

## Gendered Perspectives on the Kurdish Diaspora

**Nazand Begikhani interviewed by Lucie Drechselová**

Études kurdes, n°17, 2024, pages 195 à 208.

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Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Begikhani, Nazand. 2024. « Gendered Perspectives on the Kurdish Diaspora ». Interview by Lucie Drechselová. *Études kurdes*, 17 : 195-208

<https://www.etudeskurdes.org/article/gendered-perspectives-on-the-kurdish-diaspora/>

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Dr Nazand Begikhani (Vincent Wright Chair 2020 & Visiting Professor, Sciences Po, Paris) interviewed by Lucie Drechselová (Associate Professor, EHESS-CETOBaC)

## Gendered Perspectives on the Kurdish Diaspora

This interview is based on a talk of Nazand Begikhani at the Evangelische Akademie in Bad Boll in Germany (March 2022). The research featured in the interview is based on secondary data already published by other scholars, combined with 10 online interviews with young boys and girls from the Kurdish diaspora, conducted by Begikhani.

**L.D.:** Over the last three decades, the Kurdish diaspora has been the subject of rich debate and growing academic research. Could you start by describing the phases of Kurdish diaspora?

**N.B.:** Scholars have generally divided the history of Kurdish migration to - and their settlement in - the West into three phases (see Institut Kurde de Paris; Ali-nia, 2004; Khayati, 2014; Dag, 2020). As most of these studies were conducted and published before the recent refugee and migrant crises following geo-political changes and the popular uprising also known as ‘the Arab Spring’, in North Africa and the Middle East along with the emergence of ISIS, I argue that since the civil war in Syria, the attack of ISIS on the Nineva plain, Sinjar and part of Syria in 2014, a fourth phase of Kurdish migration has emerged.

The first period of the Kurdish diaspora started at the beginning of the twentieth century and lasted throughout the 1950s. This phase consists of individual political activists, male students, and intellectuals from privileged high profile families. Sherif Pasha, the Ottoman Ambassador to Stockholm and father of Kurdish nationalism, and the physician Mirza Seid from Persia who settled in Sweden in 1893, might be two notable exceptions (*Özoğlu, 2004*). *We found no studies to indicate the presence of any Kurdish women in the West during this first period.*

The second phase involved people from rural areas and working-class families coming to Europe as cheap labour. Their displacement started in the 1960s and lasted throughout the 1970s. They were mainly men and their womenfolk joined

them later (Agace, 2006). The 1970s were also marked by political refugees who fled Baathist military oppression and attacks on Kurds in Iraq (Institute Kurde de Paris). With intensification of Baath political repression during the 1980s, leading to genocidal operations against Kurdish civilians in Iraq, and against the background of the Iraq-Iran war, many Kurds fled their homeland as asylum seekers and became refugees. From here the third phase of the Kurdish diaspora starts and intensified by the strong political persecution, which was met by the Kurdish resistance, including organised armed movements against the different regimes in each of the countries that divide Kurdistan. This led to the displacement of many Kurds, who formed a refugee wave towards Europe and other Western countries. The Kurdish fratricidal war between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in 1994, the inequality and extreme poverty as well as the activation of radical Islamist groups, have been identified as significant factors behind the migration of the Kurdish population and their settlement in the West.

**L.D.: How have the civil war in Syria and the ISIS attacks on Mosul and Sinjar impacted Kurdish migration?**

**N.B.:** The civil war in Syria and the ISIS attacks on Mosul and Sinjar as well as their occupation of a large territory across Syria and Iraq, marked a new phase in the history of Kurdish migration and settlement in Europe; this wave started intensely in 2015 and included, among others, members of religious minorities such as Yazidis. The chaotic environment following ISIS attacks and the continuous intimidation of neighbouring countries, including Iran and Turkey, on the Kurdish population notably in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, combined with uncertainty about the future, political corruption, inequality and social conservatism in the region, have led many young Kurds to leave their homeland since 2015. These younger migrant populations from Kurdistan, belong to a generation attuned to social media and the internet, and their identity, their settlement, their mode of functioning and their connection with the homeland carry the specificities of their uncertain and fast-transforming world.

**L.D.: How would you characterize Kurdish diaspora? What is its level of politicization?**

**N.B.:** The Kurdish diaspora in Europe is not a fixed “monolithic coherent body”, it is multiple, divided with both conflicting and common characteristics (Eliassi, 2021; Hassanpour & Mojab 2005). It is divided along ideological, religious, and linguistic lines while retaining a common culture. Each group within the Kurdish diaspora defends different ideas that shape their politics, their advo-

cacy, and their resistance strategies. Those ideological, linguistic, and religious differences are important, because the groups express their identity and determine their perspectives through them. These characteristics also shape the solutions they seek for the problems the individual communities face.

The Kurdish diaspora is also highly politicized into disparate groups which motivates them and orientates their advocacy and activism. Each community tends to defend its respective political ideologies and its party interests embodying its own particular symbols and values. We can argue that these forms of division are cultivated by the states that divide and suppress them, using the communities against each other. We cannot ignore the consequences of war, which in a relative situation of peace could be internalised and manifested as an inter-group or even interpersonal conflict.

**L.D.: Are there any common features bringing Kurdish diaspora together despite their differences?**

**N.B.:** Indeed, there are common factors bringing together Kurdish diaspora populations which do not obscure commonalities among different groups, especially when it comes to collective national and cultural interests (Institut Kurde de Paris; Alinia & Eliassi, 2014). The attention paid to their culture, in its various genres, is the most common point among Kurdish diasporic groups. For example, there are regular gatherings to commemorate events like Newroz (the Kurdish New Year), and a strongly shared sense of solidarity with the homeland when facing tragic events such as Turkey invading Rojava and the “Halabja massacre” (the chemical bombardment in Iraq, in 1988).

Also, Kurdish diaspora members maintain strong ties with their homeland by establishing economic, political, financial, and social connections and networks. Information and communication technologies, the internet, and social media have helped create new opportunities for this process and built bridges with their homeland and between generations. These new means of communication could be described as survival strategies, emphasising boundaries with the host society and ties with the ‘imagined community’.

Some studies demonstrate that despite generational differences, the second generation living in European countries, such as in Germany, Sweden and Switzerland, feels quite connected to their culture of origin, showing a weak sense of belonging to their host countries. As a matter of fact, according to some scholars, the second generation Kurds (born and educated in Europe), along with Kurdish political refugees and the media, have developed a stronger “Kur-

dishness” کوردایمتی – a sense of belonging compared to that of their parents (see Khayati, 2014; Eliassi, 2021).

**L.D.:** Let’s now delve into the gendered experiences of the Kurdish diaspora...

**N.B.:** Although scholars argue that diaspora in itself is not gender specific, the Kurdish diaspora is historically perceived as male-dominated (for further information, see Alinia, 2014; Hassanpour & Mojab, 2005). Patriarchal characteristics of the Kurdish diaspora are articulated both through the male domination of diasporic public and private spaces, as well as through traditional gender norms operating within families and the community. During the first period when Kurdish students and intellectuals migrated to Europe due to the political situation after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the division of Kurdish territories across four separate nation states, very few women had the possibility to travel and settle in the West. And during the second phase, Kurdish working-class men from rural marginalised areas in Turkey migrated as “Gastarbeiter” (guest workers), settled first and women joined them as their spouse or family members (Agace, 2006).

However, during the intensification of war, in the 70s & 80s, men, women and children fled war often as families. At the end of the 80s and during the 90s female Peshmergas from the Marxist Maoist revolutionary movement, Komala in Iran, Kurdish activists from Iraqi Kurdistan and from Turkey fled with some of them as single women.

Many of those who came from Iraqi Kurdistan had fled the civil war (*Brakuji*) between the PUK and the KDP and the rise of the ideology of Political Islam which had started in 1979 with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

And more recently, with the civil war in Syria prompting the emergence of Daesh, and their attacks on Mosul, Sinjar and Rojava, we have seen a flow of migration towards Europe, especially Yazidis and people from the Syrian part of Kurdistan. Many of them were women.

As I said earlier, diaspora is a socio-political process and gender-specific, and the background history of the Kurdish diaspora, its movement and variations, have affected the social and political context, which is marked by the male-domination.

### **L.D.: What are the challenges women face within Kurdish diaspora?**

**N.B.:** The way women explore their lives, their memories, their interaction with their homeland as well as with the host society is determined by gender relations. Gender also shapes the position of men and women in their communities, their sense of identity, of belonging and their perspectives along with strategies for healing, for coping, for survival and efforts towards integration.

As such, I would say that Kurdish women's experiences in the diaspora are multi-dimensional, shaped by different geographical, cultural & socio-political characteristics and surrounded by contradictions and complexities. From a gender equality perspective, diasporic Kurdish women experience many forms of sexism and GBV within their family and community, which are often practised more severely in the diaspora than in their homeland, such as honour killings, for example. At the same time, they face racism, institutional discrimination and exclusion in the wider society of their host country. They are caught up at the intersection of these multiple forms of community oppressions and formal discriminations.

Although democracy and freedom in Western host societies give them the opportunity to transform their gender identity, with certain legal rights which affect gender norms and power relations within their communities, they are by no means free from these traditional forms of gender and race related violence and discrimination. Their survival, their coping strategies and resistance are defined by their socio-political and ideological background. For example, Peshmergas from the Komala organisation of Iran and political activists from other parts are more open to change and transformation than those who never had the opportunity to go to school, or to interact with cultural and political public spaces (Karimi, 2022).

In addition to many consecutive wars and military conflicts, they have all suffered state, societal, religious, community and family physical and/or mental violence and discrimination. Some of them have been imprisoned, tortured, raped or subjected to multiple forms of sexual violence such as the tragic experience of the Yazidis. These women suffer from multiple traumas often intensified by their displacement trajectory. Once in Europe, they receive little or no care, treatment or support. The gendered perspective of the Kurdish diaspora carries all these complexities, contradictions and multi-dimensional socio-political characteristics.

Diasporic Kurdish women (and also men) carry not only the weight of trauma, due to the legacy of past colonialism of occupation and imperialism, but also

many of them suffer from internalised inferiority, manifested by a lack of self-confidence with a sense of victimhood. These women often suffer in silence and remain uncritical of racism and discrimination from the host society. In contrast, the new generations, despite being affected by their parents' traumatised lives, become more articulate and critical, rejecting stereotyped views of the West about women from the Middle East. Many of them believe that Western women's activism cannot adequately express the needs and requirements of displaced and refugee women. They argue against stereotypical Western discourse and seek to explore the root causes of violence and discrimination by analysing the many intersectional forms of oppression.

Gender-based violence, including honour killing, deprivation from education, forced and early marriage are not happening in isolation from these forms of oppression. When some high profile cases of honour killings like Fatima Shahindal in Sweden, or Heshu Yunis and Banaz Mahmud in the UK have led to sensationalist media coverage stigmatising the entire Kurdish community depicting them as murderers of women, many Kurdish women from different parts of Kurdistan launched campaigns. Their mobilisation was against this practice within their own community as well as against far right groups who use exaggerated media representations as a way of strengthening their racist ideology against migrants and refugees (Begikhani et al, 2015).

The persistence of essentialist views about 'Oriental' women and the Kurds, along with the continuity of women's sufferings reflect the colonialist mentality and also could be seen as an outcome of ongoing conflict with nation-states like Turkey depicting Kurds as a problematic and antagonistic group. Also, due to their invisibility in the mainstream media nor in academic research, there is not much data or evidence-based knowledge countering such views). What I mean is that Kurdish women's diasporic experiences are neither adequately covered, nor researched or conceptualised enough to create a sufficient body of knowledge from which to argue robustly enough against stigmatisation and prejudices.

This means their needs, their vulnerabilities and their struggle are neither understood nor addressed by decision makers and state actors. The longer they are ignored, the more likely they are to experience oppression and stigmatisation, with many of them suffering in silence and becoming more vulnerable to violence and abuse in the process.

The magnitude of this task and the fact that many of them rise successfully to it, despite their traumatised past, demonstrates their exceptional resilience and

that they are far more than mere passive female victims of traditional practices within their community, and that they are in no way inferior to the supposedly 'superior Western white women'.

**L.D.:** Your analysis so far thus brings us to the issue of women's struggles. Could you contextualize feminist activism in the Kurdish diaspora?

**N.B.:** Historically, Kurdish women have been active members within their communities and inside Kurdish national and liberation organisations. In addition to their traditional gender roles and the burden they bear supporting their family, they are actively involved in community life and in the Kurdish national struggle: many are well-educated, highly qualified, and work in professional jobs. This all changes when they arrive in Europe, as they have to start from zero: from learning a new language, adjusting to the new environment, doing menial jobs while having to requalify in their own specialist fields, learning new life-style and new forms of interaction, all the while experiencing racism, exclusion and institutionalised discrimination.

In addition, many women and also men within Kurdish communities are fervent advocates of human rights and stand firmly against honour killings and other forms of GBV. Studies on Kurdish women demonstrate that this reality is seldom recognised in the Western media (Begikhani et al, 2015). Media representation of Kurdish women has created a kind of tension between radical members of the community and those of the host society who see the problematic issues through the narrow lens of culture and oriental 'Otherness' versus universal human rights values supposedly represented by Western societies (Begikhani, 2020).

Despite the fact that many of the emancipated women activists are challenged by their community and unwelcome in political and cultural spaces, they manage to organise themselves, breaking taboos and bringing up gender issues above or alongside national and political issues which dominate Kurdish diasporic spaces.

I would like here to put my personal perspective as a survivor of the Anfal genocide which killed all the male members of my family, and say that we have managed to launch campaigns against honour killings (such as the Kurdish Women's Action against Honour Killing in London in 2000), intervened in the media, taken a stand against the practices of FGM, of early and forced marriage and put pressure on decision-makers in our host countries and on local authorities in the homeland, such as in Iraqi Kurdistan, to reform legislation in



favour of more gender progressive laws, to establish gender studies centers, etc... While conducting these activities, we have had to work to support our children with no family backup, and to advocate for Kurdish human rights against Turkish, Iranian, Syrian and Iraqi state oppression. In this process, in addition to feminist activism, we have used our many talents as academics, artists, musicians, poets, writers, etc. etc towards that end.

In fact, in addition to feminist activism, advocating for Kurdish human rights and fighting against state oppression in different parts of Kurdistan remain the task of the majority of Kurdish women despite being discriminated against within Kurdish political parties.

Alinia Minoo's research findings demonstrate that women more often mobilise '... their memories, lived experiences, identities, and histories as resources in their struggles to create alternative spaces and homes.' (Alinia, 2014) She alongside other scholars, argues that while both men and women experience exclusion and racism and seek to find the notion of home within their community, women are more ambivalent towards their own community and identify themselves more with the host society because its perceived proactive attitude towards women.

Women's activism, whether it is through advocacy, campaigns, cultural initiatives, etc. has a great impact on their identity, their connection to the wider society, their feeling of belonging and achievement. Their interaction with host society organisations and institutions helps them to reach beyond their community and national boundaries. They arrive at a kind of praxis that can be defined as 'Transnational'.

**L.D.: Researchers have pointed out the difficult trade-offs of Kurdish women that often times boil down to negotiating between nationalism and feminism (Al-Ali & Taş 2018). How do these dynamics play out in Kurdish diaspora?**

N.B.: Many Kurdish feminists in the diaspora have successfully organised themselves, gone beyond their restricted spaces and even got involved in transnational activism. Experiences indicate that they have had an impact on policies in their host country (for example, Payzee, the sister of the late Mahmud, has been nominated in 2022 as a powerful actor in changing laws regarding child marriage in the UK).

However, their engagement in Kurdish national movements is often ambivalent, because these movements, like almost all nationalist currents, embody patriar-

chy and subordinate women. Nationalist politics accomplish masculine hegemony; many scholars such as Nira Yuval Davis, agree that nationalist politics are dominated by men, who define femininity and women's status within the nation as bearers of tradition and cultural identity.

Unfortunately, sexuality and oppression of women in private life are not at the center of nationalist projects, which puts them in a problematic relationship with left-wing groups like Komala vs KDP of Iran. Komala women have been stigmatized because of their gender policy which - although not ideal - is more progressive than other pure nationalist movements.

**L.D.: How do Kurdish women's organizing in the diaspora sit with other women's and feminist initiatives from other parts of the world?**

N.B.: Feminism and inequalities are not linear. Kurdish women's lived experiences, their displacement trajectory, and their resistance strategies show how diverse their paths in life have been (Alinia, 2014). In the diaspora, they live in close proximity and interact with women from other communities whether from the so-called Second, Third, or First World. This rich and challenging experience is double-edged: it makes them critically evaluate their history and culture while transforming their identity to adapt to their new social and political environment.

From an intersectional and transnational perspective, the idea that women around the world face the same forms of oppression and can form a kind of sisterhood against a 'singular oppressor' needs to be critically evaluated, because - although it is very noble in the abstract - in reality it is not easy to achieve because of intersectional oppression based on nationality, ethnicity, race, class, religion, age, etc.... the list is even longer.

Even, within Kurdish communities, some attempts to call for unity (such as that launched by the Kurdish Women's Movement in Europe in September 2021), are very noble in nature, but can be more exclusive than inclusive, due to the fact that they are characterized by a nationalist aspiration exacerbating tensions based on ideological differences between localized and factional Kurdish political parties.

We have two problematic issues here. At the wider diaspora level, Kurdish women seek to work within a more extensive network of feminists whose aim is to articulate and raise visibly of women's lived experiences and their struggle in different contexts (community, colonial, statelessness, refugees, migrant, etc).

They often face challenges from women of other Middle Eastern countries (such as some Turkish, Persian or Arab women) who fail to recognise their own governments' oppression of Kurds. When I quietly raised the rights of Kurdish women in Turkey during a debate with Turkish women at the UN International Forum on Women in Beijing in 1995, not only did I *not* get an answer to my question, but I was also immediately treated as a 'terrorist'; the bodyguards of those nationalist Turkish women, intervened in an attempt to eject me and my Kurdish colleagues out of the conference venue in Beijing.

Likewise, at the community level, Kurdish women's feminist activism is not always appreciated and may be actively discouraged: Again, from my personal experience, when in 1999 I was actively involved in raising awareness about honour-based crimes inside Kurdish communities, a prominent Kurdish judge – who used to be a Peshmerga commander – told me that “Kurds were more afraid of (me) than of Saddam Hussein!” Imagine I was compared to Saddam Hussein, who committed genocide against the Kurds, because I dared to challenge traditional gender norms within the community and work against honour-based violence. So some prominent Kurdish men are more afraid of losing their patriarchal authority in the face of feminist activism, than they fear war with, or oppression by a brutal dictator!

How can we reconcile the struggle for gender equality and the struggle for national freedom and rights? This is not an easy task for many Kurdish women who refuse to replicate patriarchal norms and political divisions among Kurdish movements and organisations. And in the diaspora, they are challenged by stereotypes, racism and discrimination: three heavy layers of intersected oppression and discrimination.

**L.D.:** What are the major takeaways about the situation of women within the Kurdish diaspora worldwide and what are the pathways that their activism is set to follow in the near future?

**N.B.:** I think diasporic Kurdish women through their displacement and interaction with women at one hand from different parts of Kurdistan and on the other, with women from around the world, have gained awareness about their specific positionality, their cultural and historic specificities which shape their gendered experiences within their community and in wider society. Their perspectives take root from the fact that their personal history and their stateless status have shaped their diasporic identity and their activism. Although victims of patriarchy around the world, women are not equally affected by state oppression, by global capitalism, by neoliberal ideologies and practices, and thus

don't have the same mixture of experiences. In order to understand the multiple forms of violence and discrimination practiced inside Kurdish communities, political parties and the states which share different parts of Kurdistan, we have to contextualise Kurdish history, their geopolitical situation, their stateless status and marginalised position in relation to four strong undemocratic nation-states in the Middle East, each waging war against their own Kurdish populations (Begikhani et al, 2015).

Of course, men are also victims of such violence: in addition to being the majority killed in combat, they experience psychological, emotional and sexual abuse. Their engagement in armed resistance is not without trauma, social phobia and long-term psychological suffering. The case of Iraqi Kurdistan demonstrates that despite some years of semi-independent status, relative peace and the introduction of more progressive women's rights legislation, violence has been normalised and internalised, and thereby transferred from the battlefield to the domestic space and onto the bodies of women (Begikhani et al, 2015).

And when in exile as refugees, migrants or as a labour force, Kurdish women are also faced with racism, employment discrimination and institutional violence in their host societies. Their empowerment, their coping and resistance require multiple strategies, which are not easy to achieve without support, solidarity, and resources. In this process, men's attitudes have to be addressed - because our evidence-based research shows that when men are included in gender related strategies and feminist activities, they become more proactive and supportive of women's rights - and this is probably true for all societies because patriarchy is universal.

One major characteristic - which was revealed by an online survey I conducted on the subject - is the moral and political cynicism of Western super powers. Members of the Kurdish diaspora, especially the younger male generation, think that there is a disparity between Western human rights rhetoric, and policy towards the human rights of Kurds. To justify their argument, they cite Western support for oppressive regimes like Turkey, while Turkish authorities conduct ethnic cleansing against the Kurds, notably in Rojava.

In the last eight years, since the emergence of ISIS and the active role of Kurdish women in the fight against terrorist organizations in the Middle East, the struggle of Kurdish women for their emancipation and their striving for socio-political change has been applauded across the international media (Begikhani, 2020). The West started to appreciate their courage because of their fight against terrorists who may jeopardise Western security and interests. This widespread

media publicity of Kurdish female combatants is problematic, mainly because of its sensationalist dimension. However, it has changed the representation of Kurdish women in Western collective mentality from merely passive Muslim middle eastern victims of honour crimes, to heroic figures. I am critical of the way this portrayal of Kurdish women has been circulated in recent years, however, it has given some kinds of self-esteem and confidence to those directly involved in the multiple fights in defence of their and their people's rights

This resistance has an impact on diasporic Kurdish women's perspectives towards their own gender and national identity, which is used as an empowerment strategy and an encouragement within their community and in the wider world. If we look at the wider picture, we can see that many Kurdish women have achieved great political, artistic, business and academic success outside Kurdistan. And the presence of many successful Kurdish women in the conference where I addressed this topic in Baden-Baden in 2022, such as German regional MP Berivan Aymaz, MP Ayla Cataltepe, author Ronya Outhmann, famous Soprano Parvin Chakar, and activist Mona Kizilhan, with many others, is an indication that despite all the hardship and past suffering, Kurdish women have much potential, making the best of their bad times, proving their strength and capacity to cope with tragedy. These women along with women from other ethnic minority groups should be seen as hope for a more tolerant, peaceful and multi-cultural democratic Europe. A Europe that can adhere to human rights values for all people regardless of their status, ethnicity, religion, colour, race, or gender.

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