



HONOUR VIOLENCE IN THE IRAQI  
KURDISTAN REGION:  
HONOUR OR DISHONOR?

GLOBAL SOCIOLOGY ESSAY

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## Honour or Dishonour?

Patriarchy is a deep-rooted political-social structure in which men are inherently dominating in society, as they seek and justify the right to rule over women, and alarmingly, maintain that power by using various forms of physiological and physical violence against women. Unfortunately, violence is in the nature of human beings, and when this is intertwined and reinforced with patriarchy, it creates an extensive attack against women throughout our violent world. One in three women worldwide have been victim of sexual or physical violence, and in times of calamity and crisis, it is especially the women who suffer most due to their weak and subordinate position in their family, community and society. The intensifying globalization process accompanied by the expansion of Western popular culture which includes sexism in many dimensions, as in advertisements and music videos, deteriorates the vulnerable position of women in particularly developing countries, as these states lack a fertile and resilient civil society, empirical statehood and rule of law: subsequently, this lack of essential development intensifies and deepens the patriarchal subordination of women and creates new forms of exploitation, violence and abuse. Honour violence is the most ancient practice of gender violence, and these are committed in a wide variety of forms against women throughout the world, whether they live in suppressing patriarchal societies or in the liberal democracies where one may assume that these women are protected by domestic laws. Despite the efforts of developed countries and International organizations to protect women against such violence and to stimulate emancipation, the globalization process spreads patriarchal cultures and their violent actors and practices to the far corners of our world, and paradoxically provides more opportunities for men to restrict, control and subjugate the lives of women.

(Begikhani, Gill, Hague, 2015) (Cohen, Kennedy, 2013) (Womankind, 2016)

In the Iraqi Kurdistan Region\* women are usually expected to be well educated and to become submissive wives and dutiful mothers, who must take care of the whole family. In contrast, most men learn by their dominant fathers that it is vital to become powerful and controlling leaders of their family, and more importantly, to protect the 'honour' of their family and tribe. Honour is represented in the body of a woman, and by her social and sexual behaviour. Therefore, in most families the extensive freedom of women is perceived as a transgression of traditional values and customs. Moreover, tribalism in Kurdistan is dominant and mainstream, and this has significant impact on the social and political organizations of Kurdish society, as women are intimidated and restricted within these collective structures which leads to capability deprivation. Therefore, gender violence does not only prevail physically, but is actively and collectively sustained through the cultural, social and legal elements of society, which silently utilize these so-called 'honour-codes'.

(Bruinessen, Dawod, Jabar, 2002) (Begikhani, Gill, Hague, 2015)

One could argue that a critical analysis and modification of this patriarchal society is essential, as this paves the path towards dialogue and a fertile civil society which can stimulate development and ensure a sustainable future in which all humans, regardless of their sex, race, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation, can harmoniously co-exist and be resilient against extensive attacks from aggressive actors who want to impose their backward values.

\*1: The Iraqi Kurdistan Region is an official autonomous region within Iraq and is governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with its capital in Erbil. Despite the deep-rooted corruption, nepotism and lack of solid institutions, the

region is safe and was economically prosperous until the rise of Daesh. The Kurdish soldiers play a decisive role in the fight against Daesh and are therefore supported and armed by a wide coalition of Western states. (Stansfield, 2003)

On order to fully grasp the complexity of gender violence in Kurdistan it is important to emphasize that women's position in society significantly depend in which city or region they live, what their social status is and what educational level they have obtained. Moreover, the educational and intellectual level of their parents and other family members is also vital, as higher educated communities tend to be more open minded and progressive. Roughly, there is a distinction between the conservative class, mostly lower and middle class peasants and farmers, and the upper class, in which women have much more freedom, yet extensively restricted. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that it is difficult to generalize, as increasingly more families tend to become more 'modern' in their values influenced by the globalization of culture and knowledge, and provide their women more freedom to explore the world and cooperate with other men in a professional sphere. (Begikhani, Gill, Hague, 2015) (Begikhani, Gill, 2012) (Al-Ali, Pratt, 2011)

In Kurdistan, women have traditionally little access to the outside world. Therefore, it is difficult for women in these controlling societies to reach out to International organizations or start a campaign on schools and social media in order to raise awareness and demand change by the establishment. Moreover, as male violence is common in domestic and public life, most women feel intimidated and refrain from taking action in order to stimulate emancipation. This capability deprivation makes it very challenging for women, if not almost impossible, to counter the patriarchal structures from a grassroots approach. The majority of women in Kurdistan live in 'purdah', as they are mostly excluded from public life: however, there are also many women who work as civil servants and teachers, yet they have to be obedient and obey the unwritten rules of society. (Begikhani, Gill, Hague, 2015)

Paradoxically, women who flee from these suffocating conditions are never completely safe, wherever they are, as patriarchy and cultural practices travel across time and space, which is reinforced by the globalization process. Recently, a Kurdish girl in Hannover was shot dead by her cousin at her wedding party, as she refused a forced marriage arranged by her uncles who live in Kurdistan. Her cousin travelled from Kurdistan to Germany, and was aware of the wedding location through social media. This case illustrates how globalization increased the opportunities for these patriarchal actors to travel to a liberal democracy and impose their values: their so-called justice. In addition, social media like Facebook are utilized to monitor and intimidate women, and this creates a transnational network of patriarchy around the world. The difficulty of this network is that it's hidden and sustained and expanded in private circles, and therefore difficult to detect for authorities. This is one of the many cases worldwide, as according to the UN 8000 women are killed in name of honour each year.

(UN WOMEN, 2015) (Dailymail, 2016)

The globalization process is a double edged sword and can best be described as an interconnected chain of positive and negative effects, and this is illustrated by the many intertwined opposing forces in Kurdistan which are not always easily detectable. In fact, one can argue that the globalization process is primarily positive, as it has brought a sea of information and technology to Kurdistan, which

stimulates progress and development. Moreover, international women organizations and academics can travel to Kurdistan and exchange their knowledge and recommendations with students in one of the many universities and the Kurdish women's movement.

In addition, the globalization process also expands capitalism into Kurdistan, and it has to be said that when Kurdistan became a market for global capitalism investments, the region became increasingly prosperous and this significantly improved the lives of society as a whole. Also many Kurdish women have benefited from this increase in stability and development, as their living standards have improved and allowed them to work in the various state-owned and private enterprises. (Al-Ali, Pratt, 2011) (Cohen, Kennedy, 2013)

What is more, globalization provides society in Kurdistan also significantly more access to human capital and cultural elements from around the world. This has many advantages, such as increasing cross-cultural exchange of knowledge and experiences, mainly through social media platforms which serves as enriching transnational networks. In addition, positive cultural habits and values from other societies and religions are incorporated into the Kurdish culture, although this happens on various degrees and is dependent on the receptivity of families and communities. However, this incorporation of values into the complex foundation of Kurdish society as a collective is a time-consuming process, as the new generations face the major struggle to critical self-reflection and modification of their cultural heritage, while fighting against the deep-rooted patronage, nepotism, corruption and patriarchy.

(Leezenberg, 2005) (Begikhani, Gill, Hague, 2015)

On the contrary, the globalization process increased the expansion of Western popular culture, including sexism in advertisements, music videos and pornography. This has a negative effect on Kurdish communities, particularly on the young men who are not well educated, which leads to reinforced images and values that men must be dominant over women. Moreover, one of the disadvantages is also that cultural uniqueness is lost, and replaced by a homogenization of a "universal culture" combined with global citizenship that draws significantly from American culture. This may have a detrimental effect, especially on those who want to protect their cultural heritage and values, and therefore start utilizing more extreme ways of imposing their culture and protecting the honour of their families. (Najjar, 2005) (Leezenberg, 2005)

Despite the economic developments, transnational networks of highly educated Kurdish women supported by academics and intellectuals around the world, and significant efforts of the Kurdistan Regional Government to stimulate and subsidize women's emancipative organizations, many women still become victims of forced marriage, gender violence and honour killings, as these so-called 'honour-codes' are silently utilized throughout society. This illustrates that a bottom-up approach is required to counter the deep-rooted patriarchal structures within communities, in order to gain traction for revolutionist change in the beautiful Kurdish culture. It is often said that the Kurds have no friends but the mountains.

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