

## Women and Nationalism in the Kurdish Republic of 1946<sup>1</sup>

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**A**lthough the Kurds are known as the world's largest 'stateless' or non-state nation, they have a long history of sovereign rule. The first history of the Kurds, *Sharaf-Nāme*, was written in 1597 by Sharaf Khan, the ruler of the powerful Bidlis principality. He wrote the chronicle because historians had ignored the story of 'the rulers of Kurdistan and their circumstances.' Kurdish statehood, according to this widely acclaimed source, consisted of diverse forms of sovereign rule, ranging from royalty (*saltanat*) to semi-independent principalities. This system persisted until the mid-nineteenth century when the Ottoman and Iranian states used military force to overthrow the last of the six major principalities.

The struggle for statehood has been at the center of Kurdish nationalist movements during the twentieth century. The most important experiment, which can be distinguished from pre-modern state formations, was the Kurdish Republic of 1946, established in northeastern Kurdistan, now part of northwestern Iran. This state can be distinguished from its pre-modern predecessors not only by its republican form, which was administered by a political party and a cabinet, but also by its modern educational system, modern media, national army, tax system, national anthem, national flag, national language, and mobilization of women into educational, cultural and political life.

While the presence of women in the educational and political life of the Kurdish Republic readily distinguishes it from all pre-modern forms of Kurdish statehood, this chapter argues that the exercise of state power in both cases was male gendered. Indeed, the nationalist struggle for sovereignty, much like international law that supports Kurdish self-determination (see McDonald, this volume), is a thoroughly masculine politics.

This chapter examines women's involvement in the traditionally male domains of politics in the Kurdish Republic. It is based on a survey of the publications and documents of the state, and interviews with women and men who lived in the Republic. During its short life, the government took a number of steps toward women's participation in public life. However, women entered non-domestic spheres in support of the nationalist cause, rather than as activists in a women's movement or leaders or active cadres of the ruling party. The male leaders of this nationalist movement envisioned a 'proper' and 'honorable' role for women as icons of a modernizing nation, and as the celebrated 'mothers of the homeland.'

### **The Nationalism of a Non-State Nation**

After the fall of the principalities in the mid-nineteenth century, the demand for a Kurdish state continued to be on the agenda of the uprooted princely families. Haji Qadiri Koyi (1818-1897), a mullah and poet who had migrated to Istanbul, called on the Kurds to rise up and establish their own state. He encouraged the Kurds to use their own language, collect and publish their oral and written literature, acquire modern secular science, allow female education, and engage in publishing newspapers and journals. Moreover, by the beginning of the twentieth century a new intelligentsia, educated in the modern schools established by the Ottoman and Iranian states, was emerging. In the capital city of Istanbul and other major urban centers, these activists engaged in publishing and organizing work. The Young Turk movement of the early twentieth century as well as the national and democratic movements of Europe and Asia encouraged the idea of a modern Kurdish nation and nation-state. The first Kurdish newspaper was published in 1898, followed by the first political organization in 1908 (see Klein, this volume). However, the leadership of these activities was in the hands of the landed aristocracy.

World War I brought Kurdistan enormous devastation. After the genocide of the Armenian people in 1915, the Ottoman state deported to Western Turkey several hundred thousand Kurds. Many perished before reaching their destination. The empire was, however, defeated in the war, and much of its territory was divided between the European powers. The new states of Iraq and Syria were created by Britain and France respectively and, as a result, Ottoman Kurdistan was divided between the newly formed countries and Turkey. The victors of the war promised the creation of a Kurdish state in the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920. Before the formation of this state, however, the Ottomans recovered from the defeat, and the forces reorganized by Mustafa Kemal established effective power in what remained of the empire, that is, in the territory of present-day Turkey. Under the changing balance of forces, the Treaty of Sèvres was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne, which did not mention the creation of a Kurdish state. By 1923, Turkey was declared a Republic, and soon began the forcible integration of the Kurds into the emerging ethno-nationalist

regime.

The Kurdish struggle for sovereignty continued under the rule of the 'modernizing' and centralizing states in the post-War years. A series of major revolts which occurred between 1925 and 1942 in Iran, Turkey and Iraq were severely suppressed. Under the British Occupation and Mandate over Iraq, an autonomous government led by Shaikh Mahmud, a religious leader and feudal lord, came to power in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Shaikh Mahmud resisted the limitations imposed on him by Britain, and declared himself the King of Kurdistan. His government was, however, similar to the old feudally-organized principalities in spite of its cabinet, partly-trained army, and government publishing. There was no political party, and power was in the hands of Shaikh Mahmud and the largely feudal nobility appointed by him. There was no change in the life of women and the peasantry who formed the majority of the population.

The redivision of Kurdistan had conflicting impacts on the development of the Kurds as a nation. While feudalism and tribalism were dominant in rural Kurdistan, the Kurdish community in Soviet Armenia was undergoing socialist transformation in their autonomous region (1923-1929) in Nagorno-Qarabagh. While Turkey and Iran had subjected the Kurds to the harshest forms of linguicide and ethnocide, the British Mandate in Iraq, under the supervision of the League of Nations, granted the Kurds the freedom to use their language in publishing and primary education. Although the majority of adult Kurds were illiterate until recently, the Kurds of the Soviet Union became fully literate by the 1930s. The Kurdish people have lived, since 1918, under the rule of diverse political systems, ranging from French (Syria, 1920-1946) and British (Iraq, 1920-1932) mandates to secular monarchy (Iran, 1925-1979, Iraq 1932-1957), theocracy (Iran, since 1979), and secular, ultra-nationalist, republican regimes (Turkey since 1923, Iraq since 1963; Syria since 1963).

When the first modern-type autonomous government, the Kurdish Republic of 1946, was established in Iran, Kurdish society was predominantly rural with a developed system of feudal relations and powerful though declining tribal formations, a slowly but steadily growing urban population, petty and mercantile bourgeoisies, and an emerging secular intelligentsia. There was no trace of modern industrial development and a proletariat, except in the petroleum industry on the margins of Kurdistan in Kirkuk and Kirmashan (Kirmanshah). The fragmentation of the nationalist movement by the borders of the nation-states had further complicated the Kurdish nationalist movement's project of building the nation and the state.

### **The Rise and Fall of the Kurdish Republic**

The formation of a Kurdish state under the geostrategic conditions outlined above seemed to be an impossibility. World War II did, however, change the balance of power in the region, and created favorable conditions for the

nationalist movement in Iran. Soon after Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, two Allied powers, Britain and the USSR, invaded Iran in order to pre-empt a German occupation of the country, which was, under Reza Shah, leaning towards Germany. Soviet forces occupied northern Iran while the British took over the south, separated by a small buffer zone.

The Kurds of northern Kurdistan welcomed the arrival of the Red Army, in part because it led to the immediate disintegration of the coercive organs of Reza Shah's state, that is the police, army and gendarmerie. With the weakening of the Pahlavi state, nationalist consciousness among the Kurds and the neighboring Azerbaijani Turks came into the open. The Soviet occupation forces were committed to respect the territorial integrity of the Iranian state as long as they occupied the country during the war. Also, they were interested in keeping order in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan, which were used by Britain and the United States as the route to send vital aid to battlefields from Stalingrad to Leningrad. Thus, the Soviet Union discouraged Kurdish or Azerbaijani nationalism, especially from 1941 to 1945. In spite of these limitations, Kurdish and Azerbaijani nationalism experienced a renaissance.

Even before the end of the war, the United States was helping the new Shah of Iran to build up the army and the gendarmerie. People throughout Iran were struggling for democracy, and independence from British and growing American domination. American oil companies asked the Iranian government for oil concessions in northern Iran, close to the oil fields of Baku. The USSR saw this as an American plan to establish surveillance bases on the borders of its Caucasian republics.

Although interested in the defeat of Germany, Western powers, especially the United States, were alarmed by the victories of the Soviet Union, and the successes of the communist parties in Greece, Albania, Yugoslavia, China, and other parts of the world. These victories had enhanced the socialist and national liberation movements in Iran and other Asian countries. Under the changing political conditions of the last year of the war, Western powers were trying to block the upsurge in anti-colonialist movements. The United States viewed Iran, Turkey and Greece as key strategic regions for establishing its bases against the Soviet Union and containing the communist movements of the Balkans and Western Asia. Other conflicts, some old and some new, between the USSR and Western powers in Europe and Asia came into the open with the termination of the war in 1945.

Under these conditions, the USSR refused to withdraw its forces from northern Iran after the war ended. Moreover, Moscow encouraged the nationalists in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan to form their own autonomous governments within the framework of the Iranian constitution. The 'national government of Azerbaijan' was established in December 1945 and 'the Republic of Kurdistan' was announced in Mahabad on January 22, 1945.<sup>2</sup> The two autonomous regimes became the site of conflict

between the West, led by the United States and Britain, the Iranian monarchy, the USSR, and the Kurds and Azerbaijanis. Helped by the West, Iran took the case of Soviet refusal to withdraw to the newly-formed United Nations. The last Soviet units withdrew from Iran in May 1946, and six months later the Iranian army attacked the two governments, claiming that it was ‘maintaining law and order’ during the elections for the forthcoming Iranian parliament. The autonomous regimes, persuaded by the USSR, did not resist, and were overthrown in December 1946 through military operations, which led to the execution of hundreds of leaders and participants in the movement.

### Women of the Nation

The Kurdish Republic was established by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), which was formed in August 1945 out of the dissolved nationalist party ‘The Society for the Revival of Kurdistan,’ known in Kurdish as ‘*Komeley J.K.*’ This organization was clandestine, and propagated the formation of a Kurdish state comprising all parts of greater Kurdistan. It issued numerous leaflets explaining its position on political issues, and engaged in clandestine publishing, for example, nationalist poetry, Kurdish calendars, and a very popular magazine, *Nîştman* (Homeland). It is often considered to be the first Kurdish party with a modernist nationalist outlook. The founders were male members of the urban petty bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie; the organization considered tribalism and feudalism or, to be more exact, non-nationalist tribal and feudal lords, as obstacles to the development of the Kurdish nation and its political movement. Although the party did not call for land reform, it was the first organization to propagate the need for ameliorating the conditions of peasant life.

Komele’s main external enemies were the four states, Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria, which ruled over Kurdistan, and denied the national rights of the Kurds. The main internal enemies were tribalism, illiteracy, and economic and industrial underdevelopment. Within this framework, women occasionally were called upon to join men and participate in the liberation of the motherland. In one poem, ‘The Conversation of Sisters and Brothers,’ published in *Nîştman* (Hêmin. 1943-1944: 23-4), a sister tells her brother that he should not tolerate subjugation because all other peoples have become free and that he must sacrifice his life and property for the cause of the motherland. The brother answers,

Dear *dêde* [sister], O sensible and beautiful Kurdish girl,  
May your chastity never be stained.  
Lenin rose up and the oppression of the veil was eliminated;  
You are, however, still confined under the full veil.  
Girls among all peoples are free now,  
It is only the Kurdish girls whose rights are trampled upon.  
Break the fetters and chains on your feet,  
My dear *dêde*, with the help of your brother!

For the sake of the motherland, God helping,  
 Let's work together like sisters and brothers.  
 Like Joan of Arc, rise up like men,  
 Root out the enemy from the Kurdish land!

This theme is repeated in much Kurdish nationalist poetry throughout this century. The Kurdish female is chaste and beautiful, but like the men, is oppressed by the enemy. Helped by men, she can, like Joan of Arc, liberate the motherland. The same issue of the magazine carries a brief article on a 'Kurdish woman poet, Heyran Xanimi Dunbli' (1943-1944: 29-30). The poet composed in Persian, and apparently is mentioned only to demonstrate the Kurdish women's achievement in poetry.

The last issue of *Nîştman* (7-8-9 [Spring] 1944: 10) carries a photograph of two Kurdish women executed in Turkey. The verses under the photograph provide a typical depiction of women by nationalists:

Whoever swears at another person will say, 'Go,  
 Your cowardice (*bêxîretî*) be like women, your pants be like  
 women's!  
 Where in the world is there a boy like these two women,  
 To be a symbol, in politics, for the cause of the motherland?  
 These two saplings were sacrificed for the Kurdish motherland,  
 How happy is the boy who can be like these two girls!

This poem celebrates women who fight the enemy, but subjects all women to patriarchal symbolic violence—renouncing them and, even their clothing, as 'cowards.' Women and men can achieve equality only in their struggle for the liberation of the nation; in the case of women, however, sexuality is inseparable from the project of nation-building. The purity of the nation, and its strength, is inseparable from the chastity (*dawênpakî, be namûsî*) of its women. If the motherland should be cleared from foreign domination, the ideal woman, too, should be virgin and legally possessed.

Komeley J.K. aimed at the construction of a single Kurdish nation through the formation of a state ruling over greater Kurdistan. The nature of this state was not clearly explicated, although the organization declared 'democracy' as one of the articles of its constitution (*meşamname*).<sup>3</sup> However, much like other nationalist movements, Komele was preoccupied with only one tenet of democracy, that is, independence from foreign rule. The organization paid lip service to other requirements of democratic life such as gender equality, and did not even consider the abolishing of feudal relations. Women were the property, and the chaste mother, of the nation.

In addition to propaganda through the medium of print and poetry, Komele successfully used theater for promoting the nationalist cause. The first theatrical performance in the northern parts of Iranian Kurdistan, scripted and staged by Komele, was *Daykî Nîştman*, that is, 'The Mother of the Homeland.' The Motherland, in this drama, was chained, dressed in

black and with white hairs, and was calling her 'sons' in distress to liberate her from the yoke of Iranian, Turkish and Iraqi rule. This act brought tears to the eyes of the audience. In the next act, the sons of the Motherland answered the call, took up arms, put the occupiers to run, and liberated her. The last act depicts the coming to power of the Motherland—the formation of the Kurdish state. The five acts of the play and the intermissions were interspersed with the poetry of Haji Qadiri Koyi and several nationalist songs. The impact of the play, repeatedly performed to full house in Mahabad and other towns, was profound. It survives as a moment of glory in the folk memory of the region. Not surprisingly, Komele, the producer of the play, did not try or was not able to find a female actor to play the role of the Motherland. The entire cast was male. Even some of the young male actors and performers met obstruction from their well-to-do fathers, who looked down at entertainment and performing as lower class occupations incompatible with their class honor and reputation.<sup>4</sup>

### **Nation-Building in the Kurdish Republic**

The Republic, the first Kurdish experiment in forming a modern-type autonomous government, was in practice independent of the Iranian state. The founder of the Republic was not a tribal or feudal leader but rather a new party, which was the reformed version of Komele. The main change in the organization was the omission of the demand for creating a greater Kurdistan. This was largely due to Soviet presence in the region, which supported Azerbaijan and Kurdistan autonomous governments but was committed to protecting the territorial integrity of the Iranian state.

Demographically, the capital city of Mahabad was dwarfed by the countryside, which was under the rule of tribal leaders and feudal landowners. The Kurdish Democratic Party did not act to abolish, let alone reform, feudal land relations, which had left the peasantry under conditions of serfdom. Failure to abolish feudal relations proved disastrous. Politically, the majority of the population remained under the direct control of feudal and tribal leaders; the peasants were not, therefore, citizens of the Republic enjoying equal rights with the people of the capital city. Moreover, tribal and feudal leaders were given important positions in the military and civil administration. Although they had experienced considerable repression under Reza Shah's government (1925-1941), many joined the Republic unwillingly, and were waiting for its fall and the return of the central government. They were fearful of Soviet presence, the threat of communism, and the rise of urban Kurdish politics and its interference in their affairs. Although urban nationalists did not call for the abolition of feudalism and tribalism, they were critical of the oppressive conditions in the countryside, and resented the betrayal of the nationalist movement by tribal chiefs.

The Republic inherited the administrative system created in the city of Mahabad and the region by the Iranian state. The party Kurdicized the civil

bureaucracy, while the army and the gendarmerie had been dismantled and replaced by a 'national army,' led mostly by Kurdish officers who had deserted the Iraqi and Iranian armed forces. A cabinet and a council were formed and cultural institutions such as libraries, a radio station, cinema, printing presses, and journalism were established. The party expanded its activities by forming a youth section and a women's organization. Measures were taken to improve the position of small and poor shopkeepers. However, feudal land relations in the village remained intact, in spite of the promise of intervention in the interests of both the peasants and the landlords.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Mother of the Nation**

The territory of the Republic was limited to the northern parts of Iranian Kurdistan. The capital was the city of Mahabad with a population of about 16,000, and the most important towns were Bokoan, Naghada, and Shino. According to government records, the population of Mahabad was, at the end of 1948, about 16,455 of which 8,189 were women and 8,266 men.<sup>6</sup> The population figure provided by the Iranian army in 1951 was 15,971.<sup>7</sup> The same source counts Bokoan at 3,074 and Shino at 2,212.

In the absence of census data from the period, it is difficult to provide accurate information on the life of women. The first national census of Iran, taken in November 1956, that is, exactly ten years after the fall of the Republic, provides vital statistics figures for the city and the entire county (Mahabad Census District).

The physical shape of Mahabad had not changed visibly in spite of the lapse of ten years. The population of the city had increased to 20,332. According to these data, ten years after the Republic, only ten percent of the female population 10 years and over was literate, that is, 'able to read and write.' Using these census figures, it is possible to get some insight into the literacy rates of adult (15 years and over) females in 1946. For instance, the age group of 25 to 34 in the 1956 census was 15 to 24 years old in 1946. It is highly unlikely that the literacy skills of this age group had changed during the decade. In 1956, only 6.4 percent of the females (85 out of 1,321 persons) of the age group 25 to 34 were literate. The 1956 literacy rates drops sharply to 3.7 percent for the age group 35 to 44 (27 out of 738 persons), and to 0.8 percent for the age group 45 to 64 (6 out of 765).<sup>8</sup> These figures indicate that the rate of literacy for adult (15 years and over) female population in 1946 was no more than four percent. It is also obvious, from other sources, that the majority of the literates were educated in the modern schools established after the 1930s.

In its constitution published in December 1945, less than two months before the establishment of the Republic, the Kurdish Democratic Party declared that in Kurdistan as well as in all provinces of Iran where Kurds had lived, 'the interests of the masses of the people should be safeguarded on the basis of democracy' (Chapter 2, Article 4). The document also



declared, in the same language used in Komele's constitution, that the 'goal of the Party is to extend democracy and, on that basis, struggle for the prosperity of human beings' (Article 5). The equality of men and women is stated rather unambiguously: 'In all political, economic and social affairs women should enjoy equal rights with men' (chapter 4, Article 21).<sup>9</sup>

During its short and turbulent life, the Party was not able to hold a congress as promised in its constitution. Neither did it create the mechanisms for elections and parliamentary democracy. The party was the legislative, executive and judiciary power. Its gender policy was conditioned by the nationalist outlook of the male leadership and the way the leaders and women tried to change the status quo within the social, cultural and political context of the time.

### **The Women's Party**

If the leadership of the Republic denied the peasants, the majority of the population, democratic rights, the other half of the population, the women, were given considerable prominence in the life of the capital city. During the celebrations of the 'independence (*serbexoyî w istiqlal*) of Kurdistan' on January 22, 1946, which was reported in several issues of the newspaper *Kurdistan*, twenty-three major figures of the Republic addressed the audience. Two out of the sixteen who gave a talk were women, and the girls' school was one of the four schools which performed patriotic songs.<sup>10</sup> The women speakers, both teachers of the primary school, celebrated the independence of Kurdistan, and emphasized the need for women's active participation in the struggle. Khajijay Majdi, one of the teachers, said:

Now, dear sisters, let's look at our dear brothers and extend our hands to one another, because I see that the motherland is expecting her daughters to begin action and education so that we also catch up with our dear brothers; today's world needs girls and boys to join each other like sisters and brothers for the liberation of the motherland.<sup>11</sup>

This political line, already articulated in Komele's publications, was repeatedly expressed in both female and male speeches, the press, and poetry.<sup>12</sup>

About two weeks later, the teachers of the girls' school organized a rally at the hall of the Education Office in order to celebrate 'independence and introduce the Leader of Kurdistan'.<sup>13</sup> According to the newspaper's report (which was published after the formation of the women's party), the 'lady of the Leader of Kurdistan' (*yay Pêşeway Kurdistan*), a large number of the women members of the KDP, and people from all walks of life participated in the event. The [First] Lady gave a speech on "the advancement and guidance of women." She then presented a pair of gold

earrings to the principal of the girls' school, Wilma Sayadiyan. In her talk, the Lady reminded everyone of the need for women to learn from the women abroad who 'were a great help to their husbands in the Great War.' She said:

We should not always expect our husbands [to give us] money, clothes and gold. Dear ladies, do not make your children miserable [*bedbext kirdin*] by [keeping them] within the four walls at home; send them to school so that they won't be like illiterate men and women and so that they can defend their national rights and especially so that Kurdish women will be able to be at the same footing with the civilized women abroad.

The next speaker, the principal of the girls' school, emphasized the education of women and their unity with men in order to enable their nation to make progress. The third speaker, 'Ismat Qazi, 'the daughter of the Leader of Kurdistan,' said that we, women, should have made several celebrations of our freedom so that 'all the world knows that Kurdish women love freedom much more than men do.' The fourth speaker, Kobra 'Azimi, a teacher, strongly criticized the women of Mahabad:

Since we are more retarded (*le paşîn*), our task is tougher and our load will be heavier. We should know how to take this heavy load off our backs. Of course, it will be taken off with the power of reason and science. But, unfortunately, the people of Mahabad do not see it that way. For example, they make their young daughters miserable [*bedbext*] and illiterate, and tell them to weave a pair of socks or sew a head-dress or else they say: 'I do not send my daughter to school because she will be ill-mannered.' Dear ladies, what is our ill-manners? Those who think this way are very far from the truth and have not understood the question. For instance, I myself have heard in many gatherings whenever they see us, they say: 'Here are the teachers,' and they look down at us. If we look at the writings and books by foreigners, we will be very sad and ask, 'God, are we human beings just like them? Why we should not have in a city like Mahabad a woman surgeon, physician, dentist, or even a certified midwife?'

The speaker then called on women to enjoy the downfall of Reza Shah's dictatorship, and 'not to hesitate in sending their daughters to school' where they will be taught in their mother tongue. Later, the participants donated money to the KDP. The newspaper carries the list of 41 women who donated money and gold to the party.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, all the women are identified by the names of their husbands; for example, Mrs. [of] Mr. Salih Shatri. One week earlier, *Kurdistan* reported the convention of a ladies' conference in Mahabad:

The Ladies Conference at the  
Kurdish-Soviet Cultural Society

On Friday March 8, 1946, a conference was convened at the Kurdish-Soviet Cultural Society by the Lady of the Leader [i.e., President] of Kurdistan for enlightening the minds of the women's community of Kurdistan; invited to this conference were a large number of the ladies [wives] of the members of the central committee [of the Kurdish Democratic Party], teachers and students of the girls' school, employees of the Democratic Party, and government offices, merchants and shopkeepers (*kesebe*). First, the lady of the Leader of Kurdistan talked about the importance of education for women and girls and the progress of the Union of Soviet Women, and the need for becoming acquainted with them. Next, a large number of teachers and students and other ladies made speeches. The conference which had begun at 2:00 p.m. was over by 5:00.<sup>15</sup>

No mention is made of March 8, International Women's Day, which was always celebrated in the Soviet Union. A week later, a women's organization was established. There was a brief report in *Kurdistan*:

Formation of the Democratic Party  
(by the women of Kurdistan)

On Friday March 15, 1946, a large number of thoughtful women of Kurdistan had been invited by the lady of the Leader of Kurdistan, and they gathered at 3:00 p.m. in the Cultural Society, and established, under the directorship of the Lady of the Leader of Kurdistan (Lady Mina ...[one word not legible]), the Democratic Party of the Women of Kurdistan; a large number of the women registered and undertook to pay membership fees from one to ten toomans.<sup>16</sup>

The name of the organization varies in different issues of the newspaper; for example, Union of Democratic Women of Kurdistan (*Yeketî Jinanî Demokratî Kurdistan*)<sup>17</sup> and Ladies' Party (*Ĥizbî Yayan*).<sup>18</sup>

The organization was, therefore, the KDP's women's wing. Far from being the outcome of a feminist movement, the women's party was created by a totally male-dominated political organization. The leading figure was Yay Mina, the wife of the president of the Republic.

The women's party apparently had a loose organization. Next to Yay Mina, who led the organization, were the heads (*serok*) of the ten neighborhoods (*ge'ek*) of Mahabad. In a report about the revenues and expenditures of the Women's Party in the third month of the spring (*cozerdan*, May-June), the names of the heads and the revenues (membership fees) of each neighborhood are given:<sup>19</sup>

1.	Kolsum Soltanyan	Harmaniyan	1,305.0
2.	Khorshidi Shatri	Bazar	282.5
3.	Khajijay Qazi	Chom-e	227.5
4.	Sayd 'Ashyay Shatri	Haji Hassan	822.5
5.	Sadiqay Valizada	Khir-e	936.5
6.	Ziba Khanim	Qulaqabran	230.0
7.	Aminay Dawidi	Qibla	210.0
8.	Zaray Mawlawi	Rizgayan	200.0
9.	Pirozay Mishiri	Jami'a	120.0
10.	Mawzeri Bilazada	Yahudyan	95.0

**Total****4,429.0**

The income for the first two months of spring was 9,291 Rials. Expenditure consisted of rent (1,200 Rls.), changing furniture and tablecloth (5,200 Rls.), two months of salary for one woman employee (400 Rls.), three months of salary for another employee (600 Rls.), moving and charcoal (80 Rls.), and town crier (*carçî*, 60 Rls.), amounting to a total of 7,540 Rls.<sup>20</sup> The party was first located at a primary school but soon moved into a new office, a rented house. A brief note asks interested 'literate ladies' to apply for the following positions: accountant (*hisabdar*), treasurer (*xezanedar*), secretary (*munşî*), and teller (*sindûqdar*).<sup>21</sup>

The primary aim of women's party was to mobilize adult women in support of the Republic and the nation. Since the majority of these women were illiterate, the party organized literacy training classes as well as informal gatherings. Other activities included fundraising for the national army, participation in marches, demonstrations, and writing in the newspaper. Assistance to the national army included the female work of weaving clothes and socks for the *pêşmerges*, 'soldiers'. The women's organization conferred on the Republic the image of a modern state interested in the advancement of women.

Nationalists have, since the latter part of the nineteenth century, emphasized education as a main condition for national liberation. During the twentieth century, many intellectuals, both male and female, have called for the provision of education for women. In spite of this, some parents, including mothers in Mahabad, resisted the campaign of schooling for girls. Kobra 'Azimi's criticism of the parents who refused to send their daughters to school, cited above, reveals a conflict between the nationalist interest in incorporating women into the nation, and the traditional approach, which would reproduce the pre-capitalist social order and its gender relations. In fact, the all-male leadership of the Republic, especially the President himself, was more interested than many women in promoting female education. The head of the KDP of Shino, for example, inaugurated the first girls' school in the town. The report about the school written by the principal, Hassan Kazimi, noted that 'it is necessary that all the people [of the town] thank [the KDP head] for this important service and send

their daughters to this school with enthusiasm and willingness...<sup>22</sup> It is emphasized that a liberated Kurdistan needs educated women. Liberation, freedom and education are inseparable. The highest achievement is to be like men. The uneducated woman is a burden on the nation and on the educated man. One man, in his article on 'educating women,' wrote:

One day I was going home from the Education office. I saw a woman who was standing in front of the headquarters of the Kurdish Democratic Party. She turned her face toward me and asked, in a language that is characteristic of our illiterate and simple women, 'Brother, what is this?' I thought that if I answer that this is the headquarters of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, she would understand neither the 'headquarter' nor 'party' nor 'democratic.' Helplessly, I thought for a moment and said: 'Here, some of the important Kurds get together and deal with the affairs of the country.'

The writer then argues that Kurds should not think that they have taken a big step on the road to freedom and civilization until women get educated and know about their own political and social rights (Mika'ili 1946: 4).

The members of the party supported the government through financial donations and collecting money from non-members. The President once told Yay Mina that 'the queen of France has donated her ring to the French people. Why don't you follow suit and I'm sure that this will encourage other women to financially support the republic.'

### **Regulating the Institution of Marriage**

The formation of the Women's Party was apparently the most prominent step taken by the leadership of the party for mobilizing women in the nation-building process. Other actions show an interest in intervening in traditional gender relations. One was a policy of outlawing and punishing certain types of elopement. One decision taken by the National Council was regularly reprinted in several issues of the newspaper:

(Notice)

The Elopement (*redükewtin*) of Girls and Women is Prohibited

The Kurdistan National Council rules that any man who forcibly elopes a married woman or [a woman who] has not moved into [the husband's home] will be sentenced to death; if a girl is eloped the man must be killed; but if a man asks for a girl's hand and he is refused and there is no *şer'i* barrier [to their marriage], and [the girl] is unmarried and consenting, there is no punishment, otherwise there will be three months to three years of jail. February 13, 1946, Head of the National Council of Kurdistan, Haji Baba Shaikh.<sup>23</sup>

This decision, together with a number of others, demonstrated the independence of the Republic from the legal system of the Iranian state. It was directed mainly at the tribal and rural areas where

abduction/elopement was practiced. Issued by a religious authority centered in the capital, it was the extension of the power of the center/city over non-urban areas, which were under the rule of the tribal-feudal leaders. It was also the imposition of Islamic principles on a system of gender relations, which had resisted the power of religion. The language of the text is clearly patriarchal (see Hassanpour, this volume). In the title of the notice, abduction (*jin helgirtin*), the term for the male side of the practice, is not used. Significantly, the leadership of the Republic did not attempt a similar intervention in land relations in the countryside, which in feudally organized villages was exploitative, and did not respect women's right to own land. In fact, the tradition of denying women the right to inherit agrarian land was a violation of Islamic *shari'a*, which assigns a woman half of a man's share. But even the abolition of abduction/elopement was not quite successful.

In a rare comment, Mihammad-Amin Manguri, a participant in the military administration of the Republic, noted that the ruling on abduction/elopement was in conflict with the traditions of the Bilbas tribal confederacy to the west of Mahabad. The people in the region considered it an 'oppressive and unpleasant' ruling because it did not allow 'freedom of loving, flirtation, falling in love, mixed dancing, and abduction. [It] had turned the youth into hermits (*wişkesofi*), and had hidden from them the world of love.' There was much criticism, according to Manguri, of the ruling because elopement was considered an honor. If a woman had not eloped she would not have been respected. The same was true for men: 'if a man had not abducted a woman, he would have been told, "you are not a man; had you been a man you would have abducted a woman."' Manguri claimed that 'the only fortuity that history had bestowed on the Kurds was "loving and sexual desire (*dildari w 'elaqey cinsi*) and freedom loving', and that the Kurds were ahead of the Europeans in enjoying these freedoms. He also mentions that the practice had an economic function. The adventure of elopement is always risky, but all sides are familiar with how to resolve the conflict. The man and the woman seek sanctuary (with a tribal chief or landlord, a religious authority or any respected and neutral person) where they will be safe until a settlement is negotiated; the father of the girl is usually given a 'bride-price' or 'milk-price' (*şîrbayî*), and others, too, may gain materially.<sup>24</sup>

Among the reforms initiated by the leadership was a presidential decree to conduct the Friday prayer sermon, for the first time, in Kurdish. A number of topics were highlighted to be covered in these sermons, one of them being: 'how should women be in society.' Other topics were: combating superstition, respect for religious law, sanitation and the building of hospitals, the influence of security on the progress of the homeland, and the old civilization of Kurdistan.<sup>25</sup>

In the neighboring Azerbaijan autonomous government, women enjoyed, for the first time in Iran, suffrage rights. In the Kurdish Republic,

although voting was not raised as an issue, the president was sympathetic to universal suffrage. In a press interview with Qazi Mohammad, he was asked, 'The Azerbaijan Democratic Party has granted women voting rights in the elections; have you done the same?' The answer was, 'Although I consider positive the action of Azerbaijan, I should inform you that we have not been able to achieve such success.'<sup>26</sup>

### **The Question of Feminist Consciousness**

It is obvious from the evidence presented so far that feminist consciousness was not yet evident among the women of the Republic. The educated women did believe in female education and formal equality with men. But even they did not seriously challenge the prevailing system of gender relations. The most radical critique was 'Azimi's, which led to the resentment of some women. The absence of even a liberal feminist consciousness can be documented through the pages of *Kurdistan*. One of the teachers wrote an 'advice for women' which included, among others, the following:

- Every day before the husband leaves for the bazaar, the wife should ask him, 'Do you have any orders [for me to carry out]?'
- The good and truthful woman is the crown on her husband's head.
- If your husband does not like a behavior, you should not like it either and do not do it....
- Do not favorably talk about a stranger man, else your husband will be suspicious.
- Even if you are very sad, do not be sour when he comes home.
- Try to understand the temper of your husband so that you behave accordingly.<sup>27</sup>

Most males and females who wrote about women's participation in the life of the nation presented the women in 'foreign countries' (both Europe and the USSR) as a model to be emulated. The foreign woman, in this literature, is educated in science, technology and the arts; she is equal to men and, like men, contributes to nation-building. Occasionally, the prophet Muhammad's recommendation of education for both men and women is mentioned. Also, one speaker, Mrs. Shah-Soltan Fattahi, emphasized in a speech the support of the President for female education by sending her daughters to school.<sup>28</sup>

Another theme is women's ability to be good fighters. In an article on women in Soviet Azerbaijan (adapted from Soviet sources), the high standards of education of women as well as their military contribution to the anti-fascist patriotic war is emphasized.<sup>29</sup> In another edited article

about the 'freedom of religion in socialist Russia,' the freedom of Soviet women to work outside their homes and in all domains is emphasized. It is noted that Russian women work side by side with men. The non-segregation of foreign women and men had a counterpart in the nation. 'Look at the situation of the tribes in Kurdistan and you will see that men and women work together (in harvesting, sowing, and threshing) and help each other and, in addition to this, women take care of home and children. However, what the Russian women do is very valuable because they are knowledgeable and educated; our women are very ignorant.'<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusions

The case under review confirms some of the trends other researchers have observed in nationalist movements throughout the world. In the Kurdistan of 1946, the feminist movement was lagging behind the nationalist movement. Nationalist consciousness was much more extensive and much older. While the freedom of women, equal rights, and participation in struggle had entered the nationalist agenda, consciousness did not move beyond the demands of a crude liberal feminist platform.

The first Kurdish women's organization was formed in 1919 by the members of the nationalist elite in exile in Istanbul. Like other Kurdish political and cultural groups, it disappeared after the establishment of Republican Turkey, which suppressed all nationalist activities in the wake of the 1925 Kurdish revolt. The Women's Party seems to be the second Kurdish women's organization. Hapsa Khan, a member of the landed aristocracy, was active during Shaikh Mahmud's autonomous government of the early 1920s, but her work did not signal the rise of feminist consciousness or organization. She supported the nationalist cause, and pursued an agenda for the advancement of women, especially in gaining access to literacy and education.

The nationalist movement in 1946 encouraged women to take part in non-domestic activities but put numerous limitations on their public presence: women counted only if they could assist men in the nationalist cause. The Republic was the first Kurdish state with a claim to be democratic and modern. The formation of a women's party enhanced this image: women were present in public spaces from the beginning of the autonomous regime. The existence of a woman's party formalized women's presence in the political life of the Republic but, at the same time, justified their exclusion from the decision making ranks of the KDP. As the women's organization of the KDP, it also formalized the segregation of the rank-and-file along gender lines, each having its own organization. Clearly, the two were not on the same footing.

The newspaper *Kurdistan*, published every other day, together with several magazines and later a radio station, gave the semblance of a public sphere in the making. However, only the elite and the wealthy had access to radio sets, while the rest of the population in the capital could listen to



loudspeakers installed in the major intersection of the city. It is important, however, to note that all the press and the radio station were owned and run by the KDP, a situation which did not resemble a public sphere with diverse speakers/listeners and writers/readers independent of the ruling power. Still, they provided a space for covering women's activities and the official gender policy.

The neighboring Azerbaijan National Government was more radical than the Kurdish Republic. Contrary to Kurdistan, Azerbaijan conducted land reform, although limited, and recognized women's suffrage rights. Tabriz, the capital of Azerbaijan, was the second largest city in Iran and until the end of the nineteenth century, it was the largest urban center in the country. It was also the radical center of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911. Mir Ja'far Pishvari, the leader of the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, and the prime minister of the national government, was one of the major figures in the communist movement of Iran. The presence of Soviet forces in the region was also a factor. The enhanced position of women in Soviet society was one of the recurrent themes in the Soviet print and broadcast media. In the Kurdish and Azerbaijani press, Soviet women's participation in the war against fascism was always presented as evidence of their emancipation. It is significant that the French women's suffrage rights were recognized only in 1944, two years before Azerbaijan.

Half a century after the formation of Women's Party, it seems that the feminist movement in Kurdistan is still lagging behind the nationalist movement. Brutal national oppression has overshadowed gender and class oppression; even more obstructive is the nationalist leaders' emphasis on the national struggle; they clearly privilege the national over gender and class struggles; many nationalist parties downplay class and gender domination, and relegate such issues to the future. Two political parties, Komala (The Kurdistan Organization of the Communist Party of Iran) and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), have allowed women more space in armed struggle and political organizing. The role of women in the latter is, however, reminiscent of 1946. While many women have engaged in non-traditional activities (e.g., combat and non-combat military functions, party journalism, and team work), none has reached the top leadership positions. Some of the political parties, for example, the Kurdish Democratic Party-Iraq and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the former more than the latter, have in fact obstructed the unfolding of the women's movement. The KDP, for instance, claims that Kurdish society is Islamic and traditional, and women should, therefore, follow religious and traditional forms of patriarchal rule. In emphasizing the backwardness of Kurdish society, this group of nationalists says more about their own devotion to patriarchy than women's interest in traditionalism.<sup>31</sup>

The rise of urbanization, the formation of middle and working classes, the progress of education, and the emergence of a Kurdish diaspora in the

West all contribute to the unfolding of the feminist movement and its increasing contact with socialist and radical feminisms. The critique of the patriarchal system by Kurdish feminists who do not belong to any party has already begun. Kurdish writers, female and male, have questioned the violence of Kurdish patriarchy in Kurdistan and the diaspora.

The history of the Kurdish women's emancipation movement is, like the Kurdish people itself, suppressed. Very little is known about its achievements and failures. Uncovering this history depends on the unfolding of the movement itself.

One difference between Kurdistan and the West is the triumph of nationalism in 'Western democracies.' Since the late eighteenth century, Western nationalisms have assumed state power and have created their nations and nation-states. From the very beginning, the 'nation' excluded women (see, among a growing literature, Nelson 1998). Nowhere were women considered full 'citizens,' and it took more than a century of feminist struggle before they were allowed to exercise citizenship rights such as voting. Women have indeed been able, through organized political struggle and extensive theoretical confrontations with patriarchy, to wrest legal equality in many 'Western democracies.' Inequality is, however, deeply rooted in capitalist society.

The conflict between nationalism and feminism remains unresolved. The contradiction is even more prominent in the nationalist movements of the developing world. Turkish, Arab and Persian nationalisms, too, assumed state power in the post-World War I years. Their record, in dealing with gender relations, is by no means better than their Western counterparts. The Kurdish nationalist movements, by contrast, are aiming at achieving state power. To the extent that they experienced self-rule in Iran in 1946 and in Iraq since 1992, Kurdish nationalisms have not deviated from the trend that began in the West.

In Kurdistan, the conflict will continue to be mediated by negotiations and compromises imposed on both sides by the brutality of ethnocide and genocide practiced by the four nation-states. It remains to be seen if Kurdish feminists will allow nationalism to remain the watchdog of patriarchy. However, it would be simplistic to assume that nationalism is the only obstacle to women's liberation. As a conscious movement for abolishing patriarchy, feminism is being subdued, from within, by theoretical positions, which issue prescriptions for compromise. The call, in the West, for 'indigenous feminisms,' issued by postmodernist feminists and theorists of identity politics, encourages compromises with ethnic, nationalist, and religious patriarchy. However, Kurdish nationalist politics of the 'woman question' predates this postmodernist prescription by decades (see Klein, this volume). While Kurdish nationalism has succeeded in acting as the watchdog of patriarchy, nativism and theories of 'indigeneity' invite feminism to be the lapdog of nationalism. In spite of the brutal national oppression perpetrated against the Kurdish people, it is

more likely that Kurdish feminists will not entreat patriarchy for the sake of religion, nation, and ethnic purity.

## Notes

1. This chapter is another rewriting of my ongoing research on the topic. I have used the publications of 'Komeley J.K.' (see below), the journalism of the Kurdish Republic, manuscripts, interviews, and secondary sources.
2. The word 'republic' was used in the newspaper *Kurdistan*, published by the ruling party, and Qazi Muhammad, the leader of the party and the government, was called 'president of the republic.' The central committee of the Kurdish Democratic Party issued a decree, which informed everyone to use the title 'The President of the Republic of Kurdistan' (*re 'isî cumhûrî Kurdistan*) in their correspondence with Qazi Mohammad (*Kurdistan*, [1946] 14, February 13, p. 4). Under Soviet pressure, however, the name was dropped in official contexts, and the president was called the 'leader' (*pêşewa*). The Kurds continue to call it the 'Republic.'
3. 'The doctrine of Komele is democracy and it strives for the happiness of the life of human beings' (article 8 of the platform published in *Nîştman* [1942] 6: 6; only three articles of the longer document are published).
4. The text of the play has not survived. The most detailed description is provided by Farshi (1995). A brief account is given in Eagleton (1963).
5. This promise was made in the constitution of the party (see endnote 9, below); see, also, Eagleton (1963: 70-1).
6. *Ketâb-e Asâmi-ye Dehât-e Keshvar* [The Registry of the Country's Villages] (1950: 26).
7. *Farhang-e Joghrafîyâ'i-ye Irân* (1951: 512).
8. Information based on Iranian Government (1961: 14-5).
9. *Marâmnâme-ye Hezb-e Demokrât-e Kordestân* (1970: 30-1).
10. *Kurdistan* (1946) 10 (February 6): 1, 4.
11. *Kurdistan* (1946) 13 (February 11): 1.
12. The children's magazine *Girûgali Mindalanî Kurd* (Kurdish Children's Prattle) for instance, published this poem:

### To Girls

Kurdish girl! You, too, get educated like your older brother  
Never retreat from education, my dear.  
Your brother needs your help,  
He is quite in need of your beautiful thought.

Do not fail me, get educated,  
Because whoever is illiterate is an animal. (1946: 7)

13. *Kurdistan* (1946) 27 (March 25): 2-3
14. *Kurdistan* (1946) 29 (March 30): 4.
15. *Kurdistan* (1946) 24 (March 13): 7.
16. *Kurdistan* (1946) 24 (March 13): 3.
17. *Kurdistan* (1946) 79 (August 22 [should be August 20, i.e., 29 Gelawêj]): 4.
18. *Kurdistan* (1946) 85 (September 5 [should be September 12, i.e., 21 Xermanan]): 1.
19. *Kurdistan* (1946) 77 (August 15): 4.
20. *Kurdistan* (1946) 77 (August 15, 1946): 4.
21. *Kurdistan* (1946) 85 (September 5 [should be 12, i.e., 21 Xermanan]): 1.
22. *Kurdistan* (1946) 24 (March 13): 5.
23. *Kurdistan* (1946) 16 (February 18): 4.
24. Based on the manuscript written by Mihammad-Amin Manguri (1958: 176-7). The author was himself from the Mangur tribe of the Bilbas confederacy, and enquired about the impact of the ruling on the people of the region while he was in hiding there soon after the fall of the Republic. See Edmonds (1957: 225-6) on elopement among the Bilbas. I would like to thank Mr. Mahmud Mala 'Ezzat for making the manuscript available to me. He has published the manuscript in Sweden.
25. *Kurdistan* (1946) 10 (February 4): 3.
26. *Kurdistan* (1946) 2 (January 13): 4.
27. *Kurdistan* (1946) 27 (March 25): 3.
28. *Kurdistan* (1946) 28 (March 27).
29. *Kurdistan* (1946) 73 (August 4): 2.
30. *Kurdistan* (1946) 72 (30 July): 4.
31. To give one example of this line of thinking, I quote from a 1993 interview with four leaders of the Union of the Women of Kurdistan (*Yeketi Afretani Kurdistan*), which is one of the organizations of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iraq. One of the women denied the extensive killing of women in Iraqi Kurdistan, and claimed that only a couple of women may have been killed in Sulemani. Asked about their position on eloping as a means of avoiding arranged marriage, daughter exchange or selling of daughters, one interviewee opposed the practice because, she believed, that it was

against the tradition of the Kurdish people. Another leader of the women's organization opposed eloping and said:

I cannot say, directly, that it [eloping] is a good thing. We should understand clearly the society in which we live. What culture do we have? If we talk about women's rights within a very extensive framework, the society [*komeî*] itself will stand against us. We should walk with society step by step. The Islamic culture and Kurdish culture have become societal law [*yasay komeîayetî*]; if we cross this border, we will not succeed.

The four interviewed women were leaders of the Union of the Women of Kurdistan, and were on a trip to Europe in order to rally support for their work (Çingiyani 1993: 122, 124).

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