

# Can Mehabad guard the Kurdish Woman?

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-Perhaps Fadime Sahindal's fate is one of the first things that come to mind when thinking about woman's rights in Kurdish society. Fadime was an advocate of Kurdish woman's rights in Sweden, championing against the so called honor-killings. Soon she fell in love with a Swedish man and tried to have a so called "modern life." After all she had a love affair with a non-Kurdish man, illegitimately, and sided against the will of her own family. Her father and little brother were frequently threatening Fadime, seriously indicating that they would kill her if she did not stop behaving like a Swede.

Fadime's case become national. A range of articles, TV interviews etc, were published in a bid to fend off the dangerous resting over her life. She even delivered a speech at the Swedish Parliament telling about the difficulties facing the Kurdish woman in Sweden. Nothing helped. Her father decided to take her life in order to repair the damage inflicted upon their family. Nalin Peggul, a woman, then the Swedish MP of Kurdish origin, said that of all the losers in the Fadime case, her mother was the one who lost biggest, both her daughter and a husband.

"If truth to be told Kurdish woman live under tremendous pressure. On the one hand modern society requires that they participate in the civic life, and on the other hand pressure is huge from the family's side, urging them to move in line

with the Kurdish traditions and customs," Wanawsha Najim, first year student tells me who also indicates that steps have been taken to improve women's conditions in Kurdistan. But she says that the situation is much direr in the villages than the cities.

In 2002 the Barzani administration criminalized the so called honour killings in the Kurdish enclave and although few have been punished for crimes against women's rights, yet many believe that the criminalizing it self reduces the number of the committed crimes.

"Well, I don't really think that we will be able to prevent all the atrocities done against the women and their rights. You have to realize that much of our own judiciary law is borrowed from the Iraqi law, and in that law there are no direct references to protecting woman from honour killings. We have tried to add some articles in favour of the Kurdish woman. Hopefully it will bear fruit," Adnan Zaweti, a lawyer at Irbil courthouse tells me.

The pressure became even more urgent when a series of murderings of Kurdish women inside and outside Kurdistan made headlines in the news. The Barzani government felt that it better do something about it or the image of the Kurdish men as civic loving people would be annihilated for ever.

"We must learn how to proceed to increase the percentage of women in decision-making positions; how to change our laws in ways that correspond to our new conditions to democratise

Kurdistan; how to strengthen the position of women within the family, in her decision related to education, marriage, child-birth, and political, economic and social activities," Nechirvan Barzani said in recent written statement delivered for the Kurdish women's conference in Stockholm.

## Mehabad's mission

Mehabad Qaradaghi's appointment to one of the top advisers of the Prime Minister is historic not because Mr Barzani has chosen a female adviser; rather the choice is conspicuous since Qaradaghi is to represent the Kurdish women's views within the government, and directing the government's position in regard to woman's issue.

The appointment came after months of negotiations between Mrs Qaradaghi and the Barzani administration. At a nontentatious installation ceremony Mrs Qaradgih stated that the appointment meant a positive step towards improving women's conditions in Kurdistan adding that the biggest issue is whether the government will make truth out of its promises regarding women's issues.

## Where is Mehabad?

Qaradaghi lives currently in Sweden, something many have viewed with astonishment considering the fact that she should be among Kurdish women at home to have an opinion about their condition.

"I have always worked for Kurdistan even if I have lived

abroad. All my work is dedicated for the Kurdish community. Leaving in Sweden for 13 years have given me a different perspective in terms of writing, reading, and feminist work. Me and my experiences will return to Kurdistan and as always I will be working in that line," Mrs Qaradaghi tells me via email.

Let's have a look at her record:

- She was born in 1966 in Kifri in Kirkuk province.

- started writing poetry at 12 years of old and in 1980 she published her first art piece.

- Due to her political stances, she was sentenced to one year of imprisonment (1980/1981-) in Kifri.

- Until 1991, she was a member of Kurdistan Ranjdaran Assembly.

- She married in 1992 and has a six-year daughter, Shakar.

- She has been residing in Sweden since 1993.

- Her research includes work within economics, sociology and education

- Up to now, she has produced 23 books. The books are about poetry, stories, researches about sociology and feminism.

Mr. Saman Hussain is a teacher in college of Arts English Dept. He says that, "Although I do not know her, but her appointment as an advisor is of great importance. It is important that women's voice reach the decision makers in Kurdistan. It is good to see that the government puts women's issues on their agenda. Mehabad Qaradaghi can certainly help a lot but for this she needs to be here and be acquainted with the

Kurdish women's problems on the ground. I hope she returns to Kurdistan."

## The challenges facing the Kurdish woman

But the problem is perhaps not just Mrs Qaradaghi being outside Kurdistan.



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Kurds have been in a political struggle for the past seven centuries. The Kurdish society is too much focused on liberating itself from the political oppression imposed by the superior powers in the region. So liberation has occupied a special place in their movement, and men have been important elements of that process. Little space has been given to the women to act. If Qaradaghi is to accomplish any changes she must first begin with introducing a new way of defining the role of the Kurdish woman within the movement; have women been

effective and helpful to bring together what is now Kurd call "men's revolution, men's movement, and men's effort."

"We live in what is defined as the Eastern culture, where woman is seen as half human. No body has really listened to what the Kurdish woman says. Men are encouraged not to listen to their women. In such a

culture if a woman is appointed to a high position in the form of an adviser is a great development in itself," Mrs Qaradaghi says adding that one should look deeper for other more important reasons within the Kurdish history for the weak position that is granted to the women.

Problems do not stop there. Some say that even if the government is succeeding in legislating laws in favor of the women, they will be unable to legislate people's attitudes and personal positions. Critics say that the advocates of women's rights as well as other active intellectuals should stay out of the political power. Mehabad Qaradaghi says:

"The intellectual should not remain passive. S/he should be fully active in his or her community. The changes need time. Inside or outside the power, one must always take full advantage of opportunities to speed up changes and transformations. I think power should itself be intellectual; if the un intellectual governs, the country will head towards its decline... those who say that intellectual should stay outside the political power, are actually saying that (only) the ignorant are supposed to be within the power. This is of course illogical. The important thing is that the intellectual preserves its identity when it enters into the power circles."

It is still soon to judge Mrs Qaradaghi and as one University professor said, one should wait first with their judgment till she moves then hopefully we will do not need to judge her but praise her for the things she has done for the Kurdish woman.



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