IJOKS
ISSN: 2149-2751
e-ISSN: 2149-2751
International Journal of Kurdish Studies
http://www.ijoks.com/

Article

International Journal of Kurdish Studies
9 (1), pp. 1-17
http://www.ijoks.com

The Position of Kurdish Women in the View of the British in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

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Received: Sep 17, 2022 **Reviewed**: Oct 31, 2022 **Accepted**: Dec 10, 2022

Abstract

When British travelers visited Kurdish regions in the first half of the twentieth century they recorded their memories and opinions on Kurdish society, especially the position of women. This article analyses the text the British travelers produced to understand whether they were written from an orientalist perspective. The freedom of Kurdish women impressed the British travellers and officers, and in particular they differentiated between Kurdish women and other Muslim societies. They admired the high status of Kurdish women in society regardless of class, in both rural and urban communities. That freedom was reflected in their clothing, lack of face coverings and confident treatment of foreigners. Women participated in politics, became leaders of their communities, and educated themselves, leading British travelers to make comparisons between Kurdish and European women. This article challenges the idea that British travelers considered Kurdish women solely from an orientalist perspective. While orientalism determined many of their views on Kurdish society, British views of Kurdish women were informed by comparison with Europeans.

Keywords: Kurdish Women, Liberty, Martial, Oriental

Recommended citation:
Muhammad, Q. (2023). The Position of Kurdish Women in the View of the British in the First Half of the Twentieth Century. *International Journal of Kurdish Studies 9* (1), 1-17,
DOI: **https://doi.org/10.21600/ijoks.1176572**

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Introduction

Kurdish society has been living in many parts of the world such as Armenia, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey throughout the history (Babayiğit & Dilbaz, 2015; Karacan & Babayiğit, 2017); hence, Kurds have always kept attention of various societies due to the fact that this language holds many dialects and cultural aspects in various regions (Babayiğit, 2020; Babayiğit,2021a; Babayiğit,2021b). One can be claimed that imperial strategy ensured that the British enjoyed had a long history of visiting Kurdish regions. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many British travelers, officers, administrators and soldiers visited even the most remote Kurdish regions for different purposes before and after the First World War, and especially after they had annexed southern Kurdish regions (Mosul Wilaiat) to the newly founded Iraq. During the period of the British Mandate, they stayed in the region for long periods. It is rare to find a British traveler, military officer, merchant or administrator who visited Kurdish regions without recording opinions on the position of Kurdish women. This article attempts to identify the perspectives of the British in the first half of the twentieth century with regard to the role of Kurdish women in society. While those British travelers who were passing through the region on their way to India or visiting other parts of the Middle East tended to discussed Kurdish society in brief, those with political or administrative roles in the region provided more detailed commentary.

The travelers tried to understand the ways in which Kurdish women were important in society, even though did not investigate why the position of the women was significant. But they did make comparisons. Kurdish women enjoyed a greater degree of liberty than women in other Muslim societies, but they also resembled British women in their demands for their rights and their moral code. Critical understanding of British perspectives of the East has long been dominated by concepts of Orientalism, whereby Europeans are regarded as "powerful, civilised, clothed, and cultured; the rest of the world [as] subdued, exotic, savage, half-naked and primitive" (Wintle, 1999, p.160). In Edward Said's classic formulation, Westerners considered the East a suitable place of fantasy, sherbet, daydreams, dancing girls, harems, ointments and princesses (Said, 2003)[put quotation marks]. Rana Kabbani believed that Westerners believed the East to be the site of "lascivious sensuality". These beliefs endured from the Middle Ages in Europe until the twentieth century, reaching a high point in the nineteenth century on account of

the increased contact between the Orient and the Occident (Kabbani, 1996). Europeans considered that Oriental women often elicited feelings in them that oscillated between contempt, pity, outrage and desire. They were often presented as the victim of sex (Kabbani, 1986), in contrast to ''the ideal of the vulnerable, spiritual and pure Englishwoman''. (Mabilat, 2006, p.44). They were also perceived as different from Turk (Ottoman) women who were depicted as short, fatigued and sick, especially in comparison to the assumed physique and health of English women (Odams, 1996). This article is an attempt to look beyond the stereotypes to understand how the British travelers portray Kurdish women, and how far their views were determined by Orientalism.

Previous scholars have focused on particular areas of Kurdish society. Martin Van Bruinessen argued that only the Kurdish women of the elite and noble families enjoyed a considerable amount of liberty (Bruinessen, 2001). Ahmet Serdar Aktürk, tried to marginalize the role of Kurdish women. He relied on Kurdish folklore songs which suggest that Kurdish women were oppressed by their male society. However songs, while evocative, do not provide strong or conclusive evidence.

This study is based on original sources, mostly the memoirs of British officers and travelers.

It attempts to illustrate the beliefs of the British at the time, and to evaluate British attitudes to Kurdish society and Kurdish women.

The article consists of the introduction and four sections. Section one discusses the important position of Kurdish women in society, paying attention to their high status, their liberty, and the extent to which they could make contact with the opposite sex. In the second section, the article discusses the leadership, political, and martial characteristics of Kurdish women in society. The third section discusses the status of marriage and the fourth section discusses the level of education amongst Kurdish women and girls.

Section 1:The Importance of Kurdish women

The section discusses the important role of the Kurdish women in society, including the degree of freedom they enjoyed in speaking to foreigners, in comparison with other women in Muslim society. The freedom of Kurdish women can also be seen in their dress, leading the British to

observe similarities between Kurdish women and Europeans. In the second part of the article the decline in the importance of Kurdish women is addressed.

1:1 Liberty of Kurdish Women

This section discusses the liberty of Kurdish women and their important position in society, in the view of the British. The common orientalist stereotypes about females in the East were negative: women of the East were presented as weak, sensual, and worried. By contrast it was the freedom and the high status of the Kurdish women which wasdiscussed by British officials and travelers. One such was a Dr. Ross who worked among the Bakhtyari Kurds (Asatrian, 2009), who were settled in the Lursitani bzurg, which is situated in the lands between Isfahan and the Karun River(Ross, 1921). While working there as a medic, she wrote a diary and dedicated most of her book to the Bakhtyari women and girls. She had another perspective, which is significantly different from most of the Westerners. She wrote more positively about the tribe and their women, and believed that the important position accorded to women came from the role of the Prophet of Islam. During the early Islamic period, women had a high level of freedom. The Prophet had never advocated minimizing the role of women. Even in his last pilgrimage h concentrated on the rights of women. His wife Aysha was the army leader in the Camel battle. His daughter Fatima had a significant role in political issues, and his granddaughter Zainab also had a strong personality, but after the death of the Prophet, the role of women was gradually minimized (Ross, 1921). The positive role of the Prophet is ignored by Orientalist perspectives rooted in a negative understanding of Islam and the Prophet Mohammed.

The liberty of Kurdish women attracted the attention of the British, and many praised Kurdish women. For example, G. E. Hubbard who crossed most parts of the Kurdish regions, noted his views on the Kurds in Hawraman. He wrote about how, for example, Kurdish men did not treat their women like slaves; rather they gave them the same liberty men had in society (Hubbard, 1917). For Hubbard, there was no gender discrimination, and that liberty which Kurdish women were given led them to become more confident, and to have a greater role in society. Mark Sykes, who frequently visited the country, obtained a large amount of information about the country and its people. He believed that Kurdish women and girls had considerable of freedom; they were treated well by men, and they could use guns and ride horses (Sykes, 1908). This is in clear contrast to Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, which considered that Europeans often

saw their role as a mission to teach notions of freedom and liberty to the Eastern people because they were ignorant of them (Said, 2003). Said's beliefs about Egyptian women cannot be applied to Kurdish women, especially in relation to the degree of freedom they enjoyed.

The Kurdish women's freedom in society was reflected in many aspects of their lives, such as the freedom to express their opinions, and to speak about their rights. Soane, for example held this view, noting that Kurdish women had enough liberty to speak out. According to him, Kurdish women could express themselves freely without filtration. They could speak about any topic without any judgment (Soane, 1914). This type of freedom could be seen among many Kurdish tribes. Mark Sykes in another account noted this freedom amongst different tribes of Kurds. He said that among the Zaza Kurds the women had more freedom because the women confidently had fun with the caravan (foreigners who crossed their areas) (Sykes, 1915). Besides, the Bakhtyari women could speak with foreigners such as European medical doctors (Ross, 1921). Freedom of speech meant women had the confidence to meet or welcome foreigners, in contrast with European beliefs that Eastern women were faithless and fickle (Kabbani, 1986).

In addition, the British positively differentiated Kurdish women from other Muslim women. Captain Hay, who spent two years in the Southern parts of Kurdish regions' considered that Kurdish women were much more respected than other Muslim women (Hay, 1921). Therefore, men gave them more rights. Coan (1939) like many of the British officers and travelers, could not hide his orientalist perspective on Kurdish society. He believed that some Kurds had a tendency towards criminal behavior, but that Kurdish women were different from other Muslim women, namely Persians and Turks. Kurdish women were accordded a greater amount of freedom than the Turkish and Persians, as Bengio has also argued (Bengio, 2016). British writers differentiated Kurdish women from other women in the East. That liberty was reflected in many ways, including dress.

The veil is one of the aspects that was often seen as identifying Oriental women according to European officials and travelers. The Eastern female was enigmatic, and the real person was hidden (Mabilat, 2006). The veil was also considered as a symbol of restriction, and a way of separating local women from others (foreigners) (Lewis, 2019). The British in many respects tried to represent Kurdish women as different from other Muslim communities, the style of clothing being one of them. They found Kurdish women in many parts of the country unveiled.

For example, according to Lynch, writing on the Bilki tribe in northern Kurdish areas'' Their women go about in perfect freedom and unveiled" (Lynch, 1901). Furthermore, Fredrick G Coan noted that the Kurdish men did not oblige their women to remain in seclusion and they did not wear a veil (Coan, 1939). From the European point of view, the people of the East separated their females and prevented them from mixing with the outside world, but the British did not see this amongst the Kurds. The Bakhtyari women in their villages had never veiled, which was according to the Prophet's permission (Ross, 1921). In addition, among the Balake Kurds who settled in the southern part of Sasun, the women were totally free and did not wear a veil (Lynch, 1901), unlike other Muslim women who could not go outside without a veil (Soane, 1914). Not wearing a veil distinguished Kurdish women from other Muslims but brought them closer to English women (Hubbard, 1917). British travelers portrayed Kurdish women as free and unmasked like European women.

The British officials and travelers went further however, and tried to find more similarities between them and European women. Ross recorded that one of the most important aspects of the life of the Bakhtayri women was their liberty, as they could do everything they wanted. The Bakhtayri women had, or obtained power, an achievement envied by many less successful suffragist women in Europe (Ross, 1921). This commentary confirms the difference between the treatment of and rights accorded to women in comparison to other women in the East. It does not fit with the Orientalist notion that highlighted mental differences as the main barrier between the assumed lazy Oriental people and the supposedly wise Occidental people (Kabbani, 1986).

There was another similarity between Kurdish and British women. Ross highlighted the moral codes which created a link between them. She observed that immorality was rare amongst the Bakhtyari women; in the twenty years she spent with them, there was just one case (Ross, 1921). Noel compared the situation with England at the time (Noel, 1920), and further noted that the Kurdish women had a great amount of liberty but they never misused it, and this added to the sense of their personal strength. Noel confirmed that prostitution had not been seen among the Kurds at all, suggesting they enjoyed a high status, rather than being regarded as the sexual servants of men. This is evidenced by the fact that in the Kurdish language there was' no word for prostitute' (Noel, 1920, p.85). Sykes argued that, the Kurds were emancipated but their moral codes and chastity were still very important, which differentiated them from other parts of the

Ottoman Empire (Sykes, 1915). For Noel ''the Turkish women close her veil and open their skirt, our women just do the opposite' (Noel, 1920,p.10).

Sykes observed that even the Kurdish women in the towns and cities had a great deal of freedom. In Sinjar, Rwanduz and Zakho (Kurdish towns) Kurdish women were swimming in public, which was very rare in other (non Kurdish) cities (Sykes, 1915). Sykes may have been drawing comparisons between Kurdish women of these towns and the women of the mixed cities like Mosul. He may also have been making a point about class: Kurdish women of all classes had a considerable degree of freedom. If they were presented as exotic, this was regarded as a positive point.

Another aspect of a free society seen among the Bakhtyary women, was property ownership. It is true that in the Islamic societies, and according to the Islamic rules, women had the right to obtain an income, but gradually they lost their rights and a woman's income was deemed to belong to a man, until the man in question had died. Among the Bakhtyary Kurds the Bibis, wives of chiefs, had their own income, which came from their villages (Ross, 1921). Financial independence conferred a substantial amount of liberty on women, and facilitated their participation in the local economy.

1.2:The decline in the position of Kurdish women

It is clear that Kurdish society had changed, especially as foreign lifestyles were adopted, leading to the abandonment of some of norms and culture. As society changed the role of women was transformed. Through reading the British accounts, it is clear that the high status of Kurdish women did not continue indefinitely. Wigram stated that the liberty of Kurdish women gradually declined, as he said the Kurds 'esteem for their women had decreased recently' (Wigram, 1922). According to Wigram, there were many fights and intertribal wars, but when the Kurds fought against each other, women were normally kept safe, and no one molested them; this situation had changed in the last few years (Wigram, 1922). Wigram's comment suggests that Kurdish tribal society had had a high respect for its women. While he did not analyse the reason behind the change, it was probably a result of the adoption of a modern lifestyle. As Kurds settled in various towns the status of women gradually started to decrease, and Kurdish men tried to limit the liberty of women and girls. This is particularly notable when we compare the comments of the British in the early t the twentieth century with later periods.

Section 2: The Political Role of Kurdish Women

This chapter focuses on two main points. British travellers and officers highlighted that the Kurdish women participated in political affairs in their local communities; in rural areas they had influence over their husbands, or they became the real tribal leaders of their communities. Even in the urban areas they had an important political role. In the second part of this section the martial role of women in their communities is explored.

2.1: The Leadership of Kurdish Women

The female leadership of the community in both rural and urban areas in Kurdish society was one of the aspects of society which attracted the British, and differentiated Kurdish women in their minds from the notion of the -'oriental' women. When the male leaders ruled their tribes, women exerted influence over them. According to Hay's experience, many of the chiefs were under the influence of their wives. These wives participated in decision making to prevent their husbands from making mistakes (Hay, 1921). Furthermore, the Kurdish women had the right to participate in political issues. These wives could also become powerful figures in governing entities or tribes. According to British texts, a Kurdish woman could become the chief of the tribe and the head of the village when her husband passed away and an infant son remained. She could also rule the village and the tribe until her child became an adult (Hay, 1921). When men went to war, the women participated in the council of their tribes (Coan, 1939), helping their male rulers to govern their community. V. Minorsky, (1945) believed that many Kurdish women could govern their community successfully in a number of ways.

Kurdish women themselves became tribal leaders. Near Rwanduz there was a female leader, named Fatima Khanum. According to Captain Hay her husband died before the defeat of the Ottomans in the First World War, and she became the leader of the tribe. Her village was situated between Faqian and Akoyan near Rwanduz, and Major Noel gave the authority to her. She had her own views about the rights of women, and Major Noel supported her. While some male chieftains did not want to govern under a female leader, they dared not disobey and cause trouble.

Fatima Khanum also had diplomatic ability as she helped the government to collect the sheep-taxes in the region (Hay, 1921).

There was another kind of leadership enacted when the great chief of the tribe did not have direct control over all villages. Each village had its own Mukhtar (village leader). A Mukhtar was a person who was ruling on behalf of the main chief of the tribe or the community, and collecting the tithe (taxes) from the peasants (Bruinessen, 1992). This position was important, and a Mukhtar could be a leader not just of one village but multiple villages. There are some cases where a woman became a Mhkhtar of their villages. For example, Fasla Kahtun was the leader of the Takima tribe and she was the Mukhtar until she died in 1963 (Bruinessen, 2001). The role meant that she had diplomatic responsibilities, and had to negotiate between the chief and the rest of the villagers.

Further evidence of female influence is provided by the example of Qadam Kher, who was well known in the early twentieth century in the Eastern part of Kurdish regions. She was a leader of her tribe, and fought against Raza Shah Pahlawi after her brother was killed by the Shah's order (invoking the second doctrine of Islam). Her rebellion continued for five years but it was contemporaneous with Shekh Mahmud's rebellion in Southern of the Kurdish regions. She aimed to join Shekh in fighting for independence. Eventually, she was misled by Raza Shah and arrested, and later, she was put in prison where she died (Ahmed and Nori, 2020). Qadam Kher was a significant leader in her community, and she was a nationalistic leader. She also tried to participate in Sheikh Mahmud's movement which was in the southern part of the Kurdish regions.

According to the information provided by various British visitors, the position of women among the Yazidi Kurds was similar to that of the Muslim Kurds, and there are examples of female leadership seen among them. When the Prince of the Yazidis Ali Beg died in suspicious circumstances, his younger wife Mayan Khatun led the Yazidi community from 1913-1957. It was later believed that Mayan Khatun killed her husband because she felt in love with a Kurdish tribal leader. She ruled the whole community, and when her son Saaid Beg grew up, she did not give up power to her son because she considered that he was a weak leader. She had a grandson

and became his guardian until she died in 1957 (Guest, 1987). She appear to have remained in power throughout and no man successfully challenged her in her lifetime.

While the British largely commented on the role of the Kurdish women in the tribal societies, there were also many reports of Kurdish women leaders and activists in towns mentioned by the British. These women appeared to lead their communities, and had a working knowledge of the political situation in their region. According to British accounts, the leadership character of Kurdish women was not seen only among the tribal groups, but also among the civil Kurds in the towns and cities. For example, one of the leadership characteristics of Kurdish women was seen in the account of Rabi'a Khan, who was the head of the bakers in Sulaymaniah in the 1920s. She was a business woman, and financially independent. She could deal with British authority figures confidently and represented her community successfully, and this was not unusual (Edmonds, 1957). For example, there was another Kurdish female politician in the 1930s known as Hafsa Khan . She was the wife of Sheikh Qadir, a distinguished figure in Sulaymaniah. In 1930, alongside some of the male Kurdish leaders, chieftains and tribal Kurds, she signed a petition against the Iraqi government, and was subsequently arrested by Iraqi officials. According to British reports, she was the decision-maker of her community, not her husband (F.O. 1930). Kurdish women were as important in towns as in tribes.

British accounts make clear that Kurdish women were perceived to have important political roles in the society and were interested in political issues, especially in reading the newspapers (Ross, 1921). The Bakhtyari Bibi was aware of the political situation in Iran, knew how the political trend had changed there and understood that women could participate in political issues. Women could also gain a political role, as was seen when the first lady had been chosen for the Iranian Parliament. One woman of the Bakhtyari was recorded as saying that it was the right time for women to participate in politics. She stated, ''We could break windows just as well as English women'' demonstrating that the Kurdish women were aware of the political role of European women in their societies, and felt equal to them (Ross, 1921, p.107). The Bakhtyari women were highly ambitious and active in politics and women's rights.

Kurdish women's awareness of political issues was comparable to that of women in the West. Kurdish scholars have uncovered Kurdish women's involvement in political and intellectual issues in the capitals or metropolitan cities like Istanbul. In 1919 in Istanbul, Kurdish women

established an organization to help them to be involved in political and intellectual activities (Ahmed and Nori, 2020). These examples are in sharp contrast to the Victorian idea that Oriental women were doubly inferior; they were from the East and they were female, but they were a more ''conspicuous commodity" 'than other Occidental women (Kabbani, 1986).

2.2: The Martial Role of Kurdish Women

Nearly all of the Western observers presented the Kurds as a martial race (Muhammad, 2017). For that reason, when discussing Kurdish women, they also highlighted their martial duties and freedom to perform them. According to Mark Sykes, Kurdish women could ride a horse and visited remote places without a male escort sometimes it was claimed that they bullied their husbands. In this regard, they enjoyed a freedom akin to English women (Sykes, 1915). Noel for example noted that a female relative of a well-known Kurdish man helped her husband; she could use a rifle, and she could cut her hair (Noel, 1920). Edmonds reported similar ideas about a Kurdish woman in Pshdar, whose name was Faqe Marif (although this name was unusual as it is a male name). She freely mixed with men, rode horses, carried weapons, dressed in men's clothing and participated in horsemen's ceremonies (Edmonds, 1957). Mark Sykes had an even stronger view, and considered that the majority of Kurdish women had martial abilities; they could use guns in shooting as accurately as the men, and Kurdish women could also ride horses, and became knights (Sykes, 1908). Kurdish women, as a result of having a significant position in society, exercised traditional male roles and duties. This evidence directly contradicts the orientalist idea that women in the east''were either sexual beings who were whorish or caring companions in the home, untinged by sexual ardour'' (Kabbani, 1986, p.48).

Section 3: Marriage

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, orientalists' ideas of women and marriage in the Near East were different to those of the Europeans and the British. This section focuses on marriage amongst the Kurds according to British perspectives, and on how marital customs changed over time.

The Orientalist narrative depicted Eastern women as weak, shy and totally dependent on men in society. The British however tried to differentiate between the Kurdish women and other Muslim

societies. For example, marriage among the other Muslim ethnicities could only be organized by a third party, like parents, while Kurdish women had enough freedom to marry someone they loved, as European women did (Soane, 1914). They did not need a third party to organize the marriage, and the man was free to choose a wife(Noel, 1920). In the marriage process, women played a significant role (Noel, 1920). Kurdish people bestowed freedom on the younger generation to marr, as in Europe, and the Kurds believed they shared a similar racial heritage with Europeans.

Whilst women had an important role in choosing their husbands, the trends in marriage, changed over time. In the past both sexes married at an early age, but according to British observations, the age at which women married rose gradually among the Kurds, in particular for Bakhtyari women. For instance, Ross cited Samsam on the Saltanah's belief about the rise in what was considered a marriageable age. She told the doctor that she married when she was eight but her daughter-in-law was married when she was fifteen, and her daughter would not be allowed to marry until she was seventeen (Ross, 1921). One of the reasons for that change was the adoption of new lifestyles. Some Bakhtyari Khans (boys) for example, started to study in Europe and did not return home until they reached their twenties. They then married, thus raising the age of marriage among the Bakhtyari (Ross, 1921). It is also possible that when they visited Europe, they adopted some of the customs of the European lifestyle, including marrying later in life, and reaffirming their belief that Kurdish society was different to the Orientalist and supposedly unchanging perspectives of Eastern Societies.

However, the adoption of new lifestyles was double-edged for some Kurdish women. As more Kurdish men and women moved into towns and cities from rural areas, they came into contact with lifestyles that curtailed women's freedom of movement and status. This is revealed in British reports warning of the decline of the liberty of the Bakhtyari women because they had more contact with Muslim women of the towns who had more limited personal freedom (Ross, 1921). Ross explained her belief about several Bakhtyari khans, and the decrease of freedom of the Bakhtyari women. According to her, whilst the majority of Khans wanted their women to have a high degree of liberty, when they went to live in towns, they had to submit to the common customs and norms of the towns which limited their freedom, and there their lifestyles became similar to those of the Muslim women in the towns (Ross, 1921). As Bakhtyaris had a strong

relationship with the governing Persian families, when they migrated to the cities, in particular to the Persian cities, they also had to submit to their culture and lifestyles, which did not permit women to have so much personal freedom.

Section 4: Education

In the nineteenth and the early twentieth century in the Kurdish regions, the educational system was controlled by the religious schools and madrasas. The majority of the students were boys, but some girls studied and could learn reading and writing within their houses with support from their families, or in the schools. According to Ross, the Bakhtyari allowed their girls to study as much as they could; however, they did not let them leave their home for the sake of studying, and they were expected to study in their hometown. As a result, Ross observed, it would be impossible to find an illiterate Bibi among the younger generation (Ross, 1921). Kurdish women had an important position in society, as was reflected in their right to study. Ross continued to discuss the nature of Kurdish women's literacy. She related that Bakhtyari women were generally very skilled in writing and reading. Arithmetic was one of the subjects in which they could learn to a high standard in the schools (Ross, 1921). Her comment regarding the education levels and intellect of Bakhtyari women contradicts the orientalist perspectives that characterized people in Eastern societies as lazy and ignorant (Said, 2003). These mental differences were often central to the perception of the differences between the 'lazy' Oriental people and the 'wise' Occidental people (Kabbani, 1986)

Ross wrote further on the purpose of girls' education. She said that some of the Bibi Bakhtyari women aimed to learn foreign languages (Ross, 1921). It was rare to find any Kurdish native with knowledge of another language, and therefore, they totally depended on foreign teachers. This situation shows the tolerance of Kurdish families in allowing their women and girls to have contact with foreign or non-Muslim teachers.

Medical information about the Bakhtyari women was another point which attracted Ross, as she related that the Bibis were very good doctors in their community (Ross, 1921). The majority of the women had enough education to recognize medical treatments, and how to use them. The

women worked as medical doctors, for the sake of the health of their community. Another point to note is that Kurdish women had sufficient freedom to treat people outside their families.

In the early twentieth century, in many parts of Muslim society, only men had the chance to study, but among the Kurds the situation was quite different. The Bakhtiary women could be considered as free women, within Kurdish society. Bibi Mah Begum, the wife of the Bakhtiary chieftain, was reputed to be highly intelligent and could read newspapers, and was even ' quite au fait with all the latest doings of our suffragettes'' (Ross, 1921, p.44). The implicit assumption made by Ross here was that the intellect of Kurdish women and their education had allowed them to be aware of the women's rights' movement in England, and maybe also led them to further understand their status as similar to that of the suffragettes. Gradually education amongst the Kurdish women increased in particular in the southern part of Kurdish region, where some women became school teachers and English interpretors (Hansen, 1960)

Conclusion

British travelers and administrative officers who came to the Kurdish regions tried to depict the degree of freedom and status enjoyed by Kurdish women in a number of ways. They found that Kurdish women enjoyed considerable liberty; they were brave and even became leaders of their tribes, which was an important aspect of Kurdish society. These views contrasted with their predominantly orientalist view of Kurdish society as a whole. They believed Kurdish women to be different from other women in the Islamic world, and more similar to European women in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

This article has also confirmed that women of all classes and of all religious doctrines, in nearly all parts of the country had considerable liberty. This finding again contrasts with the prevailing scholarly views that only women and girls of noble families and elite people were given liberty. As many of the British travelers and officers stayed for a considerable time in the country, this gives added credence to the idea that they were able to see most sections of society and therefore could comment on Kurdish women and girls that were not from elite families.

The British travelers' understanding of Kurdish women differed markedly from their orientalist perspectives about Eastern people in general, and even Kurdish society. They

recognized that many women of the Bakhtyari were financially independent, and ruled their tribes and communities.

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