

Kurdish Women's Stories

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Edited by Houzan Mahmoud

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Introduction

Houzan Mahmoud

The inspiration behind Kurdish Women's Stories

Kurdish Women's Stories is an anthology of women's first-person accounts from all parts of Kurdistan.¹ It was conceived as part of Culture Project's 'Self-Writing' online project, a call I wrote in January 2018 outlining the importance of writing about lived experience in love, politics, art, poetry, imprisonment or gender injustice. I wrote the call in both Kurdish and English and published both of them in our digital magazine *Culture Project* as well as on social media. I wasn't sure at the time whether or not my call would be taken up. To my surprise, women reached out to me, many of them unsure of where and how to begin, but eager to participate nonetheless. I encouraged them to write about any moment of significance that stood out in their lives.

Embarking on a self-writing project and calling on Kurdish women to write about their own lived experiences wasn't exactly an easy task for many reasons. It felt like going on a journey without knowing where I would end up, or what

1. For the sake of clarity, I would like to mention that hereafter I will refer to parts of Kurdistan as East Kurdistan (Iran), South Kurdistan (Iraq), North Kurdistan (Turkey) and West Kurdistan (Syria). These four countries have imposed geographic, cultural and political borders between us. This book will cut across these artificial borders and bring together the diverse experiences of Kurdish women from each part as well as from Kurds in the diaspora.

would come up along the way. The main reason that this was no easy task, however, is because we tend to minimise the importance of writing about ourselves as women. Political problems, war, imprisonment and displacement all made writing about ourselves a secondary issue. Women seem to be especially reluctant, perhaps because of everything they have had to endure. It is not easy to tell a life full of stories. The main issue for so many of the women in this book was that they had a lot to tell but did not know where to start or end their stories!

In recent years, many men in South Kurdistan who were politically active in Saddam's era have written about their political struggles and imprisonment. Bookstores are full of such biographies written by men, often citing their bravery and the bygone days of heroism. In contrast, the stories of women, who were also combatants, who were imprisoned, who suffered and kept the momentum of political struggle in Kurdistan alive, are missing or overshadowed by male 'heroism'. Even where women's stories are told, they are whitewashed by official party-owned publications and media made to revolve around those women who are close to the establishment, or who have high political or social status. The reason always goes back to the nature of political parties in South Kurdistan, which are mainly male dominated.

Social status and political ties play a big role in either amplifying someone's story or completely burying it. Not all women have access to power, education, publishing and social status. Many important stories are thus lost to history. I believe that education and the right to tell such stories should not be a privilege afforded to only a few, but rather that all women's experiences should be valued, told and studied.

One of the reasons I called on Kurdish women to write about themselves is because I am personally fascinated by their perseverance and resilience in the face of unspeakable circumstances. As you will read in this book, each woman has her own story of upheaval, whether through war, imprisonment, political exile, violence or the loss of loved ones, yet the endurance, love of life and determination to move forward are all mesmerising. Another reason why such a self-writing project was important was the lack of authentic voices in this regard. It was time that Kurdish women told their own life stories.

This book presents the stories of Kurdish women, all representing different political views – from liberal, leftist, nationalist and religious views to those unaffiliated altogether – and different social, educational and professional backgrounds. All of these stories are thus written by the women themselves, without any filters or censorship in the way of what they wanted to write about. This is neither an academic book based on research and theorisation nor simply a compilation of interviews for newspapers or magazines. These stories are told solely by the women themselves, and each story represents only the lived experiences of its narrator.

This book contains stories written by twenty-five women who reflect on their encounters and experiences in politics, art, love, gender injustice, exile, loss of loved ones, imprisonment and activism. These varied experiences of Kurdish women from different parts of Kurdistan and the diaspora offer a glimpse into how diverse – painful, joyful, traumatising and powerful – their lives are. It is fascinating and inspirational to see how they have found ways to praise the beauty of life despite all the ugliness of war, fascism and social conservatism in our region.

Within the context of political struggles through Kurdistan, women across generations, borders, social and political backgrounds all experienced life differently. This book was largely inspired by the reality that Kurdish women are portrayed as either eternal victims of male violence or as heroine freedom fighters. While it is true that Kurdish women face violence, both at home and at the hands of the fascist states that rule divided Kurdistan, this binary makes it hard to understand the complex and multi-layered experiences of Kurdish women; it allows little room for the uniqueness of their struggles. Like other women throughout the world, they too have their own diverse lived experiences.

Gender-based violence in Kurdish societies erupts ferociously with every war and conflict in this region. Often, the aftermath of any conflict is deadliest for women. Having said that, no one is either an eternal victim or an eternal victor. As these diverse stories show, some of the women writers in this book defied violence at home by refusing to give up and by moving on to be who they are today: activists, professionals, poets, lawyers, artists and writers. As Kurdish women, we have never remained passive in the face of violence.

It occurred to me that there was a need to explore the complexities in the lived experiences of Kurdish women and that the best way to stay true to this diversity was to have Kurdish women tell their own stories.

I find it important to highlight the significant role women have played in all struggles throughout Kurdish history. The most recent is their astounding role in the revolution of Rojava and their legendary fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in 2014. For almost six years now, as the fight enters 2020, Kurds have once again shown why humanity matters.

It was with the revolution that the female fighter image became an icon of the defiant figure – neither in eternal mourning nor a languishing victim, but rather proud and fierce and fighting in defence of herself, her homeland and the noble values of inclusiveness, an ecological society, secularism and the emancipation of women – captivated people everywhere. Indeed, the brave and legendary role that women played and continue to play in the Rojava revolution deserves endless praise and support.

Female fighters have had a strong presence throughout Kurdish history in different parts of Kurdistan. Their roles in the armed struggle across Kurdistan varied. For example, the Komala Organisation of East Kurdistan had many women in its ranks in the 1980s. The female presence in North Kurdistan in the ranks of the PKK, since its establishment until now, has likewise been high and had a major impact in bringing Kurdish women to the centre of politics in both North and West Kurdistan. The presence of women in the parties of South Kurdistan, however, was not as strong militarily, as women were mainly involved in clandestine activism. Nonetheless, I would say that women played a pivotal role in both rural and urban activism. My own family was involved with a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist group called the Toilers Association (Komalay Ranjbaran) in the armed struggle against Saddam's regime from the late 1970s until its fall, and I witnessed first-hand the great sacrifices women in my family made. I grew up seeing how my mother and sisters risked their lives to carry out secret missions, raise money, and provide food and clothing for the fighters.

Unfortunately, taking up arms in the resistance has been the main feature of our existence throughout history, at least

during the last one hundred years due to the geographic divisions imposed on us by imperialist powers and the denial of our existence by ruling states. Resisting these fascist regimes, nationalist dictators and, most recently, ISIS meant that society as a whole had to act in resisting these forces. These are not circumstances in which most of us would want to see ourselves or our families in, but it is a reality we must face, and resisting it is an act of self-defence.

The tragic events in Kurdistan are many and are still unfolding; generations after generations are still witnessing these endless wars, invasions and ethnic cleansing. While I was working on this book alone, Erdogan's fascist army invaded Rojava again, and once more the horrors of war and bloodshed loomed over the Kurds of Rojava. Within the span of six years from 2014 to 2020, the area suffered three invasions: once by ISIS and twice by Turkey. Each used Islamic pretexts to invade and occupy Rojava and slaughter its freedom-loving inhabitants, labelling them as infidel Kurds and subjecting these occupied lands to demographic change and ethnic cleansing. It is worth mentioning that Rojava is rich in diversity, a homeland to Kurds, Assyrians, Arabs and smaller communities like Armenians, Circassians and Turkmen.

Despite the state of never-ending conflicts in our region, women still experience life in all its many facets – politics, love, work, education, art and activism. I wanted to offer our readers a glimpse into the colourful lives of Kurdish women through this book.

The first two stories were dictated by women in their late sixties and early seventies and written by another woman. The two narrators didn't have the education necessary to write their own stories themselves, but were eager to share them

nonetheless. Therein, we have the opportunity to read about the courage, endurance, resistance and willpower of these two women in the face of the harshest realities of life under Saddam's regime.

I had the pleasure of launching the Kurdish version of this book in South Kurdistan in November 2019, and both women were present. They happily shared their stories again with the public and were delighted to see them finally written and published. This meant so much to me; I was moved to tears. One of the women gifted me her own traditional Kurdish clove necklace. Other women in this book, who can only read and write in either Farsi or Arabic because they were not allowed a Kurdish education, have had their stories translated first into Kurdish Sorani and then into English for this book.

The book opens with a story from the oldest woman and ends with that of the youngest, offering a glimpse into the experiences of Kurdish women spanning five generations. Their ages range between seventy and twenty years old. There are stories from women who lived during Saddam's reign on this side of the border in South Kurdistan and stories from women who lived under Khomeini in East Kurdistan, in addition to stories from women who fought in Rojava against Assad's regime and are now continuing to fight against ISIS and the Turkish colonisation. You will read how they have become agents of hope, change and revolutionary ideas in their society.

There are stories from women from North and West Kurdistan detailing their search for an identity that was robbed from them, ending up in prison, losing loved ones and, finally, taking pride in who they are and understanding why they were deprived of their Kurdish heritage.

This collection also features stories from women from South Kurdistan, whose ages range between twenty and over fifty years, detailing their journeys into the world of writing, poetry and art. From the Arabisation campaign of Kirkuk and the economic sanctions to the struggle against conservatism through art, these stories are all gripping and inspirational.

We also have women from East and South Kurdistan who share their moving stories of political activism, imprisonment, leftist ideals, and resistance against gender oppression and fascism.

Women all throughout Kurdistan have consistently stood up against the restrictions placed on them both at home and in society. We have stories from women who have been victims of female genital mutilation, forced marriage, poverty, and a strict, conservative family life. As you read on, you will realise how far they have had to come in order to be who they are today. Some of them have had to overcome gender-based violence and push past a state of victimhood to become involved in the intellectual, political and cultural life of Kurdistan and the diaspora.

Most of the women in this book have had to endure the loss of their loved ones and have picked up the pieces and moved on, standing tall and strong against oppressive regimes. They had to witness the execution of either a brother, a son, a father or a friend. Yet we see defiance, strength and the will to continue and live with dignity. Some even managed to flee to safety in Europe and have still remained politically active, even at this long distance.

I admit that it was not easy to get more stories from other parts of Kurdistan. There are more stories from South Kurdistan, twelve in all. The rest are from the other three parts

of Kurdistan. It was easier for me to find more women from South Kurdistan, as I am from there myself and have more connections there. I was not able to travel to the other parts as my resources were very limited. I only advertised the call via our website and social media and asked friends from other parts to spread the word about this project. I only wish I could have had access to better resources and been able to travel to find more women willing to write about their lives.

Finally, I am exceptionally delighted to present these stories to readers. I feel I have managed to put the pieces together, to create an image, a moment, a memory or just even a glimpse of who we are and could be as Kurdish women.