THE POLITICS OF "CYBERFEMINISM" IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE CASE OF KURDISH WOMEN[1]

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Abstract: Cyberspace has already emerged as an important site of political struggle, compelling various social forces to extend their 'real world' activism to the world of electronic 'virtuality.' While the state and the market continue their scramble for the control of cyberspace and its 'netizens', some citizens resist the virtualization of life, which they see as a new, more aggressive, form of domination and dehumanization. Feminists have actively participated in this political struggle and are sharply divided over the question of 'empowering' women through activism in the virtual space. This paper examines the politics of feminist struggle in cyberspace by focusing on the experience of using the Internet as a means of advancing feminist studies and activism among the women of the non-state Kurdish nation. The paper begins with a brief review of the debate on new communication technologies and political struggle. It will then sketch the lives of Kurdish women who are denied the right to national, cultural and linguistic identities, the right to self-rule, the right to organize, and are, consequently, engaged in a bitter nationalist conflict, which overshadows feminist activism. Reflecting on the experience of the International Kurdish Women's Studies Network, the paper offers a critique of both the 'optimist' (technological determinist) and 'pessimist' (technophobic) approaches.

Keywords: Kurdish women, globalization, cyberactivism, cyberfeminism, women and technology

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Since the advent of writing, communication technologies have constituted one site of political conflicts rooted in the unequal distribution of power. Each technological innovation has affected the balance of forces and contributed to the intensification of the struggle. The first major revolution in communications, i.e. writing, was monopolized by monarchs and religious establishments. For thousands of years, women, rural and urban working people, castes, and tribal peoples were denied access to written and literate communication. Writing was used effectively for the extension of empire (Innis, 1950) and the reproduction of the hierarchies of social, economic, religious and gender power. However, in spite of the relatively long history of written communication, the debate on its 'consequences' remains polarized. Some celebrate the enlightening and liberating potential of writing and literacy, while others critique the 'violence of the letter' (Collins, 1995:81).

The current communication revolution, which recognizes no boundaries and no end, has initiated a new round of controversy over technology and political struggle. The Internet and the Information Highway are at the center of these debates. One trend of thought assigns magical powers to new information technologies. It is claimed that a new economy, a new society, and a new period of history have already begun. This new era is marked by the rise of information as the engine of history: intellectual labor replaces physical labor; the production of knowledge, symbols and signs overshadows the production of physical commodities such as cars and houses; information regulates the economy, and has already displaced capital, land and machinery; intellectual property displaces material property; knowledge workers replace manual workers; and information economy is replacing capitalist economy.

In the realm of politics, too, messianic claims promise a radical shift in the balance of forces between the rulers and the ruled. Information technologies, we are told, dethrone the rule of the state and, by doing so, make real democracy possible. For some observers, the question is 'the withering away' of the state rather than its unchallenged, internationally sanctioned, sovereignty. Those who equate democracy with the absence of state power see, in the present environment, the formation of a political order far superior to what the West has achieved in the past two centuries. Mr. Al Gore, former Vice President of the United States, believes that the 'Global Information Infrastructure' will 'promote the functioning of democracy by greatly enhancing the participation of citizens in decision-making,' and, thus, create 'a new Athenian Age of democracy' (Gore, 1994:4).[2]

This optimistic or neo-utopian view about the democratizing powers of the Internet has, however, been seriously challenged by a diverse group of observers. Some historians of communication doubt that the current, unceasing technological

innovations constitute a radical rupture with previous ones (O'Donnell 1998). In a similar vein, other historians note that there was promise of a democratic and free society with every new technological 'revolution' since the advent of optical telegraph in the late eighteenth century. We were promised, for example, that 'the railroad would bring peace to Europe, that steam power would eliminate the need for manual labor, and that electricity would bounce messages off the clouds...,' that nuclear power would bring us heat and electricity 'too cheap to meter' and deliver limitless supply of drinking water to the world. We have, indeed, paid a high price for these unfulfilled and unfulfillable promises (Mosco, 1998:57-58; see, also, Mehta and Darier, 1998).

FEMINISMS AND THE POLITICS OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Feminist debates about politics and technology are in many ways similar to the non-gendered discourses outlined above. One major problematic is, simply but not simplistically, whether or not technologies empower women in their liberation project. In this highly polarized controversy, one view confers on communication technologies miraculous powers, which eliminate inequalities and hierarchies. In cyberspace, Susan Myburgh (1997-98:22, 23) argues,

> [t]he grand narrative of hierarchy is seriously challenged. It is impossible to *do* hierarchy in cyberspace. It is therefore extremely difficult, if not impossible, to dominate in cyberspace... The Net is a powerful political tool. Allowing the perpetration of the myth of patriarchy means women can be deprived of a powerful political voice, and even of a livelihood. *Women are now in a position where they can own the means of production.* In the information age, where information and knowledge are an economic resource, they can create, share, distribute, and use it *as they wish.* (Emphasis added)

This view is based on the idea of the neutrality of technology: the 'Net is patriarchal to the extent that the machines have been dominated by pale males... There is not equality in cyberspace to the extent that the majority of users are still male and harassment is not unknown' (Myburgh, 1997-98:23). The only inequality in cyberspace is, according to Myburgh, in the still limited access of women to the virtual world.

The technological determinist position sees in electronic information technologies Jack-in-the-boxes that interrupt the continuity of a long history of male domination. It is not clear, in Myburgh's grand narrative of the cyberspace, how and why patriarchy or other relations of domination evaporate once they move from the real to the virtual world. It is clear, however, that this position separates the cyberspace from the 'realspace', and confers on it an all powerful autonomous status. Patriarchy is viewed not as a major component of the unequal distribution of power in society but, rather, as an effect of the modes of communication. While

patriarchy in cyberspace is treated as a "myth," capitalism is turned into a wonderland where women can own the means of production, and do "as they wish" with them.

Another view rejects both the gender neutrality of technologies and the reduction of patriarchy to communication. This position looks at cyberspace as an extension of realspace, where the unequal distribution of power is reproduced and resisted.[3] It is a place where extensive global trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children takes place (Hughes, 1999a; 1999b). The Internet, according to UN's *The Human Development Report,* "is contributing to an ever-widening gap between rich and poor which has now reached 'grotesque' proportions" (quoted in Patterson and Wilson 2000:77). The information revolution in Asia, even in wired-up Japan, tends to reproduce or even increase the large power gap between men and women (Joshi, 1998). Even optimistic studies of cyberspace political activism, e.g., Hill and Hughes (1998:112), argue that "the Internet is not going to radically change politics" (see, also, Klein, 1999:219). I will examine these views in light of the experience of using the Internet for promoting feminist knowledge and consciousness in Kurdistan.

KURDISH WOMEN: THE HUB OF ALL CONFLICTS

Divided by international borders, dialects, alphabets, class, and other social cleavages, Kurdish women seem to share little in common. However, national oppression, brutally perpetrated on the Kurds in the form of genocide, ethnocide and linguicide, unites this heterogeneous 'nation' of women. Enumerated between 25 to 30 million, the Kurds constitute the fourth largest ethnic people of the Middle East, outnumbered only by Arabs, Turks and Persians. Their homeland, Kurdistan, was forcibly divided in 1918 among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and the former USSR. They have been involved in armed resistance movements for self-rule in Iraq (since 1961), Iran (since 1979) and Turkey (since 1984).

Although they are often branded as a tribal or nomadic people, Kurdish social organization is complex, comprising urban, rural, and disappearing tribal ways of life. Today, half of the Kurdish population is urban, and four cities have a population of over a million. The states which rule over Kurdistan pursue a policy of assimilating them into the official language and culture of each country. This is especially the case in Turkey, where it is illegal to speak in Kurdish in political campaigns, in official contexts and on radio and television. These states do not allow the Kurds to form their own cultural, political or educational institutions. An important development since the 1960s is the migration of a substantial number, estimated at more than half a million, to Europe, especially Germany, Sweden, Britain and France. The largest group were the ones hired by Germany as guest workers in the 1960s. The continuing wars in Kurdistan since 1961 sent waves of political refugees to Western Europe, North America and Australia.

Westerners who visited Kurdistan since the seventeenth century have claimed that Kurdish women enjoy more freedom than their Turkish, Arab or Persian sisters. This claim is based on the observation that they do not usually put on the veil, freely associate with men, and some of them have ruled tribes and territories. Kurdish women are, however, subjected to forms of oppression similar to those experienced by their neighbours (Mojab, 1987).

The first women's organization, the 'Society for the Advancement of Kurdish Women,' was founded in 1919 in Istanbul at a time the Turkish state was loosely organized. The organization aimed at 'enlightening Kurdish women with modern thinking and promoting fundamental social reforms in the life of the family,' and helping Kurdish orphans and widows of the forced migrations and massacres (text reproduced in Tahir Sharif, 1989:23). The founders were members of the Kurdish aristocracy in exile. Thus, Kurdish initiatives for changing gender relations, while limited in scope, preceded most of the state sponsored reforms in Turkey (1920s) and Iran (1930s). Forced unveiling by these 'modernizing' nation-states was largely irrelevant in Kurdistan since the majority of people lived in rural areas where women were always unveiled.

By the mid-1920s, Turkey and Iran, where most of the Kurds' lived, implemented a policy of linguistic and cultural genocide. In Iraq (under British rule between 1918 and 1932) and Syria (under French rule between 1918 and 1946), the Kurds were struggling for autonomous rule. Although a few women were prominent public figures, in Iraqi Kurdistan, the political and intellectual environment dominated by nationalism and feudal patriarchy was not hospitable to feminist consciousness. During the brief life of the Kurdish Republic established in 1946 in the Soviet-controlled areas of northwest Iran, a 'women's party' was formed as an affiliate of the Kurdish Democratic Party which led the autonomous government. The women's party tried to promote literacy and rally support for the republic. It was inspired by the 'achievements' of women in the USSR and Europe but the members were not familiar with the feminist ideas of the time (Mojab, 2001b).

During the latter part of the century, Kurdish women did not enjoy any freedom to form their own organizations in any Middle Eastern country although they could join the officially sanctioned (Turkish, Arab or Iranian) women's groups. The Kurdish nationalist political parties pursuing autonomy or independence were clandestine except for brief periods in Iraq (1958-61, 1970-74) or Iran (1979-80). Although male dominated, they usually put gender equality on their agenda. In practice, however, they failed to organize women. Even when they had a women's organization (e.g., in the Kurdish Democratic Party-Iraq), it was primarily ornamental with only a few female activists. These political parties were at times involved in guerrilla war against the state; women in villages and the cities were expected to support the military and political work of these parties, but they were not recruited as active members and very rarely joined the members of the leadership team. The nationalist parties relegated women's emancipation and class

struggle to the future, after achieving autonomy or independence. Many women willingly accepted the nationalist agenda. One factor was the violence of national oppression which rallied every one to the nationalist cause. The other was the general absence or weakness of feminist consciousness. The communist parties, too, were generally clandestine and favoured party-controlled women activism only. Feminist literature was either lacking or not readily available.

In the 1980s and 1990s, two radical Kurdish political parties mobilized women and recruited a substantial number into their ranks. 'Komala, the Kurdistan Organization of the Communist Party of Iran,' and the 'Kurdistan Workers Party,' better known in its Kurdish acronyms PKK, were both involved in guerrilla war, the former against Iran and the latter against Turkey. Young women, mostly from the urban areas, took up arms and engaged in political and military operations. However, the leadership of the parties is made up of men only. In their military camps in the mountains, Komala allowed women to engage in non-traditional work (e.g., military and political training, broadcasting, etc.). Moreover, traditional female work, e.g., cooking and child care, was divided between males and females. Men were taught about gender equality. However, nationalist agenda, rather than feminism, was dominant, especially in PKK.[4]

In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, two nationalist political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdish Democratic Party, together with other minor groups participated in parliamentary elections and formed the Regional Government of Iraqi Kurdistan in the 'safe haven' protected from Saddam Hussein by the United States and its allies. Although a few women were elected to the parliament, the two parties, KDP much more than PUK, acted as barriers to the unfoldment of women's struggle. It was argued that Kurdish society was Islamic and that women and men should respect the traditional ways of life. In 1992, women, both individuals and those affiliated with different political parties, submitted a petition to the parliament of the Kurdistan Regional Government, and demanded the reform of the Iraqi civil code, which the parliament had adopted. The petition, signed by some 15,000 women, demanded the abolition of polygyny, equal rights to inheritance and divorce. The parliament, with only six women representatives favouring the demands, rejected the proposals (Begikhani, 1996: 51).[5]

Although the majority of Kurdish women are unveiled, a few Islamic groups in Iraqi Kurdistan, supported by Iran's Islamic regime, have imposed the veil, especially in some of the areas bordering Iran. Violence against women, perpetrated by members of the family, is extensive. Some of the women who were abducted for abuse by the Iraqi army, during the 1988 genocide campaign known as *Anfal*, returned to Kurdistan but were unwelcome, and some were reportedly killed. The nationalist parties have generally ignored or supported this internal war against women.[6]

Women today face a host of obstacles such as the patriarchal policies of

Kurdish nationalist parties, the misogynism of Islamic groups, the political repression of central governments, continuing war, and a largely disintegrated economy and society. While this situation attracts many women to political and military activism, a growing tension between feminist awareness and patriarchal nationalism is visible. Pre-modern gender relations persist in a society undergoing extensive urbanization and 'modernization.' While the majority of women are tied to domestic household work and, in rural areas, activities related to agriculture, the formation of a stratum of intellectual and professional women in urban areas is reshaping the political and social life of Kurdistan. The presence of several thousand Kurdish female guerrillas, visible groups of writers, poets, painters, journalists, teachers, physicians, and even parliamentarians (in Iraq, Sweden, and Turkey) constitutes an important context for the transformation of gender relations.

The potential political power of Kurdish women is, however, constrained or, rather, drained by the violent war the nation-states have imposed on the Kurds. Living on the ruins of a civil society that was never allowed to emerge, women are resisting the status quo individually and on an organized basis.[7] These resistances are increasingly visible in the formation of women's groups, the publication of journals, and protest campaigns such as marches, vigils, and demonstrations, especially in Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan.

SEEKING REFUGE IN THE CYBERSPACE

Feminist consciousness has been and continues to be an indispensable source of power in the struggle to change gender relations. By feminist consciousness, I mean first and foremost theoretical knowledge about every aspect of gender, especially structures and traditions of inequality, history of women's movements, political organizing, and leadership. In the past few decades, we have seen a feminist 'knowledge explosion' in the West (Kramarae and Spender, 1992). Feminist scholarship, in translation and in indigenous undertakings, is spreading worldwide. However, given the conditions of Kurdish women's life outlined above, not a single work of feminist theory has been translated into Kurdish, which in terms of the number of speakers ranks fortieth among the world's 6, 600 languages.[8]

For feminist activists and women's movements, consciousness also entails knowledge about one's own social, cultural, political and economic conditions. Kurdish women have not been in a position to create such a body of knowledge about themselves. For political reasons, briefly outlined above, they have been denied presence, both as subjects and objects of research, in the various national knowledge systems. In the Middle East, the state, the media, the educational establishment, and non-Kurdish women's organizations each act, often concurrently, to deny Kurdish women a space in the creation of knowledge (Mojab, 2001a).

The exclusion of Kurdish women in the information created by the state is remarkable. For instance, since the Kurds are not recognized as a distinct nation or even as an ethnic or linguistic minority, there are no census data about Kurdish women in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Other sources of information, e.g., official statistics or reports, also make no distinction between Kurdish and non-Kurdish women. Thus, census data and statistics are used as a tool for assimilating Kurdish women.

The state also censors information on women through the control of libraries. In Turkey, for instance, libraries are generally not allowed to hold books on the Kurds or Kurdish women, and when books and manuscripts are catalogued, they are usually not readily circulated. At times this censorship is conducted in a crude form. For instance, in the early 1980s, the Turkish government pressured the American Library in Ankara to remove two geographic atlases from the library. This was because maps in the two books – the *Readers Digest Atlas* and the *National Geographic Atlas* – carried forbidden names such as 'Kurdistan.' The library was run by the US embassy, and the ambassador recommended that the books should be withdrawn immediately. However, library officials resisted. Finally, Washington interfered and, faced with resistance from the library, the books were allowed to remain on the shelves.[9] University and high school libraries, too, engage in a similar censorship of knowledge. Other state organs do their own share of suppressing knowledge. The customs offices and the post office have actively controlled the circulation of books and magazines between these countries and the West.

Communication media are important sources of information, and as a result state control of these sources is usually conducted with considerable violence. While Iran and Iraq conduct state-run broadcasting in Kurdish, Turkey and Syria do not. In the mid-1990s, Turkey privatised broadcasting but continues to deny the Kurds the right to native-tongue radio and television. In the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, which is not under Iraqi state, Kurdish broadcasting has flourished. Kurdish print media have been subjected to violent state repression, especially in Turkey. In recent years, Turkey has been leading the world in suppressing journalists. Most of the jailed or murdered journalists were those who wrote independent reports about the war in Kurdish provinces and the government's treatment of the Kurds. A press release, issued by the London-based anti-censorship group ARTICLE 19 on 24 July 1998, reported numerous 'prosecutions and imprisonment of academics, journalists, newspaper vendors and even democratically elected politicians. Others have faced extra-legal measures ranging from police harassment to murder by armed groups linked to the state.'

In none of these countries, the state or the university administration has any respect for academic freedom. Field research on many topics such as Kurdish women or any research in or about Kurdistan is either banned or constrained by 'research permits' to be issued by government. This ban is extended also to most Western researchers. The ban on research has seriously limited the scope and depth

of Western scholarship on Kurdish women.

Non-government organizations in the Middle East are not necessarily more democratic than the government. For instance, most women's organizations follow the politics and ideology of the state, and do not admit the existence of Kurdish women as distinct from Arab, Turkish or persian women. Most of these women's organizations advocate Turkish, Arab or Iranian nationalisms, and are as assimilationist as their governments.

The literature on and by Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi or Syrian women is growing both in these countries and in the academic and publishing world in the West. However, much of this body of knowledge makes no reference to Kurdish women. The status of the Kurds as a non-state nation affects the state of research in the West, too. Since Middle Eastern states do not issue 'research permits' for studying Kurdish women, students and other researchers in the West would be discouraged from engaging in this area of study. Even research funds will not be conveniently available for research projects not based on filed work. This constitutes a cycle of exclusion, which prevents the formation of a tradition of research: no faculty members specializing in Kurdish women, no students to write papers and dissertations, no library collections, no research grants, and no publishing interest.[10]

Kurdish nationalist organizations have looked at women as 'mothers of the nation,' and have tried to recruit them into the struggle for liberating the nation. They are not, however, sympathetic to feminist consciousness. They build their own women's organizations in part because they do not want women's movements to "divide" the nation.

In the Middle East, governments assimilate the Kurds into the monocultural and monolinguistic nation-state in part by creating and censoring knowledge. By contrast, the Kurds living in the newly formed diasporas in the West enjoy almost unlimited political freedom to engage in the production and dissemination of knowledge. New technologies such as computers, copying machines, laser printers, satellite dishes, books, and records can be bought, owned and used without fear of state repression. Politically, Kurdish women are free to launch journals, radio and television stations or establish feminist organizations or women's libraries. State permission is not required for any information enterprise except radio and television.

The extensive political freedom in the West is, however, constrained by class imperatives. The majority of the Kurds are either "guest workers" in Europe or refugees. Kurdish women are, therefore, not economically free to enjoy political freedoms. An educated Kurdish woman can certainly produce, for instance, an excellent camera-ready copy of a book or journal by using a personal computer and a laser printer. However, she will not be able to publish or distribute it without financial support or without going through the gate-keepers of a sceptical publishing market.

THE INTERNATIONAL KURDISH WOMEN'S STUDIES NETWORK

Given the many obstacles to the spread of feminist knowledge in the realspace of Kurdistan and the West, cyberspace seems to offer an ideal sanctuary where such fetters do not operate. This was in part what a group of women, Kurdish and non-Kurdish, in Europe and North America tried to do in the fall of 1996. They established the International Kurdish Women's Studies Network, with the modest aim of acting as a forum for the exchange of experience and knowledge among those who are interested in and work for improving the lives of Kurdish women. The founding group consisted of women who included one Kurd and others, Western and Middle Eastern, who had direct experience of Kurdistan and had conducted research about Kurdish women

The Network specified other goals such as acting as a liaison for community-based, institution-based, academic and independent researchers and activists in all parts of Kurdistan and in the diaspora; assisting those engaged in Kurdish women's studies and activism in all regions of Kurdistan and in the diaspora; promoting the theories and practices of feminism among the women of Kurdistan and the diaspora; and promoting women's rights and gender equality in Kurdistan; contributing to the production of feminist knowledge on topics such as women and nationalism, violence, war, ethnicity, global market economy, and state. The Network is not a political organization. Anyone interested in Kurdish women's studies or the improvement of Kurdish women's status can join the group.

In its short life, the Network was able to do networking among a dozen researchers and activists who lived in different countries and continents; to cooperate with activists; to convene the first Kurdish women's studies conference; to sign a contract for publishing the first bibliography on Kurdish women; to prepare for publication the first edited work on Kurdish women (Mojab, 2001a); to participate in letter writing campaign in support of a member of the network who was sentenced to jail for feminist activism in one of the Middle Eastern countries. The Network has received some institutional support from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of University of Toronto and a modest funding from the Global Fund for Women in order to promote literacy, civic and human rights education among Kurdish women.

The Network has created a website, and is now more visible in cyberspace (http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/projects/kwnet). It has attracted visitors from India to Europe to North America. Most are researchers, primarily students who seek assistance in their study of Kurdish women. The only visitors from the Middle Eat are from Turkey. Access to the Internet is limited and controlled by the government in Iran, Iraq and Syria.

THE LIMITATIONS OF CYBERFEMINISM

Although the Network is still far from exhausting the potential of the Internet, its achievements, made within a short period of time, are noteworthy. They are dwarfed, however, by the setbacks Kurdish women experience on a daily basis. In this section, I will examine both trends.

First, I deal with the ways in which realspace imperatives constrain cyberspace initiatives. The Network is composed of both activists and researchers. However, the majority of activists are Kurdish women while the researchers are either from the West or belong to one of the dominant nations (Turks, Persians and Arabs). Despite everyone's political commitment to equality, there is a horizontal hierarchy between researchers and activists. For instance, in between meetings, little communication takes place between the researchers living in the West and activists in the region. While the volume of the e-mail exchange is, at times, substantial among the researchers, they do not get transferred to activists. This unintentional omission adds to the exclusion of activists from the decision making process as well as limits significant input into the planning for future activities. Two important factors contribute to this exclusion: one is language and the other is women's access to the internet outside of the Western world.

English is the 'lingua franca' of the Netwrok. Again, researchers of European and non-European backgrounds have an easier access to English as the dominant language of science, communication and knowledge. Almost all women participants in the Network speak more than two languages. Ironically, the two standard Kurdish dialects, Sorani or Kurmanji, are the least spoken among the Kurdish women. The majority of those from Turkey do not know Kurdish. This is the result of a brutal state-sponsored policy of linguicide in Turkey. Therefore, either Turkish or the language learned in the diaspora (German, French, Swedish, or Dutch) remains the dominant vehicle of communication.

Our Network has not exhausted the full potential of the Internet. This is due to realspace obstacles, which many optimist cyberfeminists fail to take into consideration. For instance, the website has not been sufficiently updated and expanded since it was set up in 1997. This is primarily a realspace limitation. We can indeed achieve Network goals outlined earlier, and do much more. Internet allows us to establish, for instance, a cyberspace Kurdish women's library, an archive of photographs, music, and oral history, and even set up a Kurdish women's studies program. While no state can politically deter us from engaging in such activities, economic imperatives act as powerful deterrents . Very simply, we do not have enough time and resources to devote to such necessary undertakings; these projects do not feed us, and do not pay our rent and bills. We need either adequate financial resources or a strong and popular feminist movement.

Second, I must again refer to realspace patriarchal gender relations, which in Kurdistan are inscribed in blood. Women are readily killed on charges of

violating "honour" codes. Even under the regime of Kurdish self-rule in the Regional Government of Iraqi Kurdistan (1992-94), the conditions of women's lives deteriorated. Only six of the 176 members of the parliament were women, and one of the cabinet members were women. Violence, especially honour killing, is extensive. According to one report, some 575 women were killed between 1991 and 1993. In 1992, the Komar Hospital in Hewler received the bodies of 160 murdered women half of whom had been shot, and the rest strangled or stabbed.[11] In the nine weeks from January 1 to March 8, 1999, the number of women who lost their lives due to killing and self-immolation was nineteen.[12] Suicide is as prevalent as killing. In the city of Silemani, for instance, fifty women committed suicide by self-immolation in a period of six months from January to June 1995.

According to Human Rights Association (Mektebî Mafî Mirov) of Iraqi Kurdistan, 228 women lost their lives from the beginning of 1998 to March 1999. Of these, 140 were murdered and 36 burnt to death or committed self-immolation.[13] The number in Hewler reached 280 from September 1, 1991 to October 10, 1993.[14] Some of the women who were abducted for abuse by the Iraqi army during the genocide campaign known as *Anfal*, and returned to Kurdistan after the Gulf War experienced repression, and some were reportedly killed.[15] According to one account, in Iraqi Kurdistan, one woman is killed or commits suicide every twenty-four hours. The situation has been called 'mass murder of women' (*reşkujî jinan*). Another form of violence is defacing (*etik kirdin*) of women accused of violating the codes of propriety or modesty. This includes the cutting of the nose, ear and lips of the victim. Under conditions of abject poverty, prostitution is also widespread in spite of the fact that prostitutes are a target of honour cleansing.

According to incomplete data, twenty-one women in northeastern parts of Iraqi Kurdistan committed suicide by setting themselves on fire. Mistreatment by husbands and male members of the family were the main reasons for self-destruction (Mohamadi and Raouf, 1998:34-37). A study of suicide through self-immolation found out that 72 (67.8 percent) of the 82 cases in 1995-96 in the province of Kurdistan in Iran were female. This population included only those survivors who were referred to a hospital in the provincial capital, Sanandaj. The study revealed that the highest incidence was among housewives (67.1 percent) and students (15.1 percent); the main reason for suicide was problems with spouse (62.1 percent); and some 38.3 percent were illiterate (Yusefi and Yusefi, 1997).

Honour killing continues to be practised in the secular state of Turkey, especially in the Kurdish provinces.[17] Several cases were covered by the media in the late 1990s (Mojab, 2001c). One woman was murdered for an "honour crime" she had not committed. One of her friends requested a song from a disk jockey of a local radio station and dedicated the song to her. The family considered the announcing of her name a disgrace because the love song implied that she had a love affair.[18] According to another report, a father strangled his daughter, in Sanliurfa, and threw her into the Euphrates river but she survived. Her crime was to elope and avoid an arranged marriage. Huseyin Fidanboy, the chief public

prosecutor in Sanliurfa said that he had to handle one case of honour killing every two or three months. According to this report:

> Under Turkish law, killing an immediate blood relative is punishable by death. But if the killing is committed on witnessing an adulterous act or on suspicion of an illicit liaison, it is considered to have been caused by "heavy provocation," and the sentence is reduced to an eighth of its severity. In cases of honor killings, judges in the southeast [Kurdish areas] generally consider the region's customs a mitigating factor, greatly reducing the sentences. "Our judges do consider tradition and the great community pressure as a reason to lighten the sentence," Fidanboy said (Turgut, 1998).

DISCUSSION

I have argued that, contrary to the claims of optimists such as Myburgh (1997-98), cited above, the real world of unequal gender relations is reproduced rather than replaced in the virtual world. Patriarchy in Kurdistan, as elsewhere, is much more than a state of the mind, a cultural trait, or a mode of communication. Evolved in the course of a long history, patriarchal gender relations are sustained by multiple centers of power such as religion, class, nation, and the state.

The Internet is presented by many optimists as an open, borderless world in which no one is able to monitor the free flow of information.[19] This is certainly not true. The same technology that allows both the powerful and the powerless 'equal' presence in cyberspace empowers the state to conduct instant and incessant surveillance of every 'netizen.' State-of-the-art censorware is now available "within the grasp of every censoring power on earth." According to a source in Electronic Privacy Information Centre, "We are creating an architecture for blacklisting and censorship unparalleled in history" (Fisher, 1998:192, 193). Many states and private institutions throughout the world are already using the censorware. In countries such as Turkey, which had the worst world record in suppressing journalists and the media in recent years, activists in realspace have produced and accessed knowledge through the medium of print; they are, however, conveniently exposed to state surveillance the moment they enter the cyberspace.[20] In the West, those who work for the advancement of Kurdish women are politically free to use the Internet. They can build their own websites in any language they like. However, to the extent that cyberspace is borderless it allows Middle Eastern states to extend their surveillance beyond their national borders to every corner of the virtual world.

Another problem is the way class structure restricts presence in cyberspace. The poverty of the majority of the Kurds together with the high rates of illiteracy among women constrains cyberfeminist activism. By early 2000, there was another Kurdish women's website, which belongs to a Kurdish nationalist

party, and provides brief information about its women's organization. On August 19, 1998, I made a two-word search on AltaVista, looking for matches of 'Kurdish women,' and then compared it with matches for the women of the dominant nations. There were 4,251 matches for 'Kurdish Women.' The matches for 'Arab Women' were 42,918, i.e., exactly ten times more. The figures were 24,119 for 'Turkish Women' and 13, 546 for 'Iranian women.' No doubt, in near future Kurdish women will be more visible.[21] The main question is, however, what difference does it make? How does access to the Internet empower Kurdish women to change a structure of gender relations that is intertwined with national oppression, pre-capitalist forms of social organization, oppressive religious traditions and anti-feminist nationalist movements? It would be difficult to address these questions without taking into account the historical context of the current technological revolution. David Noble (1995:3-4) has compared the first Industrial Revolution with the present one, and said:

> There is a war on, but only one side is armed: this is the essence of the technology question today. On the one side is private capital, scientized and subsidized, mobile and global, and now heavily armed with military-spawned command, and communication technologies. Empowered by the second industrial revolution, capital is moving decisively now to enlarge and consolidate the social dominance it secured in the first [Industrial Revolution]....

> On the other side, those under assault hastily abandon the field for lack of an agenda, an arsenal, or an army. Their own comprehension and critical abilities confounded by the cultural barrage, they take refuge in alternating strategies of appeasement and accommodation, denial and delusion, and reel in desperate disarray before this seemingly inexorable onslaught—which is known in polite circles as 'technological change.'

Many optimists will reject Nobel's perspective as an agenda of doom and gloom.[22] It is important, however, to note that cyberspace is, like other spaces created by the technologies of the past and much like 'civil society' and 'public sphere', not a neutral field of action. Again we can learn much from the past.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1792 granted unprecedented freedom of speech and freedom of press to Americans. However, as, Harold Innis, the Canadian economic and media historian noted half a century ago, commercial interest alone was in a position to reap the benefits of this freedom. Innis noted that the Amendment gave constitutional protection to print technology. It served largely the interests of commercial press, and allowed it to form a powerful monopoly of knowledge. Consequently, the right of people to speak to one another and to inform themselves was sacrificed. Innis showed that the mechanization of communication, from print to radio and television, helped the formation of monopolies of knowledge, and the domination of the market and the state over territory and citizens.[23] This capitalist appropriation of the print media

is being repeated in new information and communication technologies (see, e.g., Gutstein, 1999; Perelman, 1998).

CONCLUSIONS

Building on critical insights of the past and present and relying on the evidence from the Kurdish casse, I have argued that cyberspace cannot but reproduce inequality. It is closely tied to realspace relations of patriarchal domination. However, as a site of struggle between two unequal sides, it should be used by those interested in a radical transformation of gender relations. Not simply a problem of communication, gender inequality is multidimensional; it is at once social, economic, political, cultural, religious, and ideological.[24] The struggle for changing gender relations is equally complex. We can undermine the rule of patriarchy only through feminist consciousness, and realspace organizing and solidarity. The Internet and other communication technologies cannot create feminist *movements*. Rather, social movements can make creative uses of cyberspace in order to unseat realspace inequality. Drawing on the experience of the past, I contend that universal suffrage was made possible (though still not achieved in some countries) only through decades of feminist organizing in colleges, neighbourhoods, streets, schools, churches, and, no doubt, through the active use of all the media of the time (from print to phonograph records to radio); however, although *legal* gender equality has been achieved in some states, inequality continues to be reproduced.

Indeed, we see in parts of Kurdistan the rise of feminist resistance not in the cyberspace, but rather in face-to-face acts of solidarity and struggle. A new generation of women activists are using the old technology of print, and are fighting gender and national oppressions through feminist journals, posters and leaflets. They also use the traditional methods of oral, face-to-face, dialogue in order to conduct their difficult struggle against the four nation-states, oppressive religious traditions, and patriarchal nationalism. While the experience of the Network demonstrates that new technologies can definitely enhance this movement, I contend that no amount of activism in cyberspace can displace let alone overthrow patriarchy in the realspace called Kurdistan.

Notes:

[1] An earlier version of this paper was delivered as a keynote address at the Know How Conference on the World of Women's Information, organized by the 'International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement (IIAV)' in Amsterdam, August 26, 1998 as well as the 33rd annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association in Washington, DC, November 20, 1999.

[2] Gore also claimed that '...representative democracy relies on the assumption that

the best way for a nation to make its political decisions is for each citizen – the human equivalent of the self-contained processor – to have the power to control his or her own life.'

[3] See, for instance, Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne quoted in Booker (1996:11). See, also, Silver (1997-98) on the perpetuation of hierarchical gender relations in cyberspace.

[4] For information on women in PKK, see *Resistance: Women in Kurdistan*, published by Kurdistan Solidarity Committee and Kurdistan Information Centre, London, August 1995, 26 pages.

[5] The Regional Government broke down in 1994 when KDP and PUK engaged in an intermittent internal war that led, in 1996, to the division of the region into two areas each controlled by one of the parties. By December 1999, each party established its own government. In April 2000, the PUK administration adopted "Resolution Number 59," which made it illegal for the courts to act on the basis of articles 130 and 132 of Iraq's penal law No. 111 of 1969; these articles virtually allowed honour killers escape punishment (*Kurdistanî Nö*, No. 2129, April 25, 2000:4).

[6] The story of the murder of these women by Islamic zealots and traditionalists must yet be written. The opposition press in Iraqi Kurdistan and some of the human rights organizations have documented some of the evidence. For a brief documentation of violence against women under the Regional Government of Kurdistan, see Muhamadi and Raouf (1998).

[7] See a collection of articles on the 'crushing of Kurdish civil society' in *War Report*, bulletin of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, No. 47, November-December 1996:21-54.

[8] I am referring to book-length sources, either translated or compiled in Kurdish. The number of articles translated or written in the language is also quite limited.

[9] David Barchard, 'Western silence on Turkey,' *MERIP Reports*, February 1984, pp. 3-6, reprinted from *Index on Censorship*, 12 (6), 1983. For information on a similar case, see, David Barchard, 'Turkey makes map reference a crime,' *The Guardian*, March 23, 1983.

[10] Here is some evidence about the un-commodified, non-marketable, state of Kurdish women's studies: the editors of a major Canadian feminist journal gladly agreed to publish a special issue on Kurdish women. However, the guest editor in collaboration with the editor should have raised $35,000 toward the cost of publishing. Even if published, they were not sure if it would sell. I must emphasize that Canada is one of the G7 countries, but its media culture, its academic and non-academic publications, are under pressure of the powerful market of the United

States. During the last ten years or so, some Canadian journals perished or were barely surviving.

[11] *Kurdistan Rapport.* Fran SACs Studieresa, 1994. Translated into Kurdish under the title, "Jin kuştin û 'yaxî bûnî nabecê'" (Killing women and 'improper revolt'), translated by Mahabad Qeredaxî, *Hetaw*, Nos. 4 and 5, June and July, 1996, p. 3.

[12] "Aştî w bijar û paksazî!" (Peace and weeding and cleansing), *Peyam*, No. 15, May 1999:2.

[13] See details in Jiyanewe (1999).

[14] "Jonbesh-e barāberi-talab-e zanān-e kordestān-e 'arāq dar moqābel-e ertejā'" (The equality movement of women of Iraqi Kurdistan against reaction), Interview with Nasik Ahmad, *Medusa*, No. 2, June 1998:11.

[15] For well documented reports on this genocide, see Middle East Watch, *The Anfal Campaign in Iraqi Kurdistan: The Destruction of Koreme* and *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Agaist the Kurds*. London, New York, Washington, and Los Angeles: Human Rights Watch, 1993.

[16] "Hewalekanî têror û xokujî" [News of terror and suicide], *Yaksany* [Slemani, Iraqi Kurdistan], No. 22, September 1998:4.

[17] "Southeast" is the official name for the Kurdish provinces of Turkey.

[18] Information based on an e-mail message, "Honour killings: A violent crime against women," sent by Ipek Ilkkaracan of Women for Women's Human Rights, Istanbul, dated 9 April 1999. The writer of the message does not use the name Kurds and Kurdistan, and refers to the region as "the Southeast."

[19] One 'prominent member of the Internet community' in Canada noted 'that the 'Net is essentially uncontrollable. The only way to control content on the Net' would be to unplug our entire national telephone system. That is the *only way*' (Chodos et al., 1997).

[20] Turkey considers anyone's ties with Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) as a crime against the state. In February 2000, three elected mayors of three Kurdish cities were accused of the crime, arrested, and later released on bail ("Turkey releases Kurdish mayors," *International Herald Tribune*, February 29, 2000). The mayors' lawyer told the Turkish paper *Radikal* (February 27, 2000) that the State Security Court had compiled a file including records of 400 pages of log-ons made from municipality computers to the Internet site of two pro-Kurdish newspapers.

[21] A similar search on Alta Vista on June 13, 2000 provided these figures: a search for "Kurdish" and "women" in "any language" provided 1,800 "web pages." The

number of web pages for other groups were: Arab women 4,515, Turkish women 19,646, Iranian women 6,417, and Persian women 11,284.

[22] For a highly optimistic view on the cyberspace, see Esther Dyson et. al. 1996. For a critique of this position, see John Carlos Rowe (1996) and Richard K. Moore (1996). For a general survey of the controversy see Graham (1999).

[23] See, e.g., Harold Innis 1951, also 1949. For elaboration of Innis' ideas, see James Carey 1975. I am indebted to Amir Hassanpour for discussing with me, over the last fifteen years, the work of the Toronto School of Communication, especially the ideas of Harold Innis.

[24] For an excellent critique of feminism and technology see Stabile 1994.

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