Twenty Years of Feminist Engagement: Reflections on Practice

Choman Hardi[1]

Abstract

This article explores the author's personal and professional challenges as a feminist and the strategies employed to address them. It focuses on the interplay of knowledge production, positionality, and ethical considerations in contexts of conflict and trauma, and it explores the complexities of intertwining personal experiences with academic inquiry. After highlighting personal struggles of navigating two worlds, the author emphasizes the importance of a reflexive and ethical approach in feminist research that involves navigating power relations and positionality, managing expectations, and responding to the needs on the ground. It ends with addressing both a personal backlash the author experienced and critiques directed toward feminist work in the region. Drawing on her experiences in conducting PhD research with Kurdish women refugees in the UK, postdoctoral research on women survivors of the Anfal genocide in Kurdistan, and a comparative analysis of the experiences of women survivors of the Anfal and Yezidi genocides, the author provides insights into the intricate landscape of feminist research in challenging contexts.

Keywords: Kurdistan-Iraq, Feminist Research, Feminist Ethics, Reflexivity, Positionality

Introduction

It is often difficult to identify the exact moment when we began developing consciousness about, behaving in accordance with, or identifying with a particular kind of politics. For many of us this is a personal process with many stages of development. It starts with a sense of unease, a vague feeling that things are not right. As our awareness develops, this unhappy feeling becomes more refined, transforming into anger. This anger needs to be embraced as it is our driving force to address the problems and bring about change: "As long as you feel / this pain, you're human, you're alive / you will resist" (Hardi 2020a).

My first feelings of unease began when I was expected to do housework at a young age and forced to wear the hijab when my family sought refuge in Iran in 1988. As a teenager I resented being tightly controlled and denied simple freedoms, such as baring my head, riding a bicycle, or taking a walk, when my brothers spent a large part of their days outdoors, free of the restrictions and responsibilities I despised. These unhappy feelings align with what Alison Jagger (1989: 166) calls "outlaw emotions" which are "incompatible with the dominant perceptions and values" and "necessary for developing a critical perspective on the world" (166, 167).

But as with all kinds of oppression, isolation obscures the source of our bitterness. If you feel that you are the only one who dissents, it may seem that the problem lies with you, not with the

[1] This article is based on activities supported by the GCRF Gender, Justice, and Security Hub (Grant number AH/S004025/1), and it focuses on Kurdish women's issues in the context of Iraq. Special thanks to Dr. Minoo Alinia and Dr. Jelke Boesten for their feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

structures that shape our lives. At times, self-doubt creeps in, making you feel that you are wrong, faulty, difficult. This is why discovering others who share similar sentiments is crucial. During my teens, the poetry of Kajal Ahmed and Forugh Farrokhzad and the novels of Oriana Fallaci, particularly *Penelope at War* (1966) and *Letter to a Child Never Born* (1977), were of great comfort to me. These literary friendships made me realize that I was not alone, my feelings were legitimate, things were wrong. At this age, the term *feminism* had not yet entered my vocabulary.

Later, in the 1990s, after my initial elation at newfound freedoms as a young refugee woman in the UK, I realized the perils of my in-between existence. I met other immigrant and refugee girls who experienced more surveillance and control compared to their brothers, but who also had more opportunities to explore freedom from tradition. Women's role in the biological and social reproduction of the group (Yuval-Davis 1997) leads to more restrictions on their behavior as compared with men: "Women… are quite frequently policed with the stick of tradition: it is women who are called on to preserve the ways of the old country" (Mani 1992: 13).

Young immigrant women may lead a double life to navigate the constraints imposed by their families. Several times, when I took the bus from London to Oxford, where I studied, I met a Muslim girl who was dropped off by her family at the bus stop, fully covered up. During the bus journey the scarf came off, as did her long manteau. She brushed her hair and put makeup on. By the time we reached Oxford, she transformed into a different person.[2] Even now, after all these years, every time I remember, I worry about what might have happened to her.

At times, experiencing racism as women refugees and immigrants, we found ourselves defending our community's practices, even when we personally disagreed with them. We were concerned that, while there was sexism in both our home and host communities, the emphasis on "women's mistreatment" within our groups seemed motivated by—and a further perpetuating of—racism. This racism can, in turn, contribute to the reinforcement of oppressive gender roles, as immigrant communities may defensively turn to tradition in response to external rejection and intervention (Espin 1996).

The emphasis on women's oppression can also be used to justify violent interventions by Western superpowers. Lila Abu Lughod (2002) highlights the example of Afghanistan, where the pretext of addressing women's oppression, without a historical and political consideration of underlying causes that implicate the West, was used to justify the military assault following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. She warns us to "be suspicious when neat cultural icons [i.e., oppressed Afghan women] are plastered over messier historical and political narratives" (785).

My personal experiences as a woman, a Kurd, and a refugee fueled my academic interests. I soon realized that most of the dominant Iraqi-Kurdish narratives and historical accounts were written

[2] It is okay for women to choose to "wear the appropriate form of dress for their communities and [be] guided by socially shared standards, religious beliefs, and moral ideals" (Abu Lughod 2002: 785), but the problem arises when they are forced to do so or when hijabi women, influenced by ideology, want to force other women to do the same as them.

by men, sidelining women's daily struggles at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class. Over and above the patriarchal bias of privileging men's point of view, this was in part due to a history of ethnic oppression, which, for decades, overshadowed other forms of oppressions. Similar to patterns observed in other liberation movements (Nagel 1998), Kurdish women in Iraq suspended the fight for women's rights and supported men in the revolution, only to find a consolidated patriarchal system after the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992.

Because of social construction of roles and expectations, men and women are targeted differently in the context of dictatorship and violent conflict, and they play different roles in resistance movements (Gangoli 2006; Nagel 1998). Examining the Anfal and Yezidi genocides, for example, reveals a stark contrast in the way men and women were victimized by the conquering forces (Hardi 2018). While men faced execution within days of capture, women endured imprisonment, prolonged exposure to hunger, and inhumane living conditions, and, in the Yezidi genocide, they were subjected to sexual enslavement and forced impregnation.

Adam Jones (2009) highlights that men are more likely to be killed because they are perceived as a threat by the invading group. Women, on the other hand, are imprisoned or raped because they are seen "as carriers of the collectivity's honour and as its intergenerational reproducers of culture" (Yuval-Davis 1997: 67). Gender has also shaped both the available opportunities and the methods employed in resisting political and ethnic oppression. Women were relegated to secondary roles by social norms, expectations, and the patriarchal framework of the revolution.[3]

Additionally, in the mainstream Iraqi Kurdish discourse and written history, men's experiences, both as victims of the central governments and as agents of change, have been prioritized. As survivors of genocide, leaders of the revolutions, and writers and artists, men have written memoirs, novels, analyses, and history books highlighting their own role and perspective and erasing women's experiences and contributions (Mukri 1982; Mustafa 1997a, 1997b; Qaramani 2009; Najmadin 2013). Even when men's writings include women, they often reduce them to simplistic stereotypes, diminishing the complexity of their lives and perspective (Kasnazani 2012). It was the absence and misrepresentation of women in these discourses that shaped my research and writing interests and prompted me to begin my work.

Personal Struggles

Maria Lugones (2010: 747) points out that "feminism does not just provide an account of the oppression of women. It goes beyond oppression by providing materials that enable women to understand their situation without succumbing to it." In essence, feminism provides us with the tools to liberate ourselves. This lengthy process includes efforts to understand the multidimensional aspects of our oppression; to unlearn and uproot deeply entrenched ideas, values, and language; and to align the world with our new worldview. We will inevitably make mistakes, get things wrong, and encounter obstacles to attaining the desired reality. What matters is our commitment to continue to grow through introspection, self-education, learning from past mistakes, and listening to women of diverse backgrounds and contexts. Liberation involves

[3] This refers to ongoing unpublished research by the author about women's role in the Kurdish revolution between 1976 and 1991.

freeing our minds and fighting for change, but it also includes negotiating and bargaining with our surroundings.

As a young Kurdish refugee woman in the UK, I often found myself in difficult situations without any guidance. Caught between the conflicting values of individualism and collectivism, I faced internal struggles in deciding whether to pursue my own aspirations or abide by my family's expectations. My therapist, rooted in individualistic principles, subtly encouraged me to follow my heart, but I knew that losing my community would not only make me unhappy but also erode my sense of self.

I thus bargained with my family to live a life in which I did not feel suffocated. I engaged in "border thinking" (Mignolo 2000), developing a new perspective that was rooted in my own experience and was divergent from the hegemonic modern discourse of individualism. I began negotiating with my mother and strategically organized my desires in a hierarchical manner. Starting with less significant requests like going to the cinema or visiting friends, I gradually escalated to my most cherished wishes, such as attending poetry readings or participating in residential creative writing courses. I presented my requests incrementally as the days progressed, knowing that the first few would be rejected, and focused my efforts—bargaining, arguing, and persisting—on securing approval for my most valued demands. These negotiations ensured that neither of us fully attained our desires, yet neither felt entirely disempowered.

Additionally, I sometimes asked my mother to shadow me for a day—attending my meetings, waiting outside during my classes, and joining me at the poetry readings in the evening. This not only reassured her but also instilled a sense of pride. The trust building helped reduce the questioning and secured me more freedom to make decisions and engage in the world.

On a specific occasion, I was considering a major decision to free myself from an unhappy relationship. Despite my initial inclination to do this quickly, I recognized the importance of engaging in numerous conversations about my discontent and the reasons necessitating a change. It took over a year for my family to fully comprehend that my decision was not hasty or careless, that it was the right choice for my well-being. Through these extensive conversations, negotiations, power sharing, and moments of inclusion, I managed to reconcile my pursuit of personal freedom with community membership.

Feminist Research

In 2001 I embarked on my research journey as a feminist. The core components of feminist research, succinctly summarized by Keshab Giri (2022: 2), include "critical reflexivity, situated knowledge, positionality and standpoint, critical reflection of power dynamics, ethics of engagement, care and moral responsibility, and normative and political commitment for justice and equality through emancipatory research"—some of which will be addressed in this article.

My feminism is rooted in the recognition that to defeat patriarchy we need to address both the immediate needs on the ground and the underlying discourses that perpetuate harm against women. The latter involves critiquing and problematizing the patriarchal value system, imagining a different system, and promoting an alternative one through producing feminist research, analyses, and artistic creations. Women's rights organizations in the Kurdistan region

have worked to address women's immediate needs through providing services, pushing for legal reform, and promoting women's participation (Al-Ali and Pratt 2011; Alinia 2013; Hardi 2013, 2021), but feminist research and analysis of the root causes and underlying structures that marginalize and oppress women are relatively recent.

For example, over four thousand children have been born to Yezidi mothers as a result of ISIS (Islamic State) rape. Termination was not an option for the mothers because of Iraqi law, which permits abortion only when the mother's life is at risk. Additionally, children born to unknown fathers cannot obtain identification in their mother's name, and their religion is determined by their father's. The children born to Yezidi mothers out of rape are hence officially recognized as Muslim illegitimate children, and they have been taken away from their mothers by the central government. Some of the children have been reclaimed by the families of ISIS combatants, but the majority remain in Iraqi orphanages (Bahar Munzir, pers. comm., December 13, 2023). In this case, while it is important that activists provide psychosocial support to the mothers and advocate for legal change, it is equally important to examine and challenge the prevailing discourse on rape, patrilineal lineage, abortion, and women's rights to their own bodies. Neither effort is enough on its own. Currently, service provision and legal advocacy to address part of this problem is progressing, but the research and artistic elements that could facilitate a change in consciousness and in the discourse are scarce.[4]

As Sherry B. Ortner (1974: 87) points out:

> The situation must be attacked from both sides. Efforts directed solely at changing the social institutions—through setting quotas on hiring, for example, or through passing equal-pay-for-equal-work laws—cannot have far-reaching effects if cultural language and imagery continue to purvey a relatively devalued view of women. But at the same time efforts directed solely at changing cultural assumptions—through male and female consciousness-raising groups, for example, or through revision of educational materials and mass-media imagery—cannot be successful unless the institutional base of the society is changed to support and reinforce the changed cultural view.

Feminist goals cannot be achieved through service provision, advocacy, legal reform, education, research, or the arts alone; they can be achieved only if the different fields enrich each other and engage institutions and the public. By simultaneously addressing cultural norms and values, institutions, and structures, we can hope to achieve gender equality.[5] My work has focused on

---

[4] "My Name Is My Mother's Name" is a campaign spearheaded by the People's Development Organization, Emma Organization, Women's Legal Assistance, and SEED, advocating for the reform of the Iraqi national ID card law. This law currently prohibits the issuance of Iraqi IDs to children under their mothers' names. This restriction has inflicted significant harm and distress to the Yezidi community where children are separated from their mothers and placed in orphanages. The campaign seeks to address this injustice and foster a change that recognizes both the maternal and patrilineal lineage of children (allowing children to be named after either of their parents), emphasizing the importance of rectifying a policy that has far-reaching consequences on the lives of vulnerable individuals and their families. Currently, Tema Group, a women-led group of young people, is working on publishing a collection of essays and stories on abortion.

[5] During revolutions, the fall of dictatorships, and periods of political turmoil, opportunities arise for radical and swift changes in structures, institutions, and values, as we observed in Rojava. But seizing such opportunities requires specific actors and effective leadership, which may be missing at such critical times.

exposing and challenging our cultural assumptions about women through teaching, research, and literary writing.

My initial research focus was to shed light on women's perspectives and experiences as asylum seekers, refugees, genocide survivors, and activists fighting for women's rights. More recently, my work has expanded to include masculinity and violence, and women's role in the revolution. Yet my questions about women's daily experiences of patriarchal and ethnic oppression, their coping mechanisms, support networks, and issues related to women's bodies were regularly trivialized and silenced by male activists and researchers whom I encountered during fieldwork.

Men's experiences of torture and death have become the yardstick by which women's experiences of violence, restrictions, discrimination, hunger, illness, birth, miscarriage, death of children, incarceration, lack of access to basic hygiene, and sexual harassment are measured (Ross 2001). Historically speaking, the stratification of suffering in national catastrophes means that men's experiences are centralized, shaping the discourse on what is deemed worthy of discussion and subsequent remembrance (Ringelheim 1999; Hardi 2011). Others discouraged talk of sensitive subjects such as theft, sexual abuse, rape, or prostitution, because avoiding these, they argued, is better for women (Hardi 2011). While it is crucial to honor women's decisions to remain silent as a means of protecting themselves from societal stigma, it is equally important not to silence them when they want and feel safe to speak.[6]

During fieldwork, important ethical concerns arose, particularly in navigating power relations, managing participants' expectations, and responding to the needs on the ground. I will now explore these themes as important aspects of doing feminist research in the postcolonial Kurdistan region, which continues to grapple with the enduring legacy of colonization.

Power Relations and Positionality

From the start, I grappled with the complexities of my role: many of the women informants were complete strangers to me, yet I asked them to share intimate details about themselves and their lives, which placed me in a position of power. Some of them, who had experienced exploitation and were exposed to stigma and danger by previous interviewers (Hardi 2011: 7, 118, 139, 178), were suspicious of me. This was also in part a consequence of life under a dictatorship in which trust was destroyed and anyone could be an enemy, attesting to the enduring power of repression, which continues to have a social, cultural, economic, and epistemic impact long after dictatorship is over.

Participants wanted to know who I was, how I lived, and why I did this research. I thus devoted time to establishing trust through informal visits and conversations before undertaking interviews with participants. Fortunately, my father's reputation as a poet was a door opener.[7] In Kurdistan, whether you are worthy of being trusted is often influenced by the reputation and history of your

[6] For more about women's lack of choice to speak or to be silent, see Hardi 2018.

[7] Historically, poets have served as influential, unifying symbols because of their role in preserving language and cultural heritage and inspiring resistance against oppression. Unfortunately, this is changing because of the deliberate targeting of cherished poets and their children for ideological reasons. At times, political parties and Islamic groups strategically attack those who dissent or challenge their authority, some of whom happen to be children or grandchildren of beloved poets. They are attacked to destroy their symbolic capital and undermine their credibility.

family. Issues such as collaboration with the former Ba'ath government, involvement in corruption, and social scandals—especially those related to women's sexual behavior—have the potential to damage your relationships with others.

Navigating the dynamics of my position as both an insider and an outsider presented its unique challenges. I was an insider, born in the same geographic region, speaking the same language, and having experienced life under the dictatorship and the asylum process. But I was also an outsider, someone who lived abroad and was perceived as "Westernized." Despite my efforts to blend in, dressing modestly, not wearing jewelry or makeup, not shaking hands with men, using common phrases such as *ishalla* (God willing) and *mashalla* (God save it) during daily conversations,[8] they identified me as "different." A woman told me that the rims of my glasses (black frame) set me apart, while others said I was different because I wore no makeup, my skin was good, or I was educated yet unpretentious.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 139) points out that "insider research has to be as ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research." The difference between the two, she argues, is that "insiders have to live with the consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis for ever more, and so do their families and communities" (137). Living with the consequences of misunderstanding and misrepresenting one's own community can be extremely difficult, a reminder of which may surface daily.

As a young researcher, I believed that being an insider reduced the likelihood of misunderstanding or misreading the codes and signs embedded in daily interactions. However, I soon realized that being an insider has two primary drawbacks. First, assuming neutrality owing to shared backgrounds with participants is problematic, as our own perspectives and biases may influence how we interpret the data.

For instance, I approached a stay-at-home mother with three children, including young twins. She was married to a car mechanic and had recently arrived in the UK, so I assumed that she had little support caring for her children. However, during participant observation, I was surprised to see her husband's active involvement in looking after the twins. In the interview she confirmed that sharing the responsibility with her husband had prevented stress. I realized that I was stereotyping this family, which highlights the effect of personal biases. It is therefore important to be careful, not assume things, and verify our interpretations with participants.

The second drawback of being an insider is that, based on personal experiences, some individuals are more inclined to express themselves openly to someone who is not Kurdish. This inclination is, in part, a manifestation of internalized oppression—an aspect of the colonial legacy—in which individuals may perceive foreign researchers as more intelligent, capable, and trustworthy than members of their own community. It is also partly because discussing personal matters with fellow Kurds may raise concerns about potential information leaks, leading to future complications within the community. This is where integrity and genuineness play an essential role in gaining participants' confidence, which requires time and patience.

[8] *Ishalla* is the Kurdish version of *Insha-Allah*, which means nothing happens without God's approval. It is used in relation to plans you have, whether immediate or distant. *Mashalla* is supposed to protect things from the evil eye. It is customary to use it when you talk about something positive, good, or beautiful.

Being an outsider resulted in different kinds of challenges. During my postdoctoral research on the Anfal genocide, I was married to an English man, a fact that the village women appeared to be aware of. I once asked a woman, "Why does everyone assume that my husband isn't Kurdish?" She answered, "Because if he was, he'd either accompany you or not let you do this work."[9] The work involved being away from home for days at a time, traveling with a male driver, overnight stays in various regions, meeting new people, and knocking on many doors, without much prior knowledge of the residents.

My outsider status made some of the older people feel uneasy. They did not want their young daughters to be influenced by me. I was mindful of their concerns and tried my best to conduct myself appropriately, emphasizing respect and highlighting my strong relationships with my parents and siblings. But there were various questions: Why did I marry an English man? Why didn't I have children? Why didn't I engage in prayer?

I found myself grappling with a recurring dilemma: How much explaining should I offer? How much of my personal life should I disclose? How much should I engage in these personal conversations? Ultimately, I decided to be open about my life. I felt that it would be inappropriate to ask women informants to be honest with me if I could not do the same myself. I acknowledge that, as a heterosexual cis-woman, sharing the same ethnic and religious background, this decision may have been comparatively easier for me than for individuals whose identities expose them to substantial difficulties and dangers.

The challenges were more pronounced in the more remote Anfal-affected regions. Some individuals, particularly the men, seemed uncertain about whether to like or dislike me. One moment they were nice, and the next they were dismissive and unfriendly. The constant personal scrutiny occasionally left me drained. The problem with people looking at you as if you are in the wrong is that sometimes you end up wondering whether you are wrong.

Some days, I experienced a lot of anxiety over how I was perceived and what was being said about me. But there were also moments of joy at unexpected support. An elderly woman once told the others in a village I was researching: "Even though she doesn't cover her head, she'll go to heaven because she has a good heart." Such affirmations were important support that allowed me to continue my work, without a major crisis.

I engaged in research while keeping in mind the disadvantages and limitations inherent in my in-between position. Ultimately, what mattered to me was the personal journeys of women striving for a dignified life despite myriad obstacles. Acknowledging the gaps in their narratives and the silence surrounding personal and sensitive issues (Hardi 2011: 65), I had no choice but to respect the omissions and try to make sense of them (see below for utilized strategies).
strategies).

Managing Expectations and Ethics of Care

[9] This is obviously not true, but in some contexts, such as some parts of the Kurdish communities, the general perception is that men would be like that.

Managing participants' expectations was another issue I grappled with. Some of the women asylum seekers in the UK and survivors of the Anfal genocide in Kurdistan needed support and asked for it. Some agreed to be interviewed only because they thought that I may be able to help them. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995: 411) speaks about the primacy of the ethical and how, as researchers, we should not sit in the shade and "watch the dancers." She argues against passive and "neutral" observation and defends active witnessing, which requires us to be "a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being, one who will 'take sides' and make judgements. . . . The witness is accountable to history . . . accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act and how they fail to act in critical situations" (419).

I struggled with determining what I can do and what I should refrain from doing. While I wanted to help, I did not want to raise false expectations as some journalists, researchers, nongovernmental (NGO) workers, and officials had done. Also, it was easier for me to help in certain situations rather than others. I was able to provide support to the women who were new to the UK by interpreting formal documents, completing forms, making necessary calls to their housing or council, and offering advice on where to find doctors or libraries. In a few cases, this relationship evolved into a kind of friendship, as some of the women became acquaintances with whom I would socialize during the community celebrations and gatherings. Some of them, in turn, became supportive of my work and attended my talks and readings.

The situation was more complicated when working with Anfal survivors, many of whom lived in impoverished villages and housing complexes with minimal services. They had survived violence, imprisonment, bereavement, assuming the roles of sole breadwinners and caregivers after the genocide. A woman who attributed her regular health problems to surviving two gas attacks came to me with her medication. She told me about her steep medical bills, lack of support from the village community, and difficulties in accessing transportation to the city hospital. She wanted me to help. While I was able to secure a small amount of financial support, I was unable to provide any long-term help or change, leaving me feeling guilty. At moments like this, expectations of support exceeded what I, or any researcher, could offer (Boesten 2008).

Occasionally, I was confronted with the survivors' anger and disappointment due to past exploitation by former interviewers (Hardi 2011: 200). They exhibited research fatigue (Clark 2008) and felt that their suffering benefited others with no return. Knowing that these women had survived severe disempowerment and disconnection, acknowledged by Judith Herman (1997: 133) as the "core experiences of psychological trauma," I tried to do no harm through adopting various strategies.

Active listening was a crucial part of my approach; when the women broke down in tears while sharing their stories, I too started crying. To avoid reducing their lives solely to their traumatic experiences, I asked them questions about their lives both before and after the Anfal genocide. Rather than representing them as powerless victims, as some perceived themselves, I regularly emphasized their strength, resilience, and resourcefulness.

I acknowledged the legitimacy of their anger and respected their boundaries, silences, and omissions, refraining from pushing for additional information. I also openly acknowledged the

limitations of my involvement and clarified that, unlike some others, I would faithfully represent their voices without editing or altering their stories.

In a comparison of the experiences of women survivors of the Anfal and Yezidi genocides (Hardi 2018), I drew on data collected by the Yazda organization.[10] I deliberately refrained from interviewing Yezidi women who, like other survivors of sexual violence during conflict (Boesten and Henry 2018), were being over-researched and retraumatized.

After completing my Anfal research, I revisited some of the women I had interviewed, taking little presents as a sign of appreciation. I did not want to give them anything before the interview because I did not want them to feel that I was bribing them. Once I had finished my work, many were happy to see me and accept the presents: food stuff and a housedress or a piece of cloth to make the dress.

But on two occasions, younger women, whose mothers I had interviewed, showed their disdain of my visit and presents. One of them told me, "My mother has many dresses, she doesn't need your cheap dress." They saw me as the patronizing outsider who comes and goes as she pleases, does not live through the challenges of their daily lives, and fails to provide meaningful support.

During my time in the field, I often grappled with feelings of inadequacy. Despite crafting poems and a book that went "against the grain" and avoided "impenetrable prose" as Scheper-Hughes (1995: 420) recommends, I was unable to change the material conditions of the survivors' lives, unable to make myself available as a true comrade "with all the demands and responsibilities that this word implies." The traumatic experiences and disapproving voices stayed with me, leading to nightmares, depression, and illness.[11]

Responding to the Needs

While doing fieldwork in Kurdistan, I delivered several workshops and seminars focusing on poetry writing, the social construction of gender, and the gendered aspects of the Anfal genocide between 2006 and 2008. I realized that, given a convincing alternative discourse regarding the social construction of women's oppression, young people are willing to reconsider their long-held perspectives. I wanted to get involved in building this discourse and to work in the higher education sector. After several failed attempts to move back home,[12] my wish was finally fulfilled in 2014 when I had the opportunity to return home and teach at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS), where I have had the academic freedom to develop gender studies.[13]

---

[10] Yazda is a global community-led institution that protects and champions all religious and ethnic minority communities in Iraq and the KRI. See https://www.yazda.org/ (accessed June 10, 2016).

[11] I wrote about this in a section titled "Afterword and Personal Reflections" at the end of my Anfal book (Hardi 2011).

[12] In 2010 I met with the minister of higher education, Dr. Dlawar Alaadeen, to start gender studies at the University of Sulaimani. I also met with Prof. Serwan Baban, the president of the University of Kurdistan in Erbil, for the same purpose. In 2013 I had an exchange with Dr. Pola Khanaqa, the director of the Kurdistan Institution for Strategic and Scientific Research, hoping to develop gender-related research in the institution.

[13] The first gender studies center was founded at the University of Sulaimani in 2011. However, the center has not been as effective as expected and has changed leadership several times, primarily owing to resistance from students and colleagues, insufficient support, a shortage of gender studies resources available in Kurdish, and an overly bureaucratic university environment (Rose and Hardi 2022).

I founded a gender studies center at AUIS, developed and taught feminist courses, decolonized course materials,[14] led the establishment of Iraq's first gender studies minor,[15] obtained funding from the European Union (EU) to democratize learning and make gender studies resources available in Kurdish and Arabic,[16] conducted research, provided capacity-building training across various sectors, collaborated with women's rights organizations on various projects and campaigns, and experienced a major backlash because of my work (see below).

After years of facing a resilient and aggressive patriarchal system and recognizing the KRG's shortcomings in meeting public needs, I have reflected with my husband on the existing gaps, our responsibility as returnees, and possible actions. We have constructed a community space intended as a resting space for women, a learning center, and a residency for artists. In this conflict-affected region, where institutional failure has led to hopelessness, where women do not have a day off from their many chores, and where activists face attacks without sufficient protection, our aim is to establish a sanctuary that is necessary for "discussions, debates, and transformations to occur" (Abu Lughod 2002: 789). We envision that this space will provide individuals with an opportunity to rest, reflect, connect with others, and imagine new realities that surpass the obvious and hidden injustices. While we are hopeful, the backlash has temporarily prevented us from realizing our goals.

In my research and writing, I have tried to "go against the grain" by complicating the portrayal that depicts all Kurdish women as oppressed victims devoid of agency, and all Kurdish men as oppressors, who are, at best, kind and controlling and, at worst, violent murderers. I have tried to do no harm, respect boundaries, and be responsive and empathetic. But this does not mean that I have always responded appropriately, nor does it mean that I have made no mistakes.

I have struggled with balancing my time between creative and academic writing, and between work and personal life. I have struggled with managing my own emotional upheavals while doing traumatic research and advocating for my own rights as a woman and a feminist. At times, despite my efforts to depict the diversity and complexity of women's experiences, I have made generalizations. I have fallen short in providing practical support to those who needed it. I have not had time to forge stronger alliances with feminists in Iraq, other regions of Kurdistan, and the broader area.

Backlash and Criticism

[14] Even as the creative writing instructor, I have tried to decolonize the reading list by incorporating literary works from women, African Americans, and Latinos, as well as local writers, including both Kurdish and Arabic voices. Many of our students come from private schools where they are exposed to numerous European and American authors but are not familiar with local writers. I tried to bridge this gap. During the concluding session of the most recent creative writing course, I encouraged students to share their feedback and asked them to make a small promise that they could keep. Many expressed a newfound sense of pride in the literary accomplishments within their mother tongues, and some committed to engaging more deeply in reading and writing within these languages.
[15] See American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, Center for Gender and Development Studies, "Courses," Gender Minor Requirements: https://auis.edu.krd/CGDS/courses (accessed May 6, 2024).
[16] See American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, Center for Gender and Development Studies, "Enhancing Education, Developing Community, and Promoting Visibility to Effect Gender Equity in Iraq and the Greater Mena Region," "Gender Courses": https://egender.auis.edu.krd/mod/page/view.php?id=677 (accessed May 6, 2024).

Toward the end of 2022, I found myself at the center of a well-coordinated social media attack that persisted for several weeks. I was accused of stealing EU funding, promoting LGBTQ,[17] and receiving funding from "the West" to undermine family values and hence "our nation." The perpetrators exploited the Kurdish fear of "annihilation" to fuel hatred against me (Hardi 2023a, 2023b).[18] The accusations gained traction by linking my funding from international agencies with a "Western agenda." This connection was established by circulating a Wikileaks tweet from August 2021, which quoted a Central Intelligence Agency report suggesting the use of feminism to reduce opposition to the military occupation of Afghanistan in 2010.[19]

It is not the first time that obtaining funding from global North institutions is used against women's rights activists and academics of the global South. The debate on the "NGO-ization" of the women's movement (Jad 2007; Alvarez 1999; Haque and Sowad 2016) highlights the challenges associated with dependency on short-term funding and changing trends from international agencies. While acknowledging that NGOs can deviate from their original objectives because of external funding priorities (Hardi 2019), it is essential to avoid blanket generalizations about all projects that obtain funding from the global North. Such generalizations oversimplify the complex dynamics, employ double standards, and unfairly undermine the efforts of global South organizations committed to social justice.

In response to my previous article on blaming feminists (Hardi 2020b), a coauthored piece by Aven Aziz and colleagues (2020) utilized the NGO-ization argument to condemn women's rights organizations deemed "foreign-funded" or "entangled with party politics." They expressed concern about projects sustained through corporate neoliberal funding and questioned knowledge produced by institutions that are "funded, backed and guided by the establishment, political parties, neoliberalist and colonialist powers." They went on to say that "this type of 'knowledge' produced by femocrats of the reconstruction industry surely is meant to hinder any true feminist activism that is critical of the status quo."

These claims raise several concerns. First, the statement lacks a nuanced understanding of the sociopolitical context in Kurdistan. While affiliation with political parties can be problematic at times (Hardi 2013), it does not necessarily hinder feminist gains.[19] Politically aligned NGOs have used their party connections to "challenge tribes and influential families in ways that are not available to independent NGOs" (Hardi 2021: 872). They have lobbied male politicians and members of parliament[20] and forged alliances with independent NGOs to collaboratively drive legislative reforms and advocate for changes in social and institutional practices[21]. This includes

[17] The courses we translated for the EU project were designed by advisors in 2019. They take an intersectional approach and include material about race, ethnicity, class, and LGBTQ identities.

[18] Following the cancellation of my community engagements because of the life-threatening backlash, I redirected my focus toward the completion of my novel, delving into themes such as migration, gender, memory, and the adverse impacts of patriarchy on both women and men. With some activist friends, we initiated a series of closed meetings aimed at introspection and strategizing. This participatory approach is generating ideas about how to consolidate our work and rebuild trust in the aftermath of the backlash.

[19] See WikiLeaks (@wikileaks), "CIA Report: Use feminism to reduce Western opposition to military occupation of #Afghanistan [2010]," August 21, 2021, https://twitter.com/wikileaks/status/1429188218424078338?s=48&t=B_PDArvsdFGqTnytfTyibw.

[20] While I value my independence, I have collaborated with women from diverse political affiliations, allowing me to witness first-hand how party allegiance can either impede or bolster our shared objectives.

[21] As women members of socialist and liberal parties lobbied the men for the right to vote in Europe.

practices such as exchange of brides, female genital mutilation, and protection for victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

Second, asserting that receiving "corporate neoliberal funding" obstructs genuine feminist activism employs a double standard and diminishes the agency of global South activists. It is crucial to recognize that neoliberalism, colonialism, and capitalism are international orders, and activists and academics, whether from the global North or South, operate within this framework.[22] While most funding for established universities and institutions comes from the neoliberal order, it is critical to remember that feminist organizations can be resourceful enough to get funding from within the system and utilize it for feminist work, and academics can "create freedom for intellectual creativity despite the neoliberal dominance" (Thomas Schmidinger, pers. comm., January 29, 2024).

Finally, while rejecting funding from institutions tied to the neoliberal system may seem revolutionary, it can lead to passivity and obstruct progress, as demonstrated in the case of supporting Yezidi mothers and children. The pragmatic use of existing resources is essential for efforts to provide essential services, rehabilitation, empowerment, and legal reform. Independent feminists, just like politically affiliated ones, must engage with institutions to effect meaningful change in laws, media discourse, cultural values, language, education, and health care.

I believe that instead of trying to discredit individuals and organizations, an action that "sap[s] the energy of frontline activists who are bearing the brunt of patriarchy, provide[s] an opening for conservative and patriarchal backlash, and make[s] no constructive contribution to the debate" (Hardi 2020b), it would be better to act "in the spirit of support for those . . . whose goals are to make women's (and men's) lives better" (Abu Lughod 2002: 789).

Conclusion

As feminist researchers and actors, we must negotiate our way through the field. Sometimes we are confronted with groups of people who are angry and feel mistreated by others, and we may be inadvertently categorized in the same way in their eyes. What matters is that we are careful not to disempower and victimize people, to categorize or label them, to force them to disclose information, or to offend or disrespect them.

We may end up dealing with issues of being judged or rejected by people for the kind of lives we lead and the kind of people we are. It is important to be aware of how this can happen and try not to let it distort our perception of ourselves and, where possible, to take time off for self-care and preserving our well-being. Additionally, we must acknowledge that social change is a gradual process requiring patience. Unsupportive environments, where our work and discourse lack resonance elsewhere, further impede progress.

Another important lesson is to enter the field with an open mind, without having preconceived ideas for which we try to find evidence. It is crucial to recognize the diversity of experiences and perceptions, check our analysis of the data with participants whenever possible, and to understand that we are not immune from misconceptions. We need to recognize that the

[22] This insight emerged during a discussion with Dastan Jasim, to whom I am grateful.

participants' priorities and demands may be different from our own (Abu Lughod 2002). The feminist utopia we imagine should not be a place where no woman wears the hijab and all of them work outside the house; it should be a place where all individuals, whatever their beliefs, convictions, and aspirations, can live a dignified life that is free of violence, force, and discrimination.

REFERENCES

Abu Lughod, Lila. 2002. “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3: 783–90.

Al-Ali, Nadja, and Nicola Pratt. 2011. “Between Nationalism and Women’s Rights: The Kurdish Women’s Movement in Iraq.” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4, no. 3: 339–55.

Alinia, Minoo. 2013. *Honor and Violence against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Alvarez, Sonia E. 1999. “Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO ‘Boom.’” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1, no. 2: 181–209.

Aziz, Aven, Houzan Mahmoud, Rega Rauf, and Shara Tahir. 2020. “A Response: In Defence of Kurdish Diaspora Feminism.” *LSE Women, Peace, and Security* (blog), October 7. blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2020/10/07/a-response-in-defence-of-kurdish-diaspora-feminism/.

Boesten, Jelke. 2008. “A Relationship Gone Wrong? Research Ethics, Participation, and Fieldwork Realities.” Non-governmental Public Action Research Paper 20. London: London School of Economics.

Boesten, Jelke, and Marsha Henry. 2018. “Between Fatigue and Silence: The Challenges of Conducting Research on Sexual Violence in Conflict.” *Social Politics* 25, no. 4: 568–88.

Clark, Tom. 2008. “‘We’re Over-researched Here!’ Exploring Accounts of Research Fatigue within Qualitative Research Engagements.” *Sociology* 42, no. 5: 953–70.

Espin, Olivia. 1996. “‘Race,’ Racism, and Sexuality in the Life Narratives of Immigrant Women. In *Feminist Social Psychologies: International Perspectives*, edited by Sue Wilkinson, 87–103. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Fallaci, Oriana. 1966. *Penelope at War*. Translated by Pamela Swinglehurst. London: Michael Joseph.

Fallaci, Oriana. 1977. *Letter to a Child Never Born*. Translated by John Shepley. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Gangoli, Geetanjali. 2006. “Engendering Genocide: Gender, Conflict, and Violence.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 29, no. 5: 534–38.

Giri, Keshab. 2022. “Can Men Do Feminist Fieldwork and Research?” *International Studies Review* 24, no. 1: viac004.

Haque, Tania, and Abu Saleh Mohammad Sowad. 2016. “Impact of NGOization on Women’s Movement Organizations: A Critical Analysis from Bangladesh Perspective.” *Social Science Review* 33, no. 2: 29–39.

Hardi, Choman. 2011. *Gendered Experiences of Genocide: Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq*. London: Routledge.

Hardi, Choman. 2013. “Women’s Activism in Iraqi Kurdistan: Achievements, Shortcomings, and Obstacles.” *Kurdish Studies* 1, no. 1: 44–64.

Hardi, Choman. 2018. “Gender and Genocide: Two Case Studies.” In *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security*, edited by Caron Gentry, Laura Shepherd, and Laura Sjoberg, 182–93. London: Routledge.

Hardi, Choman. 2019. “Gender Issues in the Context of a Humanitarian Crisis.” LSE Women, Peace, and Security Working Paper Series 21. London: London School of Economics. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/104050/1/Hardi_Gender_issues_humanitarian_crisis_published.pdf.

Hardi, Choman. 2020a. “Watching Rojava.” Posted on March 17, 2020. YouTube video, 2:52. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AOznhswVdw.
Hardi, Choman. 2020b. “Blaming the Feminists: Attempts to Debilitate a Movement.” *LSE Women, Peace, and Security* (blog), June 3. blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2020/06/03/blaming-the-feminists-attempts-to-debilitate-a-movement/.
Hardi, Choman. 2023a. “The Backlash against Women’s Rights in Iraq’s Kurdistan Region.” Chatham House Research Paper, April 14. https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/iraq-20-years-insider-reflections-war-and-its-aftermath/backlash-against-womens-rights.
Hardi, Choman. 2023b. “Surviving Abuse, Defamation, and Backlash.” Speech given on acceptance of The Equality Prize, March 14. The Gender Hub, March 29. https://thegenderhub.com/blog/surviving-abuse-defamation-and-backlash/.
Herman, Judith. 1997. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books.
Jad, Islah. 2007. “NGOs: Between Buzzwords and Social Movements.” *Development in Practice* 17, nos. 4–5: 622–29.
Jaggar, Alison. 1989. “Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology.” *Inquiry* 32, no. 2: 151–76.
Jones, Adam. 2009. *Gender Inclusive: Essays on Violence, Men, and Feminist International Relations*. London: Routledge.
Kasnazani, Bushra. 2012. “Min Şehrezadi Hikayatim ey Şehryar!” *Serdemi Jin Journal*, no. 1.
Lugones, Maria. 2010. “Toward a Decolonial Feminism.” *Hypatia* 25, no. 4: 742–59.
Mani, Lata. 1992. “Gender, Class and Cultural Conflict: Indu Krishnan’s Knowing Her Place.” *SAMAR Magazine*, no. 1: 11–14.
Mignolo, Walter. 2000. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge, and Border Thinking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Mukri, Mohammed. 1982. *Sagwar*. N.p.: n.p. (Kurdish source).
Mustafa, Nawshirwan. 1997a. *Pencekan Yektrî Deşkenin: Dîwy Nawewey Rudawakanî Kurdistanî Eraq 1979-1983.* Berlin: n.p. (Kurdish source).
Mustafa, Nawshirwan. 1997b. *Le Kenarî Danubewe bo Xîirî Nawzeng: Dîwy Nawewey Rudawekanî Kurdistanî Eraq 1975–1977*. Berlin: n.p. (Kurdish source).
Nagel, Joan. 1998. “Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21. no. 2: 242–69.
Najmadin, Pshko. 2013. *Azmwn u Yad: Allay Şoriş u Hîkayetekanî Zîndan*. 2 vols. Sulaimani: Chawrchra (Kurdish source).
Ortner, Sherry B. 1974. “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” In *Women, Culture, and Society*, edited by Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, 68–87. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
Qaramani, Awat. 2009. *The Thin Roads*. Sulaimani: Kurdistan Publishing House (Kurdish Source).
Ringelheim, Joan. 1999. “Genocide and Gender: A Split Memory.” In *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Rose, Lynn, and Choman Hardi. 2022. “‘With Education You Can Face Every Struggle’: Gendered Higher Education in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan—Part Three: The Gender Problem.” *Manara Magazine*, May 25. https://manaramagazine.org/2022/05/with-education-you-can-face-every-struggle-gendered-higher-education-in-iraq-and-iraqi-kurdistan-part-three-the-gender-problem/.

Ross, Fiona. 2001. “Speech and Silence: Women’s Testimonies in the First Five Weeks of Public Hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” In *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery*, edited by Veena Das, Arthur Kleinman, Margaret Lock, Mamphela Ramphele, and Pamela Reynolds, 250–65. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1995. “The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology.” *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 3: 409–40.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1997. *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage.