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On 'Sisterhood': What Iraqi Kurdish Women Migrants Have to Say about Women and the Commonalities They Share

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By Toni Wright[1]

Abstract

Based on a research study this paper is concerned with the migration experiences of Iraqi Kurdish Muslim women. Commonalities among women was one of the main themes emerging from the research data, with much of that data related to what some of the Kurdish women conceptualise as a 'sisterhood' of women, suggesting that for at least half of the Kurdish women, experiences of inequality, domestic abuse, and patriarchal oppression provide a significant point of commonality among women.

More complete approaches to women's experiences of relationships of power do not negate the relationships of power, inequality, and experiences of domestic abuse existing between men and women; such approaches also do not prioritise over these relationships the relationships of oppression that exist between culturally and/or socioeconomically different women. Taking account of commonalities among women through sameness experiences of gender inequalities and patriarchal abuse, and how those commonalities are constructed, offers insight into the potential evolution of transnational feminism.

Key Words: Iraqi Kurds, Women's Migration, Cross-cultural Ethnography, Transnational Feminism, Patriarchal Abuse, Sisterhood.

Introduction

The broader research project informing this paper explored the connections between the resettlement experiences of Iraqi Kurdish Muslim women migrants in the UK and interlocking subjectivities that exist and relate to women's gender, race, nationality, religion, ethnicity, and immigration status. It intended to investigate and understand the women's social and cultural location in the UK by probing these experiences, illustrating how oppression exercised over the women, as well as transgression of power exercised by the women, results in their very specific social cultural position within the UK.

This paper will look at one particular strand of data coming from the larger research, namely that which explored the relationships of power, control, inequalities, and domestic abuse between men and women. Through this consideration the possibility remains of exploring oppressive relationships of power in a more comprehensive way in order to understand the complexities of commonalities and differences among women themselves, and how they are constituted through discourses of liberalism and liberal feminism.

Spivak (in Landry & Maclean 1996) and Ahmed (2000) offer a useful means, with their

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proposal of encounters between different women, of achieving an exploration of the racial, social and political spaces that exist among women. This proposal also provides a place from which not to lose sight of an equally-important dimension to forms of feminism: the illumination of patriarchal control and gender inequalities experienced by women. Encounters between women, especially 'close (face-to-face) encounters' are, for Ahmed (2000), about allowing women to engage over issues of oppression and to share common experiences of inequality and abuse, including, and more especially, other forms of violence, such as historical colonial and racial violence done to women by other women. Ahmed (2000) understands these encounters as enabling an uncovering of inequality, discrimination, and oppression, as well as privilege, which exists among women from differing social cultural positions. Engaging in 'close-encounters' is an exercise in un-silencing privileged women as it forces disclosure of, and confrontation with, accountability (Ahmed 2000) through the exploration and illumination of different racial, ethnic, social, economic, and political spaces among women themselves. Using 'close-encounters' allows for the examination of different ways of being in the world that enables the Othered to not always be a projection of dominant ways of knowing, but instead to challenge and resist and to exist beyond such production. For Ahmed (2000) there is all too often an active disengagement by Western feminists that allows them to remain silent, to remain comfortable and not be provoked to recognise, take account of, and act upon their complicity in the construction of Othered women. The research that founded this paper engaged in 'close encounters' (Ahmed 2000) and in so doing was able to reveal not only commonality among women through their differences, but also an illumination of the commonalities among otherwise significantly different women.

This paper now provides some historical and cultural context to the lives of Kurdish women as well as offering some brief methodological background to the research before moving on to the main discussion.

Contextualisation

Some contextualisation is important for those who may be unfamiliar with Kurdish history and for noting the colonial connections with the UK and foregrounding the social cultural position of Kurdish women. Understanding the experience of migration as one that is historical as well as cultural recognises the interconnected and multifaceted nature of the national, international, and transnational (Mojab & Gorman 2007).

The Kurdish people are believed to be descended from the Medes and have a cultural history – expressed in their folklore and songs – that holds heroism and self-sacrifice to be noble. The Medes are referred to throughout the Bible, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament Book of Acts. There is an old Kurdish proverb, arising from a history of being oppressed, which states The Kurds have 'no friends but the mountains' (Bulloch & Morris 1993). Kurdish guerrilla fighters call themselves *Peshmerga*, which means 'those who face death', because so many have died attempting to establish an independent Kurdish homeland.

The Turkish government wishes to assimilate the Kurdish people into its own established society, and has attempted this through the forced resettlement of the Kurds. In Kurdish ethnic conflict in south-east Anatolia, Turkish officials were reluctant to see any flow of Kurdish refugees from northern Iraq because of the concern that such a flow could add momentum to the separatist Kurdish movement in the country (O'Leary 2002:4–5). Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq was no more welcoming, with raids using poison gas and the demolition of villages forcing

many Kurds into detention camps (McDowall 2000:357–60).

The Kurds are a diverse ethnic group living across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and provinces of the former Soviet Union. They have suffered persecution because of being 'stateless', with persecution in Iraq the most notable. Women hold an elevated place in the families of the Kurdish clans; however, they are based on paternal lines (Mojab 2001a:1–16). The Kurdish people are reported to be the single largest ethnic group in the world without a country of their own. The area called Kurdistan, home to 25 million of these people, is a mountainous region stretching some 200,000 miles from the south-eastern edge of Turkey, along the north-eastern border of Syria, touching northern Iraq and western Iran. Those who have fled the area have done so to the Middle East, Central Asia, Australia, Europe and North America.

Kurdish nationalism must be understood within the context of the history of what are now different regions that once made up a singular area known as Kurdistan. Except for the Kurdish region in Iran, this vast area was under part of the Ottoman Empire from 1299–1918. The Ottoman strategy towards the Kurds was to allow them autonomy, and to maintain their social structures and cultural traditions as a way of negating Kurdish nationalism. In the post-World War I Turkish state the aim of defusing and appeasing Kurdish nationalism remained the same, but the strategy was one of exclusion and dependency, creating displacement and anger, which incited the mobilisation of the Turkish Kurdish nationalist movement (Ahmetbeyzade 1999:188–9).

In Iraq the Kurds faced Western interference under a British mandate given under the Treaty of Sevres at the end of World War I in 1918 until independence was granted by the British in 1932. While the British mandate allowed for limited freedom for the Kurds, under an Arab state there was a cohesive Arabisation policy and stifling of debate around the 'Kurdish question' (McDowall 2000).

There are many colonial histories experienced by the Kurds; therefore, discussions of Kurdish nationalism – including the role of women within these nationalist movements – must be situated within regional, social, local and international contexts (Ahmetbeyzade 1999:204). Mojab (2001b:116–31) discussed how the Kurdish nationalist movement's preoccupation with self-rule overshadowed the agenda regarding the status of women. Mojab (2001b:116–31) identified Kurdish women as an integral part of perceptions of nation building, and their sexuality in particular, as pure, chaste and virginal, mapped out as the embodiment of the motherland. This idea of the production of the nation through women's bodies is also prevalent in the work of Gedalof (2003:94–100), who recognised a similar process of gendering the nation being played out during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

Mojab & Abdo (2004) and Mojab (2001a; 2001b) provide useful sources for raising awareness of the gendered cultural governances that Kurdish women experience through the expectation of women as moral pure, good motherhood, virtuous wives, and good housekeepers who do not strive for professional success. Kurdish women are encouraged to hope for early marriages, preferably before the age of 25, and to remain sexually inexperienced (otherwise risking shame to their family's honour). This expectation that Kurdish women should embody gendered Kurdish cultural 'norms' (Mojab & Ando 2004; Gedalof 2003; Mojab 2001a; Mojab 2001b), and representing male honour, is in stark contrast to expectations for Kurdish men and boys, who are not vilified for being sexually experienced, but are instead encouraged to explore sexual relationships. Both Mojab and Abdo (2004) and Mojab's (2001a; 2001b) work provides a sobering illustration of the commonness of domestic abuse perpetrated by men and patriarchal domination and control exercised over Kurdish women.

It has been noted that in the daily lives of Kurdish women it is not unusual to have experienced physical and psychological humiliation, torture and death threats because of the social, political and economic complexities of their region; and post-migration they often feel alienated, excluded and inferior due to problems with the use of language and the experience of racism. Furthermore, they are often plagued by permanent economic problems such as unemployment, inaccessible health care, bad housing and poor living conditions, and family conflict, which can be a cause of predominant depression (Adlim 2005:1–2). Such migrant women constitute a social group that not only faces separation from family, but also many forms of physical violence and oppression, yet they are more likely to accept hazardous working conditions and low salaries (often below the minimum wage), with many of the women exposed to serious health risks (Obando 2000:1).

During the regime of Saddam Hussein there was, in theory, a commitment to equality between men and women, but the Home Office 'Country Assessment' stated that in practice, this equality is hard to determine (UKBA 2011). The former regime in Iraq identified women as a vulnerable group because they suffered as a consequence of the sanctions imposed by the United Nations, citing the fact that women's physical and mental well-being was adversely affected as a direct result of food and medical shortages. The Home Office 'Country Assessment' (UKBA 2011) prior to the 2003 Coalition invasion pointed to the loss of jobs, rising prices, and deteriorating supplies of food and health care as sources of difficulty for Iraqi women.

Since April 2000 in the Kurdish northern Iraq region immunity for so called 'honour crimes' has been withdrawn, largely due to the influence of feminist organisations through the 1990s (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011). However, such crimes continue both within and outside the region and any laws abolishing immunity have not consistently been enforced. In the Kurdish northern region there are also a number of active women's organisations, with the latest Home Office 'Iraq Country of Origin Information' (UKBA 2011) reporting that women who live in the rural areas are most likely to be adversely affected by so called 'honour killings' and ill treatment.[i]

Mojab (2001a:16) and Galletti (2001:209-20) demystified previous suggestions that Kurdish women are freedom fighters who have enjoyed equality with, along with independence and emancipation from, Kurdish men. Although, they also point out that this is, at least, to a much greater degree than for non-Kurdish Middle Eastern women. McDonald (2001) discusses the patriarchal social structures that are embedded in Kurdish culture, and that pervade Kurdish women's lives whether they are from Iraq, Iran, Turkey or Syria. Hassanpour (2001) deconstructs and decodes the Kurdish language, music, tradition and history to illustrate that Kurdish women experience patriarchal discrimination and oppression. A 2002 report by Palmer (UNHCR 2011), carried out as part of the Women's Resource Project, discusses domestic violence experienced by Iraqi Kurdish women in their home country, and Mojab (2001b) exposed oppression, fear of physical violence and the imposition of cultural rules governing behaviour operating regularly within Kurdish women's lives. There is little evidence to suggest that the situation has changed post the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Research that has been carried illuminates continued political disenfranchisement and patriarchal governance and oppression of Iraqi women (Sadig Al-Ali 2007), although it focuses on the experiences of Iraqi Arab women and dismisses women from the 'Kurdish-controlled areas in the north' as not subject to the 'same pressures and threats applied to [*other*] women throughout Iraq' (Sadig Al-Ali 2007:242). Significantly, since 2003 some returning Kurdish ex-patriot women have accessed political power and engaged in grass roots feminist activity, but this has resulted in tensions between those women who fled Iraqi and those who stayed; evoking questions of 'who is speaking'

(Spivak cited in Landry & Maclean 1996:15–28, 267–86).

Human rights groups such as Amnesty International (Amnesty 2011) have reported Iraqi women suffering psychological trauma as a result of being raped while imprisoned under the previous regime, along with incidents of extortion and sexual assault by government officials and oppositional groups, all perpetrated as a way of ensuring cooperation and submission. The pre-2004 Home Office 'Country Assessment' reported a significant disparity between the numbers of men and women in the Kurdish areas of Iraq, as tens of thousands of Kurdish men disappeared during and after the 1988 Anfal Campaign. Domestic violence is said to occur, but there are no official statistics available, and such issues are dealt with largely within the extended family.

Iraqi Kurdish women are representative of a minority within a majority population of migrants in the UK[ii]; with the women who participated in this research either dependent upon their husbands' asylum claims or were living in the UK under the family reunion scheme. There was, however, one woman who migrated to the UK on a British passport, completely independently from her husband, leaving her son behind in Iraq, having obtained the passport through her own birthright. In terms of immigration status, the majority of the women are heavily dependent upon their husbands. In fact, rather than being allowed to remain in the UK, much like the privilege their husbands enjoyed, the women were issued temporary visa status for two years. This means that they had to wait for four years before they could apply for the same immigration status as their husbands, and one more year before they could apply for British passports, at the cost of over £800 (UKBA 2011).

With the women in the UK subject to their husbands' status, they could remain there on the proviso of also staying in their marriages. The women who were dependent upon their husbands' outstanding asylum claims could lodge a claim in their own right if their marriages were to end, but with the initial main claimants' reasons for asylum no longer under consideration, and no initial statements of reason for asylum made by the women plus the gendered nature of the UK asylum decision process, a favourable outcome to their claims would be significantly compromised (Crawley 2000:199-223).

The women in the UK under their husbands' asylum claims, or for those who have been granted a positive decision, would have recourse to public funds. This is not the case for women on family reunion visas, who constituted just over one third of the Kurdish women interviewed in this research. These women do not have the right to access free or UK student status education fees, nor do they have the right to take up employment for a significant length of time. It would be technically possible for the women on family reunion visas to lodge a claim for asylum if their marriages were to disintegrate, and therefore to access public funds; moreover, in practice such a claim would be viewed with great suspicion because of the initial way in which the women entered the UK, and would most likely not be favourably assessed (Crawley 2000:199-223). When they first entered the UK only one of the women interviewees did so completely independently of her husband, and therefore with the right to access mainstream benefits. All the other women were in vulnerable positions of financial and practical dependency upon their husbands.

Recent legislation introduced in 2007 has seen the cost of applying for British nationality increase dramatically, and since 2006 there has also been a requirement that one pass a 'Life in the UK' test, or a 'Life in the UK' course at an additional cost, as proof of the English language skills that qualify one to apply for British nationality. In September 2011 funding for ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) courses has been significantly curtailed with funding only available to those who access mainstream benefits. With limited access to the education

system and more specifically English language courses, and often total financial dependency upon husbands, the practicalities as well as the affordability of obtaining British nationality, and therefore the advantages and privileges it provides, potentially remain out of reach for many Kurdish women in the UK, leaving them with limited rights and choices.

This paper now briefly turns to an explanation of the methods and methodology employed in carrying out the research in order to offer some further contextualisation.

Methodology

The research grounding this paper was a cross-cultural, women-centred study in which recognition of situated knowledges (Haraway 1991)[iii] was an important feature of the methodological approach. Using semi-structured interviews, twenty three women re-settling in the south-eastern sector of the UK were interviewed. A convenient sampling strategy of snowballing existing relationships with Kurdish men and women local to the Dover area brought forward participants. The women interviewed were all from either Dover in Kent or Croydon in Surrey, with the exception of one woman based in Birmingham. The participants described themselves as Iraqi nationals of Kurdish ethnicity, and as Sunni Muslims. Their ages ranged from eighteen to sixty years old, with the vast majority of them being between the ages of twenty nine and thirty five; also the majority of them—seventeen out of the twenty-three—had children. All but two of the women were married, and all but one had also been in education at least until the age of sixteen, with many having attended college and institutions of further and higher education. The women had migrated to the UK during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Approximately half of the women originated from the more central Kirkuk region of Iraq, which was not a part of the Kurdish autonomous zone during the time of Saddam Hussein, with the others originating from the more northern Sulymaniah and Erbil areas. Unfortunately full demographic information has been redacted from publication material in order to maintain confidentiality as this was an important factor in participants agreeing to be interviewed.

This research intended, firstly, to explore the connections between the resettlement experiences of Iraqi Kurdish Muslim women migrants in the UK and the interlocking subjectivities that relate to the women's gender, race, nationality, religion, ethnicity, and immigration status—in effect, 'differences that matter' (Ahmed 1998:192). 'Interlocking subjectivities' refers here to Ahmed's work (1998:111, 194) on mutually-constitutive social subjectivities impacting individuals' lives and making a difference to their lived experiences. The concept of the Kurdish women's resettlement 'experiences' in the UK was about investigating the sociopolitical meaning of those experiences—experiences that involve relationships of power between different agents, and an exploration of how that power operates.

Guidance offered on how to reconcile criticism of carrying out cross-cultural research states that researchers 'are people too', and that they 'too inhabit and help construct society' (Stanley & Wise 1993:148). Remaining vigilant so as not to fall into a narcissistic study of researcher situated knowledge meant embedding a reflexive character into the methodology to ensure that the subjective nature of the women's position remained the essence of the research process. Pearce (1995) has called for greater self-reflexivity in research. There was therefore a continual process of re-evaluating myself in relation to the research, with an awareness of why the researcher is doing the research, and re-evaluating the researcher's own experiences, admitting my 'lack of control and somehow writing this into [my] script' (Pearce 1995:93). Harding & Norberg (2005) warn of the impossibility of negating power differences within

feminist research, despite great efforts to achieve it. This meant that whilst I engaged in a continuous deconstructing of my own position, as a white working class British woman close to founding an academic career from the project outcome, in relation to the Kurdish women I was confronted with the reality that my self-reflexivity was self-orientating the research in a contrary manoeuvre.

At this juncture I moved from methodological theorising towards active engagement with the Kurdish women in the form of one to one interviews. This reoriented the project away from my self-analysis and closer to an exchange among women (Oakley 2005), where not only points of difference dominated, but where associations could also become apparent (Yeoh et al 2002).

By locating situated knowledges (Haraway 1991) within the research, by remaining reflexive throughout the process, and by participating in 'close encounters' (Ahmed 2000) it has been possible to find a space from which to write, and to examine differences and possible associations without abandoning a project that also shed light on women's experiences and advocated for social change (Ang-Lygate 1997:181).

Research Data Results and Discussion

The research data illustrates disclosures by the women that reinforce how they identified the West (in general) and the UK (in this particular case) as a place of emancipation for women, and of how they expressed a desire to incorporate this perceived total freedom and equality into their lives in the UK. By doing this, they created a picture of life in Iraq for Kurdish women as somewhat subjugated and oppressed, in contrast to the lives of women in the West. In contradiction to this definition of oppression and subjugation, they also often defined the Kurds as advocates and believers in women's rights and emancipation. This presented a somewhat ambiguous picture of their situation, vacillating between extremes of being oppressed and being emancipated; crucially though for the Kurdish women their notions of Kurdish cultural liberalism was both useful in 'self-affirming and Other-rejecting' (Brown 2008:24).

The women always saw themselves as more emancipated than other nationally and ethnically different Middle Eastern women. They sought to essentialise and 'other[iv]' those groups of women as automatically more oppressed and subjugated than themselves, but had also seen Western women as automatically more liberated than themselves. An interviewee illustrated this well by stating, 'I look at Arab women and she is wearing a scarf and this. [She gestures the full face veil and gloves]. They cover the eyes and everything'. Another recounting, 'I mean, we have a problem here in that whenever they see you with Black hair they think you are an Arab, or, ah, that you are a fundamental Muslim' [07/2007].

The women located themselves along a continuum of women's oppression as somewhere between 'absolutely oppressed' and 'not yet quite fully emancipated'. They resisted the label for themselves of Other, yet reinforced the privileged, although homogenised, status of Western women by often making generalised statements in relation to British born women such as, 'Here in England I think it's easy. There is no difficulty for you' [05/2007]. By locating themselves along a continuum of women's oppression somewhere and sometimes between 'oppressed' and 'emancipated', rather than placing themselves at either extreme, they not only resist and transgress discourses that seek to govern them as only oppressed, but they also complicate the notion of women being shaped as only 'Western' (and therefore emancipated) women or non-Western (and therefore oppressed) women. That is to say, they challenge the idea of women standing in total isolation of, and in opposition to each other.

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The accounts that the women gave of their experiences of male control and governance over them were often violent and graphic, and sat in stark contrast to the freedoms and equality they often hoped to find in the UK; they also provided a contrast to the reputation of the Kurds who, as a group, the women felt advocated and fought for women's rights and emancipation. The Peshmergas (Kurdish guerrilla freedom fighters) in particular, were held up as an example of advocates of women's rights and equality, and as the facilitators of women's emancipation. An example comes from one interviewee, who said, 'If the Peshmergas have freedom in my country, the ladies will be free as well' [10/2007].

Oppressive cultural experiences bind the Kurds, men and women, in a combined struggle (Minh-ha 1988; Kandyidoti 1991), and some postcolonial feminists have suggested that ethnic and national oppressions provide platforms for commonality between the men and women, whilst others propose that they detract from commonalities between women through experiences of gendered forms of oppression (Bhabha 1994:125–30; Suleri 1992:765-9). Mojab (2007) has highlighted that the patriarchal abuses experienced by Kurdish women is often overlooked and removed from discussions that favour a focus on how Kurdish women organise in diaspora and what that means for transnational theories. It is important therefore, to illuminate those experiences in this paper, and to explore specifically what these mean in terms of the politicisation of notions of liberalism and the implications for relationships of power between women themselves.

A contradiction to notions of Kurdish men as facilitators and advocates of women's equality, freedom and rights came when the Kurdish women gave contrasting evidence regarding the oppressive and sometimes violent nature of their domestic relationships with Kurdish men. Whilst disclosure was, in general, in the third person over half the Kurdish women told of experiences of domestic abuse, specifically referring to husbands as the main source of oppression and domestic abuse in their lives. Some of the Kurdish women spoke specifically about sexual violence against women, explaining how this was a taboo topic within the Kurdish communities, and that it was violence that was, and would be, denied; nonetheless, it was happening. They also disclosed that it was an issue that caused a great deal of concern for Kurdish women, both the fact that it happened and the threat of it happening to them. An interviewee recounted the devastating psychological affects such sexual violence had when she said of her experiences in Iraq:

Sometimes the problem is that some girls, who are small[er], than their cousins or bothers or uncle will have sex with the girl. And then she is scared! She is scared because she can't say anything about it. Then, when she grows up and she gets married, they will kill the girl; then no girl. Also, for example, if the mother marries a stepfather and the stepfather has sex with her, she will have too many problems. All the time there was a doctor who went to hospitals [mental health institutions] where these girls or ladies were, and he said the problem for these girls and women were men [08/2007].

This violence was not related to the environment or context. The women maintained that it happened in Iraq, and it followed women to the UK and happened here. Women's bodies and sexuality were dominated, controlled, and violated by men, and were the site of gender-specific violence and abuse. The women wanted it acknowledged that they faced physical and sexual violence and abuse, and all of the women who disclosed this information had also spoken of certain groups of men facilitating for their rights and emancipation. There was a complexity to

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the Kurdish women's experiences of gender-related and gender-specific domination and of emancipation that was contradictory and co-existent. There was a constant co-existence of different degrees of feelings and experiences of both oppression and emancipation that impacted on their lives.

The women spoke about domestic abuse, including sexual violence, oppression, and feelings of being controlled and subjugated, and whilst domestic abuse was spoken about in the third person, some of the women still revealed intimate information about the relationships of power within their marriages. Marriage was pointed to as the single most salient relationship of power that worked to constrain and dominate the women. In particular, sexual violence and sexual relations within marriage seemed to be forms of domination. An example was offered by one research participant was of her cousin's experiences:

> My cousin, she has been married about sixteen years. She told me, 'Everyday, he hits me: once or twice or three times'. I said, 'Why does he hit you? Why don't you go to the police?' She said, 'I am ashamed. It would be shameful to d that'. I got very angry and I said, 'Why don't you go to the police?' She said once she did and they came and her husband told them, 'She is just moaning because she wants a new house'. I said, 'Why didn't you tell the police that it wasn't about this and you didn't say these things?' But she said she was scared of her husband [08/2007].

The revelations from the women provided a retelling of the discourse of patriarchal control and domination over women (MacKinnon 1991). Male domination and control was a pivotal presence in the women's lives and indicates that, for the Iraqi Kurdish women, men were both an important factor (as they had some influence and part to play in their struggle for emancipation and equality), as well as often being part of the reason for that struggle. A minority of the Kurdish women spoke of some sense of commonality between them and Kurdish men in terms of experiences of domination and oppression under the regime of Saddam Hussein. But despite this, many more of the women identified greater commonalities with Western women and many of the concepts held within liberal Western feminist arguments and movements, and this is especially true of those relating to equality rights, and men's oppression and domination of women. One interviewee spoke of a friend who experienced a violent relationship with her heavy-drinking autochthonous British husband. Oppressive and violent partnership relationships were considered a point of commonality for all women by the majority of the Kurdish women.

What are interesting are the generalised liberal discourses of Western women's freedom and looking at how a proximity to that works to define the Kurdish women against Other oppressed non-Western women. This defining of their social and political background allowed them to define themselves against particular ethnic and national communities of women, which also provided a proximity to the universal liberal principals of equal rights and individual liberty that, if not fully enjoyed by Western women as identified by one interviewee, then at least a main point of resistance and agitation. An example comes from a participant who was studying at an institution of higher education. Her assumptions about Western women's equality and emancipation were challenged, allowing for an exploration and dismantling of polarised differentiating cultural positions between women, towards the 'universal, hence non-cultural, principles of liberalism' (Brown 2008:21), which allowed for an appreciation of commonality between women, and therefore a sense of 'sisterhood'. The interviewee describes:

We had a presentation last week on the role of women in terms of education and employment and politics in this country. So a colleague, a friend of mine, did it on England. We saw very interesting figures and information about how it is. Women still get less pay at work and experience sexual discrimination, and these things are still here, and it is really shocking when you are in the heart of democracy; you can't believe it [10/2007].

That sense of joining up in a 'sisterhood' (Mojab 2001b) movement of resistance, of a commonality across cultural differences happens because of the Kurdish women's identification with 'liberalism's conceit about the universality of its basic principles' (Brown 2008:21). Unfortunately such work comes at the expense of the subjugation of particular Other women who provide the necessary, and therefore bearable, juxtaposing presence of the objectionable. This was evidenced by the way the Kurdish women re-positioned themselves in relation to women who had not experienced migration to the West by re-orienting their identity as liberators of those women who remain in Iraq. An example comes from an interviewee who said:

I am driving a car here, but there you still have to wear a dress and coat—you shouldn't wear trousers; it's not nice for a lady. But now, it's changed. Now it's better. I tell you, since 2000 when I came here, and other(s) came here, things in this country are working to change everything in my country. Yeah, I want to tell you. For example, I have a sister, and I sent her a picture of me, and she said, 'Oh why am I not wearing these clothes'? [10/2007].

Encounter with, and closeness to, the West illustrates the type of liberalism as Brown (2008) has proposed it, 'as always already being the issue of miscegenation with its fundamentalist Other, as containing this Other within, and thus as having a certain potential for recognising and connecting with the Other without' (Brown 2008:24). Through the experience of migration the Kurdish women reform relationships of power among women themselves because they assert neo-liberalist thinking as integral to their resettled identity. The women reify and reproduce certain Other women in opposition to themselves whilst at the same time sometimes experiencing being the Other themselves. The migration experience is significant because it can illuminate where there are common differences among women and where alliances form (Mohanty 2003).

Conclusion

Mindful of Mohanty's (2003) extensive work on sisterhood and coalitions among women, the data informing this paper shifted from being about uncovering the Kurdish women's resettlement experiences to more about exploring how conceivably different women speak to and encounter one another; and in this sense has been an exercise in asking how these engagements took place and what they achieved. There were points of challenge for me as a researcher through the disclosure of the gains rendered and taken by me, and also of the uncomfortable mutuality at times as points of associations were formed at the expense of others. And it is precisely because of these agitating solidarities that it must become a place from which to pursuit more sustainable encounters among women. Rather than a point of closure, discomfort around differences should constitute points of departure into further discomforts and co-accountabilities

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that call for deeper reflexivity, individually and collectively, on possible unities and shared purposes. This means proactively establishing and developing more opportunities for combinations of feminist scholarship and social actions that are co-created explorations attentive to the potential for connecting and bonding rather than separating women, and that are committed to revealing how such ties are reached. Engaging in exchanges of knowledge among women rather than in research about or with women is one departure grounded for developing more reciprocal relationships among women. In relation to this specific paper a multi-sited knowledge exchange approach (Vives 2012), that works to engage Kurdish women from Iraq who experienced migration as the ones who stayed at home, may yet provide further considerations of points of disconnection and connection among women.

Experiences of migration offer a reconstituting approach to notions of what transnational feminism is, and offer insight into what it could prospectively be. The migration experiences of the Iraqi Kurdish women in particular have introduced a distinctive approach to notions of women across socio-cultural divides. Their desire to explore, speak about and share their commonalities—across differences—offers hope for others, of a joining up that could yet provide potential for women of difference to encounter each other in increasingly positive, and less destructive ways.

i There are also UK-based awareness campaigns and organisations – for example, the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO) – that offer advice and resources to women under threat of honour-based crimes (http://www.ikwro.org.uk 2011).

ii In terms of nationality, Iraqis constituted the largest number of asylum-seekers worldwide in 2002, with 59,000 new claimants. The UK received some 110,700 asylum applications in 2002, with Iraq, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Somalia and China being the main countries of origin. Countries of origin tend to reflect global political and military activities as well as historical connections, such as a colonial past between the country of origin and the receiving country. Over the 10-year period 1992-2001, asylum applications were received from 239,013 Iraqis within the European Union, steadily rising from 11,085 to 40,577 over the decade. Statistics on applications made by Iraqi asylum-seekers in the UK since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq indicate a dramatic drop, but this must be understood in relation to the introduction of the 'faster, firmer, fairer' approach (Pirouet 2001, 155), which has seen ever-tightening asylum and refugee legislation in the UK, along with the social and political situation in Iraq.

iii Haraway (1991, pp. 183–201) has talked about the un-usefulness of traditional forms of research that disengage with the research process and seek to produce truth through so-called objectivity. For her, claiming objectivity in research is a failure to recognise difference, privilege, power, and control. Haraway (1991) argues that objective knowledge simply does not exist, and that knowledge is situated within the subjectivity of our lives and the social and political positions that we inhabit.

iv 'Othering' is used as a binary form of knowledge. In the Saidian sense (1978) this relates directly to how the Occident has conceptualised and invented the Orient, and thereby itself, through the production of the Orient's contrasting image (Said 1978, 1-2, 5-7).

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