



ROUND TABLE

Quiet Strength: Kurdish Women Kolbars and the Feminization of Poverty

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*We get money at the cost of life here. Do you think death is not better than this life? Being a Kolbar is darkness. It is unfortunate. You either get shot, or you fall down a mountain, then stay alive but disabled.*¹ (Arasteh, a Kurdish woman kolbar)

*Who will take care of them [her children] if I die? We have not received any help from the government. There is not even a doctor in our village. We have been forgotten, even by ourselves. Then, how can we expect concern from others?*² (Banaz, a Kurdish woman kolbar)

In the rugged borderland between Iran and Iraq, in the part of Kurdistan known as Rojhelat, Kurds face a reality marked by adversity and underlying struggle. This region has been systematically starved of resources and opportunities, which has led to sky-high unemployment, poverty, and illiteracy, forcing many Kurds to become *kolbars*, carrying heavy loads on their backs and making long, arduous journeys through the mountainous borders of Iran-Iraq. Previous research has provided insights into the mechanisms and living conditions of *kolbars*, driven by systematic economic discrimination against Kurds. This discrimination has roots in state policies of internal colonialism, which exert significant impacts on Kurdish lives and expose the normalization of state violence against Kurds.³ However, since this labor has been portrayed in a predominantly masculine light, its gendered side is neglected and rendered invisible in public and academic conversations. In exploring the numerous challenges faced by this resilient community, it is crucial to turn our attention to the experiences of Kurdish women *kolbars*, as their situation stands out as a powerful tale of determination in the face of adversity, battling a myriad of challenges. Therefore, this piece contributes to prior studies by illuminating the lived experiences of women *kolbars* and exploring their resistance against multiple sources of oppression in Iranian Kurdistan.

¹ “A Shocking Report from the Mountains of Kurdistan; How Kolbar Women Suffer,” *Iranian Kurdistan Human Rights Watch*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.ikhrw.com/en/report/a-shocking-report-from-the-mountains-of-kurdistan-how-kolbar-women-suffer/>.

² Yosra AleAhmad, “We are both Women and Kurd: An intersectional Analysis of female Kolbars’ Challenges in Iranian Kurdistan amid the COVID Crisis,” *Gender, Work and Organization* 30, no. 3 (2023): 1104–1123.

³ Kamal Soleimani and Ahmad Mohammadpour, “The Everydayness of Spectacle Violence under the Islamic Republic,” *Security Dialogue* 54, no. 3 (2023): 231–251; Kaveh Salimi and Shafieh Ghodrati, “Semantic Reconstruction of kolbari, Qualitative Study of Informal Kolbars of Saqez city [Persian],” *Social Work Research Journal* 7, no. 23 (2020): 175–215; and Kamal Soleimani and Ahmad Mohammadpour, “Life and Labor on the Internal Colonial Edge: Political Economy of Kolbari in Rojhelat,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 71, no. 4 (2020): 741–760.

Kurdish women in Iran bear a dual burden of oppression; they face discrimination both as women within the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereafter IRI), which systematically disadvantages them in various aspects of life, and as Kurds who also endure structural and everyday discrimination. In this round table paper, I offer an intersectional analysis that illustrates the multiple intersecting sites of discrimination experienced by Kurdish women. These discriminations form a complex web of “multiple intersecting inequalities” that further exacerbate the feminization of poverty among them.⁴

Intersectional Perspective on National Marginalization and Feminization of Poverty

The term intersectionality describes the interplay of various socially defined categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, and religion in individuals’ lives, influencing power dynamics. Intersectionality is widely employed to comprehend the dynamics of inequality, oppression, subordination, and marginalization affecting specific groups of people.⁵ An intersectional perspective rejects the notion of the universal woman and recognizes diverse experiences rooted in socio-economic factors. This perspective facilitates a deeper understanding of the intricate tapestry of gender, ethnicity, religion, familial patriarchal norms, and discriminatory legal frameworks, all of which contribute to a form of poverty that disproportionately affects women *kolbars*. More broadly, it leads to a higher concentration of women among the world’s poor.⁶ Within the IRI’s prevailing discourse, the notion of gender equality remains largely rejected, dismissed as a Western ideal and a supposed misstep in ideology.⁷ This stance has perpetuated a profound gender disparity in job opportunities and employment in Iran, although not uniformly experienced among all women. The challenges faced by Kurdish women intensify as gender-based discrimination intersects with other axes of inequality in a deeply entrenched patriarchal culture, prevalent not only in Iran but also Kurdistan, giving rise to specific manifestations of marginalization and discrimination.

Kurds in Iran have faced a series of economic, socio-political, and culturally punitive measures aimed at suppressing their Kurdish identity and adherence to Sunni Islam. This is perceived as a threat to the state identity, which is defined in terms of Persian language and culture and Twelver Ja’afari Shiism. The IRI’s implementation of systematic discriminatory practices has left Iranian Kurdistan underdeveloped, lacking essential resources, and plagued by widespread unemployment and social exclusion. These conditions compel numerous Kurds to resort to becoming *kolbars*, undertaking perilous journeys for survival. This, in turn, highlights the deep-seated ethno-cultural hierarchy that co-constitutes economic and political inequalities in Iran.⁵ The emergence of the *kolbari* phenomenon, especially among women, vividly demonstrates the impact of the IRI’s systematic discrimination and longstanding neglect of the Kurdish population, contributing significantly to the feminization of poverty. In the following sections, I briefly discuss how state-sponsored structural discrimination gives rise to the feminization of poverty among women *kolbars*.

Despite societal norms associating *kolbari* with masculinity, many Kurdish women, often widows or caretakers of disabled or ill husbands, find themselves compelled to undertake low-income, arduous jobs like border-crossing labor.⁸ The dearth of job opportunities in

⁴ Sylvia Walby, “Complexity theory, systems theory, and multiple intersecting social inequalities,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 37, no. 4 (2007): 449–470

⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, “It’s all in the family: Intersections of gender, race, and nation,” *Hypatia* 13, no. 3 (1988): 62–82; Jenny K. Rodriguez, Evangelina Holvino, Joyce K. Fletcher, and Stella M. Nkomo, “The Theory and Praxis of Intersectionality in Work and Organisations: Where Do We Go from Here?,” *Gender, Work and Organization* 23, no. 3 (2016): 201–22.

⁶ UN Women, “The Feminization of Poverty,” Fact Sheet No. 1, June 2000, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/fs1.htm>.

⁷ Deputy for Women and Family Affairs, “Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Speech on Women’s Day,” 2014, <https://women.gov.ir/fa/news/3850>.

⁸ Pantea Bahrani, “The Kolbari Is Not Just Masculine: Women’s Struggles for Basic Livelihood,” *Independent Persian*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/78836/>.

Kurdistan, coupled with a pervasive patriarchal culture, forces even some educated women with university degrees to become *kolbars*.² Women are often barred by family members, predominantly fathers, brothers, and husbands, from pursuing public roles or relocating to larger cities. Deprived of fundamental human freedom and life choices, women are unable to attain economic independence, dignity, and self-esteem.⁹

To combat poverty, many women endure physical distress to perform this job. This prolonged labor takes a significant toll on women's bodies, resulting in debilitating back problems, spinal complications, lumbar disc issues, and excruciating leg pain, severely hindering their ability to kneel and walk. In the face of this relentless suffering, many resort to strong tranquilizers for temporary relief, while others find themselves incapacitated at a remarkably young age, their bodies shattered by the burdens born. This distressing reality highlights a poignant picture of the feminization of poverty, where women's bodies become battlegrounds, marked by the intersection of state-induced oppressions imposed on Kurdish women.

Moreover, the feminization of poverty among Kurdish women *kolbars* is intertwined with the harrowing reality of being deprived of their voice and trapped in cycles of violence, sometimes leading them to commit suicide, as documented in my previous study.² This tragic reality has become a stark testament to the marginalized existence of Kurdish women.¹⁰ The plight of Kurdish women *kolbars* highlights the distressing intersection of poverty, violence, and patriarchal norms. Trapped in cramped living conditions, these women endure not only financial hardship but also physical and emotional abuse, particularly from male family members. The deeply-ingrained Iranian patriarchal culture and discriminatory family laws, which place women under male guardianship and control, privilege men and implicitly condone domestic violence against women. In such dire circumstances, women often resort to silence as a means of survival, forced to endure humiliation and aggression.²

Perceived as operating beyond the formal economy and regulatory boundaries, women must transport their loads discreetly, at night, to mitigate the risk of detection and potential gunfire from state border guards. In a region where this labor is perceived as masculine, women conceal their identity, gender, and body by adopting male attire to safeguard against both disapproval and harassment.¹¹ However, in recent years, the country's battered economy and rising poverty has led to an increase in the number of female *kolbars*, attenuating this stigma in some areas of the province.⁸ In addition, due to doubts about women's ability to withstand the harsh weather conditions, the risk of potential fatalities, and concerns about potential losses to the owner's goods, women may be afforded fewer opportunities as *kolbars*.¹² Furthermore, Kurdish women engaged in *kolbar* activities not only shoulder the responsibility of household chores but also take care of their children and in-laws. Consequently, these additional duties limit the number of cross-border journeys women can undertake. They embark on their perilous journey at times haunted by fear for their children's safety and protection in the event of their own demise. Limited job opportunities, along with unpaid household obligations, ensnare these women in a "double bind," struggling simultaneously with time poverty and income poverty.¹³

⁹ *Human Development Report* (New York: Oxford University Press, Published for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), May, 1997).

¹⁰ Javad Yoosefi Lebni, Morteza Mansourian, Mohammad Hossain Taghdisi, Bahar Khosravi, Arash Ziapour, and Gülcan Demir Özdenk, "A Study of Kurdish Women's Tragic Self-Immolation in Iran: A Qualitative Study," *Burns* 45, no. 7 (2019): 1715–22.

¹¹ Forough Rahimi, "Women Kolbars," *Iran International*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPpK2lyREGI>; Javad Yoosefi Lebni, Seyed Fahim Irandoost, Arash Ziapour, Ahmad Ahmadi, Nafiu Mehedi, and Seyyed Amar Azizi, "Identification of Causes and Consequences of Kolberi among Iranian Kurdish Women," *BMC Women's Health* 23, no. 1 (2023): 1–21.

¹² "Women Kolbars Tell about Their Pains and Suffers to the Mountains and Rocks," *Didar News* (In Persian), September 27, 2020, <https://www.didarnews.ir/fa/news/70846/%85>.

¹³ UN Women, "Why Addressing Women's Income and Time Poverty Matters for Sustainable Development," *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*, 2019, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/>

Despite enduring such interlocking forms of suffering, these women remain largely unseen, their labor, pain, injuries, lives, and even deaths rendered invisible amidst the backdrop of the Kurdish nationalist struggle. The highly politicized nature of this struggle has led IRI troops patrolling the border area to resort to the use of live ammunition, resulting in the tragic loss of *kolbar* lives. Despite the alarming frequency of such incidents, complaints to the Iranian authorities about these deaths often go uninvestigated.¹⁴ This lack of accountability perpetuates a culture of invisibility, deepening the sense of marginalization experienced by Kurdish women *kolbars*, who receive even less attention due to the intersecting axes of discrimination mentioned above.¹⁵

Amidst such systematic discriminatory practices, the IRI also exerts its social and political power to enforce control and establish dominance over the Kurdish community. Through this oppressive necropolitical regime, arbitrary distinctions are made determining whose lives are deemed valuable and whose are expendable. As Judith Butler points out:

specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived or lost in the full sense.¹⁶

The state's discriminatory practices not only silence Kurdish women's voices but also negate their very existence, relegating individuals to a state of perpetual invisibility and exclusion. The story of Kurdish women *kolbars* is a narrative of the feminization of poverty in a state whose government has adopted a direct and ongoing war against its minoritized communities. Their lives are marred by the specters of job insecurity and financial strife, compounded by the heavy yoke of unpaid labor, the pervasive threat of violence, and the haunting shadow of poor well-being.

The story of Kurdish women *kolbars* is not merely a depiction of their plight, it is also a testament to their courage and resistance in the face of overwhelming hardship, albeit manifested covertly. Their capacity for action and change is severely constrained and contingent upon the deeply ingrained discriminatory gendered norms intertwined with other sources of oppression. Despite these challenges, many of these women, through immense courage and sacrifice, do not succumb to despair. They risk their lives daily as they engage in grueling work to attain financial independence and support their families. Their silent defiance against formidable odds showcases their unwavering determination to secure a livelihood for their children. Investing in their bodies becomes a means to obtain agency within the limited terms of socially-sanctioned structural inequalities women face in Iran.

The colonial stance adopted by the IRI towards minoritized communities, particularly Kurds, consistently seeks to contain or assimilate their cultural, religious, and linguistic identity through marginalization, securitization, and violence. The tragic death of Jina Mahsa Amini in September 2022 and the subsequent "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising across the country have further highlighted the vulnerable position and precarious circumstances faced by Kurds residing within Iran's borders.¹⁷ The "Woman, Life, Freedom" slogan chanted in protest against unjust social policies towards women and their systematic oppression gave

[Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2019/World-survey-on-the-role-of-women-in-development-2019.pdf](#).

¹⁴ Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), "Iranian Kurdistan: Report Points to Increasing Death Count of Kolbar in Iran," April 4, 2017, <https://unpo.org/article/20000>.

¹⁵ Gordyaen Benyamin Jermayi, "The Ungrievable Lives of Kurdish Women Kolbers," *The Kurdish Center for Studies*, June 25, 2023, <https://nlka.net/eng/the-ungrievable-lives-of-kurdish-women-kolbers/>.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), 1.

¹⁷ Parisa Hafezi, "Iran Intensifies Crackdown in Kurdish Area; Right Group says Four Killed," *Reuters*, November 20, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/security-forces-intensify-crackdown-irans-kurdish-area-four-killed-rights-group-2022-11-20/>.

voice to a social resistance movement that foregrounded women's rights. This unprecedented uprising created solidarity not only within Iranian society but also transcended borders and raised transnational solidarity, especially among women and minoritized communities, who stood in solidarity with Iranian women in their struggle against tyranny and dictatorship.

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