



Kurdish Women in the Zone of Genocide and Gendercide

■ Shahrazad Mojab

Associate professor and director, Institute of Women's Studies and Gender Studies, University of Toronto


The first political struggles for women's emancipation coincide with the rise of nations, nationalism, and the nation-state during the bourgeois democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century. This formation of modern nation states has generally been associated with the use of violence. War, massacre, genocide, and ethnic cleansing are some of the forms of violence used by both pre-modern and modern states throughout the world. All these forms of violence have been patriarchal. State violence and patriarchal violence have been, and still are inseparable.

Genocide, i.e. the deliberate elimination of an entire people or part of it, has been perpetrated during the formation of many modern states. It is common knowledge that war-mongers have subjected women to the violence of rape in order to tame or punish the adversary. In some cases, e.g. the formation of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan by the Taliban, violence against women took genocidal proportions. This form of violence has been recently conceptualized as a concept that is beginning to gain currency.

This debate was best summarized in a recent issue of *Journal of Genocide Research*, published in March 2002.

The term was first used by Mary Anne Warren in her book entitled *Gendercide: The Implications of Sex Selection*. Contributors to the special issue of the *Journal of Genocide Research*, however, attempt to expand Warren's initial conceptualization of gendercide by supporting Adam Jones' earlier claim that Warren's analysis was limited to "anti-female gendercide" (Jones, 2000:186). Much of this literature is an in-depth sociological approach to the analysis of genocide and its specific gendercidal component. The debate evolves around some of the original feminist distinctions between 'sex' as a basis for biological differences versus 'gender' as a sociological differentiation (see Holter, Stein, and Jones in the special issue). There seems, however, to be a consensus on avoiding the dichotomization of 'sex' and 'gender' and considering them in a more relational association. Thus, an overall critique of genocide studies is that it has paid little attention to the implications of the mass-killing of men and boys in conflict situations as a matter of policy or conceptualization.

This body of literature is strong in its historical review of genocidal cases from antiquity to Nazism, Rwanda, and Kosovo. These cases are also presented in light of international treaties and UN conventions, consequently



enriching the analysis by documenting its complexity. The authors identify further international and comparative studies as a research goal in this area. Nonetheless, I concur with Stuart Stein's conclusion that this crowded conceptual domain "...is largely a means of naming, or characterizing, instances of, or clusters of mass killings" (Stein, 2002: 57 and 55). The concept does, however, allow fresh insight into mass-scale violence against women. There is still much work to be done in order to enhance both the theorization of this concept as well as develop an appropriate comparative methodology.

In this paper, I will simply look at gendercide as mass killing of women, although mass killing of men, as such, also occurs. My emphasis will be on the following three points: 1) gendercide happens at times of both peace and war, 2) patriarchal culture and state- and nation-building are two sources of female specific genocide, and 3) studying forms of local and global feminist resistance can assist us in creating a viable global feminist peace strategy.

Kurdish Women in the 'Zone of Genocide'

This paper is a study of gendercide in the war zone of Iraqi Kurdistan, where women have been subjected to varying degrees of violence. I will try to provide an historical sketch of this violence from a feminist-Marxist perspective. I will begin with the Ottoman Empire, which at the peak of its power included North Africa, the Balkans, parts of Eastern Europe, the Arabian Peninsula, and today's Turkey and Iraq. This state was formed five centuries ago and was dismantled during World War I.

There is a popular myth about the Ottoman state: Turkish nationalists and many Western historians claim that the Ottoman state was pluralistic and allowed non-Muslim peoples religious freedoms. This was based on the *millet* system; a *millet* meant a "religious community." According to this myth, all non-Muslim *millets* enjoyed the right to maintain and practice their religion. There is, indeed, a certain truth in this myth. The non-Muslim communities had the freedom to practice their religion. But there are two major fabrications about the practices of this empire. First, the subjects of the empire, Muslim and non-Muslim, were continuously subjected to massacres. Second, all pre-modern empires were decentralized; they did not have the power or means to eliminate autonomous or semi-independent principalities. If we look at the history of the Ottoman Empire from the perspective of Armenian and Assyrian Christians and even Muslim Kurds, the claim about the pluralism of the Ottoman state is nothing more than an invention. In fact, Mark Levene, a scholar of genocide studies, has shown that the modernization of the Ottoman state that began the Nineteenth century entailed the creation of a Zone of

Genocide in the Eastern provinces of the empire. In the late nineteenth century, the Ottoman state began the systematic massacre of Armenians and in 1915 eliminated the Armenian people. The Assyrians, too, were eliminated during World War I. Although the Ottomans used the Kurds against the Armenians and Assyrians, the Kurds themselves were subjected to several genocidal campaigns. The worst came in 1936-1937, in the genocide of Dersim. In Iraq, which Britain carved out of the Ottoman state in 1917, the government of Saddam Hussein conducted a genocide of the Kurds in 1988. This genocide, now well documented, was code-named Anfal. The word Anfal means "spoils of war" and was borrowed from the Quran.

Furthermore, I will argue that Western colonialism is equally rooted in genocidal violence. Western colonialism was a product of the rise of capitalism. The elimination of many indigenous peoples in the Americas and the rest of the world was part of the formation of modern empires. In more recent times, the German state under the rule of Nazis eliminated millions of Jews, gays, communists, and disabled people. The Holocaust was a product of one of the most "civilized nations" in Europe.

I contend that there are a number of enduring war zones in the Middle East and North Africa, including Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, Kurdistan (especially, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran), and Sudan, where populations are, at times, targeted as members of a particular gender. In Afghanistan, the gender policies of the Taliban regime and its rival warlords constituted gender-selective violence against women. Branded as an inferior gender, women were subdued physically, psychologically, morally, and culturally. While the extremism of this case is perhaps unprecedented in the modern Middle East, other cases of war-related gender-centered mass killing occurred in Iraqi Kurdistan. The extensive self-immolation of women and honor killing in Iraq (in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War) may also be considered as conditions of gendercide. While gendercide may happen in times of peace, it occurs more often under conditions of genocide, ethnic conflict, and ethnic cleansing. The region extending from Kashmir and Pakistan in the east to Cyprus and Sudan in the West constitutes the world's main war zone, where actual and potential armed conflicts are under way. Kurdistan is part of a region in West Asia, which has been part of the "zone of genocide" since the beginning of genocidal campaigns against the Armenian people in 1878. Research on the gender component of this war zone is necessary not only as a contribution to academic knowledge but also for the promotion of peace, gender equality, and human rights. We need to promote the understanding of the gendered nature of mass killing, which was ignored in the 1948

UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The Non-State Nation of the Kurds

The Kurdish people who live in Western Asia were the original inhabitants of Kurdistan, which according to Levene, lies in a zone of genocide. They are the largest non-state nation in the world with a population of about 25 million who were forcibly divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. They have survived two major genocides and many genocidal campaigns.

During the Gulf War of 1991, which was led by President George Bush, the United States encouraged the Kurds of Iraq to revolt against Baghdad. When they revolted, President Bush left them to their own devices. The Iraqi army attacked them and some three million escaped into the snow covered mountains in late March and April 1991. The United States refused to take any responsibility for this, arguing that this was an ancient tribal war. When forced into action because of the presence of TV cameras and public opinion, the US and Britain created a so-called Safe Haven for them, with a no-fly zone that was guarded by the American and British air forces.

War-mongers have subjected women to the violence of rape in order to tame or punish the adversary.

The disruption of the lives of millions of people in this part of Kurdistan continued to be a disaster. The Kurds suffered from the embargo on Iraq, and the embargo of Iraq on the Kurds, and the tripled embargo by neighboring states on the landlocked Kurdish "safe haven." Iraqi Kurdistan which has been a war zone since 1961, thus continued to be in a state of intermittent war. A visible change in the course of forty years of war was the turning of this part of the "zone of genocide"

into a "zone of gendercide." Hundreds of women were killed for reasons of honor (Mojab, forthcoming). No one in the region can remember anything like this in living memory.

Who was responsible for the creation of a "zone of gendercide" in Iraqi Kurdistan? There is no doubt that the Gulf War of 1991 was its main origin. I visited Northern Iraq in October 2000, almost a decade after the war. In telling the story of my visit, I have often said that all sides, including Iraq, Turkey, Iran, the U.S., the U.N., the Kurdish political parties in power, and the NGOs, were in one way

or another involved in prolonging the condition of 'gendercide' of Kurdish women. This was my impression based on intensive observation and detailed discussions with people from all walks of life. In other words, I would like to suggest that what happened in Iraqi Kurdistan can be best comprehended as the workings of a national, regional, and international order. Let me present part of my story before further analyzing the situation.

A Decade of 'Safe Haven': Visiting Iraqi Kurdistan²

The markets in Sulaimanyya and other major cities such as Dehok and Zakho were saturated with imported goods, which include massive quantities of packaged food and snacks such as Kitkat, Sneakers, gums, chips as well as drinks like Cool Aid and a variety of other pop drinks. At the entrance of Dehok, there was a major shopping center, modeled after western chain stores, whose food section included a variety of imported jams and pickles sold in bulk. Jamming and pickling are among the household activities with significant social implications for women. Often, they are done collectively and are a source of women's socializing. The store also had a huge section for electronics, largely of the most up-to-date technology. The massive presence of synthetic materials such as artificial flowers and plastic household items was noteworthy. It was the presence of military type toys that I found most jarring. Almost life-size Kalashnikovs, handguns, and plastic hand grenades were juxtaposed with glittering Ken and Barbie dolls.

On the street of Zakho another market of imported western goods was noticeable. Along a large section of the main street, all western donated clothes and other items such as blankets, towels, or sheets were sorted out and arranged in a pile; men's jean pants were on one pile, men's shirts on another, and so were women's and children's items. The donated items were for sale. One could observe this sidewalk sale from the windows of a hotel where a wall-size TV screen was the dominant feature in its small lobby. This cultural medium broadcast, round the clock, mostly erotic or pornographic music shows and programs from Turkey. The rest of the screening time was filled with mindless American style TV game shows, sitcoms, or soap operas. Men were the main consumers of this cultural entity. In my short stay in that hotel, I did not run into another woman. The hotel was packed with men, mainly truck drivers who were stranded on the border of Iraq and Turkey, at the customs post known as Ebrahim Khalil. It often took as long as a month for these trucks to get customs clearance. This length of stay would necessitate the use of city services, including hotels, restaurants, and long-distance tele-communication. This had also contributed to the growth of prostitution in the city. Although most people, when asked, confirmed the rise of prostitution, nevertheless, it was not a





'service' which was talked about openly. The Ministry of Labor and Social Services, which was in charge of all the destitute social groups such as orphans, martyr families, internally displaced people, and women, did not have adequate information on the status of prostitution in Northern Iraq. In fact, in my conversation with the minister, I got the impression that the issue of prostitution was much underplayed: Neither accurate information nor social planning to deal with it existed at that time.

The destruction of the social fabric of life in Iraqi Kurdistan was most obvious in the kilometers of trucks lined up at the border of Iraq and Turkey. Eighteen wheeler-trucks were parked bumper to bumper, at times in double rows, on both sides of the road, leaving only one-way traffic possible. The line-up passed through many small villages and attracted the village population to engage in road-side commodity exchange. This involved children as young as five years, girls and boys, as well as elderly men and women. The road-side vending service included hair cutting, food, tobacco, snacks, some bathing equipment (towels and shaving utensils for men), and clothing. In certain spots, one could see a large number of children climbing all over the impressive eighteen-wheeler oil-tank trucks as if they were playing on playground equipment. The attraction of this road-side vending had emptied villages of their working population and halted whatever was left of local farming production.

The presence of the trucks at the border was not the only factor destroying agrarian production in Iraqi Kurdistan. Several other factors, including the import of cheap wheat, rice, and other grains, had forced local farming to vanish. Farmers could not sell their products at a price that competed with imported cheap American rice or wheat. In November 2001, the Washington Kurdish Institute Advisory Board wrote a report entitled "The contradiction between UN Resolution 986 and the so called Safe Haven for Kurds." The WKI reports indicate that "There is another contradiction that stands in the way of rehabilitating rural Kurdistan and encouraging the rural population to go back to their ruined villages to resume their farming practices: The Baghdad regime obstructs any attempt by the Regional Government and the Food Agencies to purchase what is produced locally instead importing everything at the Baghdad Government's whim." The nutritious value of the imported grains was poor and thus contributed to the decline in the population's health.

One of the most valuable lessons in this trip for me was a deeper understanding of the role of the United Nations as an emerging colonial power. This was echoed by most Kurds as well as Kurdish authorities. The problems were the UN's large bureaucracy, corruption, and lack of

accountability. There was a lack of coordination among UN agencies, lack of sufficient authority and technical capacity among UN staff, and intimidation of UN staff by the Iraqi government whenever they became too friendly with the Kurds. I will turn now to Westwood and Phizacklea (2000: 1) in order to depict the UN's colonial relations in Northern Iraq. They use the term transnationalism in order to "... draw attention to the two processes which are simultaneously at work. On the one hand the continuing importance of the nation and the emotional attachments invested in it, and on the other hand those processes such as cross-border migration which are transnational in form." These two processes apply to the Kurds, who routinely cross international borders if they want to move from one part of Kurdistan to the other or if they want to enter Kurdistan from their diasporas. There is a strong element of cultural and emotional ties in this process, without which the pain of this border crossing becomes intolerable. Let me describe the scene of entering Kurdistan at a point where the borders of the three surrounding nation-states Syria, Turkey, and Iraq converge. The distance that I had to travel in order to enter Kurdistan was less than one kilometer, including passing through a river. I had to go through three check points and collect proper signatures before being able to proceed. At each point I was charged certain amounts of cash; the only acceptable currency was the US dollar. After passing through the ground check points on one side, there was a small motorboat that carried passengers and their luggage to the other side, and the same process was repeated, this time inside Iraqi Kurdistan. The flag of Kurdistan and a big banner which read 'Welcome to Kurdistan,' marked the Kurdish immigration and customs building on the other side.

The short boat ride and the arrival on the other side were quite an experience. Kurds arriving with family members and massive luggage from Europe were all loaded onto the small boat to its fullest capacity, to the extent that the edge of the boat touched the water. A sizeable crowd of relatives and friends was waiting to receive them on the other side of the river. It was an emotional encounter. They were exhausted; on average, they have been traveling for three days, flying from Europe to a major city in Turkey or Syria and then a land trip to the border, then the boat ride and another land trip to their

The case of Kurdistan shows that patriarchal violence cannot be reduced to the action of a single male person ...



home town or village within Kurdistan. The boat only operates at certain times of the day. It usually began around 9:00 a.m. and only brought passengers arriving from outside of Kurdistan. For security purposes, they wanted to reduce the population movement to a manageable size. Then, between noon and 3:00 p.m., it carried the departing passengers. There were exceptions, which only applied to European nationals, in particular the UN staff. The differential treatment of Kurds and non-Kurds at the border crossing was a reminder of the deep-rooted colonial mentality. Let me expand on this point. While I was waiting for my turn to cross the river under scorching heat, I noticed that suddenly the entire operation was halted for a while. A UN van arrived and parked with its back door open to the water. The driver passed four safety jackets with the Netherlands flag marked on them to the small boat operator. The boat crossed the river, this time with no passengers, and a few minutes later, returned with four Dutch passengers all wearing safety jackets, who immediately climbed into the waiting UN van. The Kurdish passengers observing the scene were disturbed by the differential treatment of western citizens.

Forms of Women's Resistance³

If war unleashed more violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan, it also produced resistance against violence. In Kurdistan, individuals and organizations have participated in protests against male violence. Some of these organizations have offered support services. The Women's Union of

Kurdistan, established in November 1989, has promoted women's rights, and helped vulnerable women cope with trauma.

The Independent Women's Organization (IWO), formed in May 1993, has been active in exposing honor killing and other forms of violence. In March 1998, it opened a Women's Shelter Center in Sulaimanyya, which saved many lives. In 1999, this group of activists, affiliated with the Workers

Communist Party of Iraq, launched from London an International Campaign for the Defence of Women's Rights in Iraqi Kurdistan. According to their newsletter, the shelter handled 233 cases in six months in 1999: 18 women were murdered, 57 threatened with killing, 38 committed suicide, 69 suffered from different pressures, six were raped, and three were dismembered. In February 2000 the representative of IWO in Britain wrote a letter to UN secretary general Kofi Annan to seek the

UN's support in replacing the Iraqi Personal Status Law and the Penal Law in Kurdistan. It also launched an international petition campaign against these laws. The IWO has used the network of women's groups around the world as well as internet possibilities to collect petitions and mobilize international women's and human rights groups in support of Kurdish women.

The Women's Union of Kurdistan established in April 4, 1997 in Sulaimanyya the Women's Information Center with a mandate to educate women about their rights through media campaigns, and to provide leadership training for women. The Center has been active in organizing panel discussions, holding seminars on violence against women, and organizing March 8th rallies. In a campaign against honor killing, it collected 50,025 signatures. It also formed a committee in defence of Kajal Khidir, and participated actively in the court case of Sabiha Abdulla Ahmed, who was shot dead by an armed group with the assistance of her husband on October 14, 1997. In a memorandum to the President of the Regional Government of Kurdistan, the Center presented the following demands:

1. Eradication of tribal family relations, which treat women as property.
2. Prohibiting violence against women by bringing murderers to trial; this includes trying even those who express the intention of killing women.
3. Kurdish political parties should not turn into the sanctuary of killers. Political parties which shelter killers should be considered as accomplices in the crime.
4. Abolishing the Iraqi state's Personal Status Law.

Equally significant is growing Kurdish women's activism in the diaspora, including a seminar organized by Kurdish Women Action Against Honor Killings in London on June 18, 2000. Attended by Kurdish specialists, lawyers, activists, and others, it provided yet another public recognition of the widespread phenomenon of 'honor' killing in Iraqi Kurdistan. January 2003 marked the first anniversary of the killing of Fadime Öhındal, who was murdered by father in Uppsala, Sweden (Mojab and Hassanpour 2002a and 2002b). With the passing of the second anniversary of Fadime's death, I regret to report the loss of even more lives in both Kurdistan and Europe. Nevertheless, Kurdish women in Europe are determined to continue their struggle against patriarchal violence. They organized, for example, a conference where they brought together academics, activists, and politicians from Europe and the Kurdish region in order to stop 'honor killing.'

Another indication of resistance and growing consciousness among women is the formation of a Kurdish

In Kurdistan, individuals and organizations have participated in protests against male violence.

Women's Press in the 1990s. Most of the journals are published in Iraqi Kurdistan, Europe, and Turkey by women's organizations affiliated with political parties. While it is difficult to ascertain a vibrant feminist "public sphere," in this press some of these periodicals break the silence and a few actively fight against patriarchal violence. This pressure and lobbying led to modest legal reforms in the eastern region of Iraqi Kurdistan in early 2000.

Conclusions: Conceptual, Theoretical and Policy Issues

The term gendercide allows a theoretical breakthrough in understanding violence against women. The case of Kurdistan shows that patriarchal violence cannot be reduced to the action of a single male person, although such individual acts certainly occur on a large scale. Also, women are not always targeted as individuals. Gendercide offers a crucial conceptual opening by emphasizing mass violence against women as a matter of policy by the state, by non-state communities, by religious establishments, and/or by the military at war.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the honor killing and self-immolation condoned or tolerated by the Kurdish administration may

be viewed as gendercide or conditions of gendercide. These forms of violence cannot be adequately explained within the framework of current conceptualizations of "violence against women." The concept gendercide thus allows a refinement of the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide by adding a gender element to the definition of the term. Article II of the Convention defines genocide as:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious groups, as such:

- (A) killing members of the group;
- (B) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to the members of the group;
- (C) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part ...

The concept gendercide adds gender to "national, ethnical, racial or religious groups." It offers fresh opportunities for activism to prevent gendercide, for policy making, and for theorization of state and nation-building.

End Notes

1. Over the years there is much debate in academia as well as among the Kurdish politicians and activists, on the scope and nature of Kurdish political autonomy in Northern Iraq. This political entity has been variously named as 'de-fact UN state,' 'Kurdish Authorities' or 'Regional Government of Kurdistan' (Bring 1992 and Falk 1994). Recently Natasha Carver raises question about the statehood status of the Kurds in Northern Iraq (Carver 2002).
2. The situation in Northern Iraq has changed considerably since my visit. This rapid change in the political scene of the region is a response to recent development in the US plan in re-mapping the Middle East. For more recent account of the situation in Northern Iraq see Chris Kutschera (2002).
3. For a list and website addresses of some of the Kurdish women's organization and activism check the following website:

References

- Bring, Ove. "Kurdistan and the principle of self-determination," *German Yearbook of International Law/Jahrbuch für Internationales Recht*, 35 (1992), 157-169.
- Falk, Richard. "Problems and prospects for the Kurdish struggle for self-determination after the end of the Gulf and Cold Wars," *Michigan Journal of International Law*, 15 (1994), 591-603.
- Gullvåg Holter, Øystein. "A theory of gendercide," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 4:1 (2002), 11-38.
- Jones, Adam. "Gendercide and genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2:2 (2002), 185-211.
- _____. "Problems of genocide-gendercide studies and future agendas: A comparative approach," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 4:1 (2002), 127-135.
- Levene, Mark. "Creating a modern 'zone of genocide': The impact of nation- and state-formation on Eastern Anatolia, 1878-1923," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 1998, 12.
- Mojab, Shahrzad (forthcoming), "No 'safe haven' for women: Violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan," in Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman. (eds.), *Sites of Violence Gender and Identity in Conflict Zones*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mojab, Shahrzad and Amir Hassanpor, 'The politics and culture of "honour killing": The murder of Fadime Öahindal,' *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan*, 9:1 (June 2002), 57-77.
- Mojab, Shahrzad and Amir Hassanpor, "Thoughts on the struggle against "honour killing," *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, 16:1&2 (2002), 83-97.
- Stein, Stuart, "Geno-and other cides: A cautionary note on knowledge accumulation," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 4:1 (2002), 39-63.
- Westwood, Sallie and Annie Phizacklea. *Trans-nationalism and the Politics of Belonging*. Routledge: London and New York, 2000.