

## A Review on Women's Rights Struggle in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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**Abstract:** The present article provides an overview of the Kurdish women's rights struggle in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Throughout the history of the mentioned region, Kurdish women have been struggling for their rights in their society but they have not received their rights yet. Having said that, the current work tries to shed light on how the Kurds, in their region, strive for women's rights and gender equality socially, economically, politically, and personally. The purpose of this article is to spread awareness concerning the noted situation in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The latter has, unfortunately, been experiencing insufficient attention regarding women's rights and equality among males and females. It should be noted that the struggle for equality between the sexes has been prevented by aspects such as cultural customs, an underdeveloped educational system, and incorrect political interference. This piece of work is a part of a Ph.D. dissertation which addresses gender issues among academic women in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

**Keywords:** Kurdish Society, Women's Rights Struggle, Feminism, Women's Movements, Gender Equality

### 1. Introduction

Women have always been submissive to men in every way. Unfortunately, the topic of systematic female oppression in the history of humanity is too broad for the current article. However, readers may find it interesting to learn more about the Kurds' struggle for women's rights and gender equality. It is essential to talk about the struggle of women as a whole. The history of women's rights struggle at the beginning of the 19th century is crucial in demonstrating the superiority of women's emancipation over bourgeois feminism. A cursory review of Kurdish women's emancipation history reveals that the problems women faced a century ago are regrettably still relevant today. The struggle for women's rights in the Kurdistan region can be divided into different periods and each period has its objective. The current article tries to give an insight into the women's rights struggle that started in the 19th century by mainly focusing on Kurdish sources. Thus, the main aim of this article is to share a range of detailed prospectus on the struggle for women's rights in the Kurdistan region for those who are interested in this topic. Also, this article seeks to demonstrate the differences between Western feminism and the Kurdish struggle for women's rights in the Kurdistan region in terms of waves, aims, challenges, and achievements. Previous and present studies

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on feminism and gender equality have always tried to expose the sphere of women's rights through different dimensions.

Having said that, the review article contains an overview of earlier works on the topic. First, the article will share a summary of the first period of women's rights struggle in the Kurdistan region of Iraq in the form of a literature review. This is followed by an overview of the second period of women's rights struggle in the stated area. Next, the third phase of the women's rights struggle will be tackled as well. Finally, the article ends with a general conclusion concerning the main topic and its content.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The First Period of the Women's Rights Struggle in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

The struggle for women's rights in the Kurdistan region of Iraq differs from the Western societies. In the West, there is feminism. The latter is a movement that is divided into phases that aims to establish equality among the sexes in terms of social, economic, political, and personal rights. The first wave of the struggle for women's rights in the West was led by female movements that were characterized by struggling for equal legal rights for females. The latter emphasized educational rights and the right to work. After a short period of time, it shifted towards political rights that strove for women's suffrage.

In the Kurdistan region of Iraq however, the struggle for women's rights as an organized feminist movement is an invisible one. However, several scholars in the region do agree that there is feminism as a movement in the region with different phases and aims (Mukeryani, 1999). Others believe that the ideology of feminism is visible in the struggle for women's rights in the Kurdistan region, but not as a movement. Mojab (2001) argues that studies have shown the complexity of Kurdish women's lives in the region due to the domination of patriarchy and nationalism. Mojab also argues that the struggle for women's emancipation in the Kurdistan region was inspired by the feminist movements of the West. 'At the same time, Kurdish women's creative resistance to feudal, tribal, and modern forms of patriarchy' is notable (Mojab, 2001, p. 16). Furthermore, Mojab (2001) believes that these women have made history by participating in different feminist struggles against their national patriarchy.

Despite the different opinions related to if there is similar western feminism in the Kurdistan region or not, numerous scholars agree that the struggle for women's rights in the region was and is still necessary. Also, each period of the struggle for gender equality and women's rights differs from each other in that each period had varied aims. The struggle for women's rights in the Kurdistan region of Iraq did not begin with an organized movement. Rather, it was started by individual male intellectuals to solve illiteracy problems among females and to spread awareness in society by giving females educational rights. According to Kurdistan Mukriyani who is a Kurdish linguist, Kurdologist, and feminist, the history of feminism in the Kurdistan region of Iraq can be divided into various periods. Mukriyani's book in 1999 discusses the emancipation of Iraqi-Kurdish women from the late 1900s to the 1970s.

Nevertheless, throughout history, different movements support women's rights and over a period of time, women activists were mainly struggling for their ethnic group to increase not only the rights of the population in general but also their rights. With regard to the Kurdistan region, history reveals that women's movements in the region were mingled with nationalist movements (Ranharter, 2013, p.150).

However, and ambiguously, nationalism and the fight for an independent autonomy have offered Kurdish females a platform to seek a more public role. The fight for these females were double; on the one hand, they struggled against the prior social, economic, and religious mandate, and on the other hand, they were struggling against the oppression of the colonialists (2013, p.151).

### 2.1.1 Literary Sphere and Women's Rights Struggle

Mukriyani<sup>1</sup> (1999, p. 39) describes that the first period of the struggle for women's rights in Iraqi-Kurdistan was covered by literary influences. The struggle for women's rights in the mentioned region received strong support from different scholars and Kurdish poets, especially from male figures. Mukriyani (1999) points out that the very first male poet who revealed his support for the rights of Kurdish women in the Kurdistan region of Iraq was the Kurdish Poet Haji Qadri Koyi (1815- 1892). Moreover, in his book, *Giw Mukriyani*<sup>2</sup> (1969) indicates that when Haji Qadri Koyi was 38 years old, he travelled to Istanbul where he started his new poetic career (Ibid, 1969). In the same city, Koyi became a well-known figure in the world of literature where he managed Persian lectures. He continued his poetic journey by writing on nationalism, social issues, and love. Koyi has produced a famous poetic work where he is openly supporting women in terms of equality in education among females and males as shown below:

"بۆچی فهرمووویهتی نهی نهمین

(اطلوبا العلم ولو بالصین)

نێر و می لهو حه ديسه فه رقی نییه

"(Gîw Mukriyanî, 1969) گهر مه لا نه هی فهرموو دینی نییه"

The above stanza from his poem analyses a sentence from the holy Quran where he attempts to show that males and females are equal in their educational rights and if any (Imam or Mullah) rejects this purpose, according to Koyi they are unbelievers. Yet, the text above shows how brave Haji Qadri Koyi<sup>3</sup> was. His braveness enabled him to write such a stanza while knowing that it was forbidden by the Othman Empire to write such type of poems, especially in the Kurdish language. Haji Qadri Koyi was inspired by Ahmadi Khani<sup>4</sup> who was a nationalistic poet as he tried to give Khani's message a continuation (1650-1707). According to Shakely (2002), Koyi was willing to open the eyes of the Kurds by supporting them in solving illiteracy problems and backwardness as he believed that they had a lack of knowledge and were suffering from religious fanaticism. He motivated the Kurdish people to undertake science and the reality

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Kurdistan Mukriyani has written more than 12 books about the emancipation of Kurdish women.

<sup>2</sup> The Reflection of Women's Question in the Name of Women in the Kurdish Press Between 1898-1970.

<sup>3</sup> *Diwani Haji Qadri Koyi*, was published in 1969. Haji Qadri Koyi was a Kurdish poet who was born in 1815 in Koy Sanjaq which during that time was ruled by the Ottoman Empire (Mukriyani, 1969, p. 6). He argues that Koyi's father passed away when he was just at the age of 7 and that his mother took care of him and sent him to the Mufti Mosque in the year 1822 where he learned to read and write. In the mosque, he received the 'Faqe' (Faqe is a person who is an expert in Islamic jurisprudence) position which allowed him to give lectures in the mosques of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Kirkuk, Rawandiz, and Mahabad. The listed Kurdish cities are all situated in the Kurdistan region of Iraq except for the city of Mahabad which lies in Iranian Kurdistan.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmadi Khani is one of the most famous national poets who is well-known for his famous poem named MUM U ZIN, which is a Kurdish classic love story written down in 1692 and is considered to be the epic of Kurdish literature.

of modern society as he believed that in this way the liberation of an independent Kurdistan was possible. Furthermore, Koyi never got married and passed away in 1892, in the city of Istanbul, Turkey, where he was also buried.

### **2.1.2 Kurdish Female Leaders in the Struggle for Women's Rights**

During the period between the 1800s and 1900s, one of the most notable Kurdish women who is widely known in Kurdish history and who was able to successfully control the relations between Kurdish tribes was Adela Khanum, also known as Lady Adela (1847-1924)<sup>5</sup>. During the mentioned period, most tribe leaders were males, however Adela Khanum, as a Kurdish woman, ruled over many tribes. Among the Kurds, she is well-known as the Kurdish female leader who successfully runs the internal affairs of her clan.

However, Meiselas and Van Bruinessen (2008) in their book *Kurdistan in the Shadow of History*, claim that one of the earliest Kurdish feminists that supported women's education as a tool for empowerment was Hapsa Khan (1891-1953)<sup>6</sup>. At the beginning of the year 1920, Hapsa Khan established one of the first Kurdish women's organizations as she started a school for women in the region. Yet, it is worth mentioning that Hapsa Khan's aim was more concerned with Kurdish nationalism rather than feminism. In addition, she was a pioneer in struggling for the women's educational rights. Khani together with her husband who was a Kurdish leader, Sheikh Qadir Hafid<sup>7</sup> and like many other people of that time wanted an independent state. Her husband had an important leading role in the Kurdish resistance against the British occupation (*Kurdistan Women*, 2008).

The same book by Meiselas and Van Bruinessen (2008), quotes a sentence by Lotte Errell about Hapsa Khani's powerful charisma which goes as follows: "whose husband gets up when she enters the room" (Meiselas, 2008 p. 170). However, the quotation says not much about Hapsa Khani's powerful personality because standing up when someone enters a room is a sign of respect in the Kurdish culture, even if the person who enters is a child (Mukriyani, 1999). In a book written by Kamal Mazher Ahmad (1937-2021)<sup>8</sup> in 1981 entitled *Women in History*, Ahmad claims that many of the missionaries who visited the Kurdistan region have misunderstood the Kurdish woman. He argues that many of these missionaries were intellectuals who specialized in the Middle East as they visited other regions of the Middle East before arriving in the Kurdistan region (Ahmad, 1981, p. 73).

On the other hand, Mojab (2001, p.10) indicates in her article that in the West there is a tradition of researching the Kurds. Western history is heavily influenced by missionaries, travellers, diplomats, philologists, and army men. Compared to the past, the literature on the Kurds is currently expanding at a

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<sup>5</sup> According to Edmonds (1957), Lady Adela was also named Princess of the Brave by the British as she was one of the women leaders in the history of Kurdistan. she was a Kurdish ruler of the Jaff tribe in Halabja of the Kurdish Region.

<sup>6</sup> The mentioned information was received during an interview in 1992, in Iraq with the niece of Sheik Mahmud named Drakshan Jalal Ahmad Hafid.

<sup>7</sup> He was the brother of the Kurdish leader Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji who had the leading role in a series of Kurdish revolts against the British Mandate in Iraq.

<sup>8</sup> A well-known Iraqi-Kurdish writer and historian who received his Ph.D. in Soviet Union. He published several books on several topics in Kurdish and Arabic including the Kurdish cause and women in history.

faster rate. In the past, several anthropologists including Henry Field, Edmund Leach, Frederick Barth, Henny Harald Hansen, Wolfgang Rudolph, Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth, Martin van Bruinessen, and Leszek Dziegiel, carried out a significant fieldwork during the 19th century, primarily on Iraqi Kurdistan. A serious criticism towards their literature has not yet been made. However, it is not difficult to see that colonial interest shaped their works, at least impressionistically (Ibid., 2001, p. 11).

During that time, there were not many critical discussions on the social science literature as well, particularly on the anthropological fieldwork that have been conducted in the Kurdistan region back then. Furthermore, these anthropological fieldworks were shaped by historical and intellectual contexts. In addition, the theory and methodology used in these fieldworks on Kurdish women were written from a male perception. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that only the work by a Danish anthropologist named Henny Hansen was completely devoted to the females of Kurdistan who tried to scrutinize Kurdish women in the late 1950s. His work on the Kurdish Woman's Life is a landmark in the study of Kurdish females. Furthermore, Hansen's work cannot be briefed from the feminist perspective. Undeniably, during that time, the fields of social sciences and especially anthropology were not touched yet by the feminist theories and methodologies (Mojab, 2001).

As argued by Ahmad (1981), the missionaries compared the Kurds with non-Kurds in the area which is shown in their writings. The writings carry a comparative overview which resulted in some misunderstandings as they were exposing an image of the Kurds during that particular period of time which was larger and more beautiful than it actually was in reality. Regarding Kurdish women, Ahmad gives an example of how these missionaries were overemphasizing Kurdish women. According to Ahmad (1981, p.74), "the missionaries were extremely exaggerating the social status of women among the Kurds".

Then, Ahmad (1981, p. 74) states that it seems that these missionaries were coming from the narrow streets of closed-minded cities of the Middle East to the open mountain areas of the Kurdistan region of Iraq which made them quite confused which is why they were more positive about Kurdish women if compared to other women in the Middle-East (Ibid., 1981, p. 74). Ahmad (1981, p. 75) uses walking barefoot as an example. Indeed, Kurdish women do not walk barefoot because women who are living in the mountainous areas are not walking barefoot which is due to the cold winter and the rocks in the mountains do not allow them to do so (Ibid., 1981, p. 75). However, another example by Ahmad (1981, p. 75) is linked to clothing. Kurdish women, if compared to areas around them, were wearing colourful clothes without both a black Abaya<sup>9</sup> and a scarf which was a cultural and religious habit in the Middle East. The colourful clothes that Kurdish women were wearing were connected to the natural environment they were living in. They were raised in a colourful environment, as their daily life involved them exposed to the green colour of the trees, the blue colour of the sky, and the red colour of the flowers that is the way it is reflected in their clothing style.

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<sup>9</sup> A loose and black coloured, body covering dress that women wear in public over their clothing to comply with decency laws which still exists in many Middle-Eastern countries, especially in the gulf region.

## 2.2 The Second Period of Women's Rights Struggle in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The second period of feminism in Western societies focuses on a wide range of themes such as family, sexuality, domestic violence, and reproductive rights. While the second period of the struggle for women's rights in the Kurdistan region of Iraq concentrates on educational rights, women's suffrage and the ending of unpleasant traditions in the Kurdish society. The female movements during the 1940s and the 1950s struggled for their rights as part of the revolutionary movement against British domination as well as against Iraqi kingship. These females participated in humanitarian aid, welfare activities, strikes, demonstrations, and underground political activism from all sides of political areas (Ranharter, 2013 p.151).

Throughout history, Kurdish women along with all females in the world had fewer rights and were oppressed by their society (Ahmad, 1981, p. 77). Some unpleasant traditions in Kurdish society have rooted, especially in rural areas and villages, such as the exchange of women (ژن به ژن)<sup>10</sup> or levirate marriages<sup>11</sup> which unfortunately persists. With regard to cities, many young girls were married off as they were not allowed to choose their life partners (Ibid., 1988).

Regarding education, Ahmad (1981, p.77) highlights that illiteracy has been the main problem for most women in the Kurdistan region. A statistical report for the year 1952 shows that in the city of Erbil, 759 girls received education in primary schools. In Sulaymaniyah, on the other hand, 1132 girls joined primary schools. Erbil contained 39 female teachers while Sulaymaniyah had 49 female teachers. In the same year, Erbil included 131.288 female citizens. Referring to the latest number, 107.940 were illiterate. In the same year, Sulaymaniyah existed of 123.644 female citizens. Those who were above 5 years old and illiterate reached the number 101.886. (Ibid., 1981, p.77).

### 2.2.1 The Role of Men in the Struggle for Women's Rights

Kurdistan Mukriyani (1999) indicates that the second male poet who worked on Kurdish women is Malla Muhamadi Koyi. Koyi believed in equality among men and women, therefore he was the first Mullah in the Kurdish society who sent his daughter to school. Another male poet who is well-known in Kurdish society and has worked on the rights of Kurdish women is Qani Muhammed Abdulkader (1898-1965). He struggled for the suffrage of Kurdish women. Furthermore, another male poet who is also popular in Kurdish society is Abdulla Goran (1904-1962). Goran was a leftist poet. Shakely (2002, p. 14) indicates that Goran is known as the father of Kurdish modernism. Goran brought a revolution in the Kurdish poetic world as during that time Kurdish poetry was influenced by Arabic, Persian, and Turkish heritage for many years. So, Goran avoided this influence and gave his poems a form, a language, and content which was based on Kurdish reality, culture, and folkloric norms and values. Concerning his encounter regarding women's rights, Goran worked on equal rights between males and females in terms of marriage, the free will of choosing your marriage partner, reducing social class differences, and solving the social problems of females.

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<sup>10</sup> By force pair of siblings married to another pair of siblings.

<sup>11</sup> It is a type of marriage in which the brother of a deceased man is obligated to marry his brothers' widow.

The last poet that will be discussed in this section is Hemin Mukriyani (1921-1986). Hemin Mukriyani was the pen name for Seyed Mohammad-Amin who was a famous Kurdish poet, journalist, and literary critic that struggled for female rights in terms of religious oppression and the emancipation of females in the Kurdish society. Nevertheless, he strongly believed that only political and national equality between males and females will lead to an independent state. Although, the mentioned male along with many others have struggled for female rights as unfortunately, Kurdish females were not able to do the same due to cultural, social, and religious norms. According to Kurdistan Mukrayni (1999), until the year 1926, no efforts and attention were given to females in the Kurdish press.

### **2.2.2 The Struggle for Women's Rights through Literature Sphere and Nationalism**

Shakely (2002, p.7), Mukriyani (1999), Ahmad (1981, p. 77), and Meiselas and Van Bruinessen (2008) argue that the first Kurdish-written newspaper was established in 1898. The newspaper was named Kurdistan and was first published in Cairo by Migdad Midhat Badirkhan. Belatedly, his brother, Abdul-Rahman Badirkhan embraced the newspaper as he expanded the publication in Geneva, London, and Folkestone with which its publication date between 1898 and 1902 (Mukriyani, 1999). After the year 1926, an article was written in the journals Zari Kurmanji (1926-1932) and Diari Kurdistan (1926) which were related to the status of women in Kurdish society.

According to Mukriyani (1999), Hussein Huzni Mukriyani was one of the first intellectuals who wrote about the importance of the role of females in Kurdish society. Huzni wrote an article in 1926 entitled: Why the Education and Development of Females Are Necessary? where he mentions the importance of females within the Kurdish society in terms of education, national, and cultural beings. The importance of female roles was a special one because during that period the Kurdish people were oppressed and not allowed to express their Kurdish identity.

Mukriyani (1999) discusses that in 1946 there were two articles produced by a male intellectual named Salahuddin in the Galawesh Magazine who criticizes Kurdish females intending to develop an awareness among females in Kurdish society. The article discusses that Kurdish females did not improve themselves in terms of education and social status. In addition, in 1950, another male author with the penname Perikhan wrote an article in the Hataw Magazine. The article provided information about a new event occurred in Kurdish society at that time. The event had to do with the fact that females were able to work in factories for the very first time. Working in factories as women caused social reforms as this event had created a major shift in the labour market during that period. Although this alteration led to a conflict in Kurdish society, it was not acceptable to allow Kurdish females to work in factories which were in line with some social norms of that period. The journal Zhen (1954-1960), issue number 1268, which was published in October 1955, contained an article titled Taji Kechan<sup>12</sup>. The article was about the first girl who attended school which was open for elderly females who had the will to study. The school aimed to reduce illiteracy among females and to give females more opportunities to join in education.

Another journal called 'Hataw' existed from 1954 to 1960. Referring to issue number 5 of the mentioned journal, in 1954, the first article was related to in-equality among Kurdish males and females. The article

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<sup>12</sup> Taji kechan means the crown of girls. This was the name of the first school that was opened for elderly women.

was written by Gew Mukriyani under the penname Khunche Mukriyani. Other male authors with pennames such as Sabrya Muhammed, Kecha Kurd-Pershang, Ziba Abdull-wahed, Hiter, Runak Jalal, and Adiba Ali participated in this magazine as well. The stated figures have written about the emancipation of females in the educational system. Kecha-Kurd Pershang was living in Kirkuk and has written an article in *Hiwa* magazine, volume 9, in 1958. The article mirrors the need for female magazines for Kurdish women in the Kurdish language (Ibid., 1998).

According to Mukriyani (1999, p. 54), the reason why many of these authors were using pennames is because of two different reasons. Firstly, to motivate women to participate in literary spheres and the workplace, and to receive a diploma so that the Kurdish society will develop. The second reason is related to an attempt to show non-Kurds that Kurdish females are also able to produce knowledge in terms of literary works, self-emancipation, social movements, and political campaigns for reforming issues generated by gender inequality.

Then, during the 1970s, the media, especially the press, took over the struggle for women's rights in the Kurdistan region of Iraq regarding civil rights. The latter expresses itself in educational equality between males and females, more work opportunities for females, women's entrepreneurship, and political participation of women in the region. The mentioned points became the construction of the second period of feminism for the purpose of the fight for equal rights between males and females. It is worth noting that despite the lack of feministic waves in the Kurdistan region, many Kurdish intellectuals agree that after the 1970s the third phase of women's struggle started whereby Kurdish females began to struggle for their rights through civil organizations whereas later their struggle was followed by international non-governmental organizations (Mukriyani, 1999).

Both, Viyan Suleiman (2019, p. 8) and Mojab (2001) demonstrate that the first organization that was established to struggle for women's rights was *Yeketi Afretani Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Women Union) in 1952. The Kurdistan Women Union was created by the Kurdistan Democratic Party. The establishment of this organization took place secretly due to the political situation of that time. Until 1958, the organization contained 10 females as they were privately organizing meetings in Sulaymaniyah. However, there were other active females who fell under the organization in other Kurdish cities such as Zakho, Kirkuk, and Khanaqin (Ibid., 2009). In addition, Mukriyani (1999) argues that the Kurdistan Women Union was secretly established with the cooperation of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) on December 11, 1952. Up to present, Kurdistan Women Union operates as a civil society organization, it is regarded as the oldest women's organization in the region. Dozens of brilliant women have played an effective role in its establishment and in the achievement of its objectives. The following is a list of some names: Miss Nahida Sheikh Salam, Bahya Maroof, Zakya Ismail Haqi, Wazira Pirdavud, Hassiba Qazzaz, Payman Maroof, Fakhrya Sadullah (1999, p. 49). Furthermore, Mojab (2001, p. 18) explains that the Kurdistan Women Union (*Yekêti Afretanî Kurdistan*) published its first issue titled 'The Voice of Women (*Dengî Afret*)' in 1953. In total, six issues emerged between the years 1953 and 1990. Additionally, Mojab (2009, p. 18) discusses that a Kurdish women's press appeared in the 1990s, however, most of the publications continued to be initiated by Kurdish women's organizations aligned with Kurdish political parties.

As a result, Suleiman (2019, p. 9) argues that the Kurdistan Women Union can be divided into six phases that spread over a period between 1952 and to present. Phase one was from 1952 to 1958 as they were working secretly. The second phase, however, was from 1958 to 1961 as its main focus was to uncover the organization in combination with self-determination; the opening of the union's headquarters in cities, and the process of operating activities. The third phase lasted from 1961 to 1970 while the union's main aim was to participate in the September Revolution (also known as the Aylul revolts<sup>13</sup>) and to accomplish political activities by demonstrating the role and abilities of Kurdish women. The fourth phase started from the announcement of the 11 March Autonomy Agreement of 1970 until 1975. During this phase, the Kurdistan Women Union started formally organising itself by arranging multiple conferences and congresses including creating a strategic program for the union. Phase five (1975-1991) consisted of diasporic operations. Phase six commenced after the uprising of 1991. This phase consisted of the return to Kurdish cities in combination with the struggle for the civil rights of Kurdish women (Ibid., 2009).

It is obvious that Kurdistan Women Union is not just struggling for women's social equality, rather, it is also impacted by the political and nationalistic atmosphere that has prevailed over time. According to Mojab (2001, p. 9), Kurdish feminists have given up the women's movement to the interests of Kurdish nationalism. In the early 1920s in Iraqi-Kurdistan, national liberation completely covered women's emancipation as Kurdish nationalism was dominated while these national liberations were only writing useless information about gender equality. In addition, Mojab (2001) highlights that nationalistic parties have shifted gender equality to the future when an independent state is achieved. Yet, these nationalists were promoting the misbelief in the freedom of Kurdish women (Ibid., 2001). Hence, the 11 March Agreement of 1970<sup>14</sup> provided the Kurds a sort of self-government which offered a range of different rights such as the right of using the Kurdish language officially, freedom of speech, and press. The mentioned rights became a pillar to support Kurdish females. As an outcome of the stated phenomenon, multiple organizations emerged such as Kurdistan Academy, Kurdistan Writers' Union, and Cultural and Arts organization (Mukriyani, 1999).

### **2.3 The Third Period of the Women's Rights Struggle in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

The third wave of feminism in the West carries the possibility of a renewed form of feminism from the mid-1990s in which self-development, choice and discriminatory practices from new cultures are prominent. As opposed to the objectives of women's rights in the West, Kurdistan region experienced other types of objectives. Before 1991, the struggle for women's rights was mainly focused on gaining national rights for the Kurdish people in general rather than chasing any kind of gender-specific agenda (Mojab, 2000). The third period of struggle for women's rights began after the uprising of 1991 through women's organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) at the national and international level as more awareness of Kurdish Women's issues was discussed. As Ranharter (2013), Qaradaghi (2018), and Hardi (2020) argue that during the end of the second half of the 20th century, more women's

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<sup>13</sup> The first Iraqi-Kurdish war lasting from 1961 to 1970. The battle was led by Mala Mustafa Barzani in an attempt to establish an autonomous Kurdish administration in the northern part of Iraq.

<sup>14</sup> Iraqi-Kurdish autonomy agreement of 11 March 1970 was a consensus after the first Iraqi-Kurdish war and for the creation of an Autonomous Region whereby the Kurds reached three Kurdish provinces and alongside with districts that have been determined by Kurdish majority. This agreement was a serious attempt to resolve the long-running Iraqi-Kurdish battle.

organizations were established as they were often associated with political parties. However, Kurdistan Women Union, shares that there are currently approximately 5000 local women's organizations registered. On the other hand, only 106 women organizations seriously worked on women's rights in 2019 (Suleiman, 2019).

The Kurdish scholar, Choman Hardi, who is an educator, poet, and the founder of the first gender studies centre in the Kurdistan region, argues in her article entitled 'Blaming the feminists: attempts to debilitate a movement' that after 1992, when the establishment of the Kurdistan regional Government was announced, organizations related to women's rights struggle proliferated. And since then, men speak of female movements that mainly contain women's rights categories, nonetheless, it also covers individual activists, lawyers, academics, journalist, and authors (Hardi, 2020, p.2). The purpose of Hardi's article was an attempt to correct some of the misrepresentations about the women's movement in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

On the other hand, the fight for women's rights as a movement is unknown due to the political resistance against Saddam's dictatorship and the ethnical oppression that hides the struggle for gender justice in the Kurdistan region (Hardi,2020). Nevertheless, despite limitations such as; the lack of feminist literature in Kurdish, an underdeveloped society, and short-term funding, the struggle for women's rights in the Kurdistan region has been able to create a change (Suleiman, 2019; Hardi, 2020, p.2). Despite the situation mentioned above, there were some positive changes made in this period to support women. An important positive characteristic was the legal reform regarding women's rights in terms of domestic violence, family law, and participation in politics. Moreover, other improvements such as; giving services to women in need, shelters, the development of gender studies by challenging the authoritative gender discourse, training women's empowerment, and the appearance of several women in the public sphere (Hardi, 2020, p. 3).

### **2.3.1 The Challenges Woman's Face in this Period**

Despite the progress in achieving some women's rights, the struggle for women's rights during the above-stated period also faces major barriers. These hindrances include a genuine lack of will on the part of the Kurdish authorities to improve the situation of women. The failure of the judicial branch to implement reform laws regarding female rights, the failure of the education system to promote gender equality, the degrading of women, the reproducing stereotypes and the media's role in opposing women's rights, and smear campaigns against activists and NGOs (Hardi,2020).

The media, including social media, also plays an important role regarding the period in question by creating awareness concerning women's rights and gender equality. Unfortunately, Hardi (2020, p.2) and Qaradaghi (2018) argue that the Kurdish media is sexist and politically motivated. Throughout the social media, many misconceptions of feminism are being shown; media indicates patriarchal and conservative religious norms, and smearing of campaigns against feminist activists is particularly prominent when it comes to gender injustice (Hardi, 2020, p.3).

Moreover, the relationship between Kurdistan regional Government (KRG) which established in 1992 and Kurdish woman are formed by the beliefs in the accomplishment of the KRG regarding women's rights

and gender equality (Ranharter, 2015). According to Al-Ali and Prat (2009) after the elections in 1992, of the 105 elected members of the parliament, five of them were females. After 1992, the two ruling parties were the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) as both parties tried to include tribal leaders, by publicizing the 'neo-tribalism' in the Kurdistan region of Iraq (McDowall, 2000, p.385). However, in 1994, the KDP and PUK were fighting against each other which resulted in a local war (Al-Ali and Prat, 2009). At the same time, Kurdish Islamic groups attempted to Islamize the Kurdish community which was sponsored by the neighbouring country of Iran (Mojab, 2004, p. 129). Nonetheless, Kurdish females were divided in line with the political and administrative division of the Kurdistan region of Iraq. As Mojab (2003) argues, many women activists were reporting the increase in so-called honour killings and other crimes against Kurdish women which are labelled by Mojab as 'gendercide' (Mojab, 2003). In addition, Mojab (2004, p.122) indicates that both KDP and PUK maintain female oppression, including honour killing, as a part of the Kurdish tribal and Islamic culture.

Furthermore, Bagheri (2022, p. 626) argues that one of the main reasons why the Kurdistan regional Government (KRG) is not effective in entrenching the political participation of Kurdish women's rights is because of the lack of a rightful democracy, or due to a sold process towards legitimate democracy. A further reason is a weak power shared among the two leading parties in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

Despite the aggression that Kurdish women faced from certain sides, Kurdish female activists fought to overturn the provisions of the Iraqi penal code which allowed executions of women due to honour violations. Fortunately, Kurdish women's activists successfully achieved these changes in the year 2000 in the PUK-controlled zones and the year of 2002 in the KDP-controlled regions (Al-Ali and Prat, 2009). Another achievement that Kurdish women have attained was the reform of the Iraqi personal status code of 1959 concerning gender equality in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. In addition to that, some Kurdish regions permit a man to have multiple wives which is punishable by three years in prison and being fined (Mojab, 2004).

### **2.3.2 The Continuation to Enhance Women's Rights**

Kurdish women's activists are urging to bring women into the public domain through political participation, employment and education, and they frequently discover significant overlap with those made by nationalists to 'modernize' the nation (Al-Ali, 2001, p. 341). However, Kurdish women's rights activists are criticizing the Kurdish parties, authorities and are supporting vulnerable women in many different ways. They attempt to change the patriarchal system by focusing on major socio-political changes (Hardi, 2020, p.8). However, as Hardi (2020) points out, gender equality is not the responsibility of only non-governmental organizations and activists. It is, however, also the responsibility of the larger community.

On the other hand, another important aspect is that Kurdish women's activities are not willing to work with women in the rest of Iraq as they have different aims regarding women's rights in comparison with women in Iraq. Kurdish women activists associate Islamic law with inequalities and social injustice (Al-Ali and Prat, 2011, p.349). Accordingly, many Arab Iraqi women are a member of one of the Islamic political parties or merely devout women who promote women's issues from an Islamic perspective (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011, p.351).

It is significant to highlight that an increasing number of women's rights activists have already cut links with major political parties and are now a part of larger protest movements in the Kurdistan region that call for better services and an end to corruption. In this regard, women's rights advocates are outlining some of the primary demands of non-elite women in Iraqi Kurdistan for a more equitable distribution of resources. However, they also continue fighting against institutionalized patronage that supports the perpetuation of discrimination against women (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011, p. 354).

Another achievement in this period is the participation of Kurdish women in the military, which can be considered as women empowerment. Bagheri (2022, p. 627) describes that the enlistment of Kurdish women in the military could be seen as a step towards gender equality. Nevertheless, the Kurdish military being used as a venue for women to demonstrate and improve their knowledge and abilities with rising awareness in collaboration with Kurdish males does not represent a significant improvement in gender equality and women's rights per se. To rephrase it, even though the KRG is trying to promote a narrative of gender equality within Kurdish society by allowing Kurdish women to join the Kurdish Militia, there are still a lot of obstacles in the way of achieving gender equality.

### **3. Conclusion**

Despite the lack of Kurdish academic sources regarding the current topic, it can be concluded that the struggle for women's rights in the Kurdistan region of Iraq differs from the Western feminist movements. Yet, it is worth highlighting that the fight for women's rights during the last decade, in the region, shows that the struggle for women's rights is dividable into different phases with specific aims. Throughout the last century, women in Kurdistan region have been effective in defending themselves and their region. Over the years, the events determined the way of struggling for equality among men and women. Hence, it is worth mentioning that in early 1900, the fight for women's rights in the region was not organized in contrast to Western societies. Therefore, it is difficult to separate the phases into a specific period. The women's movement as a feminist movement in Kurdistan region is an unclear. The reasons behind this foginess refer to the social, cultural, and political situation, and not to forget individually based. In this patriarchal society, most of the social, economic, religious, and political power is in the hands of men. Hence, it is essential to engage men, especially the ones with power to bring a change in society that supports the females' rights.

Previously, several male intellectuals showed their support to females, especially regarding civil rights. Therefore, the first period of struggling for the rights of females is associated with some individuals who fought for equality among males and females. The second period of struggle for women's rights in the Kurdistan region of Iraq was mainly focused on civil rights, with a particular focus on educational rights. The intellectuals used the press and the media to reach the public, which makes the struggle a bit easier than it was in the first period. After the Iraqi-Kurdish autonomy agreement of March, 11, 1970, the Kurds could use the Kurdish language, and due to of this transformation, many people had the opportunity to write about the Kurdish females' situations in general. This alteration has led to the establishment of the (political) organization that struggles for women's rights.

The third period of women's rights struggle is characterized by a large number of women's rights organizations that emerged in the region after the 1990s. The Kurdish uprising of 1991 has enabled

Kurdish women who have been working in political parties for a long period of time to increase their engagement through participating in women's organizations, unions, and groups unaffiliated with political parties. Women's activists have tried to reform the legal system by protecting women from domestic violence, family law, and political engagements. Nowadays, women's activists despite the major obstacles are spreading awareness of women's rights and gender issues. Other achievements in this period are that women have succeeded in creating more national and international awareness of women's issues in the region through social media. Additionally, numerous studies based on the western perceptions are been conducted on Kurdish women in the last 20 years. Subjects that were tackled are political participation of females in the government and the removal of cultural taboos such as divorce especially due to domestic violence. Finally, this study would recommend further studies to be conducted focusing on Kurdish women from a Kurdish perspective.

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