, and the Personal Status Law which includes women's rights in marriage, child custody, inheritance and divorce.¹⁰ Furthermore, they fought to abolish polygamy laws which allow men to have up to four wives as long as a judge agrees. However, they only succeeded in amending the law from the man getting permission from a judge to get permission from his wife. Although the laws have been amended, the KRG has failed to implement them. Naçiba argues, "it [new laws] clashes with our patriarchal society especially since there was no grassroot work done on how to prepare people for the new developments." She also claims this is one of the reasons the laws are not implemented. On the same note, Samira argues that most women do not know their rights. This is an indication that women's organizations have not worked to raise awareness about women's rights.

Violation of honor codes can result in violence. Honor killing usually takes the form of murder, through stoning, drowning, setting to fire or through another form of fatal murder weapon (Dailey 2016). It is a social tradition of vengeance on women by male family members who violate honor codes, and it is a common practice through the former colonized world and one of the sources of anxiety among women (Chesler 2010). Throughout the 1990s, Kurdish

¹⁰ The personal status law limits women's choice in marriage and allows marriage of girls above nine, deprive a mother of her children after they reach teen years and immediately loses them if she remarries. It gives women half the amount of shares in inheritance as that of a man, and if a woman asks for divorce, she loses all her rights to property including her dowry.

women fought to criminalize murder committed in the name of honor. It was not until 2002 that the KRG amended the law. However, the struggle continues and according to the interviewees, the phenomenon is on the rise.

Naçiba and a group of women activists planned a protest after a 21 year old woman was found dead at Mother Park in Sulaymaniyah in 2015.¹¹ Similar to the women who protested the death of Farkhunda Malikzada in Afghanistan,¹² they planned to take the body from the morgue and bury it in protest of gender violence. She explains this would have created much controversy since women are not allowed to bury the deceased in Islam. However, she claims “a few PUK women had permission from Assaysh [Kurdish security forces], and they kidnapped the corpse and quickly buried it” in order to avoid protests. Likewise, Samira feels defeated in her activism against honor killings. She claims that international organizations take no stance on cases of honor killings and all they contribute to the case is another written report.¹³ She argues that if international organizations are the leading institutions in battling violence, they should force the

¹¹ For more on the story, see:

- "Father Murders Daughter in 'honor Killing' in Iraqi Kurdistan." Kurd Net - Ekurd.net Daily News. October 08, 2015. Accessed May 1, 2019
<https://ekurd.net/father-kills-daughter-honor-killing-kurdistan-2015-10-08>.

¹² A 27 year old girl was lynched by a group of men in Kabul, Afghanistan accused of burning the Quran. She was later buried by a group of women in protest against gender violence, a custom appointed to men. For more on the story, see:

- "Farkhunda Burial 'a First for Afghan Women'." BBC News. August 10, 2015. Accessed May 1, 2019.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/magazine-33809144/farkhunda-burial-a-first-for-afghan-women>.

¹³ Finding statistical data on honor killing is difficult to find due to the lack of transparency, however, reports show that there is a rise in honor killings which some of the interviewees attributed to the laws not being implemented. Between 2013 and 2015, Erbil had 470 cases, Sulaymaniyah 690 cases and Duhok had 280 cases. Honor killings are not only committed by fathers, brothers, uncles and cousins, but also by husbands. In January 2015 alone, there was three attempted murders reports of women and 20 murder threats. Additionally, the rise of honor killing has led to an increase in self harm and the rate of suicide in Kurdish women has gone up drastically, resulting in about 220 cases of suicide by burning each year. For more information, see

- Salih, Golzar. "Honor Killing through Sulaimaniya's Lens." International Policy Digest. November 26, 2018. Accessed May 2, 2019
<https://intpolicydigest.org/2017/07/06/honor-killing-sulaimaniya-s-lens/>.
- Refugee Board of Canada. "Iraq: Honour-based Violence in the Kurdistan Region; State Protection and Support Services Available to Victims [IRQ105424.E]." "Iraq: Honour-based Violence in the Kurdistan Region; State Protection and Support Services Available to Victims [IRQ105424.E]", Document #1334232. February 15, 2016. Accessed May 2, 2019
<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1334232.html>.

government to implement Article 406. She further argues that international organizations should at least try to raise awareness among people on gender equality but they do not. As a result, Kurdish women activists who work outside of these institutions are establishing a new form of resistance and constructing a new identity to Kurdish women's movement that opposes international mediation between society and state.

The gender quota system allows women to join political institutions and be given an opportunity to have decision-making posts, but it did not manage to create a system of protection for women. The interviewees show that women in political institutions are facing harassment and exploitation. The fear of social stigmas force women to stay quiet about discrimination and sexual harassment within these institutions. Samira who works with women in political institutions claims women are facing all kinds of discrimination and harassment.¹⁴ She tells the story of a woman in an all-women's group meeting, who spoke about her experience in politics. She was going to be promoted because she had been diligent in her work but this proved useless as she had been threatened and forced to quit her job and leave politics. "At a meeting, she had been given a small letter which read 'if you get elected, we will tell people that you are cheating on your husband,'" Samira claims. The woman then felt compelled to leave politics as Samira points out, "she quit because if [she] had not and had gone home to tell [her] husband this, he would have said well it is true. If [she] had told [her] mother, she would have also said it is true otherwise you would not be in politics." This is the reason the interviewees believe that the gender quota system is a superficial solution and that the KRG has prioritized patriarchy. This is an indication of discrete oppression that has created a political environment which invites women into governmental institutions but fails to integrate the concept of equality and women's political participation into society.

The KRG also criminalized the practice of FGM as part of the Family Violence Law (Human Rights Watch 2015). However, it still takes place throughout the region, especially in

¹⁴ This phenomenon is not unique to Kurdish women, but undealt with in Third World countries and usually in institutions where women are placed in power through gender quotas. See:

- Bobbitt-Zeher, Donna. "Gender Discrimination at Work." *Gender & Society* 25, no. 6 (2011): 764-86. doi:10.1177/0891243211424741.
- Hejase, Hussin Jose. "Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: An Exploratory Study from Lebanon." *Journal of Management Research* 7, no. 1 (2015): 107. doi:10.5296/jmr.v7i1.6965.

rural areas and small towns. Khanda publicly speaks about her experience with FGM, condemning it as a brutal practice. In an article titled “A Hand Full of Blood” Khanda narrates her experience as a child who had undergone FGM. She claims that after her testimony on FGM, “many girls and women contacted [her] and told [her] that it has encouraged them to talk about their experience with FGM” (Hameed 2018). FGM is a common cultural practice throughout the Middle East for various reasons, among them is the belief that FGM controls a women’s sexuality. There is an ongoing campaign against FGM in the KRI which tries to stop the practice by raising awareness on the health dangers FGM can lead to.¹⁵ The campaign is funded by Wadi Association for Crisis Assistance and Development Co-operations. The interviewees argue the practice continues because the law is not sovereign.

Additionally, the KRG has failed to implement polygamy law. According to the interviewees, Kurdish men travel to the nearest cities that are outside the control of the KRG to get a second, third or even fourth wife and the first wife or wives have no choice but to accept the *fait accompli*. Samira explains that this kind of practice often takes place in the city of Kirkuk which is geographically outside of the control of the KRG.

Najiba argues that the KRG will not make changes to laws that will make women equal to men, so the “laws are patriarchal because [...] it serves their interest.” She argues that theoretically, political parties believe in women’s rights, but in reality they enjoy the inequality and they use nationalism, religion and traditions to maintain gender relations as they are. This expression of indifference towards implementing laws that protect women from gender violence, FGM, rights in marriage and honor killing is a manifestation of how deep impact the of patriarchy, colonialism and sanctioning customary laws and practices have entrenched itself into Kurdish society.

6.4 Nationalism, Patriarchy, Religion, and Traditions

The interplay between nationalist discourse, patriarchy, religion and tradition were almost always pointed out as proof on why the gender stereotyping loop is interminable within Kurdish

¹⁵ For more on the campaign, see:

- "Stop FGM in Kurdistan." Stop FGM in Kurdistan. Accessed May 2, 2019
<http://www.stopfgmkurdistan.org/>.

society. Houzan's article titled "Phobia of Feminism in Kurdistan" and the negative feedback she received from nationalists among other groups was "aggressive." In the article, she claims that Kurdish society is afraid of gender equality because it upsets the patriarchal orders and their nationalist attempts at unity (Mahmoud 2015).

The discussion on religion as a contributing factor to women's oppression in Kurdish society was mentioned by Kner as one of the reasons women in power are also subjected to discrimination. She states, "we have patriarchy that still exists in the government, we have religion as another problem that the parties use to their advantage to further oppress women in power in order to avoid opposition." Rezan adds that it is not only men who stand in opposition to instrumentalizing religion to oppress women, but even when there is an initiative within PUK to challenge the role of religion, "Miss Hero¹⁶ immediately rejects it, [because] she doesn't want to lose conservative men in PUK." Religion is used in this context to normalize gender oppression for the sake of party politics.

However, Parween provides a unique explanation on the use of religion. She argues that even women's organizations prioritize religion over law. She claims, "they [members of Asuda Organization] used to take a mullah¹⁷ to try to solve the problems with the family of women who were living in the shelter, almost never through the police force." This attests to the influence of neoliberal feminism which regards women of color as particularly oppressed. It uses culture and religion to define the frameworks in which this gender oppression takes place. Parween believes women's organizations are performing this way without engaging with the consequences of this approach to solving women's problems.

Naçiba argues that women's organizations use religion and culture as a way to excuse their impotence. She claims, "even [women's organizations] bring up religion, and culture as factors [because] they cannot offer any other explanation." As one would anticipate, women's

¹⁶ Hero Ibrahim Ahmad is the wife of Jalal Talabani, the late President of Iraq. She is one of the most prominent female figures in PUK. For more, see:

- Goudsouzian, Tanya. "Hero Ibrahim Ahmad: The Original Female Peshmerga." Kurds | Al Jazeera. October 29, 2015. Accessed May 2 2019.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/women-make-change/2015/10/hero-ibrahim-ahmad-original-female-peshmerga-151027111035570.html>.

¹⁷ A Muslim man who has mastered the religion and usually works at a mosque.

organizations would not criticize political parties and their use of nationalist discourse. They also do not to engage with the influence of party politics and imperialism on gender inequality, most likely because other concepts would not fit into their neoliberal feminist narrative.

Naçiba further claims that through institutionalizing the struggle for gender equality, the KRG has succeeded in establishing a mindset among women where they are constantly looking for confirmation from an authority figure. She argues, “women think they can just run and start protesting in front of the parliament and that will make a change. And if they need something, they think they have to be part of the government.” She believes that Kurdish women have adopted the narrative that social problems can be solved using a top-down solution approach. However, she believes that privatizing the struggle for gender equality will not solve women’s problems. The way Naçiba sees it, the government is not interested in solving women’s issues. On the contrary, she believes that the KRG is established on patriarchy and it wants to maintain that uneven relationship between men and women. Similarly, Parween believes that people’s understanding of women’s oppression has been so poked at that the understanding of gender inequality has completely been changed. She claims that recently, people see economic instability as the only source of gender inequalities without even looking into what causes these economic instabilities.

Similarly, Khanda argues that it is not only patriarchal institutions that have contributed to women’s oppression, but “we have even adopted the worst of capitalism through these institutions. Capitalism and patriarchy want women to be objects and they, of course, complete each other.” Similarly, Samira argues that there is no strong women’s unity in the fight against oppression because of women’s organizations. She argues that starting an organization has become a weapon even the government uses to oppose the struggle for gender equality. She claims that the government started a Kurdistan Man’s Union¹⁸ to “dismantle whatever women’s movement is trying to do. [...] Just to challenge the women’s movement, they kill women on women’s day such as March 8th and November 25th.¹⁹ Of course, this is to say that there are

¹⁸ Kurdistan Man’s Union was created in 2010. They advocate for polygamy, early marriage and amending the Personal Status Law in men’s favor.

¹⁹ The 25th of November is the international day for ending violence against women. For more information, see:

men who are not subject to the laws.” This is one of the factors, she argues, why so many women activists feel defeated in their fight against gender inequality. This is an indication of the manifestation of institutional violence and neoliberal attempts at controlling the public sphere.

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- "Violence against Women, Sexual Violence, Women, Abuse, Discrimination, Elimination of Violence against Women." United Nations. Accessed April 24, 2019. <https://www.un.org/en/events/endviolenceday/>.

7. Analysis

7.1 Kurdish Women's Anti-History

The Kurdish struggle for national liberation was neither fought by one gender nor was it one chapter in Kurdish modern history. It was fought by men and women and it is an ongoing struggle. Kurdish women fought alongside Kurdish men in a national aspiration for statehood (Al-Ali 2012, 113-15). During this time, Kurdish women organized within the national struggle for independence. It was not until 1991, that women shifted their focus to gender oppression (Kaya 2017, 8-10).

The struggle for power between PDK and PUK cultivated a path to many social problems. Among those problems was the rise of gender oppression. The competition between PDK and PUK led to a rise in nationalist discourse and a return to patriarchy (Al-Ali, Pratt 2011). As shown by the literature, during this period the whole of Iraq was suffering from a stepping back to tribalism, religion and nationalist discourse. This was caused by the UN sanctions that was imposed on Iraq which led to a rise in poverty (Brown, Romano 2006, 51-60). Saddam Hussein's approach to legitimate his power and avoid further collective action against him was done through building tribal ties and instrumentalizing Islam as a method used to create national identity based on traditional social stratification and going back to customary laws (Ibid.). Paradoxically, Efrati demonstrates that in fact sanctioning customary laws through TCCDR is a colonial legacy which were actually different from the original tribal customs. For example, tribes forgave women committing adultery if the women confessed and showed regret in a period of two days, while TCCDR proposed immediate killing based on violation of honor codes (Efrati 2012, 47-50). After 1991, the laws that Iraqi women's movement had fought to amend for example the Personal Status Law which protected women's rights in marriage, and divorce, were all abolished in Iraq (Tabet 2005, 1-28).

Similarly, PDK and PUK restored tribal ties and encouraged nationalism in order to stabilize their power. Kurdish women's mobilization in this period mostly focused on fighting gender violence especially honor killings. Due to the rise of tribalism and a return to patriarchal values, there was a rise in honor killings and domestic abuse (Alinia 2016). PDK and PUK were

stating that honor killings were part of the Kurdish culture and that gender roles were fundamental for society's well-being (Al-Ali, Pratt 2011, 342). But what continues to concern women activists to this day is not only the rebirth of despotism but the exclusion of women in the narrative of Kurdish history.

The manipulation of history by devoiding it of women's participation is one of the reasons Kurdish women are marginalized in the KRI. Kurdish women were active during the national struggle (Al-Ali 2012). As a former member of PUK, Rezan is witness to this change in narrative. She argues that women's contribution to the national struggle is not presented in Kurdish recorded history in order to deny women their lawful right to power. But it comes as no surprise that Kurdish nationalism marginalized women as Cynthia Enloe argues that nationalism is a masculine product and it based on masculine hope (Enloe 2014, 93). In the Middle East, nationalism grew out of a postcolonial context in a struggle against colonial powers. Women joined national movements for liberation based on ethnic oppression (Keddie 2007). The case of Kurdish women was no different. Kurdish women found national liberation fundamental to liberation. However, once the armed struggle was over and the Kurds built an autonomous government, masculine aspirations for power degraded cultural knowledge and controlled the public sphere. In this process, it erased women's participation in the national struggle and Kurdish women were further oppressed.

Nonetheless, women by this point had gained experience in political activism due to their participation in the national struggle. The interviewees claim that women were mobilizing to demand their lawful right to power although focused primarily on creating women's shelters due to the rapid increase in honor killings, a situation Mojab calls "gendercide" (2003, 20-25). Nonetheless, women today believe that the immense focus on gender violence compromised the integrity of Kurdish women's movement. Houzan believes that women's organizations shifted women's focus away from women's right to power. Khanda agrees with Houzan and argues that the way women mobilized in the 1990s was partially because international organizations directed the women's movement.

The international community did not take into account the intersectional complexities of women's oppression. Although Shirin believes there was no alternative since the rates of honor

killings were incredibly high, Khanda argues that through continuing to establish women as victims of patriarchy and religion, both political parties and international organizations exploited Kurdish women. The interviewees argue the narrative that Kurdish women are victims of violence and culture serves the interest of patriarchy.

Kurdish women activists are furious about the ways in which Kurdish history has been stripped of women's narratives, yet what they believe makes the case for gender equality more difficult to win is that this narrative is perpetuated through gender quota system and women's organizations. They believe that the gender quota system has resulted in segregating the genders, reinforcing gender stereotypes and perpetuating male dominance. They believe that male dominance has created nepotism and gender discrimination which has interrupted the possibility of a genuine political representation of feminist identity.

To the consternation of Kurdish women activists, women who fill up the 30 percent quota have become fixated on national identity and marked by a nationalist system of value. One can anticipate this outcome since Kurdish nationalism continues to be used as a force against ethnic oppression. The KRG adopted CEDAW standards of gender equality in order to be recognized as worthy of independence in the eyes of the international community (Al-Ali, Pratt 2011). In this context, women's participation in politics is not a representation of gender oppression or a struggle for gender equality, instead, it is a national struggle for independence. In this regard, Kurdish women's activism within these institutions resembles those of the masculine mindset. It does not resemble a democratic opening for women.

Moreover, Rezan believes that the gender quota system creates a bourgeois solution to women's problems. She argues that the gender quota is not made for any woman, but those who have connections to men in power, in other words, it is another source for nepotism. She further explains, those women are usually from an upper middle-class background. Along the same line, Naçiba believes that this bourgeois solution to women's problems is creating an unrealistic understanding of reality among young women, which is why she believes there is a rise in suicide and honor killings. She argues that this unrealistic understanding of reality is caused by the way in which gender equality is portrayed. She claims that the representation of women on does not reflect that of the society. She says, "women on TV are always made to look strong, [...]"

modern, and free to do what they want,” but she argues that the society does not accept allow women to do as they want.

The singularity of neoliberal feminism, and their “capitalist hierarchies” in understanding gender oppression does not take into account regional factors that have contributed to women’s oppression such as postcolonial experiences (Swarr, Nagar 2010, 5). Naçiba asserts that these institutions clash with society because they are not born of society, instead, they are imported propositions and do not provide a solution to gender oppression in the KRI. Similarly, Parween argues that whenever people speak about women’s problems, most people conclude if women in power are not doing something, then it is not the responsibility of male politicians to represent women when their job is to represent the *nation*. This is an example of how neoliberal feminism has restructured people’s understanding of political and social discourse. Furthermore, it demonstrates how neoliberal feminism has transformed the logic of collective action (Larnar 2000, 5-10). In this respect, this privatization of the struggle for gender equality has reconstructed women’s rights as a private matter, not a social problem.

In spite of the difficulties Kurdish women activists face, my interviewees constantly referred back to the successes of the Kurdish women’s movement. The Kurdish women’s movement was able to force the government to amend some of the laws that initiated gender violence and discrimination, such as Article 128 of the Penal Code which did not recognize honor crime as murder; and Articles 3 and 4 of the Personal Status Law that allowed polygamy to male individuals; and criminalized the practice of FGM as part of Family Violence Law.

One of the first exploitation of women that took place in the KRG was through depriving women of their history. The narrative manipulation of history has marginalized Kurdish women and it is a result of nationalist aspirations, a colonial legacy. Furthermore, the gender quota system has brought women’s face into the political scene, but it has failed to bring women’s voices. Although it appears to include women in politics, the KRG does so for a national interest which is to be recognized as worthy of independence in the eyes of the international community (Kaya 2017). This is an indication that the globalization-from-above has resulted in further exploitation of women.

7.2 Privatization of Women's Struggle for Gender Equality

The image of Kurdish women that neoliberal feminism has created, is of course not a case unique to Kurdish women, but one we see among all women of color, is an image of a woman who needs saving. This woman whose life is in danger because of the brutal culture she is from does not have agency and is unable to make life changes on her own. This meddling of international organizations with the first attempt at creating a Kurdish women's movement by directing Kurdish women to focus on honor killings has proven detrimental to Kurdish women's case for liberation.

Although the participants believe safety is fundamental to women's liberation, they argue that it must not be the only focus. With the help of IMF and World Bank, Kurdish women's movement has been narrowed down to battling gender violence through women's organizations. Additionally, privatization of women's organizations turned them into an offshoot of party politics. Following the 2003 occupation of Iraq, the international community invested substantial funds into women's organizations, especially the US. The distribution of monetary funds was done through PDK and PUK which in turn have monopolized women's organizations (Al-Ali, Pratt 2011). The influence of the international community makes it impossible for Kurdish women to determine what their struggle for liberation would be like without the global interference. Houzan claims that privatizing the Kurdish women's movement has destroyed a potential discourse that goes into the depth of gender inequality in the KRI. She argues that one of the first things that needs to happen is for Kurdish feminists to confront PDK and PUK about their role in encouraging violence against women in the 1990s. This is a suggestion also made by Naçiba who believes that women should not have faith in the KRG.

Houzan argues that the privatization of the struggle for gender equality has narrowed down the struggle to "don't kill us, don't kill us." Similarly, Rezan believes that after 2003, women's organizations were created in order to monitor women's activism. She asserts that women's organizations create the illusion that women have their own sphere of influence where they can work together to make a difference. Additionally, she argues that women's organizations also work to take responsibility to create gender equality off of the shoulders of the KRG. In this way, when women's organizations fail to protect women from, for example, honor

killings, women will be to blame, not the KRG. She argues that in the KRI, “no political party has feminist values.”

Khanda is critical of any kind of work conducted in the name of women’s rights by any private institution. She believes that PDK and PUK want to depoliticize the struggle for gender equality. She claims that by turning the struggle for women’s rights into bureaucratic work, they disengage it from being a movement against structural oppression. She further argues that neoliberal feminism works in the interest of political parties because it prevents women in these institutions from looking back at the damages they caused to women in the region as a whole, and to Kurdish women particularly since in the 1990s. Naçiba believes working within institutions for gender equality helps PDK and PUK monitor women’s activism. Furthermore, she argues it also works in the interest of the hegemons in the KRI because it keeps the flow of social conflicts. She maintains that women’s organizations have stopped viewing women’s issues as a social problem. She claims, “15,000 women have been killed from honor killings between 1991 to 2012, and these are only the official reports.²⁰ This is three times the amount of people killed in the chemical bombing to honor killings Halabja.” This is one of the reasons Shahrzad Mojab call honor killings “gendercide.”

Kurdish women consider institutionalizing the struggle for gender equality as a neoliberal attempt to privatize the struggle for social movements in the KRI. They also believe that the international community is perpetuating the narrative on Kurdish women as victims of cultural and religious practices. In this framework, the understanding of the influence of colonialism, nationalist and postcolonial challenges have all been neglected. The participants believe that international intervention has reduced the scope of the Kurdish women’s movement by privatizing it and consequently dominating it. The political parties enjoy this narrative as it allows them to redirect women’s attention to social problems in order to avoid their demand on political participation. By doing so, PDK and PUK avoid the challenge of a strong political demand by the Kurdish women’s movement. In this regard, Kurdish women activists believe that

²⁰ Naçiba as well as Samira, Khanda, Shirin, and Parween argue they know the numbers of women who have been killed in the name of honor, however, women’s organizations have not published official reports about the number of women killed in the name of honor since 1991.

creating women's organizations has hindered the chances for a grassroots movement for gender equality.

7.3 The New Understanding of Gender Equality

In the 1990s, Kurdish women activists perceived the influence of international organizations as a positive. Most Kurdish women also had faith in the KRG as a result of the nationalist beliefs in Kurdish sovereignty. Therefore during that period, Kurdish women's movement mostly focused on building women's shelters for those whose lives were in danger. However, Kurdish women activists are now reflecting differently on the impact of international organizations in Iraq as a whole and the KRG specifically. Khanda argues "the presence of the international community in the KRI has made the struggle for gender equality more complicated, by using methods that are patronizing." This is a product of the hegemonic governance that neoliberalism pursues by controlling discourses.

Likewise, Naçiba asserts that the international organizations are continuously victimizing Kurdish women and providing no alternatives. In the meantime, she believes that PDK and PUK stabilize their power and strip women who are not connected to men in power of genuine political participation. Furthermore, Houzan mocks the methods the international organizations and claims that she does not understand why Kurdish women have to fly to Istanbul or Beirut to talk about the issues of women in the Erbil or Sulaymaniyah. She believes this has led to an idealization of working for women's rights. She claims that this makes working for women's rights favorable but within women's organizations. She maintains that this makes young women believe that this is the right approach to creating gender equality. She argues that it has resulted in an abstract analysis of women's issues. Similarly, Samira claims that neoliberal culture has resulted in a pursuit of economic stability at the cost of social change.

The grievance that the international community has caused digs deep into the wounds of Kurdish women activists. Khanda and Parween argue that international organizations do not regard Kurdish women's history. They do not take into account the fact that PDK and PUK contributed to violence against women; and they most certainly do not challenge narratives. Khanda further argues that gender quotas are helpless and that unless there is a clear

understanding of women's participation in the national struggle, Kurdish women cannot justify their demand for political participation. This is an indication of a much entrenched resistance to gender equality.

Similarly, Parween believes this narrative that Kurdish women are victims and lack agency works in the interest of neoliberal feminist agenda. It sustains the idea that Kurdish women need to be saved from their brutal culture. When women oppose this narrative, Khanda believes they are silenced because "there is only one story about Middle Eastern women, that they are victims, and they face domestic violence." She argues that no other narrative exists for neoliberal feminists which is why Kurdish women's political identities are always overshadowed.

Samira believes that institutionalizing the struggle for gender equality has built itself into Kurdish women's motivations. She argues that women are no longer seeing the struggle for gender equality as a social struggle or as a struggle for human rights. Naçiba believes that neoliberal feminism has invaded society's willingness to create social change through grassroots movements and that even people have adopted this "concept that the government is the father of the people, [it] has killed all possible dynamics for social change and has led the society to lose all of its confidence." She argues that people's agency is taken from them.

Parween argues that the whole notion of gender equality has become a big puzzle. She argues that in the 1990s, people either believed in equality or they did not, but now the notion has become blurred and people are neither against it nor for it. She further argues that whenever she talks about women's issues, the provided solution is "she [any vulnerable woman] should find a job." She argues in a country where the majority of new graduates are unemployed, widows from rural areas who have no job skills most certainly cannot find work. She believes this new understanding of gender inequality among people is concealing the causes of gender inequality and possible solutions. Similarly, Najiba asserts that since the international community and women's organizations have made people believe that social change is a private matter, it is their responsibility to make sure they force the government to implement new laws.

After nearly three decades, Kurdish women activists believe that although in the 1990s women's organizations were necessary, they are now standing in opposition to institutionalizing

the struggle for gender equality in the KRI. Additionally, the privatization of the struggle for gender equality has destroyed people's will to make social transformations by changing people's understanding of gender equality.

7.5 Conclusion

Transnational and postcolonial feminist theories help us understand that neoliberal feminism and neoliberal feminist policies cannot create social change as they do not take into account the characteristics of the experiences of women of color. In the case of the KRI, neoliberal feminist policies have resulted in institutionalization of the struggle for gender equality. Consequently, this process has caused grievances among Kurdish women activists. The gender quota system and women's organizations have become another brick in constructing gender oppression. On one hand, gender quota system has led to further marginalization of women in power and compromised feminist identity. On the other hand, women's organizations have become another branch of party politics and have narrowed down Kurdish women's movement by reducing it to a struggle against gender violence. By utilizing transnational and postcolonial feminist theories, I analyze the issues that neoliberal feminism have created for women in the KRI. Consequently, neoliberal feminist policies has become the origin of Kurdish women activists' grievances.

8. Conclusion

The primary purpose of this study is to show the root of the grievances caused by the institutionalization of the struggle for gender equality in the KRI. The ten participants of the study in this thesis illustrate that institutionalizing the fight gender inequality has counter-narrated the struggle and has proved detrimental to the discourse and struggle for gender equality.

This thesis exposes the ways the process of institutionalizing the struggle for gender equality has marginalized Kurdish women activists. Since the process is a privatization process, it has allowed PDK and PUK to monopolize all institutions and control who has access to them. But this form of mobilization for the struggle of gender equality was not born of Kurdish society. The political changes after 1991 and the Iraqi no-fly zone invited international organizations into the KRI. They helped Kurdish women build women's organizations and shelters. Although it was necessary at the time to focus on fighting gender violence due to the high rates in honor killings, it still narrowed down the vision the Kurdish women activists and weakened Kurdish women's movement. The 2003 US occupation of Iraq resulted in a mushrooming of women's organizations, and a complete meddling with social and political structures. This drastic change proved to be the beginning of a new set of obstacles for Iraqi women's movement as a whole as well as Kurdish women's movement.

This study exposes the ways in which the 2003 Iraq War changed the course of history in Iraq. The US intervention brought not only the military, but also a new model in policy-making, one of which was neoliberal feminism. In order to employ its paradigm, neoliberal feminism imposed policies in the KRI. The results of those policies were to assemble and impose gender quota system and build institutions such as women's organizations to battle gender inequality. However, these new approaches to gender equality has resulted in other obstacles for Kurdish women activists. The gender quota system has presented a nuisance to the identities of women who are in positions of power. As indicated in the analysis, the interviewees believe that the gender quota system is devoid of feminist identity and it is a continuation of the struggle for statehood.

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