

# **HONOR & VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN IRAQI KURDISTAN**

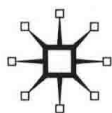
*Minoo Alinia*



HONOR AND VIOLENCE  
AGAINST WOMEN IN  
IRAQI KURDISTAN

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HONOR AND VIOLENCE AGAINST  
WOMEN IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

## **Previous Publication**

*Spaces of Diasporas: Kurdish identities, experiences of otherness and politics of belonging*

Minoo Alinia

*To my family  
and  
to those people who stand against oppression and  
struggle for peace, justice and human dignity*

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MINOO ALINIA  
May 2013, Stockholm

## ACRONYMS

IPC	Iraqi Penal Code
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

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## LOCATING THE BOOK

### INTRODUCTION

On April 7, 2007, in the village of Bahzani, close to the city of Mosul in Iraqi Kurdistan, 17-year old Doa Khalil Aswad was stoned to death by several of her male relatives in front of a large crowd. Several uniformed policemen watched the killing. She was killed because she had fallen in love with the wrong man. She is not the only person to have been killed for love, or simply for refusing to subordinate herself to rules that limit her personal freedom, feelings and desires. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that 5,000 women are killed each year in the name of honor (UNFPA 2012). In Iraqi Kurdistan, 446 women were killed between 1991 and 2002, and 155 women committed suicide between 1999 and 2000 (Najiba Mahmoud's private archive). In March 2009, 53 cases of violence against women were recorded in Hewler, Suleimaniah, Duhok and Kirkuk—the four main cities of Iraqi Kurdistan (Human Rights Data Bank 2009). According to the newspaper *Hawlati*, 76 women were killed or committed suicide and 330 women either burned themselves or were burned by others in 2011 in three areas around Hewler, Suleimaniah and Duhok (ibid.). Azadi hospital statistics show that 434 people, 90 percent of whom were women, attempted suicide in the city of Kirkuk between November 2011 and March 2012—and 124 of these women died of their injuries (Warvin). Both men and women can be either victims or perpetrators of violence, but the majority of the killers are men and the majority of the victims are women.

Killings occur among people of different religious faiths, of different nationalities and in different regions and countries of the world. Such killings are the most extreme form of violence in the name of honor but this violence is widespread and takes many other different forms. The phenomenon has attracted more and more attention in recent years, and has been the subject of political discussion and

policymaking. Because such murders have also occurred in Western countries among groups with migrant backgrounds, the issue has been featured in the political projects of racists, right-wing populists and extreme nationalists in the West.

Fadime Sahindal, a young woman of Kurdish descent from Turkey, was killed by her father in Sweden in 2002. She was killed because she refused to enter into a forced, or an arranged, marriage to a cousin, and also because she had started a relationship with a man with whom she had fallen in love. It was not the first murder of its kind in Sweden, but the strong focus by the Swedish media initiated an intense and polarizing debate. The increased attention paid to condemning and taking legal action against gender-based violence within migrant communities—which had previously been tolerated in the name of cultural difference—was a big step forward. Violence against women within these communities had been neglected by the authorities, and women's calls for help were often not taken seriously as there was a perception that such violence was “within the culture” (Eldén 1998; Ertürk 2009; see also Burman et al. 2004). However, the changes in policy and the related legal action were not accompanied by changes in the perceptions of the violence, and were not the result of new knowledge and new definitions of the problem. One discriminatory approach—a cultural relativist approach that tolerated violence against women in the name of multiculturalism—was replaced by another discriminatory approach—an ethnocentric approach that justified ethnic discrimination and racialization in the name of gender equality. Instead of criticizing the culturalization of violence that allowed violence against women in the name of cultural rights, it was cultural differences and the idea of coexistence and pluralism that came under attack. Migrants from the Middle East and North Africa were categorized and labeled as carriers of the honor culture, even in cases where the perpetrators and the victims of violence were born or raised in Sweden. Inspired by discourses on the “clash of civilizations” and the “war on terror” in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, violence against women was used to legitimize and justify racializing discourses and practices (Alinia 2011; Ertürk 2009; Keskinen 2009). A notion of cultural difference from a nationalistic and ethnocentric point of view constructed a dividing line between “us” and “them,” and strengthened the racialization of Swedish society in the name of gender equality and the rights of migrant (Muslim) women (for further discussions see Alinia 2004, 2006, 2011; Ålund and Alinia 2011; Carbin 2010a,b; Eduards 2007; Gruber 2007). This culturalist approach, which according to Razack

(2004: 129) “enables the stigmatizing and surveillance of Muslim communities,” has dominated Swedish public debate and policy since 2002 and has been supported by the media, politicians and officials (Alinia 2011; Carbin 2010a).

Two other, albeit marginalized, categories of definition of violence in the name of honor have existed alongside these culturalist explanations. One defines violence in terms of the universal problem of men’s violence against women (Carbin 2010a) opposed to the culturalist explanations’ focus on differences and particularities of this kind of violence. Unlike the culturalists emphasis on difference, it emphasizes the similarities between various types of gender-based violence. The problem with this universalist notion is that since it defines the problem based only on gender and sexuality, it misses intersecting oppression based on class and ethnicity as well as the political, historical and structural specificities that distinguish violence in the name of honor. Hence, attempts to elucidate the violence often unwittingly end up in culturalist explanations.

The other category of definition starts from an intersectional approach. No existing Swedish studies of violence in the name of honor have departed from this approach but, as noted earlier, a number of articles, reports and other scientific publications have criticized the strongly dominant culturalist approach.

This book employs intersectional analysis to take account of not only gender oppression but also the oppressions of class, ethnicity, generation and sexuality. It departs from the experiences of victims, perpetrators and activists in order to capture the complexity and multidimensionality of the phenomenon, and to contribute and deepen knowledge on this issue. It highlights the mechanisms behind violence and murder in the name of honor, its historical, social and political aspects; and the meaning of honor in relation to female sexuality; and the oppressive structures of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and generation in the case of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The empirical material was collected in Erbil and Suleimaniah, two major cities in Iraqi Kurdistan, and in various smaller towns and villages near Suleimaniah during two months of fieldwork in 2007 and 2008. It consists of 30 individual interviews conducted with women’s rights activists, representatives of women’s organizations and shelters, victims of violence and the perpetrators. The language in the southern part of Iraqi Kurdistan is Sorani, the southern dialect of the Kurdish language, which I speak, and all communication with the respondents was in their native language. Their words as set out in this volume have been translated by me.

### **The Discourse of Honor and the Culturalization of Politics**

Presenting violence against women as an isolated phenomenon and as a cultural characteristic of “the other” is what Žižek calls the “culturalization of politics,” according to which “political differences—differences conditioned by political inequality or economic exploitation—are naturalized and neutralized into ‘cultural’ differences” (2009: 119). Culturalization that is defined by Yuval-Davis as “the colonization of the social by the cultural” (1997: 66) does not take account of the multiple processes of power relations at all levels and in all the social domains of life. Moreover, the concept of culture is very much loaded with racial conceptions and has been widely used as a substitute for biology and race in the terminology of modern racism (Azar 2001; Pred 2000). However, criticizing culturalist explanations does not imply that culture and cultural practices are irrelevant. It is more about what is meant by culture or how culture is defined and used as an analytical concept, how cultural and social processes and phenomena are studied, and from which position, since there are no neutral spaces or positions (Collins 2009; Mohanty 2003; Riley et al. 2008<sup>1</sup>; Yuval-Davis 2011). Thus, the aim should be, as Welchman and Hossain argue, to devote “particularly rigorous attention to the construction of equal and honest engagements and alliances, and conscious efforts to avoid this being or becoming for the ‘West’... a particular and isolated problem of ‘the... other’” (2005: 14). Many scholars have criticized the “racialized discourse of ‘cultural pathology’” (Werbner 2007: 170) for ignoring historical and sociopolitical contexts and processes, and for describing violence in the name of honor as an isolated phenomenon essential to certain cultures and groups of people.<sup>2</sup> With respect to the media and policy debate on such violence in Western Europe and the United States, with a particular focus on the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom and Canada, Korteweg and Yurdakul point out that:

The debate took place in a context of racialization, in which these immigrants have increasingly been constituted as different along the intersecting dimensions of gender, religion and culture... Muslim immigrants were often the primary focus of media and policy debate even though these countries have very diverse migrant streams, including non-Muslim immigrants who commit honour-related violence. (2010: 40–41)

It is striking how the perpetrators of violence and their culturalist opponents, who stand on opposing sides, depart from the same perceptions of culture and identity. They both agree about the culturalization of violence, defining killings as culture and thus hiding the governing structures of power and intersecting oppressions within which this violence emerges (Alinia 2011). Perpetrators use culture and honor as excuses and as a way to legitimize and justify killings, normalize the violence and maintain existing power relations (see chapter 4). Their culturalist counterparts reproduce perpetrators' discourses by departing from their explanations without any further problematization and analysis. Consequently, they define the problem from the viewpoint of the perpetrators and reproduce their honor discourse and present their version as representative of a whole group, country, region, nation and so on.

In order to distance myself from sexist and racist honor discourse, I do not use terms such as honor killing, "honor culture" or "honor violence." These terms depart from perpetrators' explanations and are based on the oppressive honor discourse. In Sweden, moreover, these concepts are strongly connected to the culturalist discourse of honor and have become part of the vocabularies of racist and right-wing populist parties. Instead, I use the term "violence in the name of honor," which although still not an ideal concept, is less problematic. The concept departs from a broad definition and encompasses various types of violence, including killing. This study is in line with what Žižek (referring to Walter Benjamin) calls the "politization of culture" (2009: 119). It seeks to identify political processes and various structures of power and dominance that not only make violence possible, but also encourage it. It sees the violence not as a cultural characteristic essential to certain groups, but as an outcome of certain social, political and historical processes, as well as intersecting violence and oppression of gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and generation, that are continually evolving.

This study argues that what characterizes violence and murder in the name of honor is its focus on the control of female sexuality. At the same time, however, it argues that it cannot be seen as a problem entirely related to gender and sexuality, isolated from the oppressive structures of ethnicity and class. This violence is also strongly connected to collective identity construction, boundary making and community maintenance, as well as tribal social organizations and the drawing of boundaries based on national, ethnic and sectarian beliefs and conflicts. Moreover, in Iraqi Kurdistan, these processes have to be studied in relation to

nation state formation and foreign interference, and in the context of almost a century of war, ethnic oppression, displacement, militarization, state violence, dictatorship and national oppression, and of widespread illiteracy and socioeconomic marginalization. These processes must also be seen in relation to political structures, that is, the nature of the state and the political system, the nature of Kurdish nationalism and the Kurdish movement, and these actors' gender politics.

The contextual framework of the study, in relation to the overarching organization of power and influence in Iraqi Kurdish society, is discussed in chapters 2 and 3, with a particular focus on the implications for gender identities and relations, for women and for violence against women in the name of honor.

### LOCATED EXPERIENCES AND SITUATED KNOWLEDGE

This study is based on individual experiences of violence and murder committed in the name of honor, and also of resistance and struggle against it. There is, however, an inevitable gap between experience as it is lived and any communication about it (Dolan 2002; Essed 1991; Riessman 1993; Widerberg 1996). Experience involves a culturally and historically specific context and, as Widerberg suggests, there is a discursive dimension to articulations that provides a livid tension in relation to the lived experience. This refers to the way people interpret, describe and represent their lived experiences through discourses, ideologies and the knowledge produced in their society. Another important aspect of experience is its central role in the construction of subjectivity. Our experiences based on our different "situatedness" affect our knowledge, our perceptions of reality, the way we identify and the way we relate to social and political processes (Anthias 2002; Collins 2009; Skeggs 1997; Yuval-Davis 2011).

In order to properly understand violence and murder in the name of honor in Iraqi Kurdistan, while at the same time challenging and unmasking racist and sexist beliefs and stereotypes, respondents' experiences need to be studied in the broader context of power hierarchies and the overall organization of power and domination in that society. In this regard, experiences not only of violence and oppression, but also of resistance must be seen within the "matrix of domination" (Collins 2009) and the intersecting violence of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and generation that frame constructions of manhood, womanhood, honor and violence. Women's subjugation, liberation or emancipation is, as Gökalp puts it, "heavily embedded within the

power relations that interplay at the familial, communal, national, and global levels” (2010: 568; see also Collins 2009; Enloe 2000; Mohanty 2001, 2003; Sharoni 1997; Yuval-Davis 1997, 2011). As is discussed in the later chapters, in Iraqi Kurdistan, these processes have historically been connected not only to local and national but also to regional and international relations of power and dominance.

Violence against women is a universal phenomenon, although women’s experiences of violence and their struggle against it differ depending on where and under what circumstances they live (Collins 2009; Ertürk 2009; Mojab 2004b; Mohanty et al. 2008; Yuval-Davis 1997). It is impossible to find a unified and homogeneous female experience, “particularly when historical patterns of colonialism and contemporary global inequalities are taken into account” (Jacobson et al. 2000: 1). Discussing the diversity of women’s experiences, Yuval-Davis points out that Western women’s struggles began by claiming “their full and equal citizenship rights” while “in the colonial South or wherever national liberation struggles were fought, feminists became engaged in the general national struggle” (2011: 109). Therefore, any analysis of women’s experiences “must always be appropriately contextualized, rather than being appropriated by universalizing notions” (Jacobson et al. 2000: 1). Understanding the complexities of violence against women in both its dimensions, according to Ertürk, is best captured by “intersectional and continuum approaches” (2009: 61). Cockburn (2004: 43) writes about a “gendered continuum of violence,” which ranges from everyday domestic life to war. This means that violence against women is inherently interconnected in peace time or in times of war. Violence against women has both a universal and a particular dimension. It is therefore important “to see the particularities in women’s diverse experiences without losing insight of the universality of VAW [violence against women]” (Ertürk 2009: 61).

An intersectional approach challenges the modern/postmodern dichotomy of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism, and stands for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situation (Collins 2009, 2004; Harding 1991; Haraway 2004). The epistemological basis for intersectionality is described by Yuval-Davis thus:

A development of feminist standpoint theory which claims, in somewhat different ways, that it is vital to account for the social positioning of the social agent and challenge “the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway 1991: 189) as a cover for and a legitimization of a hegemonic masculinist “positivistic” positioning. (Yuval-Davis 2011: 3–4)<sup>3</sup>

## INTERSECTING OPPRESSION, POWER, KNOWLEDGE AND RESISTANCE: TOWARD AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The wider analytical framework of this study is very much inspired by Patricia Hill Collins's concept of intersectionality (2009). A significant aspect of critical studies of intersectionality is their relation to power and stratification. Intersectional analysis originally carried out by black and other marginalized women is defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who introduced the term, as "the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects' lived experiences" (Yuval-Davis 2011: 8; see also Collins 2009; Anthias 2002). However, intersectional analysis concerns not only oppression but also resistance and struggle. Collins' study of black American women's experiences discusses not only the complexity of oppression but also the complexity and contradictory nature of struggles when various forms of oppression intersect.

Among the key tools of empowerment and struggles against all forms of oppression and social injustice are coalition strategies, recognition of other oppressed groups' experiences and, above all, knowledge of the complex nature of intersectional oppression. However, as Collins puts it, the relationship between oppression and the struggles against it is far more complex, since resistance is also carried on within the matrix of domination where the multidimensionality of intersecting oppression, and the different situatedness and positioning of social agents, make a simple model of permanent oppressors and perpetual victims impossible (Collins 2009: 292). A dialectical analysis of power in relation to social injustice can be so explained:

When it comes to social injustice, groups have competing interests that often generate conflict. Even when groups understand the need for...transversal politics...they often find themselves on opposite sides of social justice. (ibid.)

Individuals and groups experience oppression differently: as men or women, poor or rich, minority or majority, young or old, of different nationality, and so on. This also affects their perceptions of reality, their knowledge and identity, their relationship to oppression and resistance, and their ability to relate to other groups' oppression and struggles (ibid.). As Collins puts it, each group "identifies the oppression with which it feels more comfortable as being fundamental and classifies all others as being of less importance" (2009: 306). Which or whose experience is the one that matters also depends on power relations and historical and political processes within a society. For