



Enacting Citizenship

Kurdish Women's Resilience, Activism and Creativity

Hamelink · Bocheńska · Wiktor-Mach · Kaczorowski
Hanoğlu · Skupiński · Hajiagha · Rodi Keskin · Weiss · Şen

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NOTES ON FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH

The photograph on the front cover was taken by Kurdish photographer Fatma Çelik (2017). It depicts two football players from the Amedspor club behind lace curtains. In our reading for this book, the picture can symbolize the layers of visibility and invisibility shaping Kurdish women's struggles for citizenship, rights and recognition. It reflects both constraint and agency, highlighting their quiet but persistent activism within constrained spaces. It can also refer to creativity and strength, and everyday life as well as spectacle—such as a football match in Diyarbakir. Diyarbakir is one of the centers of Kurdish cultural, political and social engagement and activism.

TRANSCRIPTION AND GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

In this book, we have applied the following strategy of transcription for person names and geographical locations, aiming at appreciating the multiplicity of languages and forms of transcription used by the Kurdish people. Taking into account that, since 1932, the Kurds have possessed their own version of the Latin script invented by Celadet Ali Bedirxan, we decided to write most of their names following this alphabet. However, we abandon this convention for Turkish names of Kurds and English transliteration of Kurdish names that are widely known through English sources. Sometimes, if names are widely known in a certain transliteration (such as Ardalan instead of Erdalan), we follow this for reasons of recognizability. We follow the common English transliterations of Arabic, Persian, or Russian names and surnames. Regarding the names of geographical locations, we generally follow the Kurdish alphabet, but sometimes the more widely known transliteration or name. In the case of the cities Hewlêr or Diyarbekir, which are also widely known as Erbil or Amed, we applied the two names interchangeably, in a similar way to how they are used by Kurdish people. For many other locations, we selected the most popular English transliterations (for instance, Halabja).

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First and foremost, however, we would like to express our deep gratitude to all the Kurdish women who took part in our study in all parts of Kurdistan as well as in the diaspora and to the whole Kurdish community who supported us in many various ways while conducting our research. Thank you so much for all your generosity, encouragement, and friendship despite all the challenges and difficult conditions you face. Without all of you, this research could have never been accomplished!

We would also like to express our gratitude to the Kurdish cultural institutions and the amazing people connected to them, who helped us with not only finding and reaching interlocutors but also spreading the information about our research and its results. These are among others: *Wegfa Mezopotamya* (Mezopotamya Foundation, Diyarbekir), *Kitêbxaneyê Kurdî ya li Stockholmê* (Kurdish Library in Stockholm), *Enstîtûya Kurdî ya Brûkselê* (Kurdish Institute Brussels), *Radyoya Swêdê Beşa Kurdî* (Kurdish section of the Swedish Radio), and DayMer in London.

We would like to express our deep thanks to Chris Kutschera and Kurdistan Photolibary as well as to the photographers involved for their willingness to assist us in organizing three photo exhibitions during this project: *Jin, jiyān, azadī—Woman, Life, Freedom—Daily Life and Social Involvement of Kurdish Women in Kurdistan and the Diaspora* (Asia and Pacific Museum, Warsaw, May 2021, and Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, Kraków, October 2023); *Jin, jiyān, azadī—Women, Life, Freedom. Kurdish Women’s Work Through the Eyes of Kurdish Female Photographers* (Asia and Pacific Museum, Warsaw, Autumn 2023); and *Women in Exile* (Gamle Munch Community Centre, Oslo, March 2024).

Last but not least, we would like to thank all other institutions who engaged in promoting our project and research. We are very grateful to the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw for becoming our main partner in the project and arranging the two fascinating exhibitions about Kurdish women along with many accompanying events. We express our deep gratitude to the Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology for assisting us in presenting the photo exhibition in Kraków as well as in organizing other meetings promoting Kurdish culture. We would also like to thank the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków, Foundation Citizen Perspective (Perspektywa Obywatelska), Czuj-Czuj Association, Foundation Kosmos (Poland), and Casa da Horta Associação Cultural in Porto (Portugal) for assisting us in promoting our research results through the cultural events and online publications. In Norway, we thank the Oslo City Council and Gamle Munch Community Centre for supporting the photo exhibition there and ReNEW grants (Reimagining Norden in an Evolving World) for their financial support. Last but not least, many thanks go to the Andrzej Wajda Centre For Film Culture for the cooperation in the promotion of the project and the book during the Kurdish Sun in Winter Warsaw festival (February 2025).

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHERS

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Sara Namó (1975) lives in Silêmanî and is a photographer and poet. In 2005, her poetry collection Namó was published. She participated in photography exhibitions such as “May Colour” in 2017; a photo and poetry exhibition entitled “Hanging Words and Colors” in collaboration with Qubay Calízade. She works now in the project “Archiving old neighborhoods and houses in Silêmanî”. In 2019, she was awarded by the Ministry of Social Affairs as special talent.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
AKP	Turkish: <i>Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi</i> (Justice and Development Party)
BCF	The Barzani Charity Foundation
CHP	Turkish: <i>Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi</i> (Republican People's Party)
CPI	Communist Party of Iran (Farsi: <i>Khizb-i Komunisti Iran</i>)
DAANES	Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Kurdish: <i>Rêveberiya Xweser Demokratîk a Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriyeyê</i>)
DAP	Turkish: <i>Doğu Anadolu Projesi</i> (Eastern Anatolia Project)
DEM	Turkish: <i>Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi</i> (Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party)
DTP	Turkish: <i>Demokratik Toplum Partisi</i> (Democratic Society Party)
EU	European Union
GAP	Turkish: <i>Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi</i> (Southeastern Anatolia Project)
HDP	Turkish: <i>Halkların Demokratik Partisi</i> (Peoples' Democratic Party)
HXP	Hêzên Xweparastinê (Self Defense Forces)
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IOM	UN Migration Agency
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JK	Kurdish: <i>Komaley Jiyanewey Kurdistan</i> (The Committee for the Revival of Kurdistan)
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDPI	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (Kurdish: <i>Hizbî Dîmokratî Kurdistanî Êran</i>)

KFM	Kurdish Freedom Movement
KHK	Decree Law (Turkish: <i>Kanun Hükmünde Kararname</i>)
KJAR	<i>Komelgeha Jinên Azad a Rojhilatê</i> (Rojhelat Free Women Society)
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MEM	Mesopotamia Ecology Movement
NES	North-East Syria (Kurdish: <i>Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriye</i>)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OHAL	Turkish: <i>Olağanüstü Hal</i> (The State of Emergency)
PDK	Kurdish: <i>Partî Dîmokratî Kurdistan</i> (Kurdistan Democratic Party)
PJAK	Kurdish: <i>Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê</i> (Kurdistan Free Life Party)
PKK	Kurdish: <i>Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan</i> (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Kurdish: <i>Yekêti Nîştîmanî Kurdistan</i>)
PYD	Kurdish: <i>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat</i> (Democratic Union Party)
REACH	Rehabilitation, Education and Advocacy for Community Health
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council (Kurdish: <i>Meclîsa Sûriya Demokratîk</i>)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces (Kurdish: <i>Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk</i>)
SMO	Social movement organization
TEV-DEM	Kurdish: <i>Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk</i> (Movement for a Democratic Society)
TİP	Turkish: <i>Türkiye İşçi Partisi</i> (Turkish Workers' Party)
UK	United Kingdom
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNWFP	United Nations World Food Programme
USA	United States of America
YPG	Kurdish: <i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel</i> (People's Defense Units)
YPJ	Kurdish: <i>Yekîneyên Parastina Jin</i> (Women Defense Units)



CHAPTER 1

Enacting Citizenship: Kurdish Women's Resilience, Activism, and Creativity

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INTRODUCTION

The Kurds are frequently described as one of the largest stateless nations, with an estimated population of around forty million worldwide (Kurdish Institute of Paris, 2016). Their statelessness, nation-building projects, and identity have become the theoretical lenses through which their problematic citizenship is most often contextualized and contested. While the number of publications related to citizenship studies has grown rapidly in recent decades (Shachar et al., 2017), non-European realities remain largely understudied or are dominated by what Bayat calls “exceptionalist outlooks,” suggesting that the Middle East is different and, thus, fatally “unchangeable” (2013, p. 3). As a consequence, many vital internal sources of transformation remain unnoticed or barely visible (Bayat, 2013; Kian, 2023). Rather than looking at the Kurds exclusively through the popular lenses of statelessness, nation-building, or minority issues, this

book focuses on how Kurdish women enact citizenship across Middle Eastern and European societies.

Their minoritized position within the states and communities of which they form part has often made it more difficult for Kurdish women to be active in the public sphere or official and legal organizational and political life. However, as shown from various perspectives in this book, women are mobilizing their often invisible powers and resources in many fields to perform citizenship. This is the first book in which such practices among Kurds and Kurdish women are labeled “enacting citizenship” and in which the experiences of women from many places all over Kurdistan and the diaspora are collated and analyzed together. We believe that focusing on how Kurdish people contest and reconsider citizenship may be more fruitful than simply discussing their state of deprivation. In this introduction, we present the main concepts of the book: the meaning of citizenship in subaltern communities; gendered citizenship in Kurdistan and its rootedness in diverse heritages and representations; Kurdish women’s resilience, agency, and creativity in navigating a range of contested issues such as party politics and guerrilla movements; combining activism with care for the family; professional development; and refugee and diasporic life.

The majority of Kurds live in Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, with other groups predominantly in Europe and smaller numbers in other parts of the world, including the Caucasus and North America. Divided across four Middle Eastern states, the Kurdish homeland, Kurdistan, is often identified by Kurds by referring to the four points of the compass, thus challenging the divisions imposed by state politics. Following this lead, we also use these names in our book interchangeably: Bakur (Turkish Kurdistan), Rojhelat (Iranian Kurdistan), Başûr (Iraqi Kurdistan), and Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan).

Kurds rarely have the same access to citizenship and political representation as majority citizens, and the non-existence of a Kurdish nation-state usually precludes state sponsorship of the production and promotion of Kurdish culture and language. For the majority of Kurds, violent conflict and political suppression are the rule rather than the exception. For ethnic or religious minorities, “good citizenship” in the Middle East often requires assimilation into the nation’s majority and the partial or full denial of the minority’s identity. In Türkiye, the idea “that the state belonged to ethnic Turks only and that Turkish identity, culture, and language must erase others (...) is still the trademark of the contemporary Turkish constitution in particular, and Turkish politics in general” (Baris, 2017, p. 99). Historically,

in Iran, the Islamic Regime led a “Holy War” against Kurds shortly after the 1979 Revolution, driving the Kurds into armed resistance and prompting the formation of several Kurdish underground opposition parties. In Syria and Iraq, citizenship under the Ba’ath regime was based on pan-Arab nationalism, which, as in Türkiye, attempted to erase, assimilate, or oppress other ethnicities (Lalik, 2009; Tejel, 2009). The political situation has changed in these countries, and Kurds have gained some form of autonomy through the establishment of the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Iraq and the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES)/Rojava cantons in Syria. Our book contributes to exploring how the—although contested—existence of autonomous Kurdish regions has influenced Kurdish women’s aspirations for citizenship.

Their exclusion from mainstream politics and society has led to a range of alternative initiatives in which many Kurds participate. Although governments and majority populations often ignore these initiatives, their influence on a considerable proportion of the population is significant and should be regarded as part of a country’s overall citizenship formation. The best example may be the Kurdish leftist slogan *Jin, jîyan, azadî* (Women, life, freedom), which was spontaneously borrowed and appropriated by the Iranian majority in protests following the killing of a Kurdish woman, Jîna (Mahsa) Amîni, by the morality police in September 2022. Even if the fact of borrowing has not been widely acknowledged by the majority (Ghaderi, 2024), the process itself highlights the minority-majority trajectory of inspirations, a trajectory that challenges the image of minorities as living on the periphery or in need of ideas backed by the center. Therefore, rather than following Spivak’s pessimistic conclusion that the subaltern has no voice, we look at the opportunity structures that subaltern communities mobilize to influence their social and political environments (Eimer, 2020; Escobar, 2008) and are attentive to the subtle ways in which women act “on their own lives and those of society” (Kian, 2023, p. 6).

Our research shows that Kurdish women play a crucial role in these processes by creating and extending spaces for resistance and alternative citizenship practices. Women not only operate in a politically restrictive environment but were, and are, also limited by a highly patriarchal society in which they were often limited in movement, choices, and agency, and had little access to leadership or other more visible positions (Kian, 2023; Mojab, 2001; Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009). Nevertheless, women’s initiatives have been crucial in the transformation of Kurdish society, its culture, and its moral imaginations. While some researchers have recently explored the

development of Kurdish women's movements (Dirik, 2022; Käser, 2021), they focus predominantly on the women's movement within the Kurdistan Workers' Party, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan/*PKK and do not cover other initiatives or organizations. While they examine different Kurdish regions and language areas, we still lack a truly comparative perspective that takes into account the different socio-historical developments in the four parts of Kurdistan and across the diaspora. Moreover, until now, few researchers on Kurdish women's activism have investigated how women operate subtle or small-scale initiatives in their own environment and how their activities have changed existing views of gender roles and women's positions (Kian, 2023; Weiss, 2010).

We therefore propose gendered approaches toward citizenship, which are important in highlighting how notions of citizenship evolved as the terrain of the model citizen, often defined as masculine, white, and from the upper classes of society (Butler, 2015; Lister, 1997; Volpp, 2017). Feminists have attempted to make notions of citizenship more inclusive by focusing on the lived practice of citizenship (Halsaa et al., 2011), understanding citizenship as a performance, a dynamic negotiation, and a struggle (Hildebrandt & Peters, 2019). Nevertheless, Leti Volpp reminds us that citizenship is hardly a story of constant progress and success in which those previously excluded are always gradually included; it may not be infinitely expandable (2017, p. 158). Moreover, as modernity is characterized, among other factors, by the increased global circulation of goods, ideas, and people (Appadurai, 1996), citizenship cannot solely be understood in a national context (Tambakaki, 2010); it is constructed partly in an international arena.

Representations of the Kurds, both within the Kurdish society (particularly Kurdish nationalist movements) and in the accounts of missionaries and European travelers (Dwight et al., 1904; Rzepka, 2013), have historically depicted Kurdish women as "freer" and more "independent" than other Middle Eastern women, and in Kurdish history there are indeed exceptional cases of women as famous leaders or personalities (Van Bruinssen, 2000). The women who currently form part of the various Kurdish armed forces (most notably the PKK and the People's Defense Units, *Yekîneyên Parastîna Gel/*YPG) are part of a longer history of the inclusion of small numbers of women as female fighters in resistance struggles. As shown in our study, this heroic heritage—although it plays a significant role in women's empowerment—cannot be identified directly with emancipation or women's rights. At the same time, Kurdish women's activists voice concern about the frequent occurrence

of domestic violence and the oppression of women by their relatives and husbands, killings in the name of “honor,” and women’s lack of access to work, financial means, education, and other forms of independence. The continuing conflict that flares up time and again in Kurdistan has normalized violence and militarized society, and this has, according to Bozarslan, led to the “formation of a ‘tragic mind’ that perceives violence as the surest provider of justice and hope” (2004, p. 15). Decades of conflict have had huge repercussions for those who have lived through displacement, violence, and oppression, the destruction of villages and social structures, and economic scarcity.

Ideologically, already in the 1990s the PKK linked its struggle for Kurdish rights with that for women’s liberation (Käser, 2021). This quest for women’s emancipation as part of the Kurdish rights movement got a more prominent place in PKK ideology during the 2000s, and in practice during the 2010s, for example, through the introduction of the co-chair leadership system in Bakur and Rojava and through Jineoloji teachings (the “science of women,” an ideology for women’s liberation developed by Öcalan and the women’s movement within the PKK, see Käser, 2021; Dirik, 2022). The PKK has developed its own model of political community, democratic confederalism. It is “a political alliance of cities and towns that is meant to transcend nation-states, but live with them if necessary” (Baris, 2021, p. 143) and based on “active citizenship” (Jongerden, 2019). It consists of autonomous political entities for which “the ultimate authority within a residential community is the community itself” (ibid., p. 151). In the DAANES/Rojava cantons in Syria, this form of stateless democracy was implemented officially since the 2014 constitution, in which the aim of women’s liberation is incorporated (Charter of Social Contract, 2014. See also Chap. 3).

In the following sections, we present our research methodology and then investigate different notions of citizenship. We examine to what extent Kurdish women have access to the political domain and in what areas they were and are excluded from the legal political arena in different states, stressing the differences in opportunity across the Kurdistan region. Subsequently, we introduce the alternative arenas that Kurdish women have created in order to overcome this exclusion and marginalization. We challenge some apparent certainties about patriarchal dominance and, through experimental reading, offer new approaches to the representation of women in Kurdish culture. We look at the obstacles faced by women when negotiating their actions within family life by linking them to the

concept of lived citizenship. We also look in greater depth at how transnational ties between women have strengthened Kurdish citizenship initiatives and how a transnational and global imagination of citizenship has affected Kurdish initiatives in local settings. Finally, we introduce the intersectional perspective that runs throughout this book and investigate how different social hierarchies (class, gender, sexuality, religion, disability, and nationality) have affected Kurdish women's lives.

METHODOLOGY

The book is a result of the interdisciplinary and collaborative project *ALCITfem (Activism and Its Moral and Cultural Foundations: Alternative Citizenship and Women's Roles in Kurdistan and the Diaspora, 2021–2024*, supported by Norway Grants and the National Science Center Poland), which consists of ten researchers working in the fields of sociology, gender studies, social and cultural anthropology, literary and heritage studies, linguistics, political science, and political ecology. The research methods used are, therefore, also interdisciplinary and collaborative. The fieldwork for this project was conducted between 2021 and 2023 in all regions: Bakur and Istanbul, Rojava, Başûr, Rojhelat, and Tehran, and among Kurds in many different cities in the diaspora in Europe and North America (mainly, but not only, in London, Stockholm, Oslo, Vienna, Brussels, Berlin, and Toronto).

The fieldwork was built in many ways on the previous projects of the authors, involving extensive previous research in Kurdistan and the diaspora. All the researchers speak at least one of Sorani, Kurmanji, Zazaki, Turkish, or Arabic, and some have a command of several of these languages. Language knowledge is crucial in creating a mutual understanding between the researcher and the participants, in gaining a deeper understanding of the participants' context and narratives than is possible via a translator, and in achieving direct and unmediated contact. Conducting interviews in indigenous and often endangered languages adds to the revitalization of these languages and thus to decolonization efforts (Olko, 2018; Smith, 2021). The aim is to support not only the minoritized languages but also the indigenous knowledges and epistemologies that are often hidden in the lexicon, metaphors, and narratives and hence cannot be easily translated or grasped outside that specific linguistic and cultural context (Bocheńska & Ghaderi, 2023). This is also why we retain the local names of territories such as *Kirdane* and *Kirmancîye*

(Chap. 7). The majority of the interviews were transcribed and translated into English by a group of interpreters, followed by each researcher checking translations of their own interviews.

The data collected consists predominantly of semi-structured and life-story qualitative interviews but also includes focus group discussions and a literary analysis of Kurdish literature and art. In total, the project researchers have conducted over 250 qualitative, semi-structured interviews:¹ 97 with Kurds from Bakur (mainly Amed and Dersim) of which 14 lived in Istanbul and 22 lived in Europe; 55 with Kurds from Başûr (mainly Silêmanî and Hewlêr) of which 5 lived in Europe; 35 with Kurds from Rojava (mainly Qamişlo) of which 10 lived in Europe and 6 in Istanbul; and 65 with Kurds from Rojhelat (mainly Sine, Mariwan, and Bane) of which 5 lived in Tehran, 17 in Başûr, and 13 lived in Europe and North America. Research participants were recruited from within, but also from outside the usual circles of organizations, parties, and institutions, especially those active in less visible or established forms of activism. All the research participants gave informed consent for the use of their interviews in the academic publications emerging from this research. Chapter 9 is based on a collaboration between Hamelink and Şen, the latter a Kurdish professor in Türkiye who works on related topics and whose work contributed to the project. This book is unique in bringing together comparative material that not only looks at the different communities but also searches for interconnections and mutual influences between these communities.

In crafting the introduction, we used a collaborative co-writing process involving all researchers. Each researcher contributed with insights from their own areas of expertise. This approach ensured the integration of diverse perspectives, encouraging interdisciplinarity and coherence in framing the research. Through collective drafting and feedback, we adopted the principles of co-production, emphasizing shared intellectual labor and equitable decision-making. By writing the introduction together, we also adopted the methodological principles of co-production in research, which prioritize collective analysis, shared interpretation, and co-construction of knowledge, further enriching the methodological rigor and intellectual depth of the work. This reflects our commitment to ensuring that the collaborative spirit underlying the research permeates the text itself, embedding our diverse insights from the very beginning.

¹ Most interviews (57 out of 72) in Başûr/Iraqi Kurdistan were conducted by Kaziwa Salih in the scope of the ALCITfem project.

CITIZENSHIP, NATIONALISM, GENDER, AND INDIGENEITY AMONG SUBALTERN COMMUNITIES

When defining citizenship, scholars often recall the 1950 definition given by Thomas Humphrey Marshall: “Citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed.” Marshall distinguishes three elements of citizenship: civil rights (individual freedom and equal protection under the law for all), political rights (the right to participate in the exercise of political power and political life), and social rights (the right to fulfill basic human needs and live a life of dignity). This definition is based on certain assumptions. First, it understands citizenship primarily as a (passive) *legal and national status* granted to citizens of states. Since the 1990s, scholars have paid greater attention to citizenship as a *practice* that is actively performed by everyone who lives as a citizen or pseudo-citizen within the borders of a certain state. This means that people who are not legally citizens—for example, residents, stateless persons, or refugees—could also be enacting citizenship (see Chap. 9). They are not legal citizens but, to quote Hannah Arendt, they “have the right to have rights” (Arendt, 1949; Benhabib, 2004; Butler, 2015; Hamacher, 2014; Kesby, 2012). Moreover, traditional approaches to citizenship assume the existence of only one political (often understood as national) community to which people belong, whereas this is usually not the case. As Baris (2021) observes, the nation-state is not the only political reality; it is often blind to internal diversity or deliberately tries to hegemonize its population. Moreover, there exists a global hierarchy of nation-states, in which some are more powerful than others, and this also affects the level of equality of their citizens. Many have argued that the term “citizenship” has taken on a new meaning in a globalized world. Nira Yuval-Davis (2007), for example, proposed the term “multi-layered citizenship” to indicate that people in a globalized world belong simultaneously to several political communities (Yuval-Davis, 2007, p. 562). Another advance in the conceptualization of citizenship comes from indigenous studies where substantial work has recently been conducted on the concept of ecological citizenship, opening our imaginaries toward beyond-human entities (Murdock, 2020). Within this framework, rivers, streams, mountains, and forests should also be granted rights. Within Kurdish societies, the ideas behind ecological citizenship

are present in many aspects, in particular in the Alevi ideology on nature, which opposes dominant anthropocentric narratives.

Understood in this way, citizenship remains a basis for “the right to have rights,” and the right to citizenship—as membership in the political community—can be claimed through *acts of citizenship* (Isin, 2008, 2009, 2016). The latter take the form of different, often every day, practices and performances that transform political fiction and non-existence into new political realities. Citizenship is, therefore, not an essentializing concept but, rather, “a sensitizing tool that can be used to indicate a loose conglomerate of spheres of action in which communities are developed that in turn attribute certain ‘contestable’ rights and responsibilities to human beings” (Plummer, 2003, p. 56).

Furthermore, liberal-democratic definitions of citizenship, including that of Marshall, ignore “the extent to which conceptions of citizenship are variable social constructs” (Olson, 2008, p. 40). In reality, some people have greater access than others, for example, in the Global North, the “ideal citizen” is often assumed to be an adult, bourgeois, heterosexual man of a majority ethnic group. This assumption has an “exclusionary effect for women, non-white men and women, non-economically well-situated people, and children” (Wihstutz, 2017, p. 177). Similarly, as a minoritized group, Kurdish people are not seen as ideal citizens in most states in the Middle East, nor in the diaspora. Sometimes they live a precarious existence deprived even of formal access to citizenship (Lori, 2017), as was the case for many of the stateless Kurds in Syria (Statelessness in Syria, 2019). However, the relation between citizenship and statelessness in Syria was significantly changed and altered in the cantons of DAANES, where more spaces of agency appeared for persons previously considered stateless (Chap. 3). Kurdish women have the additional disadvantage of being deprived of many of the privileges that Kurdish men enjoy, and some may have experienced other intersectional inequalities (such as being LGBTQ, living with a disability, or being a member of a minoritized religious group such as the Alevi or Yezidi) that deny them full access to citizenship rights.

The term “lived citizenship” has been introduced to address the intersectional character of citizenship and its embeddedness in everyday life (Kallio et al., 2015), not necessarily involving the political participation in the public arena that is often reserved for majority “model” citizens. Sheller (2012) notes that citizenship has become more inclusive precisely

because subaltern groups have pushed back and fought for their inclusion for so many centuries:

The creation of an increasingly universal complex of citizenship throughout the world today can be seen as an outcome of long historical struggles in which enslaved and indentured workers, women and sexual minorities, indigenous peoples, peasants, migrants, and refugees have both challenged regimes of exclusionary citizenship and negotiated with states and with existing citizenries for inclusion. In so doing, they have transformed (and continue to contest) the meaning and practice of citizenship today. (2012, p. 25)

When subaltern groups are relegated to the margins of society, this often means a literal marginalization to spaces away from the public eye or centers of civil rights. For queer people, dominant spaces are heteronormative areas where non-heterosexual identities are not expected or accepted. Heterosexual conduct is the norm to which people refer; it is repeated and reproduced by popular culture and thus becomes the model that is present and represented in public spaces. Access for people living in poverty is restricted because they lack economic means to access certain places, and their appearance may reveal their poverty and demean them. For disabled people, dominant spaces are designed and intended for able-bodied people, and for black and brown people, dominant spaces in many places worldwide are defined as white. While heterosexual, bourgeois, able-bodied, male members of the majority population experience both their own body and their social space as neutral, the subalterns are excluded on the basis of their bodily performance.

This is why “performances of citizenship and the spatial relations that arise from contestations over citizenship are irrevocably grounded in the intimate domains of bodily practice” (Sheller, 2012, p. 25). Such performances can also be linked to Plummer’s notion of “intimate citizenship” (2003), Butler’s rights to appearance (2015), or Bayat’s art of the presence and active use of public space by subjects who are usually expected to use the public only passively (2013, p. 11). Marshall’s understanding of citizenship, shared by Arendt, assumes a division of the public from the private sphere. In this understanding, while the public space is one of politics and decision-making, private space is responsible for fulfilling human needs and care, and thus is largely associated with traditional women’s roles (Butler, 2015). But new approaches to citizenship highlight that the

private sphere is “deeply embedded (...) within a matrix of power relations” and is interconnected “with the public and the political” (Wihstutz, 2017, p. 180; see also Bayat, 2013; Butler, 2015; Plummer, 2003).

For indigenous people, their subaltern status is closely linked to “settler colonialism” and its assimilation and modernization projects (Wolfe, 2006, p. 394). Although the academic literature on Kurdish movements and activism previously sidelined the indigenous aspects of Kurds (e.g., Gunes, 2012), this has recently started to change. Ünal (2022) points to the self-identification of Kurds as indigenous people. More precisely, she has analyzed the debates within the Kurdish Political Movement in Türkiye around the concept of indigeneity and claims that this term offers the movement an alternative to the state’s categorization of Kurds—and other non-Turkish groups—as “ethnic minorities.” In the Turkish language, Kurds refer to the concept of *kadim halk*, an autochthonous nation, to claim Kurdish rights to self-determination, as well as other political and cultural rights. The turn to indigeneity is also a turn toward inclusivity, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and the recognition of the many indigenous groups (such as Kurds, Armenians, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Yezidis, and Arabs) that have lived for centuries in the region now divided between Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. It includes debates about the diverse Kurdish dialects, their positioning toward each other, and standardization strategies (Bocheńska & Ghaderi, 2023). One of the principal environmental movements in the region, the Mesopotamia Ecology Movement (MEM), includes not only Kurds but also activists from other ethnic groups (Chap. 2). Resistance toward wide-ranging inequalities is also visible in Kurdish women’s activism and, in many ways, their experiences and ways of acting resemble those of indigenous people around the world.

In many countries, nation-states excluded the “first nations” from political participation and deprived them of many of their rights. The history of colonialism, which led to the dispossession and destruction of local people’s livelihoods, is still reflected in socio-economic status and the extent of poverty. Indigenous people comprise approximately 5% of the global population, yet they account for 10% of the world’s poorest people (Hall & Perkins, 2012, p. 5). Indigenous women scholars have also shown in detail how a wide range of state institutions employ violence toward indigenous women (Stephen, 2022). As stated by Faye Ginsburg, indigenous communities possess their own collective narratives and histories, many of which involve traumatic experiences, yet these stories have often been marginalized or omitted from the broader national narratives of

dominant cultures, and there is a risk that they may fade away even within local contexts (Ginsburg, 2002, p. 40). In the pursuit of increased rights, indigenous women continue to participate in cultural initiatives, increasing their visibility and earning admiration within their communities. Additionally, their proficiency in speaking their mother tongue helps safeguard indigenous wisdom and skills essential for dismantling colonial knowledge structures and promoting confidence in indigenous traditions (Bocheńska et al., 2023; Bocheńska & Ghaderi, 2023; Hassan, 2015; Smith, 2021; Wilson, 2008).

Politically and socially, this inequality has led to resistance, activism, protests and social movements fighting for greater inclusion and equality for all citizens. Women formed part of these different strategies to resist state dominance and regime repression in a variety of ways. In the Middle East and elsewhere, nationalist movements often accommodated women's liberation. Many authors underline that the struggle of indigenous women is most often intersectional (Fallah, 2019; Kian, 2023; Mohammadpour, 2023; Shisheliakina, 2022) and entails different goals such as women's emancipation, national liberation, class struggle, or striving for increased cultural rights. According to Kathy Davis (2008), intersectionality supports a recognition of the differences and complexities of women's policies and exposes interactions between multiple identities. In the context of intersectional struggle, characterized by different structural inequalities that lead to higher levels of insecurity and "both domestic and state/insurgent violence" (Walby, 2009), the quest for citizenship rights differs greatly from situations where women are part of the ethnic majority of a nation-state. Comparisons can be made with African-American women, who developed intersectionality as a theory to better understand the difficulties they faced in struggling against multiple forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1998), as well as with Palestinian women, for whom Islah Iad (2018) describes the contradictions inherent in women's activism regarding gender and nationalism.

TOWARD GENDERED, AFFECTIVE, AND INTIMATE CITIZENSHIP

Access to rights, support, and status is unequally distributed (Somers, 2008). Therefore, scholars have proposed alternative ways of theorizing citizenship that are more inclusive of people who do not fall within the

ideal citizen category and that include private practices that are not directly understood as related to citizenship but are strongly impacted by it. Feminists have challenged traditional definitions of citizenship by adding new concepts, for example, “lived citizenship” (Halsaa et al., 2012), “gendered citizenship,” or “intimate citizenship” (Plummer, 2003). These terms highlight two important points. The first relates to the care responsibilities that form part of citizenship obligations (Serafini, 2022). Caring for oneself and others is a core dimension of each person’s life and society more generally. Paid work is therefore not the only responsibility of citizens; care work and work at home also form part of it. The second is that the most intimate and private relations, such as marriage, the nuclear family, and children, are deeply regulated by the modern state through heteronormative expectations, rules, and laws. As a result, the state has a significant impact on the private sphere, which makes it impossible to consider this an unregulated area distinct from the public sphere. The significant effect of the framework enforced by state and nationalism was referred to by Liisa Malkki (1992) as the “national order of things” which impacts people even when they migrate or associate themselves with transnational communities (see Chap. 9). Examples of the impact of the state on private and intimate relations are multiple: people with relationships that do not follow heteronormative patterns are often excluded from full access to citizenship rights, for example, through a ban on gay marriage; women may have little legal power to fight intimate partner violence as a result of the absence of a well-defined criminalization of domestic violence; and the state may interfere in families by taking away their children, who then have no voice in deciding where they would like to grow up.

Carol Johnson argues that “the politics of affect has major implications for determining who has full citizenship rights” (2010, p. 495), referring to how, in nation-states, citizenship is constructed partly through emotions. In nationalist ideologies, “the neurotic citizen is encouraged to have several anxieties, including about the Other” (Johnson, 2010, p. 500), and “the good citizen both feels and performs particular emotions” (p. 501), for example, through expressing love for the nation and fear and hatred for its potential enemies. Politicians and citizens appeal to the emotions of other citizens to accept and encourage certain behaviors, customs, and symbols as typical and everyday representations of “the nation” (Billig, 1995). In Türkiye, Kurds learn that certain behaviors are accepted by the majority while others (such as speaking Kurdish, dressing in Kurdish clothes, or engaging in Kurdish cultural practices) should be unlearned in

order to become full citizens of the state (Hamelink, 2016). Until 2012, under the Ba'ath regime, Kurds in Syria experienced similar pressures around speaking Kurdish, attending Kurdish festivals, and listening to Kurdish music, because such activities were understood as primitive and disloyal to the state and were often criminalized. Until the 1990s, Kurdish political movements also demonstrated self-orientalizing views in which they condemned Kurdish oral performances for their traditional and “backward” content (Hamelink & Baris, 2014). However, with the emergence of a strongly institutionalized diaspora culture (mainly among Kurds from Bakur and Başûr) during the 1990s, and especially from the 2000s onward, Kurdish political movements have attempted to prompt a revaluation of Kurdish culture, traditions, and language, encouraging Kurds to embrace them (see Chap. 7). The various Kurdish movements have established their own criteria for deciding who belongs and who is an outsider. Being a good Kurd has thus been a site of struggle and negotiation, because “to be a citizen implies ‘the other’ who is not a citizen” (Plummer, 2003, p. 52). People attach strong emotions to who belongs and who is regarded as an outsider, as Sara Ahmed (2014) shows: the good citizen is juxtaposed with the bad citizen, the outcast, the other—the immigrant and person of color.

In Kurdistan, a heteronormative gender regime expects women to be engaged in heterosexual marriages and excludes (or directly abuses) homosexuals and transgender people; hence, it prescribes how women are expected to live their lives. Elements cited by women during the interviews were the expectation to be a good mother, wife, and daughter by taking care of family members and household tasks (Chaps. 4 and 5). For women, expectations of good citizenship are therefore often connected to expectations about womanhood. At the same time, these role models have started to change with improvements in the education of Kurdish women, who increasingly talked of different aspirations. Professional development, or, as stressed by our interlocutors, “doing something interesting in one’s life,” was until now perceived as the domain of men. They were the ones who could move freely in public and whose modern education was prioritized by their families for them to gain higher prestige and economic status in society. The Kurdish national movement encouraged the education of Kurdish women, mainly to produce better-educated mothers.

Yet, it was the Kurdish feminist movement that highlighted women’s skills, talents, and intellectual potential (Jineoloji, 2018; Mahmoud, 2021). Therefore, professional aspirations such as becoming a doctor, a

businesswoman, an artist, or an academic, or even a more amateur engagement in language revitalization or collecting folklore, can be perceived as combining capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000) and connecting different opportunities, women's inner selves, and their socially performed roles. This is because they support women's self-confidence, increase their visibility and audibility, and allow them to command respect in their communities (Bocheńska et al., 2023; Maghsudi, 2023). Such activities can also be related to the politics of affect because the acquisition of professional skills is hardly ever seen as simply an individual endeavor. Rather, women see it as a social and affective undertaking that may encourage other women to find their way in life beyond the prescribed gender norms (Kian, 2023).

ENACTING AND PERFORMING CITIZENSHIP

According to Arendt, to act means not simply to initiate something new but primarily "to enact oneself as that being that makes the beginning" (1958, p. 77). Engin Isin suggested that, unlike *active* citizens who follow existing legal routines (such as participating in elections), *activist* citizens are not "a priori actors recognized in law, but by enacting themselves through acts [of citizenship] they affect the law that misrecognizes them" (2009). In other words, activist citizens often occupy a space of legal and political *fiction* and, only by enacting this fiction, gradually force the existing order to recognize them and their claims as justified. Hence, they enact the alternative reality they desire and imaginarily invite the expected transformations in the social and political world in which they live.

As the chapters will show, Kurdish women can no doubt be perceived as activist citizens. They have often been affected by unequal citizenship structures. And although they were active throughout the history of Kurdish resistance against repressive regimes and the building of alternative strategies, institutions, ideologies, and practices, their presence and participation therein have often not been recognized or acknowledged. Moreover, women activists often saw themselves first and foremost as Kurdish activists, advocating for the Kurdish cause, and only after that as women activists. They thus often put the rights of the Kurds as a group above those of women in particular (Hardi, 2013; Mojab, 2001). The continually erupting political conflicts in different parts of Kurdistan and the need to struggle for a general recognition of Kurdish rights and emancipation, in many cases prevented the emergence of organizations

independent of political parties or those that advocated women's rights (Alinia, 2013). As noted by Asef Bayat (2013) and Azadeh Kian (2023), the lack and shortcomings of organized movements in the Middle East do not, however, imply an absence of resistance, which may take many less visible forms (Chap. 10), such as non-movements (Bayat, 2013), small-scale activism (Chap. 11; see also Bocheńska et al., 2023; Hamelink et al., 2025), networked activism connecting individuals willing to make a change, often starting at the grassroots level (Chaps. 2 and 10; see also Wiktor-Mach et al., 2023), or “the subtle struggle of ‘ordinary’ women” (Kian, 2023) who enact themselves as citizens through their available means and moral imaginations (Chaps. 6, 7, and 8).

CREATIVITY AND RESILIENCE

Our decision to focus on creativity and resilience stems from the aforementioned understanding of citizenship as a process of *enacting oneself as a citizen*, which relies on the power of imagination, creativity, resourcefulness, and resilience. While conducting our research, we found many examples of women who are extraordinarily creative and resilient in developing new initiatives under very difficult circumstances (Chaps. 6 and 11). Linking creativity and resilience to the performance of citizenship reflects our determination to move away from stereotypical images of women as housewives, victims, refugees, or fighters, or—perhaps more accurately—we desire to suffuse these images with new meaning, supported also by the photographs in this book. We therefore explore the simple act of living a life as an act of citizenship, and with that turn, turn to hopes and dreams; claims on society and the ethical dilemmas and moral choices in everyday life (Chap. 8) as central aspects of exploration. As was often stressed by our interlocutors, some gender roles, such as the housewife, should be understood today not only in terms of observable actions, for example, of fulfilling domestic tasks, but rather in terms of the inner selves of humans who are equipped with the skills and talent to manage the difficult realities surrounding them (Chap. 9). The dominating stereotypical narratives circulating in society reveal subtle and blatant forms of dehumanization (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014) because they deny women the right to self-reflection, self-creation, and self-development. Challenging such dehumanizing discourses and exposing the variety of voices within Kurdish society is, therefore, important (Bocheńska, 2018).

As we see through the photographs that illustrate this volume, women are active agents who manage their lives and those of their loved ones through a range of strategies that include sophisticated moral imaginations (Nussbaum, 1990; Steiner, 1987). Women occupy many different positions: as citizens of states; members of communities; initiators of collective and individual initiatives; professionals, leaders, and activists; as daughters, mothers, partners, and friends; as fighters and as peacemakers. Creativity can thus be directly linked to gendered, affective, and intimate citizenship because it makes obvious the interdependence of private and political aspects, which are “constituted through the network of passionate human beings engaging with each other, often in highly personal ways” (Plummer, 2003, p. 7). Based on our research, we can add that these networks also include relations human beings have with their cultural heritages or professional development, which contain, express, and remodel diverse intimacies and thus constitute vital and empowering inspirations for public activity.

KURDISH CITIZENSHIP: MOBILIZATION UNDER RESTRICTIONS

In the nation-states that emerged in the Middle East after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, citizenship was built along ethnic, linguistic, religious, and gendered lines. Definitions of “good citizenship” in all these countries partly, or sometimes fully, excluded Kurds from enjoying equal citizenship rights. In Türkiye, the Turkish nationalist ideology emphasizes the primacy of Turkishness and the Turkish language, together with Sunni Islam, as key components of a national identity that marginalizes and excludes other identities, cultures, and languages (Chap. 7; Gunes & Zeydanlioglu, 2014). As a consequence, Kurds have sought rights and opposed the hegemonistic tendencies of the state in various ways, including armed rebellions, political activism, and guerilla tactics. Drastic consequences of rebellions organized by Kurds during the emergence of the Republic of Türkiye—such as Sheikh Said in 1925 and the Ararat rebellion of 1927—included resettlement, extrajudicial killings, persecution, the implementation of emergency rule in Turkish Kurdistan, and the introduction of harsh laws. These reactions by the state were aimed, among other goals, at preventing any means of self-organization for the Kurds (Tejel, 2009, p. 4). When Turkish leftist political movements emerged in

the 1960s, many Kurds contributed to them, especially the Turkish Workers' Party (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi/TİP*) (Özcan, 2006, p. 41). In the latter part of the decade, the Kurds became disillusioned with the Turkish left due to its lack of support for a Kurdish identity distinct from the general community of oppressed groups in the country. This change was intensified by the 1960 and 1971 military coups, which targeted leftist organizations, leading to their fragmentation.

The following decade witnessed the flourishing of numerous Kurdish organizations proclaiming leftist programs without using armed struggle as a means of implementing them (Romano, 2006, pp. 46–47; Temel, 2015). Their emergence was influenced also by a new generation of Kurdish activists, often educated in universities where they had gained or strengthened political and philosophical justifications for their worldviews and claims for citizenship. The PKK, formed in 1978, was one such organization. Following the coup of 1980, which took a heavy toll on all leftist groups, the PKK gradually monopolized the Kurdish political struggle in Bakur and shifted the main area of conflict to guerrilla warfare by conducting its first armed attack in 1984 and announcing the goal of creating an independent Kurdistan. The Turkish state responded with harsh military operations, a new resettlement policy, and the introduction of laws aimed at enforcing more direct control of Kurdish-inhabited regions, including the institution of village guards (*köy korucular*).

Although the 1990s were difficult for the Kurds of Bakur due to the military conflict, some laws were introduced that allowed Kurdish political and cultural representation and led to the formation of pro-Kurdish political parties, which were subsequently closed by the state, re-named, and reformed in the following decades. The end of the state of emergency in 2002, combined with the electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet va Kalkınma Partisi/AKP*) ushered in a period that was more favorable to minority rights and allowed the Kurds a degree of cultural and political self-organization, a situation that was consolidated after 2012 with the introduction of the peace process (*Çözüm süreci*, lit. “Solution process”). During the early twenty-first century, Kurdish civil society in Türkiye blossomed, forming various paths for civic engagement (Diken & Baysal, 2015). The situation changed, however, in 2015 when the peace process ended, the AKP entered into a coalition with an ultranationalist party, and a “war on terror” was announced, intensively targeting Kurdish activists. The political and legal situation worsened after the

failed 2016 military coup and a long state of emergency and a crackdown on oppositional media, institutions, and groups. As a result, civil society was weakened and many cultural organizations in the country were forced to go back underground (Geerdink, 2015; Kaczorowski, 2016a), and a lot of activists left the country fearing persecution.

In Iran (Chaps. 2, 6, and 10), the unfolding citizenship of Kurds and other minoritized groups took two distinct paths. From 1925, Reza Shah's policies aimed to promote a predominantly Persian national identity, recognizing the Persians as the dominant nation in Iran. The Farsi language and Iranian identity were declared as almost sacred foundations of the modern state (Grigor, 2005). This approach resulted in the marginalization of the Kurds, who were deprived of their political and social rights. Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the concept of a unified Iranian nation became intricately linked with Shiite theological perspectives, while a substantial number of Kurds in Iran follow Sunni Islam, notably in the Mukriyan and Sine areas. The diverse religious landscape of the Kurdish communities caused some to be aligned with the regime. In Ilam (Elam) and Khorasan, the Kurdish population predominantly identifies as Shiite. In Kermanshah province, nearly one million people follow Yarsan, with another segment practicing Shia Islam. The intricate nature of the relationship between the Kurds and the state thus defies simple characterization and extends beyond ethnic considerations. These concurrent trends not only set the stage for socio-political discrimination but also gave women a second-class status under Islamic laws. Kurdish women faced compounded challenges arising from a politically charged environment, economic underdevelopment, and dual forms of discrimination.

In Syria and Iraq, Arab nationalism and Ba'athism became crucial elements in the definition of citizenship, while others were defined as lesser citizens (Lalik, 2009; Tejel, 2009). In Syria in particular (Chap. 3), citizenship rights were used as part of a policy to marginalize the Kurdish minority. The 1962 special census introduced particularly strict measures for the determination of Syrian ancestry, which led to approximately 120,000 Kurds being stripped of citizenship and categorized either as a "foreigner" (*ajnabi*) or "unregistered" (*maktumin*). These statuses were mostly hereditary and carried restrictions on employment, travel, and land ownership, meaning that by the time the Syrian Civil War started in 2011, around 300,000 Kurds in Syria were effectively stateless (Allsopp & van Wilgenburg, 2019; Schmidinger, 2018, pp. 60–62). Until then, opportunities for any form of political activity were severely limited. Despite the

vital role of the Syrian state in supporting the PKK and its relocation to the Beqaa Valley in (Syrian-occupied) Lebanon in the 1980s, the policy of Assad's regime toward the domestic Kurdish population was one of strict Arabization. This is best exemplified by the idea of the "Arab belt," a project to colonize Syria's northeast by Arab settlers in order to diminish the Kurdish majority in these areas and further divide the Kurdish populations of Rojava and Bakur. Despite a lack of political freedoms, some Kurds in Syria, including women, decided to support clandestine activities of illegal political parties, either leftist (socialist, communist) or nationalist, for example, local branches of successful Iraqi Kurdish parties such as KDP and PUK (Allsopp & van Wilgenburg, 2019). However, Kurdish activists suffered the same repression of political dissent as other Syrian citizens, ranging from the limiting of civil rights to forced disappearances and executions (Munif, 2020). With a few exceptions, such as the 2004 Qamîşlo riots where a football match resulted in a city-wide uprising with dozens of people killed and over 2000 arrested, most Kurdish activism was limited to the private sphere which favored a focus on language and culture preservation. An example is underground language courses that also served as a means for the proliferation of the Kurdish Freedom Movement's ideology, which eventually led to the establishment of the Democratic Union Party (*Parîtya Yekîtiya Demokrat/PYD*) in 2003.

The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and the subsequent Rojava Revolution in 2012 changed the social and political situation in the region drastically. Most Kurdish organizations reestablished themselves openly and, for the first time, a form of Kurdish autonomy was proclaimed for the region. Since then the name, territory, and administrative organization of the autonomous region in Syria's northeast changed repeatedly. Most notably, in the course of the war against ISIS, the region expanded beyond the easternmost corner of the country, inhabited predominantly by Kurds and other minoritized communities like Assyrians and Armenians, well into traditionally Arab territory. Currently, the administration uses as official name of the region the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria (DAANES) and emphasizes that DAANES includes other regions than only those inhabited by a Kurdish majority, therewith resisting strictly Kurdish connotations (McGee, 2022). The general diplomatic position of DAANES is not to challenge Syrian territorial integrity and thus confirming that they are part of Syria, even if Syria here corresponds to the not-yet-existing, prefigurative, democratic, and pluralistic Syrian Republic, rather than the existing Syrian Arab Republic of the Assad family (Schmidinger, 2018; Charter of Social Contract, 2014, art.3).

Yet, the hegemonic power remains with the predominantly Kurdish PYD and affiliated military forces (YPG, YPJ, and the broader coalition known as the SDF, of which the YPG and YPJ form the backbone). DAANES implemented significant social and political changes, often placing women at the center (see below). Restrictions for previously stateless people were lifted (Stateless journeys, 2019). Efforts were made to encourage more political and social freedoms which helped in the establishment of a multitude of local NGOs and opened regions for international help outside of the control of the government in Damascus. Despite major developments, the situation in DAANES remains precarious and unstable, mostly due to the aggressive actions of Türkiye, which considers PYD and YPG/YPJ terrorist groups because of their connections with the PKK. Türkiye invaded the region twice in 2018 and 2019 and continued hybrid warfare. This became part of everyday experience in northeast Syria, leading to severe deterioration of living conditions and mass migration from the region (Chaps. 3 and 9). At the time of finalizing this book (early 2025), Türkiye has invaded the region in more places than before, causing further destruction, unrest and instability.

Under the Ba'ath dictatorship in Iraq/Başûr, particularly from 1970 to 1991, the disenfranchised Kurds endured episodes of genocide, demographic shifts, forced deportation, and persistent struggle (Salih, 2022). The genocidal Anfal campaigns killed tens of thousands (according to Human Rights Watch, the most conservative estimate is 50,000) and affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of survivors (Hardi, 2011). Following the Kurdish uprising in 1991 and the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Kurdish population of this region has been engaged in a gradual process of rebuilding after its widespread destruction through genocide. Although part of the Republic of Iraq, Kurdistan has experienced distinct social, economic, and historical developments that differ from the rest of the country. After the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the KRG was accorded federal status in the Iraqi constitution and allocated 17% (13% after cuts) of the national budget based on its population as a proportion of Iraq (Natali, 2015). Besides, the 2007 Iraqi Kurdistan Oil and Gas Law encouraged foreign companies to invest in the region, turning KRI into a rapidly developing "capitalist frontier" with foreign capital and workers (Kuruüzüm, 2022). A continuing problem during the more than 30 years of the existence of the KRG, and one that remains unresolved today, is the division of Kurdistan geographically and politically between the Talabani and Barzani families. The Talabani family leads the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*Yekêti Nîştîmanî Kurdistan*,

PUK) and controls the Silêmanî (Sulaymaniyah) governorate, while the Barzani family leads the Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partî Dîmokratî Kurdistan/PDK*) and controls the governorates of Hewlêr (Erbil) and Duhok. This power struggle not only limits the possibility of free political participation and democratic citizenship, but also affects women's positions and, arguably, strengthens patriarchal structures (Alinia, 2013).

Nevertheless, until 2014, many positive developments in Kurdistan served as a beacon of hope for other Kurdish areas, such as having Kurdish governance with a Kurdish flag, Kurdish place names, Kurdish-language education, and cultural festivals. The positive status of Kurdistan changed with the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 and the drop in oil prices after the ISIS takeover: shouldering the burden of fighting ISIS led to the neglect of other aspects of life and a huge economic crisis. The government's revenues "shrank enormously, reflecting multiple shocks" (World Bank, 2016, p. 12). Mainly as a consequence of the fight with ISIS and the Syrian civil war, 1.8 million refugees entered the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). At present, Kurdistan is home to an estimated five million inhabitants, of which over one million are internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees (Khedir, 2021; UNHCR, 2022), which presents the KRG with enormous challenges. The power of the KDP was threatened by the instability created by these different factors and it closed the parliament for two years, subsequently, announcing a referendum for independence from the central Iraqi government in 2017. The contentious referendum led to conflict with the central Iraqi government, the loss of control over Kirkuk, and a strengthening of the power of the PDK and the Barzani family (Esposti, 2021).

Nationalist programs in the states in which Kurdistan is located included not only policies and imaginaries about expected cultural identity and forms of citizenship but also ways of managing, controlling, and appropriating the environment, including its natural resources. Türkiye's large-scale development projects in Kurdish regions, such as the Southeastern Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi/GAP*) and the Eastern Anatolia Project (*Doğu Anadolu Projesi/DAP*), which have had a significant effect on local ecosystems, were connected with the state's intent to control people and gain easier access to knowledge about the area, its inhabitants, and their patterns of behavior. These industrial projects may also represent a policy of ensuring central control over Kurdish-inhabited lands, as Turkish politicians have previously mentioned the possibility of constructing dams to prevent resettled Kurdish people from returning to the southeastern mountains.

In Iranian Kurdistan/Rojhelat, our interlocutors underlined the colonial nature of the water infrastructure, such as big dams, hydroelectric power projects, and channels to transport water across provinces. The benefits from these constructions, which are located in territories inhabited by Kurds and which damage local landscapes and ecosystems, go largely to other provinces. Kurdish opposition to the systematic destruction of the natural environment has been described by Allan Hassaniyan (2021) as “the environmentalism of the subalterns” to highlight the context of inequality and the multi-layered character of activism in this field.

Kurdish communities in different countries have responded to the politics of exclusion with a variety of strategies. Often, an unavoidable strategy has been assimilation into the countries' majority population and adaptation to the country's domestic laws and regulations—from citizen registration to school enrollment, from military conscription to economic laws and taxation. Equally often, however, and alongside adaptive strategies, the response to exclusion has been contentious. Political strategies include the legal contestation of inequality through participation in national and party politics, as well as contestation through underground or disputed political parties (Chaps. 5 and 10) and guerrilla warfare (Chap. 8). Cultural strategies include the continuation, preservation, and revival of Kurdish culture and language (Chaps. 6 and 7). Kurdish activists are also actively building transnational alliances and networks (Chaps. 2, 4, 9, and 11), connecting the diaspora and non-Kurdish organizations in Europe and beyond to work on common solutions.

HOMELAND AND DIASPORA CITIZENS

Kurdish cultural, political, and women's activism was, and is, strongly supported by and often initiated in Europe, where many Kurds settled in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, either as labor migrants or as political refugees. Kurds set up cultural and political organizations, and the ties between Kurds in Europe and those in their homelands remain strong (Başer, 2015; Weiss, 2018). In the diaspora, activists were able to develop organizations, ideas, and support for those at home largely without impediment, and often with the support of European countries' national funds for initiatives connected with culture and integration. Organizations in transnational and internal diasporas not only offered support for and the cultivation of Kurdish culture at times when its public manifestation was forbidden by the states in which Kurdistan is located but also contributed to discussions between various Kurdish groups and

the spread of a common Kurdish identity, experiences, and interests. Such initiatives also played an important role in language revitalization, such as Vate Publishing House, which released the first novel written in Zazaki (Kaczorowski, 2016b; Şanlı, 2022). Kurdish diaspora organizations played a crucial role in the internationalization of topics connected to Kurdish history, culture, and language (Demir, 2012). Naturally, Kurds living in Europe and the organizations they built were influenced by European contexts, moral values, and ideas about citizenship and belonging. This had an impact on communities in the homelands as well. In any study about Kurdish activism and the development of gender roles, it is, therefore, essential to include diaspora communities.

Because of the size of the Kurdish communities, their dispersal over different states, the different languages spoken, and limitations on travel, there was often little contact between communities from different states, within the homeland as well as in the diaspora. They were often more connected as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) of Kurds, and especially as political actors and victims of repressive regimes. For example, in many of the interviews, participants said that they commemorated the Halabja massacre, although few had ever met people from the region or had any connection with them. Apart from the PKK, truly transnational organizations were difficult to find. However, especially during the early 2000s, Kurdish media and political movements forged more connections between the different communities. Kurdish media, largely broadcast from abroad, played a crucial role in opening up a space for the reformulation of discourses and the creation of transnational ties. New connections were not only established through institutions but also built up individually, especially in recent decades.

KURDISH WOMEN’S PROTEST AND RESISTANCE

As in other contexts of a long-term, sometimes violent, national struggle, the Kurdish women’s fight for women’s emancipation and liberation went hand in hand with that for national liberation. It is, therefore, imperative to emphasize the socio-political contexts in which these women operate, given the direct impact that political systems have on their activism. For example, in the Iranian context (Chaps. 2, 6 and 10), the political landscape in Tehran has consistently influenced the participation of Kurdish women in activism in Rojhelat and elsewhere in the country. Except for the most recent uprisings protesting against the murder of Jîna Amînî, Iran’s hostile political environment has limited opportunities for women

to engage in socio-political activism. As a result, women have either exhibited a heightened political and social engagement during periods of a central power vacuum, actively striving for the realization of citizenship rights or—confronted with a pervasive security environment—endeavored to sustain activism at less overtly political levels by continuing literary and cultural activities to varying extents. Following the establishment of the KRG in North Iraq, cultural and political initiatives in Rojhelat were influenced by political developments in Başûr and the dynamic political landscape in Bakur. Notably, women's literary and cultural activities in Rojhelat, influenced by Başûr, have played a significant role in fortifying cultural and literary activities. The women's movements in Bakur and Rojava have also profoundly impacted the reshaping of moral imaginations of femininity in Rojhelat and the challenging of traditional notions of inferiority.

In Iraq as a whole, women's emancipation was, from the first decades of the twentieth century onward, seen as central to modernizing the country. Women's organizations played an active role in breaking taboos and fighting for gender equality, and, as a consequence of their lobbying, in 1959 the regime implemented progressive family laws enhancing gender equality. Not all women were equally affected by these measures; divisions within Iraqi society were often class-based, and the government programs were less accessible to women from the lower classes and those living in rural areas, thus excluding the majority of Kurdish women living in the rural north of the country. Additionally, these programs were not "neutral"; the government used education and organizations such as the General Federation of Iraqi Women and the Ba'ath Party to "resocialize" and "indoctrinate" the population (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2009, p. 69), while at the same time increasing pressure on politically active people. This political repression eventually culminated in the genocidal Anfal campaigns.

After the establishment of the Safe Haven directly following these events, "women were the first to take the opportunity to organize themselves, raise gender equality issues, and mobilize against gender-based violence" and were "significant in the emergence of civil society" (Alinia, 2013, pp. 83, 92). In the first decades of the twenty-first century, when other regions of Iraq spiraled into turmoil and violence, women activists in the KRI pushed for change (Chaps. 2, 11). They established organizations and shelters to counter violence against women. They also put pressure on the KRG to implement changes in the Iraqi constitution concerning women's rights. While these resulted in a series of amendments to the law, these are, however, still weakly implemented (Begikhani et al., 2015). Despite these efforts, violence against women in the KRI has increased

since the 1990s and is far more visible now, according to Mino Alinia, for four reasons: it is now openly discussed instead of silenced; women increasingly resist subordination, which leads to conflicts with men; the younger generation, with greater exposure to new ideas, sees things differently, which leads to conflicts with older generations; and after decades of violence and repression, the liberation of the Kurds allows more space for other concerns (Alinia, 2013, p. 107).

In Rojava, or North-East Syria (Chap. 3 and 9), even in the harsh circumstances described above, women were often active, for example, as members of illegal political parties. It is also worth noting that, while it embraced elements of Arab socialism within its ideology, the Syrian Ba'ath regime supported the engagement of women in the public sphere to a certain degree and some Kurdish women managed to have successful careers as government officials or teachers even before the war and revolution. However, after the establishment of the autonomous administration, the PYD's commitment to the idea of women's liberation changed the situation of women in Rojava profoundly. This includes not only the worldwide recognizable images of all female military units of the YPJ forces but also advocating for more women in positions of power and introducing women's law and institutions geared toward helping women to cope with systemic violence rooted in patriarchy. The administration introduced women-only military and police forces; a women's union; a co-chair leadership system (in which each position has to be occupied by a man and a woman); and new legislation and institutions modeled especially to target gender-based violence and discrimination. With these new institutions, the situation of women and activists in Rojava is changing but is at the same time jeopardized by the continuing reality of war and revolution.

In Bakur (Chaps. 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 11), Kurdish women were important in the development of leftist and pro-Kurdish political movements. As guerillas, activists, or politicians, they played a key role in the political and ideological development of the Kurdish movement. Sakine Cansız, who was killed in Paris with two other Kurdish women activists in 2013, played a founding role in the PKK's women's movement and laid the groundwork for the mobilization of Kurdish women in the broader struggle for Kurdish rights. She became a symbol of commitment to gender equality and Kurdish freedom, which inspired many women to participate in armed struggle within the PKK. Others became well-known for their advocacy of Kurdish rights within Türkiye's political system. In 1991, Leyla Zana was elected a member of parliament but, after reading part of

her oath in Kurdish, was arrested, accused of being a “terrorist” and “separatist” in court, and sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment. In 2007, Gültan Kışanak was elected to the Turkish Parliament and later became the mayor of the Diyarbakir (Amed) municipality, the unofficial capital city of the Kurds in Bakur. Like Zana and many others, she was detained in 2016 and remains imprisoned today. It is also important to remember the small-scale activism carried out by Kurdish women at a local level. In towns and cities across Bakur, women have been at the forefront of grassroots initiatives (see Chaps. 5, 7, and 11), particularly concentrated in Amed and Dersim, hosting women’s cooperatives, workshops, projects, organizations, and campaigns. Despite being subjected to constant discrimination and violence, women continue to defend their existence in various social and political spheres in their search for equality and freedom.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The book is divided into five parts. The first part, “Ecological Citizenship,” studies nature-related practices of citizenship in Kurdistan through which women enact their rights and work toward transformative change in their communities. Chapter 2 looks at the indigenous contestation of environmental state policies and claims to water and natural resources that, in some cases (e.g., the Mesopotamia Water Forums), connect Kurds from all areas. Chapter 3 investigates the new democratic structures established in the semi-independent region of North Syria, which have encouraged women to develop environmental initiatives alongside other types of new social organization.

The second part, “Citizenship, Activism, and Family Life,” investigates how women negotiate their roles as women, mothers, and activists, and how they shape ideas about belonging and citizenship that are primarily formed in the family. These chapters investigate gender negotiations among families in local and diasporic contexts, including Bakur, Istanbul, and various cities in Europe. Chapter 4 focuses on women activists who are active in public life and are also the main actors in family life. Chapter 5 investigates the negotiation and navigation of gender roles among Alevi Kurds who are doubly minoritized due to their ethnic and religious identities. Through the experiences of Dersimi women, the chapter examines how women are “doing gender” within their everyday local and transnational lives and how their gendered practices and the transmission of gender roles within their families relate to performances of citizenship.

The third part, “Citizenship and Cultural Heritage,” investigates how Kurdish culture and language can be sources of inspiration in empowering women. In contrast to the widespread notion of heritage as an ideological tool of top-down politics, we perceive it as a bottom-up practice of non-violent resistance (Hammani & Uzer, 2022) and negotiation, rooted in intimate and social memories and imaginations. Chapter 6, through text analysis and autobiographical research, reveals new possible interpretations of Kurdish oral and classical literature that challenge apparent certainties about the guerilla movement and patriarchal domination. This chapter also discusses modern uses of Kurdish heritage by women artists and activists in Rojhelat. Chapter 7 presents the revitalization efforts of Zaza women activists in Türkiye. It demonstrates that the motivations to revitalize the language are rooted in the women’s personal experience and the fear of loss caused by the endangered status of the Zazaki language, but also in modern forms of action through which the women establish themselves as activist citizens. They offer alternative narratives of citizenship, identity, and belonging that incorporate Zaza experiences in Bakur.

The fourth part, “Negotiations of Citizenship,” looks at examples in which women’s activities are contested. Chapter 8 proposes to see the act of living a life as an act of citizenship and investigates the difficult life choices of an individual woman from Bakur, a former guerilla fighter. In the course of her life, she goes through different stages of how she looks at her position as a Kurdish woman, and the social environment also looks at her differently according to her subject position. The author argues that in order to understand the transforming power of living a life, we should look first at spaces of imaginary and secondly at the different meanings that heritage narratives may obtain throughout our lives. Chapter 9 presents a case study of a neighborhood in Istanbul where Kurdish women from Bakur, displaced during the 1990s, meet with refugee women from Rojava, Syria. They struggle to find a shared imagination of citizenship in which both groups could have a place. This chapter includes the importance of refugee identities within Kurdish regions and the power hierarchies created by the position of refugees.

The fifth and last part, “Citizenship and Activism,” studies the relationship between these two concepts. Chapter 10, considering Iran’s undemocratic environment, divides Kurdish women’s activism in Rojhelat into three periods of survival and stagnation, in which women have managed to open new spaces of citizenship by mobilizing different opportunity structures to gain increased access to the public sphere. Chapter 11 is based on interviews with Kurdish women from all the Kurdish regions,

some living in Kurdistan and others in the diaspora, and aims to establish a better understanding of small-scale initiatives through which the women establish a “citizenship from below” (Sheller, 2012). They turn their minoritized position into a resource by mobilizing marginal spaces to their own advantage. The chapter shows how Kurdish women use affective citizenship strategies and activist placemaking to create strong bonds between women and to fight gendered—as well as state—oppression. In recent decades, they have also increasingly managed to build transnational connections through which they reimagine and remake gendered citizenship. Finally, Chap. 12 presents a series of photographs that were part of two exhibitions in Warsaw and Oslo. The photographs depict Kurdish women’s resilience and creativity in ways that they and the (mostly Kurdish) photographers chose to portray them.

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PART I

Ecological Citizenship



CHAPTER 2

Water as Life and Freedom: Rights to Water and Alternative Environmental Imaginaries in Kurdish Women's Activism

Dobroslawa Wiktor-Mach

INTRODUCTION

Territories inhabited by the Kurdish people, including parts of contemporary Türkiye, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, are among the most vulnerable regions on Earth in terms of climate and ecosystem fragility. Changing ecological conditions are likely to significantly affect people's lives, livelihoods, culture, and political choices and women are often said to be more vulnerable to these transformations. Research on Kurdish societies has not yet paid sufficient attention to ecological and climate crises. Although many studies have focused on Kurdish women's mobilization, political movements, and cultural initiatives, environmental activism has been neglected in the mainstream discussion of social change in the region. Far from Edward Said's oft-quoted description of environmentalism as "the indulgence of spoiled tree-huggers who lack a proper cause" (Taylor, 2013, p. 141), Kurdish activists are addressing the pressing issues that may turn the region into an uninhabitable desert and deprive its inhabitants of means of subsistence. As I will show in this chapter, their ecological practices cannot be seen as apolitical or unrelated to the question of social change. On the contrary, as ecofeminists have long argued, environmental issues are inherently political, even if only on a small scale

(MacGregor, 2021). Looking at Kurdish women's eco-activism on multiple scales, we can see it as an act of citizenship that, despite the constraints, is full of transformative potential not only in the environmental field but also in the gender sphere.

The water crisis has recently emerged as one of the greatest threats to human survival and well-being. It is a global phenomenon but is particularly acute in certain regions, such as the Middle East. The Tigris (*Dicle*) and Euphrates (*Firat*) rivers and their tributaries, which have sustained life in the region for centuries, are under enormous anthropocentric pressure. In Iran, water scarcity is a central environmental issue with various impacts across the country and ethnic groups (Hassaniyan, 2024). While climate change, severe drought, and changing rainfall patterns have affected the availability of drinking water in the region, they are not the only sources of water problems. Rivers flowing through the Kurdish lands are under political and economic pressures. First, wars and military conflicts have left infrastructure in ruins. Secondly, the states in which Kurdish people live prioritize neoliberal economic models in many ways: inviting private companies from abroad to construct large dam systems, hydroelectric power plants, and water canals to store and centrally manage water, and paying insufficient attention to pollution, the impact of water interventions on local ecosystems, and the livelihoods of the riverine communities (cf. Acara, 2019; Aksu et al., 2016; Prudham, 2004).

The literature on the nexus of water issues and their social, political, and economic dimensions has grown in recent years (Boelens et al., 2016), but the women's perspectives are under-researched. For groups that are marginalized and subaltern, including a significant proportion of women, unequal access to fresh water or participation in decision-making processes concerning the use of water on their territories represents a particularly urgent concern. The case of Kurdish women's engagement in struggles over water and other natural resources illustrates notable resilience and creativity. The women often connect environmental activism with the fight for empowerment and gender equality as well as for the recognition of their cultural identity and the advancement of Kurdish rights (for Iranian Kurdistan, see Hassaniyan, 2021, p. 936).

The transnational dimension of the rivers that cross Kurdish lands is crucial.¹ The two main rivers that define Mesopotamia (in Greek, "The

¹For more information of the geography of Kurdistan and the terms applied in the book see Chap. 1 of this volume.

land between the rivers”) and are key water sources for the Kurdish people—the Tigris and the Euphrates—both have their sources within the borders of contemporary Türkiye in eastern Anatolia (the Tigris at Lake Hazar near the city of Elazığ). They flow along parallel courses through northern Syria and Iraq to meet at Shatt al-Arab. An important tributary of the Tigris is the Sirwan River, which originates in the Zagros mountains, near Hamadan, in Iranian Kurdistan. It then descends through the mountains and for some 32 km forms the border between Iran and Iraq. It finally joins the Tigris below Baghdad. Therefore, water governance in upstream countries has a direct impact on those downstream.

While mainstream narratives and dystopian images present local ecologies affected by climate change and mismanaged by postcolonial states, Kurdish activism demonstrates acts of resilience and agency even under adverse conditions. This challenges the pessimistic perspective described by Hoffmann (2018) as “environmental oriental determinism.” Women’s environmental activism—as yet neglected in Kurdish studies—is an important part of grassroots mobilization in defense of nature. Ecology and feminism are closely related, and it can be argued that certain ecological ideas and an awareness of the value of the natural environment came from the Kurdish Women’s Movement. As we have observed in all four states, Kurdish women are playing an increasingly active role in environmental action, although they are less visible in many cases than the men who lead many of these projects and speak publicly about them (Wiktor-Mach et al., 2023). It is important to note that what environmentalists aim to achieve and how they operate varies in each of the states where Kurds live. In Bakur (Northern Kurdistan, Türkiye), where the environment has become highly politicized, women have introduced feminist ideas into environmentalism. The ideology of ecofeminism—which links struggles for women’s liberation and the rights of nature—is quite widespread in activist circles and is part of many narratives. Many Kurdish ecofeminists emphasize the intersectionality of gender, class, and power dynamics in relation to the natural environment. The revolution in Rojava (North-East Syria) provided opportunities to reconstruct the social world according to the ideals of women’s liberation, ecology, and direct democracy.

Jineolojî networks have played a crucial role in developing these ideas. Promoted by the Kurdish women’s movement since 2011, *Jineolojî* has opened up new perspectives and created unique spaces for women’s engagement in the field of environmentalism (Piccardi, 2022). Members

of this group advocate a common struggle in which the construction of a new society based on ecological values, justice, autonomy, and women's liberation requires the subversion of patriarchal relations and coloniality. The prefigurative attempt at building a community rooted in the ideals of Jineolojî is Jinwar—a women's village in Rojava which, as a revolutionary project popularized the Kurdish movement, was inaugurated in 2018. The women of Jinwar use natural materials, solar energy, and organic farming methods. They seek to promote ecological lifestyles while providing a safe space and opportunities for women to exercise citizenship on their own terms (Cioni & Patassini, 2021; see also Chap. 3).

Although ecofeminists argue that the environment is inherently political and every daily practice has a political implication, the relatively widespread perception of nature-related initiatives as apolitical often makes it easier for women to start to engage in activism. Throughout Kurdistan, girls and women devote their time to defending forests, lakes, and rivers, reversing environmental disasters, and advancing prefigurative politics in areas such as agriculture. This engagement is not easy, however. In particular, mainstream politics and patriarchal norms often inhibit wider activism among women.

The chapter discusses the intricacies of social struggles related to rivers in which many Kurdish women take part. It is based on fieldwork conducted throughout 2021 and 2022, including semi-structured interviews with environmental activists from various formal and informal groups and initiatives in Başûr (the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, KRI), Bakur (Turkish Kurdistan), and Rojhelat (Iranian Kurdistan), alongside an analysis of secondary sources (such as media materials from environmental campaigns, reports from activist groups, and media statements). It presents social mobilization around water rights through the lens of acts of citizenship (Isin & Nielsen, 2008), a theoretical framework useful for making visible the agency of Kurdish activists committed to reversing the negative transformations of the rivers and repairing the relationships between humans and river habitats. This requires them to overcome the limitations and barriers created or imposed by nation-states, economic conditions, and social context.

Water has increasingly become an issue that mobilizes Kurds to perform acts of citizenship where state action has failed. Their activism resembles the way many other water activist groups around the world resist ecological injustice, stand against the control of water and that of the

riverside population, and work on alternatives to the status quo. Many examples of the contestation of water regimes come from indigenous peoples who are affected by the privatization of land and water, the damming of rivers, extractivism, and various other forms of water injustice (Boelens, 2014; Boelens et al., 2023; Hommes et al., 2016). The issue of water was prominent during our fieldwork and frequently raised when discussing the current ecological situation. By defending Kurdistan's rivers, Kurdish groups and individuals enact agency and commit themselves to prevent further catastrophes. They aim to repair the relationship between people and river habitats, even when they lack political support or when those in power oppose their actions. For many Kurdish women, this is also a struggle for empowerment, changing gender relations, and participation in decision-making.

Drawing on social movement theory, political ecology, and decolonial literature, I discuss how Kurdish women's water activism is intertwined with ideas of life, freedom, and transboundary common space. Their actions can be seen as acts of citizenship in the following ways: claiming the rights of both local communities and nature, creating counter-hegemonic discourses and imaginaries of water-human relations, and thinking about alternative solutions. To strengthen their voices and chances of success, activists focus on multi-scalar networking and alliance building, including cooperation with diaspora and transnational environmental movements.

The chapter is structured as follows. I first set the scene for the analysis by highlighting key aspects of the water crisis across Kurdistan. I then explore how activists respond to the transformation of rivers and the challenges of shrinking water resources in the region, highlighting the perspective of women and the role of acts of citizenship.

WATER CRISIS IN KURDISTAN: SETTING THE SCENE

Waters in the Middle East are increasingly in the spotlight as images of disappearing rivers and streams during the hot season make headlines. Kurdish areas are facing an unprecedented water crisis, both in terms of quantity and quality. Overexploited and mismanaged water resources make them more vulnerable to even modest changes in climate and rainfall patterns (Türk & Jongerden, 2024, p. 1742). Dams, which are being built on an unprecedented scale, have been a source of significant tension. This

is becoming an issue of concern for local people, especially those connected to farming and agriculture. Kurdish activists discuss rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, and lower water levels as accelerating threats that are becoming a new reality. Many of the areas where the Kurdish people live are at great risk of desertification, which could make the land uninhabitable in the future. Farmers have already experienced the effects of climate change, as acknowledged by a woman close to the Kurdish movement:

You know, in all of the Mediterranean region, the drought issue is the most important thing. I can clearly say that it is affecting us a lot. The seasons also change. For example, some products which used to grow in May, are now [growing] in June, like that. Seasons change, (...) the model of agricultural production has changed. That is affecting us a lot. I can say that drought is the first thing [of importance]. (Woman activist and politician, 30s, Bakur, June 2022)

During the everyday conversations I had with many people across the region, they did not always explicitly use the term “climate change” but used it to refer to droughts, heat waves, or other weather-related events as disrupting socio-economic patterns and everyday life. Discussion of climate change is primarily conducted among scientists, activists, and those engaged in politics rather than in casual conversation. From our observations, it is, however, also clear that everyday discussions about weather and climate do raise an awareness of ecological challenges. Nevertheless, there appears to be no concrete plan or strategy on how to mitigate the impacts of climate change:

I remember when I was a university student (...). My university professor always told us that there would be a water war in the future. At that time, we had no water problems, drought, or lack of rain. And the problems came much sooner than he predicted. As far as I know, [his predictions] were based on research done at the university. It was predicted that by 2040 the Sirwan River would dry up, but this year pictures (...) show that the Sirwan River has dried up. Everything requires planning. And one of the biggest problems in our country is that we don't have a plan. (Woman researcher and activist, 30s, Silêmanî, Başûr, November 2021)

Many problems stem from the current economic system and practices and the role of industrial agriculture, which significantly affects

ecosystems. Farmers have used chemical fertilizers that, in the long term, harm the soil, pollute groundwater, and threaten the future of food production and the availability of clean water (Bilgili et al., 2018). In Syria, the Ba'ath regime promoted a water-intensive industrial style of agriculture, with disastrous consequences for the rural population (Barnes, 2009; Türk & Jongerden, 2024). A young activist in Rojhelat, working in ecotourism, highlighted the tension between environmental concerns and the economy:

In recent years, agricultural production has increased. The farmers are trying to increase their production, and this requires much water extraction from underground waters. This happens at the same time that our water resources are increasingly limited. Many of our waters have dried up. Facing drying up is the main problem for future generations in Kurdistan (...). When I focus on the [environmental] problems, the people of Kurdistan do not agree with me (...) because of the economic aspects. The economic problems are so big that no one can see other things. (Woman activist, 20s, Rojhelat, July 2022)

This quote highlights the question of social class and the urban-rural divide in relation to the environment. If water scarcity reaches a worst-case scenario, much of the rural population—without sufficient resources—would be forced to migrate to the cities. However, the urban areas are not prepared to accommodate waves of internal migrants. The water situation is a complex issue. Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, receives more rainfall as well as fresh water from the Tigris and its tributaries than southern parts of Iraq, as some activists acknowledged. They told stories of rich Arab families buying houses in Iraqi Kurdistan because of the unbearable summer temperatures and water shortages in their areas of origin.

Water pollution is also a crucial concern for local communities worldwide (Boelens et al., 2023). Capitalocene perspectives understand the degradation of nature as a consequence of capitalist modes of production, which have transformed the relationship of humans with the natural environment: Nature has come to be seen as “cheap,” and non-human life is less valued (Moore, 2015). Kurds in both urban and rural settings face significant challenges related to waste, contamination, and the toxicity of their rivers and streams. As Kali Rubaii wrote (2023, p. 195), “The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers are the sacred world-makers and life-sustainers of

Iraq. At the same time, war has transformed them into toxified vectors of disease, death, and neglect.”

Scientific studies support the individual observations. The Euphrates and Tigris basin, which supplies water to some 60 million people in Türkiye, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, is already experiencing a decline in water flows (Cornforth et al., 2023, p. 10). Reports from many international organizations point to the dangers posed by rising temperatures, lower precipitation in the region, and dwindling groundwater reserves (e.g., UNDP, 2021; World Bank, 2022). The World Wildlife Fund warns that Türkiye, currently classified as a “water-stressed” country, is expected to become a “water-poor” country by 2030 (Tansel, 2021). Water scarcity is even more pronounced in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Droughts are intensifying and becoming more erratic, and even a short period without water affects people and their environment, particularly in terms of food production and access to drinking water (Jongerden et al., 2021; Kuzma, 2023). Meanwhile, the region’s population is growing and so is the demand for water.

The water crisis is intricately linked to power dynamics, hegemony, and conflicts. Long periods of war and violence, including the ISIS invasion, have had a profound impact on the waterscapes. Much of the water infrastructure was demolished and has yet to be rebuilt. In Bakur—the south-eastern highlands of Türkiye—ongoing military conflict between the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Turkish military forces has severely affected the relationship between people and rivers (Jongerden et al., 2021). In Rojhelat, environmental activists interpret Iranian state acts in relation to nature in the Kurdish-majority lands as colonial practice (Wiktor-Mach et al., 2024); in particular, they criticize the exploitation of regional natural resources for the benefit of provinces outside the area. In Rojava, water problems are exacerbated by a dependence on the Euphrates River, which originates in Türkiye. Reduced water flow has a direct impact not only on the availability of drinking water and agricultural potential but also on energy production. According to representatives of the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES), Türkiye is deliberately restricting the amount of water that reaches their areas; Türkiye, however, denies this accusation, claiming that climate change is responsible for the crisis (cf. Kajjo & Sahinkaya, 2021).

There is little empirical research on Kurdish women from an ecological perspective. Ecofeminist writers, however, alert us to the various forms of injustice experienced by subaltern women around the world. In

Bakur, research has explored the impact of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (*Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi, GAP*) on the local population. This enormous development project planned in the 1970s began with the large-scale transformation of the Tigris and Euphrates basin and, in the 1980s, became a multi-dimensional endeavor, including promises of welfare and women empowerment. It is, however, highly controversial from a Kurdish perspective. Leila Harris (2016) has argued that GAP has affected local people in various ways, depending on the intersection of factors such as gender, ethnicity, class, or rurality. She shows that, contrary to GAP's promises, women in particular did not benefit from irrigation or the transformation of agriculture. Women are also the victims of displacement from hundreds of villages and towns flooded as a result of the construction of large dams. Forced migration to cities has negatively impacted many women and their social and economic status. Ecofeminists refer to GAP, therefore, as a "maldevelopment" that has destroyed nature, widened inequalities, and further marginalized women (Konak, 2013).

The literature on environmental struggles has recently engaged more directly with discussions of water rights and water justice, questioning control over water, commodification, privatization, and neoliberal policies (Aksu et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Labajos & Martínez-Alier, 2015; Strang 2019). Subalternity adds another dimension to these debates, raising questions about the resilience, adaptation, and responses of marginalized communities to environmental degradation (Boelens et al., 2023; Martínez-Alier, 2021). In this chapter, I build on these insights and explore the ways in which the Kurdish people perform acts of citizenship in relation to the water crisis and challenge dominant views of water governance in many ways.

WATER ACTIVISM AS ACTS OF CITIZENSHIP

The current water crisis across Kurdistan raises multiple questions: Who owns the rivers, lakes, and streams? Who has the right to water? Who has a right to decide upon the fate of water and how to engage people in the debate? Water also has a transboundary dimension in that rivers are controlled by different states. A river that crosses state borders is subject to different authorities with their own interests and ideas about water management. As the climate crisis worsens, shrinking water resources are likely to increase competition and conflict.

In this section, I will present examples of narratives, initiatives, campaigns, and discourses related to the water issue in which Kurds locally and transnationally struggle for their rights to the natural resources located on their lands. Women attempt to enact citizenship from below, looking for ways to influence their communities, although the degree and form of activism vary between regions. I will analyze how Kurds actively respond to the water crisis, using the concept of “acts of citizenship” to underline a focus on rights, obligation, and agency in the context of subalternity and indigeneity. In opposing transformations of water carried out by or with the consent of the state, Kurdish activists not only seek to save river ecologies but also to redefine the meaning of citizenship (see Holston, 2009) and underline the gender aspect. They demonstrate that subaltern groups have a voice and want to reshape approaches and public discourses around water and its connection to how society and politics function.

The notion of the equality of all citizens, including minorities and women, and the role of the state in guaranteeing people’s rights are problematic in many contexts. Kurdish activists react to political restrictions and mobilize themselves to fight for what they see as their rights and for the commons (cultural and natural resources accessible to all, tr. *müşterekler*). Even in unfavorable political and economic circumstances (amid marginalization, discrimination, or military conflicts), and when regimes apply various means to demobilize people, Kurdish activists undertake action to fight for the common good, such as water, lakes, and rivers. The role of women with regard to water issues adds a crucial perspective in the understanding of acts of citizenship. I analyze Kurdish water justice activism following feminist scholars who argue that citizenship relates not only to legal status but also to participation in the public sphere, challenging the status quo, caring for the commons, or enlarging a dynamic sphere of activism that may, in turn, transform relations between citizens and the state (Halsaa et al., 2012; Isin & Nielsen, 2008). From this perspective, protests and other forms of direct action can be seen as “insurgent citizenship” practices (Holston, 2009). Similarly, Azra Hromadžić (2023) has proposed the term “riverine citizenship” to talk about rivers as unique areas of environmental politics. In the case of Kurdish women, it is crucial to add an alternative dimension to citizenship practices, as I will show below.

COMPLEXITIES OF WATER AND WOMEN'S STRUGGLES

Picnics with family and friends on the banks of a river are very popular among Kurds. During my first days in Diyarbekir, on an extremely hot summer day in 2022, a friend invited me on a road trip with a group of Kurds interested in local heritage, culture, archeology, and nature. After visiting a centuries-old mosque and the ruins of a church in a small town nearby, we drove to a beautiful valley where forests shaded the river and hundreds of people were spending their weekends. Some were swimming in the water, others cooking food and tea, regardless of temperatures exceeding 40 degrees. Not far away, at a small lake, young boys were jumping from a high, rocky plateau, brave and joyous. The idyllic scene by the reinvigorating, fresh flow of water was interrupted from time to time by political discussions, criticizing the Turkish government for its lack of attention to Kurdish needs and desires.

Attachment to nature—rivers, mountains, landscapes—is a common motif in Kurdish identity (these elements of the landscape feature widely in images and stories symbolically representing the place of origin or homeland), as well as in activists' responses about their inspiration for volunteering. They are quick, however, to add that in current times, an interest in ecology is no longer a pastime, as Edward Said once remarked. Instead, in the words of an activist from the Mesopotamia Ecology Movement (MEM) in Bakur, "It's a necessity, (...) the inability to remain unresponsive to the destruction happening around." Water struggles in south-eastern Türkiye, as well as in Rojhelat, are primarily about dams, their impacts on communities, and hydroelectric power plants. MEM is a key platform connecting ecological activists, groups, and associations. Anti-dam resistance links Kurds to subaltern and indigenous communities worldwide that oppose the development and extractivist paradigms of their countries. They see a need to take a stance against the destruction of rivers, their ecologies, and riverine communities (cf. Rodríguez-Labajos & Martínez-Alier, 2015).

Many local environmental justice volunteers are also members of the MEM, making their voices stronger and more united. The MEM was formed during the 2011 Mesopotamia Social Forum in Diyarbekir as a small working group to resist dams, hydroelectric power plants (HEPPs), and other forms of socio-ecological destruction but soon grew into a larger organization that integrates numerous local associations and groups

across the region (Özcan et al., 2015). Women play a vital role in the movement, in ecology discussions, and in the struggle against HPPs, amongst other areas. In terms of structure, it resembles a collective rather than a formal organization, and it aims to achieve holistic change inspired by the principles of social ecology and democratic confederalism: radical democracy and gender equality are seen as necessary conditions for an ecological society (cf. Hunt, 2021). An important characteristic of the MEM and the associations that take part in joint work is their model that promotes women's participation and the active role of women in decision-making, as an activist from Mardin explained:

We have a leadership model called a “co-presidency” in our movements and associations. In the co-presidency, a woman and a man are the spokespersons. The equal participation of women in labor is taken as a basis. We make an effort to achieve this. The participation of women is very important because ecology cases, ecology problems are common in one place. We do not think that the struggle for ecology is very separate from the struggle for women. (Man, engineer, 20s, Mardin, July 2022)

However, there are not enough women in the movement and the activists admit that involving women in activism is not easy. A young Kurdish woman from Rojhelat who devotes her free time to environmental work underlined that “women who participate in these activities have to be more self-reliant than men.” She referred here to the perception of women's engagement in the public sphere; even if women are often seen as closer to nature than men, many families object to their environmental activism. Moreover, there are other family-related obstacles, such as the need to carry out time-consuming household duties. For men, it is easier to join meetings and other events related to the environment. During the second Mesopotamian Water Forum in May 2020, participants acknowledged a need to work harder to “get more women on the stage” and listen to their voices (Save the Tigris, 2020). Members of the largest environmental organization in Rojhelat, the Chiya Green Association, admitted in our conversation that engaging women in their work is not easy, due to traditional roles and family responsibilities as well as patriarchal norms. Some Kurds criticize women who go out of their homes alone, and this mindset is a serious cultural obstacle to activism. Another problem is the view of the NGO as opposed to the state; many women fear the impact

their activism may have on their children. It often takes time and constant personal contact to convince families to allow their female members to join the group.

Protests against large dam-building projects are acts of citizenship, arising from feelings of injustice and a responsibility for the common good. Activists ask basic questions about the rights to water. Through anti-dam resistance, the protesters endeavor to force states to stop ecologically destructive projects, although usually without success. At the same time, they claim rights to the waters that flow through their territories. One of the main water campaigns was organized against the controversial Ilisu Dam on the Tigris River, which was a key element of the GAP and included appeals to the United Nations and the European Union to rescue the local cultural heritage (Aykan, 2018). The struggle to save Hasankeyf—the historic pearl of the Batman province in south-eastern Türkiye, which was flooded by dam water in 2020 after years of protests—was a critical moment for Kurdish ecological movements and their supporters. When women from the Jineoloji movement commented on this case, they emphasized that the construction of the dam was not solely a river transformation project but more importantly, a deliberate attempt to destroy links between Kurdish history, society, and nature. As in many subaltern struggles, this is a key aspect of Kurdish contestation: “The dam project is not purely about governing water, but also about governing people” (Hommes et al., 2016). A former female co-spokesperson for the then Peoples’ Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP)’s Ecology Committee stressed that, for Kurds, this aspect is crucial to their nature-related activism:

Actually, nowadays, ecological attacks have become part of this special war strategy. It is a tool of oppression to the people over there and it’s definitely not like in other places, not like other ecological conflicts in Türkiye. The Kurds are oppressed via the environment a lot! (...) So the Kurdish people’s political mind is a bit different. They are taking it as a political thing as well, not just environmental protection. But it is very much connected to the Kurdish question. (Woman activist from Van, 30s, July 2022)

She made clear that nature in Bakur is highly politicized in opposition circles. Kurdish activists do not believe that the state will manage the water crisis fairly. Jongerden et al. (2021, p. 384) refer similarly to dams built

within the GAP project as “ordering mechanisms” that serve Türkiye’s geopolitical aims while exacerbating the water catastrophe. The displacement of people from their villages and drastic geographical transformations are seen by the Kurdish opposition as war tactics to control not only the natural resources of the region, such as water, but also the local population, and to prevent guerilla activities (Jongerden, 2010).

In the Dersim (Tunceli) mountainous region in eastern Anatolia, the state’s plans to build eight large dams on the Munzur River and its tributaries have attracted significant opposition. For Alevi Kurds, the river has a sacred status and holds a special place in local imaginaries. Resistance to the dam projects was one of the motives behind the Munzur Culture and Nature Festival, inaugurated in 2000 and commonly regarded as a site of political activism. Besides, Dersim activists managed to mobilize thousands of people in campaigns and marches to oppose the destruction of this sacred area, and their anti-dam movement became well-known outside the region (Ayboğa, 2021; Sözen, 2019). These protests attracted many different kinds of activists, and what was unique was the role of Alevism as an important source of inspiration and motivation:

There are also some politicians, socialist, communist revolutionaries who run the resistance, and HDP advocates for nature politically. But they give up earlier when there is significant risk, because they are engaged in political resistance. The most sincere advocates are those motivated by Alevism. (Male, 40s, Dersim, July 2022)

In Rojhelat, Iran, dams and hydraulic infrastructure are also widely contested, even though protests are highly risky under the authoritarian regime and where activists are under surveillance they may be imprisoned or even executed. They nevertheless have the courage to speak about the devastating impacts of large dam projects on the local population, ecosystems, cultural heritage, and water flows. Although dams had been built under the Pahlavi regime, their numbers have grown dramatically in recent years. The ongoing construction of dams has prompted activists to hold joint meetings with people from all provinces in the region to discuss the challenges linked to the dams and cooperate in organizing environmental action. Activists do the work of documenting the effects that the dams have on the lives of the local population, ecosystems, and cultural heritage, highlighting the unjust practices of the state.

Kurdish water struggles involve the question of coloniality, defined in this context as the overuse of power relations by the state against minorities. The construction of dams in Iran, many situated in Rojhelat with projects completed rapidly through government programs, mostly benefits more central provinces where water scarcity is an urgent problem for industry and households:

They follow the center-periphery policy and take this approach to the water issue. That is, there is a tendency for water from the entire Zagros region, from Lorestan to Mako, to be directed to the center. This is despite the fact that the inhabitants of this region are among the poorest people in the plateau called Iran. Where does the water flow from the provinces of Ilam, Kermanshah, and Lorestan? To the center of Iran, to the factories of Isfahan and the ironworks of Isfahan. (Former director of Chiya, an environmental NGO, 2022)

Acts of citizenship involve speaking up for water justice and attempting to pressure the central authorities to treat all communities equally with respect to access to clean water. Importantly, activists are well aware of their lack of power in relation to the state, with its police and security structures. This makes water activism difficult but does not deter Kurdish activists from fighting for water and citizenship rights.

As a young woman born in Hawraman (Rojhelat) remarked, although the inhabitants may not have a strong civil society in the Western sense, they do care about common goods and take various steps to protect them. Their approach to nature, she argued, is based on mutual relations and “commoning” practices that prevent harm to the environment. Diverse activities, such as acts of resistance opposing dams, HPPs, or water pollution—alongside publications, reports, advocacy efforts, petitions, education, training, and other awareness-raising events—are thus a way to fight for nature and rescue relationships between humans and non-humans and can be seen as acts of citizenship.

As stated above, the water catastrophe also has another dimension—the severe pollution of rivers and lakes. Toxicity, contamination, and waste have become words commonly used by activists to describe river conditions, especially in Başûr (Wiktor-Mach & Zangana, 2024). Furthermore, there is the direct legacy of war, as much critical infrastructure, such as sewage treatment plants, has been demolished and needs to be replaced or

rebuilt. However, many problems are the result of current neoliberal practices that approach water as a cheap resource easily exploited for energy and profit. Environmental pollution and its health impact are of concern to many women who train and educate others about it. Women—academics, doctors, engineers, artists, students of various faculties—are active agents of change in their communities and beyond. The young feminist artist Tara Abdulla uses art as activism to convey messages in her hometown of Silêmanî and beyond. Environmental conservation is one of her main interests, alongside gender issues and violence against women. One of her water-related projects was a protest against the widespread and dangerous pollution of the Tanjero River, which flows close by Silêmanî to later join the Tigris River downstream. Sewage, waste, and garbage have entered the river either directly or through leaks from the city dump. Waterkeepers, with whom Tara collaborates, have made many campaigns to stop the poisoning of the Tanjero. Protesters marched through the city wearing costumes made of garbage, including plastic, newspapers, and textiles. Through direct action, they want to peacefully protest against environmental degradation, raise awareness, and inspire people to act. For Tara, art is a powerful medium of social change: It is a sphere that offers greater freedom to talk about difficult subjects, criticize, or explain problems. She contrasts this with the stricter rules of politics or religion. Like many other environmentalists in Kurdistan, she sees the need to educate people about nature degradation and the environmental crisis. Her acts of citizenship occur in the public space—she creates art on walls, holds public exhibitions, or engages in street action.

Many KRI activists focus on recycling, which they see as a relatively easy way to solve some of the problems of mixed garbage. Recycling in Silêmanî is not effective: Small, private initiatives cooperate with scavengers who collect plastic items which are then sold to Türkiye or Iran, and individual organizations work on recycling or water management; for example, the University of Silêmanî has a system for water recycling. However, the regional government has not implemented a systematic way to address issues of pollution, water management, or recycling.

Is water activism successful? States have found ways to pursue their strategic objectives through neoliberal agendas in search of economic development and recognition. They have managed to build hundreds of dams across Kurdistan, with many more planned, while summers become drier and water resources scarcer. Anti-dam movements rarely succeed in

preventing the construction of dams or hydroelectric power plants, although in some cases they have managed to postpone the projects. The activists said that they continue to do what they can. As Ercan Ayboğa (2021) argues, the anti-dam campaigns have hugely increased public awareness of water problems and climate change. Kurdish people have become more involved in the ecological issues around dams, water infrastructure, energy production, waste, and natural and cultural heritage. As a consequence, there is greater political debate on ecology and a more critical approach is found among the Kurdish people in Bakur and other parts of Kurdistan. Throughout Kurdistan, water activism is a risky endeavor, although the degree of risk varies. Such movements, protests, and small-scale activism have nevertheless increased ecological awareness among Kurds and the development of ideas and alternative discourses that may influence the future of the region, especially when water conditions further deteriorate.

REIMAGINING WATERSCAPES: WATER, LIFE, FREEDOM

The unfolding water crisis offers an opportunity to rethink current practices and move forward to other water ontologies and new ways of thinking about rivers, lakes, and reservoirs. Among Kurdish environmentalists, some groups and individuals are committed to the search for alternatives. Members of the MEM in Bakur state that, although resistance to ecological harm is now a priority, discussing solutions, ideas, and the principles of an ecological society is equally important to them. They organize meetings, conferences, and workshops in which they discuss alternative ways of understanding water and its social, cultural, and ecological significance, with important implications for human–water relations.

When droughts are particularly intense and rivers disappear, the mainstream media often frame the problem as a consequence of climate crisis, urbanization, or population pressure (cf. Barnes, 2009). Dams and HPPs, conversely, are represented as “green” or “sustainable development” and as providers of “clean energy.” Mainstream water governance is also framed in de-politicized language as embodying rationality and science-based solutions (Boelens et al., 2023; Duarte-Abadía et al., 2015). Climate change is, however, entwined with myriad issues. When considering water and climate change, we must not lose sight of gender relations, class inequalities, poverty, ethnicity, power relations, and, more generally,

politics, political economy, and the global flows of resources. This approach is present in many Kurdish imaginaries related to the water crisis—especially in Bakur—which stresses that ecology is inherently a socio-political matter, a class issue, inseparable from democracy. Kurdish groups such as MEM or Waterkeepers have actively contributed to alternative water discourses and concepts. Some water and river imaginaries appear more frequently in the perception and action of Kurdish activists, especially references to life, the commons, and freedom. The slogan “Jin, jîyan, azadî” (Women, life, freedom) refers to similar ideas that captured the imagination of activists in many parts of Kurdistan and can be seen in water activism. Acts of citizenship are extended to ecology, and water is a key element of claiming human rights as well as nature rights. In the following section, I will illustrate how Kurdish activists connect the idea behind the slogan with the environment and environmental activism. The examples reveal that, in different areas of Kurdistan, people relate environmental justice to a vision of nature as animated, as having a soul, and as being part of the indigenous Kurdish heritage.

Av jîyan e: Water Is Life

This slogan was used during a campaign organized by the Solidarity Economy Association to support women’s cooperatives, water infrastructure, and other projects in Rojava, where insufficient access to freshwater for households and agriculture is a major threat to local communities (Internationalist Commune of Rojava, 2018). People see water as much more than simply a resource to be used for human needs. A river expert and protector from Diyarbekir, Bişar İçli, expressed this view during a journey along the Tigris River: “Water should be holy. It is life, and everything here is related to it. Trade, agriculture, cleaning, everything. It’s our life, and it’s being destroyed” (McCarron, 2023, pp. 34–35).

Alevi Kurds, mostly inhabiting the region of Dersim, north of Diyarbekir, are known to treat nature and other life forms in a unique way. Their religion—known in the local language, Zazaki/Kirmancki, as *Raa Heqî* (*Rêya Heqî*), the path of truth—includes the concept of a *jiare*: a sacred place connected to nature that is regarded as “alive.” Rivers, lakes, and springs are treated not as material objects, but as part of a spiritual world that contains a soul and sacrum. These sacred places in nature are worshiped and many rituals are performed in their vicinity. One of the

most venerated *jiare* is the Munzur River and its *Munzur Gözleri* (Munzur Springs), where Alevi people pray and light candles, as they are widely known for their supernatural power and potential to work miracles. The springs are a popular pilgrimage site as well as a place to spend free time surrounded by nature. This creates a special relationship between people and rivers, similar to the “river-as-subject ontology” described by Boelens et al. (2023). Such a perception of the natural world motivates people to oppose the top-down, technocratic, and modernizing approaches adopted by states and manifested in mega-dams or other hydraulic infrastructure. Worldwide, such state practices “separate hydro/social worlds, sideline river-commons cultures, and deepen socio-environmental injustices,” as argued by Boelens et al. (2023, p. 1125).

There is a generational difference in how people relate to nature. Younger activists, particularly, emphasize that their way of taking care of the environment is a “modern” one, resembling the practices of NGOs, project-based action, or awareness campaigns. They often describe the older generation as being closer to nature but not activist. When people directly depend on nature, they often make efforts to interact with it sustainably. One participant born in Meriwan (Rojhelat) explained:

Our ancestors didn’t imagine themselves as separate from nature and the environment. Because they were aware of the necessity of nature. They used nature in such a way that, the next time, they would be able to use it again. (Woman activist, 20s, Rojhelat, July 2022)

When discussing the effects of dams on water flows in Kurdistan, the activist highlighted that rivers have a great significance to Kurds, beyond being just a geographical feature. Kurdish culture has always been closely intertwined with the local environment. She referred later to the Sirwan River in the Zagros Mountains as a sacred, living entity, related to all other natural elements and to local communities:

No Kurds recognize the Sirwan merely as a river. On the contrary, Kurds look on the Sirwan as a human being. They feel that the Sirwan can speak. It is reflected in Kurdish poems and songs. The Sirwan flows like a river in the life of Kurds (...). The Sirwan is a part of Middle Eastern heritage. For this reason, the dams built on this river completely disrupt the flow of life. (Woman activist, 20s, Rojhelat, July 2022)

The Bakuri stories about Feqê Teyran, the legendary Muslim saint and poet who was believed to be able to converse with nature, also feature conversations with the river. One of the poems ascribed to him is entitled “Ey av û av” (O water and water!) and contains a dialogue between the poet and the Tigris River (Gündoğar, 2003, p. 129). Similar imaginaries appear in many indigenous communities. Australia’s first peoples, for example, challenge the mainstream water ontologies to claim decision-making rights over the rivers: Indigenous leaders have fought to change the status of the Martuwarra (Fitzroy) River in Western Australia to be an “ancestral person” with its own rights to life and flow (Boelens et al., 2023; Martuwarra RiverofLife et al., 2021).

In Silêmanî, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, we visited an exhibition on rivers. The Culture Factory, which until 2003 had functioned as a tobacco factory, was a venue for the activist and photographer Nabil Musa to showcase material from the project “Reconnecting with our lifeblood,” in which a group from Waterkeepers Iraq and Humat Dijlah made a journey along the Tigris and its tributaries in 2020. The photos, accompanied by short poems, narrated stories about riverside communities, their connections with the Tigris and its tributaries, and the current water catastrophe. The exhibition served as a reminder that rivers have always been the lifeblood of civilizations and can be seen as a call to regain the perspective of our ancestors and their closer everyday interactions with rivers. Again, in this case, the term “life” denotes the essence of rivers in relation to humans.

Commons

In recent decades, the rivers that meander through Kurdistan have been dammed, enclosed, and transformed in various ways, altering their free flow, connectivity, and biodiversity. Ecofeminist activists, in particular, challenge the mainstream view of water as a commodity and tool to maximize profit and material gain. The ecofeminist discourse criticizes market-driven water policies, neoliberalization, and the privatization of nature, including water, and advocates a focus on the commons as belonging to and accessible to all those living in the area. It also criticizes the conquering of the fragile environment and vulnerable social groups, such as women, rendering them voiceless (Bickford, 2021). Instead, ecofeminist scholars propose a “subsistence perspective”: an

approach to nature and people grounded in values such as cooperation, sharing, and care (Shiva & Mies, 1993). The Kurdish movement has embraced many of the ideas of Maria Mies’s socialist ecofeminism, especially via the Jineolojî women’s movement (Piccardi, 2022). We had an opportunity to talk to a Jineolojî group in one of Europe’s capitals. During the meeting, the women explained their perspective and aims. They primarily criticized capitalist imaginaries and practices which downgrade—or colonize—nature, native people, and women to maximize financial gain. They underlined that “communal ways [of life] are helpful” and felt it was necessary to regain control over natural resources that “the state has stolen from us.” The analogy of the Kurds’ situation to subalternity or internal colonialism was common in many conversations.

The Ecology Committee of the Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party (*Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi, DEM*), the former People’s Democratic Party (*HDP*), has also criticized the neoliberal approach to water governance. In a statement issued on March 22, 2022, for World Water Day, Menekşe Kızıldere and Naci Sönmez highlighted that the day was observed “in the shadow of the commercialization of water by states.” They called for more attention to the human rights aspect of the water problem: “Viewing water assets as a commercial commodity or damaging water assets is a violation of both a human right and a natural right (...). Unfortunately, water is still seen as a resource, not an asset, by the states all around the world.” Through this framing of the water problem, Kurdish activists link their claims to the transnational movement for water justice, which delegitimizes the neoliberal view of water as a commodity used for profit (e.g., Davidson-Harden et al., 2007).

The MEM has also proposed to communalize so-called natural resources or commons, including water, and reintroduce a sharing culture and common responsibilities. In the past, in municipalities where the Kurdish opposition was the ruling party, water was distributed free of charge (Conde, 2016). The MEM often refers to the aim of communalizing water, land, and energy and promotes this aim at public meetings, conferences, and workshops (MEM, 2016). The idea of the commons refers not only to the status of nature but, most of all, to the community which co-decides on it, which currently is controlled by the state. The rights to rivers involve water governance and decision-making which are, within the Kurdish movement related to the PKK, discussed

under the paradigm of democratic confederalism as one of the pillars of the restructuring of society, closely connected to the issue of gender empowerment.

Water and Freedom

In Kurdistan, water activism is also part of the struggle for autonomy and recognition. The centrality of freedom for Kurdish activists distinguishes their engagement from other movements against HEPPs in Türkiye. For example, in the Western Mediterranean region of Türkiye, people protest against the hydropower infrastructure because it directly threatens the agricultural production of fruit and vegetables, which, in the hot climate, require much water (Yaka, 2020). Özge Yaka (2023), who conducted field research on the contestation of HPPs in various parts of Türkiye, concluded that Kurdish mobilization includes an important additional aspect: the anti-hegemonic ideas and motivations that relate them to indigenous water struggles in Latin America, the USA, Canada, and other places. In our research, Kurdish activists also underlined this similarity and made connections to indigenous struggles worldwide.

Freedom entails participation in water governance and the right to a voice in decision-making regarding rivers, streams, lakes, and their environment. This is the issue raised by many environmentalists who oppose top-down measures to water governance, which have wide-reaching effects on local life surrounding those waters. Direct references to the idea of freedom are widely seen in Dersim where, for decades, efforts to safeguard the Munzur have been interrelated with political struggle. In mass protests against planned hydroelectric plants and a dam within the Munzur Valley (a national park that would be flooded as a result), the slogan “Let Munzur Flow Freely” was used. The campaign mobilized thousands of people from outside the region and brought victory to the protesters, as the court canceled the projects and declared them illegal.

Since the early 2000s, the Dersim region has hosted the Munzur Culture and Nature Festival, when permitted, which expresses the cultural identity of Alevi Kurds. The hot summers, when concerts, panels, and other events take place, are a highly contentious time, as the Turkish state tries to curb local resistance and the quest for rights and autonomy. Concerts and other art forms are commonly used to spread ideas among the local inhabitants as well as visitors. The latter include numerous Dersim

people who live elsewhere, many in Western Türkiye or abroad, strengthening the role of the festival as a venue of “performative reflexivity” (Sözen, 2019, p. 64). Many people visit the sacred Munzur Springs and spend time on the riverbanks talking about the importance of the Munzur River. In camping sites close to the river, people rest from the sun during the day, and in the evenings engage in conversation and sing songs around the fire, reconnecting with friends and welcoming guests. The topic of freedom frequently arises when people discuss national or local politics, the repression of the Kurds, the damming of Kurdistan’s rivers, or the developmental politics of the state, which are perceived in colonial terms. The freedom of rivers also implies freedom for people to take care of these rivers according to their practices and religious beliefs.

“WATER KNOWS NO BORDERS”: THE NATURE OF TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

Another way in which environmental activists try to save Kurdistan’s rivers is via transnational networks, cooperation, and mutual support. Kurdish activists are very conscious that ecological problems transcend nation-states. Water scarcity is forcing many states to take control of the water on their territories. This adaptation strategy—and the large-scale damming of rivers—causes obvious problems for downstream countries and communities. As a female eco-activist from Rojhelat expressed it:

Because of the cut-off of water flows from Türkiye and Iran to Başûr, the southern cities of Iraq will shrink, then the dust from the southern cities of Iraq will come to Kurdistan and affect our whole life here. This legacy, this nature belongs to all peoples of the region. Environmental elements are intertwined with each other. But human beings are stupid because they think that cutting off water flows in one region, through the construction of dams, will solve the problems. But this is not true, now dust in (Iraqi) Kurdistan and part of Iran surrounds us. But as a woman who lives in Iran, I have the same problems with the dust as those who live in Iraq. I mean that all elements of nature, the environment, as a chain, are intertwined with each other. (Woman activist, 20s, Rojhelat, July 2022)

For Kurdish women, who form a significant part of these groups, participation in transnational initiatives is an important element of their connected struggles. It grants them more visibility and some degree of

empowerment, due to the international attention and connections brought. Kurdish women also mentioned solidarity with women in other countries who are often more affected by ecological problems.

In 2019, before the coronavirus pandemic limited social gatherings, activists in Silêmanî hosted a Mesopotamian Water Forum, initiated by the Save the Tigris campaign and the MEM. The event attracted around 180 people, including many women, who were interested in finding solutions to the water crisis in Iraq and neighboring countries that share the same rivers. Activists from Iraqi Kurdistan, Iraq, Iran, Türkiye, and Syria exchanged experiences and assessments and discussed initiatives, ideas, and potential solutions. Their sessions and workshops offered an alternative space for water-related discussions by civil society actors whose voices are not taken into account by politicians. Their main goal was to counter “the destructive policies of the states” (Save the Tigris, 2019, p. 3; Ayboğa, 2021, p. 89). The Forum’s attendees referred to the 2010 United Nations General Assembly’s declaration of access to water as a human right and called for democratic and participatory decision-making in relation to rivers and waterways. Participants expressed their objections to large dams, which destroy the landscapes and are used as weapons in regional wars and conflicts. Instead, they propose to use the water crisis as a catalyst and opportunity for closer cooperation beyond state borders. For that reason, they underlined the common heritage of Mesopotamia. Acts of citizenship in this case extend beyond the borders of nation-states. Events such as the Water Forum provide a chance for activists to forge a stronger collaboration across the region and to reflect on a problem that requires a transborder solution—a solution that the states have so far been unable to provide.

The Mesopotamian Water Forums were preceded by other events, such as the first conference of the MEM organized in April 2016 in Van, which attracted participants from many Kurdish municipalities in Türkiye who formed the MEM, activists from Turkish ecology movements and political parties, members of the Chiya Association—the largest environmental organization in Rojhelat—and organizations from Europe. This was the biggest ecological event since the MEM was founded (Su hakkı, 2016) and enabled a multi-actor coalition and networks to be built that were later helpful in organizing water congresses in Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava. The Van meetings called for a better and more effective way to organize action at the grassroots level. Participants were also interested in forging closer relations with people across borders who shared similar problems. They saw that a wider interest in the topic would help them build

counter-hegemonic water imaginaries. Boelens et al. (2023) have also underlined the role of coalition-building across territories as a strategy to challenge conventional approaches to water and find solutions to problems of water injustice. Mutual support is crucial in strengthening local struggles and amplifying their voices.

One way to shift the thinking about transborder waters is to change the emphasis from conflict to peace. The first Mesopotamian Water Forum in 2019 used the slogan “Water knows no borders.” The idea presented at the forum was that, as rivers connect territories and form a common geography, Middle Eastern peoples who share the same problems should engage in more interaction and contact and try to overcome the differences resulting from their various backgrounds and political divisions. Activists from the MEM often underline the principle of inclusivity. They say that they do not define themselves by their ethnic or religious identities. They aim to include people from a range of socio-cultural groups and work together to build a strong ecological movement that is not limited to Kurdish activists.

CONCLUSIONS

Climate change is already a reality in Western Asia; all parts of Kurdistan are experiencing the shrinking of water sources, changes in precipitation, and an unprecedented scale of weather anomalies. Kurdish activists admit that fresh water—the most crucial resource in ensuring the sustainability of various forms of life—is under threat. Lakes, smaller streams, and rivers are already disappearing. The central governments in the region work hard to control the waters, keep them within their borders, and channel their benefits and the electricity from the power plants to the center, which only exacerbates the problems from a regional perspective. Many Kurds are concerned about falling water levels but also about the state’s practices in water governance. The construction of large dams and HEPPs is seen by Kurdish activists as a colonial approach to their lands rather than a modernization project, as state officials tend to present them.

Acts of alternative citizenship are performed by minority members when the state refuses to ensure equal rights and justice. As ecological problems become more acute, many Kurds, including Kurdish women, emphasize that they cannot be indifferent to what is happening with the rivers and lands of their ancestors. During our research, we observed ongoing contestation of control of riverine ecologies and access to fresh

water among Kurds. This has the potential to become a key area of conflict, but also of cooperation. Environmental activism can be empowering, especially for women. It is linked to a sense of agency and feelings of responsibility and solidarity. By coming together to work on projects or collaborate in other ways, women forge connections and deepen relationships that are crucial for their well-being and feelings of empowerment.

Kurdish women in all four parts of Kurdistan and the diaspora have been joining environmental movements. Moreover, feminist movements have, to various extents, incorporated ecological ideas and concerns. Activists' ideas, projects, and initiatives are heterogeneous but links between environmental and women's issues feature prominently. In some cases, the approach is more political, and water struggles are part of an explicit struggle for gender equality and women's emancipation. Through networks, centers, and cooperatives, Kurdish women connect ecological concerns with the discrimination or marginalization they experience in their lives. Women movements such as Jineoloji have achieved much in this field, introducing ecological ideas into Kurdish milieus, which have then begun to circulate more widely. Women activists often refer to social ecology and democratic confederalism as inspirations for their ecology-related projects. Joining in environmental activities can expose women to a politicized view of ecology and politics more generally. In other cases, their engagement is confined to events such as cleaning water banks, teaching about nature protection or climate change, or organizing other educational activities.

Despite this diversity in forms of activism, women's responses to water crises can be seen as acts of citizenship. Their subaltern status does not prevent them from fighting for the right to fresh and clean water for themselves, their families, and their communities. This work redefines what citizenship means in practice, showing not only that women have a voice but also that they want to take part in reshaping waterscapes and water governance. Acts of eco-activism in the Kurdish context bring together environmental and women's struggles in an intersectional way. This area creates new spaces for women to engage and be empowered.

This way of enacting citizenship also resembles the practices of many indigenous peoples. The way Kurds often talk about water and other natural elements challenges mainstream ontologies. A close relationship with the natural world is an important part of various acts of citizenship. It often justifies the activists' involvement and emphasizes the need to work toward changing the reality.

Developing alternative water strategies is fraught with challenges. When discussing water policies, we cannot ignore the question of inequalities and gender. State power sidelines many efforts to propose alternative solutions to the water crisis, especially when these come from minorities. Kurdish communities are usually excluded from decision-making about (trans)local rivers. Their traditional practices in terms of the use of water are also ignored by decision-makers. Transnational activism is very important in this case since the Kurds do not have their own state to protect their interests. Therefore, they use opportunities that appear at the global level and build solidarities with other groups in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere, also promoting the Kurdish issue.

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CHAPTER 3

Women, Environmental Activism, and Stateless Citizenship in Post-state North-East Syria

Marcin Skupiński

INTRODUCTION

In the warming rays of the late-autumn Syrian sun, I was sitting in an outdoor café located in a park in the center of Qamişlo city. The park is one of the few green and welcoming areas of a city consisting mostly of new concrete houses constructed with little or no urban planning. As such, it is always busy and the café is a popular meeting point for students and activists. Unsurprisingly, it became also for me the location of many meetings, with friends and for more formal interviews. This time I was meeting a very important person: Bêrîvan Omar is “the Person” to whom I am referred whenever I ask about people working for the “ecological revolution” in Rojava (North-East Syria, Ayboğa, 2021; Hunt, 2019; Knapp et al., 2016, pp. 36–41, 211–220). She is a young, elegant woman, a graduate of one of Syria’s universities. Over cups of tea we discuss how she has become a well-known figure in municipal administration and, more importantly, why it feels that she is surprisingly alone in her quest for better environmental politics in a region where, famously, a feminist and ecological revolution is taking place.

I’m Bêrîvan. Bêrîvan Omar. I’m from Amûdê, living in Qamişlo. I graduated in agriculture. And in 2015 I started to work with the municipal administration (*belediye*). I got interested in this work because I studied

agriculture. I also read some books by Öcalan. And I like planting trees, taking care of the environment.¹ And I like the environment. When I went into the details of environmental protection, I realized how we are affected by harming the environment. And we don't know! People are affected psychologically and some diseases even come from the destruction of the environment. So starting to make people, especially children, more aware of it made me like my job more. And, secondly, because I like my homeland, especially here, and I like what came with the revolution, so I care a lot about the environment here and I want to make it green.

In this quote, Bêrivan presents many of the changes that have occurred in Rojava, the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited corner of the Syrian state since the 2012 revolution. She is a young Kurdish woman taking on a leading position within the administration. The administration itself is the product of complex processes involving the dialectical relationship between the hegemonic power of the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat/PYD*) with its ideology of democratic confederalism (Błaszczuk, 2019; Jongerden & Akkaya, 2013; Knapp et al., 2016, pp. 36–43; Öcalan, 2011) and pre-existing state structures. These structures are often rooted in Syria's authoritarian governance yet impossible to remove without damaging infrastructure and people's livelihoods. She is not a party cadre but, like most officials, was educated within the democratic confederalist ideology. She is one of many young Kurds who, after receiving some education or work experience outside Rojava, have returned to their home region and found a way to influence the future of their region through new institutions and introduce ideas they feel are important. Despite multiple setbacks in terms of ecology and a lack of support and understanding from some of the older and predominantly male officials in the administration, her situation illustrates the new opportunities emerging for young Kurdish civilians since the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Asad lost its grip on the Kurdish-majority territories of north-east Syria, resulting in changes in citizenship status and practices, as well as in gender norms.

In this chapter, I will discuss some of the changes in the political landscape following the retreat of the Syrian state from the north-east and the consequences for the development of alternative citizenships in the absence of the state and in relation to an ideology that promotes “the stateless” (Baris, 2022; Dirik, 2022a; Staal, 2015). The chapter is based

¹The most commonly used term in Kurmancî is *xweza*, meaning more precisely “nature” or the environment in more common rather than academic understanding.

on fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2023 in the areas of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (*Rêveberiya Xweser Demokratîk a Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriyeyê*, DAANES), more commonly known as Rojava. The Kurdish term Rojava is seldomly used in official communications or names of institutions today, largely replaced by DAANES for the governing entity and often shortened to North-East Syria (*Bakur û Rojhilatê Sûriye*, NES) as a geographic description of the region. In this text, I follow the same naming pattern, sometimes using Autonomous Administration (*Rêveberiya Xweser*, AA) to refer to governing structures such as municipalities and directorates, as used by locals in the field. Both terms resist strictly Kurdish connotations (McGee, 2022) and reassure regions that are part of Syria, even if Syria here corresponds to the not-yet-existing, prefigurative, democratic, and pluralistic Syrian Republic, rather than the existing Syrian Arab Republic of the Asad family (Schmidinger, 2018; Charter of Social Contract, art.3). However, in some places, I will also use the Kurdish term Rojava as it is widely used informally, both in the region and abroad, among supporters of what is internationally known as the “Rojava Revolution.”

As most of my research in NES was focused on environmental activism and the implementation of social ecology, I will investigate how concerns about the environment offer an interesting nexus for individual agency, political struggle, and the material world. I will argue that—in the context of DAANES’s concern with ecology—environmental activism creates a relational field in which new authorities can be both supported and criticized while simultaneously fostering a closer relationship with the land and helping to develop a sense of shared responsibility for the future of the region. Furthermore, I will briefly analyze the impacts of Turkish state policies on the environmental situation in NES to highlight how local environmentalism is deeply politicized and can hardly be analyzed outside its context of civil war, Turkish–Kurdish conflict, and, indeed, the geopolitical strategies of the Turkish state.

Many accounts of Rojava focus on its revolutionary movement and offer perspectives from the inside, extrapolating these to the region in general, despite its political and ethnic diversity as well as the generally limited scope of many of the initiatives described (Dirik, 2018; Keasden & Szarek, 2023; Knapp et al., 2016; Staal, 2015). My aim is to offer a broader perspective, taking into account some of the more critical voices as well as observations of everyday life in NES. In this chapter, in line with the spirit of this volume, I will examine the core themes of my research

with an emphasis on women and highlighting some changes in gender relations. However, I need to note that due to my own cis-male passing the original scope of my research was necessarily limited.

Like other authors in this volume, I tend to define “activism” in fairly broad terms, covering a range of activities aimed at the improvement of one’s surroundings or challenging existing forms of oppression. This encompasses actions described as “everyday activism” (Goldstein, 2017), “everyday resistance” (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2020; Scott, 1989), and even life as politics (Bayat, 2013) or, in certain cases, life as resistance. However, in the course of my research, I focused primarily on those understood as activists in the more traditional sense of the word, who were, in most cases, organized and current or past members or employees of the various structures of the AA or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Most of my interlocutors were not direct members of military structures² or even the PYD party and the degree to which they supported them varied. However, all my interlocutors identified as Kurdish, supported autonomy from the Syrian state, and, in some way, engaged with the AA as a way to have an impact on the future of their region.

STATE AND CITIZENSHIP IN DAANES

I approach citizenship as a social construct, yet its most widespread characterization is the legal status gained through being a member of a state (Olson, 2008) which becomes less obvious in the dissolution of state structures. Perhaps more nuanced terms, such as the forming of political

²Despite the growing sector of civilian administration, the Rojava Revolution originated, to borrow classic Maoist terms, from the barrel of the gun (Hammy & Miley, 2022). The People’s Protection Units (*Yekineyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) and Women’s Protection Units (*Yekineyên Parastina Jin*, YPJ) are essentially party military forces of PYD and were crucial in securing its control over Kurdish areas in 2012 and its subsequent war against ISIS. They also remain key spaces through which people are introduced to the party’s revolutionary ideology. The armed structures in the region developed between 2012 and 2022/23, eventually encompassing an equivalent to police force (Asayis) popular militias organized at a neighborhood level (Self Defence Forces, *Hêzên Xweparastinê*, HXP) and the organization of the Syrian Democratic Forces (*Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk*, SDF) with US support as some sort of military superstructure which could be recognized as a regional military force rather than a one-party guerrilla militia. As many important political figures are also military leaders, the lines between military and civilian administration are blurred. Moreover, due to the introduction of military service in DAANES areas, having served in the SDF can no longer be assumed to indicate strong ideological support for the PYD.

subjectivity (Boudreau et al., 2009) would be more useful in grasping the complex realities of the field. The concept of citizenship in increasingly complex realities was further problematized by Isin (2016, pp. 48–49) who theorizes citizenship beyond the narrow confines of one polity (such as the nation-state). In his analysis, he points toward the performativity of citizenship, arguing that it is not only polities that perform citizenship through granting certain rights and statuses, but also people through their acts of citizenship. This active approach to citizenship as “doing rights” can help in grasping how people living in NES expand their rights and agency in the post-state context. Furthermore, a specific approach to citizenship is developing within the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM)³ itself. As described by Baris (2022), it rejects the principles of nationalism and statism and chooses voluntary residence as its basis (p. 107). This “Kurdish model” of citizenship draws heavily from ideas of direct democracy and indigenous sovereignty and, therefore, places less emphasis on the institutional right to vote, instead promoting the right to self-organization and direct political participation. Furthermore, the notion of citizenship holds specific weight in the context of the Kurds of NES, many of whom were denied citizenship and most of the rights that accompany it. It is precisely this experience that contributed to the formation of what Dilar Dirik calls “stateless citizenship,” expressed through exercising political will outside “rituals like voting” and creating structures that are “ungovernable” from the perspective of the state (Dirik, 2022a, p. 42). In a practical realization of such alternative citizenships, for the Kurds of Syria, as I describe in this chapter, it was precisely the anti-state revolution that opened spaces of agency and subjectivity of which they had previously been deprived.

To understand the unique nature of changes in citizenship and subjectivity in north-east Syria, I will first discuss the situation in Ba’ath-governed Syria prior to 2011–12. It was in a seemingly functional state that a significant population of Cizîrê Kurds were stripped of their citizenship and civil rights due to the infamous 1962 census. The census introduced discriminatory measures against Kurds, who had to prove that they had settled in

³Here I use the broad concept of the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM), following, for example, Isabel Käser (2021), to refer to a plethora of legal and clandestine organizations that grew out of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK) and share a certain commitment to its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, and ideas of democratic confederalism (Jongerden & Akkaya, 2013).

Syria before the country's independence. Where this was impossible, they fell into one of two "stateless" categories: *ajnabi* (foreigners) or *maktu-min* (unregistered; Allsopp & van Wilgenburg, 2019; Schmidinger, 2018). However, not only were the citizens' rights of the Kurds limited in pre-revolutionary Syria, as the Syrian state did not recognize the right of birth, emigrants, refugees, and their Syrian-born descendants did not enjoy full citizen status and were considered "foreigners" with the right of residence. All these limitations were lifted in areas under AA control.

Furthermore, as Bayat (2013) has aptly noted, in the context of authoritarian states, Western-derived approaches to citizenship and civil society are not applicable, since there is no true public sphere in which citizens' agency can be performed. Regarding the Syrian state, Munif (2020) makes an even more radical argument, based on Mbembe's notion of necropolitics (2003). He argues that the entire Syrian state was essentially directed toward the private businesses of the Assad family and, according to the logic of what would serve the regime, all Syrian lives were disposable.

A correct description of the current political and social situation in NES highlights a number of challenges due to the ongoing civil war and the intentionally ephemeral nature of the AA. The region has been described by Schmidinger as a "Kurdish para-state" (2018, p. 4) but also as a "transitional, autonomous government consisting of all ethnic components in the region" (Staal, 2015), "a 'third way,' to rupture the broad dominance of the Assad regime and the chauvinist-Islamist forces" and "a society based on direct democracy" (Knapp et al., 2016). The "Kurdish" nature of the area is also debatable. The hegemonic power remains with the predominantly Kurdish PYD and affiliated military forces (YPG, YPJ, and the broader coalition known as the SDF, of which the YPG and YPJ form the backbone), yet from the beginning of the revolution, the PYD, TEV-DEM⁴ (*Tevgera Cîvaka Demokratîk*, Movement for a Democratic Society), and later DAANES placed great emphasis on the multi-ethnic character of the region, focusing in particular on the minoritized non-Arab

⁴TEV-DEM is a union of the various KFM organizations in Syria, including the PYD and workers' unions. TEV-DEM played a crucial role as the political wing of the KFM at the beginning of the revolution. Its importance is seen in the prominence of the yellow-red-green tricolor banner, officially a TEV-DEM flag, which became widely associated with Rojava. However, as the project for democratic autonomy grew stronger, more specialized institutions emerged, with DAANES taking an administrative role and The Syrian Democratic Council (*Meclîsa Sûriya Demokratîk*, SDC) proclaimed as the de facto parliament of the region in which TEV-DEM is a significant coalition member but not the sole member.

communities of NES, such as the Syrians, Armenians, Circassians, and Turkmen. This tendency continued during the war against ISIS, which ended with the liberation of a significant Arab-majority area by the SDF.

According to Cherstich et al. (2020), revolution should be understood as the unfolding processes of deep societal transformation rather than a single point in history. The Rojava Revolution can best be described in terms of such a process and is now entering a more structured period with the emergence of fixed institutions and a stable administration replacing the ad-hoc basis of a war economy and rebel governance (O'Connor & Akin, 2023).

I decided to use the term “post-state” to describe the current predicament of Syria’s north-east, where one of the main promises made by the political movement is to dismantle the fixed-state structure by introducing various forms of direct democracy and broad notions of autonomy, struggling to affirm the right to self-governance while not necessarily challenging Syria’s sovereignty (Charter of Social Contract, 2014). It is a more accurate characterization than “post-war,” as the civil war in Syria is far from ended and attacks from Türkiye are part of everyday life in NES. On the other hand, according to the classical Weberian definition (1946), the Syrian state has no monopoly on the legitimate use of violence in the north-east apart from small pockets under tight military control in Qamişlo and Heseke and some military bases in the countryside. Thus it is legitimate to consider NES as liberated from the Syrian regime, as the latter has no means of enforcing its rule in the area, although its state administration remains partially functional, with government offices open and residents able to obtain legal documents in the same way as Syrian citizens. Payments for pensioners and civil servants are also delivered through the national post office. In some cases, parallel institutions have emerged. Most notably, as of 2022–23, two schooling systems function in the autonomous areas, one offering “regime” education and the other “autonomous” education. The autonomous system places more emphasis on Kurdish and other minority languages and also incorporates elements of KFM ideology (to the dismay of some) but its biggest problem is a lack of formal recognition outside the DAANES area. The state education is clearly oriented toward the Syrian Ba’athist ideology and is mostly delivered in Arabic but is still popular even among Kurds and other minoritized groups, as it is both nationally and internationally recognized, allowing graduates to continue their education in other parts of Syria and abroad.

Alongside remnants of the authoritarian Syrian state, the democratic structures of DAANES are also organized across two different logics: one of direct democracy and the other of the fixed governmental structures needed to maintain infrastructure and diplomatic relations with other state and para-state actors. Since building up radically democratic and experimental entities is time-consuming, the precarious situation in the region generally favors the latter, along with the remaining state institutions. Consequently, many positions of power remain in the hands of rather pragmatic officials.

The contradictions of the mode of governance developed in NES are most visible in the example of communes (*komîn*). These are intended to be the basic cells of a direct democratic system, a tool to bring more decisive power to popular assemblies at the village or neighborhood level. Their importance was highlighted by Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK leader and principal ideologue of the KFM, often referred to by his supporters as *Serokati* (“Leadership” in Kurmanji) or *Serok Apo* (Apo, Öcalan’s nickname since the early days of the PKK, meaning uncle in Kurmanji). As a result of this call to action, party supporters rallied across the liberated areas to establish communes. In theory, these should function as the basic units of a democratic society, forming the basis of a direct democratic system which should ideally exist in parallel to state-like institutions and keep them in check (Hammy, 2018). Ideally, the commune enables the politicization of society at a very basic level and acts as a tool of direct democratic governance, where community members make decisions in their immediate surroundings and express their instructions to representatives at more centralized levels of decision-making. Members of the commune receive briefings on the current political situation and base their decisions on that knowledge (Civil Diplomacy Center, 2023).

However, in reality, the communes have limited political power and are responsible only for mundane tasks, such as administering social benefits (assigning to families their share of subsidized basic goods, such as oil, gas, and bread) or issuing residency registrations (required in order to work legally in NES). Thus most ordinary NES inhabitants consider them a form of district office and most of those I met were not active members. Furthermore, communes are commonly associated—with justification—with the PYD and KFM’s ideology of democratic confederalism, which creates significant obstacles to engagement for a wider spectrum of NES society that does not necessarily support this particular political option.

Conversely, some commune members feel they are looked down on by municipal officials and treated as the lowest tier of governance. This complicated relationship between the communes and other, more professionalized AA bureaus became more evident in conversation with an official in a newly established section of the AA. I asked why the communes were not fulfilling their role of giving people control over governing structures. He responded that communes were “something from the beginning of the revolution” and “[need] great reform.” Nevertheless, communes are important spaces of political engagement and have a significant degree of autonomy. For example, they are responsible for the security of neighborhoods where *asayiş* are largely absent—surprising for a European observer where the presence of the police on the streets is normalized and its monopoly for violence largely unquestioned. Even as the lowest tier of administration, communes contribute to building a more localized identity and a growing feeling of responsibility, simply through decentralizing administrative tasks.

Thus, what I call the Autonomous Administration is in fact an amalgam of multiple structures sometimes operating on different, often contradictory logics of political collectives and centralized governance (Graeber, 2009) and in different proximity to the PYD and KFM. It encompasses newly created committees and institutions such as the *Mala Jin* (Women’s Houses), as well as offices and directorates with clear continuity from pre-revolutionary equivalents. The contradictions in this setup are visible in everyday life in NES, as even local people struggle to understand the relations between the various structures and some initiatives have been hard to implement due to the blurred responsibilities of different offices.

Ultimately, whether DAANES is seen as an unfolding process in the deconstruction of the state and the development of a stateless democracy or as an initial step in the construction of a Kurdish para-state, the institutions of the AA offer many opportunities for political engagement for previously stateless and disenfranchised Kurds and other minoritized groups.⁵

⁵The Syrian state did not generally recognize citizenship through birthright, meaning that children born in Syria to migrant families inherited foreigner (*Ajnabi*) status. The problem of statelessness was not, therefore, limited to Kurds but was similarly experienced by descendants of migrants from other Arab countries. The AA’s approach to the question of formal citizenship is fairly open, based on registration within the commune system. Thus, within DAANES, there are no limits on political participation for those defined by the Syrian Arab Republic as “foreign” or “unregistered.”

One mainstream approach to what might be called “civic society” is to focus simply on NGOs as a measure of civic activity and “democratization,” considering them the main, if not the only, legitimate form of social engagement. This discourse can be found in many reports regarding citizenship and democratization across the world. However, it has been widely criticized by scholars and activists alike. Even in Western contexts, it rules out many forms of social activism and political action; in non-Western contexts, it becomes still more controversial, given the role of “NGOization” in diminishing and disarming other forms of political engagement (Jad, 2004).

Consequently, the PYD and related movements exercise a certain reserve toward the Western model of civil society based on NGOs playing a de facto supplemental role to the (increasingly neoliberal) nation-state. The party and many activists within the AA would rather see the development of what is described as the “democratic nation” (Öcalan, 2017a) through general participation in the structures of self-administration and self-defense. Ideally, this process should go hand in hand with the development of revolutionary subjects (Cherstich et al., 2020), persons recognized by the KFM as having a “revolutionary personality.” Such a revolutionary should actively challenge a statist and capitalist mentality, exceed a narrowly understood citizenship, and contribute to building a democratic nation that is self-governing and does not rely on NGOs. The PYD and related structures are attempting to facilitate such a process top-down, contrary to the typical anarchist approach of gradually building up grassroots societies and cooperatives that would eventually render the state obsolete. The party is not limiting civil activity, and the AA actively encourages it and seeks relations with like-minded international organizations and the attention of larger humanitarian organizations and UN commissions in order to meet the needs of the population, both through finance for projects and international recognition. For this reason, an environment of social organization emerged that would not have been possible under the Ba’ath regime. Many local Kurdish-majority organizations have emerged since 2012, covering a range of topics including peace-building, research and advocacy, ecology, women’s rights, and Kurdish culture. Often they were organized from the bottom up by relatively young people wanting to share responsibility for some aspects of governance, influence AA policies, or offer support in important areas where the AA had insufficient capacity. However, some were older intellectuals from Syrian universities who acted as experts and added legitimacy to the

initiatives; organizations dominated by these intellectuals tend to focus on diplomacy and policy-making as well as culture-revitalization efforts.

Lastly, the Rojava Revolution changed citizenship for many in the region by creating less obvious paths for upward economic mobility and wealth acquisition as it opened up to entrepreneurs from *ajnabi* or *maktumin* backgrounds. Economically, despite a far-left ideology, DAANES and the PYD decided not to force top-down economic reform, as they wished to challenge capitalism. Instead, they focused on supporting cooperatives as a voluntary alternative to capitalist trade and entrepreneurship. Consequently, most of the NES economy functions according to market principles. Furthermore, NES remains embargoed. Within the Syrian state, it was a rural and colonized region, far from self-sufficient. The informal trans-border trade with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Türkiye is crucial for the supply of basic products—most processed goods available in the shops are Turkish, or sometimes Iraqi or Iranian, brands. It is an open secret that trading oil is important for DAANES revenues, although the criminalization of this trade by state monopolies makes it hard to trace. In general, class division is visible in cities across NES, and some of my interlocutors observed that fortunes had been made thanks to the war situation rather than despite it.

Citizenship may be understood narrowly as connected with the state and its apparatus (Olson, 2008). However, with a more critical analysis and through the examples above, it is possible to see how the collapse of dominant state structures and the introduction of a system that sought to abolish the state altogether had a positive impact on what may be termed “citizenship” in terms of direct political engagement (Baris, 2022), agency, and taking responsibility for the immediate environment through acts of citizenship (Isin, 2016). The changes described in this section contributed strongly to the ambiance of civic and cultural activism I experienced in Qamişlo. Although the city is relatively small and the political situation precarious, almost every weekend saw book fairs, theater plays, film screenings, concerts, or exhibitions of local artists. Certain venues—such as cafés and cultural centers—served as work- and meeting places for students, activists, and older intellectuals alike and were sites for both formal meetings and informal socializing between those different groups as Qamişlo developed an “activist scene” (see, e.g., Graeber, 2009, for a description of New York’s activist scene at the turn of the millennium). All these activities happened somehow on top of “business as usual” in the bustling, mostly male-dominated, cafés and restaurants of the *souq* (city center) that

grew in numbers and quality, rather than collapsing due to the war as might have been expected.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION

Under the banner of “women’s liberation,” women’s engagement in building the new autonomous region in north and east Syria was encouraged by the military, security, and general administration (Käser, 2021). Many women’s organizations in Rojava are part of the broader “Kurdish Women’s Freedom Movement,” a range of semi-autonomous organizations with roots in the PKK, as Isabel Käser describes it:

Today, one can imagine the Kurdish Freedom Movement and its organizational structure like a tree that over past decades has grown more and increasingly versatile roots. (Käser, 2021, p. 43)

The case of Rojava is perhaps the most interesting, as the PYD secured a position of hegemonic power, introducing “women’s liberation” as part of the official ideology and giving significant power to organizations forming the Women’s Movement (Dirik, 2018, 2022; Topal, 2024).

Similar to the co-mayors in Bakur (Turkish Kurdistan), the system of co-leadership (*hevserokatî*) was introduced on a wider scale in Rojava in different administrative structures and on different levels (regions, cantons, and municipalities) as well as in specific offices (the water, economy, and ecology directorates) and DAANES-operated educational institutions such as schools and universities. As one of my interviewees explained, the *hevserokatî* system is understood as part of the ecological drive by the movement:

The co-chair system is also an ecological concept. It brings balance between men and women. When there is no balance, it creates problems for the environment. With this, we are trying to bring the balance back. (Woman, 20s, Qamişlo)

Another important pillar of the Kurdish Women’s Freedom Movement in Rojava is the Women’s Union—Kongra Star. With multiple branches and regional offices, this is the strongest civilian women’s organization and it, in turn, coordinates more specific projects across the NES. For example, *Aboriya Jin* (Women’s Economy) is an economic branch of Kongra Star and operates women’s cooperatives across the region, including sewing

factories, agricultural cooperatives, shops, and bakeries, employing local women, not necessarily Kongra Star members or sympathizers.

The cornerstone of the women's revolution in Rojava was the passing of the Women's Law, a collection of regulations prepared in consultation with women activists that overwrite Syrian law and customary law in the most pressing issues regarding gender-based violence, family issues, and honor and chastity norms. Along with the new law, the institution of *Mala Jin* (Women's Houses) was introduced and incorporated into the self-governance system, with one *Mala Jin* office usually serving a neighborhood (i.e., a district in a larger city). *Mala Jin* is part of a system of restorative justice that the AA is attempting to establish in NES, run by women in support of women, mostly to provide support and counseling in cases of gender-based violence or conflicts within the family.

Women's rights and women's engagement are also promoted by international organizations such as UNICEF and UNHCR and local NGOs such as the feminist Roze or NEXTEP, an organization set up by young, educated denizens of NES seeking to support peace-building activities. They usually adapt certain forms of Western equal-rights discourses. Although they work from many different ideological bases, the AA has a generally positive attitude toward actions focused on women's rights and creates a safe space in the public sphere for campaigns addressing women's health and gender-based violence.

The proliferation of the Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement across different social spaces, including crucial sectors of governance, security, and military, contributes to changes in gendered citizenship in NES (Topal, 2024). Women with experience in these fields are slowly changing their attitudes regarding gender roles in their families and neighborhoods, and this contributes to broader social change, with more women entering the labor market. However, it is important to remember that NES is by no means an island of gender equality in the region. Even in institutions considered a model for the changes implemented by the KFM, it is not uncommon to hear sexist jokes alluding to polygamy, which was outlawed by the Women's Law. Many spaces, including markets and cafés, remain dominated by men, and some activities—such as riding bicycles—are considered inappropriate for women. The women's institutions and laws as described here are stronger in Kurdish-dominated regions. In Arab areas, DAANES has introduced some of its organizations (e.g., Zenobia, a counterpart of Kongra Star focused on Arab women), but power remains largely with the conservative tribal leadership in these regions, whose

subtle alliance with DAANES relies on a great degree of autonomy. However, by offering women careers in the military and governance, DAANES clearly challenges the norms of what is considered appropriate for women—in particular, Kurdish women—and existing patriarchal structures and leads to changes in gendered citizenship, with women taking on more openly public roles.

ECO-POLITICS OF NES

Environmental and ecological issues create an interesting nexus in the web of relations described in the previous sections. Following Escobar's (1999) "framework of nature regimes on anti-essentialist grounds, identifying organic, capitalist, and techno-natures," I argue that these different nature regimes are also observable in north-east Syria and affect the changing political subjectivities of its inhabitants.

A form of capitalist nature is probably still most widespread, as it was strongly promoted by the pre-revolution state. The Syrian state essentially shared its high modernist vision of progress (Scott, 1998) with other countries from both the Eastern and Western blocs, which in turn affected the state vision of modern farming that shaped much of NES's landscape, dominated by the large-scale monoculture of wheat (Internationalist Commune of Rojava, 2018). Despite changes introduced with state land appropriated by DAANES turned into cooperatives, most agricultural production in the region is on private farms whose owners are under pressure from the market economy, with their main concern to make ends meet against an extremely volatile context of conflict and financial crisis. It is not, therefore, surprising that green transformation is not the greatest concern of many struggling farmers in NES, who attempt to operate according to known schemes and technologies. DAANES itself is not an isolated socialist para-state and is also under pressure to participate in the global capitalist economy in order to function. The most obvious example is its reliance on oil production (Wahab, 2019; Zaman, 2019), a form of model extractivist industry (Mitchell, 2011).

Yet the most interesting socio-natural hybrids appear where this mainstream capitalist regime of nature is challenged by the vision of nature promoted by the KFM. The AA's approach to eco-politics is based largely on the social ecology developed by Murray Bookchin and later elaborated by Abdullah Öcalan and his followers in the context of Kurdistan and the Middle East (Hammy & Miley, 2022; Hunt, 2019; Öcalan, 2017a). As

one activist explained to me, “Actually, I read Öcalan. I was inspired by those books and I think it’s my job, my duty to work for ecology.”

Ecology is considered within this paradigm to be an integral part of the social revolution, intertwined and interconnected with the goal of challenging capitalist modes of production. Bookchin (1982) uses philosophical arguments, partly backed by anthropological and historical evidence, to argue that, ultimately, systems of the oppression of humans by humans are interconnected and rooted in the human domination of nature that also gave rise to patriarchy (the domination of men over women). Bookchin’s argument, akin to classical Marxist approaches, is teleological and evolutionist, recognizing the progress in human development in certain stages, starting from a natural society organized along strictly egalitarian lines. He believes the introduction of hierarchy harmed original social relations and led to the rise of the state: a structured hierarchical order. However, for Bookchin, if the damage done by capitalism and extractivism is to be undone, it is not through the rejection of modernity but, rather, through a paradigm shift toward equality and democracy that will allow humanity to take a leading role in fostering biodiversity and securing life on the planet, rather than destroying it. Bookchin’s ideas were developed in a very specific milieu of the radical and anarchic left in the United States and were written in part as a critique of primitivism which, at that time, was rising in popularity, with a general trend in anarchism toward a lifestyle rather than a school of political thought and a growing strain of deep ecology and primitivism (Bookchin, 1995). Contrary to this strain, he saw humans neither as another animal nor as a pest destroying the earth but as a very special species whose capability for progress and self-reflection can contribute to improvements for all living beings.

Perhaps the strongest and most profound points made by Bookchin were related to his contemporaneity, criticizing the developing gap between the new technologies available and the inability of the richest societies to utilize them for the greater good. As green technologies were increasingly hijacked by capitalist enterprises, and political movements became either increasingly dogmatic or a lifestyle, Bookchin advocated an integral approach to the potential exploitation of opportunities created by development, with an overarching aim of transforming human-environment relations. Öcalan adopted Bookchin’s historiographical framework but gave it a distinctively Kurdish and Middle Eastern contextualization. In his reading, many attributes of natural society are ascribed to the original Neolithic farmers, whom he considers the predecessors of

modern Kurds. The Kurds, since they inhabit mountainous areas on the verges of empires and modernized relatively late, are said to retain many traces of this organic society, while modern Middle Eastern states, especially Türkiye, represent continuity with the first historical states and empires of Mesopotamia, where inequality was born. Yet the characteristic of KFM's approach to social ecology with biggest implications for practice in NES is its focus on women's liberation. Although Bookchin recognized formation of patriarchy as an important stage in the development of hierarchical order, his further analysis focuses on liberation of abstract "humanity." Contrary to that, Öcalan and his followers placed women's liberation as a central concern and the most important step in a path to dissolve other forms of dominance.

In practice, DAANES seeks a holistic approach to the problem of nature protection, seeing humans as part of nature. Thus, AA's officials often underline that they do not seek to deprive people of their livelihoods or separate nature from society in other ways (Descola, 2008). Relatively few NES initiatives would be recognized as nature protection in terms of the system of reserves and protected areas seen in modern states and promoted by transnational entities such as UNESCO (2005). On the other hand, within this approach, some of the social reforms promoted by DAANES are also seen as ecological, for example, the co-chair system (which fosters gender balance and thus a balance in nature) or the cooperative economy as a system serving people rather than exploitation.

Recently, environmental concerns have become more than just theoretical problems for Kurdish communities in south-west Asia. Especially in Türkiye, large-scale, state-supported infrastructure projects have highlighted entanglements of natural, political, and cultural. The town of Hasankeyf (see Chap. 2) is perhaps the best example of the destruction of cultural heritage in the context of a project raising ecological concerns that also formed part of a larger state strategy aimed at (among other things) exerting political pressure on neighboring states and combating the Kurdish guerilla movement. However, by controlling the key water resources, Türkiye's ecological pressure goes well beyond its borders, impacting north Syria but also areas as far as the Mesopotamian Marshes in southern Iraq.

The state of Türkiye generally sees DAANES as a threat due to its ties with the PKK. The general strategy of Türkiye regarding NES seems not to be one of outright genocide but, rather, of isolation and slow ecocide,

intending to cause living conditions in NES to deteriorate to a degree where most of the original population will emigrate, and support for AA will collapse due to its inability to maintain security and high living standards.

In NES itself, climate catastrophe is a lived reality. During my visit, the region had for some years experienced a prolonged drought that had already started to change certain habits; for example, agricultural methods traditionally based on natural rainfall have been replaced by the extensive use of groundwater. With a dryer and hotter climate, desertification becomes a growing problem, amplified by a lack of vegetation that could slow down the process. The lack of trees and shrubs is the result both of decades of industrial farming and war and economic crisis during which more trees were cut down by locals and various militias. The effects of environmental catastrophe are enhanced in Rojava through the environmental pressure of the Turkish state; for example, the water crisis in the city of Heseke is a direct effect of the occupation of its water station after the Türkiye-led invasion of NES in 2019. The consequence of disruption to the workings of the water station is that over half a million people lack access to safe running water and, in a drought situation, this cannot easily be replaced from another source. In this context, ecological activism in NES operates on different scales and modes of political belonging as a response to global changes in climate and local forms of political resistance against certain kinds of environmental necro-politics.

SOCIAL ECOLOGY AND CITIZENSHIP IN POST-STATE NORTH-EAST SYRIA

Perhaps the best example of how social ecology is intended to function can be found in the Jinwar project. Jinwar is a women's village built close to Dirbêsiyê, in the Cizîrê canton of DAANES. Modeled partially on Umoja village in Kenya, Jinwar offers an autonomous women's space where the only permanent residents are women and children. It is the only such place in Kurdistan, but similar ideas have appeared also elsewhere in Kurdish society, for example, in Dersim, Bakur (see Chap. 11). The male presence is not prohibited in Jinwar, but it is strictly limited. The main aim is to create a safe haven where women who have experienced gender-based violence can develop, free from the pressure of a patriarchal society.

Women living in Jinwar defined it as follows during a group interview in April 2023 conducted in the village:

- A: Jinwar means many things but for me the most important is strength. Strength for women. Here we can do a lot of things. And we're gaining strength.
- A2: It's a natural life (*jiyana xwezayî*); for us, it means to know yourself. To know our nature. Jinwar is life.
- A3: Jinwar is a new life. Independence of women. It's women's color, women's language, women's resilience, women's culture. All the colors of democratic life. These are women's voices that we're building up in Jinwar.

Jinwar, as a place where, according to one of the women, democratic life is practiced, is a crucial model for the whole democratic, confederalist project. As such, it is also an important site where some of the eco-feminist ideas presented in Öcalan's writings (Piccardi, 2022) are vividly discussed and experimented with in practice. Consequently, Jinwar is a site where "natural life" is practiced, a concept I asked my interlocutors in Jinwar to expand upon:

- A: For example, all women here are living together. Everyone has their own home but at the same time, we are all living together. And in this life we do everything with respect to each other; if anyone needs anything, we do this together. And we take care of each other. Materially and emotionally. And how we take care of the land is also important. We protect the land, we plant land for our necessities, but it's not to hurt the land. By planting, we take care of the land. And when we grow fruit, for example, it's also not just for ourselves. We take the fruit but we also take care of the tree. And here, just as we care about people, we care about animals and trees. So we know that every living thing in the village needs love. And we approach it like this.
- A2: And we are trying to build up an ecological mindset (*bişmendiya ekolojîk*). Because this mindset was reversed over 5000 years of history and now we are trying to regain the natural society mindset again. To be united with nature with land, nature, animals, plants, and humans all together. For sure, for now, we've made some steps, but it's not enough, we will continue the process.

A3: So to be natural means to be... When we are dealing with land when we are planting. We take care of the land and we also get food from the land. So it's one of the sources of income for us, for progressing our life but at the same time not in a material sense, when we are dealing with the land then we are also getting more comfortable, we are learning from the land how to be more relaxed. And this is also a good thing.

Women in Jinwar work on creating new, closer relationships between people and the land in a very tactile manner. During my stay, an official tree-planting ceremony in commemoration of Apo's birthday turned into an eco-feminist ritual by the evening, planting trees together but also discussing phases of the moon and other factors. These very embodied experiences play a crucial role in developing affect and political motivations based on them (Laszczkowski, 2019). In the case of Jinwar, staying and working there creates very strong embodied experiences of working the land collectively. A relationship with the land forged in this way is very intimate as it includes bodily contact with the physical environment through the acts of cultivating land, foraging herbs, and even building mud-brick houses.

In Jinwar, these practices are connected directly to an idealized vision of the past (Bookchin's "natural society"), a matriarchal community of the first neolithic farmers of northern Mesopotamia. Yet they also have a strongly contemporary dimension, strengthening feelings of belonging and responsibility for the land which could be described through the Kurdish concept of *parastina welat* (protecting the country) or patriotism. Initially, this concept was connected to a readiness to fight to protect the homeland; however, it gradually evolved. With the adoption of a democratic confederalist model and the development of an environmental consciousness across Kurdistan, the concept started to be reinterpreted as protecting the environment from destruction and further alteration by capitalist ventures and state-sponsored projects (see the introduction to this volume). In the context of NES, the two meanings are tightly interconnected through related threats of ecological degradation and Turkish occupation. In the overall scale of the NES, Jinwar is a relatively small project: Over a dozen women live in the village permanently. The village is also located close to the Turkish border, and many families left the area due to safety concerns amid recurring threats of a Turkish invasion of the region. The initiative is commonly associated with DAANES and KFM, so it is considered to be a potential target and the village has been evacuated

several times when threats seemed more serious. However, due to the important role that Jinwar plays politically and ideologically, it is frequently visited by large numbers of both local people and sympathizers of the revolution. This in turn helps the proliferation of ideas and practices developed in the women's village, making it a vital point of alternative knowledge production and skill-sharing, creating a community of practice among those who visit.

Outside relatively safe spaces like Jinwar or the movement's academies, hybrid ideologies and concepts of nature arise when different discourses and organizational cultures meet. The story of the establishment of one of the most prominent environmental organizations in NES is a good example of the dynamic relations between certain regimes of nature, agency, and civic activism in north-east Syria. *Keziyên Kesk* (Green Braids in Kurmanji) is a leading local organization focused on the environment, which cooperates with the AA in support of its goals of developing social ecology. Although the main spokesperson is male, many women volunteers support the organization and the name itself positions the organization within the eco-feminist discourse with its use of the symbolism of braids in Kurdish culture. Braids appear in many folk tales and contemporary poetry, signifying beauty, life, and abundance, and can also be associated with female strength and bravery (see the fairy tale about Çilkezi, the Woman of Forty Braids, mentioned in Chap. 6).

According to the narratives of current members, the initiative was prompted by a rather unfortunate project in one of the municipalities which, according to a story told by the organization's founders, proposed the construction of concrete trees along a road as part of neighborhood revitalization. The idea met with opposition from the young and educated and soon a network of like-minded people from different backgrounds emerged, brought together by social media. The movement turned into a protest and eventually forced the municipality to revise its plans. This story differs from similar stories of civil dissent in that, in this case, the declared values of DAANES—rooted in democratic confederalism—complied with the demands of protesters, which made it much harder for officials to dismiss them through a “pathologization of resistance” (Theodossopoulos, 2014). Eventually, an agreement was reached, and some of the protesting individuals decided to form an organization that could further contribute to better environmental policies. As the group consolidated as an NGO, it also cooperated more closely with the AA, as the two agreed on the same goals. Eventually, *Keziyên Kesk* received

significant support from the AA in the form of arable land for its tree nursery as well as access to schools and universities to promote environmental knowledge.

This story exemplifies two issues. Firstly, despite all revolutionary ideology, a capitalist approach to nature is widespread, not only in society but also within the administration. The officials followed the modernist ideology of creating clean urban spaces with artificial nature that are easy to maintain and require no further investment in the future. This approach to public spaces can be seen in other parts of Kurdistan and many European cities and towns. On the other hand, an ideological commitment to ecological revolution makes it much harder for anyone in power to dismiss the environmentalists' claims. This, in turn, enables a shared understanding of nature and a shared vision of future development by activists and the administration. In the case of the AA and *Keziyên Kesk*, this shared vision was galvanized into a plan for the widespread re-greening of Rojava, an idea reflected in the "Make Rojava Green Again" campaign launched by international supporters of the Rojava Revolution.⁶ The idea of greening Rojava brings about different socio-natural imaginaries. On the one hand, we can see similarities with "high modern" ideas of "greening the desert" common in colonial, socialist, and post-colonial visions of progress (Buxbaum, 2022; Scott, 1998; Wren, 1977), in which the idea of greening was linked to making previously barren land productive for humans. Both the Internationalist Commune and *Keziyên Kesk* seek to distance themselves from such approaches by including ideas derived from social ecology, seeing re-greening not as another feat of human domination over nature but, rather, an act of life-nurturing cooperation. In search of practical inspiration, they tend to look at eco-villages or other alternative communities and approaches, such as permaculture and agroforestry.

⁶A number of foreign, non-Kurdish, volunteers arrived at what is now DAANES, particularly to support the YPG and YPJ in the fight against ISIS after the siege of Kobani. They are mostly radical leftists who perceive DAANES as the partial realization of their ideals and wish either to support the revolution or to study it for the benefit of the broader anti-capitalist struggle. A structure named the Internationalist Commune was created to accommodate those willing to contribute to the revolution in close cooperation with the structures of the KFM. However, there are also more autonomous structures for international volunteers, as well as a number of foreigners working for different structures of administration on a more independent basis. Together, international contributors make a significant impact on the internationalization of the Kurdish movement and foster ideological discussions within the movement. Their presence should therefore be taken into account.

Keziyên Kesk itself came up with an interesting plan for decentralizing re-greening efforts through a web of plant nurseries that would provide free seedlings for everyone willing to plant them on their land or in their neighborhood. This program connects readily with education and planting trees around schools so that every school could potentially be a small nursery and a hub for green activities in the neighborhood. This approach offers another opportunity to formulate a relationship between the land and identity through a practical process of changing the environment against a backdrop of climate change and pressure from Türkiye. On a deeper level, it can be interpreted as a form of multispecies alliance that may be necessary to further support life in a context where environmental damage is already clearly visible (Haraway, 2017). In this context, the act of planting trees becomes an act of enacting citizenship through life-supporting activities or, in fact, a form of conviviality involving humans and non-humans (Bird Rose, 2017). It can also be seen as an act of resistance and resilience, as the main aim of Turkish necro-politics is to make the region uninhabitable.

The actions of *Keziyên Kesk* show how environmental concerns can serve as a tool to challenge self-government on its shortcomings within a framework of mutual understanding and positive critique. On the other hand, the case presents how the AA's commitment to certain progressive ideals makes it open to cooperation with grassroots movements that share similar ideas.

However, not all activists focused on the environment in NES work so well with the AA. A general atmosphere of democratization supported the proliferation of grassroots organizing, mostly among the Kurdish community in NES,⁷ and activists searched for inspiration and funds from different sources. Various forms of environmentalism are working and circulating around NES, as the reality on the ground is globalized, and the actors include large organizations such as the UN and international NGOs. A green agenda became standard in these organizations, even though on many occasions it simply takes the shape of a discursive tool to gain funding or is merely greenwashing. Usually, it is also framed within the criticized agenda of green redevelopment (Esteva & Prakash, 1998), showing

⁷Note that some of the more critical commentators (e.g., Balanche, 2017) interpreted this process as “kuridification” rather than democratization, as most of the new organizations originate in the Kurdish community or are related to Kurdish political parties or other organizations commonly associated with the KFM. However, regardless of the perspective, the contrast with the period before 2011 is evident.

a certain continuity with previous schemes that have forced capitalist development on communities across the globe. Therefore, the ideas about the ecology circulating within this discourse differ significantly from the vision of social ecology and tend to focus on policy-making as well as certain forms of nature protection. In the everyday reality of NES, both discourses on ecology appear side by side as some DAA officials also seek ways to gain international recognition for the region and access money from international aid funds. This allowed activists to criticize the AA for perceived failures in introducing regulations and a work culture modeled on solutions from countries of the Global North.

This became evident to me in an interview with members of another environmental NGO. We met one evening in a café in the center of the city, a popular spot for young people and the local intelligentsia, as it doubles as a library and is one of the few such spaces with a mixed-gender clientele. My interlocutors came from a different background than most of the people I met earlier at the university or within the administration. Speaking in perfect English, both had worked with international NGOs in the past.⁸ We indulged in a long conversation, sharing ideas on what a good environmental policy in NES could look like and the obstacles experienced by citizens trying to effect change from outside the system of Democratic Autonomy.

Some of the main obstacles noted by my interlocutors were similar to those I had heard earlier when speaking to other activists and officials engaged in ecological work, who complained about general ignorance and the “problem with the mentality of the people,” one they hope to change through education. As it was explained that evening, “We think that our car, our house should be clean. But it’s ours! Outside is related to the government. This [attitude] comes from the time of the regime. When we cleaned Mizgeft,⁹ we were cleaning it, but at the same time people dropped their rubbish there, even though they saw we were cleaning it!” This assessment is consistent with remarks made by other activists I met in NES

⁸Discussing the economic impact of international aid on Rojava lies outside the scope of this chapter. However, for context, it is important to note that jobs with foreign NGOs are among the most well-paid in the region and are generally sought after by people with higher education and a knowledge of foreign languages. The few lucky people who succeed in securing a job within the aid industry form a privileged stratum of local society, at least in terms of monthly income.

⁹The word *mizgeft* means mosque in Kurdish, but here it is the name of a popular picnic destination and the location of one of the AA’s forestation projects.

who often pointed to the authoritarian nature of the previous regime that led to a lack of what could be described as “activist citizenship” (Isin, 2008).

Interestingly, my interlocutor suggested later in the interview that disobeying rules and regulations is, in her opinion, a form of enacting agency in the context of an oppressive state that will punish any act that dares to be political in nature. This way of thinking is akin to everyday resistance as described and theorized by Scott (1989), although played out here in an uncanny way as a somewhat reactionary act of disobedience to rules that may seem worth supporting.

However, in that interview, something more became evident, namely that problems in developing a more ecological mindset among the population and in the DAANES may not be due solely to the “mentality of the people” but also to the attitude of the administration.

R1: You talk about people; I talk about Self-Administration. It’s their job to provide both!

R2: Their excuse is that people don’t support them, it’s the first excuse. The second is...

R1: No, no. Their first excuse is that we are not living. And, you remember, I had a fight. It was a fight; my tone was not nice. He said, ‘We are not living in a stable area, we are in a warzone, we don’t know when we’ll be attacked, all that. It all comes together. Stop thinking about excuses and start thinking about what you’re going to do.’ I said, ‘Whether you talk or not, talking about it does not change the reality!’ (...) Because it was all excuses, excuses, and no one would think out of the box. I’m not someone who can think about the environment out of the box, but at least I push, I fight. But also, they don’t see their mistakes (...) like, if you failed in something, what lesson have you learned? Last time, I had kind of an interview, like, what would you advise from your own perspective? I said, ‘Maybe more accountability, and more monitoring, more strategic plans. And share your achievements!’ (...) Also they never hire the right person for the right job. (...)

R2: Two things, paid, but also they will not respect you! (...)

R1: If you want me to teach people not to throw rubbish, you need at least to put out some bins for it. Minimum. It needs collaboration from both sides, but as they are bigger and their rules are bigger, they have more responsibility. But they don’t know how to benefit from people like us, who are interested.

The challenges experienced by the activists here point in two directions. The first is that, even within the AA, ecological problems are treated as less important, especially given the war conditions. This highlights an interesting, dialectical relationship between the prefigurative ideals of the Rojava Revolution and the everyday political realism of officials whose tasks revolve around supplying the ever-important military while also satisfying the needs of the people. Second, are the shortcomings of the system of DAANES itself. The complexity of the system makes it hard for people to interact with it, as it is unclear who is responsible for what. Some activists simply become burned out because of the perceived inability of the AA to act. Furthermore, according to my interlocutor, the AA has a tendency to offer support to those it recognizes as supporters and tends to ignore or even put obstacles in the way of private initiatives. Here, the topic of ecology offered an interesting space for criticizing the administration for its incapability to include people representing a wider political spectrum and to support private initiatives. The latter points also toward a divergence in approaches to forming political subjects, as KFM-related institutions do not share the liberal ideals embedded in a Western vision of NGOs and civic society and indeed seek to support collective endeavors through which a new, revolutionary subject can emerge.

CONCLUSION

Engagement in ecological activism in NES creates a space for enacting citizenship (Isin, 2008, 2016) both through reaffirming allegiance to the ideals of the Rojava Revolution and democratic confederalism in the context of wider society and through challenging and criticizing those in power either for their insufficient actions or for their diminishing independent and private initiative. Furthermore, in the context of ecology and the environment, the activities described in this chapter form what can be described as the micropolitics of life directed against the necro-politics that form the modus operandi of both the Turkish (Bargu, 2019) and Syrian (Munif, 2020) regimes. The politics of life in NES create possibilities for multispecies conviviality (Bird Rose, 2017; Tsing et al., 2017) and animating multispecies projects (Haraway, 2017) that, in the case of DAANES, further politicize the environment as a form of resistance against the ecocide perpetrated by the Turkish state. In this regard, the practice of stateless citizenship in Rojava includes the important component of a relationship with the land and the environment, with the future

possibility of including non-human actors, as already mentioned in the Charter of Social Contract.

Many observers of the Rojava Revolution (e.g., Pye, 2024) saw a gap between the radicality of certain aspects of the revolution and people's readiness to take responsibility for their self-governing. The ecological initiatives discussed in this chapter are by no means mass movements, but they showcase the possibility of mitigating these contradictions as they all promote a form of direct engagement in changing one's environment. On the one hand, planting trees or cleaning the neighborhood together may foster a sense of collective action and grassroots organization so crucial for Kurdish and stateless citizenship(s), as described by Dilar Dirik (2022) and Hanifi Baris (2022). On the other hand, some of the examples show that the problem is not only people's "mentality," as many of my interlocutors called it, but also the complicated relationship between revolutionary institutions and other forms of social organizing that contributes to a situation in which not everybody is invited equally to "take responsibility," thus showing the limits of stateless citizenship outside places and organizations committed to the ideals of democratic confederalism.

In this chapter, I have shown how new relations between land, governance, and gendered individuals are created. Alternative citizenship(s) enacted by the peoples of NES reconfigure the relationships between political subjects and governance. DAANES' adherence to ideals of democratic confederalism makes it hard for AA officials to dismiss claims formulated along democratic, ecological, and feminist lines. This opens a significant space for "activist" or "stateless" citizenship, as attested by the positive and hopeful attitude of many of my interlocutors toward DAANES's capacity for change and improvement. The gender-environment-politics nexus was most pronounced in the Jinwar case where, in the context of this women-only village, eco-feminist ideas are discussed openly in a relatively small community. However, the proliferation of the Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement across society contributed to the activation and politicization of women, who often take the leading roles in projects concerned with ecology or the alternative economy. In most cases, forms of political belonging formed through practice are related to DAANES as the defining polity, rather than the Syrian Arab Republic. As envisioned by the authors of documents and declarations from Rojava, and more broadly NES, the change in the region may also

bring about the creation of a prefigurative Republic of Syria, a democratic nation where the autonomy of NES is respected and Arab nationalism is no longer a key component of state ideology.

The extremely volatile nature of the region, as described above, and the continual threat of Turkish invasion contribute to the fact that this chapter—even more than other ethnographies—should be seen as reflecting a particular point in time when the research was conducted and this chapter was written. Some parts of the text may quickly become outdated, especially details such as names of specific institutions. Hence, this chapter attempts to capture a snapshot of the social, political, and environmental changes happening in NES in real time and with incredible speed. That said, one of the aims of the chapter was to shed light on the agency of persons—in particular, women—and collectives in NES in creating this new reality. As the situation in the region continues to be unstable, what seems to remain is the hope of the activists that their work will not be in vain but will contribute to long-lasting change for the better in NES, Syria, and south-west Asia in general.

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PART II

Citizenship, Activism, and Family Life



CHAPTER 4

Public Activism, Gender Roles, and Family Life Among Transnational and Translocal Kurds

Karol Kaczorowski

INTRODUCTION

The situation of Kurdish women and Kurdish families in Türkiye and the European diaspora is affected by their minority status, persecution, and the political struggle for recognition throughout the history of the Republic of Türkiye (see Jongerden, 2007; Özcan, 2006). Apart from the defining impact of the state, dominant discourses in Türkiye and reactions to historical and personal experiences of discrimination, Kurdish families are also impacted by traditional gender norms prevalent in their society and in neighboring Middle-Eastern ethnic groups. Previous studies on the topic by scholars such as İsmail Beşikçi (1992) and Ahmet Özer (2003) have observed that despite an important and well-known tradition of Kurdish women being active in the public life of their communities, the principal traditional expectations of women passed on to them during their socialization are connected with serving the family and domestic responsibilities.

Consequently, failing to comply with the norms of managing domestic duties and primary caregiving activities can lead women in Türkiye to be labeled as bad mothers. In Türkiye, both popular and political (Kemalist) views on motherhood construct women as the main carers of children and crucial for their development, while overlooking the economic functions

of mothers (Erel, 2009, p. 122). Such traditional norms are certainly not specific to Turkish, Kurdish, or Middle-Eastern societies, as similar studies confirm this situation in many socially conservative societies around the world. In an influential study of caregiving in Filipino diaspora communities, Parreñas (2001) showed how dominant domestic discourses influence migrant mothers and transnational and translocal mothers to feel they are characterized as poor parents. However, as observed by Erel (2009, pp. 110–111), empirical findings from various diasporas show that, for migrants themselves, work and motherhood do not have to represent opposing social roles and can be integrated into a perception of successful motherhood contributing to the well-being of the children and the whole family.

Apart from potential gender imbalance within their own community and family setting, Kurdish women are also affected by state policies and dominant Turkish nationalistic narrations of the family and ethnic and religious minorities. Many (including participants of this study) highlighted a perception that the Turkish state only protects men within a family; some talked, for example, about how impunity encourages violence against women, especially in instances when the police escort women who have appealed against their husbands back to their homes (Kelek, 2011). The difficult history of state oppression and violence toward Kurds and other minorities in Türkiye adds to the experience of state hostility among these groups (Begikhani et al., 2018). Certain challenges connected to experiences of discrimination due to gender, ethnic, or cultural aspects of identity may also be experienced in the diaspora, where stereotypes of Middle-Eastern women (Erel, 2009, pp. 109–110) and social exclusion based on minority status can also be found. Language and cultural barriers can pose additional challenges for migrants. This was also emphasized by the participants of this study, who mentioned that cultural barriers and the fear of isolation are major obstacles for women in navigating and negotiating their gender roles in the diaspora, especially if they have no social contacts other than their abusive partner (and his family) in their new location.

While minority status and challenges from the Turkish state affect migrants and their relatives, often even after migration, it is important to mention other factors influencing diasporic life. Studies of the Scandinavian Kurdish community have shown that Kurds feel there is a stigma attached to being a Muslim family or a Muslim woman in European host societies, involving expectations that Muslim women are socially conservative,

restricted in their inter-gender relations, and subject to violence (Eliassi, 2010; Toivanen, 2014, p. 123). As observed also in Germany by Umut Erel (2009, pp. 109–110), otherization is common, based on an association of the Middle East with Orientalist conceptions of Muslims in contrast to stereotypes of “modern” and “socially equal” European citizens. This stigma can also be described as a form of “new racism,” a phenomenon of replacing prejudices connected with biological traits with those connected with cultural traits (Wahlbeck, 1999, pp. 19–18). Transferring from a minority status in one country to a minority status in another also requires the translation of common needs and interests of the Kurdish diasporic group, as observed in the UK by Demir (2012, 2015).

While facing additional hardships, migrants may make use of new forms of social networking and cultural and political mobilization, both through hometown organizations (Hersant & Toumarkine, 2005), being or becoming a member of a political movement, or finding opportunities to meet Kurds from other regions of Türkiye or other parts of Kurdistan. As a result, internal and external migration centers such as Istanbul (Kaczorowski, 2016), London (Ata, 2023; Baser, 2015; Demir, 2015), Stockholm (Alinia, 2008), Berlin (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018), or Paris (Toivanen, 2021) may serve as important places of cultural exchange and production.

Despite unsupportive social circumstances and the intersectional complexities of being underprivileged, Kurdish women are often publicly active, enacting their citizenship and gaining a sense of freedom and empowerment through various activities connected to their multiple identity markers. The study presented in this chapter aims to analyze these forms of social engagement among transnational and translocal Kurds from the perspective of the participants’ perceptions of family life, gender roles within families, and evaluations connected with family life among Kurds and in the society where they reside. Thus, the chapter also aims to elucidate the challenges that activists face in balancing acts of citizenship (including public activism) with maintaining everyday family life.

DOING FAMILY AS AN ACT OF CITIZENSHIP

The concept of acts of citizenship is used in this chapter as a methodology that starts from analyzing how marginal groups contribute to constituting their own rights and place within citizenship, looking also at actors and forms usually overlooked by public and academic discourse (Andrijasevic,

2013; Isin, 2008). Drawing on scholars such as Robert Ware, Adolf Reinach, Jacques Lacan, and Mikhail Bakhtin, Isin (2008, pp. 25–27) distinguishes acts from actions. An act is defined as a more general phenomenon than an action; it is usually formed before the action and can even foreshadow actors, as its main purpose is to express a commonly felt need. Consequently, an act involves both decision and direction (2009, pp. 379–380) for others to understand it. It is, however, not the same as mere social interaction; in Isin’s view, it also involves a rupture to the existing order, aimed at changing it instead of leaving or avoiding it. Acts, in this understanding, may not have a particular spatial or temporal mapping. They are built on each other and contribute to a new set of acts. The creation of “new sites and scales of struggle,” dynamic transformations, and the introduction of new actors are distinguishable traits of acts of citizenship (Isin, 2008, pp. 37–39). This theorizing arises from the observation that citizenship is not a status but a set of practices that make citizens in different spheres—social, cultural, political, and symbolic. It is something learned and cultivated rather than given or imposed. In times of intensive transnational social exchange, this phenomenon involves new subjects, sites, and scales of claim-making. It also includes non-political activities but is directed at and expressed in dialogue with others (Isin, 2008, pp. 16–19). This stance underlines the social construction of acts but also defines them as something more general than particular or individual actions. Iker Barbero (2012), who used the concept to analyze the 2001 protests of undocumented migrants in Spain, summarized that acts of citizenship involve three main traits: a dialogical character, a rupture, and a focus on justice rather than the law.

These social and political aspects of acts of citizenship make them similar to the concepts of infra-politics and micropolitics proposed by Scott (1985) and the sub-activism presented by Bakardjieva (2009). Although Isin’s acts of citizenship enunciate and value everyday claims for rights and recognition, they differ from Scott’s micropolitics in that the latter depict only non-mainstream and seemingly apolitical activities, while acts of citizenship encompass a broad spectrum of attitudes to a web of rights, including official political activism.

The theoretical approach of the research analysis in this chapter underlines connections and intersections between acts of citizenship and acts of *displaying* and *doing* family. It follows David Morgan’s (1985, 1996, 2011) observations that the *practices* of the family are more important for

their constitution than a sense of *being* a family. Morgan (1996, pp. 190–191) argues that this includes parts of everyday life that may be taken for granted or seen as banal or self-evident by family members but which in fact play an important role in family relationships.

As noted by Janet Finch (2007), studies on late modern identities (e.g., Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2013) have demonstrated how personal, cultural, and group identities are codependent and change together. This observation also supports the analysis of family life through the life histories of women and their dynamic attitudes to and perceptions of both private and social life. For Finch (2007, p. 70), this also argues the importance of displaying family—doing acts that are understood by their recipients as caring and cultivating family relations. Given the fluidity of families in late modern and transnational contexts (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007), the continued existence of the family depends on such acts. The quotations from respondents show how a sense of vocation connected with public participation (either connected with Kurdish culture or general social issues) has to be negotiated and occurs in conditions connected with family life. From this perspective, socialization in families is interrelated with potential resistance to gender norms and advocating for gender equality. The public activism of the respondents takes place against a background of gendered contracts and the everyday negotiation of meanings. These negotiations can be treated as sub-activism, infra-politics, or acts of citizenship.

The abovementioned acts of citizenship and the displaying of family occur in the context of transnational webs of meanings, norms, and practices. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2013) observed that “world families” are impacted by juxtapositions of minority/majority and being together/being apart. This is the case for the Kurds, who are a group without a sovereign country; thus, Kurdish men and women can be perceived as minorities on various axes of power. These webs of meaning are connected with various sociocultural norms, anticipations, and judgments associated with gender roles, described as the “gender regime” by Sylvia Walby (2009). In family studies, it has been highlighted that transnational families involve flows of emotional, economic, and cultural capital (Levitt, 1998; Parreñas, 2001).

Confirming observations in earlier studies showing the effect of politics in mobilizing communities in the diaspora (Baser, 2015; Baser & Swain, 2011), this chapter shows the continuing effect of Türkiye’s policies on

Kurdish families from Bakur (Turkish Kurdistan) living abroad. While modern technologies and social networks stimulate transnational interactions and relations in today's age of globalization and can weaken the conceptual and physical boundaries connected with what Lisa Malkki calls the "national order of things" (Malkki, 1992), they cannot completely overcome them (Wahlbeck, 1999). This order is especially visible when state authorities impose their narrative and policy on most spheres of their citizens' everyday lives, as is arguably the case for Türkiye. In this context, Turkish nationalistic discourse can be treated as a "predatory identity" (Appadurai, 2006, pp. 51–59). The term emphasizes the construction of a sense of community from a sense of threat from other identities in the immediate environment. Other identities are treated as the key threat to the existence of the predatory identity, which perceives itself as a majority in danger. Appadurai observes that this tendency appears in social categories that have historically existed close to themselves.

SPECIFICITY OF THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED

The analysis presented in this chapter is based on fieldwork conducted by Hayal Hanoğlu (Chap. 5) and myself among Kurdish diasporas from Northern Kurdistan in Brussels, Stockholm, London, Istanbul, and cities in Poland between December 2021 and August 2023. We conducted 17 interviews with women activists, 3 interviews with male transnational activists, and 1 couple's group interview, alongside expert interviews with representatives of Kurdish cultural organizations, including women's organizations and publishing houses. To ensure anonymity, I will refrain from providing a specific list of institutions; however, I indicate the location of the interview and give general demographic information on the respondents when citing them. Of the interviews analyzed, I will quote from ten respondents below, as their narratives represent wider themes and topics also mentioned by other participants. The technique used in the in-depth interviews was inspired by Uwe Flick's episodic interview within a framework of biographical methodology (Flick, 2008).

The episodic interview includes a set of prepared questions but gives priority to respondents' narratives and reactions during the conversation. It entails asking general questions on broad topics before moving to the main areas of interest. We usually started with general questions on Kurds and Kurdish culture; we then asked about everyday life before turning to the main subject of the interview—the intersection of family life and

activism. After the interview, the participants were able to supplement the discussion with additional topics chosen by themselves (Flick, 2008).

While the cities chosen for the study—representing significant diasporas of Kurds and hosting important Kurdish cultural organizations—differ vastly, this chapter focuses on similarities in the respondents’ experience of dilemmas connected to family life and public activism. The selection of this perspective follows recommendations that transnational studies are not limited to the context of a particular territorial or political entity but applied also in other studies of the Kurdish diaspora, such as Ayar Ata’s research in London (2023, pp. 75–76). It is, however, important to note that political, legal, and social situations differ between cities and countries. As observed in family and gender studies—among others by Magdalena Ślusarczyk and Paulina Pustułka (2016)—diasporas live under specific conditions and forms of family (analyzed as gender contracts), and gender roles may be affected by external factors such as the social policy in a given country. These are also connected to cultural differences in gender norms and cultural patterns in family life. Arguably, the Scandinavian countries are some of the most open and apparently egalitarian in Europe, while Poland and Central-Eastern European countries can be assessed as the most conservative, where domestic management and emotional support often fall solely to women.¹ The institutional situation also differs between countries: Sweden has municipal and state support for cultural initiatives such as the Kurdish Library, but such help would be impossible in Istanbul from a state that has throughout history treated Kurdish institutions as sources of threat and secession. While numerous Kurdish organizations exist in Istanbul (see Kaczorowski, 2016), they function with no help from public institutions.

Although the aforementioned differences represent important factors of the topic analyzed, it may be argued that diasporic and activist family life experiences have many aspects and challenges in common, both in Europe and in Türkiye. This observation will be supported in the discussion of research findings when quoting participants.

The category of the “migrant family” involves various stages and types of migration. In the study described in this chapter, the women and men interviewed were already established migrants (living in the place of residence for at least two years) who migrated for one of multiple reasons,

¹To explore these differences further, please refer to Katarzyna Suwada’s (2017) research on fatherhood in Sweden and Poland.

often driven by insecurity. For some (especially translocal respondents residing in Istanbul), this insecurity was related more to economic conditions than direct state persecution, and they are still able to visit their hometowns and wider family. They did, however, also mention experiencing discrimination. The majority of participants were middle-aged; the youngest was 31 years old and the oldest was 68. The respondents were raised in Alevi and Sunni Muslim families.

It is also important to note that most of the participants could be described as middle-class, taking into consideration their education status (the majority have higher education) and stable economic conditions. By “middle-class,” I understand—following Cenk Saraçoğlu (2010, pp. 12–17), who uses a class distinction based on Karl Marx—a broad group which is neither the most economically deprived nor the highest in the economic and social hierarchy, whose members have no direct control over the means of production and do not have the greatest impact on the economy or state but are also not the group with the toughest living conditions or the most difficult situation in the social hierarchy.

PARTICIPANTS’ PERCEPTION OF THEIR FAMILIES

Since, in the modern sociology of the family, the fluidity of this social institution is often underlined (e.g., Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007), it is vital to start the discussion with the participants’ own perceptions of their family and the acts that sustain it, as underlined in Janet Finch’s theoretical approach. The majority of respondents stressed the important role played by family in terms of emotional, economic, and psychological support, citing frequent contacts with immediate family as a positive trait of Kurdish culture and the partial result of a solidarity based on mutual experiences of discrimination and persecution as a minority. They underline that, in difficult times, being able to rely on families is crucial and provides a sense of stability:

Family, binding. For me, it’s binding and it’s something that plays a role in the course of my life, plays a role in a good way, guides me Uh, I know that I have someone to reach out to when I need it, and that’s a very comforting thing. (...) Kurdish families are more connected to each other. And the reason is this: the difficulties they face. Whether it’s political, livelihood, all kinds of difficulties. They are more attached to each other. They help each other more. (Benaw, London, 48 years old)

Many participants were raised in more socially open families in terms of gender topics, where the children were consulted and allowed to choose how they spent their free time in adolescence. It is important to note that the narratives of the respondents indicate a socially open family in which daughters are raised with a better situation regarding gender inequality. These attitudes were associated by the participants with parents not interfering in their children's life choices and not being overly controlling with regard to appearance or social life. Being allowed to, for example, be a member of a musical band, volleyball club, or other sports team, being able to spend their leisure time and dress as they wished, without restrictions or the imposed influence of their immediate or extended family, were cited as characteristics of more socially open and equal families.² Respecting a daughter's choices and giving her an education are also frequently mentioned traits of a family with a good approach toward gender equality. The prevalence of perceptions of the family as socially open may be because many respondents are from an Alevi background, which is often perceived in Türkiye as more socially liberal than Sunni families (see Hanoglu, Weiss & Kaczorowski, 2025), but also due to the middle-class background of the respondents, as well as their families' political sympathies with the Kurdish left.

The impact of the broader, extended family was described either as less present in the lives of the respondents or as a negative trait that involved a need to consult on life choices that, in the participant's mind, should not have been required:

But in the extended family, answering to everybody—especially the elders of the family, it's like everybody has the authority to hold you to account. Aunts, grandfather, grandmother, uncles ... you are reporting to everyone. (Benaw, London, 48 years old)

Thus, while referring on the one hand to positive ties and the role of the family in socialization, some of whom could be role models in terms of gender identity and intra-family balance, the participants also remarked on the negative influence of the extended family on gender equality among

² Confirming the narratives of the respondents, Isabel Käser (2021, pp. 185–186) observed actions such as riding a bicycle, participating in a sports team, wearing revealing clothes as practices traditionally associated with shame, even among families in the Mexmûr camp inhabited by the Kurdish left, who had been well exposed to programs of gender emancipation advocated by Abdullah Öcalan.

migrant Kurds. This impact was understood as the reproduction of gender imbalances.

The apparently trivial opportunities to dress as one likes, be a member of a sports team, choose how to spend one's leisure time, and not have to consult the extended family may be examples of how everyday life is connected to the creation of gender norms and also of how such gender norms are part of "doing" and "displaying" family in everyday life as theorized by David Morgan (2011) and Janet Finch (2007). Consequently, these acts of doing and displaying family may lead to changes in the environment and even a gradual social transformation, similar to acts of citizenship.

Another topic raised by participants was siblings, who were mentioned as points of support in everyday life, especially after migration (some of the women interviewed had sisters or brothers who had migrated earlier or together with them). Most respondents also mentioned frequent contact with siblings, either directly or via telephone and other media if living in a different country. Despite the importance of positive sibling ties and their integrating function, the respondents also commented on the traditional role of an older brother as the guardian of the chastity of their sister (Suad, 1994; Van Osch et al., 2013). Some mentioned that men felt responsible for this role even in seemingly socially open families, especially during the sister's adolescence. On the other hand, participants also underlined a gradual change in this area, describing brothers who—after broadening their knowledge (e.g., through education or the experience of having their own family)—were changing and now shared everyday household duties with their wives and were helping their sisters and parents as well.

It wasn't like, one day my mother made my elder or younger brother wash the dishes and the next day she didn't make me do it. She always made me do it. And when my brother came to England and she asked, "What's he doing?"—I had a baby at that time—I said: "He's looking after the child, he's even changed diapers, he swept the floor" and so on And she said, "Why does he do it for you but not for me?" Because you didn't make him do it. (Awira, London, 43 years old)

Defining more equal family relations, resisting male dominance, and noticing a gradual change in the community are also related to the topic of gaining gender consciousness and eventually challenging wider gender norms.

While some participants attributed their views on gender roles and gender identity to the political consciousness connected with their upbringing in a leftist home or to raising awareness of the topic in the political sphere, the majority pointed to self-reflection during education or after encounters with other, more gender-conscious people. These people could have been feminist activists or just colleagues who expressed the need for more balanced gendered social relations in everyday life. The influence of the social atmosphere prevalent in the place of migration was of significance as well, as Istanbul and European capitals such as Stockholm and London were identified as multicultural spaces where women could be more independent than in rural areas where traditional conservative views on gender relations may predominate. One respondent described how meeting female co-workers in Istanbul—who were strong personalities driving their own lives without relying on the opinions of fathers or male partners—inspired her to question gender relations. A male respondent who studied medicine in Poland admitted that he learned how to be a man and a father during his student years in Poland, feeling that he had been too young to develop his views on gender roles when living in Southern Kurdistan. Another respondent from Istanbul underlined how studying and participating in political activism had made her think through her family relationships. She was, however, also critical of gender relations within Kurdish political youth movements in the city, mentioning expectations on dress code and behavior for female activists that did not apply to their male counterparts.

Being engaged in public activities—either related to general activism (e.g., in labor unions, cultural organizations, women’s associations, shelters, educational organizations) or directly involved in the Kurdish political struggle—also affected views on gender equality and gender roles within the family. Such engagement also impacted the family life of the participants.

PUBLIC ACTIVISM AMONG TRANSNATIONAL AND TRANSLOCAL KURDISH WOMEN

Activism among transnational and translocal Kurdish families can be understood as a result of a sense of vocation and a desire to work for the Kurdish community. Many said that they wanted to contribute to the Kurds’ resistance to political persecution and the threat of cultural

assimilation resulting from the pressure of the Turkish state and Turkish nationalistic discourses against manifestations of distinctively Kurdish culture. While Hamit Bozarslan (2004, p. 15) notes the creation of a “tragic mind” connected with the normalization of violence in Türkiye (and also in the Middle East in a broader sense), it can be argued that the prevalence of violence and injustice often leads to a response in the form of resistance, which can be performed on a small scale in daily life or in the form of public participation in an organization (e.g., a labor union, political party, or cultural movement). This vocation may result from encounters with discrimination which lead people to feel forced to become politicized to counter the oppression. The participants often mentioned a feeling of needing to become involved in politics in the insecure environment of Türkiye; one example is a respondent currently residing in Stockholm who felt the urge to resist state politics when she was in high school and her teacher was fired because he was Alevi:

I grew up with Sunni traditions, but why can someone do something to someone else just because of their beliefs? Of course, this is what actually made me become a revolutionary. I mean, you can't just stay around here, there is something There is an injustice in this country. You have to choose something. (Can, Stockholm, 68 years old)

Although time has passed and the parties ruling Türkiye have changed, younger respondents held a similar position. The environment also has an impact on family life—both immediate and extended—as family members may have less time to spend with their relatives due to factors related to their activism, such as commitment to an organization or political party or being incarcerated as a result of political engagement.

The following participant, a journalist, spoke about how difficult it is to be both a woman and a journalist in Türkiye. However, she was not keen to talk about gender issues, finding this topic “far” from the reality of Türkiye, as she saw a focus on gender issues as a more “Western trait.” She explained that she and her colleagues were living with a very intense and threatening political state agenda which caused multiple problems. Therefore, she argued, what women need is not currently on her agenda. She stressed how women’s issues are deeply connected to politics in Türkiye:

You can't regard basic women's problems in Türkiye as independent from other problems. But you are presenting them all separately. You use one

argument here, a different one there. So it doesn't happen in a way You know, the women's struggle is already coordinated with the struggle you are waging with the state. That's why I gave the Istanbul Convention as an example. I mean, this is not independent from general politics. (Dever, Istanbul, 45 years old)

Framing gender equality as a second priority after the Kurdish cause can be seen as part of internationally known nationalist discourses and their hierarchy of topics,³ and as Shahrzad Mojab observes, can also conceal internal gender inequality (Mojab, 2021, p. 26). Discussing internal inequalities in this discourse is seen, on the one hand, as weakening the more general cause of fighting political injustice (Yüksel, 2006). On the other hand, the prioritization expressed by this female participant points to the importance of experiences of ethnic, cultural, and political discrimination and persecution, which are often seen by Kurdish women as having a greater impact than gender oppression and, thus, being more crucial to resist. Those who are raised in politically active families tend to experience the high costs of family engagement—in the history of the Kurds in Türkiye, this often involves incarceration, police and military raids, forced disappearance, or even death—and almost inevitably develop a heightened feeling of insecurity toward the state, much greater than the insecurity that may result from gender inequality. This is visible in the narration of a respondent from London who described her attempts to create the best environment for herself and her sister while not questioning intra-family hierarchies, as she felt that caring for her suffering family was more important:

I mean, of course, I tried to do my best not to cause my parents more pain. On the other hand, of course, there was a rush to study and help out. My brother was in prison at the time. He was sentenced to five years, my other brother. My sisters-in-law were on their own. My sister and I were looking after the children for half a day and going to school for half a day. So it was a difficult time. We were already in a very difficult financial situation. All of

³While such participation in political causes was connected with emancipation in anti-colonialist thought such as by Fritz Fanon (1968), Isabel Käser (2021, pp. 168–170) observes that based on historical examples, after the revolutions patriarchal male dominance over women prevailed. There is a separate topic connected with essentializing binarity in gender among the PKK cadres, while the political activists of the Kurdish left in Turkey underline the need for inclusion of LGBTQI identities in the framework of the Kurdish struggle for freedom (see Käser, 2021, pp. 190–195; Weiss, 2010).

these things were very limited anyway, we didn't have time to make enquiries at that time. [...] We didn't question it because we didn't want to upset our parents who had lost their son. (Gerdana, London, 50 years old)

While, as cited above, some interlocutors prioritized political recognition for the Kurds over equality within families, the majority perceived the topic of gender equality as inseparable from the Kurdish issue. For them, being active in Kurdish women's organizations (such as *Yekitiya Jinên Kurdistanê* in Stockholm) or generally being active as women in Kurdish culture improved the gender balance by educating communities (both diasporic and of the receiving society) and influencing their social surroundings. Some participants also pointed to a change in the perception of gender among Kurds in general owing to politics and the Kurdish leftist movements' assessment of this problem as important (see Öcalan, 2013). The co-chairing system and gradual introduction of the topic of gender to Kurdish politics were seen as having brought signs of improvement in intra-family dynamics that had been inspired by the political sphere. The impact of domestic politics on family relations shows the influence of the "national order of things" as observed by Lisa Malkki (1992) and, as highlighted by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2013), shows that Kurdish families have to relate to webs of meaning associated with Türkiye's political situation and hierarchies.

A sense of empowerment may also result from engagement in various forms of public service, including those not specifically connected to the Kurdish community, as described by a Londoner working in an organization to help victims of domestic violence:

First of all, I wanted to change the world. When I studied criminology and decided to work against violence against women and girls, I wanted to change the world. I just wanted the world to be a better place for women and children (...) So that is rewarding, empowering, and I learned a lot from the survivors. (Ester, London, 39 years old)

Activism can, therefore, create a feeling of fulfillment, and a sense of independence, and also act as a potential source of additional prestige within the nuclear and extended family. A few respondents cited public activities outside the household as the most effective step toward gaining independence, confidence, and, eventually, a better position within a community. This was reflected in the experience of a representative of a Kurdish

organization in Brussels, who associated the simple act of going to a language lesson, and the resulting opportunity to chat and get to know other migrant Kurdish women, with recognizing the possibility to improve the well-being of women and, as a result, the whole family. This demonstrates the intersection between the acts of citizenship theorized by Isin (2008) and what can be referred to as *doing* or *displaying* family (Finch, 2007). The participants' acts of claiming rights impacted the ways in which they cultivated family life.

Many respondents stressed that any form of participation in public life (even simply being engaged in the labor market) makes an important contribution to feeling empowered and being more successful in efforts to achieve gender equality within their social surroundings. Studying, working, contributing to awareness-raising events, and participating in community meetings were cited as means of raising prestige within the family and also gaining the independence that leads to a greater sense of empowerment. The need to participate in life outside the family home as a step toward gradual emancipation was underlined by participants and also highlights the social relevance of space. Such activities are practiced in everyday spaces such as cafes, offices, or shops, rather than *homely* spaces, as in Tim Edensor's (2002, pp. 45–68) typology. This stance confirms observations underlined within social theory (among others by Doreen Massey, 1994) that spaces play an important role in social relations.

A participant in London explained how she decided to engage in various training and courses to learn English, integrate into her new environment, and socialize outside the family:

I did many courses, you know, computers, floristry, sewing ... After that, it was Photoshop, as far as I remember ... Because, well ... How can I explain ... the life of the people here was very different from the life I had led in the last five years in Istanbul. And I couldn't socialize with them. It was a salvation for me to go to a course, because at least there I could socialize and learn something at the same time. I even did a gardening course. (Awira, London, 43 years old)

While this respondent experienced empowerment due to being actively engaged in the host community (e.g., through participating in courses), other London-based participants felt othered as migrants from the Middle East (Erel, 2009, pp. 109–110). Cultural and language barriers, and fear of isolation, are major obstacles for women navigating and negotiating

their gender roles in the diaspora. One participant who worked in a women's shelter in London described situations facing migrants from various countries (including Türkiye) when women who did not speak the host country's language and had no social contacts in the host community would return to their violent partners from fear of isolation.

A participant based in Stockholm (69 years old) also described how, when divorce became more common in the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden in the mid-1990s, divorced women became socially excluded, as it was not socially acceptable for them to start a new romantic relationship. As they had, when married, often focused mainly on household tasks, they had a narrow perspective on social life, personal development, and leisure after their divorce, and the men would exclude them as a consequence of the divorce. Kurdish women's organizations at the time, including that of the respondent, were actively working to counter and mitigate this tendency by creating social spaces for women to share their experiences and participate together in social gatherings, such as weddings and entertainment. This participant saw a positive consequence of the rise in divorce, as divorced women participated more actively in the organization's activities and were more open to discussing gender topics than married women who sometimes felt pressure from their husbands. Another respondent, based in Istanbul, observed that the influence of a husband's family can be restricting, and separation and divorce can be liberating:

I don't think family is always an advantage in one's life. It definitely isn't. For example, when I married my husband, I realized that compared to him, I am more free. He is more feudal, in some ways, I'm not talking about politics. Why? Because I grew up away from the family. For example, I can express my feelings more easily, I can hug you more easily. Like that, I can hug my friend more easily. (Jiwan, Istanbul, 50 years old)

While participants described involuntary social exclusion and isolation, especially after migration, as a factor discouraging resistance to male dominance and even violence, it is important to note that the participant mentioned that voluntary separation—either from the extended or immediate family or from the social milieu that had a negative impact on her—was liberating and a strategy to gain independence. Being able to achieve self-realization through education, a professional career, or activism on terms chosen by the respondents themselves was underlined as a very important advantage to them. Raising children in accordance with one's own values,

and with less input from the extended family, was also mentioned as a positive effect of voluntary separation.

This observation aligns with the research of Sabahat Ölcer (2020), who studied in-law relationships among Kurdish migrant women. Her respondents felt less pressure when they lived separately from their in-laws. They mentioned how the traditional expectation that the bride should serve her in-laws and be dependent on their will impacted them negatively. An earlier quantitative study of Turkish and Moroccan migrants in Belgium by John Lievens (1999) showed that Turkish migrant women were more likely to marry a partner from their country of origin, not due to any traditional ties or values, but because they saw it as a possibility to gain independence from their future in-laws, who remained in Türkiye, and with whom, therefore, they would not need to cohabit.

TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Although activism stemming from political organizing is the most visible type of activism among Kurds from Türkiye, it would be an omission to neglect other types of public and small-scale activism in which transnational and translocal Kurds participate. These activities, as noted earlier by Demir (2015), can be understood in accordance with Avtar Brah's (1996) theory of diasporas as part of the translation of diasporic needs and interests to the host society and, also in the diaspora, to request recognition of the Kurdish issue. These attempts to translate the Kurdish perspective can also be treated as acts of citizenship as developed by Engin Isin (2008). They are directed at both migrant and host groups and contribute to creating a sense of community on principles other than the legal understanding of citizenship in Türkiye. Thus, such activities challenge the "national order of things" and hierarchies enforced by the Turkish state on the Kurds. The act of claiming rights through a translation of needs also shows the dialogical nature of how citizenship is performed. This confirms Isin's theorization (2008, p. 397), which, following Reinach, stresses that social acts are relational and directed so that others may recognize the actor. The respondents in this study were active in cultural organizations (e.g., a library, a publishing house), labor unions, organizations helping women (e.g., against domestic violence), migrant organizations, NGOs, and academic and educational organizations. The transnational character of their activism also lies in engagement in the social issues of the host

communities or cooperation and activities upheld across geographical and political borders. Participating post-migration in the public life of both the local Kurdish diaspora and the host society is the most visible example of this tendency. For example, one respondent, who had previously been connected with the Kurdish political struggle in Türkiye, became active after her arrival in Stockholm as a teacher of migrants recently arrived in the city and as a member of a Kurdish women's organization. Other examples include the retired head of a teacher's labor union, who was also a candidate for the Swedish parliament, and a person working in a shelter for women in London. It is also worth noting the international connections and cooperation of Kurdish organizations. This engagement and identification with both Kurdish and local cultures were also observed by Ayar Ata (2023, pp. 75–77), especially among second-generation Kurds in London.

One respondent underlined the existence of transnational activities organized by Kurdish women's associations that aim to connect members of the Kurdish diaspora from around the world through sharing experiences of everyday life in their location:

There are associations from almost all European countries. All Kurds from America, Canada There, for example, we do this kind of work. We organize conferences. When we hold an online conference, a lot of women from their countries attend and listen. (Hawdem, Stockholm, 69 years old)

Another transnational activity cited by the participant was sending remittances to family still in Northern Kurdistan and Türkiye:

Sure, they listen to that kind of work. And the diaspora makes a great social and economic contribution. You know, for example, they don't calculate the economic contribution of the diaspora to the country. Maybe it contributes more than the European Union! Every family, think about it, helps their family, this is economic support. In every home where this economic support goes, there is definitely a social impact. Because women work here. She sends half of the money she earns to her family. These are all influencing factors (Hawdem, Stockholm, 69 years old).

This participant underlines the undervalued and often omitted perspective of migrant Kurdish women helping their families economically. This is an important contributory factor to the well-being of Kurdish families in

the sending community and, according to the respondent, is connected with the common practice of migrant women maintaining a professional life in Sweden. The participant regards this as a further example of the undervaluing of women's economic activity in contrast to political activity (in the views of the cited respondent, this is characteristic of men in the diaspora).

A similar topic was raised by another respondent, also residing in Stockholm:

I am not sure how is it in other countries but in Sweden, when we first arrived, the women started working, and they studied rather more than the men. There was a hunger for education; women were more engaged in this new society because they were thinking that they have kids here and they need to create a life from scratch. For many men, this was a place where they were guests, where they would stay for some time and then go back home, or they would visit from time to time. (Karin, Stockholm, 63 years old)

The narratives of these participants show that it is not only explicitly political activity that can be an act of citizenship; by underlining gender difference, the quoted women stress the value of non-political actions such as work, remittances, and engaging with the host community. They regard this, next to direct political activism, as actions that impact everyday family life. This follows calls from scholars including James C. Scott (1985), Maria Bakardjieva (2009), and Asef Bayat (2013) to appreciate and analyze seemingly non-political forms of social life as important forms of resistance and citizenship—an alternative understanding of the notion of citizenship compared to classic liberal or republican interpretations (Bakardjieva, 2009). In this section, we saw how transnational activities and cross-border connections are also acts of citizenship that contribute to Kurdish communities in home and host countries.

CHANGING GENDER RELATIONS AS A RESULT OF DISSENT AND GENERATIONAL CHANGES

While the women activists interviewed were critical of the general gender relations within families and in professional and public life—not only in the Kurdish diaspora but also in their host communities—they did mention a gradual change in attitudes. Most noticed a gradual improvement in

the situation, which they ascribed to the constant efforts of women's organizations and Kurdish women challenging gender inequalities in everyday life.

When asked about Kurdish migrant women's resistance to male dominance and desire for a division of household duties, one respondent residing in London said that such resistance often requires courage, because ultimately separation or divorce might be needed if the partner does not wish to change his attitude:

Well, it's also very, I mean, it means building a new life. Building a new life, starting from scratch again, is something that really requires strength and power. It exhausts you both mentally and physically in every way. It takes a lot of effort to achieve this. As humans, we always take the easy way out. This family thing is not only Kurdish, it's the same with the British, it's the same with other things, it's the same with most of them. (Benaw, London, 48 years old)

This respondent underlined that unequal treatment within couples and society is specific to Kurds but also exists in the receiving community.

Many participants felt that consistently demanding respect, insisting on one's own independence and the right to make individual choices (e.g., regarding education or leisure time), a fair sharing of household duties, and demanding the partner's participation in the emotional life of and caregiving in the family were acts that gradually improved the position of women among Kurds.

Hah, exactly, the exception does not break the rule, but as women, as Kurdish women, we have fought a lot of battles to get here. We didn't win this easily, we didn't get it easily, we suffered a lot of losses in our own Kurdish family life. It was not so easy. But somehow we succeeded. (Benaw, London, 48 years old)

It is important to note that such demands in everyday family life are, at the same time, claims for rights; they can therefore be understood as acts of citizenship (Isin, 2008) as well as practices of doing family (Morgan, 2011).

Changes in women's perception of gender roles, increased levels of education, activities of Kurdish women's organizations, and general societal changes (connected with discussing gender topics in the media and

popular culture, both in Türkiye and in host countries) were cited by participants as reasons for the gradual change and improvement in gender equality among Kurds from Northern Kurdistan. For example, an elderly activist in Sweden said:

[Gender relations] change, because they [Kurdish women] don't stand alone; there is an organization there too. There are women's organizations now. At least one or two, when you talk to them at home, in a meeting, on some occasion, there are so many people out there ... There is also a high rate of schooling. At least girls are studying. Now there are some [TV] programs ... I don't have much contact with Turkish television. I don't listen to it either. I see some things on the internet. There is a lot of change. There is development. (Hawdem, Stockholm, 69 years old)

It is also worth noting that most of the respondents mentioned, when speaking about changing gender roles, that it is usually the women's thinking that changes first; they then socialize with men and voice their demands, leading men also to start changing. Generational change was also underlined and connected with an increased consciousness of gender roles after this emerged as a new topic in Kurdish movements, especially since the mid-2000s. A male respondent residing in Brussels commented:

So, my father, despite the fact that he called himself Marxist-Leninist, had no understanding of gender roles and was actually reproducing some of these gender roles in everyday life, and everything (...). But when I started to study ... erm ... I came across Kurdish women, of course, not only Kurdish, I mean feminists in general. But Kurdish women in particular, and that was my first encounter with the question of gender, because before I was only among my family, and the Kurdish women taught me a lot. (Berken, Brussels, male, 35 years old)

When describing generational change and improved gender equality in the Kurdish diaspora in Sweden, a 63-year-old respondent active in both Kurdish and Swedish organizations compared the paternal engagement of her son to that of her husband:

Even though my husband did engage with the kids, the difference with my son is enormous. My son takes more responsibility for everything; he is like, 'Oh the kid is sweaty' so he changes their clothes, he is more aware of when diapers need to be changed, or when the child is sitting in the car too much,

etc. My husband would not think about that kind of thing. He would not even remember these things. (Karin, Stockholm, 63 years old)

Thus, being an active, caring father who is emotionally engaged and who takes part in everyday child-raising duties were features cited as positive traits more commonly found in the new generation and a topic that is more frequently discussed. Similarly, this respondent noticed that contemporary women oppose the conservative division of duties and gender roles and thus also influence men to change.

One respondent mentioned that she had previously experienced greater tension, connected to cultural differences, between Swedes, Kurds in Sweden, and their relatives and friends living in Türkiye. According to the participant, this improved due to frequent contact and traveling back and forth between Sweden and Türkiye. Marriages between Kurdish men and women and members of the receiving society also contributed to a better understanding and closer relations between these groups. She also observed changes in attitudes toward social relations between men and women in Kurdistan and Türkiye.

Negotiating Vocations: Activism and Family

Negotiating activist engagement while maintaining family relations is challenging for many transnational and translocal Kurdish women. This is not only due to the political impact of activism, as mentioned earlier, but also to conflict between a sense of vocation as a member of an activist community and a desire to offer family members the best possible care.

When reflecting on her activism, a participant in her late 60s who migrated to Stockholm in the mid-1980s and was very active in Kurdish women's associations commented that when she was younger, she gave little thought to the importance of family or creating a family of her own. Political participation was everything to her. From her interview, it appears that before she migrated, when she was a political activist in Türkiye, a desire to support Kurds in the political sphere dominated, at the expense of economic planning or starting a family. Only after she migrated to Sweden was she able to gain some time and reflect on the benefits of separating her political, professional, and personal lives and spending time establishing her own family.

So family ... it didn't matter much. All we had was the political organization. After [joining the organization], even though I was a young girl, I never thought about my future – what I'm going to do, what's going to happen in the future, how I'm going to live. You know, all of us, everything was, well, limited to us. Friends who were in politics in our period, we all experienced the same thing, the difficulty. And that was the mistake we made. For Swedes, your private life is separate, politics is separate, work is separate. But we didn't do that. We mixed them all, we made a soup. There were no boundaries left for anything. (Hawdem, Stockholm, 69 years old)

Hawdem's activism also impacted her relationship with her husband; she commented on her experience of living together with her husband in the headquarters of the organization they were part of before they migrated. She assessed this as mixing politics and her personal life, which felt uncomfortable for her, especially because they had to share private space with other people, which affected their relationship.

When describing raising her daughter in Stockholm while helping migrant women through Kurdish women's organizations, she acknowledged that she sacrificed her time for these women and had fewer opportunities than she would have wanted for bonding activities with her daughter. However, despite this, she felt that she had managed to pass her independent spirit on to her daughter, who grew up to be an independent, strong woman, now has a family of her own and an active professional life, and is raising a child with a Swedish husband.

When reflecting on the years since migrating to Stockholm in the 1980s, another respondent highlighted a lack of fair and equal sharing of caregiving and household duties. On the one hand, she emphasized that she was glad to be able to take care of her children, especially as she had earlier been afraid of losing contact with her daughter due to challenges in obtaining a passport for her and bringing her to Sweden. On the other hand, she indicated that she now understands the importance of having time available for personal development:

I would have written two more books for example if he [her husband] had shared [time for household duties] better or I could have done a PhD. I started, then quit again and again. I went to so many courses, but somehow I never finished the PhD. I could not do it because of both the organizations I was part of and also family stuff. (Karin, Stockholm, 63 years old)

In Karin's account, the importance of personal time is highlighted just as it is in the case of another participant from Stockholm—Hawdem. The difference between these narrations lies in an understanding of "personal time." While Hawdem gave her time to Kurdish organizations and therefore had no personal time—understood by her as the time to care for her daughter—for Karin, personal time was a time for self-development and education. Activism in social organizations is cited here as a threat to Karin's personal time: responsibilities to multiple social organizations—she was very active in Swedish social organizations and labor unions—prevented her from completing her PhD.

On the other hand, the same participant described her current situation, which she described as being temporarily retired from public life, as a conscious act to help her daughter and take care of her granddaughter. She saw this as a pleasant opportunity to spend time with family, rather than as a necessity, which again points to the high-value participants ascribed to spending time on caregiving and personal growth.

Another participant, quoted earlier in the chapter and based in London, regrets leaving the NGOs she worked for and starting her own company, as this gave her less time to spend with her children:

No, let me say my current regret is the wrong decision I made last year. The decision to open a business. Because I had a very good plan. I was working part-time, I would come home from school, pick up my kids, they would have their usual evening dinner and drinks and studying ... And I would have a lot of time at home. I had a lot of time for them at weekends. Now, because of the time I spend at work, I can't spare this time for my children, for example. I would like to change that. (Awira, London, 43 years old)

The narratives of the respondents presented above reveal the dilemmas of having to manage a finite amount of time between a deeply felt need to contribute to the community and the aspiration to give as much attention as possible to raising children and cherishing relationships within the immediate family.

CONCLUSION

Kurdish women and Kurdish families in transnational and translocal diaspora contexts are affected by a specific juxtaposition of challenges connected with the intersectional characteristics of their minority status

(ethnicity, official citizenship, religious identity, marital status, or cultural heritage). While their positions on various axes of power and multiple minority statuses show their entanglement in transnational webs of meanings, as observed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2013), their various ways of cooperating with social, cultural, and political activism show a rich repertoire of civic engagement, both in host society organizations and institutions and in movements connected with Kurdish culture and politics. This variety shows how acts of citizenship theorized by Engin Isin—or the similar phenomena of sub-activism described by Maria Bakardjieva—can involve broad types of activities that contribute to a group and impact the ways of *doing* family. Such acts are often not directly connected with politics or classic liberal and republican understandings of citizenship but, rather, show how alternative groups can be treated as a civic community.

Following Isin's (2008, 2009) theorization of acts of citizenship, the main traits of these phenomena can be found in the quoted life histories of the participants: claims for the recognition and respect of rights from the Turkish state, the host society, and international public opinion; the challenging of inequalities and attempts to break the legal understanding of Kurds as second-category citizens; and ways of seeking justice through social, cultural, and political activism. Experiences of state oppression, violence, and discrimination as a cultural minority were often cited by respondents as factors that had drawn them to activism. In the difficult history of the Turkish state, the state's invasion of the everyday life of its inhabitants (especially the Kurds, as a minority perceived to be rebellious) was described as forcing people to become socially and politically involved. It is therefore a major factor in spreading a sense of vocation to contribute to the community and challenge the state's maltreatment by participating in Kurdish organizations, even after migration. The influence of Türkiye's politics on transnational Kurdish women and families also shows the strength of the "national order of things," as observed by Lisa Malkki (1992).

Many respondents also highlighted the role of public activism and activities outside the home (such as employment or participating in education and training) in enabling them to gain a sense of wider freedom for Kurdish women. Involvement in such endeavors usually affects activists' family life but, at the same time, can also influence their views on gender roles within the family.

While giving a high value to family life was underlined as a positive trait of Kurdish culture, and relatives were defined as crucial in helping

respondents emotionally, economically, and in practices of everyday life after migration, at the same time, participants indicated the problems they lived through as a consequence of growing up with a conservative perception of gender roles under the influence of an extended family who tried to control their choices. In instances when over-controlling and unequal relations were dominant, some respondents had deliberately distanced themselves from their relatives as a means of finding independence.

The generational change in attitudes toward gender equality observed by the majority of respondents was attributed predominantly to the role of women's institutions in spreading awareness of the topic, but also to everyday resistance and women challenging manifestations of patriarchy. They indicated that their own changed views on gender relations eventually also led to changes in men's behavior in terms of, for example, emotional involvement in raising children and reaching a more equal division of household duties than previously experienced. Looking at this phenomenon through the lens of Isin's theory, it is important to note that this active dissent toward patriarchal norms not only contributes to a change in the immediate family, but also may contribute to a wider change around the consciousness of issues connected to gender. A change in attitudes toward traditional gender roles is consequently a result of a rupture in the status quo of gender relations. This breach of the traditional order was created by Kurdish women's demands, and acts of citizenship supporting more equal relations. The respondents' appreciation of the women's professional and reproductive labor; their successful cooperation with the host society, and the ways in which they helped improve the situation of their relatives' lives in Northern Kurdistan, show the importance they attached to non-political, socially engaged acts that helped maintain social ties and improve their well-being. From this perspective, the efforts made by women to socialize with the host society and send remittances to relatives in their home society can be understood as an important sub-activism that has the potential to improve the situation of marginalized groups in both home and host countries. Such relations and activity in the public life of host societies may be treated as important ways of translating Kurdish needs to the host society, reflecting the dialogical nature of acts of citizenship.

The narratives of the participants, the majority of whom were activist migrant women, show how involvement in activism can be understood as a vocation born out of a need to challenge the injustice faced by Kurds. It may serve as an opportunity to gain a sense of purpose and, sometimes, also self-dependence and prestige, but it also creates dilemmas in terms of time management and balancing various types of vocation: contributing to the community and cherishing family life. The participants also expressed how such choices and dilemmas are dynamic, as their evaluation of family life may change over time, as may that of their partners and family members who may change their attitudes and behavior. Equally, changing social circumstances may enable women to choose one path or another. An activist who wished she had spent more time with her daughter, or a union member who regretted not achieving a more equal division of caring earlier in her life but who has now decided to temporarily retire from public life to care for her granddaughter, are examples of dynamic perspectives on the interconnections between family life and activism.

Kurdish transnational families living in Europe are affected by various webs of meaning. While still heavily influenced by Turkish politics and the minority status of Kurds, they also function in an environment where they are migrants, facing challenges connected to acculturation and relations with their host societies in Europe. Apart from the potential legal challenges connected with their status as migrants or refugees, Kurds may also face stigma connected with Orientalist perspectives on Middle-Eastern identity. Moreover, transnational families are affected by various cultural patterns and expectations—sometimes connected with prevalent gender norms but sometimes also disparate—between the sending community, the host society, and the diasporic group.

These webs of meaning, however, also include various opportunities and means that enable them to challenge inequalities and oppose injustice both in public politics and everyday family life. These claims for recognition can involve engagement in Kurdish organizations, the organizations of host societies, and also ways of what Janet Finch calls *doing family*—acts of maintaining family relations, including claims for gender equality.

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Dersimi Women, Family, and Activism: Navigating and Negotiating Alternative Spaces

Hayal Hanođlu

INTRODUCTION

My grandmother was a Dersimi woman whose story began in a village in Dersim and ended in Istanbul. She was a survivor of the Dersim Genocide: as a child, she hid in the forest during the military attacks and witnessed the destruction of villages and their inhabitants. Besides this traumatic history, and having given birth to four daughters, she then selected a second wife for her husband in the hope of producing boys. She later helped her co-wife raise eight sons she had borne and adopted them as her own. A truly extraordinary woman, having been born in a village and spent her entire life there, one day she simply left my grandfather and moved to Istanbul in her late 50s. However, she never left her stepsons, taking some of them with her to Istanbul and helping them to establish a life there. She spent years struggling to free one of them from the infamous Diyarbekir prison, regularly traveling to Diyarbekir to visit him and arrange help for his court case. In the traditional Dersimi clothes that she wore until the day she died, she attended various protests and showed solidarity with striking workers. When she came across politicians or the authorities in these protests, she defended the workers' rights by reminding them of the divine justice of *Xızır* or Ali's *Zülfikar*.

My grandmother was a strong believer: she devoted herself to Alevism and practiced intensively. In her later years, she would suddenly disappear at regular intervals, and my mother and aunts would anxiously search for her. She was usually found traveling around Türkiye for her religious commitments, such as attending the Annual Hacı Bektaş Veli Celebrations in Nevşehir (central Anatolia), staying for days at the Abdal Musa Dervish Lodge in Antalya (southern Türkiye), or very often visiting the Karacaahmet Sultan Dervish Lodge and similar places. Her commitment to Alevism was not limited to religious practices and places but extended to Alevi publications. Despite being illiterate, she regularly visited bookshops to buy books on Alevism and then asked me to read them aloud to her. As a teenager, I was not always enthusiastic about doing so but I later came to admire her passion for learning even though she could neither read nor write.

I open this chapter with my grandmother's story, which exemplifies multiple intersecting dimensions of life for Dersimi women: addressing societal norms, both serving and resisting patriarchal codes, and engaging in religious and political causes while coping with the memories of the Dersim Genocide. Taking multiple factors into consideration, including religion, ethnicity, language, and politics, the chapter aims to provide insights into the construction and transmission of gender perceptions and practices among Alevi Kurds through the experience of Dersimi women. I explore gendered negotiations of Dersimi women in social and political life to shed light on the complex interplay of family, gender, and activism and provide initial insights into the alternative spaces in which Kurdish women perform citizenship.

The chapter demonstrates how the politics of belonging and identity are constructed within the everyday life of Dersimi families, and how family and activism interact and contribute to each other in a dynamic and interconnected manner. I discuss the transmission and transformation of the gender roles and norms that are most enforced and visible in families, and the involvement of families in shaping the politics of gender, identity, and belonging. This focus on the family underlines the intimate and foundational nature of social relations, where citizenship practices are often first learned and enacted. The formation of gender roles, belonging, and identity within families can be understood as connected with acts of citizenship as conceptualized by Isin (2008) to highlight the multilayered dimensions of Dersimi women's social and political participation and claim-making practices. I explore how performances of citizenship

encourage the challenging of traditional gender roles and norms within the family, the assertion of agency, and claims to rights and responsibilities that contribute to reshaping familial and wider social dynamics.

The chapter is interested in multiple questions: how religion, ethnicity, and politics intersect with gender in shaping the experiences of women and how these practices are transmitted and reproduced; how women navigate and negotiate their gender roles in family and community spaces; and finally, how gender norms are formed in contested regions where collective memory and the traumas of state violence shape the cultural and political spheres, as well as alternative spaces of rights, claims, and performances of citizenship. Drawing on a multi-sited ethnography—including interviews with Dersimi women in Dersim, Istanbul, and London—the article explores the various dynamics shaping the gendered practices of women in local and transnational spaces. The interviews with 15 women involved in political, cultural, and ecological activism reveal the complex and dynamic ways in which gender roles are negotiated across different contexts. To maintain anonymity, the participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms chosen from traditional Dersimi names.

The chapter begins with a brief background information, followed by two main sections. The first section explores the complex dynamics that intersect with gender in shaping the experiences of Dersimi women. It gives a panorama of the challenges faced by Dersimi women in navigating their gender roles. The second section follows women who are creating alternative spaces of citizenship, showing how Dersimi women navigate and negotiate their gendered roles, responsibilities, and rights. The histories of state violence transmitted through families, the interplay of family and activism, how these shape and contribute to each other, and the involvement of women in organizations are all explored in this second part.

DERSIM: A UNIQUE TERRITORY IN EASTERN TÜRKIYE/ NORTHERN KURDISTAN

Dersim historically referred to a larger area in eastern Türkiye, also known as Turkish or northern Kurdistan (Bakur). The so-called Tunceli Law, passed in 1935 just before the military operations that resulted in genocidal massacres, changed the borders of Dersim significantly: the northern, eastern, and southern parts were broken off and connected to the surrounding cities and the remaining central part was renamed “Tunceli.”

Today, to describe this region as Dersim rather than the state-imposed name of Tunceli is a form of protest against the state, used to express political opposition.

Alongside its particular religious, linguistic, historical, and political characteristics, Dersim is often regarded as the natural home of the Alevi Kurds. It is the only place where Alevis (predominantly Kirmanckî/Zazakî-speaking Alevis) form the majority but it is one that they have historically shared in harmony with the Armenians and represents a cultural hub where most of the Kurdish Alevi *ocaks* (traditional religious institutions based on sacred lineages) are located (Hanoğlu, 2016). Many of the Alevi Kurds living in nearby provinces such as Erzincan, Elazığ, Bingöl, Sivas, Malatya, and Maraş, regard Dersim as their former home, from which their ancestors emigrated during the Ottoman era.

Due to the many marginalized segments in Dersim, it has been renowned as a place of opposition throughout history. Dersim has a long history of resistance against central power, dating back to rebellions during the Seljuk and Ottoman Empires (Gültekin & Gezik, 2019, p. 17) and has been described as the only part of Türkiye which “had not been effectively brought under central government control” (van Bruinessen, 1994, p. 145) until 1937. The events of that period are closely linked to the newly established Republic’s nation-building process, based upon the Turkish-Islamic code of one nation (Turkishness), one religion (Sunni Islam), and one language (Turkish) (Robins, 1996). Dersim, the natural bastion of Alevi Kurds since the sixteenth century (Gültekin & Gezik, 2019), was far removed from the ethos of the new nation-state in almost every sense. Accordingly, state officials labeled it an “abscess” needing “surgery,” as seen in official documents justifying the military operations.

During the military operations between March 1937 and September 1938, an estimated 40,000 to 100,000 civilians were killed, and thousands more were deported (Deniz, 2020; Kieser, 2011; McDowall, 2004). The Republic of Türkiye has legally justified the atrocity as a military operation against “rebels” identified as “domestic enemies.” It was, however, a systematic targeting of the population in the villages. During the genocidal massacres, Dersimis suffered severe human rights abuses, including the bombing of villages by army aircraft, the poisoning by gas of people hiding in caves, and the sexual abuse of girls and women. The military operations were followed by social engineering (Bozdoğan & Kasaba,

1997) achieved through the education¹ of “indigenous” people (Törne, 2015), inspired by an “enlightenment” vision. Hundreds of children were separated from their parents, and young girls especially were sent away to be adopted by commanders or their relatives, and later married to Turkish men.²

Despite the scale of these brutalities, none of the officials or commanders involved were punished (Kieser, 2011; McDowall, 2004). On the contrary, many individual perpetrators were treated as national heroes, with airports, highways, schools, and hospitals named in their honor. The atrocities remained a taboo subject for decades; even today, the official archives remain inaccessible, and no official responsibility has been taken for the brutality inflicted on civilians, including women and children.

During the genocide, tribal leaders and their followers organized armed resistance, but most were executed, including the best-known figure, Sey Rıza (Seyyid Rıza), who led local militias against the military forces. Despite efforts to silence this history of resistance, their story remained a marker of the region’s political opposition throughout the Republic’s history. Dersim is still widely seen as the core of left-wing opposition, home to many socialist organizations, including those that initiated the armed struggle against the state during the leftist waves of the 1970s and 1980s. Alongside many political organizations and parties, Dersim can also be seen as a center of activism due to the many local initiatives, including cultural campaigns, festivals, art performances, women’s cooperatives, workshops, and many other activities.

Its religious-cultural character is another unique element in Dersim, which constitutes a distinct form of Alevism called *Raa Heqî/Rêya Heqî* in Kirmanckî/Zazakî or *Rêya Haq* in Kurmançî/Kirdaşkî. For its followers, Dersim is composed of a sacred geography with numerous natural landscapes, including mountains and rivers, that are seen as places of worship and pilgrimage (Çem, 2000; Deniz, 2012; Munzuroğlu, 2000). Religious practices include *jarê* (sacred places of worship and pilgrimage), rituals devoted to the moon, sun, spirit of water, and rivers, as well as tales

¹The fact that Dersim retains its leading place in education rankings in Turkey may be linked to such historical campaigns launched in the name of “civilizing” Dersim, and channeled a long-term assimilation. This merits further discussion, but regrettably lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

²The documentaries *İki Tutam Saç-Dersim’in Kayıp Kızları* (Two Locks of Hair: The Lost Girls of Dersim) and *Hay Way Zaman* (Unburied in the Past) give the stories of these missing girls.

about the mountains and other sacred places, portraying their spiritual relationship with the natural landscape.³ Not surprisingly, nature in Dersim has been carefully protected⁴ due to this unique nature-oriented faith.

The above aspects together have created a form of territorial identity in which people attribute particular significance to the land. Gültekin and Gezik suggest that “being from Dersim” (*Dersimli*) has become a key sign of a “common cultural identity with strong and popular ethnocultural and sociopolitical aspects” (2019, p. 21). The Dersimi identity is characterized as an attachment to Dersim’s nature, religion, and collective history.

INTERSECTIONAL DYNAMICS SHAPING THE GENDERED PRACTICES OF DERSIMI WOMEN

Resisting Patriarchal Structures

When exploring the various identities of Dersimi women, we find a strong intersectional interrelationship between ethnicity, religion, politics, gender, and other social categories and divisions that interact with and contribute to each other. The Kurdish Alevi identity itself includes a mixture of cultural elements in which Alevism and Kurdishness intersect, and which together create new sociopolitical and ethno-religious dimensions (Gültekin, 2019). These peculiarities make the Kurdish Alevi socioreligious organizations, worship practices, myths, and beliefs significantly different from those of the Alevi Turks or Sunni Kurds. Besides this double-minority position, Dersim has its own cultural, religious, historical, linguistic, and regional peculiarities in which multiple identities, categories, and processes intersect with gendered practices and negotiations of women.

These intersecting identities encompass ethnic, religious, and politically marginalized dimensions and often represent sources of discrimination. A participant, Intizar (31), an activist living in Istanbul, shared how her gender, combined with her Kurdish, Alevi, and Dersimi identities, created

³For a more detailed account of religion in Dersim see Aksoy (2020), Çem (2000), Cengiz (2000), Gezik (2000), Gültekin (2019), Gültekin and Gezik (2019), and Munzuroğlu (2000).

⁴Munzur Valley is a national park registered by UNESCO as a site of natural heritage; it contains the sources of the Munzur River and Mercan Stream, water fountains, rich natural beauty, endemic plant species, and regional animal species.

unique obstacles in her professional journey. This highlights the complex dynamics of identity politics and discrimination in the workplace:

I experienced mobbing a lot in the private sector due to my various identities... Being a woman, there was discrimination that originated from the patriarchal system. But here we experiencing difficulties in many ways, as different identities come into play. Because I am not just a woman, I am a Kurdish woman. At the same time, I am an Alevi woman from an Alevi family [...] And as I am from Dersim, the issue of Dersim or Tunceli also came to the fore. It started when I said “Dersim” because of a segment that defends an official ideology, that we call Kemalist. And they wanted me to call it Tunceli. I was against it. It is Dersim and it will always be Dersim [...] Afterward, they created problems because of my Kurdish identity. And I was dismissed a little later.

Some participants find that the disadvantage resulting from oppression and state violence is in fact a basis for the advancement of Dersimi women. For example, according to Malê (43), a dismissed civil servant and activist living in Dersim, women in Dersim are socially, economically, and culturally “more aware” than their counterparts in Türkiye. She attributes this to the historical conflict and state violence they have faced since childhood, which has led to a deeper understanding of life and conflict. The oppression experienced by women in Dersim prompts them to strive for excellence in education and their social and economic lives as a means of minimizing their oppression. However, she observes that this awareness and internalization are not as prominent in Dersimi men, who, despite experiencing state oppression, may not fully internalize it and may exhibit an incomplete understanding, especially within family dynamics. Like many participants, Malê—as a married woman—noted a contradiction in men’s behavior toward women inside and outside the home, which she links to their lack of understanding. While they may adopt progressive gender discourses in social and political environments, men often follow more feudal approaches within their own families. This inside-outside dichotomy creates a significant contradiction, challenging the notion of progressiveness in Dersim society. Malê highlighted the superficiality of the claimed progressiveness among Alevis and Dersimis, stressing the continued existence of feudal norms for men:

They[men] may or may not be members of any political party. Even if they advocate the highest, most progressive thing ideologically, or they are the

most radical leftists, go to their homes and see their family relations, you will be shocked. At home, they rule and live with a completely feudal understanding, and outside they often talk about equality between men and women. There is a great contradiction, it exists in Dersim too. We are Alevi, "We are more progressive" or something like that, it's rubbish. Alevism or modernity here is so superficial... So superficial. They are living feudalism to the core.

Almost all the participants cast doubt on claims of gender equality, which is often taken for granted in Alevi society, particularly in Dersim. Xece (41), a journalist and political activist living in Dersim, argues that true equality is still lacking, despite the widespread claim that women in Dersim have a more visible role in society than those in the Sunni-conservative Kurdish provinces. While women may work, go out, and pursue careers, they still bear the primary responsibility for household duties and childcare:

Women in Sunni-conservative Kurdish provinces, taking Alevi-Kizilbash Dersim as an example of course, according to them, women may be in a better position, they go out on the streets, they are civil servants, they study, they become teachers ... But this does not mean that this woman has gained more rights and freedom than other women. Because it is still the man who draws the working woman's salary but it is still the woman who does the work when she goes home. It is still the woman who raises the child. What is the only difference? During the day, instead of sitting at home and cleaning, she goes to work and is a civil servant, but in the evening it's the same thing...

Other participants linked this to a patriarchal tradition in Alevi culture: although it is often perceived as progressive in gender issues, religious positions have historically been held predominantly by men. Gule (49), a political activist living in Dersim, highlighted the inherent gender imbalance within Alevism that women find themselves navigating. They challenge this cultural and religious framework while striving for freedom and equality:

In Alevism in the past, *pirs* and *dedes* used to travel; they were all men. Which woman was the *pir*, which *ana*, which woman was visiting the houses? There was no such thing. No matter how much we say, there is something about Alevism, it has a masculine side, there is a side that feeds

that thing. You know, it's always a man who sits on the mat in the *Cem*. Very rarely, and that's because of what this political thing has brought recently, they seat a woman, an *Anna*. I don't think we are very egalitarian, you know, in terms of women and men, in terms of that status. You know, Alevism has a serious masculine aspect.

This patriarchal religious tradition clashes with the Alevi claim of gender equality. Gendered discourses play an integral part in the Alevi boundary-making process, especially in making positive comparisons with Islam. In particular, the lack of gender segregation in worship and of a dress code for women are key markers of this positive comparison. Alevs often talk about how their women have a better position than Muslim women and proudly embrace the fact that they are open and secular and do not control how women dress and behave. While claims to gender equality may play a foundational role in shaping the gender identity of Alevi women and, to a certain degree, contribute to their empowerment, they seem nevertheless simultaneously mask areas of gender imbalance within social and familial spheres.

Lastly, there is no doubt that women face many difficulties in negotiating and navigating their gender roles within the broader context of Türkiye's politics and the state's gender policies. Participants underscored the state's focus on protecting the family rather than women, thus contributing to the perpetuation of gender-based violence. Some highlighted how legal impunity encourages such violence, while others highlighted instances of the police attempting to dissuade women from pursuing legal action against their husbands. Indeed, whether through legal and regulatory frameworks, social welfare policies, or cultural and normative influences, the state governs multiple aspects of family life (including marriage, divorce, and childcare), and these legal frameworks can shape family structures, roles, and relationships by defining rights, responsibilities, and obligations within familial units. Particularly in recent decades, the Turkish government has promoted patriarchal forms of family organization that align with its political agenda.

Persistent Violent Environment

Individuals and groups have a collective memory of historical events, whether these occurred in their lifetime or long before they were born. Collective trauma is passed down through the generations, creating an

“intergenerational haunting”: the cultural inheritance of a violent past has widespread effects on the psychology of a group and their identity formation over time and space (Frosh, 2018). Research shows that the trauma of the Dersim Genocide has been transmitted through the generations, affecting the second and third generations (Çelik, 2013). Indeed, the brutal memories of the genocide haunt all Dersimis, appearing as a common theme in all the participant narratives.

All the survivors had to live with terrible memories; however, most of those carrying the collective memory of the genocide were women, as the men had been the main target of the soldiers’ mass killings. The survivors’ memories, therefore, often include untold stories of Dersimi women who had lost their parents, husbands, brothers, and sons or were separated from their families as small girls, to be adopted by Turkish families in different cities, and lost touch with their families. Xece states her grandmother was her first role model due to her strength: she was a child survivor of the genocide, had her family killed, and was a strong woman who was always angry:

She is old now. She doesn’t have the strength anymore. She also has regrets. I mean, I can understand my granny too. After all, as a child of ’38, as someone who lost her family, who was always alone, without a family... That’s why she plays two figures at the same time. Sometimes I think she probably forgets her own role, that she is a woman, because my grandfather died early and left her with five children. That’s why my granny is stuck between these two characters. She is also angry. I think she took out all her anger toward her family and her husband on her son and daughters-in-law. That’s what I saw in my granny.

The collective history of Dersim was constantly present in the family stories that I will describe later in more detail. The contemporary experiences of Dersimi women are multilayered and complicated as they grew up with the collective traumas of their grandparents who survived the Dersim Genocide, but at the same time had to cope with social and political expectations and constraints, and with the violence perpetrated by the state throughout their lives. State violence includes not only forced imprisonment, torture, and other kind of physical oppression but also exile and the dismissal of civil servants. For example, many Dersimi women who were working as civil servants were exiled or dismissed through Decree-Law policies. The *Kanun Hükmünde Kararname* (KHK) was a decree issued

by the government under the State of Emergency (Olağanüstü Hal/OHAL) declared in the aftermath of the failed 2016 coup attempt. Exempted from judicial review, these statutory laws restricted fundamental rights and freedoms and resulted in the dismissal of a large number of public employees.⁵ Due to the active political opposition in Dersim, a large number of the dismissals were unsurprisingly of Dersimi, among them many women. Thus, some of the participants believe the government plan had two objectives: through the KHK, they were able to eliminate a section of the opposition while banishing women from the workplace.

Kurdish women's narratives of their personal experiences involve disruption, negotiation, and battles against patriarchal norms in various spheres of their lives: their families, social circles, political organizations, and interactions with the Turkish state at various levels (Çağlayan, 2019, p. 36). This persistently violent environment emphasizes what Weiss (2018, p. 62) describes as "an enduring intergenerational process" for Kurdish activists, highlighting the feelings of moral outrage resulting from multiple layers of violent memories and the constant repetition of violence by the Turkish state. Thus, the impact of violent environments on women's lives is a crucial part of the intersectional dynamics shaping their gendered practices.

Migration and Transnationality

Another complex dynamic shaping the gendered practices of Dersimi women is migration and transnationality since the number of Dersimis living outside Dersim is greater than those living in Dersim as a result of its brutal history. After the genocide in 1937–38, a significant portion of Dersim's population was exiled to the western cities of Türkiye. Due to the institutional hatred toward the population of Dersim, as reflected in their label as "enemies of the state," Dersimis living in other cities of Türkiye had to hide their birthplace. However, many later moved to Europe due to oppression and marginalization. The second wave of

⁵Between July 2016 and July 2018, a state of emergency was declared seven times, and more than 151,967 public employees were dismissed (Rudaw, 2018). These employees were not only military, police, and intelligence officers who were actively involved in the coup attempt, but also public servants including state officials, teachers, bureaucrats, health workers, and academics.

migration occurred in the 1990s when Dersim faced a large evacuation and the destruction of villages and forests. This intensified between 1994 and 1996 with the action of military forces claiming to be fighting against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). As a result, by 2000, the total population of Dersim had reduced significantly, particularly in the villages, which saw a 75% decrease.⁶ Eventually, a significant number of the displaced population migrated to other countries.

Migration may shape women's gendered experiences positively in many ways. For example, it may stimulate change in patriarchal structures. In their work among Iranian couples in Canada, Shirpak et al. (2011) suggest that different ideologies around gender and women's rights have disordered traditional gendered settings transferred from Iran, and men appear to have lost their primacy in the family as a result of this change. Similarly, an ethnographic study shows that Indian women in the UK feel safe and secure from violence by men (Simic, 2021). Some studies show that traditional gender roles are also influenced by migration, with women gaining legal rights and freedom (Hyman et al., 2008; Pyke & Johnson, 2003; Shankar & Northcott, 2009). Indeed, in liberal Western countries, women may gain not only social and economic independence but also freedom of expression and identity (Shankar & Northcott, 2009). Their increasing participation in the workplace may change male-based decision-making mechanisms and open more space for women to make decisions in their daily lives (Pyke & Johnson, 2003). This shift for women is also linked to access to new opportunities and charities protecting women (Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo, 2005). Expanding their skills and education opens new opportunities for careers and self-improvement.

As for many other migrant participants, the experiences of Şire (43) and Seve (55), who are living in London, demonstrate such effects of migration. Şire was born in a village in Dersim and moved to London when marrying a Dersimi man from her kin circle. However, she later felt

⁶During this period, 287 villages (out of 417) were evacuated, 242 primary schools (out of 268) were closed, and thousands of families lost their homes (Hacaloglu, 1996). The evacuation and destruction of villages were accompanied by widespread forest-burning to destroy potential hideouts of PKK militants (Jongerden et al., 2007; van Bruinessen, 1995; Van Etten et al., 2008).

pressured by her extended family in London. To free herself, make her own decisions, and live her everyday choices, she looked for ways to isolate herself from them. Eventually, by attending various courses and taking advantage of other opportunities available to migrant women, she was able to escape the extended family environment and the societal norms imposed on her even in London. After some time, with new qualifications, she found employment and worked for a couple of years, after which she set up her own company. She is also actively involved in social issues in her community and engages in cultural activism, contributing to keeping Dersim's language and traditions alive in London.

Seve (55) was also born in Dersim and then moved first to Istanbul and later to London to study English, after which she decided to stay. She subsequently pursued a postgraduate degree and embarked on a career path that led her to work in local councils and various women's support charities. Through various roles in women's organizations, she dedicated herself to working with women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, with a particular focus on those of Muslim, Asian, and Middle Eastern origins. Her journey involved various training courses that significantly heightened her awareness of women-related issues. Through these experiences, she began to critically reflect on and question the gendered practices within her own nuclear and extended family. For example, she never carried keys or a wallet when she went out with her husband, as he always made the payments and opened the front door with his keys. Although she had a university degree and had lived in London for several years, she found herself following this habit, which prompted her to question and reflect deeply on how she could have unconsciously adopted such practices.

Migration also impacted life in Dersim, as migrant Dersimis made great efforts to improve social, cultural, and economic life "back home." This was an important part of the reconstruction after the devastation caused in the region, especially in the 1990s. In particular, Dersimis living in European countries have been active in Zaza and Alevi cultural revivals (Solomon, 2015), creating new literature and music, mainly in Zazakî, since the 1990s (see also Chap. 7). This provoked further transnational collaborations and political and cultural mobilization, including cultural events and ecological campaigns in Dersim itself, in which women take an active part.

WOMEN CREATING ALTERNATIVE SPACES OF CITIZENSHIP

Family Histories of State Violence as a Motivation

Family, as seen by radical feminists, is a male-dominated institution, protecting patriarchal structures that play a key role in disempowering women (Bell & Klein, 1996; Thompson, 2001; Willis, 2012). Indeed, it would be wrong to underrate the role of family in restricting women to traditional gender roles and expectations. However, family is also seen by many as a source of activism through which it shapes individuals' social and political formation, particularly in the context of the Middle East, where people's histories are often marked by collective memories and the trauma of wars, ethnic and religious conflicts, and state violence. Stephan (2009), in her work on the family and women activism in Lebanon, suggests a rethinking of family influence and questions both social movement literature, which sees the family as an "irrelevant actor," and feminist movement literature that considers family as "hindering" (2009, p. 319). She finds the family effect to be much more complex than depicted in feminist theory and, showing how women often gain social capital through family and kinship networks, regards family as an empowering factor for women's activism in Lebanon.

Anthias (2002) emphasizes how family narratives help shape individuals' sense of belonging and their understanding of collective identity within society. Through examining the narratives of young Greek Cypriots, she suggests that families play a role in enabling stories of spatial movement and location. As such stories are recycled within families and the broader community, they contribute to social and cultural reproduction, articulating individuals' sense of self and affiliations. They draw upon collective narratives from their surroundings, including those passed down through generations. Similarly, Joseph (1999) underlines the profound connection between the family and self-formation in the Middle East, which she conceptualizes in the term "familial self." She asserts that traditional values that prioritize the family over the individual contribute to the development of a relational self, enabling the individual to find significance within the family context. Neyzi and Darıcı (2015) refer to Joseph to emphasize the impact of family on the social and political formation of Kurdish youth. They highlight how the family is attached to politics in the Kurdish context since "both the victimhood that stems from state violence

and resistance to the state are experienced in the familial realm” (2015, p. 13). They underline how the context of war became “the intimate life of the Kurdish family” and transformed established categories of familial roles and structures.

Indeed, families play a significant role in shaping the politics of belonging, encompassing processes of inclusion and exclusion based on social divisions and identities such as gender, ethnicity, and nationality. Within Dersimi families, the construction of belonging and identity occurs within the everyday context of familial interactions and practices. The family’s history and experience play a key role in the formation of a political, ethnic, and religious identity—or other senses of belonging—in its members, and particularly its children. This was shown in the stories of many participants who experienced exile, forced migration, imprisonment, torture, and the killing of relatives who were involved in political struggle. For example, Xece’s family had to leave their village in 1994 in a period of evacuation and destruction that provoked widespread outrage among the Dersimis, who saw it as a continuation of the genocide. It was at that time that two of her siblings joined the armed struggle. After giving this political context through her family story, she describes her own political development:

My family is a socialist family. When we were young, my father was an active member, and he was also in prison. Later my siblings joined the struggle with the Kurdish movement. I can say that that was the moment when it really clicked me. If you ask how my political tendencies were formed, how I “knew,” it was when my siblings joined the struggle. I learned with them that we were Kurds, that we were women and Kurds at the same time, and I witnessed how the struggle was formed or how it worked. That’s how it started for me.

When I asked participants about their motivation for becoming involved in activism, many mentioned 1938 as a source of motivation, discovered mostly through family stories. Many women noted how they witnessed the collective trauma of the Dersim Genocide through their families and how it shaped their political development. For example, Narê (46), living in Dersim, is an active participant in a women’s cooperative initiated by a political group, and explains how her mother’s sensitivity to the persecution of people by the state, linked to the collective memory of the Dersim Genocide, affected her political formation:

When someone was harassed or persecuted by the state, my mother would sit and cry, "Shame, you know, they were beaten, shame..." That's all the woman could do. Maybe because of that, maybe because we listen to a lot of things based on the past, I'm talking about Dersim '38... Because we are a society that is constantly oppressed like this, a society that is constantly despised and marginalized, maybe it's something that comes from that...

Indeed, the impact of the genocide is extensive, ongoing, and passed down in all aspects of Dersimi society. Malê describes the trauma transmitted from her grandfather, who was a child survivor of the genocide, exiled to a city in central Anatolia after his family was brutally killed. Malê's parents not only avoid talking about this but also avoid speaking their language, Kirmanckî/Zazakî, with their children, demonstrating how family history affects children and the formation of their identity and sense of belonging:

'38 is actually a very big factor for us, even for me, in my entry into this struggle: My mother's side of the family went through the trauma of '38. My grandfather came back from Kütahya when he was 20 years old. When my grandfather was very young, 7 years old, the militia made him carry the head of his uncle. They were all killed—his whole family, all the elders were killed. So they grew up with that trauma. That's why my mother tried not to teach us the language. She would say this openly. "If I teach you this language, you will go after this language." [...] Years later, when we talked about it with my mother, she said, "I was always scared if you learn..." Because, when she was young, her grandmother always told her about these events, because there were mainly women left, you know, they told her about these events. Because she knows that her family was massacred because of their identity... She says: "If you don't know this language, if you forget it, you will be spared from that massacre, you will not experience those traumas."

Despite the efforts of her mother, their collective history became a source of passion for her daughters who learned—and even taught—their mother tongue as well as became involved in political activism: She became an activist in union and party work and her sister a Zazakî teacher. Her mother expressed the fear felt by survivors and their children, which made them look for ways to protect their children from state hostility. However, fear and despair itself seem to have inspired a sense of political opposition in their children.

Overall, as we see here, a family history of state violence can become a source of activism by creating, inspiring, or stimulating action, and fostering alternative spaces of citizenship. Family experiences shape identities and influence a sense of belonging and commitment to particular causes or movements, driving their members to engage in activism. Accordingly, a family history of state violence may shape acts of citizenship (Isin, 2008) that involve the active participation of individuals or groups in shaping their communities and asserting their rights. In other words, individuals or groups exercise agency by taking action to address societal issues or injustices, often drawing inspiration from their personal and family experiences. In this way, familial experiences and dynamics contribute to the cultivation of activism and the establishment of alternative forms of civic engagement.

Activism as an Agent of Change Within Families

Activism offers a platform to challenge established gender norms, not only on a societal level but also within the intimate spaces of the family. Gender norms are often deeply rooted and reinforced through socialization processes. However, activism offers individuals the opportunity to question and challenge these norms and can foster conversations and actions within the family aimed at promoting gender equality; for example, by encouraging the equal division of household labor, challenging traditional gender roles in parenting, or confronting sexism within family relationships. By addressing these issues within the family, activists not only promote a more egalitarian dynamic within their own household but also contribute to broader social transformation by challenging the underlying reasons for gendered inequalities.

Çağlayan (2019) discusses the evolution of women's participation in the PKK and highlights the evolution of the family as a parallel process. She speaks of the implementation of the people's war strategy, which required the mobilization of both genders, and how the PKK began to actively promote gender equality. The traditional patriarchal family structure was identified as a major barrier to women's involvement, with patriarchal control and honor codes limiting their role. She suggests that by mobilizing women and highlighting their shared experiences of oppression, the PKK aimed to redefine Kurdish identity and promote collective action for societal change. According to Çağlayan, this involved rejecting

traditional gender roles and constructing a new model of the family that symbolized modern Kurdish society and supported the national democratic revolution, with men and women playing equal roles.

Dersim has a wide variety of political organizations (including but not limited to those affiliated with the Kurdish movement) in which women play a significant role. Inspired by the broader movement, women may challenge traditional stereotypes that confine them to specific roles or limit their aspirations. As women become more active in various social spheres, this newfound empowerment often leads them to reassess their role within the household. This may result in a more inclusive and flexible approach to family responsibilities, including a redistribution of tasks based on individual strengths and preferences rather than gender. For example, Intizar described her determination to share daily household responsibilities with her husband and to minimize the gender-based division of labor in her family:

Because this is my responsibility as well as my husband's responsibility. Or if I am cleaning, I tell him to do the cleaning on certain days in the same way.

When advocating for societal changes that challenge existing norms and hierarchies within households, conversations and negotiations around gendered roles can, on the one hand, lead to a redistribution of power within families but, on the other, also lead to conflict within families. For example, Xece, who believes that change should start within the family, explains how she intervened in the relationship between her father and mother and underlines the changes occurring across generations of women:

I think my father sees the gaps between us and the figures of women he sees as from his era, his generation. We are the kind of women who discuss and argue at home... For example, I'm the kind of person who argues with my father, gets angry and says what he's doing is wrong. [...] I always said, "My mother is exploited at home. You go and get a salary from outside, but it is my mother who is being exploited. You have to give half of your salary to my mother." So that's how my conflict with my father happened. [...] Because of the violence my father used against her, I was always against my father, like that. "You're doing wrong! You won't, you will not, you can't!" I was always like that, I mean.

Similarly, Reyma (45), a political activist, who spent years in prison with her sister, stresses the positive effect of her political activities on changes in family members and their gendered relations:

Now, there are many positive effects. For example, my father used to abuse my mother like any other man. I don't remember it, at least not in the years when we started to be revolutionaries. But before, when I was a child, my sister remembers it very well, because she was also hurt in those fights. I mean she was beaten up too. [...] But, as I said, these processes of ours have created great changes in them. My father stopped being violent. He started to become a person who reads, researches, questions, and objects. Well, in the end, if you can't change or transform your own family, you can't change or transform anyone else.

This demonstrates that women's involvement in activism can play a pivotal role in raising awareness of gender inequality, domestic violence, and discriminatory practices. Equipped with a deeper understanding of their rights and societal expectations, women may seek to renegotiate power dynamics within the family, fostering an environment that values equality and mutual respect. For example, Narê, a married woman with two children who works for a women's cooperative in Dersim, explains how she intervened in her daughter's relationship with a boyfriend who was restricting her dress preferences:

I get angry when my daughter's boyfriend puts pressure on her. One day, he told her not to wear a dress that he thought was not appropriate for her. I lost my temper. I said, "You will wear it and go to meet him in this dress." If he disagrees, he can leave. If I don't change you, don't change me. Yes, there may be some things you can do together, and you can decide together, but he is already dominating and putting pressure on her even when she is still at her father's house. Isn't that a bitter thing? So, I called him and said "You can't control my daughter like that. My daughter is in my house. If I allow that dress, you have no right to say anything."

Many participants emphasized the strong impact of women's activism on gender negotiations within the family and society. According to Gule, the women's movement in Türkiye stands out as a dynamic force where women have fearlessly voiced their demands in various fields since the 1980s. She highlights a significant shift in public awareness, as evidenced by increased attention to cases of violence against women. According to her, this increased awareness arising from the fight for women's rights now extends to families and relatives who actively embrace such issues. Some participants attributed the rising divorce rate in Dersim to the fight for women's rights and empowerment. In their opinion, the influence of women's activism on the household has potentially contributed to a rise in

divorces over the past 20–30 years in Dersim, particularly among those aged 30–40. They attribute this rise to the divergence between women seeking to establish their identity and the traditional expectations placed on them in marriages. Men often place domestic responsibilities solely on women, leading to dissatisfaction and divorce.

Overall, women’s activism catalyzes transformative change within family settings, promoting empowerment, awareness, and the redefinition of roles. As women challenge societal norms, these shifts resonate within the intimate spaces of the family, contributing to more equitable and inclusive relationships. This can be seen as “acts of citizenship” since women transform themselves from subjects into claimants “of justice, rights and responsibilities” (Isin, 2008, p. 18). This conceptualization of claiming rights is certainly not limited to the family; however, it is in the family spaces that activist women initially encounter patriarchal structures, challenge inequalities, and claim their rights.

Involvement in Organizations as Catalysts for Change

Extending Isin’s concept of “acts of citizenship” (2008), to our study, I understand Kurdish Alevi women as enacting their citizenship and gaining a sense of freedom and empowerment through public actions and various forms of activism connected to their multiple identity markers, as we have explored elsewhere (Hanoğlu et al., 2025). Kurdish Alevi women have been at the forefront of political and military struggles and have played a key role in the establishment and maintenance of various political movements, including the ideological and political development of the Kurdish movement. In particular, Dersimi women have become visible as guerrillas, activists, or politicians both within Türkiye and the global diaspora community. The best-known include Sakine Cansız, a founding member of the PKK’s women’s movement, and Gültan Kışanak, who served as mayor of the Diyarbakir (Amed) municipality, the center of Kurdish political activism and the unofficial capital city of the Kurds in Türkiye. Both women endured years of imprisonment in the notorious Diyarbakir prison, which was widely known for systematic torture and the occasional murder of detainees (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2009). The brutal stories from the Diyarbakir prison came to symbolize resistance and radicalization. The narratives of Cansız and Kışanak indicate the dual journey of disempowerment—as political prisoners—yet also empowerment through their emergence as prominent female figures in the realm of Kurdish politics and Kurdish

women's political advocacy. After her release, Cansız started the Kurdish women's movement. Her murder in Paris in 2013 caused protests throughout the international Kurdish community. Kışanak, once released, engaged in party politics for decades. During the political crackdown on Kurdish politicians after the failed coup d'état of 2016, she was again imprisoned. Her arrest—together with that of her co-mayor Fırat Anlı—initiated immediate protests both within Türkiye and internationally (Weiss, 2018). Still in prison today, Kışanak remains a leading figure in the Kurdish women's movement and Kurdish politics.

As well as political organizations, Dersim is also home to unions, cultural associations, and various forms of religious, linguistic, and ecological activism, and women's participation is visible in all these platforms. These initiatives offer alternative spaces for women to express themselves and to challenge and redefine traditional gender norms and expectations, both within their own households and in the wider community. The participants who engaged with them in whatever form stated the positive contribution of such initiatives to their lives, particularly in terms of pushing their perceptions beyond traditional gender roles. For example, Reyma, who led a women's workshop and a regional women's association, stresses the important role that such initiatives play in taking women out of the house and making them a "social being":

If we talk about the individual we just talked about, the moment she leaves her home, it could be for an economic activity, it could be for a cultural, social activity, once the woman gets a taste of being a social being, she starts to want more. I mean, how good it is to live... There is a life outside the house, outside of cooking, outside of waiting for your husband to return from work. As soon as she starts to feel that you can improve yourself or that you have the potential to develop it, she starts to draw a route for herself. So she starts to think about what she can do more. In this sense, I think it is very useful. Cooperative activities, women's association activities, the carpet workshop, *bağlama* courses, etc., all of them have different effects, positive effects on women.

Women's cooperatives not only help women to become involved in society but also provide financial support that contributes to women's self-confidence and strength. For example, Hurê (46), a divorcee working in a local women's cooperative, narrated how she was afraid that she could not cope with the difficulties of being a single mother and maintaining a life without a husband. However, when she had the opportunity to work in

the cooperative established by a local socialist initiative, everything changed for her:

... When I had the first problem with my husband, I was very scared. My biggest fear was that if we split up one day, I would go hungry in the house with my daughter. We had very serious problems indeed. [...] But then I worked in the cooperative, worked in the packaging department there. When I started working there, when I got my first salary, I realized that I was on the road. [...] With work, with earning money, they are not so heavy on you, you get over it more easily.

Whether through financial help or widened social circles, these activities contribute to raising awareness of gendered issues and the reconstruction of gender roles not only within the family but also, likely, in broader social contexts, because they help empower women through self-awareness and questioning. According to Reyma, when a woman begins to question her circumstances and capabilities, she takes control of her life. She endeavors to create and produce, continually seeking out new opportunities and possibilities for herself:

Once a woman enters into life, the questioning starts. When she starts questioning, she already manages her own life. I mean, if she can create something, she does. If she can produce something, she does. She finds out what more she can do.

Reyma's statement emphasizes the proactive and self-directed nature of women's empowerment, in which questioning leads to action and self-realization. These examples indicate how grassroots initiatives and women's participation play an important role in the construction of gender equality and women's empowerment (see also Chap. 11).

Overall, the narratives presented underscore the transformative potential of women's activism within both familial and broader societal contexts. By challenging patriarchal norms and inequalities, Dersimi women are reshaping gender dynamics within their families, promoting empowerment, awareness, and the redefinition of traditional roles. Their activism extends beyond the confines of the family, intersecting with broader political, social, and cultural spheres. Moreover, initiatives such as women's workshops and cooperatives provide alternative spaces for women to assert themselves, fostering self-awareness and questioning that, in turn, leads to proactive engagement and self-realization. These grassroots efforts not

only challenge existing power structures but also contribute to the broader struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment. Ultimately, the experiences shared by participants highlight the multifaceted nature of women's activism and its vital role in effecting social change and promoting justice and equality.

CONCLUSION

In the first part of this chapter, I focused on how ethnicity, religion, politics, and gender intersect in different ways and create a complex net of dynamics that shape the experiences of Dersimi women. Their various identities create a unique sociopolitical and ethno-religious context that influences their lives in multiple ways. Histories of state violence in the form of genocide and displacement continue to affect Dersimi families, leading to multiple forms of discrimination that persist today and resulting in unique obstacles and challenges. At the same time, the Alevi cultural tradition, often perceived as progressive in gender issues, also presents patriarchal aspects that challenge the notion of gender equality. While Alevis may pride themselves on their open and secular practices, gender roles within family and religious contexts often remain traditional and hierarchical, particularly concerning women's responsibilities at home. Migration and transnationality further shape the gendered experiences of Dersimi women, providing new opportunities for self-expression, education, and economic independence.

The narratives of Dersimi women, in general, reflect a continual struggle against patriarchal norms and gender inequalities within the familial, social, and political spheres. However, these intersecting identities not only act as sources of discrimination and marginalization but also contribute to resilience and empowerment, challenging established power structures and contributing to broader societal change. Some women perceive their disadvantaged position as a catalyst for progress, as they strive to excel in their education and social and economic life to minimize oppression.

In the second part of the chapter, I looked at the different ways in which Dersimi women create alternative spaces of citizenship. Women's involvement in political and cultural activism led not only to a greater awareness of gender inequality but also to change within their own families. As shown by the participants' experiences, activism empowers women to renegotiate their roles, confront domestic violence, and demand respect and equality within their relationships. Family and activism engage in a

reciprocal relationship in which values, experiences, roles, and advocacy efforts influence and shape each other. The dynamics between the two are fluid, reflecting the evolving nature of both family structures and social movements. This interplay contributes to broader societal shifts toward greater equality, justice, and inclusivity.

Women's involvement in political or cultural activism can be considered a strategy against violent histories, which creates a new social context for them. The life experiences of Alevi Kurds—involving discrimination, marginalization, exile, prison, and many more forms of oppression—motivate women to find strength and result in resilience, solidarity, and resistance, which are sources of empowerment (Hanoğlu et al., 2025). This emphasizes the multifaceted nature of women's activism as well as how it challenges established power structures and gender inequalities within society. It catalyzes transformative change, leading to more equitable and inclusive relationships both inside and outside the household. Through their activism and advocacy, Dersimi women actively claim their rights and responsibilities within society.

Grassroots initiatives such as women's associations, workshops, and cooperatives provide alternative spaces for women to express themselves and challenge gender norms. These initiatives empower women through self-awareness, questioning, and proactive engagement, aligning closely with Isin's notion of citizenship (2008) as active participation in shaping individual destiny and that of society. They then exemplify the pivotal role played by women navigating and negotiating alternative spaces of citizenship. The experiences of Dersimi women thus underscore the dynamic nature of citizenship as a lived practice in which individuals actively assert their rights and agency to effect social change and promote justice and equality.

Let us return to my grandmother, whose story has always interested me—a survivor of genocide who divorced a powerful landlord and moved from her village to a metropolitan western city, who actively supported religious and political causes, and who was one of the few elders to begin talking publicly about memories of the genocide and call for them “not to be forgotten.” The dilemmas, controversies, and surprises in her life, in the sociocultural context of a woman born in 1929, are fascinating. Despite the multiple challenges that made her life journey difficult, she also had many experiences that resonated with empowerment and independence, particularly for a woman of her time.

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PART III

Citizenship and Cultural Heritage



CHAPTER 6

Reading Kurdish Heritage Anew: Women's Representation, Intimate Citizenship, and Moral Empowerment

Joanna Bocheńska

INTRODUCTION

Kurdish cultural heritage is today associated principally with the meaningful past which provides resources for the national struggle and alternative visions of the political order that the Kurds desire to build. Like other forms of nationalism, Kurdish nationalism has shaped Kurdish heritage along the lines of commemoration, focusing on personalities, places, events, and cultural artifacts. For most of the twentieth century, Kurdish heritage remained on the margins of the official states' interests and policy. It was often destroyed, silenced, or assimilated and transformed into Arab, Turkish, or Iranian heritage. This reality still conditions Kurdish culture in Iran and Türkiye. Since 1991—and especially since 2005, with the establishment of Kurdish self-rule in Iraqi Kurdistan and the subsequent creation of the self-administered DAANES/Rojava region in north Syria in 2011—Kurds have finally been able to establish their own heritage policy in these two regions.

One of the key components of Kurdish heritage policy is the preservation of the mother tongue, which became endangered in the twentieth century by the assimilation policies of the four Middle Eastern states. Interestingly, women are increasingly active in this field (Bocheńska et al., 2023) and, as demonstrated in Chap. 7, are inspired by modern culture

and the creative forms of engagement it proposes. Apart from the concern for language, as shown in this chapter, Kurdish political movements and popular resistance use various mechanisms to cultivate a memory of the past and its heroes. Narratives of the past and their various interpretations can directly or indirectly inspire people to act, even if their role is not always immediately visible, and as stressed by Mehmed Dicle, the famous Kurdish writer from Bakur (North Kurdistan, Türkiye), it can be hidden deeply in the “collective subconscious” (2015). According to my previous studies, moral imagination offered by folkloric texts and modern literature provides a powerful ethical tool (2016a, 2018a, 2018b). Folk narratives were until recently widely known by the Kurds and impacted their moral choices. Also, it happens that Kurdish people use stories or proverbs to explain the moral codes they follow (2018a, p. 59). Therefore, Kurdish heritage must today be considered an important element of Kurdish alternative citizenship, especially since heritage was defined as “a fundamental right and responsibility for all” in the 2017 Delhi Declaration on Heritage and Democracy (ICOMOS, 2017, p. 1).

Following the popular meaning of heritage (*miras* or *kelepör* in Kurdish) and numerous international charters, heritage is identified principally as a thing or practice of the past which should be protected and nurtured in its transmission from one generation to the next. As stressed by Vecco (2010), the understanding of heritage has evolved considerably over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and encompasses not only tangible but also intangible content. In this chapter, I propose to present Kurdish heritage from a wider perspective including both the customary historical context and the dynamic and intimate relationship established between the past and the present (Smith, 2006; Tolia-Kelly et al., 2017; Waterton & Watson, 2015; Wu & Hou, 2015). This implies the active role of people who are not just passive recipients of the past, but who actively co-create heritage often to the point of “abusing” its past meaning (Waterton & Watson, 2015, p. 12).

While Kurdish heritage may be described as dissonant or alternative (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996) according to the policies of the official states of which the Kurds form part, it is often reproduced in these states’ official narratives of national grandeur and importance. This became especially visible in the cultural policy of Iraqi Kurdish institutions (Kurpiewska-Korbut, 2018) and in the popular nicknames of respect formed by adding *nemîr* (immortal) to the names of political leaders such as Mela Mustafa Barzanî (1903–1979) or even cultural figures such as the classical poet

Ehmedê Xanî (1652–1707). A reading of the national Kurdish identity dominates the interpretation of literary texts and arts, rendering any other meaning or heritage usage almost unthinkable. Communism and socialism have also inspired Kurdish heritagization and are visible in Kurdish cultural productions associated with different versions of left-wing Kurdish ideology, such as the novel *Pêşmerge* (Partisans) by Rehîm Qazî (2007 [1961]) and the movie *The End Will Be Spectacular* (2019) by Ersin Çelik.¹ The English title of the movie shows that leftist ideology is not devoid of grandeur, even though it does not expose nationalism but the class struggle or—more recently—colonialism and the fight against it (Öcalan, 2013).

According to David Crouch, the problem with such heritage-making is that it “speaks of Great Things that become objectified and often reified: Great Places, Sites and People. The objectified becomes distanced from the real, the everyday, the experience of individual lives” (Crouch, 2016, p. 58). Therefore, although this chapter will address extraordinary deeds and characters, the main aim of my argument is to present heritage as working on a more intimate, personal, and everyday level. This corresponds with Plummer’s idea of intimate citizenship which emphasizes the role of “innermost thoughts or feelings” (2003, p. 9) and hints “at the world in the making, worlds in which a public language of ‘intimate troubles’ is emerging” (2003, p. 13). For this reason, I will also use autobiographical research, which encourages reflection on the factors that shape life experience and enable moral and social imaginations to develop (Nussbaum, 1990, 2013; Stephenson et al., 2015).

Importantly, heritage, as a thing or practice bequeathed from the past, may constitute “the co-constructed shared unconscious of members of a certain social system such as community, society, nation or culture.” This is because “it includes shared anxieties, fantasies, defenses, myths, and memories” (Weinberg, 2007, p. 312). Mehmet Dicle (2015) talks of a collective subconsciousness understood as “the cultural codes, which consist of many elements; starting with narration and ending with reflections, witty sayings, aesthetical tastes, revenge, love, pleasure and pain.” He further suggests that “although most things that for centuries happened to Kurdish society have been forgotten, they are still hidden somewhere in a place, in our subconscious” (Dicle, 2015). This chapter, therefore, aims to reveal certain traits of the past in modern Kurdish undertakings which may

¹The Kurdish title is *Ji bo Azadiyê* (For Freedom).

be considered examples of an unconscious usage of heritage. Such an assumption is, of course, inherently speculative but expands the scope of possible interpretations and enriches the approaches to Kurdish heritage.

Furthermore, contemporary reality and modern usage of heritage can be helpful in understanding the historical context of some artistic works because—despite many changes—there are also continuities in human practice. For example, according to Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, modern literary works can offer “interpretations of the oral literature” and “throw light on the folklore sources” (2014, p. 212). Following this lead, in this chapter, I will use my contemporary experiences and conversations with Kurdish people to shed light on the Kurdish past narratives too.

The emancipatory discourse of and about Kurdish women appeared on a wider scale in the later decades of the twentieth century, against the nationalist and leftist backdrop described above. This discourse accentuated the struggle against the patriarchy, encompassing criticism of official state policy, religion (mainly Islam), and the traditional norms of Kurdish society (Açık, 2014; Begikhani et al., 2015; Burç, 2020; Çağlayan, 2012; Dirik, 2022; Hardi 2013; Käser 2021; Mojab, 2001). While women were often presented as victims of male domination, there was also an emphasis on the so-called special status of women in Kurdish society, which allegedly distinguished them from women in other parts of the Middle East (van Bruinessen, 2001; Öcalan, 2013). This approach directed attention to strong female personalities such as female tribal leaders or—more recently—the guerrillas. The Jineolojî project, a new movement based on the science of women, was created in recent decades by Kurdish women inspired by Öcalan. Although Jineolojî is in many ways comparable to the “separate spheres” and “women’s culture” approaches of American and European second-wave feminists of the 1970s and 1980s (Käser, 2021, p. 63; Morgan, 2006, pp. 7–9), it brought fresh air and vigor to many women’s undertakings. According to Jineolojî ideologists, feminism failed to bring changes to the capitalist order of exploitation and inequality. The Kurdistan Women’s Liberation Movement, Jineolojî, and its followers oppose what they see as an unsuccessful feminist movement that became stuck in futile theoretical debates, and thus, they stress the role of direct action (Jineolojî, 2018, p. 10). This new discourse and the idea of women’s knowledge that needs to be explored while “breaking through dogmatism and by strengthening mental courage” (2018, p. 79) certainly enabled an acknowledgment of the more subjective and everyday context of women’s lives which cannot be reduced to victimhood,

subordination, or the struggle against patriarchy (Begikhani et al., 2018; Bocheńska et al., 2023). While Öcalan himself often played with symbols of grandeur, for example by evoking the image of Ishtar or calling on Kurdish women to sacrifice their lives for the people (Çağlayan, 2012), the Kurdish women themselves adopted a variety of different approaches to their heritage in order to discover its empowering dimension. For example, while Jineolojî proposed that “women are creators of humanity with their discoveries of many firsts in societies” (Jineolojî, 2018), Kurdish women artists in Rojhelat told me about women’s natural creativity (*xul-qênerî*). Most probably an inspiration from Öcalan and Jineolojî, the notion of women’s natural creativity enabled the Rojhelatî artists to discover the different skills and intellectual potential held by their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations. This approach offered young women a sense of self-confidence when struggling to participate in modern literary and artistic life in Rojhelat (Iranian Kurdistan) and Iran.

Taking the aforementioned into account, this chapter aims to support Kurdish women in exploring Kurdish heritage and the meaningful and empowering past of women. However, I would like to apply a slightly different approach than the one proposed by Jineolojî, where “her story” is believed to be entirely suppressed by “his story” and therefore in need of rescue. I wish to suspend the feminist certainty about patriarchal domination, invented as a theory by first-wave feminists (Morgan, 2006, p. 6), and, instead, look at Kurdish heritage through a deliberately naïve lens, where patriarchalism is absent and where we aim to grasp the logic and ethics of past societies without imposing modern labels on them. My desire to suspend patriarchalism as a theory does not mean that I am against feminist efforts; on the contrary, this approach is intended to reveal useful feminist content hidden in the Kurdish past. The problem with patriarchalism as a theoretical approach, as observed by many feminists before me, is that when it is perceived as systemic oppression, it creates a sense of deliberate abuse perpetrated by men over and over again and reduces women’s activities to almost fatalistic submission (Morgan, 2006, p. 6; Rowbotham et al., 2006, pp. 51–56). Hence, it often works reductively, concealing other historical conditions, as if it were the only norm dominating traditional society. Importantly, suspending patriarchalism does not mean undermining it as a still useful theory. Rather, it is treated in this chapter as a temporary experiment which allows us to grasp other mechanisms of social organization which slip attention when labeled simply as “patriarchal.”

The chapter is divided into three sections in which I will combine different methods: textual analysis to address oral and classical literary traditions, which are the main two pillars of today's heritage practices; semi-structured interviews and conversations conducted with Kurdish women in different parts of Kurdistan over the last decade,² which offer an insight into Kurdish interpretations of the past; and, finally, my own experience as a woman and mother. One can, of course, argue that because of not being Kurdish, my personal experience is of no value for this study. Yet, I believe that it is very important today to demonstrate how the Kurdish tradition can inspire others. In this way, we can see Kurdish culture as inseparable from the world heritage, which challenges the minoritizing policy of Türkiye or Iran, where the Kurdish cultural production keeps to be presented as of local importance only.

I understand literary analysis in two different ways. First, I see the narratives emerging in oral and classical literature as things of the past whose historical context should be taken into account. Secondly, however, I recognize the freedom of the reader—both Kurdish and outsider—to interpret the text according to their current needs (Barthes, 1967). Following this lead, there are no *correct* or *incorrect* interpretations because all of them may enrich our thinking about a text and a subject. In this way, I intertwine and reconcile two different approaches to heritage. The first, often referred to as “thing of the past” should be considered so that we can grasp a sense of the transformations that follow. The second—heritage as performance—enables us to use the past “to negotiate new ways of being” in the present (Smith, 2006). Thus “heritage” also becomes an important act of becoming, communication, and meaning-making, closely linked to acts of citizenship (Isin, 2008, 2009, 2016). Although I depart from the analysis of folkloric and classical texts, I perceive heritage as encompassing the entire Kurdish cultural production. The sculpture of Mestûre Arđalan by the Kurdish artist Hadî Ziaoddinî, located in the public square of Sine (Sanandaj in Rojhelat), is one such example, especially that it was inspired by Mestûre's poetry and proves how literature is interconnected with other examples of artistic production (Bocheńska & Hajiagha, 2024). The main idea of this chapter is, therefore, to

²The research in Rojhelat discussed in the third section was conducted in July 2022. It was based on ethnographic fieldwork, photography, text analysis, a focus-group discussion, and semi-structured interviews with 27 Kurdish artists, photographers, writers, activists, actors, film directors, researchers, and students, 16 of whom were women and 11 men.

demonstrate that in the past, female characters were not entirely devoid of strength or importance, whether in their physical capacity and courage—as expressed in the oral tradition—or their spiritual strength, rooted in mystical reality and the idea of limitless love. Even if these examples are scarce and rooted in philosophical systems that have been largely undermined (such as family honor or religion), we cannot ignore them or project onto them only a reductive reading of nationalism or patriarchal domination. When read with attention, they offer us many possibilities to see the active role played by women in the past that can also inspire women's empowerment today.

*ŞÉR ŞÉR E, ÇI JIN E ÇI MÉR E (A LION IS A LION WHETHER
IT IS FEMALE OR MALE): COURAGE-BASED MORALITY
AS AN INCENTIVE FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT*

The above quotation is a popular Kurdish proverb, often used today by Kurds to point to a perceived message of equality between men and women in the Kurdish oral tradition. I often heard this saying repeated by Kurds to describe how female guerrillas have an equal standing to male guerrillas and as demonstrated in Chap. 8 this saying stirred women's imagination and inspired them to brave actions. Contrary to popular interpretations, I suggest that this proverb does not testify to the equality of men and women in Kurdish oral tradition but, rather, to a different system of values. The proverb means that women may be treated with the greatest respect, usually reserved for men, provided that they are as brave as lions. Like many other Kurdish proverbs, this one has its origin in a folktale. It is a tale about a lion and a fox. The sentence is spoken by the lion when the fox mocks him for feeling obliged to return home to his wife. The fox implies that the lion is weak and afraid of his wife. The lion answers that, while the mate awaiting the fox is only a fox, he, the lion, is awaited by a lion because the "lion is lion be it female or male."³ In the oral traditions of many nations, including the Kurds, these two animals are imbued with different symbolisms. The lion, the king of the animals, is a symbol of courage and power, while the fox is associated with cunning. In the story, the lion is unmoved by the fox's jibes: his nobility cannot easily be shaken by a joke.

³Watch for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJ_AViywzD8.

In my previous study, based on an analysis of Kurdish folklore, classical texts, and modern literature, I suggested that the concept of honor in the Kurdish oral tradition was gendered and depended mainly on two virtues: courage and faithfulness (Bocheńska, 2018a). While men, who engaged in war and multiple struggles, were meant to be brave, the women's main task was to remain faithful to their husbands and families and to keep chaste. Cowardly men and unfaithful wives were perceived as devoid of honor and could, therefore, easily be killed or removed from their community as not worthy of life or protection. These demands can be of course interpreted as elements of patriarchal domination. However, it seems even more interesting to look at how the heroic moral code could serve women within and despite these patriarchal limits. Courage was associated with a readiness to die and with acts of bravery, mainly related to military combat. Judging from the Kurdish historical chronicles, military combat was part of everyday life and often, although not always, conditioned by physical strength. Following the logic of military combat, women were perceived as physically weaker and not seen as very capable of bravery, yet they were in no way devoid of valor. Both the oral tradition and the Kurdish chronicles present courage as rooted in spirit, not just in body. By quoting from the Quran, Şerefxanê Bedlîsî [Bidlisi] indicates that courage comes from God and assists even the lowly (1967, p. 185).

In the past, bravery was not simply an individual feature; it had political meaning (MacIntyre, 1996, p. 229). Moreover, courage and heroic deeds were among the imagined foundations of nobility, which is why in stories about noble families and in fairy tales we encounter bravery among representatives of the nobility: princes, their sons, and sometimes their daughters. Women were often told to be brave; against the reality of frequent military combat between different emirates and leaders, courage was a quality in demand and therefore took priority over sex. This suggests a possible answer to the question of why there were so many women rulers and chieftains in Kurdish society (Van Bruinessen, 2001). Women, even if not directly invited to fight, were not seen as devoid of bravery, and this was the social context of the proverb cited above. Yet the presence of women leaders does not prove that Kurdish society is based on gender equality. Rather, along with Kurdish folklore, it points to the existence of a system of social promotion based on courage.

Women's Courage and Chastity in Fairy Tales

In the following, I will give examples from fairy tales that support the notion of female bravery. However, women were still required to remain faithful and chaste, demands never made of men. Moreover, the women's courage in these stories is often reduced to the avoidance of extramarital sexual intercourse.

Çilkezi (the Woman of Forty Braids) often appears in the Kurmanji fairy tales as an example of a strong and brave female character. In the story *Mîrza Mihemed û Çilkezi* (collected by Nihat Öner from Hatice Özmüş, Serhad region, 2016), we follow Mîrza Mihemed on a hunting trip. He is unable to catch a beautiful gazelle, in fact Çilkezi in disguise. She finally hides in a tent and appears in front of him as a woman. When he asks her where the gazelle has gone, she suggests that they should fight each other and that, if she wins, she will kill the hunter. Mîrza Mihemed wants both to find the gazelle and to marry Çilkezi. However, Çilkezi unexpectedly wins the wrestling contest and, since she is already in love with Mîrza Mihemed and does not want to hurt him, sets him free. Later, Mîrza searches for her but to no avail. Finally, he miraculously finds a letter in which she introduces herself as the daughter of an emir and tells him where to find her. After reaching the palace of her father, Mîrza Mihemed becomes a farmer on his land, embarks on many difficult tasks, and finally marries his beloved Çilkezi.

The tale is unusual in that it presents a woman as physically stronger than a man and capable of winning a wrestling match. Her body is associated with an animal, the gazelle, a popular Middle Eastern symbol of beauty. She is brave enough to challenge the man, and the physical combat attracts them to each other. Also notable is their very close physical contact during the wrestling, which is portrayed in the fairy tale as if the norm of chastity were suspended for a while.

In another fairy tale, collected by the Celil family (2010), we again encounter the brave figure of Çilkezi. The fairy tale starts with Mîrza Mihemed searching for a princess whose picture he had seen on a portrait rescued from the sea. He finally finds her, demonstrates his physical strength and courage, and grants her wish; thus, they are married. Unexpectedly, Mîrza Mihemed is kidnapped by a mischievous priest who forces him to become a swineherd. Çilkezi resolutely embarks on a search for him and encounters various challenges. She may not be fighting a

dragon, but she must escape all the men who stand in her way and wish “to marry her” or, in other words, have sexual intercourse with her. To do so, she either deceives them or fights them. On one of her journeys, when she is dressed as a man, a magic bird lands on her arm, which—according to custom—shows the inhabitants of the kingdom who should be their new ruler. She becomes their ruler, in her male guise, which gives her a better opportunity to search for her beloved. She installs her female portrait close to the public well, asking anyone who recognizes the woman in the portrait to come to the palace. Soon her husband and various other men from whom she escaped appear at the palace. Before revealing her true identity, Çilkezî asks all the men to tell their story in front of each other, and each time she requires them to confess whether there was any sexual intercourse between them and the lady in the portrait. Only after receiving a negative answer from all the men does she decide to tell her husband who she really is.

The fairy tale conveys many moral messages. First, we learn that there may be brave women capable of ruling a country. Secondly, however, we learn that all a woman’s courage and love would not be enough to restore her marriage unless she proves that she has retained her chastity.

A third example is a legend known among Sorani speakers as *Eşkewtî Gewerê* (The Cave of Gwer), which was broadcast by Radio Mahabad approximately 40–50 years ago. I heard it first in a slightly modified version from a woman from Serdeşt (Rojhelat) living in Bakur. Gwer is the name of a young woman with a child who travels to another village to visit her parents. She is accompanied by an evil servant. Due to bad weather, they have to hide in a cave. The servant declares that he wants “to marry her”; if she does not agree, he will kill her child. Gwer does not give him what he wants, and so he kills her child. Later she fights her abuser, kills him, and declares that “her conscience remained clean and her heart calm.” Her courage and determination have been made famous in the stories about her.⁴

This story is certainly cruel. The life of the child is shown as being worth less than female chastity, which should be protected at any cost. Courage is represented in Gwer’s infinite determination to protect her chastity and her ability to fight and overcome her assaulter. Importantly also, it shows her emotional strength, understood as an ability to detach

⁴The text of the tale was made available to me in 2017 thanks to Salah Payanyani and Jaffer Sheyholslami.

herself from her feelings for her child, thus becoming stronger than human sentiment. Another example is the wives of the Khan of Golden Hands, from the famous epos of *Dimdim*, narrated and sung in Kurdistan in many different dialects. After the death of their husband and his fellows (Celil, 1967), they blow themselves up along with the fortress of Dimdim, which is filled with Persian enemies.

What we learn from all these stories is that women's valor and courage were mainly associated with the ability to engage in physical combat and beat the attacker. This could make a woman a ruler. Furthermore, the tradition shows us female characters who will take their own lives in order not to surrender their castle or their body to the enemy. This demonstrates that being brave enough to face danger and to fight to the end, whatever the cost, a quality often associated only with men, also created a social lever for women. It did not make them free or emancipated in the modern sense but could bestow on them a lion-like sense of honor, power, and splendor. It could also immortalize them through stories in the same way as male heroes.

Courage Among Modern Female Fighters

Let us now investigate the modern traits of this moral heritage which are, without a doubt, visible in the elevation of female guerrilla fighters. I do not intend by this to reduce the liberation struggle of the PKK women to simply following a traditional pattern of bravery. Rather, I wish to expose the role of heritage, which has until now slipped the attention of researchers.

Both Handan Çağlayan (2012) and Isabel Käser (2019, 2021) emphasize that it was not until the late 1990s that many Kurdish women joined the militant forces and proved their capability for heroic deeds, including a suicide attack on the Turkish army. Öcalan then developed his ideology of women's liberation (2013) which he gave the symbol of the goddess Ishtar. Öcalan began referring to the role of women in the 1980s when he called on both men and women to reconsider the meaning of *namûs* (honor) and associate it with the homeland rather than sexuality and family. He stressed that the link between honor and sexuality and family was an old custom that not even "brave fellows have the power to overcome" (Öcalan, 1999, p. 19; Çağlayan, 2012, p. 10) and suggested that this pre-occupation with the traditional sense of honor should be abandoned in favor of seeking honor elsewhere, in fighting for the homeland. Thus, he

redirected courage to the service of new aims, expanding the Kurdish notion of honor (Appiah, 2010; Bocheńska, 2018b).

Initially, women were described by Öcalan as slaves but also as potentially instrumental to the revolution. They were urged to leave their “backward families” and follow a new path. The call was well-received and brought results by the end of the 1980s and toward the mid-1990s when many women joined the armed struggle (Çağlayan, 2012; Özcan, 1999). The women guerillas proved to be devoted, brave, and able to fight effectively, on a par with the men. On July 30, 1996, the female guerilla Zilan blew herself up during a Turkish military parade in Dersim, thus spectacularly proving her readiness to die, like the wives in the fairytale of the Khan of Golden Hands. Before her suicide, she wrote a letter to Öcalan explaining that her “sacrificial act” was part of the struggle for the liberation of her people because one “should prefer an honorable death to a dishonorable life” (Zilan, 1996). Her limitless courage corresponds to the courage of the women described in folk stories, although it was attached to the new challenge of liberating a homeland rather than a castle, clan, or family.

Zilan’s enacted readiness to die in the name of freedom brought respect not only for her—as an immortalized symbol—but also for other women guerillas. It motivated Öcalan to take women more seriously. From this point on, in his writings, women were no longer presented as slaves with the potential to become liberated humans, but as individuals who had already successfully embarked on the path to freedom and could serve as examples for the entire Kurdish community (Açık, 2014; Çağlayan, 2012; Käsler, 2021; Öcalan, 2013). Furthermore, Öcalan united the ancient image of Ishtar—the Neolithic Mother Goddess—with Zilan, who became the “freedom goddess of the modern age” (Çağlayan, 2012, p. 19). What has to date escaped attention, however, is that Öcalan’s new mythology owes far more to Kurdish oral tradition than to the Neolithic era. Although he seems to unconsciously adopt a courage-based morality, he makes full use of the moral heritage of the limitless courage of men and women and redirects it to serve new purposes. As stressed by Necla Açık, the party’s narrative continued to suggest that women should overcome their weakness through “courageous deeds” and “drastic measures,” implying that women had to prove their strength and strong will (2014, p. 122). This imperative, although instrumentalized in modern writing, reproduced the values (undesirable weakness versus desirable strength) and courage-based morality expressed in the Kurdish oral tradition.

Like Öcalan, many people were impressed by the courage of Zilan and other female guerillas, which elevated their position in the organization, society, and international opinion. This came about not only due to Öcalan's charisma and writings but also because this pattern of courage-based respect was deeply rooted in Kurdish heritage and was, thus, familiar to Kurdish society. Moreover, to paraphrase Crouch, the grand-scale symbolism applied by Öcalan and the PKK detached the representation of the women guerrillas from everyday life. They were perceived almost as goddesses, heavenly beings who were obliged to protect their chastity (Käser, 2021, p. 164) and were discouraged from returning to normal life and marrying (Weiss, 2010).

However, the public may not interpret the imposed heritage of magnificence as Öcalan and the PKK intended. When I was invited in July 2015 to an Iftar dinner on the edge of Mount Ararat, next to the cemetery⁵ for the *şehids* (martyrs) from the PKK, Zilan's portrait fluttered over the heads of mullahs who were reading the Iftar prayers for those gathered for the commemoration. It demonstrated, in the first place, the grandeur of struggle and of the militant heritage that everyone—including those attached to Islam—should respect. Yet, the Iftar organized for a small group of families who came to commemorate their loved ones, killed in the struggle, constituted also a far more intimate and multidimensional meeting. The grand portrait of Zilan was not associated there with the Ishtar goddess but with the small photographs of *şehids* kept in the wallets, pockets, and vivid memories of mothers, fathers, grandparents, and friends. Thus, the heritage of grandeur rooted in narratives of the past and developed to serve the needs of a liberation movement aiming to combat the colonial Turkish state was intertwined with the emotional needs of the families, thereby creating effects that were not entirely planned or designed by the PKK leadership.

In conclusion, while the proverb about the lion testifies to a courage-based system of respect rather than the existence of gender equality, it is precisely this mechanism that has been an effective lever for Kurdish women. As has been shown above, they use it for different purposes than those usually envisioned by a patriarchal society. The narrative about limitless courage has been suffused with feminist slogans and applied in

⁵The cemetery was destroyed by Turkish soldiers in 2016.

different acts of citizenship, to which I will return in the third section of this chapter. Chapter 8 also demonstrates that being lion-like and brave may take on different meanings over the course of one person's life.

LIMITLESS MERCY AND FORGIVENESS: A WOMAN POSSESSING SPIRITUAL STRENGTH IN *MEM Ū ZİN*

In the previous section, I discussed the image of a physically strong and brave woman, often associated with a powerful or beautiful animal. In this section, I will show a contrasting image by proposing the notion of beauty shown in the figure of Zin. Along with her beloved Mem, she is one of the protagonists of Ehmedê Xanî's famous seventeenth-century poem. Despite her earthly frailty, Zin is embedded with a spiritual beauty and strength not common in other people. While Sitî and Tacdîn—another couple in the poem—are portrayed as fulfilling their goals and achieving happiness on Earth, Zin and Mem are from the beginning described as passive, thoughtful people filled with inner passion. These are precisely the features that give them an inner light; even if they cannot achieve their worldly goal of marriage (because the prince will not allow it), they reach a metaphysical level of perfection.

The poem, by Ehmedê Xanî, shares common characteristics with other mystical poems about unhappy lovers, such as *Khosrow and Shirin* by Nizami (1141–1209) or *Yusuf and Zuleykha* by Jami (1414–1492), but also demonstrates many unique features. To my knowledge, it is the only mystical work where Allah is called not only *Maşûq* (Beloved) but also *Aşiq* (Lover):

Ma'şûq-i tu yî, bifexr û nazî
Aşiq tu yî, lêk-i bê niyaz î (Xanî, 2005, p. 116)
Beloved you are, proud and tender
Lover you are, yet without desire (Khani, 2008, p. 15)

According to Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), who was one of the most influential Sufi poets in the Middle East, “aşq” and “işq” cannot be used with regard to God because this word means “wrapping with love” and being “overwhelmed by love” (Ibn Arabi, 2010, p. 14), an action which is intrinsically humane and not suitable for God. Therefore, this word generally does not appear in Islamic literature with regard to God. However, it

appears in Ehmedê Xanî's text along with the context of God's limitless forgiveness (Bocheńska, 2016b).

From the poem's introduction, we learn that it is written to show those with foresight or wisdom that the Kurds are not without the ability to love (2005, p. 172), which suggests that this ability was seen as important by Xanî. Furthermore, in the introduction, the narrator addresses God and suggests to him boldly that he should be able to forgive humans their sins:

Kufrê tu meger neşî bibexşî!	If you could not forgive infidelity
Ger tê gunehan bi me binexşî	If our sins you are recording
Dê şad-i bibin li me şeyatin	Satan will gloat over our misery
Mesrûr-i bibin gelek melain	And many accursed will be rejoicing
Qet xiret e, ey penahê alem	Would this be fair, O, refuge of the World!
Qet laiq e, ey şivanê adem	Would it be appropriate, O, shepherd of the herd!
(Xanî, 2005, pp. 157–158)	(Khani, 2008, p. 28)

From the concluding part of the poem, we learn that the foes of God will also be forgiven. This is demonstrated through the figure of a noble old man, who also enters heaven after the death of Mem and Zîn. Mem and Zîn find themselves in a heavenly palace, but they are accompanied by the malicious Bekir. During their lives, Bekir had been a doorkeeper who was the reason for their misery because he had discouraged the emir from allowing Mem and Zîn to marry. The old man is astonished to see Bekir in heaven, but Bekir says that the man “still has much to learn” (2008, p. 230) because he is unaware that Bekir's wrongdoing was caused by love. Explaining his real intentions behind depriving Mem and Zîn of earthly happiness, he says that he “pulled them from the world's corruption” (p. 230) and offered them paradise instead (p. 231).

We then learn that everyone, including Tacdîn—who killed Bekir—is forgiven by God, because “foes were to share in love” (p. 232). To understand this, Bekir requires both the old man and the reader to apply their mathematic skills to calculate God's love, mercy, and forgiveness, which obviously have no limits (p. 232). I have suggested elsewhere (Bocheńska, 2016b) that Bekir represents Satan in Xanî's poem and that, in applying the conventions of a story of unhappy lovers, the poet was proposing Satan's salvation, a theme formerly discussed in the Islamic world. Bekir is directly called “Iblis” in the poem (Xanî, 2005, p. 350; Khani 2008,

p. 109), and the way he acts—by inciting wrongdoing while committing none himself—very much resembles the Quranic description of Satan and his evil acts (Bocheńska, 2016b). Yet, in this chapter, I would like to focus on the figure of Zîn and her role in saving Bekir-Satan. It is thanks to her request, expressed after the death of Mem and after Tacdîn kills Bekir, that Bekir is forgiven and God allows him to enter paradise. In fact, Satan refused to bow to a human, not to God, and subsequently led people astray. Therefore, for Satan to be forgiven and summoned to heaven, a human had to play a role. It is noteworthy that Xanî selected Zîn, a woman, rather than a man, to ask everyone “not to hurt Bekir.” Her speech about Bekir constitutes a long and important part of the poem. She insists that Bekir was the reason she and Mem found the truth and, therefore, that he should not be harmed. Importantly, she almost repeats the narrator’s suggestion from the introduction—that God should be forgiving:

Însaf-i, jibo Xwedanî, însaf Ayîne dibîtin ev qeder saf!	Would it be fair if the possessor of charity Who is a lens perceiving everything with utter clarity
Qet mumkin e ab û abegîne Ev renge neket qebûlê kine! Haşa, ku bi xeyrê puxteê işq	Who is a perfect mirror like the water Would thus not accept a rancor? God forbid that he should lack compas- sion for rancor
Kella, ku sîwayê suxteê işq	For never having experienced a burn- ing passion
Ev çende li sahibê cefayê Ev renge kesek biket wefayê Ev taîfê merhemetsirişt in Lew laiqê nî’meta bihişt in (Xanî, 2005, pp. 580–583)	This much is said of the alienated person This way one fulfills one’s obligation Such people are merciful by nature They too are deserving of heaven’s blessing (Khani, 2008, pp. 219–220)

Zîn’s words are delivered at the cemetery after Bekir has been killed and are, therefore, directed not to the emir but, more importantly, to God. She does not only ask but dares to advise God that Bekir should be forgiven. As we already know, her request is fulfilled by God after her death, as described in a subsequent section of the poem. Since her speech is uttered before the noble old man enters paradise and meets Bekir, it is she who reveals Bekir’s secret to the reader. He was part of God’s economy of love, according to which even those who have never “experienced a

burning passion” have a share of love thanks to all the others who are able to love. However, in the concluding chapter, we hear from Bekir that he looked on Mem and Zîn “as their lover” and therefore did not allow them to waste their love on Earth. Obviously, even Bekir was not devoid of the ability to love, although Zîn does not yet know this when she explains Bekir’s deeds to the public. She perceives them as motivated by rancor and argues that people like Bekir deserve God’s mercy. Her act thus qualifies as an act of forgiveness inspired by God’s limitless love, which people who are “able to love” are invited to follow. Zîn—not a man—is painted by Xanî as the perfect human, able to grasp God’s idea of love and follow this in her life. For the Kurds, traditionally, a world without God was unimaginable. Xanî’s story offers a concept of spiritual strength that is very different from the courage-based morality proposed by the Kurdish oral tradition. This spiritual strength is found in being able to suffer and finding meaning in suffering. In more recent centuries, the idea of tolerating suffering as imposed by religious worldviews has been undermined by a secular humanist morality that has abandoned the focus on paradise and the afterlife in favor of earthly happiness (Appiah, 2010; Bocheńska, 2018a). However, for many reasons, we remain vulnerable to suffering. According to Paul Ricoeur, the human ability to forgive even the gravest crimes is inspired by a “voice from above” which is rooted in different religious traditions but is not identical with any. While no one can be ordered to forgive, “forgiveness exists” and hovers on the horizon of human expectations because of its ability to restore the “happy memory” of a time before wrongdoing and invite people to still have hope for the future (2004).

Let me now introduce the concept of forgiveness and the benefits it can offer to individuals in their daily lives, through my friend Nazîle, an old woman from Bazîd (Doğubayazıt), the region which was most probably also Xanî’s homeland. She passed away in 2019, but I am indebted to her for many interesting conversations during the summer months I spent there between 2007 and 2018. I was always a guest in her home while working on my doctoral dissertation and other projects. It was a place where I could take my children and could combine my work with motherhood. In her home, I learned Kurdish and Turkish while drinking endless cups of tea and taking care of all the children collectively with the other women. She used to call me her daughter and occasionally shared some of her worries with me. For example, sometimes she was not content with her *bûk* (daughter-in-law), who managed to show her disagreement with

the rules of the house, which were still largely imposed by her husband and parents-in-law. Quite often in our discussions, I found myself taking the side of the *bîkk*, although I was always listening to Nazîle. Once, however, Nazîle responded more seriously to my attempts to challenge her perspective. Her voice trembled as she told me that, in the past, her husband used to beat her but that, unlike the younger generation, she was always able to forgive him because she loved him. Unexpectedly, I heard pride and decisiveness in her tone. I knew she had married for love, yet I could hardly discuss with her her apparent readiness to accept this violence. I considered it a weakness or simply submissiveness, in the same way that many feminists, as well as Öcalan and his followers, criticize this acceptance of violence.

Only much later did I realize that she was talking not about being weak but about being strong. As the mother of nine children, in a world where divorce was hard to imagine, her ability to forgive and start each day without poisonous rancor was indeed an example of strength and the only possible solution to her daily difficulties. I understood this many years later when, as a single mother, I had to face the aggressive behavior of my adolescent son who experimented with drugs for over a year. His behavior destroyed the sense of security we had been used to in our small family.⁶ Unlike Nazîle, I was equipped with a range of modern solutions, including psychological support and friendly policemen. Yet, they could not replace me in my daily life, where I alone had to manage everyone's complex emotions and actions. I realized then that the idea of forgiving each other, performed on a daily basis, was not only a source of strength that we could draw from but also the best tool to avoid rancor and keep hope alive. At the same time, as stressed by Ricoeur (2004), no one can be forced to forgive, and it is not my intention to suggest that women should tolerate and forgive the violent behavior of their male family members. Rather, we should strive for a world where such behavior is radically absent. Nevertheless, within the context of the ongoing struggle against patriarchal structures, including violence, do we do justice to the struggle of women if we interpret their forgiveness as slavery or weakness? Instead of this one-sided interpretation, I propose to highlight the strength and wisdom in the forgiveness that a woman such as Nazîle was able to show. While avoiding another simplification by suggesting that all Kurdish

⁶The ethical aspect of including this information in my chapter was thoroughly considered and discussed with my son who approved the text.

women were simply following the idea of forgiveness, the heritage described above offers us a different perspective on women's strength and social participation in a patriarchal society.

Nazîle's story does not indicate a modern usage of Xanî's heritage; in contrast to popular oral narratives, the poem was a sophisticated work of art accessible to a limited number of people. Nazîle was illiterate and unaware that Xanî Baba, known in Bazîd as a noble Muslim, was the author of any such poem. However, listening to her story and seeing her strength, rooted in her ability to love and forgive, we can perhaps imagine why Xanî gave his female character the capacity for forgiveness, turning his heroine into a symbol of—almost inhuman—perfection. In his life in Kurdistan, he may have encountered many women like Nazîle who survived their daily lives by being able to love and forgive. Perhaps it is not, therefore, an exaggeration to suggest that his image of a Loving God, able to forgive endless sins, was inspired at least in part by women. This suggests that women's voices were not totally absent or dismissed in works written by men.

THE LADY WITH THE BOOK: MESTÛRE ARDALAN, AN INSPIRING WOMAN WHO ENTERED THE WORLD OF MEN

A final example of how courage is expressed and reproduced in culture and heritage is found in a well-known poet of the early nineteenth century, Mestûre Ardalan. In the spring of 2011, I visited Hewlêr (Erbil in Başûr or Iraqî Kurdistan) and would often wander, pushing my one-year-old son in a stroller, in the large and pleasant park of Sami Abdulrahman. One of the first things I came across there was a sculpture of Mestûre Ardalan, so large that it attracted my attention even from the other end of the park. I immediately realized it had to be Mestûre Ardalan, whose real name was Max Şeref Xanim Kurdistanî (1805–1847), the Kurdish poet and historian who wrote both in Persian and the Kurdish Gorani dialect and is known for the moving elegies she wrote after the death of her husband, Xosrow Khan (1834), in which “the personal tone set her apart from her male counterparts and gave her poems a unique feminine quality” (Ghaderi & Scalbert-Yücel, 2021, p. 9). She also wrote a history of the Ardalan emirate and demonstrated considerable literary skill as a chronicler, using her own style and critically evaluating different sources (Vasilyeva, 1990, pp. 36–37). She was the author of *Shar'iyat*—a treaty on religious law that



A statue made in 2011 by Kurdish artist Hadî Ziaoddînî depicting the Kurdish poet Mestûre Ardalani (1805–1847) in the city of Sine (Sanandaj) in Rojhelat. By Joanna Bocheńska, Sine 2022, Rojhelat. CC-BY

she described as “guidance for those who are lost”⁷ (Bush, 2022). After the death of her husband, she was forced into exile in the Baban emirate (present-day Iraqî Kurdistan), where she died and was buried, with the result that she now represents an important connection between two parts

⁷Translation Andrew Bush and Azad Hajiagha.

of Kurdistan—Rojhelat (Iranian Kurdistan) and Başûr (Iraqi Kurdistan)—and her personality gained complexity. Hence, she is now perceived as an important figure not only because of her aristocratic background but also through the prism of her difficult experience of life in exile. Her works were discovered in the twentieth century when the first collection of her poems was published by Yahya Marîfat (1925), followed by her chronicle (1946), the publication of which coincided with the establishment of the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Kurdistan (known also as the Mahabad Republic). At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, her life inspired male writers including Toşînê Reşîd (2010), Cemal Ahmedî Ayin (2005), Xosrow Caf (2018), and Eta Nehayî (2015), who turned her into a character in their novels and short stories.

The bust in Hewlêr had made the journey from Rojhelat, where it had been created by the Kurdish artist Hadî Ziaoddînî. He created another sculpture of Mestûre in his hometown, Sine. The Hewlêr bust was unveiled in 2005 during an international conference on Mestûre, while the statue in Sine (Sanandaj) could only be erected in 2011, after two years of negotiations between the artist, the Sine municipality, and the Iranian regime. The ruling ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran perceives women as second-class citizens compared to men, and the authorities were, therefore, very cautious about placing a statue of a woman in a public place. Ziaoddînî's public representations of Mestûre Ardalani indeed mark an important milestone in the history of her reception and heritagization. Not only was this the first statue of Mestûre created, but it also entered the public urban space of two important, historic Kurdish cities and drew attention to a female Kurdish intellectual. Images of the two sculptures were soon featured on the covers of books, CDs, and posters, published on both sides of the Iraqi-Iranian border and even in Bakur. Furthermore, the sculptures, especially that in Sine, were reproduced by Ziaoddînî and his assistants in miniature (50 cm), with approximately 1500 copies offered for sale and distributed in Rojhelat, Iran, Başûr, and Europe. Thus, Ziaoddînî's representation became inseparable from Mestûre's heritage. As stressed by many interlocutors in our study, it is hard today to imagine Mestûre any differently than the image created by Ziaoddînî.

The statue in Sine is located at the end of a green alley that leads to the manor of Xosrow Abad, which became Mestûre's home after she became the wife of the Ardalani ruler Xosrow Khan (1826). Currently an area for recreation, located not far from Mount Awyer (Abidar), the place is frequently visited by Sine inhabitants and tourists. It is also relatively close to

Sine's busy streets, and the area is generally considered one of the most desirable in the city, which was stressed by some interlocutors as an important factor. The statue of Mestûre was thus offered a prominent position, in contrast to a previously erected figure of a mother, located in a less desirable neighborhood. The Sine statue of Mestûre was appreciated by young Kurdish women artists for a number of reasons, as highlighted in the interviews. Şibin, a painter in Bane, said:

If you look at the statues in the cities you will understand the majority of them are men. In Bane, Saqez, Serdeşt. For example, Abubekir Pîran⁸ created a sculpture of a mother. It is a very nice sculpture. But I wished this sculpture of a mother was presenting a real Kurdish figure of a woman that we all know. (...) But the work by Kak⁹ Hadî Ziaoddîni is something very special. Creating such a sculpture of Mestûre Ardalan needed a lot of courage and strength.

Şibin perceived Ziaoddîni's work as resulting from courage and strength, but she refers here to a different type of courage than that represented in the folk stories—not a readiness to die but, rather, a will to live and to do something important in one's life, for example, creating a piece of art that offers something new to society: an image of a female Kurdish intellectual. The undertaking is not, however, devoid of risk in the political reality of Iran, where opponents of the Islamic regime are so often confronted with police brutality and violence, and the reference to courage is justified (see more on this topic in Chap. 11). Şibin's views were shared by many others who stressed that Ziaoddîni's achievement was to create a sculpture of a woman who managed to do something interesting with her life. Perwane, in Sine, highlighted a significant detail of the statue:

The book in her hand is very important to me. The strangers who come to the city, if they see the sculpture, can immediately understand that it is of an important woman. And they would understand in what field the woman is important. I think it is a perfect sculpture because the book in her hand shows the main field of this lady. Honestly, I like this sculpture because it emphasizes studying, reading books, and knowledge.

⁸ Abubekr Pîran is a Kurdish sculpturer from Rojhelat.

⁹ Literary "elder brother," a respectful way of addressing a man.

Her words emphasize Mestûre's intellectual potential and make her representative of other women willing to develop themselves, despite the obstacles imposed by the regime and conservative Kurdish society. Rana, the photographer in *Sine*, added:

I very much like the sculpture Hadî Ziaoddîni created in my city, on this street, in a place that used to be her home. It brings out a very nice feeling in me because it is a symbol that we women have existed. Yes, a woman can become a big symbol, a woman can be presented in the form of a sculpture, and you can see her magnificence. This is how proud you can feel. It creates a good feeling in me.

Rana's positive emotions and the pride evoked by the sculpture certainly refer to its grandeur: she admires the statue's magnificence. Yet, this splendor does not objectify Mestûre. It is not related to an ideology or the need to sacrifice one's life in a struggle, as is, for example, expressed in Öcalan's image of the goddess Ishtar. Instead, it indicates a mobilization inspired by the process of contemplating Ziaoddîni's work. The assertion ("Yes, a woman can become a big symbol") and the reference to Mestûre as a big symbol and appropriate subject of a sculpture seem to assure Rana that women can hold an equal position to men. Taking into account the many obstacles hampering the careers of women in Iran, the sense of greatness expressed in Rana's words seems to be directed at an inner mobilization. It appears that the encouraging women requires a strong and powerful incentive and leverage.

Çinar, a writer, stressed that women need a figurehead for the jobs and activities that they are occupied in as artists and activists. She explained that it helps her to imagine that "there were women who did it before me," one of them being Mestûre, who managed "to enter the world of men" (interview with Çinar, *Sine*, July 2022). This clearly shows that Kurdish heritage, even when from another era and sometimes described in grandiose terms, is not always distant from the public's emotional needs. On the contrary, in the case of Mestûre, who belonged to the relatively distant past, her modern sculpture by Ziaoddîni has constructed a certain intimacy, stirring mobilization and inner strength, especially for women. This form of empowerment certainly draws on the courage-based morality and spiritual strength that I discussed earlier in this chapter based on the Kurdish oral tradition and literature, but in a different way. In the Kurdish oral tradition, courage was represented as physical strength, military

struggle, or the readiness to die for a cause. In the early written poem *Mem û Zîn*, courage was understood as the spiritual strength behind forgiveness, and for my friend Nazîle, this forgiveness sometimes meant suffering silently within the house. For contemporary women, however, Mestûre's courage means being involved in public life, artistic activity, writing, and other occupations as a woman. Moreover, while in the earlier examples spiritual strength was evoked by the image of God, a promised paradise, or the abstract goddess Ishtar, in this case, it is evoked by a realistically imagined woman with a book, whose works we can read. Through the statue of Mestûre, women are called on to be brave and spiritually strong by using their intellectual and emotional potential, knowledge, and artistic skills, which are inseparable from the creative life, or *xulqênerî*, as stressed many times by women speaking Sorani Kurdish.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have investigated different representations of women in Kurdish cultural heritage. While suspending the patriarchal theory reading, I suggested that it would be useful to look at the Kurds as a *heroic society*, where the ruling principle was not simply the domination of men over women but, rather, the moral imperative of limitless courage directed at both sexes through oral narratives. By revealing a courage-based morality in the oral stories, I exposed the traditional model of women's promotion which, although radically different than today's equality discourse, offered some opportunities to women. This model was most probably unconsciously applied by Öcalan, who invited women to be endlessly brave and fight for their homeland. Many women responded positively to his call by joining the PKK guerrilla forces, which opened new ways for Kurdish women to reform the movement from within, with their own knowledge and ideas (Dirik, 2022; Käser, 2021). Thus, we can observe the visible impact of Kurdish heritage on today's women's actions and its successful reuse in the modern context of military and feminist struggles.

Reading Ehmedê Xanî's poem anew and focusing on important details of the storyline, we see Zîn, the female character, as more than Mem's beloved. She is an active person, equipped by the poet with special qualities. *Mem û Zîn* is a unique masterpiece of Islamic culture where God is called not only beloved (Maşûq) but also Aşiq (Lover), which implies an active role as a loving and forgiving, being capable of limitless love even toward enemies such as Satan (Bocheńska, 2016b). In this chapter, I

suggested that Zîn, the female character, had been assigned a special role by Xanî, namely to act with a God-like but human ability to love and forgive. She asks for forgiveness for her enemy, Bekir, who represents Satan in the storyline. I further related this interpretation to my conversation with an elderly woman from Bazîd with whom I had talked about this topic. Through these alternative interpretations, I challenged the feminist idea that women's submissiveness makes them tolerate violence in their families. The ability to love and forgive, as in Xanî's poem, was treated by many women as God-given strength, courage, and the wisdom to cope with everyday difficulties. Although this ability is portrayed by Xanî as an almost inhuman capacity, love and forgiveness should today be understood not as sources of weakness but, rather, of strength for women. While we can, today, refuse to accept the general premise of the poem, which locates human goals in the reunion with God in the afterlife, the storyline can still empower women coping with many emotional and moral challenges.

Finally, by revealing the modern heritage-making of the poet and chronicler Mestûre Ardalan, through a sculpture by the Kurdish artist Ziaoddînî which was installed in the public space of the city of Sine in Rojhelat, I was able to show a different approach to courage-based morality and spiritual strength. For Kurdish women artists in Sine, courage is directed neither at a reunion with God nor at military combat, but rather at life and the artistic endeavor which can bring change to society. This means that women undertake activities and professions that have until recently been seen as only for men. Rooted in the past, the image of Mestûre's bravery in embarking on intellectual and artistic activity in a world dominated by men enriches the Kurdish meaning of courage, creates an intimacy between the distant historical figure and contemporary women, and contributes to their growing self-confidence when struggling for their rights. Moreover, the grandeur that the Kurdish artists attribute to the sculpture does not detach them from Kurdish heritage. Rather, it serves to reassure the artists of their position as active citizens, even more empowered to struggle for their rights as women and as Kurds.

All the abovementioned examples of heritage testify to the richness of the representations of Kurdish women and to the many heritagization options that bridge the Kurdish past with the present. It is clear that rooting something in the past and imbuing it with a special value is not simply the result of essentialist and reductive ideologies. Quite often it is due to the inner needs of women who, struggling with constant challenges and

their own lack of self-confidence, employ such imagery and wording to empower themselves. Looking beyond nationalist and patriarchal perspectives enables us to see Kurdish heritage as a vast source of inspiration for women's empowerment and struggle for citizenship, which—equally importantly—also involves intimacy and moral imagination that can positively impact any political action.

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Language and Resistance: The Struggle of Kird/Zaza Women to Preserve Zazakî in the Kirdane and Kirmanciye Regions of Türkiye

Hüseyin Rodi Keskin

INTRODUCTION

Zaza women activists are working to establish new domains of language use and to encourage native speakers to converse and communicate in their native tongue, fostering language use across settings such as educational institutions, media platforms, cultural events, and community gatherings. Reviving the Zazakî language requires not only linguistic effort but also a broad engagement with the cultural heritage and values embedded within the language. Linguists stress that there are many reasons why we should protect the world's linguistic and cultural diversity against language loss caused by

This chapter builds on my MA research conducted in the scope of the ALCITfem project. While my thesis, *Cultural Initiatives for Language Revitalization Among Kird/Zaza Women in Turkish Kurdistan*, provides a broader analysis, this chapter focuses specifically on the motivations driving women's actions and the connections between these motivations and the forms of activism they inspire in the regions of Kirdane and Kirmanciye. Although there are some overlaps in data and analysis, this chapter offers a more in-depth exploration of the personal and collective motivations behind these cultural initiatives.

colonization, displacement, and the economic and political pressures exerted by states on local communities. The loss of a language is deeply intertwined with the loss of cultural knowledge, folklore, and traditional practices; when a community loses its language, it experiences a profound “erosion of its entire culture” (Fishman, 1996; Hinton, 2001). At the same time, language revitalization is an important attempt to protect languages at risk and to “reverse language shift” (Fishman, 1996). Language revitalization is part of a broader process of decolonization, cultural revival, and reclaiming the right to self-determination by “creating new speakers of the target language, building new domains for language use, and creating a future generation of speakers” (Grenoble, 2021, p. 9). Languages play a significant role in creating the social, spiritual, and cultural cues that contribute to the formation of cultural identity. One of the fundamental reasons for reviving a language is “to claim, or reclaim, identity and knowing the language as the single route to learning to be a member of the culture” (Grenoble, 2021, p. 12). According to Faye Ginsburg (2002), indigenous people have their own “collective stories and histories—some of them traumatic—that have been erased in the national narratives of the dominant culture and are in danger of being forgotten within local worlds as well” (2002, p. 40).

By encouraging the use of Zazakî and promoting its importance among the younger generation, Zaza activists are taking significant steps toward revitalizing the language and preserving the cultural identity of the Zaza community. The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to analyze the different motivations and practices of Zaza women. According to Mark Karan, motivations are crucial in the language choice decisions that impact language revitalization, and thus “motivational and attitudinal studies need to be part of the background research for any language development” (2008, p. 6). Many publications offer categorizations of the various types of individual and social motivation (Grenoble, 2021; Karan, 2008). In this study, I propose to see motivations as inspired by and related to particular types of action, such as speaking the Zazakî language and promoting its use through demonstrations, theater performances, collecting Zazakî folklore, writing literature in Zazakî, or producing television programs for children. This will allow us to see how the motivations for women to revitalize language intertwine with their other social goals, such as professional development and women’s emancipation. This study is based on interviews that I conducted and translated¹ in 2021 with women

¹I am a native speaker of Zazaki and Turkish, thus all the interviews were conducted and translated by me.

activists—11 Zaza and one Kurmanji—involved in the revitalization of Zazakî in Kirdane and Kirmancîye,² specifically in the provinces of Çewlîg/Bingöl, Amed/Diyarbakir, and Dersim/Tunceli. The efforts made by Zaza women to keep the Zazakî language and culture alive contribute significantly to the continuity of these and the transfer of their collective stories and histories to future generations, despite the oppressive policies imposed by the state of Türkiye.

Following Engin Isin, I suggest viewing the endeavors of the Zaza women activists as acts of citizenship that challenge the established norms of the state of Türkiye, particularly its denial of language rights for minorities. In the contemporary global landscape, marked by layered identities and conflicting loyalties, citizenship has become a dynamic and often contested phenomenon that transcends a mere legal status (2008, 2016). Perceived as acts of citizenship, the various undertakings of Zaza women aim to challenge the power structures of the state of Türkiye, assert their linguistic human rights, and advocate for both language preservation and women's rights. I also use Ginsburg's term "cultural activism" (2002) to highlight how Zaza women activists employ cultural and linguistic practices to assert themselves against power structures that have marginalized or distorted their interests and realities. Ginsburg describes cultural activism as a concept that emphasizes both political agency and cultural intervention, reflecting individuals' deliberate efforts in the late twentieth century to mediate and mobilize their culture. This perspective diverges from the nation-state's emphasis on the majority culture and language, focusing instead on the unique culture-making practices of minority groups (Ginsburg, 2002, p. 8; Hamelink, 2016, p. 288). Moreover, in this chapter, I explore how emotions tied to language loss and marginalization, along with a commitment to prevent them, drive Zaza women to imagine and actively embrace the use of Zazakî in both private and public domains. I present a perception of these actions as a nuanced combination of capabilities that assist Kurdish women to enhance their subjectivity as both Kurds and women (Bocheńska et al., 2023). I also follow certain feminist perspectives that stress the inclusivity of the citizenship concept by emphasizing lived experiences and practices of citizenship (Halsaa et al., 2011). The term "lived citizenship" is introduced specifically to address everyday practices, actions, experiences, and individual perceptions, rather than focusing solely on legal status or a formalized approach (Kallio et al., 2015). In the context of Kurdish women, the

² *Kirdane* is used by Sunni Zazas to define their land and country, while *Kirmancîye* is used by Kizilbash/Alevi Zazas to refer to the land and country they live in.

marginalization of Kurmanji and Zaza women in mainstream politics and society has given rise to numerous initiatives that can be characterized as lived citizenship and which offer alternatives to state institutions.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ACTIVISM OF ZAZA WOMEN

The history of assimilation in Türkiye is woven into the nation's evolution from the end of the Ottoman Empire to the formation of the Republic of Türkiye. In the early twentieth century, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk oversaw a determined effort to create a homogenous nation-state, with policies aimed at assimilating diverse ethnic and cultural groups. The Lausanne Treaty of 1923 recognized non-Muslim minorities and their language rights, but Muslim communities such as the Kurds were entirely denied their identity and linguistic rights. Türkiye's assimilation efforts intensified in the early years of the Republic, and Turkification policies were enforced through education, language bans, and forced migrations. The most brutal example of this policy was the Dersim genocide,³ which targeted the Kurdish Alevi community.⁴ Despite recent initiatives to address linguistic and cultural rights, challenges persist, and the collapse of the peace process in 2015 further undermined cultural initiatives, leaving minority languages and cultures in danger of extinction.

Both historical and contemporary assimilation policies have ultimately resulted in the marginalization and endangerment of the Zazakî language. In order to prevent the Zazakî-speaking population from using their native language, the later Ottoman rulers and then the state of Türkiye allowed only a certain percentage of the Zaza-speaking population to reside in Zaza cities. The seventeenth article of the Eastern Reform Plan contains the following provision: "Speaking Kurdish by Kurds who have settled in a scattered way in our western provinces of Euphrates should be banned immediately, and girls' schools should be given importance to ensure that

³ 1937–1938, known as Tertelê in Kirmanckî.

⁴ In 1937 and 1938, the Turkish Armed Forces carried out three operations against the Dersim region, targeting civilians and resulting in the Dersim massacre. This military action led to the loss of thousands of Kurdish (Kirmanckî, Kurmanjî) lives and the displacement of numerous others. The primary victims of the Turkish military campaign were the majority Kirmanckî/Zazakî and minority Kurmanjî-speaking Alevi-Kizilbash Kurdish population of the region, along with the remaining Armenian population (Van Bruinessen, 1994; Deniz, 2020; Strasser & Akçınar, 2017; Törne, 2015). This event played a crucial role in shaping the Zaza Kurdish identity.

women speak Turkish” (Bayrak, 2009). In traditional Zaza families, mothers spend time with their children from when their children are very young; it is the mother who enables the child to gain language competence and helps them learn the customs and traditions of their community. Mothers—and the future generation—have thus become a key target in Turkification policies. According to Güntaş, the particular emphasis on women indicates that the role played by women in the transfer of identity and culture through language was well-known by its planners, and the primary purpose of regional boarding schools was to assimilate Kurdish (Zaza, Kurmanji) girls through education. Of the 55 boarding schools opened by the state between 1962 and 1973, 50 were in the Kurdish provinces (Avar, 2004). Assimilation policies were enforced through violence in these schools and aimed to transform the girls into Turkish-speaking citizens (Avar, 2004; Güntaş, 2004, p. 86).

Historically, Dersim has seen instances of women assuming leadership and warrior roles. Upon the death of the chief of the Ferhadan tribe, Keko Aga, between 1909 and 1910 in Dersim, his wife Daye Khanim served as a tribal chief for 30 years (Dersimi, 1952, p. 19). The wife of Alişer, Zarife Khanim, was politically active and fought against the Turkish army alongside her husband during the Dersim massacres in 1937. Zarife Khanim, who demonstrated her bravery when fighting in Koçgiri in 1921 and in Dersim in 1937, became a symbol for contemporary female guerrillas. However, it is crucial to note that these women operated within a patriarchal society based on an understanding of honor that was deeply rooted in physical strength and courage and thus associated with masculinity. Courage held political significance in Kurdish society, forming the basis for alliances. Women’s honor, on the other hand, was tied to chastity and family reputation. However, by showing bravery, a woman could elevate her significance and even become a leader in her community. Yet such figures can hardly be seen as proof of women’s emancipation. These women were respected and appointed as leaders because they adhered to traditional principles of bravery, and their representation in folklore often emphasized their courage (Bocheńska, 2018a; see also Chap. 6 in this volume).

Zaza women’s activism in Türkiye dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, when Kurdish left-wing activists distanced themselves from Turkish left-wing politics, giving rise to the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkish Kurdistan (Yüksel, 2006, p. 780). The Turkish left’s neglect of the Kurdish case prompted a more autonomous position among Kurdish activists, including Zaza women, who sought assertively to advocate for Kurdish rights. In the multi-party era of the 1970s and 1980s, independent women’s organizations

such as the Revolutionary Democratic Women's Association (DDKAD) were established and fought for women's rights and education, arranging theater performances in Zazakî and Kurmanji (Alış, 2017, pp. 209–210). The PKK, formed in 1978, included key Zaza women such as Kesire Yıldırım and Sakine Cansız. While their military engagement challenged traditional gender norms, it is crucial to recognize the broader contributions of Zaza women, such as preserving cultural heritage through literature, theater, and music, and participating in associations to advocate for community rights. An understanding of the multifaceted nature of Zaza women's activism goes beyond military engagement, shedding light on their diverse efforts to safeguard language, culture, and rights.

ENACTING LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION BY ZAZA WOMEN: MOTIVATIONS AND FORMS OF ACTION

The interviews conducted demonstrate diverse motivations behind Zaza/Kurd women's efforts to revitalize language and culture and show that they are closely related to different forms of activism. By discovering some form of action, women often felt empowered to struggle for their language, which is why these two aspects are treated as intertwined in this chapter, enabling a deeper understanding of women's intentions and aspirations. This focus enables a nuanced analysis of the sociocultural dynamics and collective goals driving these initiatives and contributes to the creation of a comprehensive perspective on their preservation endeavors. The interviews, conducted anonymously due to the political sensitivity of the topic, cover themes such as identity, the usage of Zazakî language, cultural activism, and a sense of citizenship and belonging.

A principal motivation for Zaza activists was the UNESCO report that defined Zazakî as an endangered language. This classification had a profound influence on the Zaza community, leading to numerous new initiatives among activists (Bocheńska & Ghaderi, 2023, p. 354) and prompting many individuals to disseminate this knowledge widely, often through means such as public demonstrations.

Bedriye became interested in the Zazakî language while studying in Ankara in 2010. She decided to participate in one of the Zazakî courses organized at the time of the peace process. It was her first experience of learning her native tongue, and she describes it as follows:

I started participating in a Zazakî language course in Ankara in 2010. In that course, I became aware of my language and culture, and I realized that I

could only have my Kurdish identity with my own language. In the course, our teacher told us that according to the UNESCO report, our language would disappear, which made me very uncomfortable. I realized that I used to introduce myself as a Kurd, but I was not a Kurd. If I do not speak my own language, I am not Kurdish; how can I leave my own language, follow another path, and still say I am Kurdish?

For her, not being able to speak Kurdish (Kirmanckî) meant not being part of the Kurdish community; this confirms that indigenous languages are key to feeling part of a community (Grenoble, 2021). The fact that the new generation does not know the Zazakî language makes them an easy target for Türkiye's assimilation policies. Young Zaza activists like Bedriye are breaking the circle of assimilation. They aim to reverse it by addressing the lack of awareness or understanding of their language. Bedriye learned Zazakî and decided to speak it; in this way, she "talked back" to the Turkish structures of power that tried to annihilate her native language. Kurdish language courses—even if limited and with many shortcomings—encouraged her to speak Zazakî and use it within the community.

Havin, another female Zaza activist, explained her feelings and motivation for participating in language activities:

The disappearance of the Zazakî language affected me, so I wanted to contribute to my own language. On the day of the Bingölians, the Şehri Bingöl Theater group was performing, and for the first time I saw that there was theater in the Zazakî language, and it inspired me a lot. I was impressed that people were striving for a language that was on the verge of extinction. I can even say that I was ashamed, "How did I become such a stranger to my own language and culture?" After that, I started to take part in Zazakî theater.

We can understand from the above quotation that, for the indigenous person who desires to do something to reverse the loss of their language, artistic activities such as theater performances can offer a possible means of engagement. The Zazakî language and culture have been seen as symbols of backwardness by the state of Türkiye and Turkish media for many years, but the use of the Zazakî language in the arts had a positive effect on local people's perspectives on their language. Havin, like many other Kurds, did not prioritize her native tongue, probably because she had internalized the view of Kurdish culture and language as "backward," and saw it only as a language for home and family conversations. However, her encounter with actors speaking her native tongue made her realize that it can also be a language of art, literature, and modern culture, and when she saw others

performing in Zazakî, she realized that she was alienated from her own language and culture. Thus, we see that “language loss is essentially an issue related to the relationship between language and culture” (Fishman, 1996). Her inability to speak her native tongue caused her to feel ashamed, but at the same time, this shame impacted her positively.

Keje is a key example of an activist who participated in a local event to support her native tongue and encourage other Zazas, especially the younger generation, to use and speak their native tongue in their daily life without fear and shame.

We organized an event in the Dara Heni/Genç district of Çewlîg/Bingöl province. We printed the slogan *Ziwanê xo binus, qisey bik, binus* (Learn, speak and write your native tongue) in Zazakî on t-shirts, which we wore during the event, and did not take them off until the end. With this event, we were trying to raise awareness among the younger generation to speak their native tongue. During [the event], we did not speak Turkish with the local people, and among ourselves, we only communicated in Zazakî. The new generation is ashamed to speak the Zazakî language. Our main goal in this event was to enable the younger generation to speak their native tongue in public without shame. Why should they be ashamed to speak their native language? Do they feel embarrassed when they are speaking in English?

The younger generation is not accustomed to hearing Zazakî in their daily life, on television, or at school. These performances claimed a space for Zazakî in public life and, at the same time, highlighted awareness that the language was endangered. The activists aimed to increase people’s interest in their native tongue and enable them to speak it without fear, hesitation, or shame (Bennett, 2020). In the Turkish media and politics, the Kurdish language has consistently been associated with terrorism and perceived as culturally backward. Turkish films portray the Kurds as wild and ignorant peasants or mountain people, dehumanizing them (Bocheńska, 2018b; Marilungo, 2016). Even with some degree of relaxation of state prohibitions in the 2000s, many Zazakî speakers remained hesitant to use their language openly, as reflected in the above quotations from Havin and Keje. Havin expressed the amazement she felt on observing endeavors to safeguard a language on the brink of extinction, and this led her to contemplate her disconnection from her language and culture. This realization motivated her to actively participate in Zazakî theater. Keje, for her part, underscored the sense of shame experienced by the younger generation when speaking Zazakî, emphasizing the overarching objective of empowering young people to express themselves confidently in their

native tongue in public settings. Educated Zaza activists such as Havin and Keje are cognizant of the prevailing negative perception surrounding their native tongue, and their objective is to challenge and overturn it, fostering a sense of confidence among Zaza youth to speak without fear and shame. When people see others “striving for a language,” they are “impressed” by their actions and, in this way, sensations of loss and shame are transformed into hope and mobilization.

Other modern forms of action that can inspire motivation include the Internet and television, which enable easy access to information—considered very important for minority languages—and offer indigenous people a “new means of self-representation” (Prins, 2002, p. 72). Since minority languages have often been excluded from mainstream national media, the Internet today offers an alternative space for local community activists to teach and run other activities in their native languages. Bêrivan, who dubs cartoons into Zazakî on the Kurdish cartoon channel Zarok TV,⁵ described her work as follows:

Nowadays, everyone is very busy with the Internet and television. Children watch television daily; the Internet and television have a significant impact on them. In the past, there has never been a Zazakî television program for children, so what I do now is very important. Currently, there are many cartoons in the Kurmanji language, and we would like to have cartoons in our language too so that our children can find something to watch in their native tongue. Our job is tough, but our aim is significant; we do not want our native tongue to disappear, and we are fighting for our own language so that our children can learn their native tongue.

Zarok TV, Türkiye’s first private Kurdish children’s channel, launched in 2015, broadcasts in Kurmanji, Sorani, and Zazakî. Despite facing challenges, including a temporary closure in 2016, the channel continues its mission. Bêrivan perceives her tasks as “significant,” indicating the strength of her motivation to do her job. She also emphasized the need for more support for the Zazakî language, which receives limited airtime compared to Kurmanji. The Internet and television provide opportunities for language revitalization, and activists like Bêrivan view them as crucial tools for preserving native languages and use them to promote programs in Zazakî. Despite popular concern about the potential negative effects of digital media on children, the emergence of platforms such as Zarok TV is perceived as positive by minority communities such as the Zaza because it

⁵Zarok means “child” in Kurmanji Kurdish.

increases the public accessibility of Zazakî and the modern content expressed in it. Moreover, it offers an alternative space for the implementation of indigenous language policies, free from state intervention.

Helin, who teaches Zazakî at Bingöl University, continues her Zazakî studies as a folklore collector. She is an activist who grew up with her grandmother's fairy tales, indicating the motivation of memories and cultural heritage. Therefore, she strives to preserve Zaza folklore and pass it on to future generations:

I focus on academic studies, and I teach Zazakî at Bingöl University. We, the teachers of the Zazakî language department of Bingöl University, are preparing Zazakî textbooks for the fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade students. We have published four Zaza folklore books on behalf of the Zazakî language department, and the materials in these books were collected by our own students from Zaza villages. Mainly, I am working on Zaza folklore. I aim to protect my language, culture, and especially my folklore.

Established in 2013, Bingöl University is the third university in Türkiye—following Mardin Artuklu University (2009) and Munzur University (2013)—to offer an undergraduate program in Zazakî language and literature. Despite the challenging political context, Zaza academics have designed a curriculum, and each year they create Zazakî teaching materials for primary and middle-grade students in book and digital formats. While neither Kurmanji nor Zazakî has official status, the state's cooperation is acknowledged, although this may change at any time. Helin, a folklore lecturer, actively engages her students in fieldwork to document Zazakî tales, stories, folk songs, traditions, and customs from rural Zaza areas. Compiling this folklore into a book aims to prevent the extinction of Zaza folklore and the Zazakî language by incorporating it into contemporary teaching materials that can be used in the future (Bocheńska & Ghaderi, 2023; Bocheńska et al., 2023).

Another motivation involves Zaza folklore and childhood immersion in songs and fairy tales related to the traumatic memory of the 1937–1938 Dersim genocide. Zelal highlighted the impact of Kirmanckî *kilams*—songs about Dersim—in motivating her to explore the study and use of her native language. She describes her journey as follows:

I graduated from the Zazakî Language and Literature Department at Munzur University. For my BA essay, I worked on Zazakî folk songs by Silo

Qiz.⁶ Currently, I am collecting folklore stories, tales, and poems. My inspiration from my early childhood is our *kilams*⁷/folk songs, and I have always been influenced by Silo Qiz. He has many *kilams* related to the Dersim genocide in 1938, and we, the children of Dersim, grew up with stories and *kilams* about the genocide.

Many young people, including Zelal, have grown up amidst harrowing stories of genocide. Therefore, Zelal is dedicated not only to preserving folklore and language but also to passing on collective memories of the Dersim genocide. The 1938 genocide had been “erased” from Turkish national narratives and was “in danger of being forgotten” by the Zaza people (Ginsburg, 2002, p. 40). Zelal’s goal is to document and transcribe the songs and poems of the Zazakî folk singer Silo Qiz, who witnessed the genocide. She strives to ensure that the stories are kept alive and widely known. Viewing folklore as a crucial cultural and historical repository, Zelal sees the Zazakî language as a tool to resist the official Turkish historiography. Many similar initiatives, focused on oral history and tragic events from the past, are found among other Kurdish folklore collectors (Schäffers, 2019). An unemployed Zazakî teacher, Zelal remains dedicated to her work on Zazakî folklore, engaging in cultural and linguistic activities in her town with unwavering determination. A memorial to the Dersim genocide in Türkiye remains a central theme in her efforts to preserve the Zaza collective memory.

LANGUAGE AND WOMANHOOD

The majority of women activists identified saving the language as the main aim of their actions. However, it became apparent that revitalizing the native tongue could also offer a feminist set of inspirations. It constituted an alternative space for women to better express their feelings and reconsider their lives as women. The best example is found in the interview with the writer Bedriye:

Language opened a way for me to exist. In my literature, I shout about the things I endure in my daily life or about how I see people. Every day I am

⁶Silo Qiz (1914–2019) is one of the witnesses of the 1938 Dersim Massacre, according to his own account. He learned to play the violin from his father when he was five years old and transferred the people’s pain and joy into improvised *dengbêj* music, often performed at village weddings and funerals.

⁷Zazakî folk/dengbêj songs.

becoming better at it, and I can see it in my books and poems. The more I read and write in my native language, the more I improve myself. The language is my teacher, and it opens my way to exist. Sometimes I forget that I am a woman, but every time I start writing, I recall my womanhood and I feel that I am a woman again.

For her, her native tongue is not just a spoken language but a medium to communicate with others or express frustration. It also offers an aesthetic and ethical potential, a safe space, that enables Bedriye to enjoy living in the world as a woman. Using their native tongue in writing literature, women believed they strengthened their sense of self by acting as transformative agents and creating books that countered the erasure of women's and Kurdish voices and histories (Bocheńska et al., 2023).

Gule also associated speaking her native language with womanhood and women's freedom:

Everyone learns their native tongue at home, and children learn their native language from their mothers. In my opinion, language, womanhood, and women's freedom are inseparable.

Furthermore, Zaza women activists recognize the crucial role of the native tongue in daily life and its influence on worldviews. They focus on women to prevent language shift, and they expand Zazakî activities, linking language revitalization to women's rights. By actively contributing to the revival of their native language and culture, Zaza women also advance their own rights because their cultural activism increases their visibility and commands respect in their community. Additionally, the women's knowledge of their native tongue brings them valuable indigenous knowledge and skills, which are essential for decolonizing knowledge and thus for raising trust in indigenous cultures (Hassan, 2015, p. 9; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Female Zaza activists view women as key to the revival of language, which also prompts endeavors for women's emancipation and liberation.

PROBLEMATIC CITIZENSHIP AND THE MAIN CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN'S ACTIONS

Engin Isin asserts that citizenship reaches beyond legal status and encompasses dynamic phenomena in a globalizing world. Acts of citizenship aim to challenge the legal and institutional order of existing states and can be performed as part of everyday activities (2008, 2016). The Zaza women's efforts can be called acts of citizenship because the women strive to

challenge the Turkish power structure and assert their linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Philipson, 2022). As shown above, the interviews highlight the pivotal role of Zaza women in language preservation. Their activism contradicts traditional gender roles in Kurdish society, showing women's engagement based on knowledge and skills beyond purely domestic roles (Bocheńska et al., 2023; Grenoble, 2021; Skutnabb-Kangas & Philipson, 2022). This section sheds light on the problematic sense of citizenship as understood by Zaza women. Many reject Turkish identity and do not perceive themselves as fully fledged citizens of Türkiye, principally because the state does not recognize their right to language, culture, and identity. Gulçin admits:

You need to have equal rights to feel like a citizen of a country. Turkish education is free for Turks; there is no language pressure in their lives, but I am Zaza Kurdish and cannot receive an education in my native language. How can I feel as a Turkish citizen when our villages were burned down, and when we were forced to migrate from our motherland?

Zaza activists, including Gulçin, firmly oppose Turkish citizenship, pointing to ongoing disparities in fundamental human rights, particularly that no education is offered in their native language and that restrictions are imposed on its use in public. They highlight Türkiye's aggressive policies toward the Kurds, both historically—particularly during the 1980s and 1990s, which resulted in widespread forced displacement—and today. The enduring trauma and resentment within the Kurdish community stem from this forced historical and contemporary migration and state violence. The historical and continuing political, linguistic, and cultural oppression by the state of Türkiye significantly impacts its Kurdish citizens, who often feel marginalized and not fully integrated into the current state system due to past and present policies that suppress their rights and undermine their cultural identity. The wounds inflicted by this oppression continue to shape the experiences and perspectives of Kurdish citizens regarding their place within the state system.

Hazal does not feel like a Turkish citizen but believes that she has been forced to become one, even though she wants to be able to feel “Kurdish”:

I do not feel like a Turkish citizen, but I am forced to feel it; it is Kurdishness that I have adopted and live by, and naturally, I would like to be a Kurdish citizen. I have been working on Kurdish languages (Zazakî, Kurmanji) and culture for years; a woman who struggles for her native language and culture does not feel like a Turkish citizen.

She states that she does not feel like a Turkish citizen because she is engaged in the struggle to speak her native tongue and to participate in Zaza culture. In other words, she has adopted the cultural identity she has chosen for herself. Moreover, because a Kurdish identity is not recognized in Türkiye, many Kurdish people are forced to be Turkish citizens, which they find dissatisfying. In contrast to other interlocutors, Aysel commented that she has not been oppressed regarding her language or culture:

I feel like a Turkish citizen because I live in this region, in Türkiye. Yes, I am a Kurd, but when I live in this region, I have no trouble expressing myself, speaking my native language, doing activities in my native tongue, there is no pressure on us.

Aysel remains indifferent to the Turkish policy of assimilation and the oppression that accompanies it, asserting that she is able to use her native language in daily life and education without problems. However, it is not uncommon for Kurds who identify as Turkish citizens either to conceal their Kurdish identity or to perceive it as secondary. This attitude is largely influenced by a long-standing negative portrayal of the Kurdish language, identity, and culture by the state of Türkiye and its media. In Türkiye, the notion of being a good citizen is strongly linked to a sense of contentment at being Turkish, as reflected in the ubiquitous slogan *Ne mutlu Türk'üm diyene* (“How happy is the one who says, ‘I am a Turk’”), prominently displayed even on the slopes of Kurdish mountains. Consequently, the Kurdish identity is often suppressed, as it deviates from the state-imposed image of an ideal “Turkish” citizen.

Interestingly, Havin states that being a Zaza citizen (*hemwelatîyê Zazayan/Zaza vatandaşı*) has a different meaning for her than being a Kurdish citizen:

I would like to be a Zaza citizen, not a Kurdish one. I have always verbally said that I am Zaza, but it would mean something different to me if it was written on my ID. I cannot say I am Turkish or Kurdish, I am Zaza, and I would like to have a chance to prove it in an official document.

In Türkiye, the term “Kurdish” is predominantly associated with the Kurmanji dialect, culture, and identity, leading many Zazas to distance themselves from this classification. The Kurdish political movement, which primarily centers on Kurmanji Kurdish, tends to prioritize and support Kurmanji, leaving the Zazaki language and culture without sufficient support. This lack of acknowledgment within the Kurdish

political movement has resulted in many Zazas feeling marginalized and excluded from the broader Kurdish mainstream. In response, some Zazas emphasize their distinctiveness, not seeking recognition as a separate entity but rather as an integral and unique ethnic group within the wider Kurdish community.

Local activists in Türkiye, in Kirdane and Kirmançîye, particularly those advocating for the Zazakî language and culture, face challenges due to limited support from NGOs, local authorities, political parties, and the state. Hazal is an activist in Çewlîg/Bingöl province and encountered difficulties with the local municipality, governed by the AKP, which initially wanted to control theater performances:

The Şehr-i Bingöl Theater Group, collaborating with the local municipality, faced challenges in obtaining approval for our plays. Before the performances, we had to submit the script, particularly if it was in Zazakî and Kurmanji. The municipality initially approached these scripts with concern, citing political sympathies and occasionally rejecting them. However, as it came to recognize the non-political focus on language and culture, the obstacles diminished, reflecting a shift in attitude toward the group's objectives.

This shows that even the position of the ruling party, which is generally perceived by the Kurds as oppressive, may evolve. On the other hand, an absence of support from the Kurdish opposition People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi/HDP(BDP)) for the Zazakî language was also frequently cited, leading some Zaza activists to distance themselves from the Kurdish movement. Gulçin criticized the language discrimination of the Amed/Diyarbakir municipality, expressing concern about the limited backing for Zazakî and emphasizing the disconnect between Zaza activists and the broader Kurdish political movement:

In the municipality of Amed, they carry out their academic and cultural activities in Kurmanji, and their activities in Zazakî are negligible. We always say that the Zazakî language is in danger of extinction and should be supported more.

Another Zaza activist, Bedriye, complained about the Dersim municipality:

The Kurdish community and the municipality of Dersim still do not understand the struggle we are involved in for our own language. The politicians do not understand language issues: they want people to gather around them but do not care what language these people speak. Several times, I asked the

municipality of Dersim for help in publishing a local newspaper in Zazakî or support for the Zazakî language, but their response was always negative. They are unaware of the plight of the Zazakî language, or do not want to understand it.

The challenges of conducting activities in indigenous languages in Türkiye are evident, with state and local administrations displaying ignorance or skepticism toward non-Turkish languages. This skepticism hampers the creativity of activists and their willingness to engage in future projects. The city of Dersim is governed by Türkiye's first and only communist mayor and party.⁸ Despite the party's success, during its term in office, the Dersim municipality did not sufficiently support Zazakî, causing reactions from local activists.

Interestingly, there is an acknowledgment that even political opponents like the AKP may gradually shift their stance over time, presenting fewer obstacles to Zazakî language and cultural activities. This is particularly noticeable in Çewlîg, where the AKP has greater influence than the HDP. However, the pro-Kurdish HDP faces criticism for what is seen as a narrow perception of Kurdish artistic engagement. The lack of Kurdish language proficiency among some HDP members contributes to a lesser emphasis on language revitalization within Kurdish politics. Meanwhile, the Diyarbakir municipality's prioritization of and financial support for Kurmanji language initiatives has forced Zaza activists to carry out their activities independently without sufficient backing. Both the local authorities and the Kurdish politicians have an overarching focus on political agendas, rather than language and culture, and this adversely affects Zazakî revival campaigns.

The lack of cooperation among Zaza women activists was also identified as a challenge. Curiously, however, beside the Zaza activists, some Kurmanjis have also taken on the struggle for the revitalization of Zazakî. Hazal joined the Bingöl City Theater Group (Şehri Bingöl Tiyatro Topluluğu) in 2009. It was the first Zazakî theater group in the Çewlîg/Bingöl province. She acted in various Zazakî plays over six years because she perceives Zazakî as more vulnerable than Kurmanji:

⁸Fatih Mehmet Maçoğlu (also known as "The Communist Mayor") is a Kirmanc communist politician and founder of the Socialist Councils Federation (Sosyalist Meclisler Federasyonu/SMF). In the local elections in 2019, he was elected mayor of Dersim/Tunceli, representing the Communist Party of Türkiye (Türkiye Komünist Partisi/TKP).

In general, I can say that I live by feeling and absorbing the Kurdish identity, yet I do not identify as either a Zaza or Kurmanji; I am Kurdish, so I can say that I am both Zaza and Kurmanji. Therefore, I embrace it like this, so everything in the Kurdish language and culture is part of my essence. Currently, all our theater plays are played in Zazakî, and we consciously create our plays in Zazakî; it may be in Kurmanji too, but Kurmanji is a language that is already supported, and people actively speak it, so with our art, we are trying to keep alive a language that is on the verge of extinction.

Hazal is a compelling example, choosing to advocate for the Zazakî dialect that is more vulnerable than her native tongue, Kurmanji. Despite belonging to a different community—she is an Alevi Kurd in a town mostly composed of Sunni Zaza—she finds purpose in promoting Zazakî. Hazal challenges the prevailing belief, perpetuated by the Turkish education system and many citizens, that only Turkish can facilitate modern life, emphasizing the importance of linguistic and cultural diversity.

The challenges outline a very complex reality and the impact of speaking Zazakî on a sense of citizenship. While Zazakî offers an alternative to Türkiye's policy of assimilation, it does not seamlessly align with the current Kurdish policy, which tends to marginalize it. These complexities underscore the multifaceted nature of the linguistic and cultural dynamics shaping a sense of citizenship within the broader political landscape.

CONCLUSION

This chapter explores the multifaceted practices of Zaza women in Kirdane and Kirmancîye (Türkiye), focusing on their efforts to preserve the Zazakî language and cultural identity in the face of historical and contemporary assimilation policies. Through interviews with Zaza and Kurmanji women activists conducted in 2021, the study reveals the pivotal role played by Zaza women in revitalizing their language through various means, including demonstrations, theater performances, literature, children's broadcasts, and the collection of folklore. By challenging the Turkish state's oppressive policies and advocating for linguistic human rights, Zaza women act as citizens who defy the status quo. The interplay of emotions tied to language loss, marginalization, and a commitment to preventing it drives these women to actively embrace the use of the Zazakî language in both the private and public domains. The actions they observe—and subsequently undertake and develop—stir their imagination and create the motivation to reverse the language shift. The advanced assimilation and

the endangered status of Zazakî underscore the urgency of their endeavors. The contributions of Zaza women transcend military and guerrilla engagement to encompass a broader spectrum of initiatives aimed at safeguarding their cultural heritage and community rights. In navigating the complex landscape of global citizenship and lived experiences, Zaza women emerge as resilient agents striving to ensure the continuity of their language and cultural legacy despite challenges and adversity.

This exploration of the multifaceted activism of Zaza women reveals a rich tapestry of efforts to challenge historical power structures that have suppressed their linguistic and cultural rights. Through interviews covering themes of identity, language usage, activism, and citizenship, this study sheds light on the motivations that drive these women toward specific actions. From educational initiatives to folklore preservation, theater performances, television broadcasting, and literary contributions, Zaza women activists display a collective commitment to revitalizing the endangered Zazakî language and safeguarding their cultural heritage. The challenges they face reflect the broader political and societal dynamics impacting their endeavors. The activists contribute to language revitalization, challenging the negative perceptions surrounding their native tongue. Their collective efforts represent a resilient response to the assimilation policies of Türkiye as they strive to empower the younger generation to embrace their native language without fear. Overall, Zaza women's activism not only represents a struggle against language loss but is also a broader assertion of cultural and gender identity, challenging historical marginalization and contributing to a more inclusive understanding of citizenship.

In viewing the endeavors of Zaza women activists through Engin Isin's lens, I see their courageous acts as expressions of citizenship, bravely challenging Türkiye's status quo, especially its neglect of language and cultural rights for minoritized people. Within today's complex global landscape of diverse identities and competing loyalties, these women's efforts embody a deeply human pursuit, a desire to assert their linguistic and gender rights while preserving their cultural heritage. The narratives provide nuanced perspectives on their sense of citizenship, reflecting the complex relationship between Kurdish identity, cultural rights, and national belonging in Türkiye. While some express a desire for Kurdish citizenship, aligned with their linguistic and cultural identity, others navigate a more pragmatic coexistence within the framework of Turkish citizenship. The challenges faced by Zaza activists, including those posed by local authorities, political parties, and the state, highlight the multifaceted struggle inherent in linguistic and cultural preservation. Moreover, divergent approaches within

the Kurdish political landscape, where Zaza activists often find themselves marginalized, underscore the need for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of citizenship that embraces linguistic diversity and cultural richness. The intricate interplay of language, identity, and citizenship among Zaza women activists exemplifies a broader call for recognition, representation, and the safeguarding of indigenous languages within the complex sociopolitical tapestry of Türkiye.

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PART IV

Negotiations of Citizenship



CHAPTER 8

The Lion Who Did Not Want to Be a Hero: On the Simple Act of Living a Life

Nerina Weiss

The experience may be like that of being in a closed room with the windows shut against the “world” others are seeing and accepting. It is probably a limited world with enclosed and labelled spaces, with arrows pointing in directions people are expected to move into. [...] But, unexpectedly, another window may open, and there may be a glimpse of a world in which things can actually be “otherwise.” The observer may suddenly feel “a passion for the possible,” one description of imagination—breaking through limits and boundaries. (Greene, 2005, pp. 78–79)

Sometimes I look back at my life and wonder. If I had had another possibility, I would not have chosen war. Who would choose war and death to find freedom, if she could choose life?—Jihan, November 2020

Şêr şêr e, çi jin çi mêr e. A lion is a lion whether it is female or male.

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INTRODUCTION

During one of many conversations I had with Jihan while she was visiting her family in a small village in Bakur (Turkish Kurdistan), she narrated the events of the previous day. She was still shaken and expressed deep sadness but also a sense of empowerment in telling of her confrontation with her sister's husband:

Sevda's husband had been involved with another woman. He pressured my sister to accept that woman as his second wife, but she refused. One night, he called us. When I answered the phone, he said: "Come and get this bitch of a little sister of yours and bring her home." "Ah," I answered. "So, the dog has run after other bitches, has he?" I told him that I would not get my sister so that he could install that other woman in her home. He cursed and got into a frenzy over my insults and refusal. I returned the insults. "Shut up, or I will come and kill you," he screamed through the phone. I laughed. "Ah, my friend, is this really what you want? Come and try, if you dare! I have so many years of war behind me. I know how to kill a man and I *have* killed a man. Do not tempt me." That shut him up, quite nicely.

I woke my brothers and their sons, and the same night we went to Sevda's home. Sevda sat outside. He had beaten her and then evicted her from their house. We were all in shock. Apparently, it was not the first time but she had not told us, afraid that her marital troubles would lead to conflict and violence between the families. I felt my stomach clench. I was not the old Jihan anymore. I had changed too much. "Enough," I said. I went inside and sat down in front of that dog of a husband. I sat my sister next to me and confronted that man. "I will take my sister home. But know that I will sue you, that I will take everything you own from you, the children as well." I told him how worthless he was. "Look at her," I told him, pointing at Sevda. "She is younger than me and looks decades older. What kind of animal are you to treat her that badly?" I turned to Sevda and asked her to get her shoes and leave. At that point, her husband changed his mind. I guess he was scared that I would be true to my word. He did not want to accept that Sevda should leave. "Beg her to stay. Let all your family beg her for forgiveness!" I told him. "None of us will decide over Sevda. Whether she stays or leaves with us, is her decision only." (Jihan, Summer 2017)

Can the simple act of living a life be an act of citizenship? And how may we understand the transforming power of that act of living?

The short answer to the first question is provided by Engin Isin (2008), who argued that “to recognize certain acts as acts of citizenship requires the demonstration that these acts produce subjects as citizens.” That is, living that life means constituting oneself (and others) as someone “with the right to claim rights.” Whether a lived life can be regarded as an act of citizenship will thus depend on a person’s hopes and dreams, her claims on society, and demands from her intimate relations. It may depend on the ethical dilemmas she encounters (Plummer, 2001, p. 248) and the choices she takes to resolve them.

I have taken seriously Plummer’s call to provide “the grounded day-to-day stories of new ways of living, which reveal how people confront ethical dilemmas and deal with them practically” (Plummer, 2001, p. 248). I therefore base the following discussions on the life trajectory of one woman—that of Jihan, a middle-aged Kurd from Bakur. She is a woman full of contradictions and complexities. She had read Jean-Paul Sartre before she learned the basics of mathematics. She enjoyed society’s recognition and respect as a guerilla fighter of the Kurdish Workers’ Party PKK and cadre but never wanted to be a hero. She has fought and fallen from grace (Weiss, 2010). She came of age deeply engrained in the armed struggle of the PKK and later broke ties with it. Although she has turned her back on political activism, she has never ceased to honor the values she embodied as a guerilla fighter. Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, has described these as “honesty, dedication, self-criticism, loyalty, and the preparedness to dedicate her life and death to the struggle, freedom, humanity, and people” (Käser, 2019, p. 18). Jihan’s struggle is no longer that of the PKK, nor is her loyalty bound to the Kurdish nationalist movement, but she is still willing to dedicate her life to the struggle for freedom and the well-being of herself and those around her. In other words, Jihan’s story so beautifully exemplifies the complexities of a life whose trajectory did not always follow expected gender scripts and at times runs counter to normative gender roles (Lal, 2011), both within the Kurdish nationalist movement and outside. As such, Jihan’s life may be understood as a “creative break” with life as usual.

Theories of citizenship, and particularly newer theories in that field, have turned their focus away from the subject and toward the deeds that produce such subjects (Isin & Nielsen, 2013). This shift highlights the importance of change and transformation. Such changes have been theorized as “the righteous break with habitus” (Isin, 2009) and the

challenging “of dominant cultural scripts” (Lal, 2011, p. 554) and “existing exclusions” (Sheller, 2014, p. 287). The changes described in these theories relate not only to the subject that is performing or enacting citizenship. There seems to be an underlying understanding that these changes are also intended to affect others. Actors may transform themselves and others into citizens as the claimants of rights (Isin, 2009, p. 368). How this affective transformation is brought about, particularly within intimate relationships, will be the subject of this paper.

Isin (2009, p. 368) has suggested exploring emerging sites, scales, and acts to understand how these “produce new actors who enact political subjectivities and transform themselves and others into citizens.” Sites are, in his understanding, the “fields of contestation around which certain issues, interests, stakes, as well as themes, concepts and objects, assemble. The ‘scales’, are scopes of applicability.” Here I want to turn our attention to a different emerging entity, that of imagination and the imaginary. Dawney (2011, p. 353) has argued that “the concepts of imaginaries and the body that imagines, are central to an understanding of how bodies, individually and collectively, act on the world in order to manage affects, bring about change and in doing so produce subjects.” Imaginaries are the “images, symbols, metaphors and representations which help construct various forms of subjectivity” (Gatens, 2013). They are “a space to be found between discursive and material events and practices” and a “force that transforms the present by opening up a different past and a different future” (Latimer & Skeggs, 2011, p. 395). The act of imagining, then, also includes perceptions and expectations, memories, and fantasies. These imaginaries are linked to the emotions that are triggered by them and vice versa (James, 2010, p. 253).

In this chapter, I will not explore imaginaries as such; I am more interested in the possibilities of change and the images, symbols, and metaphors these may create. Imaginaries are contextual and historicized, and “differently historicized bodies are productive of and invest in different imaginaries, and as such may increase or decrease their capacities to act in accordance with those histories which have affected their imaginary experience of the world” (Dawney, 2011, p. 540). I will explore one particular imaginary, that of women whose lives constitute “momentous acts” or “creative breaks” (Isin, 2008) with the status quo and thus challenge various power regimes.

I will argue that many of Jihan’s choices have been affected by women (alive, dead, or fictional) whose lives provided these creative breaks with

habitus. I do not propose that these women were decisive in Jihan's life choices. On the contrary, they did not make Jihan join the guerrillas or leave the movement; these choices were influenced by various factors—some more consciously considered than others, both then and in hindsight—including what Jihan knew and did not know, her desires and hopes, acute crises, and prolonged pressure. I argue that her intimate knowledge of women and their stories provided her with *spaces of imaginary*. These women enabled Jihan to “imagine a future in full awareness of approximations and uncertainties and even the likelihood of failure” (Greene, 2005, p. 79). Through them, Jihan could imagine alternative ways of living and thus imagine that a choice was possible. Similarly, she herself may have affected those more or less closely related to her. She may not have created citizens as claimants of rights (Isin & Nielsen, 2013) but she may have enabled others to imagine the possibility of claiming such rights in the future. Following Martha Nussbaum (1990), imagination is here understood as a space where our memories, moral considerations, symbols, and desires meet and impact each other when we envision certain scenarios or situations and see ourselves acting in them.

In the following, I will provide more information about the data on which this chapter is based and the methodological considerations before offering a thick description of Jihan's life. I tell her story chronologically, from her early family life, through her time as a PKK guerilla fighter, to her imprisonment and release. I end this chapter by analyzing Jihan's story in the light of citizenship theories and theories of imagination.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I have known Jihan for nearly two decades. We first met in the mid-2000s during my doctoral fieldwork in Bakur. At that time, Jihan had just been released from prison and was, as a PKK cadre, sent to the small Kurdish town in which I lived. Everyone knew Jihan; they all respected her, and some feared her. I liked her friendly and reserved manner. She was curious about me and my work and always willing to provide me with important contextual knowledge of gendered discourses, the Kurdish nationalist movement, and state violence. We soon became friends and have remained so ever since.

Although Jihan and I frequently discussed my work on the Kurdish nationalist movement and state violence, she refused to let me interview her about her life. “Maybe later,” she said when I dared to ask. We

continued to be friends and talked about everyday events, common friends, the political situation in Türkiye, my work, and the books she read—until a few years ago.

In 2017, Jihan called to inform me that she was ready to tell me the stories of her life (Chernoff, 2003, p. 93). My task has been to provide an anthropological translation (Zeitlyn, 2008, p. 159). I was to publish her biography in Norway and keep the transcripts of our conversations as a testimony of her story for her children to read in the future. For several years we talked, sometimes twice a week, sometimes twice a month. In all, we have recorded more than 80 hours of biographical interviews, and our conversations are still ongoing.

Jihan, who had prepared herself for our biographical interviews by reading biographies by authors such as Stefan Zweig, Paolo Coelho, Maxim Gorky, and Susanna Tamaro, often returned to a particular event several times in our conversation—sometimes the day after she had introduced me to that event or person, sometimes after a period of years. “I have been thinking,” she would tell me. “We need to talk about x once more. Last time, I only told you one side of the story. But there is more.” In a form of meta-narrative, she explained, improved, and retold. She wanted her story to be as objective as possible and to give due credit and respect to those around her.

Jihan insisted that her testimony should not just be that of her own life but of her generation. She therefore often dwelled on descriptions of people important to her—family members, comrades in the mountains, and friends from her time in prison. Each of these stories was a small narrative in itself, and they were woven together through the ties of friendship, loyalty, and love that bound them to Jihan. She also often talked about her own family, her husband and children, and her mother and siblings, who still lived in a small village in the eastern border region of Türkiye. She updated me on their recent news and shared with me her joy over happy events and the well-being of her family and her anger, indignation, and pain each time any of them had been the subject of misfortune, injustice, or violence.

Although I know some of the women to whom Jihan is intimately related, I have not conducted interviews with them as I have with Jihan. For a few years, while I conducted my PhD fieldwork and visited the town she lived in, we shared friends and acquaintances. I knew her husband

before they were married and had heard gossip about them. However, this was before Jihan had agreed to embark on our biographical project.

Therefore, what follows is Jihan's story; it is her version of events that informs this chapter. It may be questioned how I can claim any power of transformation in Jihan's life without having personally seen the effect on others. I cannot, of course; I can only describe, in as much detail as possible, how Jihan has challenged norms and societal and political rules and how she continually has spoken out (and indeed acted) against power. I can show how Jihan's life "enlarged the social imaginary and repertoire of gender by challenging conventional plotlines" (Lal, 2011, p. 554) and, as such, has the potential to effect change.

Jihan is still living in Türkiye as I write this chapter. Obviously, Jihan is not her real name. It is not even the *nom de guerre* she was given in the mountains, but a pseudonym created for the purpose of documenting her story. Similarly, all those who feature in this chapter have been renamed. Jihan insisted, however, that the dead should keep their names, so that their legacy could live on and respect could be paid where it was due. I mention no place names and remain deliberately vague in my descriptions of where particular events occurred.

JIHAN'S STORY

Let me now turn to Jihan. She was born in a small village in northeastern Türkiye, the third child of 12 siblings, and grew up at a time when Kurdish clan structures were still intact and the long arm of the state had not yet reached their small village. In fact, Jihan—and her siblings—knew little about the world outside. What she did know, she had learned through the village's only radio, owned by her father, and later from the PKK guerrilla fighters who passed through the village.

The Lions in Her Kin

Jihan's childhood is marked by stark contrasts. Her father was well-respected even beyond their village. He mediated between feuding parties, he was wealthy, and it was in his house that the village's only radio could be found. His first wife had been childless and, after her untimely death, he married a woman 20 years his younger, only 13 or 14 years old, who

would become Jihan's mother. A year after the marriage she gave birth to her first child. Every second year, another child followed. Jihan cannot remember seeing her father raise his voice to his wife and she never saw him act violently. Indeed, Jihan believes that he loved his wife, "He always did as she wished." On the other hand, Jihan reflected, he never helped her with her burdens: It was the responsibility of Jihan's mother to lead the household, cook for the hired shepherds, and take care of the children and the animals, even though she was constantly pregnant or breastfeeding yet another child. "My mother was not a bad person. She had no chance. Under these circumstances, she had no possibility to be good to herself, how could she be loving and caring to us children?" Jihan asked, rhetorically.

As long as Jihan can remember, her mother had been angry and kept a strict regime for the girls, who had to help with the household and take care of their younger siblings, while the boys worked the fields and herded the animals. Jihan's mother did not allow the children to play or to be idle. As soon as the girls approached puberty, their mother became even stricter, and they were hardly allowed to leave the house. Beatings and rebukes were everyday routine. The children feared their mother and, later, also their oldest brother. Jihan still bears physical and mental scars from their maltreatment. The scar on her forehead, for example, testifies to the time her mother threw an iron bar at her. Why, she cannot remember. Nevertheless, Jihan occasionally managed to steal off for a few hours to play with her friends, of course in all secrecy and knowing that she would be severely punished if she were discovered. "I would hear my mother call for us and pretended not to hear her," she recalls. "I wanted to be with my friends. All that housework was irksome for me."

While Jihan hated the household tasks her mother gave her, she loved to work with her father. She was tall and strong and not afraid to get her hands dirty, and perhaps she also preferred spending time with her father, as her relationship with him seemed to have been far more peaceful and friendly than with her mother. Since her older brother was "good for nothing," in her words, she soon took over his role, encouraged by her father. Her elder brother and her father did not get along well, partly because her brother had no interest at all in the family's way of life, preferring a world of music and poetry. As her brother could never meet his father's expectations, the latter gave his duties to Jihan; she was to water

the fields, cut the wheat, and look after the animals, tasks usually assigned to boys. “My mother tried to imprint on me my role as a woman. My father taught me the role of a man.” Her father not only seemed content to let Jihan do the boys’ tasks, thus crossing the gendered division of labor, but also encouraged her to cross the traditional gender divide in other regards. He taught her how to use firearms, took her with him to the mountains to tend the flock, and taught her how to ride a horse. For Jihan, these were rare moments of pure freedom, sitting on her father’s horse and galloping through the mountains.

Jihan was not the first girl to herd animals or use firearms to scare away wolves and human enemies. In the Kurdish oral tradition, the image of the strong woman acting against gendered norms but respected for her valor and courage is a common trope, as described in Chap. 6 of this volume. For Jihan and her father, these lions did not, however, belong to a mythical past, existing only in histories and songs. For them, these women were real. Jihan had known several such women who had crossed the classical gender divide, and so had her father.

Women in our tribe had always been brave and ready to do what was needed. Not only in times long past. They still are. My father has met many of them, and so have I. Take the two daughters of my father’s brother, for example, Nuran and Emina. They were like amazons. Their mother as well. My uncle’s sons were all weaklings, but those girls were like lions. They were independent, thought and acted in their own way. In my father’s family, such qualities were encouraged and valued in a woman.

Bocheńska describes how these women had qualities such as bravery in the face of danger and the willingness to fight to the end, whatever the cost. That these women possessed qualities usually ascribed only to men “created a social lever for women. It did not make them free or emancipated in the modern sense but could bestow on them a lion-like sense of honor, power, and splendor” (see Chap. 6 of this volume). In a similar vein, Jihan often dwelled on particular qualities of her female cousins. Referring to the fairytales and histories she had heard, she described them as honest and direct. They refused to engage in gossip or talk behind people’s backs. In short, “they were, what you might call independent women,” Jihan explained.

Her Wish for Gender Equality

Jihan started to reflect on the inequalities in her family from an early age:

Equal treatment between men and women has been my greatest wish. It has always been something that I thought about. I do exist, as well. I can also do the same things [as boys]. Why then am I excluded, only because I am a woman? I could do everything that the boys could not do, and more. Look at my brother; he was not diligent, nor did he contribute much to the family. He was of no use to any of us. Still, he had more freedom than me and could do what he wanted.

Even in her childhood, she had observed how her mother treated her sons and daughters very differently, as if the sons had a greater worth. They received more care and attention. Jihan knew that her mother also acknowledged the girls as her children and mothered them in her own way. However, Jihan always felt that the girls were treated as less important and less deserving of care and less in need of their mother's love. It therefore became important to her to demonstrate her worth and to show that she could be better than the boys around her.

Her father had already acknowledged that much. It was Jihan he asked to do the tasks that would usually fall to the eldest brother. Her father seemed to have liked the idea of having a lion among his children. She preferred trousers to skirts, and her father encouraged her to dress in boys' clothes, even lending her his own trousers. Her mother, however, did not like the lion women in the family, "probably because they were so very different from herself," Jihan explains. She did all she could to make Jihan a woman according to her understanding of gendered conduct and norms. Thus, while Jihan's father encouraged her to be different from the other girls, her mother tried to punish her into obedience and compliance with the gendered norms of society.

In the early 1990s, her uncle brought a television to the village. Every evening, the villagers assembled at his house and watched various broadcasts. Jihan and her sisters loved the music shows and soon fell in love with the Turkish singers Sezen Aksu and Gülben Ergen. Sezen Aksu, in particular, caught Jihan's eye, with her short bob. For Jihan, this hairstyle was something completely new. She was fascinated.

The short hair was both nice and a little bit beyond me. When I cut my hair for the first time, my mother looked at me as if I had killed someone. She put her face into her hands and cried.

Jihan's village had a rather syncretistic belief system. The villagers identified as Sunni Muslims, "although I have never seen my parents keep the fast," and prayed to "pagan" deities, such as the Goddess Ishtar.¹ In this belief system, long hair was considered special in women, if not holy. "Long hair symbolized fertility and they encouraged women with long hair to walk across the fields. Cutting our hair was taboo." Jihan's decision to cut her hair thus contradicted not only gendered norms but also their beliefs. Jihan believes today that her wish to resemble Sezen Aksu was not only motivated by a glamorous beauty ideal. There was another reason to cut her hair and thus become "unwomanly" in the eyes of the other villagers:

My constant desire to compete with the boys, that was probably another reason. Short hair sort of meant being superior. If I just took one step away from being a woman and one step towards being a man, then people would respect me more. I guess I thought something like that.

Jihan hoped that by becoming more of a man and less a woman, she could counteract the unequal treatment of the sisters and brothers. She hoped in this way to receive the respect she yearned for.

The Way to the Mountains

Jihan's family became involved with the PKK early on. Their tribe had participated in the Ararat Revolt in the 1930s. In the 1980s, Jihan's male cousin joined the PKK, and a few years later, her elder brother started working for the PKK in a civilian capacity, mostly delivering goods and messages.

Our involvement with the movement started via the PKK. First my cousin, then my brother and then my entire family. After 1993, the entire village was involved and we village people started to identify with the PKK. We identified with the Kurdish ideology. We have always known that we were

¹The Goddess Ishtar features in some of Öcalan's writings. It is unclear, even to Jihan, whether there is a connection between her mother's relationship to the pagan deity and Öcalan's writings.

Kurds. But that we had been oppressed by the state, that it had been forbidden for us to speak Kurdish, we became conscious of this through the PKK.

Since the family was semi-nomadic and spent several months each year in the mountains, they were frequently visited by the PKK. Jihan still remembers her first impressions of the PKK guerilla fighters who visited the village.

We were small. The adults sat there and talked. It was like a fairytale for us, something we had not seen before. The guerilla soldiers loved each other so much and treated each other with equality and respect. Women and men there were equal.

For Jihan, these guerilla fighters were mythical figures. They behaved in a way she never had seen before: Their mutual respect, the natural inclusion of women in the discussions on those evenings, and the assertiveness with which these women behaved represented a totally new world for her. For so long, she had wanted to be treated with respect and to receive the same care and love as her brothers. These PKK guerrilla fighters, these mythical heroes, were treated with deference and respect not only by her parents but by all the villagers. Still more, these assertive, smiling, and strong women were loved and respected by their male comrades, who treated them as their equals.

When Jihan was 13 years old, Turkish state security accused her family of collaborating with a terrorist organization. Her brother had already had to flee a few years before. Now the entire family came under severe pressure. The state confiscated most of their animals, destroyed their harvest, and arrested Jihan, her father, and one of her younger sisters. The two girls had helped their father lead their animals to the mountain pastures and happened to be present during the raid. Their younger brother, who had also joined them on the mountain pastures, had managed to flee undetected. The three prisoners were brought to the nearest city, where they spent a week in custody. All three were frequently tortured and abused during that week. Through the contacts of her father, they were finally released and allowed to return to their village.

For Jihan, that week in custody had been extremely traumatizing. She also knew that her experience would profoundly influence how she, and those people around her, would see her from now on:

You save yourself for this one person. Only one person is allowed to touch you—after you have married. This one person can beat you and love you. He can do whatever he wants with you. This is how you are taught to think. And then this happens. A stranger undresses you and does to you whatever he wants. He might not sleep with you, but everything else. He was the first who touched me, and he was a soldier. I was 14 years old.

In the village, everyone speculated about what had happened to the two girls. Had the soldiers done it, raped them and taken their innocence, or had they not? Everybody whispered behind their backs but no one showed any interest in hearing what the girls had to say. Indeed, such direct interest would have been taboo. Therefore, their experiences in the prison cell remained a secret, shrouded in silence. The girls did not even talk to each other about what they had experienced, and their father acted as if nothing had happened.

To maintain the family honor, Jihan's mother feverishly started searching for husbands for her daughters. However, who would want a girl whose reputation had become so questionable? Jihan knew what to expect. She knew that the best she could hope for was to be married to a widower many years her senior. She had seen how unhappy her mother had been in her marriage, even though her father had treated her well. Following the abduction and torture, the prospect of a forced marriage was the last straw for Jihan; she could not cope any longer.

I just wanted to get away, wanted so much to be free. I wanted to be by myself, [to] have self-respect. I wanted to be treated like a human being. And then there is this propaganda. Those in the mountains are described as so fantastic. Like mythical heroes. And they had gender equality among their ranks. I had heard the elders talk about them. And well, I had a child's mind....

Käser (2019, p. 18) has argued that the PKK “offers an alternative for women. Not only as a physical or geographical escape, but also an ideological, political, and intellectual alternative to narratives, realities, and systems lived in all parts of Kurdistan.” Indeed, for Jihan at least, the female guerrilla fighters had created a space of imaginary. The young girl had seen a glimpse of another world, one in which women were loved and respected,

a world where men and women were equal, and where friendship and love between them were not shameful but beautiful and natural.²

One evening, when the guerrillas had again visited their house, Jihan decided to arrange to meet them. After the fighters had bidden farewell to the family, she volunteered to accompany them to the end of the village. She told them in confidence about her decision to join them and asked them how to go about it. After some scrutinizing questions, the guerrilla fighters agreed to meet her at the mountain pastures and told her what to bring with her. And so, one evening in the late summer, just short of her fifteenth birthday, Jihan left her family.

In the Mountains

Among the guerrilla fighters, Jihan gradually adjusted to her new life. It was a hard life: Death was omnipresent and not only was the war dangerous, but hunger, cold, and heat drained both body and soul. Mountain life in the 1990s was quite different than in later decades (see, for example, Käser, 2019). Jihan became a guerrilla fighter at the turning point of the Kurdish-Turkish war. Until then, the Turkish soldiers had been relatively powerless against the PKK's guerrilla tactics, but things were about to change. The Turkish state had invested in making the mountainous hinterland accessible, building roads, and adapting their army to counter the guerrillas' tactics. Unlike Käser's description of later recruitment procedures, Jihan had little time for any education in party ideology. The group moved frequently, clashes happened often, and most of their time was spent catering to their basic needs.

When Jihan joined the guerrillas, she had been illiterate. The lectures were therefore difficult to follow and Jihan struggled to follow the political jargon in them. However, she wanted to learn and was curious, so she learned to read and write with the few texts the soldiers had available—Öcalan's letters and a book of Sartre. Initially, she understood nothing of what she read and spelled the words out one letter at a time.

During her year at the Academy in Syria, Jihan frequently met the leader, as she would call Öcalan. He had particularly engaged with the female guerrillas, and one of the first tasks he had given them upon arrival at the academy was to learn how to swim. "How can you save the world,

²While sexual relations between PKK guerrilla soldiers were strictly prohibited, deep friendship and comradeship between all soldiers were encouraged (Käser, 2019; Weiss, 2010).

when you cannot save yourself,” he supposedly argued. The women were encouraged to talk and give their opinions in political debates. They criticized and were criticized.

Time passed, and Jihan became a *militan*, someone who followed the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and internalized his teachings. She had become “PPK-icized” (Käser, 2019). For several years, she fought alongside her comrades. The Kurdish guerrillas were under pressure, and the death toll among their ranks was rising dramatically in the 1990s. Jihan lost many of her dearest friends, and eventually, the Kurdish mountainous landscape became to her a mausoleum for her dead friends. The six years she spent as an active guerrilla fighter were brutal and merciless but also marked the time when she experienced the greatest love, closeness, and mutual respect among her comrades.

In 1999, Abdullah Öcalan was arrested. Shortly afterward, Jihan was caught and sentenced to 16 years in prison. As was common in the 1990s and early 2000s, the political prisoners had strict daily routines, and political discussion and education took up most of their day. In fact, the PKK had formed specific committees to organize and oversee education in Turkish prisons (Westrheim, 2008). The prisoners were mostly left unattended by the prison staff, and the warden “facilitated communication between prisoners, organisation and a sense of close community particularly for those who were members of political organisations” (Green, 2002, p. 98). The prisoners were organized in a hierarchical system that in many ways mirrored the organization of the PKK guerrillas in the mountains (Käser, 2019). This included absolute subordination and obedience to the leadership.

While the war had been brutal and merciless but brought love and respect, prison for Jihan was only brutal. The initial torture was one thing, but even after the intense period of interrogation, Jihan found no peace. She was housed together with 50–60 prisoners in a largely self-organized ward and struggled with her own demons; many years in active battle had taken their toll on her mental health. She also struggled to adapt to the other political prisoners and their political system, which differed from that in the mountains. She felt that the values of the “militant”—which Öcalan had described as “honest, dedicated, steadfast, principled, abstinent, communal, sincere, self-critical, loyal, and prepared to dedicate their lives and deaths to the struggle, freedom, humanity, people, and the leadership” (Käser, 2019, p. 18) and which she had experienced in the mountains—were not widely present among the political prisoners. She was

disgusted to see how individual prisoners used their political activity for personal gain; this was something she could not accept. She had always been confrontational and now refused outright to submit to the strict rules of the political organization within the prison. She openly criticized the political leaders in prison and was punished for her disobedience. She had survived the violence of the state; now she was imprisoned within the prison by her own people. As a punishment for her disobedience and insubordination, Jihan was forced to spend most of her first year in prison isolated under a bunk bed.

Gradually Jihan became critical of the movement and its ideology. While she retained and respected the values she had internalized in the mountains, she gradually became “de-PKK-icized”: She removed herself from the ideological sphere of thought and embraced a more individual, for her freer, perspective. This process of gradual withdrawal took many years and continued even after her rather surprising release from prison.

After Her Return

In 2005 Türkiye was again negotiating EU membership. To please the Europeans, it implemented various legal reforms and granted amnesty to a selection of political prisoners. Jihan was among them; although she had received a sentence of 16 years, she was released after seven years and seven months. She returned to her family, which now lived in utter poverty as a result of the war and the loss of their livestock; her eldest brother was in exile and her father dead. While the family had previously hired shepherds to care for their many animals, they had now sent the youngest sons away to work as shepherds for others. When she returned, the family looked to her to set things right, but she had neither the strength nor the ability to do so.

Besides her family’s expectations, the PKK leadership also had ideas about her future. They expected Jihan to continue her work as a political cadre and to start a branch of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi/DTP), a predecessor of the DEM Party, in her hometown. She was then sent to a neighboring city to act as an adviser to the pro-Kurdish mayor there. As one of the few female guerrilla fighters who had returned from the mountains and prison, she was highly respected, admired—and feared. Her criticism of the civilian structures was merciless. She demanded the same effort and the same loyalty to the

movement that she had been used to in the mountains and regarded the movement as having been corrupted by civil society, with individuals using political positions to their own advantage. In her position as PKK cadre and adviser, she was admired for being different than many other women. As one of the very few women in the small town she came from, she had been allowed to move around freely, travel from village to village, and be in the company of men unrelated to her overnight. She was therefore treated like an *erkek Kadın*, a manwoman, to whom other rules applied.

Jihan did as she was told, but she was tired of living from hand to mouth, under constant police surveillance, and she was tired of all the rules and expectations. She did not want to adjust to strict social and political demands any longer.

In the party, there was no space for individuals. But I am an individual and want to be one. I deserve not to be suffocated by extreme collectivism. I have the right to decide about my own life. Because I can think for myself.

Jihan did not want to be an *erkek Kadın* either. She wanted to be respected not because she was less like a woman and more like a man, but for the woman she was. She wanted a civilian life, free from the party's demands and rules. She longed for the kind of love and comradeship she had known in the mountains, with a husband and children. Against the wishes of the movement that banned marriage for cadres and against the expectations of a society that expected men to take the initiative in marriage, she chose a man, courted him, and eventually wed him.

I asked him if he wanted to marry me. I told him that as he was looking for a wife, and as I was considering marrying myself, why should the two of us not get married? He was shocked. "Are you serious?" he asked me. "Yes," I said. He needed a week to consider. That was fine with me. If he had wanted, he could have taken a year (she laughs). One week later we got engaged.

It is important for her (and him) to stress that the initiative was hers. Her husband told me that he never would have dared to offer a marriage proposal to a PKK cadre like her. Indeed, he needed quite some time to finally agree to it.

The news of her nuptials were not welcomed by her social network in or outside the small town. Jihan had been a hero, a symbol of the

liberated woman. That image was severely damaged by her marriage. Those around her had scolded her for perpetuating the patriarchal structures that she, as a guerilla fighter, had been adamant to break. How could she, who had apparently overcome the old way of life and become a *militan*, leave all that behind to return to a married life of subordination? But Jihan had a different perspective. She had left the movement behind, had broken her bonds with them, and turned to a civilian life of her own choice. I deliberately write “turned to” and not “returned to.” For Jihan there was a difference: She had not returned but had chosen a new life, one that promised to be less controlled, more free, and that would provide her with the peace and space for opportunity she had dreamed of. Jihan understood that she had not been free or liberated as a PKK guerrilla and cadre; this understanding had become painfully clear during her imprisonment. Therefore, she had not returned to a life of subordination; she had left behind a life of subordination and control as a guerilla and party cadre. Marrying and leaving her political life felt like freedom at that moment. Jihan wanted to decide for herself what her future life should look like. For once, she had taken life into her own hands.

CONCLUSION

To conclude Jihan’s story, let me return to my initial questions: Can the simple act of living a life be an act of citizenship? And how can we understand the transforming power of that act of living?

I have argued that in order to understand the transforming power of living, we should look at spaces of imaginary. I have approached these spaces as windows offering a glimpse of a world in which things can be “otherwise” (Greene, 2005, p. 78), thus providing a space in which the present is transformed by “opening up a different past and a different future” (Dawney, 2011, p. 395). These spaces of imaginary are created in the interrelation with certain other women (alive, dead, or mythical), whose lives illustrate alternative ways of living and thus enable others to stand up to those wielding power and challenge norms. The women in Jihan’s life—the lions, the television stars, and the heroes—did not change Jihan’s life directly, but they opened up these spaces of imaginary, where change was possible. They did not influence her choices in life but created a possibility for choices to be made.

The lions in her family and the family's mythical past had taught her that women could and have demanded the respect she lacked. These women, who embodied many of her society's ideals—courage, wisdom, and loyalty—also behaved in ways that other women did not. They did what only men were usually allowed to do: they sometimes wore male clothes, participated in armed altercations, and took center stage and gave their opinions in negotiations among strangers. Jihan's knowledge of and about these women, which she shared with her family, created a space where equal respect between the sexes was a possibility. It also made it possible and acceptable for her father, at least, to accept her wish to follow them. He encouraged her to wear men's clothes, let her borrow his horse and roam the countryside, and taught her to defend herself and the family with a gun.

When Jihan talked of her childhood, she also talked of her desperate wish to be respected and treated equally to the boys in her family. She was convinced that her gender was the cause of the injustice, unequal treatment, and violence she experienced. Jihan's introduction to the television stars of her generation opened another such space: Here she saw women who dressed differently and wore their hair short. They represented other ideals of beauty that broke with the traditional norms with which Jihan had grown up. These stars created new imaginaries of womanhood and beauty, and Jihan's introduction to the bob cut offered her the possibility to be "less like a girl and more like a boy."

Similarly, the guerilla soldiers opened a window to a world where women sat side by side with their male comrades, with mutual love and respect. This world, which in many respects was so different from her own, yet still connected, offered yet another space of imagination. In a desperate crisis, that space of imaginary turned into a physical space, an exit route from an alternative reality to the domestic violence and impending arranged marriage that had been her only options before joining the guerrillas. To return to the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, Jihan is clear that if other possibilities had been open to her, she would have chosen otherwise. For who will choose death, when they can choose life?

I have been bold, even reckless, in the formulation of my first question—whether a simple life may be an act of citizenship. Living one's life is never a simple endeavor and it has certainly not been simple for Jihan.

On the contrary, she fought multiple struggles, not circumventing the obstacles she met but tackling them head-on, often with severe consequences to her life and well-being. She lived a life filled with the pain of years of violence and loss and the unbreakable optimism that the future would be brighter than the past. No, I definitely did not believe that the act of living itself was simple. Rather, in my question, I wanted to go beyond the large-scale acts of becoming a guerilla fighter or an activist citizen within a given polity, to examine the everyday choices and struggles conducted at multiple sites and on multiple scales. Jihan has lived her life alongside and in conflict with established norms, and in doing so has challenged the habitus and cultural scripts. The creative breaks are many. Some of these might be characterized as of momentous character (Isin, 2008). Other breaks have been less easily visible. Together, they made Jihan the woman she is.

Jihan is very clear that, given different circumstances, she would never have become a guerrilla fighter. “No one should ever be forced to give up her freedom and to go to war,” she repeatedly says, but she survived and gained confidence and insight, despite or perhaps because of all this.

Her marriage is not harmonious: Her husband struggles to accept her as she is. He never managed to stop her from wearing trousers or make her dress in a more feminine way, and he never managed to break her will. On the contrary, over the years Jihan has refused to put up with his caprices or those of his family. As she has become, at least partially, financially independent of him, his economic sanctions can no longer force her into submission. Ultimately, he has no other choice but to take her as the strong and willful woman she is.

She is still involved in the life of her extended family. Sevda, whose story I touched upon briefly in the introduction to this chapter, is still living with her husband. Jihan had to intervene several times and, at one point, she brought Sevda to her home in the western part of Türkiye. It was the first time Sevda had ever left her village. She and her children spent a few months with Jihan in the city before returning to the village and Sevda was reconciled with her husband once again. This time, however, she had clear demands and, according to Jihan, the small changes she achieved improved her life at least slightly. Jihan also tried to leave her husband but returned. She could not bear the thought of leaving her children behind. When she reflects on her life story, she does not feel that she has achieved much. Her life has gone full circle: She escaped a violent home and arranged marriage to be caught in a marriage that often makes her unhappy and that she

sometimes regrets. However, she has never given in to the demands of people around her. She has continued to dress differently: She still only wears trousers, and she wears her hair short.

Jihan's story shows how the cultural heritage of a lion does not provide a defined scenario for who the lion is but leaves space for imagination and different interpretations. While in today's Bakur, being a lion is often related to female guerrillas, the notion of the lion can be reimagined. A woman can have the courage and strength to become a PKK fighter and also have the strength to leave it in order to start another life. It is in this possibility of reimagination that we may find the hidden power of stories such as the one about the lion women. Endless interpretations may be attached to them instead of forcing one norm or one scenario only.³

Jihan has never become politically active again. In today's Türkiye, her family is under enough surveillance already. Nor does she know how she should engage politically, having broken with the Kurdish nationalist movement, while remaining too close to its core values to join any other political party. Instead, Jihan invests her energy in improving her physical and mental health and in improving the lives of those around her. Of all the siblings, she is the only one who can stand up to violent brothers and abusive brothers-in-law. Her high status as a former guerrilla fighter (and thus a far better shooter than any of her brothers-in-law) combined with her husband's economic strength has enabled her to intervene in abusive marriages, support her sisters and sisters-in-law, and set an example for the generations to come. Jihan may not be able to achieve big changes in her own family, nor in the lives of her brothers and sisters, but she is certainly one of the lions who can open up new spaces of imaginary for those around her and serve as an example of how to be a woman in Kurdistan.

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³I am grateful to Joanna Bocheńska for pointing this out to me.

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The Hierarchical Re-formation of Kurdish Women's Citizenship: Encounters in a Neighborhood in Istanbul

Besime Şen

INTRODUCTION: MULTIPLE PERILS AND MULTIPLE DOMINATIONS

This article analyzes encounters between Kurdish women from Rojava (North East Syria) who came to Istanbul as a consequence of the Syrian civil war and Kurdish women who are citizens of the Republic of Türkiye and came to Istanbul through forced internal migration. Both groups have, in different ways, sought to demand equal citizenship within the Republic of Türkiye. The “hosts” in these encounters between the two groups of Kurdish women in Istanbul were Sunni Kurdish women whose villages had been burned and evacuated in the 1990s. These women and their families, who arrived in Istanbul as a result of forced migration, largely settled in residential areas that were not resistant to earthquakes and were, and are, at great risk (Şen & Tunç, 2011). The “guests” in the encounters were Kurdish (mostly Sunni) refugees from Rojava. Although the majority of immigrants from Rojava settled in cities such as Urfa and Mardin in Bakur (Turkish Kurdistan), where they already had relatives and thus existing networks before the war, others settled in Istanbul. Rojava Kurds who reached Istanbul settled in the same neighborhoods as earlier immigrants from Eastern Türkiye (Kılıçaslan, 2016). I argue that the

encounter of these two groups of women exemplifies a larger issue, namely, the encounter of Kurdish citizens of different states. Focusing on the encounter between Rojava Kurdish women and Türkiye's Kurdish women, the findings of this research show that multiple hierarchical positions, including class, gender, ethnicity, and religious identities, are formed on the scale of the neighborhood.

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted over three years (2019–2021) in a poor neighborhood of Istanbul (Okmeydanı), during which I tried to follow the encounter of the two groups of Kurdish women, both of whom were establishing a new life and attempting to find a space in the public sphere. I interviewed six women in depth, had many conversations with other women, visited them while they were working at a local NGO that had established the Women to Women Kitchen Project¹ for refugee women (hereafter the Kitchen Project), and met with them in their homes (and in my home). The experience of Rojava Kurds of becoming refugees in Türkiye and their recent history of multiple perils and multiple dominations, as established at the axis of Rojava and Türkiye and their survival skills in Istanbul, revealed unique findings concerning Kurdish women's citizenship and the forced settlement of women in new political geographies. Their citizenship practices are intertwined with racial, class, and gender factors.

First, the encounters in the neighborhood demonstrated that, on the one hand, the neighborhood was a safe place in which women were able to move around relatively freely and come in contact with other women from Rojava, as well as Türkiye citizens. However, it was also a source of danger (see below), which in different ways limited their mobility and options. Second, the NGO activity in the neighborhood offered an additional safe space for women, giving them a means of empowerment and earning money, and a place to create new networks. The Kitchen Project was an important place for the women I interviewed: It enhanced their status in the neighborhood, as NGOs were regarded as reliable organizations with an established institutional role. Taking part in the project, therefore, gave the women access to an institutional environment related to the state of Türkiye and Turkish citizens. At the same time, the project revealed a different type of hierarchy in which Rojava Kurdish women felt positioned below Arab Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens. Third, the Kurdish women of Rojava, in their status as refugees, lacked access to political participation,

¹<https://bianet.org/yazi/women-to-women-refugee-kitchen-182834> retrieved on 09.04.2022.

while the Kurdish women of Türkiye were strengthened by their political participation. This created a new context in which the citizenship demands of the two groups of women differed from each other and became hierarchically structured. Differentiation between the two groups emerged in terms of the possession of an ID card, the ability to vote, and the ability to participate in political processes through the pro-Kurdish HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, People's Democratic Party, now known as the DEM, *Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi*, People's Equality and Democracy Party). This requires an analysis of new forms of domination. The concept of "citizenship as a set of rights," proposed by Ruth Lister (2011) as an active participatory practice, finds meaning in the performance of political agency. I will therefore draw attention to the distinctions that activate the political agency of Kurdish women.

War and displacement have recently and historically shaped the citizenship practices of Kurdish women. The results of a study by Hamelink and Güngör (2022), in which they examined the experiences and motivations of Kurdish women escaping from war, showed that the current displacement of Syrian Kurds should be seen as part of a broader history of expropriation, discrimination, and displacement. Although both groups of women have lived through such experiences, their encounter in Istanbul shows that they lived under different circumstances and felt a need to protect themselves and their position, which led to a process of "hierarchical citizenship." I distinguish between two distinct periods of Turkish refugee policy—the first optimistic and the second exclusionary—which also affected the experiences of Kurdish women in encounters in the neighborhood. The early period of Türkiye's refugee policies had an inclusive approach inclined toward solidarity. The second period, when refugees began to settle more permanently, was (and still is) exclusionary, even including attacks and violence on the part of citizens toward newcomers.²

In this process, I found that spatial scales (such as the home-neighborhood-city-country) were important determinants in methodological as well as political terms. I argue that the encounter between these two groups of Kurdish women reveals that women play an important role in establishing these scales and that their civic positions and resources are shaped by the strategies that women develop, starting from the scale of the household. Issues such as finding a house to rent, finding furniture and other household goods, meeting the specific needs of children, and obtaining medical

² <https://bianet.org/haber/ankara-altindag-da-suriyeli-multecilere-saldırı-248615> retrieved on 04.10.2022.

services and school places take place at the level of the neighborhood, and women are the most active agents in these issues. Revealing the importance of the public–private space distinction for Kurdish women’s citizenship is another important factor in establishing the relationship between patriarchal structure and citizenship policies. While Kurdish citizens are living in unjust and unrecognized conditions in the Turkish public space, they try to build their Kurdishness and dignity in the home. The “home” is not only a private space, it is also a space where Kurdish citizenship practices are performed and, at such moments, forms a Kurdish public space with its own rules, activities, acts of citizenship, and obligations. Due to political pressure and problems in public spaces, “home” is for Kurds the safest place to speak Kurdish, listen to Kurdish music, and talk politics.

To discuss the importance of the relationship between space and power in the construction and transformation of Kurdish women’s citizenship, I benefited from a study by Mollett and Faria (2018) entitled “The Spatialities of Intersectional Thinking: Fashioning Feminist Geographic Futures,” according to which “intersectionality is a framework for understanding multiplicity as a way to interrogate political and structural inequalities, not simply categories of identity”; the authors point to the spatial dimensions of these inequalities. Within the framework of processes of citizenship formation, I aim to reveal the role played by different scales of home, neighborhood, city, and country in the lives of Kurdish women who left the geographies they lived in previously. Doreen Massey (1994, p. 188) argues that “space and place are important in the construction of gender relations and in struggles to change them. The limitation of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination.” Kimberley Crenshaw’s formative (1993) analysis of women’s shelters in Los Angeles’ minority communities connected and co-implicated ineffective federal immigration policy, mass incarceration, and racialized unemployment with the intimacies of violence in the lives of immigrant women and women of color. Crenshaw builds conceptual and geographical bridges between the scales of body, home, and state to reveal experiences of immigrant women, who lived in these shelters, with racialized unemployment and violence. Thinking in terms of scale was also very useful for my research on Kurdish women’s encounters in the Okmeydanı neighborhood.

I also found during my research that the Rojava women made use of gendered Kurdish representations that present women in certain ways. The processes of political identity formation—and the spaces available for political activity—are deeply gendered, and multiple representations of

Kurdish women, such as “images of women as heroic fighters, victims of wars, sex-slaves and refugees,” are situated within the framework of “gender and nation” (Begikhani et al., 2018). The “citizenship–motherhood” relationship, which emerged through the Saturday Mothers–Peace Mothers (Çağlayan, 2019), represents the Kurdish female identity in public space and politics. In the face of militarist violence directed against the Kurdish female body, the image of the “armed Kurdish female guerrilla” is rising to the fore. The image of the guerrilla woman gives courage to Kurdish women in danger and increases women’s participation in politics. The “burden of representation” of this community identity and the future destiny of women are also increasing.

Before turning to an analysis of Kurdish women’s encounters, I will give some background information about the research methodology, the women’s history before they moved into the neighborhood, and the neighborhood structure itself.

METHODOLOGY AND FIELDWORK CONTEXT

This research started from a desire to know more about the situation of Rojava Kurdish women who were in the process of establishing themselves in Istanbul. I participated as much as I could in the lives of Rojava Kurdish women, at home and in the neighborhood, for three years from 2019 until 2021. When I asked for a connection through one of my students, she gave me the phone number of Solin, who asked me to meet her at the Kitchen Project. She then invited me to her home, and through her, I came to know the other women. I met and spent time with the interviewees, in the Kitchen Project, at their homes, and sometimes at my home as well (although I live quite far from the neighborhood). In the course of these meetings, I observed certain commonalities and differences between the two groups of Kurdish women, which shaped their citizenship experiences and practices. With this finding, I revised my theoretical discussion and held additional interviews on focus topics.

I conducted the interviews in Kurdish, which was a crucial factor in enabling this research since I knew no Arabic, and the Rojava women did not know enough Turkish. Our shared language—Kurmanji—created a bond between us that contributed to the research findings. Language was also a reason why the Alevi Kurdish women of the neighborhood were not included in this encounter. They did not speak Kurdish in daily life, and their relations with the Sunni Kurdish women were thus quite limited. Their common language was an important factor in Rojava Kurdish

women and Türkiye's Sunni Kurdish women meeting and establishing a social relationship (see also Kılıçaslan, 2016). I had meetings with six Rojava Kurdish women in the neighborhood, interviewed them, and spoke with many others, such as visitors to the Kitchen Project and visitors at home. With Türkiye's Kurdish women, I could only make observations, although I was able to chat with them in a home environment when they visited the Rojava Kurdish women. I did not want to interview them as I wanted to underline my position of solidarity with the Rojava Kurdish women. Their position was precarious, and for ethical reasons, I found it important not to create unnecessary opposition between the two groups. I never met the men of the houses I visited throughout the research but learned from the women that none of their husbands or brothers had close social or political ties with Türkiye's Kurds. One of the reasons for this may have been that Rojava and other refugee men were increasingly trying to be less visible in public spaces due to racist attacks.

During the field research, it was crucially important not to undermine the security of the interviewees, who lived in precarious conditions after their escape from Syria. I tried to give this due attention at every step. I went to hospital with them, we gathered at home and cooked dinner, or we went to neighbors' parties together. When I started conducting interviews, the health, education, and employment opportunities of the women and their family members had already begun to improve, as they had been in Türkiye for several years (except for one young married woman) and had established themselves to some degree in Istanbul. For example, they were earning an income by cooking for the Kitchen Project, and their spouses had also found work. In our meetings and interviews, they usually told me about their successes, not their traumas. Indeed, when I asked about their escape stories and their first months in the neighborhood, the only answer I received was, "It was difficult, very difficult." Apart from this, they were always silent on this part, and I did not push them further. It was my impression that, because of their unclear and uncertain situation, it was important for them to emphasize their strength and achievement to me; this seemed a way for them to illustrate how they deserved the status they demanded, namely of being regular and accepted citizens, either in Türkiye or in Europe. Of the women I interviewed, only Solin and Hêlin, who were single, were able to go to Europe through the UNHCR program in 2021. After Hêlin moved to Germany, I visited her in her new place of residence in 2022, and I continue to communicate with both of them today.

All the research participants had moved to Istanbul during the war, from Damascus where they had lived in Kurdish working-class

neighborhoods. They had grown up in Rojava and had moved to Damascus mostly in adulthood. Solîn and Mizgîn worked in the textile business, and interestingly, their move to Istanbul was organized through their connections within this business. Solîn was single and 45 years old. She lived with her single brother, who also worked in the textile industry, and her teenage nephew. The others were married and had family. They were aged between 18 and 60 years, but the majority were young. Unlike the other interviewees, Solîn and Hêlîn had also taken part in refugee projects in KADAV (*Kadınlarla Dayanışma Vakfı*, Women's Solidarity Foundation) but were no longer active there when I met them. Solîn and Mizgîn were working at the Kitchen Project, and I met the others through them. A young interviewee Fatê, who had a baby, had worked as a laborer in Damascus, and her family worked as apartment guards and gardeners. She stated that Kurds in Damascus mostly worked in such jobs, showing that her environment was mostly working class. Another interviewee, Nazê (32 years old), who did not work in the Kitchen Project, was a university graduate but due to the war had not been able to start her working life. During the research period, she did not work but was at home taking care of her newborn baby. As her husband was educated and spoke Arabic and English, he worked in an export textile company in Osmanbey, and their situation was somewhat better than that of the other participants. They were also the only interviewees who had no plans to go to Europe.

Apart from the long-term relationship I established with the above-mentioned women, I also had conversations with many other Rojava Kurdish women and Türkiye Kurdish women in various places at various times over the three years of my research. These conversations gave me important contextual information about the knowledge, ideas, and prejudices that people in Türkiye had about the new refugees. Many expressed anti-refugee rhetoric, even though they had been refugees or migrants themselves at some point in their lives. I often listened to such conversations, for example, during the summer months when I stayed in my own village of origin (a Kurdish Alevi village in the Elbistan region). Women who came to the village on vacation from places such as London, Berlin, Ankara, Istanbul, and Adana would make passionate anti-refugee speeches. In conversation, I asked them whether they were in contact with anyone from Rojava since I knew that there were refugee families from Rojava in the area. They told me that they employed Kurds from Rojava for service jobs such as garden maintenance and cleaning. They spoke Kurdish with them but did not establish permanent relationships with them. The connections they established were thus only for irregular employment. During

my visits to Diyarbakir and Mardin in the research period, I always asked the Türkiye's Kurdish women I met whether they had friends from Rojava. In that area, I never met anyone who had established such relations, so it seems that relationships between the two groups were generally weak.

I also met with Kurdish men from Türkiye and asked them similar questions: whether they had any Kurdish acquaintances from Rojava and what kind of relationship they had, if any, with them. Sometimes, these questions prompted long conversations. None of them knew or had any contact with Kurds from Rojava. The only such contact was between Kurdish intellectuals; for example, if the author of a book about the Kurds was from Rojava, Türkiye's Kurds were also present at its launch. In such cases, their interest seemed to be raised because of their shared Kurdish cultural heritage.

Although many academic studies on Syrian refugee women have been conducted in Türkiye since the refugee crisis, I feel that the findings of these studies offer limited insights. The literature largely explores differences in religion, language, and ethnic identity compared to the host community, which offers a narrow perspective. The studies I examined (Adıgüzel & Tanyaş, 2020; Gürpınar, 2017; Kaya, 2018; Körükmez et al., 2022; Freedman et al., 2017) regard "Syrian women" as a homogeneous category that includes Kurds from Rojava, thereby making them invisible. A study by Biehl and Daniş (2020), *Migration Research in Türkiye from a Gender Perspective*, included Kurdish women among the interviewees but produced no findings specifically about Kurdish women.³ This results in epistemological injustice (Kidd et al., 2017), since the experiences of Rojava women have differed substantially from those of Arab women before and during the war, as well as while living in Türkiye as refugees. The interviews with Rojava women therefore carried extra importance. I felt this more strongly because of my own position as a Kurdish Alevi woman who has experienced, and continues to experience, discrimination and exclusion on the basis of my ethnic and religious identity. Even though I have a privileged position as an academic raised in a middle-class family with, for example, access to regular travel to Europe, I identify with the underprivileged position of Kurdish women, whether they originate from Türkiye, Rojava, or other countries.

³ I tried to scan the research conducted so far but could find only one study that researched and analyzed Syrian refugees, and attitudes and approaches toward refugees according to their political, ethnic, and religious identities: Morgül and Savaşkan (2021).

THE OKMEYDANI NEIGHBORHOOD

Since this study focuses on the encounter of two groups of women settled in the same neighborhood, Okmeydanı, this section offers some historical and sociological context to the structure of the neighborhood and the settlement of these two groups. Today, although it borders central and cosmopolitan districts such as Beyoğlu, Şişli, and Kağıthane, Okmeydanı is regarded as a slum neighborhood. Visitors see poorly constructed buildings vulnerable to earthquake damage and unplanned streets. Refugees pay rent for houses on the verge of collapse. For this reason, housing prices and rents are low, even though the neighborhood is centrally situated. Refugees settle in many neighborhoods with these characteristics, and such areas can be seen almost as waiting rooms, since those who achieve a better economic position leave for other neighborhoods in the city. Another feature of the neighborhood is that it houses many textile workshops that offer employment to the local inhabitants, and it is also close to industrial centers where other textile workshops are concentrated. Workers of all ages and genders, including children, work in these textile workshops for very low wages.

The first large migration flow came in the 1970s and 1980s. These were mainly Alevis who were leaving the rural areas as a consequence of two major events: the political coups in 1971 and 1980, and the pogroms carried out against Alevis, of which the Sivas–Kayseri massacre (1967) and the Maras massacre (1978), during which many people were killed, were the events that triggered most migration. They created an atmosphere of fear that caused many Alevis in Bakur to leave everything behind and settle in the big cities. This history also laid the basis for how Alevi neighborhoods became known for being highly politicized, leftist places. In addition to this type of migration, there were also immigrants from Alevi and other groups who came to the neighborhood earlier, for economic reasons. The Okmeydanı district became politicized with the activities of left-wing groups in the 1970s. Even though other, non-Alevi, segments of the neighborhood became closer to the radical left, the neighborhood's political identity was characterized mainly by Alevis in the 1990s (Aslan, 2011). In this decade, Alevi organizations began to increase and become stronger, and the presence of radical leftist groups in the neighborhood increased (Yonucu, 2018). Police pressure and control, which emerged in the neighborhood after the 1980 military coup, continue until today and are still significant (Aslan & Şen, 2011; Yonucu, 2018). This pressure continued

over time as the economically stronger members of the neighborhood migrated and new poor and ethnic immigrants settled in their place.

The second large migration influx occurred in the 1990s when Kurds living in Eastern Türkiye were forced out of their villages and towns and resettled in one of the large cities, often in Kurdish-dominated provinces, but many also in Istanbul and other cities in Western Türkiye.⁴ Their villages had been set on fire and their family members imprisoned; many had been tortured, and when they escaped and came to Istanbul, they remained involved in politics. With this migration influx, the political activities of the Kurds in Türkiye moved to urban centers, and party politics in these areas became important. These neighborhoods also became a focus of the Kurdish movement, as they could potentially recruit local members and enlist the support of Kurds, especially in cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, Mersin, and Adana (e.g., the current DEM party increased its representation in parliament and gained a majority in the municipal government in Kurdish cities). Voting, therefore, had a strategic importance for Kurds as it strengthened their legal position in parliament.

The third Kurdish migration flow took place in 2014–2015. After ISIS took over parts of Syria, and especially during the attack on Kobanê, many Kurds from Rojava fled to Türkiye.⁵ The Rojava Kurds in the neighborhood initially had contact mostly with each other. The interviews revealed that, when they first arrived, conditions were very difficult, and they were focused on survival. Over time, as their daily lives developed, their communication with other Kurdish neighbors improved. Neighborhoods with

⁴In 1987, the government declared a State of Emergency (OHAL) after which many Kurds were evacuated from the countryside by military forces, and mass migration took place in 1987–1999. According to the GNAT report, the figures provided by the OHAL Regional Governorship indicate that up to 1997, 905 villages and 2523 hamlets were evacuated, and the number of immigrants was established at 378,335 (TBMM, 1998). Human Rights Watch estimated this number to be 2 million (HRW, 2002), while the Turkish Human Rights Foundation, the Human Rights Association, and the Association for Social Assistance and Culture of Migrants (Göç-Der) stated in their joint press release that 3–4 million people had migrated. Approximately 12,000 people fled to Iraq during these conflict years (UNHCR, 2004). Forced migration also led many Kurdish citizens to migrate to Europe as political refugees (Kurban & Yüksek, 2008).

⁵Çelik (2005), in an article entitled “I miss my village!”, reveals important findings about the experiences of Kurdish women, among them Alevi and Sunnis, who came to the metropolises as a result of forced migration in the 1990s. She describes this process in terms of gender and power relations, in which also political organizations and other associations played a role.

different ethnic groups, such as Okmeydanı, tend to be poor, and the residential environment is of low quality. At the same time, the fact that Kurds and refugees live there further reduces the economic value of the area. This developed into a cycle, as the low economic value of the area and its dangerous environment ensured that houses were given to Kurds and other refugees by “latent consensus” in the early years of refugee settlement. In later years, this consensus was disrupted by the state’s high-level discourse on refugee and Kurdish policy, leading to racist attitudes and attacks. It became common in neighborhoods in Istanbul (as I experienced recently while looking for new accommodation myself) to hear statements, such as “This is a decent neighborhood—no Kurds or Syrians live here.” Therefore, while women from Rojava were creating basic humanitarian conditions in Istanbul, they were also trying to protect themselves and their families from sexual, racist, and other violence directed at them.

Over the last two decades, another important development in the neighborhood has been the position of the DEM (then the HDP), which represents Kurdish interests and is now an important party in municipal elections. Both secular and Islamic Turks see the HDP as a party open to negotiations, and as a consequence, it has gained a powerful position. The effect of this situation on the neighborhood is largely positive for the Kurds. For example, *muhtar* (local chiefs) elections are an important element of political representation, especially at the neighborhood level where the *muhtars* exert their influence. When Kurds form the majority in a neighborhood, they can elect their own *muhtar* and have a voice in local developments. With their “own” *muhtar*, they have, for example, greater access to housing and can more easily obtain permission to open a shop or business. In the metropolis of Istanbul, during the 1990s, Kurdish immigrants became increasingly powerful, mainly through leftist and pro-Kurdish political parties. Moreover, women became increasingly important within the Kurdish movement and were also seen as important for membership and voting. Kurdish political activity grew in importance as a protective mechanism against racism and the attacks of ultranationalist groups. Thus, the scale of the city and metropolis played an important role in improving conditions for Kurds and Kurdish women.

Due to the impoverished and unsafe character of the neighborhood and its large refugee population, it became a focus area for NGOs offering their services to newly arrived refugees. I divide the involvement of NGOs in Okmeydanı (and more generally in Türkiye) during the Syrian refugee settlement into two periods: the early period of 2014–2018 and the later

period starting in 2018. At the beginning of the Syrian war, we saw a highly diversified NGO presence in metropolitan cities such as Istanbul, adopting an optimistic position. Feminist groups also became involved in supporting the newcomers. During this early period, NGOs delivered joint refugee projects with the EU, which supported them economically and institutionally and cooperated with the Turkish Medical Association in a project called “Doctors call on everyone to defend life and peace!”⁶ We saw that municipalities led by the CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, the Republican People’s Party), which would later intensify its anti-refugee policy, also developed policies for refugees during this period. Early, albeit partial, efforts were made by NGOs and the CHP to gather information on refugees, in compliance with EU policies, which may have been an important incentive for the initiation of the projects. During this period of optimism, NGO institutionalism had two direct effects: it made ethnic identities more fluid and it strengthened the presence of women in the public sphere. It was during this period that the Kitchen Project was established (below) and became an important resource for Rojava Kurdish women. NGOs in the neighborhood, such as the Okmeydanı Association and the Mutfak project, played a supporting role in making the first moves to transform the precarious position of Rojava Kurdish women in the neighborhood.

In the second period, which was when I came to know the women and the project, this early optimism had vanished, replaced by widespread unrest in Türkiye’s population about the millions of Syrians who had come and stayed. This was partially a consequence of the 2016 military coup,⁷ after which a climate of fear and insecurity prevailed throughout the country. The state gradually began to dominate every area of civil society and became increasingly authoritarian. The AK Party government targeted foreign NGOs in particular, and obtaining permits for these organizations became difficult, and some permits were not renewed or were granted only for short periods. It became also more difficult for NGO workers to obtain work permits. Combined with the economic crisis and an increasingly authoritarian government, a discourse emerged that held refugees responsible for all these problems. With the withdrawal of the NGOs, the position of Rojava women became more precarious. Türkiye’s Kurds also adopted this anti-refugee attitude, holding refugees responsible for the

⁶ https://www.ttb.org.tr/haberarsiv_goster.php?Guid=675e6950-9232-11e7-b66d-1540034f819c retrieved on July 14, 2023.

⁷ Information provided in an interview I conducted with a former AK Party member.

nation's problems. This sentiment contradicted other developments in and characteristics of their situation: On the one hand, they still competed with Turks in the metropolises to which they migrated; on the other hand, alignment with Kurdish politics while at the same time identifying as being "more Turkish than refugees" positioned them well to access resources.

Neighborhood connections and the women's involvement in the Kitchen Project were further shaped and influenced by the continuing aspiration of many Rojava Kurdish women to leave Türkiye and move to Europe. Although not everyone wanted to leave, the majority planned to do so, since life in Türkiye was precarious. There were, however, also reasons to stay. Family members who remained behind in Syria and were still at risk could be monitored more easily and protected from Türkiye, close to their homeland. The same was true of houses and other material possessions: Remaining in the region gave people easier access to their properties, even if only in their minds. Nevertheless, Syrians arriving as refugees in Türkiye often had plans to migrate to third countries; they saw Türkiye as a transit country from where they would look for other opportunities. When, in more recent years, racist attacks against refugees started and the economic situation became increasingly dire (not only for refugees but also for Turkish residents), Rojava Kurds and their families started actively searching for new countries to migrate to, especially in Europe.⁸

SETTING UP A HOME, AND NEIGHBORHOOD ENCOUNTERS IN OKMEYDANI

The first task facing those arriving in Istanbul is finding suitable housing. Accommodation is normally found through acquaintances already there. The new arrivals found security by sharing daily life, care, and family chores with relatives and neighbors; the house has a strategic importance as a central area for neighborly relations. After their arrival in Istanbul, the women I interviewed told me that they initially stayed together in poor-quality and unhealthy houses and warehouses. For example, Mizgîn and her children were receiving medical treatment because they had lived in damp accommodation. Türkiye's Kurds had experienced similar problems in Istanbul when they arrived in the 1990s as a result of forced migration

⁸In addition to the interviewees in this study, all the Kurds from Rojava with whom I have been in contact personally have been trying to travel to Europe since 2015, for various reasons. Those who have established a business in Türkiye also feel unsafe.

(Şen & Tunç, 2011; Yarkin, 2020). After a year, they were able to find better homes, and neighbors helped them with sofas, carpets, and kitchen utensils. Access to housing, employment, education, and health needs is easier within certain networks. Although Syrian refugees' involvement in Istanbul's housing, employment, health, and education systems, in general, indicates a structural integration, different factors are decisive in shaping this process for the Kurds of Rojava, as they live under the control and supervision of the state because of their Kurdishness.

Various organizations were active in the Okmeydanı neighborhood to assist refugees. The Okmeydanı Association was established in 2014 as a protest group to counter the urban transformation project announced by the AK Party administration in the neighborhood and to provide grassroots support. The participants of the association and the statements they made tended toward left-wing politics and sought solutions regarding the vulnerability to earthquakes of many houses in the neighborhood, as well as property rights. The Solidarity Network "I am a refugee, I am a fellow citizen" (the "Refugee Solidarity Network") is also a leftist organization established at the beginning of the Syrian war that worked in the various neighborhoods in Istanbul where refugees were concentrated: Yarımburgaz in Küçükçekmece, Tahtakale in Avcılar, Altınşehir in Başakşehir, Güvercintepe, Şahintepe, Okmeydanı in Şişli, Demirkapı in Bağcılar. I give these neighborhood names because they can be seen as a mental map of the places where, like Okmeydanı, Kurdish immigrants from Kurdistan's rural areas initially settled in the 1990s. These same neighborhoods were also the places where Syrian refugees settled after the war started and which saw similar encounters between Rojava Kurds and Türkiye's Kurds as in Okmeydanı. This shows the relevance of the research topic for many locations in Istanbul and across Türkiye. After the arrival of the Syrian refugees, the Okmeydanı Association became part of the Refugee Fellow Solidarity Network and became involved in the process of settling refugee families in the neighborhood. A third organization active in the neighborhood was the above-mentioned women's support organization KADAV, which also played a part in improving conditions for the Rojava women.

The Okmeydanı Association and the Refugee Solidary Network were crucial in creating the first contacts between the refugees and the inhabitants of the neighborhood. The fact that they were organizing projects for the refugees, were respected NGOs in the neighborhood with a powerful position, and were operating from an official office in the neighborhood created a positive atmosphere around the arrival and settlement of the

refugees and offered them a very important starting point toward acceptance in the neighborhood. It opened doors to them, not only in terms of direct material assistance in setting up their homes (help with furniture, etc.) but also in finding jobs and making connections. This positive atmosphere facilitated encounters between the original inhabitants and the newcomers. In these encounters, it proved to be much easier for Türkiye's Kurds and the Rojava Kurds to connect, because both groups knew Kurdish, while other Syrians had no language through which to communicate with the Turkish or Kurdish populations in the neighborhood. This shared language knowledge was also the reason why initial contacts were formed mainly with the Sunni Kurdish inhabitants who had settled in Okmeydanı during the 1990s, and not with the Alevi inhabitants who either knew no Kurdish or had lost it after living in Istanbul for many decades. The encounters that form the focus of this chapter are thus mainly those between Rojava and Türkiye's Kurds, who shared—apart from their language—an adherence to Sunni Islam.

The presence of Türkiye's Kurds who had settled in the neighborhood before them offered additional advantages for Rojava Kurdish women in terms of accessing housing and job opportunities. Women from Rojava stated that they had received significant support from Kurdish women from Türkiye and the Okmeydanı Association, in finding accommodation to rent and purchasing household goods.⁹ They had also received support in accessing school and hospital services. This support has been very important to them, especially since they, at least initially, spoke no Turkish. To put one's life in order depends on at least one person in the household earning an income. When I conducted my research in the neighborhood, the Rojava Kurdish women had homes and access to social services. They initially worked as textile middlemen, market traders, or food sellers in the neighborhoods where they lived. There were important reasons why most, especially the women, found jobs in their own neighborhoods: It reduced daily expenses such as for transport, they did not have the networks to find work elsewhere, and it was seen as unsafe to leave the neighborhood. The neighborhood was seen as a safe place from which the women could

⁹Kahveci et al. (2022) and Kahveci (2023) investigate the processes of finding rental accommodation for Syrian refugees in Istanbul. They reveal that factors such as gender, housing rental prices, neighborhood, and political representation of the neighborhood are important. However, Rojava women often turn to networks such as their Kurdish relatives or fellow countrymen to find accommodation.

operate, as it is an area within which the men in their household accept their movement, and it allows them enough time to complete their usual household tasks. Living in the same neighborhood—or neighborhoods nearby—as families they knew also enabled women to share care work. It appears from my research that women made connections at the neighborhood level much more easily than men. Men found low-paid jobs, especially in the textile sector, and often worked 12–15 hours per day. They were therefore not very present in the everyday life of the neighborhood. The women did other jobs, such as working in the Kitchen Project, as I will show below. They had responsibility for household tasks and children and were less available for heavy jobs such as those in the textile sector.

Often when I visited the Rojava women in their homes, Türkiye's Kurdish women would also come, and we would sit together for hours. From my observations, I found that the women connected with each other in three areas: sharing food, hospital visits, and religious customs. The Rojava Kurds took the initiative in these house visits: They made sure they had cleaned their houses and offered Syrian coffee, tea, snacks, and food from their home regions. The effort they put into receiving guests seemed to be an important strategy through which the Rojava women tried to show their skills, their cultural heritage, and their capability. It was also a way in which they tried to escape their poverty: They did not show or discuss it, or their financial problems, but instead tried to normalize their life and show their strength by demonstrating that they were capable of offering good-quality food, even preparing extensive meals for their visitors. Second, women made connections through religious practices. My research indicates that women already used religious symbols in Syria as a way of connecting and adapting to the surrounding culture. Solin, for example, said that she started to wear a headscarf after moving to Damascus, where the Arab religious culture was much more prominent than in her Kurdish home region. In the houses in Okmeydani, there was evidence of a range of religious customs: elderly women would say their prayers; during Ramadan, they fasted; they hung Islamic pictures and symbols on the walls. When their babies cried, they played them recitations from the Quran on their phones, and often also played religious music or recitations on their phones when they had visitors at home. It seems that they regarded this display of religiosity as a way of connecting with their visitors. Third, after their arrival in Türkiye, many suffered health problems, often as a consequence of war and their refugee journey. They often therefore had hospital appointments. Although the Türkiye's Kurdish

women did not accompany them on these visits, they sometimes looked after their children and talked to them about their health issues. Talking about health seemed to be a safe way of showing vulnerability and the need for support and protection.

These research findings reveal that the “neighborhood unit” on a social scale can protect women, Kurds, and refugees at risk. The fact that there was, and is, almost no institutional Kurdish public sector in Istanbul since the birth of a new political climate in 2015 makes the neighborhood unit even more important for Rojava Kurdish women. However, at the same time, the hierarchical position created by the different citizenship positions of the two groups of women was not completely erased in the relationships they established. The fact that Türkiye’s Kurdish women were citizens and the Rojava Kurdish women refugees created a barrier that continued to affect their positions and relationships, as shown in several examples.

The neighborhood relations that developed only existed inside the home; any relationship did not extend to sharing work or activities in public. For example, it is usual in Türkiye for women who live in the same neighborhood to go to market together. However, this did not happen between the Türkiye’s Kurds and the Rojava Kurdish women; the latter only went with each other to market.

Another shared bond between the Kurds of Türkiye and Rojava was through marriage. A young woman related to my interviewee Mizgîn was married to a Kurd from Türkiye, and I encountered marriages between Rojava women and Türkiye’s Kurdish men many times, also outside the neighborhood. However, the same did not happen between Türkiye’s Kurdish women and Rojava men: it was only Rojava women who seemed to be available marriage partners for Türkiye’s Kurds. As in other situations in Türkiye and elsewhere, marriages can be made between men of a higher hierarchy and women of a lower hierarchical position, following a historical pattern of marriage relations related to a belief in the patriarchal bloodline transmitted through the father. A man can therefore marry someone from another religion, ethnicity, or lower hierarchical group, because the woman—and any children born from such marriages—are subsumed within the man’s ethnic, religious, and hierarchical position. For Rojava women, such marriages could be made to gain economic and family stability and access to citizenship, but might also be a source of exploitation (see, e.g., Goers et al., 2022).

A third example of the barriers between Rojava and other Kurds is seen in how Rojava Kurdish women moved away from Okmeydanı to different

neighborhoods through their Rojava Kurdish networks. Moving to another neighborhood, city, or country reshapes relations, and the relations between the two different groups of Kurdish women were also reshaped by such moves. For example, my interviewee Mizgîn moved to a different neighborhood during the pandemic. During this period, her relationships with women from Rojava continued, but those with the Türkiye's Kurdish women weakened. When I met Hêlîn, who had migrated to Berlin, she had also lost contact with Türkiye's Kurds. I joined her on a picnic in Berlin, and all those present were Kurds from Rojava. Her life in Berlin was, therefore, again initially established among and with the Kurds of Rojava, not with Kurds from other regions, with other Syrians, or with Germans.

In short, although the two groups of women created bonds and relationships inside the home, they stayed segregated in public and would do few activities together. The partnership that they created remained limited to the private space and did not extend to the public domain.

KURDISH ENCOUNTERS ON THE AXES OF NEIGHBORHOOD, VIOLENCE, AND SECURITY

The safety of the neighborhood was a continual cause for concern for its inhabitants and affected the Rojava Kurdish women even more than others, at least in certain aspects. As women, and due to their precarious status as refugees without Turkish ID, they were more vulnerable to violent sexist and/or racist attacks. Politically, being Kurdish from Rojava meant that they could be associated with unrest and suspected of potential connections with Kurdish political party activity in the neighborhood and elsewhere, leading them to become the target of police control and surveillance. The poor economic situation of most people living in the neighborhood was a further reason for insecurity and precariousness, combined with the poor quality of housing and earthquake risk. This combination of factors created significant insecurity for many inhabitants of the neighborhood, causing them to be in a constant state of alert to protect themselves, their families, and the women and girls of their families. I will give below examples of how this precariousness lived out in everyday life for the Rojava and Türkiye's Kurdish women, and how this affected their relationships. My own position as a Türkiye's Kurdish woman is recognized in this analysis, although I was not living in the same neighborhood.

In the first months of my research, I became friends with Solîn, Mizgîn, and Hêlîn. Solîn and Hêlîn always insisted that I stay the night every time

I met them. As a Kurd, I was culturally familiar with this offer and also invited them to stay at my house. Since they were living with Mizgîn's brother, it would have been more convenient for them to stay at my house sometimes, but they never accepted my offer. Much later, I understood that these initial exchanges and their refusal to come to or stay at my home were related to issues of safety and the difficulty of obtaining permission to go anywhere as a single woman. First, it was risky for refugees to travel around the city, since they could be stopped by the police and asked for their ID, as happened frequently. Even if they had valid papers, they could be deported back to Syria, be abused, mistreated, or arrested by the police during the encounter. Second, Rojava women, especially when single, lived under the tight control of their relatives with regard to visiting places or going outside the house. The anxiety that something violent or shameful could happen to them was strengthened by incidents involving Rojava Kurdish women and stories circulating in the neighborhood.

About six months after my first meeting with the Rojava women, in an interview with an NGO worker at KADAV in 2019, the latter told me about a shocking incident in the neighborhood involving a young woman from Efrîn (a Kurdish canton in North Syria). She was kidnapped by two young Türkiye's men and taken to Adana, a city over 800 km to the east of Istanbul. After being apprehended by the police in Adana, the two men were released, and the woman was deported back to Syria, despite the continuing war. During the same period, a young woman from Efrîn was raped and then killed alongside her three-year-old child, in a city close to Istanbul. Although the victim of this brutality was described in the press as "a Syrian woman," the fact that the woman was from Efrîn stood out in the perception of the Rojava women. These incidents had a profound effect on the sense of security of the Rojava women living in the neighborhood.

Amid the sexual violence experienced by Yezidi Kurdish women in 2013, and the conflicts in late 2015 and early 2016, all kinds of violence directed specifically at Kurdish women's bodies, homes, and belongings were shared through the internet and news media and became widely seen. While these violent incidents, and the stories and images circulating about them, increased women's fears, they also increased the control of families and tightened the social environment around women. As Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) has suggested, the concept of honor in Kurdish society strengthens mechanisms of control based on patriotism and the reputation of the family and community. The forced marriage of daughters is one strategy used by families to prevent the loss of honor (Gill et al., 2012). It should, however,

be noted that such marriages create a new circle of violence. One story circulating among Rojava Kurds was that of a young woman from Rojava who was married to an 80-year-old Kurdish man in Türkiye, ran away from home after being subjected to violence from her husband and in-laws, and ended up living on the street with no support. Such cases were frequently reported in the press and research reports. Jamie Dettmer's (2013) article reveals that similar violent situations occur in Syria and Rojava. Many such cases in Türkiye and Rojava, whether in the same neighborhood or other cities, became known to the Rojava women and heightened their sense of insecurity. These violent incidents limited their mobility in the city and led them to establish more controlled relationships within the neighborhood. My observations and interviews show that Rojava women felt safer and stronger when involved with NGOs, as their political position was much more precarious than that of Arab women from Syria. For this reason, the Kitchen Project in the neighborhood had a different meaning for the Rojava women than for Arab women.

Research has shown that gender roles and relations change with migration, including for refugee women in Türkiye fleeing the Syrian war (Körükmez et al., 2022). It seems, however, that this happens in different ways on each social scale, and such differences are important. For example, when she marries a Kurdish man from Türkiye, a Kurdish woman from Rojava is just another woman whose body has been colonized by a man from Türkiye. However, the popular image of Rojava women in Kurdish politics in Türkiye is that of a hero. Thus, while the fighting Rojava woman serves as a glorified image for Kurds in Türkiye, at the same time, the woman from Rojava living as their neighbor is redefined as "Syrian," in a lower hierarchical position and often in competition with them.

Apart from a lack of safety due to sexual and racist violence, attacks in the streets, and marriages on unequal terms and in precarious conditions, there was also the political dimension that Kurds were and are always aware of in Türkiye, and that was especially present in this neighborhood. I observed a reluctance among Türkiye's Kurdish women to be with women from Rojava in public spaces: As stated in the previous section, they did not want to be seen with them. At the time this research was conducted, the Kobanê trial was ongoing, in which HDP (currently DEM) party leaders and members were prosecuted for involvement in the "support for Kobanê" actions during the 2014 ISIS operation against Kobanê in Rojava. After these events, the police continued to increase

pressure on Kurds in daily life. In a neighborhood such as Okmeydanı, where political activity and confrontations with the police have been commonplace since the 1970s, people are under greater pressure than in other places. Knowing the activities of local political parties, and the potential for demonstrations and popular uprisings that could arise from this, the police were on high alert and ready to take even violent action against anyone possibly involved. This situation limited the political solidarity and rapprochement that could be established between the Kurds of Türkiye and the Kurds of Rojava, since Türkiye's Kurds were well aware that contact with the Rojava Kurds could compromise their security. Visiting Rojava women in their homes was, therefore, a much safer way to be in contact with them.

THE KITCHEN PROJECT: AN EMPOWERING MECHANISM IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The Kitchen Project examined in this study was established in the Okmeydanı neighborhood explored in the previous sections: a poor neighborhood in the Şişli district. The initiative also had branches in the Kanarya and Bayramtepe neighborhoods. Its main goal was to create a space of solidarity for refugee families in the early period after the initial refugee influx. It was established under the leadership of the Okmeydanı Association¹⁰ and in cooperation with the Solidarity Network "I Am A Refugee, I Am A Fellow Citizen." Both were established during the early period of NGO engagement in the neighborhood and Türkiye, as explained above. From 2016, the Okmeydanı Association started to support women's "informal" production of home-made food products. The women tried to prepare the food by coming together in their homes or sometimes using the association's space. Seventeen women led initiatives and worked actively for the kitchen. The establishment of the kitchen as an independent place, that is, the place I visited during the research process, was realized with funding from a German foundation and support provided through the Okmeydanı Association.

When food orders were received, word was sent around to the participating women in the neighborhood, who then came to prepare the food. The Kitchen Project was established on the ground floor of an apartment

¹⁰ <https://www.sivilsayfalar.org/2019/09/23/dayanismadan-dogan-mutfak-kadin-kadina-multeci-mutfagi/> retrieved on May 3, 2023.

building, in a former shop. It had a kitchen where the participating women prepared food, and a section reserved for children to play, which made it easier for women to bring their children along. In the same building were other neighborhood activities, such as textile workshops and wedding halls. The refugee policies of the EU and the UN prioritized the protection of women and children, and the Kitchen Project was a suitable environment for this approach.¹¹ In the kitchen, there were usually at least some women and children present. The atmosphere was multilingual and comfortable. The fact that the employees were women was welcomed by the neighborhood. In this respect, the Kitchen Project can be seen as a “docile” project, a tame and controllable activity that fits within the expectation of women as preparers of food. Work for the Kitchen Project was to order and, therefore, flexible: those women who were available could go and work.

The fact that the Kitchen Project was located directly in the neighborhood where the women were living met the security needs of Rojava Kurdish women and created some continuity between the Project and their homes: They were already shopping, picking their children up from school, and involved in other neighborhood activities. They also could make use of the childcare. All these factors prevented women from easily breaking away from working life. Like my interviewee Mizgîn, some women brought their young children along when they worked at the Kitchen Project. The kitchen environment was undoubtedly one tied to traditional female roles such as cooking and cleaning but, at the same time, it was a place where women were able to develop solidarity channels to meet their own needs. A woman could leave her child with another woman to visit the hospital or do other chores. When one woman shopped, she was also shopping for a woman who was taking care of her baby at home.

In every conversation I had with them, my interviewees working at the Kitchen Project specifically mentioned the connections they had with institutions and the activities they did for them. They took food orders from universities and NGOs, for example, and made contact with these institutions when delivering the meals. Mizgîn and Solîn went to Ankara with NGOs to attend a meeting organized by a government ministry (they did not remember which one) and explain the Kitchen Project. They

¹¹There were similar projects in other cities in Türkiye, such as the Mutbakh Project in Antep-Kırkayak.

talked about their participation with pride. The interviewees talked about the training and skills they had received in Syria, such as nursing and first-aid training in Rojava, organized by Kurdish political groups and carried out within a short timescale. For this reason, their skills and education were more advanced than those of other Syrian women.¹²

Two Kurdish women were very active employees of the Kitchen Project and, because of their active involvement, were also invited to be part of the project's activities, such as meetings with the ministry and municipalities; they proudly showed me the news and photos on social media when they had participated in these activities. Through such activities, the Kitchen Project gave them a much more visible public presence. The fact that the Kitchen Project was a women's project increased the interest of both the (Şişli) municipality and NGO circles. It empowered the Kurdish women working there in other ways too. Alongside the economic advantage of having an income, it also enabled women to "stay within the law," as the project was established under the leadership of the Okmeydanı Association.¹³ Almost every week, various meetings were held by a university, press, or municipality for which catering was needed. Thus, in the eyes of the neighborhood, they worked for an official institution.

Even when the Kitchen Project closed due to the pandemic, Turkish volunteers still tried to reach out to women in the neighborhood and offer their support. For example, just after the start of the pandemic, I visited my interviewees who were participating in an activity at Şişli Square. After the closure of the Kitchen, women with children suffered especially greatly. For this reason, some women from Turkish and Kurdish leftist feminist circles, connected to the Şişli Municipality Women's Studies Units, set up an open market to support these women within the framework of the March 8 events, and Solın, Hêlin, and Mizgîn sold the canned goods they had prepared, which gave them some income. Thus, at crucial moments, when women had very little to fall back on, such support offered them a last opportunity to improve their situation.

¹²I did not fully understand what these short courses were or which institutions ran them. However, as the process progressed, I realized that they were given by political groups (Iraqi Kurdish KDP) to prepare society for the constant conflict and unstable conditions in the Rojava region.

¹³The association was founded in 2014 to address urban transformation in the neighborhood. It was launched as a solidarity association that provided legal support and information for those in the neighborhood whose houses were due to be demolished.

Although the involvement of the research participants in the Kitchen Project was seen as temporary, and the division of labor within the household therefore continued as before, there were nevertheless some changes in the women's gender positions. It had been difficult for all refugees to find jobs soon after arrival, and some of the women found a job through the Kitchen Project earlier than their husbands. They then gained recognition from others in the neighborhood because of their involvement in the Project. Through the Project, they catered to various organizations, including local government, universities, and ministries, which gave them access to public spaces they would not have been able to enter otherwise. This somewhat stretched the patriarchal relations within the family. Other studies have shown that extreme situations, such as being a refugee, can weaken patriarchal power relations in the family (Şeker, 2019). For example, migration can result in women working, which they did not do previously. When the daughter-in-law becomes the breadwinner of the household, the husband and the mother-in-law may lose their strong hierarchical position within the family. The NGO-Kitchen Project was an important factor in this respect. Nevertheless, Solin explained that she still only visited her neighbors after obtaining her brother's permission, for safety reasons.

In summary, the Kitchen Project created an environment in which women did not need to restrict themselves to being simply Muslim, Kurdish, or a woman. The women's activities in the project reshaped their sense of belonging and their objective living conditions. Their Kurdish citizenship was both shaken and re-established in this process. After coming to Istanbul, Rojava women had to re-establish their lives from scratch. They were forced to go into public spaces to work but doing so brought security risks, as shown above. The Kitchen Project enabled women to earn within the relatively safe space of the neighborhood, by using their skills while gaining a certain recognition and reputation under a corporate roof. It also allowed them to care safely for their children. However, NGO activities decreased after 2018 (affected by the 2016 military coup), and the state came to dominate this area.

NGO HIERARCHIES

In terms of international NGOs, a clear divergence emerged regarding the position of the Kurdish women from the Kitchen Project with whom I associated. Professional workers for international refugee NGOs comprised mostly Arab and Turkish volunteers. Although the participating

volunteers may not have been conscious of it, visiting such environments requires a high level of social capital and social skills and produces a cosmopolitan elitism. The women from Rojava were clearly aware that they did not belong to the elite character of these environments. They were aware of their disadvantaged civic position due to their historical and geographical marginalization. Although the Kitchen Project was generally able to create a safe space for the research participants, as we have seen above, in some situations they still felt marginalized as Kurds. For example, when going to the project and other related institutional environments, they did not reveal their Kurdish identity but presented themselves as Syrian refugee women. While at the Kitchen Project, they spoke Arabic, the shared language of communication there. Others saw them as Syrian, and the women seemed to feel that it was not safe for them to reveal their Kurdish identity in institutional environments. This may be related to the history of marginalization in Syrian Kurdistan, where they would also have spoken Arabic and most probably not emphasized their Kurdishness. It may also be related to an awareness of the precarious position of Kurds in Türkiye. At the same time, the Rojava Kurdish women felt that their lives were not limited to their positions within the Kitchen Project. They embraced the myth of the brave and free Kurdish woman fighting against ISIS in the prominent Western media, as this reminded them that they were part of a larger and stronger society. This gendered image gave them strength, and they often referred to it while showing me pictures on their phones of women fighters. It seems that such imaginaries allowed them to escape the limitations they felt as Rojava Kurdish refugees from Syria.

I once attended an event with my interviewees that was organized by another NGO. The event, for which my interviewees had cooked the meals, was attended by many Arab Syrian refugees. When we entered the dining hall, my interviewees said suddenly, "They are rich, we were working for them [in Damascus]." In such environments, the Rojava women refrained from establishing relationships with the Arab professionals who were also present, since they felt that they did not belong to their circles. At the same time, however, they were able to easily establish relationships with Turkish professionals; I even observed them making jokes with them. Despite such exceptions, the Rojava women predominantly found strength within the Rojava Kurdish network. Rather than investing in relationships with Arab or Turkish women, they built lasting ties with Kurdish women from their own home region. They also tried to invest in relationships with those in the European diaspora, hoping that they would be able to follow

them one day. These networks do not always automatically lead to greater empowerment; indeed, they can have the opposite effect. Migration to Europe has the potential to draw women back into patriarchal relations. For example, after Hêlîn migrated to Germany through the UN program, she married a relative and no longer talks about her plans to study medicine, while Solîn lives with her family and remains single.

I tried to examine here the questioning of Einhorn (2006) regarding the relationship between “NGOs and women’s use of civil society spaces for collective action,” which she raised for discussion. The refugee policies of the EU and the UN prioritized protecting women and children, and the Kitchen Project was a suitable environment for this approach. However, the Kitchen Project eventually came to an end, not only because of the pandemic, but also because of a problem with the president of the Okmeydanı Association. The women participating in the project brought the problem to the attention of Şişli Municipal Council since the president of the association was also a member of the city council. Women in the council and from the Okmeydanı Women’s Platform announced that the president was being investigated due to allegations that he subjected refugee women to mobbing, economic, psychological, and verbal violence at the Kitchen Project.¹⁴ This may be another indication of the hierarchical and elite position of the organizers and volunteers involved in the Kitchen Project, in contrast to the refugee women whom the project was meant to serve.

CONCLUSION

This research into the lives of Rojava women in a poor neighborhood in Istanbul and their encounters with Kurdish women from Türkiye produced important results regarding the hierarchical relations and segregation of different groups of people in the neighborhood. While the Kurdish women from Rojava were attempting to establish new lives as refugees in a neighborhood of Istanbul, they encountered Kurdish women from Türkiye who had previously migrated to the same neighborhood through forced migration. Many such Kurdish encounters occurred largely as a result of war and conflict and increased the precarious position of the Kurds. The concept of precariousness in this context relates to legality

¹⁴ <https://sendika.org/2021/06/okmeydanindan-kadinlar-anlatiyor-multeci-kadinlarsiddet-uygulayan-bir-adamin-kendi-siddetinden-magduriyet-devsirme-cabasi-623598> retrieved on Feb 8, 2024.

versus illegality (Goldring & Landolt, 2011, p. 328) which causes unequal access to citizenship rights. The Okmeydanı neighborhood, where both groups established their lives after migration, offers favorable conditions in terms of access to housing and job opportunities, but conversely has poor quality housing, vulnerable to earthquakes, and a tense political atmosphere that also poses risks for its inhabitants. As discussed in detail above, the fact that the neighborhood has had a political identity since the 1970s offered a positive environment for the establishment of NGOs offering solidarity to newly arrived inhabitants, but it also creates an environment of oppression and tight police control. For this reason, Kurdish families whose conditions—particularly economic conditions—have improved tend to move to other neighborhoods. However, a lack of clarity regarding the families' ability to obtain ID, which would give their children a future, and the increase in violent attacks were continual sources of insecurity for them. The fact that some of the families of the research participants already lived in Europe, and two of them migrated to Europe shortly after the research period, provided Rojava Kurdish women with hope and a plan to go to Europe if they had the opportunity. Leaving the neighborhood and indeed Türkiye were therefore visions that were, for many, always on the horizon.

The practices of Rojava Kurdish women and Türkiye's Kurdish women when meeting each other in the metropolis of Istanbul reveal that these encounters led to the establishment of certain hierarchies. The emphasis on cultural differences increased as they came to know each other better. While Rojava women, who were in a weaker position, emphasized a "common culture," Türkiye's Kurdish women, in a more advantageous position and politically more powerful, emphasized "cultural difference." In response, Rojava Kurdish women worked hard to establish partnerships with the Kurdish women of Türkiye, mainly within their homes, which was the only place where the latter felt comfortable to meet with them. The home was the place where Rojava Kurdish women demonstrated their skills and tried to establish partnerships through religious practices, as they had done in Damascus living as Kurds among (often more religious) Arab women. Moreover, the encounters between the two groups of women followed a certain order, moving from space to security, and then mobility. The first step for newly arrived refugees is to find acceptable accommodation in the neighborhood; after that, they can seek to secure a livelihood, better economic conditions, and a more secure position within the neighborhood. Finally, they may be in a position to visit other places freely and

possibly move to other neighborhoods. In order to move up these ranks, they first need a Turkish ID. Without this, the women were at risk of being stopped in the street by the police, interrogated, and deported. Without ID, they did not have permission to go to other cities, which created spatial divisions. Another external factor in terms of security and space is that Rojava Kurdish women were more vulnerable and therefore more likely to be targeted by perpetrators of violent and sexual and racist attacks.

The NGOs in the neighborhood were another important nexus offering opportunities and support to the Rojava Kurdish women, who mobilized this support as a means to improve their living situation. The Kitchen Project, which formed the center of the research and was the place where it started, not only gave women the opportunity to earn an income by using their skills, but it also provided them with a safe space and the confidence and reputation they needed in the neighborhood. This project, in common with other NGOs, also gave women another opportunity: Leaving the neighborhood safely was only possible if organized through and with the NGOs. At the same time, the Kitchen Project revealed other hierarchies among the NGO leaders and volunteers, as well as with Arab Syrian women who were often in a better position than Rojava Kurdish women, even before migration. Such hierarchical differences were also seen in the focus of academic studies on Syrian refugee women, which rendered Rojava Kurdish women and their specific conditions invisible. The Kitchen Project closed with the pandemic, but NGO activities supporting refugees had already started to decrease after 2018. In the first years after their arrival, the women therefore had more access to assistance and support, but their position deteriorated from the 2016 military coup and, more acutely, after 2018 when the government increasingly limited possibilities for NGOs and NGO workers to operate in Türkiye and even closed down many organizations. In short, the Kitchen Project offered empowerment opportunities for some women in the neighborhood initially, but this was not permanent or sustainable. The NGO projects and the encounters with Türkiye's Kurdish women were helpful in some ways but did not provide conditions for "equal" citizenship.

We can conclude from this research that the Syrian war, which challenged the boundaries and geography of Kurdish identity, began to reshape the geographical and cultural-ethnic boundaries of Kurdish political society. Migration movements led to increased differences in the legal status of Kurdish women in the countries they live in. We have seen that this process led Türkiye's Kurds to begin to differentiate themselves from Rojava Kurds

in a hierarchical manner, seeing themselves as closer to Turks and the Rojava Kurds as closer to Arabs, and regarding themselves as real citizens with an ID and the right to vote, in contrast to Rojava Kurds who did not have these rights. Although Türkiye's Kurds were still in a vulnerable and perilous position themselves—and lived in a neighborhood vulnerable to earthquake damage and political tensions—the Rojava Kurds were at still greater risk. The Türkiye's Kurdish women were therefore eager to define themselves as better citizens, in order to protect themselves from the more perilous situation of the Rojava Kurdish women, and defined them as “different from us.” The position of women thus began to transform into multiple levels of citizenship within and beyond different borders (Yuval-Davis, 1997) and similar to what Yuval-Davis elsewhere (2020, 100) calls another type of racism, namely defining the other party as “not modern.”

Differences in the legal status of Kurdish women in the countries in which they live have increased with migration movements. Zolberg (1988) was among the first to note how the spread of the nation-state as a universal model for organizing political communities concomitantly produced refugees who did not fit national definitions of membership. In former multi-ethnic or colonial territories, this new definition and organization of people as belonging—or not belonging—to the right national category has resulted in large groups of people being excluded from being ideal citizens of the nation-state project.

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PART V

Citizenship and Activism



Kurdish Women's Activism in Iranian Kurdistan: Between Abeyance and Mobilization

Azad Rahim Hajiagha

INTRODUCTION

After revealing that she was a member of a leftist Kurdish party, Rexşende Bulurî, a 41-year-old mother from Mahabad, was forced to leave her five young children and join the Peshmerga forces in tumultuous times, when Kurdistan was under attack from the Islamic Republic of Iran (1982). One year later, a 13-year-old girl from Saqez, Emîne Kakabawe, was finally able to join the Peshmerga on her third attempt and was given a Kalashnikov bigger¹ than herself. The girl's dramatic and inspiring life journey, from Peshmerga fighter to Kurdish refugee and, finally, Swedish lawmaker, made her a controversial figure, both within Swedish politics and her own Left Party (Vänsterpartiet). In 2016, she was named "Swede of the Year" by the journal *Fokus*. While railing against the labeling of Kurds as "terrorists" in the Swedish Parliament, she was indirectly accused by the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, of being a terrorist. Although many first- and second-generation Kurdish women socio-political activists fled abroad and continued their activities in the diaspora, activism also continued within Iran's borders.

¹ Her book, entitled *Amineb—No Bigger than a Kalashnikov: A Peshmerga in Parliament*, was released in 2021.

In 2007, the security forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran arrested a Kurdish woman activist, Zeyneb Celaliyan, from Maku, near the city of Kirmaşan (Kermanshah). She was initially sentenced to death, but this was later changed to life imprisonment. After 16 years of imprisonment, the Iranian security service announced that they would allow her medical treatment and grant her temporary release on condition that she repented and confessed. She has thus far steadfastly declined to do so.

On May 23, 2019, Zara Muhammadi, director and founding member of the Nûjîn Socio-Cultural Association, Kurdish human rights activist, and language teacher, was arrested in Sine (Sanandaj) and sentenced to ten years in prison. On February 13, 2021, she learned that the Court of Appeal had reduced her sentence to five years. Mojgan Kavusi, a Kurdish cultural activist and filmmaker, was arrested three times for her Kurdish-related activities and sentenced to 76 months. Accused of collaborating with Kurdish opposition parties and inciting disorder, she and Muhammadi resisted pressure from security forces, refusing to confess or repent. Their resolve remained unshaken despite ongoing persecution.

The images described highlight the paradoxes within Kurdish women's activism, shaped by Iran's centralized, Islamist regime. While this activism dates back to 1945, defining it within socio-feminist theory remains debated. Though intersecting with Iranian women's activism, the Kurdish movement is distinct, rooted in Kurdish identity and a culture of resistance. However, Kurdish society's patriarchal foundations limit the scope of women's activism. This chapter aims to construct a theoretical framework for elucidating these aspirations and struggles to underpin the socio-political engagement of three generations of Kurdish women within the tapestry of the Iranian nation-state.

As the third largest ethnopolitical group in Iran after the Persians and Azeris/Turks (Eliassi, 2021), the Kurds number nearly seven million, or 10–15% of the total population of 80 million (Stansfield, 2014, p. 60). Accurate estimates of the Kurdish population are difficult due to security concerns. In Iranian Kurdistan (Rojhelat), most Kurds reside in West Azerbaijan, Kordestan, Kermanshah, and Ilam, near the Turkish and Iraqi borders. Over one million Kurds also live in Khorasan (Hamza, 2020, p. 207) in north-east Iran, and significant numbers are found in Tehran, Hamadan, and the Caspian region. This dispersion complicates socio-political analysis of Kurdish activism, particularly concerning Kurdish women.

The socio-political engagement of Kurdish women faces significant challenges in gaining visibility within the framework of women's activism in Rojhelat. To address this, it is imperative to bridge history, politics, and

political movement theory within the Iranian centralized state context. However, the prevailing mainstream social sciences—dominated by male epistemology (Çağlayan, 2020) and male-dominated historiography (Baker, 1998; Naples, 2021)—are shaped by male perspectives and have systematically overlooked women's agency as knowledge-bearers, further contributing to the scarcity of research on the Kurdish women's movement in Rojhelat. The historiography of Kurdish national movements, influenced by patriarchal nationalist tendencies,² has often marginalized women's narratives, framing the Kurdish nationalist struggle as predominantly a male endeavor. Despite recent efforts by female authors such as Golrox Qobadî and Meleke Mustefa Sultanî³ to highlight women's activism, the broader collective memory remains entrenched in masculine narratives. The absence of archival records, according to Qobadî, even within leftist Kurdish organizations, exacerbates this scarcity. Moreover, Rojhelat's diverse geographic landscape, characterized by linguistic, religious, and ideological variations among Kurds, poses additional challenges to the documenting and understanding of Kurdish women's activism.

Another issue arises from presenting Iran as a homogeneous nation-state, disregarding cultural and linguistic divisions when discussing Kurdish women's activism, even among gender studies scholars (Rostami-Povey & Povey, 2016; Fathi, 2017; Gheytañchi, 2001; Ghoreishi, 2021; Honarbin-Holliday, 2008; Saeidi, 2022; Tajali, 2022; Tohidi, 2016; Vakil, 2011). The Persian-dominated nationalist project (Stansfield, 2014, p. 62) reinforces disparities between the center and periphery through cultural symbols, often marginalizing Kurdish women's activism in Rojhelat within Iranian studies. This leads to the invisibility of Kurds in Iran's symbolic structure. Given the Kurds' unique status in the Middle East, studying Kurdish women's activism in Rojhelat reveals female agency beyond conventional nation-state studies. It highlights the socio-political dynamism of Kurdish women and their alternative politics, theorized in this volume through a citizenship lens, uncovering overlooked aspects of their activism and social engagement.

²Taifur Bathai (1946–2020), dubbed the “accidental guerrilla” and a former member of the Central Committee of the KDPI, stands out as a distinctive Kurdish politician who, through his writings and a movie, acknowledged the socio-political aspects of women's role in Kurdish society.

³For instance, in recent years, these two Kurdish activists collected and published the memoirs of Kurdish women in Kurdistan's social and political organizations with a critical perspective.

This chapter investigates Kurdish women's activism at three significant times: the Kurdistan Republic in Mahabad (1945), the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and the era of reform up until 2022. Drawing on an analysis of published documents, and interviews with three generations of female Kurdish activists in Rojhelat and the diaspora, this chapter posits two interrelated questions. First, what factors have influenced the survival and abeyance of Kurdish women's activism? Second, what tactics and strategies have Kurdish women employed to endure and navigate activity during periods of both survival and stagnation? This chapter argues that—in response to socio-political changes and evolving opportunity structures—Kurdish women's activism, which was initially rooted in political cultures of resistance among the Kurds, has progressively evolved to become socio-political activism during pivotal socio-political transformations (1945, 1979, 1997–2005, and 2022). Faced with severe socio-political oppression and increasingly non-democratic conditions (1980–1997 and 2005–2020), the activists have employed socio-political, cultural, literary, and artistic measures for survival (1979–1945 and 1997–2017), thereby securing their existence and laying the groundwork for continued activity in subsequent periods.

METHODOLOGY

Kurdish women's narratives within authoritarian regimes underscore the strategic mobilization of memory and storytelling as tools of activism. By examining these evolving strategies, we reveal the intricate relationship between personal memory and broader socio-political frameworks, illuminating both setbacks and acts of resilience (Christiansen, 2011, p. 8). Concurrently, it exposes the precarious nature of contesting Iranian citizenship's core tenets and proposing viable alternatives. Recognizing the inherent subjectivity of narrative, and viewing memory as a dynamic meaning-making process—following Portelli (2000)—enables a deeper understanding of how past events shape future trajectories. This chapter draws upon 24 in-depth interviews conducted between 2022 and 2023 with three generations of Kurdish women activists from Rojhelat and the diaspora. The analysis delves into the complex interplay between authoritarian governance, Kurdish and women's identities, and external forces influencing activism. Interviewees were meticulously chosen based on their experiences under both the Shah and the Islamic Republic. Their testimonies offer a dual perspective on life in exile and in Rojhelat,

shedding light on the construction of a non-democratic state and the intertwining of Kurdish and women's identities.

The interviewees chosen for this study were primarily women entrenched in political discourse or active and influential in the political sphere. Most originate from the Sorani regions of West Azerbaijan⁴ and Sine. The reports and authenticated sources represent Kurdish women's activities across Rojhelat. This chapter aims to clarify the persistence of and the obstacles to women's activism within the adversarial context of Rojhelat and Iran. It investigates the resilience of Kurdish women's activism within an authoritarian-centralized theocratic system. Contrary to conventional perceptions of decline, Kurdish women's activism in Rojhelat retains unique features. It criticizes patriarchal aspects of the Kurdish national movement, intersects with Iranian women's demands, and contests centralized agendas. This analytical framework uncovers overlooked dimensions of feminist activism, particularly during lulls in mobilization, and enriches studies on social movements (Bagguley, 2002; Dhal & Taylor).

The chapter begins with an exploration of social movements in non-democratic systems, focusing on abeyance and factors influencing women's activism. The subsequent section briefly examines Iran's hybrid political regime and opportunity structures, after which the chapter turns to investigate women's (in)visibility in patriarchal contexts, advocating for gender equality while embracing a Kurdish identity. Finally, the article reflects on the activist dynamics of Kurdish women, emphasizing abeyance, survival, and resilience narratives. It scrutinizes women's liberation efforts amidst ethnic and gender dimensions, highlighting the interplay between oppression and empowerment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Despite late-twentieth-century waves of democratization, authoritarianism persists in the Middle East, intertwining religious ideology with societal structures. Unlike well-grounded democracies that foster open societies and flexible governance (Tas, 2021), non-democratic regimes restrict political mobilization to regime-endorsed institutions, often resulting in single-party systems. Authoritarian, centralized frameworks

⁴It is important to stress that the province exhibits distinct demographic patterns and that the Kurmanji dialect is also spoken there, alongside Azeri, Farsi, and Sorani.

significantly influence the socio-political sphere, often marked by limited civil and political rights. These regimes may exhibit secularist or religious authoritarian tendencies. Iran has occupied a distinctive position among non-democratic states, both before and after the 1979 revolution. Under the first and second Pahlavi monarchies (1925–1979), which were characterized by authoritarian patriarchy, an “enlightened absolutism” emerged, despite constitutional and parliamentary structures (Shakibi, 2013). However, after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) introduced a blend of parliamentary politics, revolutionary zeal, theocratic foundations (Kamrava, 1998), and militaristic elements. Scholars classify it either as a sultanistic regime (Houchang et al., 1998) or a unique hybrid regime (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015), reflecting the varying degrees of inclusivity of these different elements.

The dominance of a centralized state in Iran’s modern history—coupled with a Persian identity and Shiite adherence (Shariati, 1361 [1982] p. 194; Stansfield, 2014)—merits attention due to its neglect of ethnocultural diversity and ethnic demands. This policy has both weakened state structures and hindered democratic progress, fostering minority movements such as the Kurdish national movement. In Iran’s non-democratic political landscape, participation in socio-political activity is inherently high cost and high risk, and social movements exhibit different organizational structures and objectives than in democratic contexts (Johnston, 2015). Ethnic nationalist demands also influence social movements in multi-ethnic states, driven by perceptions of ethnopolitical inequality and lack of legitimacy (Muro, 2015). Thus, in evaluating the emergence, evolution, and survival of ethnic minority women’s movements in a hostile environment, one must consider variables including the structure of the central state, the demands of the women’s ethnic movements, and the social structures of the ethnic minority.

Although social movements are considered collectives that act with continuity to promote or resist change (Turner & Killian, 1987), they are not political parties, trade unions, pressure groups, or riots. Rather, social movements “can be thought of as an informal set of individuals and/or groups that are involved in confliction relations with clearly identified opponents” (della Porta & Diani, 2006). They may engage in “a sustained campaign of claim-making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 145). Tilly et al. (2008) employs the metaphors of “performance”

and “repertoire” to elucidate the customary and constrained modalities of claim-making adopted by social movements that challenge the political establishment. These metaphors underscore the tendency of claim-makers to introduce innovations while adhering to the boundaries delineated by the existing repertoire and prevailing cultural context. These may occur in a range of political systems and are, sometimes, linked to the democratization of authoritarian societies (Tilly, 2004). The idea of social movements corresponds with Plummer’s perception of citizenship as a “sensitizing tool” that points to spheres of action in which communities develop (Plummer, 2003, p. 56) as well as with performed citizenship in which:

[being] a citizen comprises a complex conditional framework that entitles us to certain actions, suggests certain ways of acting and links actors to one another in distinct ways, not only giving meaning to our actions but primarily allowing certain acts and actions to *be* acts and actions, to be real—that is, to constitute reality. (Hildebrandt & Peters 2019, p. 4)

Therefore, although seemingly invisible, the actions of Kurdish women demonstrate a noticeable tendency to transform society.

Depending on the socio-political situation, social movements may—in pursuit of their objectives—direct their efforts toward specific social issues or adopt a more expansive scope by addressing fundamental societal concerns. As a result, some movements are modest and localized while others have extensive reach. They combine three kinds of claim: program, identity, and standing (Tilly et al., 2020). Understanding social movements requires us to examine the political process paradigm and the new social movement approach. The former emphasizes state–movement interactions and views protests as a challenge to the status quo (Mackay, 2008; Tilly, 1985, 1995), often seeking policy change through unconventional strategies. In contrast, the new social movement approach prioritizes identity-centric and non-instrumental goals and is less focused on state relations. It challenges established meanings, fosters marginalized subjectivities (Mackay, 2008), and cultivates solidarity, moving beyond observable activism. This model, emphasizing “challenging codes,” primarily targets personal, collective, and cultural transformation. Participants in these movements seek to problematize language, highlight dominant codes, and, thereby, render power—rather than their presence—visible and thus amenable to negotiation (Melucci,

1989). Manifestations in this approach may be less overt compared to the visibility norms of contentious politics and are often navigated through informal and submerged networks amidst crucial events. Within this framework, individuals derive significance from their engagement in social movement networks. For them, participation becomes intrinsically valuable, serving as both a means and an end. Over time, their identities and affiliations evolve and extend through ongoing interactions and enable certain acts and actions to constitute reality (Hildebrandt & Peters, 2019). According to Melucci (1997), the traditional coordinates of personal identity (family, church, party, race, class) are diminishing in the complexities of today's "planetary society," to be replaced by "multiple bonds of belonging created by the proliferation of social positions, associative networks and reference groups" (Melucci, 1997, p. 61). Depending on the various political settings, each of the paradigms can be applied. Yet, given the continuing lack of democracy throughout Iran's modern history, and the relative openness or closure of the political space, it seems possible to use a combination of these two paradigms to explain the structures of abeyance and, ultimately, the survival of women's activism during the stagnation.

Within the domain of social movements, the abeyance framework has attracted substantial scholarly attention due to its analysis of the survival strategies and mechanisms employed by movements during periods of stagnation amidst hostile environments or impending challenges. The formulation calls attention to previously unexplored phases of social movement development when it is difficult to mobilize mass participation, and allows scholars to understand the "carry-overs and carry-ons" between movements (Gusfield, 1981, p. 324). Within the framework of social movements in democratic settings in general, and the American women's movement in particular, Verta Taylor (1989) introduced and developed the concept of abeyance, positing that feminist organizations persevered in the period immediately following World War II. They emphasized culturally centered internal activities and fostered profound emotional bonds. These sustained the commitment of activists amidst indifference and potential resistance in subsequent phases and upheld a collective feminist identity and pivotal vision. Analyzing women's activism in the USA, Taylor determined that when a movement declines, it does not necessarily disappear. Instead, pockets of movement activity, or "free spaces," continue to exist and can become the starting points of a new cycle of the same movement or a new movement at a future time (Taylor, 1989).

Free spaces may include “cultures of solidarity,” “safe spaces,” “submerged networks,” “social movement communities,” “movement halfway houses,” “political cultures of opposition,” “beloved communities,” and “abeyance structures,” indicating how the abeyance of movements persists and sets the stage for subsequent mobilization (Crossley & Taylor, 2015; Taylor, 1989). The notion of abeyance recognizes that those facing oppression possess “free spaces.” These spaces offer native resources, interpretive frameworks, and tactics to confront and counteract their subjugation (Polletta, 1999). From a socio-historical standpoint, a consideration of the alternating phases of authoritarian states and the subsequent emergence of political openness in Iran—within which Rojhelat is situated—provides a lens through which to reevaluate the activism of Kurdish women within this analytical concept. Therefore, abeyance structures serve a tripartite function: promoting the survival of activist networks, sustaining a repertoire of goals and tactics; and “promoting a collective identity that offers participants a sense of mission and moral purpose” (Taylor, 1989, p. 762).

Turning to British feminism, Paul Bagguley argued that movements in abeyance prioritize self-maintenance through voluntary organizations and intellectual activities, without direct confrontation with the social system. He, therefore, emphasized decentralization and informal network-like associations, advocating a focus on informal and horizontal structures (Bagguley, 2002, pp. 171–172). He thus integrated Katzenstein’s “unobtrusive mobilization” into the abeyance model, highlighting it as a primary form of contentious politics (Mackay, 2008, p. 23). In subsequent articles, Taylor emphasized the continuity of social movements in a hostile environment bereft of opportunities and in which the actions of the government and other authorities seek to exclude or repress dissenting voices (Crossley & Taylor, 2015), thus acknowledging the pivotal role of culture. Beyond mere ideology, culture shapes mobilization and relationships, offering marginalized groups “free spaces” to address challenges (Taylor & Leitz, 2010; Taylor & Rupp, 1993; see also Chaps. 6 and 7 of this volume).

Abeyance structures operate on three levels. Initially, they establish bonds among activists, including network affiliations, distinct activist identities, and narratives of injustice, thereby creating pre-existing networks for subsequent mobilization. Second, abeyance structures alter activists’ goals, incorporating tactical repertoires and thus resulting in the diversification of the collective action strategies available to the group.

Lastly, in contexts where activists operate in relative isolation, group cohesion will depend on mutual solidarity, shared commitment, or a unified sense of purpose, acting as a potent symbolic resource for future mobilizations (Rupp & Taylor, 1999; Taylor, 1989; Taylor et al., 2009). Recently, this theoretical framework has attracted attention in Middle Eastern Studies. Zihnioğlu meticulously explored the persistence of the women's movement in the complex legal and political landscape of Türkiye, particularly following the tumultuous events of Gezi Park (Zihnioğlu, 2023). Therefore, it seems apt to apply the theory of abeyance within the non-democratic context of Iran to explain the evolution and dynamics of Kurdish women's activism in Rojhelat.

BECOMING VISIBLE IN SOCIO-POLITICAL SPHERES: WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT UNTIL 1979

The emergence of women's socio-political activity is contingent upon the contextual milieu, and its efficacy or lack thereof does not depend solely on the motivation, capacity, skills, and effectiveness of movement leaders and activists, but on a range of contextual factors, including political opportunities in a given context (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 16; see also Koopmans et al., 2005). Beyond the complexities of aligning women's activism with broader social movement models, there is some disagreement and confusion around when activism can be called a movement. This complexity is further compounded in attempts to demarcate and elucidate the contours of Kurdish women's activism (see Chap. 11). The challenges encountered in addressing this issue can be attributed, in part, to the non-democratic and centralized mechanisms of the state, the absence of a party system and civil society within Iran, the conflation of the Kurdish question with notions of separatism, and the semi-patriarchal constructs within Kurdish society.

Reza Khan's modernization policies (1925–1941) were underpinned by a vision of a centralizing, rationalizing nation-state, coupled with Iran's official discourse of modernization. Influenced by nationalist discourse and the positivist logic of authoritarian modernization (Vali, 2011), these policies significantly shaped Iran's socio-political landscape. Notably, some scholars argue that Reza Khan's policies brought a pivotal shift in the partial emancipation of Iranian women, marking a transformative phase (Afshar, 1989; Keddie, 2002) in gender dynamics. However, the degree

to which these policies penetrated post-World War II Rojhelat remains the subject of scholarly debate, given the inherent centralization of state directives and developmental disparities. The data indicate that, in Rojhelat, after World War II, male illiteracy was at 95%, while female illiteracy was absolute (Ghassemlou, 2013, p. 23).

The downfall of Reza Shah's dictatorship and the subsequent power vacuum set the stage for the establishment of the Committee for the Revival of Kurdistan (*Komeley Jiyanevey Kurdistan*, JK) (McDowall, 2004, p. 237) which in August 1945 was transformed into the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI). With the emergence of a modern party, a segment of Kurdish women found their voice, making their presence known for the first time in the socio-political sphere.⁵ The involvement of female educators in primary education, the publication of women-authored columns in Kurdistan newspapers, women's speeches at political assemblies, and their active participation on March 8, 1946, culminated in the formation of a political entity known as the Kurdistan Democratic Women's Party of Iran (*Partî Jinani Demokrati Kurdistan*) or the Democratic Women's Union of Iranian Kurdistan. However, as highlighted by Kobra Azimi, a teacher and affiliate of this union, the women's party seemed to operate with no formalized, independent program or charter but was primarily set up to contribute to the KDPI (Hasanpour & Qazi, 2021, pp. 50–51, 59). Furthermore, the limited number of autonomous and educated women also hindered the development of an independent movement.

While the nationalist discourse rendered women's activism visible and facilitated their integration into the KDPI, it did not lead to the socio-political mobilization of larger numbers of women. During this period, women's discourse revolved predominantly around two pivotal themes: women's rights and Kurdish national aspirations. Additionally, Kurdish women were depicted as heroines in their role as the reproducers of the nation, the protectors of its "motherland" and the "honor" of the nation, and the guardians of Kurdish culture, heritage, and language (Mojab, 2023, p. 206). Mojab argues that "the existence of a woman's party formalized women's presence in the political life of the republic" but simultaneously justified their exclusion from the decision-making group. Moreover, "it formalized the segregation of the rank-and-file along

⁵It can be argued that women's initial engagement in the public sphere occurred in that time.

gender lines, each having its own organization” (Mojab, 2001, p. 142). Nevertheless, despite the absence of gendered awareness in that period and even later, the historical legacy of women’s presence in the Republic of Kurdistan provided a foundation for sustained women’s activism, especially among political parties.

The educational infrastructure expanded in Sine, Saqez, and Mahabad, with 152 schools established by 1955, which increased literacy rates. Women gained employment opportunities, including in teaching and public service. Female student enrollment surged to 809 (Cabi, 2022, p. 85) due to structural openings during the White Revolution.⁶ However, dissatisfaction with authoritarianism and uneven development led to alignment with opposition parties. In the 1970s, student growth, land reforms, and social disparities fostered socio-political activism. Political repression, non-democratic environments, economic deprivation, and memories of the Mahabad Republic (Qobadî, 2015) led Kurdish women to establish resistance centers within leftist movements. In an interview, Qobadî stated:

The ideological orientations of my contemporaries were molded by Marxist-Soviet frameworks, along with insights derived from Cuba and Latin America. Within these political constructs, our moral imaginations of social equity and justice served as the underpinnings for the establishment of *Komala*. As a result, collaborative endeavors among women, their brothers, and spouses fostered the advancement of Kurdish women’s activism.

On the one hand, these factors served as obstacles to the development of women’s activities; on the other, they unobtrusively mobilized the revival and continuation of Kurdish women’s activism after the collapse of the republic. Importantly, they were described as “underpinnings for the establishment of *Komala* (1970),” a party inspired by Maoist ideology which recruited women to its ranks and solidified its institutional presence amid the initial phase of the Islamic revolution. Golrox Qobadî, Rexşende Bulurî, and Şemsî Xuremî—prominent women activists from the first generation, who sustained their engagement during both the monarchical and Islamic regimes—stressed that it was during that period (1977) that connections with Kurdish leftist organizations in Iraq, particularly the Patriotic

⁶The White Revolution, spearheaded by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi from 1963 to 1979, modernized Iran and led to urbanization and literacy.

Union of Kurdistan (PUK), were established. In the hostile environment preceding the 1979 revolution, women activists used a range of tactics to advance their agenda including initiatives such as establishing book-reading circles, living in economically disadvantaged urban regions, offering assistance to marginalized communities, educating illiterate women, and advocating for women's rights. In the crucial months preceding the revolution, the outcomes of these activities empowered Kurdish women to seize political opportunities and assert their agency within the socio-political public sphere.

TOWARD VISIBILITY: KURDISH WOMEN'S ACTIVISM SINCE THE 1979 REVOLUTION

The ideological underpinnings of the Iranian Revolution may be construed as an amalgamation of Islamism and a distinct interpretation of Marxism (Misepassi, 2003). Nevertheless, the lack of political liberation under the Shah's regime emerged as a fundamental justification for the revolution. The centralized state structure, political authoritarianism, and limitations on the articulation of a Kurdish identity, further exacerbated by the overarching conditions in Iran, also propelled the Kurdistan political environment toward a revolutionary phase. The fate of women has, however, raised fundamental questions about the Iranian Revolution and whether it was reactionary, "premature," in any sense emancipatory, or necessarily contradictory (Moghadam, 1992, p. 427). Less than two years after the revolution, its effects were evident within Iran's political atmosphere. The initial zeal surrounding the revolution fostered a hope for freedom and democratic governance. Simultaneously, this period saw an upsurge in structural opportunities for political mobilization, evidenced by a rise in women's participation in the new social movement organizations (SMOs) and political parties (Cabi, 2020; Qobadi, 2015; Soltani, 2022).

In the post-1979 period, the advancement and abeyance of Kurdish women's activism were shaped by several key factors. First, Ayatollah Khomeini's dismissal of ethnic pluralism triggered armed resistance, leading to a holy war against the Kurds and the restoration of government control in Iranian Kurdistan by 1983 (Moghissi, 1996; Phillips, 2015). Second, Kurdish movements sought self-determination. They established liberated zones for leftist-secular and nationalist factions, which were

supported by associations and city councils (Cabi, 2020). These served as SMOs, orchestrating a collective struggle across Kurdistan. Finally, Kurdish political aspirations promoted the incorporation of women into military initiatives and radical democracy by combining nationalist and socialist ideals, although nonviolent protest was the first approach.

The oldest female Peshmerga within Komala, mother-of-five Rexşende Bulurî, served within the organization's core for several years before the revolution. In an interview, she described her motivation for joining the Peshmerga forces as a straightforward choice, stressing that she "joined the Peshmerga to break the exclusivity that men traditionally held." Şemsî Xuramî, another Komala Peshmerga, said:

Joining the organization was a moment of pride for me. It provided a sense of freedom, the feeling of breaking out of a cage, and the sensation of soaring high. I acquired a sense of agency, decision-making, and independence. However, within the organization, due to male dominance, it was not possible to fully experience that sensation.

Nevertheless, the unresolved paradox between organization and freedom persisted, perpetuating the challenges to achieving women's empowerment. Thus, objections stemming from patriarchal perspectives remained significant within this organization. In an interview, Qobadî recounted instances where the arming of Kurdish women encountered resistance:

The party's central committee, organizational officials, and male intellectual comrades were among those who opposed the formation of women's battalions. Simultaneously, during specific negotiations, some male Peshmerga members went so far as to threaten to lay down their weapons if women were allowed to be armed.

Including women in the ranks of the Komala Peshmerga represented a crucial shift in increasing the visibility of women in a male-dominated realm. However, while acknowledging this pivotal transformation, it is necessary to admit that progress in women's emancipation was limited. Mojab believes that the role of women in Komala was restricted to "encompassing culinary tasks, provision of first-aid, and clandestine activities such as distributing political pamphlets, flyers, newspapers" (Mojab, 2023, p. 207). We may add to this the collection and transfer of financial aid. Entrenched structural impediments within Kurdish

society persistently inhibited women from assuming more proactive roles. Rexşande recalls that “as fighter women, we did not endeavor further. We believed that our freedom and visibility within the organization and public sphere were sufficient at this level.” It is noteworthy that most of these women and girls became affiliated with organized parties when they were younger. Consequently, Komala was reluctant to entrust them with significant responsibility. Diba Alıxanî, the Kurdish women’s activist of the 2000s, perceives the involvement of women in a militant organization such as Komala as a source of inspiration for future generations and believes that it “has played a crucial role in shaping the development of intersectional feminist policies among forthcoming cohorts of women.”

The advent of the clerical-conservative regime posed a severe setback to the initial wave of Kurdish women’s activism. Perceived as synonymous with separatism and anti-Islamic ideologies, Kurdish activism became a target for eradication. During the civil war and afterward (1980–1988), amid intense state repression, many female activists went into exile or faced incarceration. *Golzar-e Şaghaiqha*’s documentation reveals that after the 1979 revolution, 58 women were executed, 12 of them affiliated with KDPI and 40 with Komala, primarily from Sine, Mahabad, and Saqez. Conflict with the central state led to the death of 31 female Peshmerga, 20 of whom were affiliated with Komala, one with the KDPI, and others with leftist organizations. Additionally, 18 women died in internal conflicts within the KDPI, while 25 deaths occurred later as a result of torture or honor killings (Qobadî, 2020, pp. 303–355).

After the Kurdish Peshmergas gave up their armed struggle in 1987, the new regime systematically dismantled their organizational infrastructure, leading to the untimely death, exile, or imprisonment of numerous committed members. Despite these challenges, the Kurdish women’s struggle continued clandestinely in urban areas. While the departure of prominent activists altered the nature of activism, innovative approaches simultaneously emerged. For instance, according to an interview with Qobadî, covert associates of Komala in Sine instituted a cooperative framework to combat personal and financial hardship. They facilitated continual socio-political interaction among their members and alleviated financial problems. However, the situation raised two main challenges: recruiting new members became difficult in this hostile environment, and activists primarily operated in exile or in a limited, semi-public capacity within

Kurdistan's social circles. Their experiences were transmitted to subsequent generations, influencing nascent informal networks able to circumvent state repression. Due to severe limitations to the right to association, women activists adapted to Iran's non-democratic milieu by focusing on individual and decentralized activities.

In contrast to Koopmans (2005, pp. 16–17), who views racial and ethnic differences as context-dependent without anticipating a unitary and direct causal impact on mobilization and claim-making, the political resistance of Rojhelat and identity-based claims demonstrate that these two variables have a direct effect on the recasting and survival of Kurdish women's activism and the formulation of feminist claims (Koopmans et al., 2005). However, the institutional features of political regimes are key to understanding political opportunities and their role cannot be neglected. They can facilitate or inhibit collective action (Koopmans et al., 2005). The conjunction of these factors, along with the political reforms introduced from 1997 to 2005, signaled a shift in Kurdish women's activism, from armed resistance to civil engagement.

THE POLITICAL REFORM ERA AND IDEOLOGICAL INTERSECTIONS: FORMING FREE SPACES AFTER 1997

From the implementation of the theocratic system in which gender relations became subject to extensive regime control, women posed a challenge to Khomeini's authority, constituting the initial radical opposition to the revolutionary leader (Moghissi, 1996). As gender control became a central tenet of governance, women's defiance of patriarchal authority assumed a critical importance. The Iranian–Iraqi war and subsequent consolidation of Islamic rule stifled women's voices. However, by the mid-1990s, the regime faced widespread discontent, failing to quell dissent from women, workers, and other groups (Mojab, 2001). During Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989–1997), Iranian women engaged in activism within restricted spheres, seizing opportunities after the 1995 Beijing Conference⁷ (Ahmadi-Khorasani, 2013). Despite government

⁷The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was an important event for gender equality, with the unanimous adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action by 189 countries. This document represented a comprehensive agenda for women's empowerment, outlining strategic objectives across 12 key areas to advance women's rights and achieve global gender equality.

scrutiny, activism burgeoned within the political system from 1993 to 1994 (Khorasani). Expanding their efforts, women established NGOs focused on children's rights, exploiting a legal framework established by Iran's ratification of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. These organizations provided a platform for women's advocacy within ideological constraints, exemplified by the formation of the Associations for the Protection of Children's Rights, Population against Environmental Pollution, and Mother's Aid Society (Ghoreishi, 2021, p. 107; Khorasani, p. 69).

The rise to power of the reformists (1997–2005), led by Mohammad Khatami, and the relative opening up of political space (Keddie, 2000), created an opportunity to reduce the risk of repression and foster collective and unobtrusive mobilization. During this period, women's activities were primarily situated within the discourse of Islamic feminism (Moghissi & Mojab, 2023) and influenced by relativism and cultural postmodernism. Some academic activists sought to provide more flexible interpretations of Shi'a texts relating to women's rights. Nonetheless, as indicated by Hanna, an activist from the second generation, "the political and securitized environment in Rojhelat restricted the structural opportunities available for Kurdish women activists to engage in governmental organizations, setting them apart from their counterparts in Tehran." Women attempted to establish a more visible presence in public spheres, despite recurring and violent opposition from fundamentalist factions (Mojab, 2001). This optimistic period also saw a simultaneous resurgence of cultural and Kurdish-centered activities in Rojhelat, coinciding with other developments that were regarded as promising by many Kurds: the relatively stable consolidation of a semi-state in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI), an expansion of the activities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)⁸ in Rojhelat, an increase in the number of educated people, the geographical expansion of women's activism, and the familiarization of students with feminism as an empowering concept.

⁸In Rojhelat, it is relevant to note that the PKK initially operated under the banner of the People's Democratic Initiative. Subsequently, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK) announced its establishment in April 2004. The women's branch of the party is known as Komelgeha Jinên Azad a Rojhilatê (KJAR).

The development of this environment alleviated the apprehensions associated with a public presence stemming from prior experiences of oppression and violence. Simultaneously, the amalgamation of political and socio-cultural activities offered new structural opportunities for the expansion of women's activism. During the initial two years of the reform period, the predominant focus of their efforts lay in intellectual, literary, poetic, and cultural pursuits. The introduction of reading groups indicated a recurrence of the earlier activities of women. As stressed by Çinur Saidî, such groups provided a platform for young female writers that invigorated literary discussions and activism. This initiative, aimed at sustaining their involvement, was grounded in identity-based aspirations, encompassing both gender and Kurdish national perspectives. Its success was visible, for example, in an interest in creating literature in Kurdish and in encouraging some women to switch from Farsi to Kurdish when writing literary works. Women sought to legitimize contemporary feminist demands by referring to past women's activism and even women historical figures like Mestûre Ardalán (see Chap. 6). The Kurdish Republic continued to wield influence as a symbol of resistance and struggle (Vali, 2011, p. 137). According to Alîxanî, it was combined with "portrayals of Kurdish women in Peshmerga forces" and played a crucial role in fostering commitment. and constructing images derived from earlier struggles. After a prolonged abeyance that had lasted approximately 15 years, such imagery provided legitimacy for the resurgence of a new phase of activism.

Mahboube Ebtekar, a member of KDPI, highlighted her party's pivotal role in elevating Kurdish women's visibility within the socio-political realm, particularly while constructing the image of the republic. In discussing the differences between Kurdish political parties, she emphasized the profound influence of women within the party. Alîxanî, a psychotherapist living in London, offers an insight into her motivation for engaging in educational initiatives in marginalized communities in the Hawraman region between 1994 and 1995. While she began advocating against honor killings, Alîxanî highlights the lasting impact of female Peshmerga units and women's involvement in Sine, while pointing to ongoing social inequalities and gender biases. Even within the reformist milieu, this convergence engendered a more assertive articulation of Kurdish women's aspirations than those of their counterparts in Tehran, as Alîxanî explains:

While women in the central areas were striving to reconcile Islam and feminism, Kurdish women aimed to eliminate the compulsory hijab. When we, as Kurdish women in Tehran, proposed the abolition of the compulsory hijab, the response was that this demand did not align with their priorities at that moment. Our focal concerns were the right to divorce and child guardianship.

Şahnaz Eliasi, who was a member of Komala in the 1980s and endured imprisonment with her 11-month-old child in Mahabad, draws on her personal experiences to affirm that the hostile Iranian environment, alongside the vigorous Kurdistan political space, formed a vital foundation for revitalizing women's activism. Her life journey—from childhood in Mahabad to active participation in the Kurdish community in Tehran [*Jame'ye Kordbay-e Moqime Markaz*], collaboration with the PKK and then PJAK, subsequent re-imprisonment, and finally emigration to Sweden and becoming the KJAR's spokesperson in Stockholm—serves as a prime example of the long-term engagement of Kurdish women and simultaneously reflects the emergence of a new political force in Rojhelat.

Fateme Karimi, an educated female Kurdish activist currently serving as the director of the Kurdistan Human Rights Organization in Paris, has underscored the significance of visual representation, specifically images and videos featuring female PKK guerrillas. Reflecting on the pejorative word *za'ife* (weak), used in Kurdish society to refer to women, Karimi contends that footage of guerrilla women played a crucial role in dismantling entrenched stereotypes because “upon seeing this footage and witnessing the unwavering strength exuded by the female guerrillas, deeply ingrained societal stereotypes disintegrated within my consciousness.” She realized that women unequivocally possess the capacity to chart alternative paths in their lives. Zilan Vejî, the co-chair of PJAK, discussed the challenges posed by geographical limitations and the historical absence of female agency within the Kurdish national movement:

We were fortunate; the sighting of a woman in guerrilla attire with a gun aroused our curiosity and excitement. Furthermore, the determination, self-confidence, will, and autonomy displayed by these women had a profound and enduring impact on us. Their independent presence and articulate expression in significant gatherings revealed that their fight extended beyond the liberation of Kurdistan to encompass the emancipation of women.

According to Helale, a Kurdish lawyer and activist, “the differences in attitude and ideology between Kurdish women and women from other parts of Iran were obstacles to further solidarity between them.” Manna, for instance, recalls how in 2007, “the centralist women activists only agreed to the participation of Kurdish women in the March 8 ceremony in Hamadan on condition that they participated as Iranian and not as Kurdish women.”

August 27, 2006, saw a significant collaboration between secular and Islamic feminists, alongside Kurdish activists, with the One Million Signatures Campaign, an initiative prompted by the government’s suppression of women’s public assemblies and the existence of discriminatory gender policies and laws (Ghoreishi, 2021). While the campaign initially succeeded in fostering solidarity between centralist women and those from diverse ethnic backgrounds, according to Manna, “many of the latter felt that the attitudes of centralist women lacked inclusivity and failed to acknowledge the unique challenges faced by Kurdish women due to their Kurdish identity.”⁹ Advocates of the campaign argued that the women’s struggle should focus solely on gender issues and thus urged participants to refrain from engaging with the political and cultural concerns of Kurdistan (Sheyh-Alislami, 2021). However, according to Helale, “Kurdish women activists argued that in Iran, the issues confronting women cannot be divorced from questions of ethnic identity.” Neġin recounts her experiences, noting that intelligence service interrogators were particularly harsh toward Kurdish activists taking part in the campaign, viewing them as more politicized and, therefore, more dangerous. She recalls being repeatedly questioned about her Kurdish identity during imprisonment and interrogations, illustrating the efforts of the authorities to force the Kurds to identify as Iranian.

Women activists in Rojhelat, particularly in the Kermanshah and Ilam provinces, faced security constraints when advocating for gender- and identity-based issues. Anîsa Cafarî, a board member of *J* magazine and a third-generation Kurdish activist from Kermanshah, experienced this firsthand when she was arrested, accused of endangering national security and being affiliated with anti-revolutionary groups. She highlighted the disparity in the status of NGOs and civil organizations between the

⁹This issue has been extensively discussed in the author’s article written in collaboration with Wendelmoet Hamelink, entitled “Kurdish Women Activism: Struggle for Re-conquest of the Public Sphere.”

provinces mentioned above and others such as West Azerbaijan and Kordestan. Obtaining approval to form institutions or literary associations proved exceptionally challenging. As a result, few social organizations exist with which women actively engage. Currently, the co-chair of the Kurdish PEN in Germany, Anîsa Cafarî, attributes these restrictions to the regime's assimilation policies, which have hindered a Kurdish identity revival. Cafarî suggests that the varying levels of Kurdish women's participation in Rojhelat are linked to a level of familiarity with Kurdish political parties and their background. While their counterparts in Kermanshah and Ilam lack experience and awareness, women in Kordestan and West Azerbaijan are familiar with political and armed struggle.

INTERSECTIONAL ACTIVISM WITHIN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

Looking at the three periods discussed above, Kurdish women's activism has been profoundly shaped by the intersection of patriarchal structures within Kurdish society and the intertwining of the Kurdish issue with Iran's centralized and religious framework. This dynamic led to heightened surveillance and barriers to Kurdish activism. Despite these challenges, Kurdish women continued being active, navigating both the hostile state environment and the patriarchal norms within Kurdish society. Engagement with these environments became a critical component of women's activism during the reform period and paved the way for visible intersectional activism. In response, successive central regimes in Iran, from the monarchy to the Islamic government, have consistently monitored Kurdish women, both politically and in terms of security. We may, therefore, say that the Kurdish issue contributed significantly to the emergence of abeyance in Kurdish women's activism.

Narrating how she joined the Peshmerga at the age of 13, Emîne Kakabawe, a former member of Komala and currently a Kurdish parliamentarian in Sweden, alluded to the notion of honor:

Upon my initial attempt at dancing, my father reprimanded me, stating: 'You must uphold honor.' Nonetheless, I stood firm in front of my father. I said, 'Damn the *şeref* (honor). I want to become Peshmerga and fight against all of you.'

Fateme Kerîmî recalls the negative social response to a research initiative on female circumcision undertaken in Kurdistan; even certain university professors deemed the proposal objectionable. The women's activism discussed above illustrates the multifaceted and long-lasting impact of a hostile environment on Kurdish women's agency. However, these efforts can also be influential in mitigating negative outcomes.

While acknowledging their oppression by central government, the second and third generations of female activists persistently assert their Kurdish identity as an integral aspect of a broader struggle for Kurdish women. According to Bulurî, opposition to centralized and religious governmental structures in Iran constitutes a fundamental aspect of women's engagement and has shaped the trajectory of their activism. Şemsî Xuramî, whose involvement in social and political spheres began under the shah's regime, and who currently serves as a member of the central committee of the Communist Party of Iran (*Khizb-i Komunisti Iran/CPI*) in Sweden, asserts:

The Kurdish national issue and the dual oppression imposed by the Iranian central state upon the Kurds have endured persistently. Across the modern history of Iran, Kurdish women have actively struggled to eradicate this oppression. In this context, I even acknowledge the Kurds' right to secession.

Despite the optimism generated during the campaign to free Roya Toluyî¹⁰ (Ahmadi-Khorasani, 2013, pp. 196–198) and the reform period up to 2005 (Ghoreishi, 2021), the events following the One Million Signatures Campaign revealed that the centralized state impacted Iranian women in Tehran, both ideologically and in terms of the activists' mindset. The expression of a Kurdish identity was still met with accusations of separatism. As noted by Alixanî, "Persian women frequently viewed themselves as first-class citizens, whereas Kurdish women were often perceived as the second-class ones."

Within this intersectional framework, the visibility of women's activism rendered their position fragile, even from the perspective of Kurdish political parties. During and after the reform period, some political factions sought either to confine women to roles strictly within the party structure

¹⁰ Born in 1966 in Bane, Rojhelat, she is a Kurdish human rights activist and feminist. In 2004, she established *Rasan* magazine, which addressed the challenges faced by Kurdish women. However, the Iranian authorities banned the magazine and shut it down in 2005.

or to align their demands with party ideologies. A Kurdish women activist who was recently sentenced to prison describes this process:

Women advocating for women's rights are oppressed by men and traditional Kurdish policy. The system accuses them of being under the domination of Western culture, and encouraging the disintegration of the family. Traditional and classical Kurdish nationalism accuses independent women of having hidden ties to the state.

Embedded within the complex fabric of Kurdish society—comprising class struggle, gender dynamics, and Kurdish identity—Karîmî posits a redefined paradigm for Kurdish women's activism. This fusion engenders new dimensions of intersectionality, heralding the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish women's movement. Despite setbacks such as the failed establishment of the Kurdistan Feminist Party (*Partî Feminîstî Kurdistan*),¹¹ Kurdish women persevere in their pursuit of empowerment and the eradication of honor killings. Employing innovative tactics such as conducting rights workshops and consulting, online conferences, and public demonstrations, they confront the hostile environment and catalyze the growth of a burgeoning women's movement.

The *Jin Jiyar Azadî* uprisings of 2022, provoked by the killing of Jîna Amînî by the morality police and originating largely in Rojhelat, not only represented a challenge to the status quo across Iran but also interrogated the underpinnings of Kurdish society and its political factions, particularly by foregrounding the marginalized status of women's agency. They sparked numerous debates on the inclusion of women in party leadership and even served as a catalyst for internal divisions within one Kurdish party. Although the uprisings were suppressed, they underscored the significance of non-democratic state structures and historical barriers in impeding the progress of women's activism. Moreover, they demonstrated the enduring nature of the women's struggle, which has survived recurrent historical cycles, remaining steadfast and capable of challenging various ideologies. The harsh crackdowns and widespread arrests of activists in the aftermath of the uprisings—echoing historical patterns in Iran's undemocratic political landscape—also prompted an immediate backlash

¹¹ The party emerged in 2014, established by 14 activists in Rojhelat and the diaspora, but was officially launched in 2015. However, the differing interpretations of feminism among the founding members, and disparities in their views on nationalist ideology and feminism, contributed to the party's eventual collapse.

from women. In response to severe repression faced by women activists in Kurdistan, the Tawar Collective was established, comprising women activists from both Kurdistan and the diaspora. The collective issued a statement entitled *Revolutionary Subjectivity and Uprising Against Oppressive Structures*, in which it affirmed its resistance to the pervasive structures of domination and exploitation perpetuated by familial, religious, capitalist, and governmental forces in diverse manifestations. Thus, the women's ongoing struggle encompasses resistance to the status quo, the invisibility of women's activism, public norms, religious and paternal authority, and, ultimately, the fear of revolutionary change. Drawing upon a historical view, Xuramî asserts that "despite evolving circumstances, the enduring ideals echo those advocated by her generation since the Shah era. Currently, millions of women continue to engage in a struggle fueled by these ideals, founded on the principles of freedom, gender equality, and justice."

The uprising and subsequent events are grounded in ideas and values fostered by a left-wing intellectual tradition within society. The data on female fatalities between 2010 and 2018 reveal a significant shift in the geographic involvement of women in political parties. The political involvement of Kurdish women—historically concentrated primarily within the Sorani and Sunni regions of Rojhelat—has significantly expanded to include areas extending from Maku to Kirmaşan. The somber toll on women's lives within various political organizations—including PKK, PJAK, and KDPI—from 2013 to 2018 extends from Mariwan to Heseke in Syria. According to Qobadi's findings, the mortality count among Rojhelati women has escalated to 86 individuals (Qobadi, 2020). This geographical expansion reflects both increased participation and organizational growth. Kurdish women's activism has evolved beyond the identity-driven context, demonstrating a nuanced approach beyond mere participation in the Kurdish national movement. Spanning nearly a century, it showcases resilience amid periods of stagnation, survival, and resurgence, overcoming structural barriers in a challenging environment. Despite hurdles, Kurdish women's activism has expanded geographically and achieved significant progress toward radical goals.

CONCLUSION

Following the 1979 revolution and taking advantage of the political opening between 1997 and 2005, and in later years in Rojhelat, Kurdish women engaged in civil activism with the explicit goal of securing

citizenship rights, transitioning from armed resistance to civil struggle. Despite the influence of historical narratives and the ideological orientations of political parties, according to Karîmî, “this shift in discourse steadfastly resisted the assimilationist policies of the central state in Iran and Rojhelat.” Until the *Jin, Jiyan Azadî* uprising, Kurdish women shared similar objectives to women activists in Tehran regarding the struggle against gender discrimination, although they emphasized their Kurdish identity and embraced secular and leftist approaches. While Kurdish women activists are cautious to classify their endeavors as constituting either a movement or activism,¹² the distinct demands they advocate for in hostile circumstances, coupled with their active engagement in public domains—characterized by a mix of Kurdish political ideology and secular and leftist tenets—highlight their potential to act and constitute a new reality (Hildebrandt & Peters, 2019). In more favorable circumstances, such a platform may transform into a nascent Kurdish women’s movement. Despite the bold activism demonstrated by women in Rojhelat and Iran in the aftermath of Jîna Amînî’s murder, which suggests their potential to champion democratic aims, instigate significant political changes, and change the patriarchal society, the severe repression they encountered also marks the onset of a new era of abeyance. Ironically, following this repression, women in Iran, especially in Rojhelat, reverted to their previous strategy of unobtrusive mobilization, revitalizing covert networks by forming feminist study groups and utilizing online platforms to participate in street politics.

The establishment of the Tawar Collective by Kurdish women in the diaspora and Rojhelat heralds a notable shift in the discourse of radical activism within Kurdish women’s activism. In interviews with several members, the collective has articulated the inspiration drawn from the enduring resilience demonstrated during the 1979 resistance in Kurdistan, further fortified by their active engagement in the Rojava (North Eastern Syria) revolution. They highlight the importance of the post-uprising protests, which provided invaluable opportunities to develop contacts with other marginalized groups. Accordingly, their objectives are twofold: first, to amplify the voices of independent Kurdish women feminists within the

¹²Drawing on conversations with over 30 Kurdish activists, there are compelling grounds to regard it as a movement characterized by unity and goal pursuit. Nevertheless, doubts arise regarding its existence due to Kurdistan’s geographic challenges, ideological party divisions, and government repressions.

Rojhelat context, thus safeguarding them from potential marginalization by right-wing and centrist Iranian feminists; and second, to confront the patriarchal structures entrenched in Kurdish society. Nevertheless, faced with hostility from Iran and Rojhelat, it is essential to recognize the lasting nature of Kurdish women's activism, which persistently endures cyclical patterns. Despite the varying degrees of prominence observed in women's activism during phases of political liberalization and abeyance, largely influenced by the political climate of the day, a sense of continuity prevails. Evidently, Kurdish women's activism has demonstrated resilience over time, delineating pivotal sites of resistance and perpetuating experiential wisdom across successive generations.

Initially developed for democratic settings—but also applicable to non-democratic regimes—the concept of abeyance illuminates the challenges faced by social movements in hostile political environments, preventing premature conclusions about movement survival. It emphasizes the need to investigate latent movements and underscores the continuity of collective action in non-democratic socio-political contexts. Therefore, in this chapter, I have argued that throughout the historical trajectory of activism, the Rojhelati women's engagement not only preserved its survival but also progressed toward the establishment of a women's movement. The interweaving of Kurdish women's activism with political ideologies such as nationalism and socialism, coupled with the adversarial socio-political milieu of Iran and Rojhelat, has endowed it with a distinctive nature. As noted by Michel Wieviorka (1993), “nationalism and social movements may be in opposition, amalgamate, or articulated,” raising the question of why the advent of a politics of nationalism signals the subordination, or even demise, of women's politics.

In accordance with the *communities of memory* framework proposed by Laura Woliver (1993), the recollection of past events could potentially bridge the broader context of Kurdish identity-based movement(s) with women's engagement in challenging environments. Memories of past grievances and battles help subordinate groups forge a collective identity and fuel a commitment to fight against injustices in years to come (Valiente, 2015). Nevertheless, the divergent political stances of Kurdish political parties have resulted in a fractured women's activism. Within the context of Kurdish society, identity-based claims in the form of nationalist politics, closely intertwined with centralized state structures, function as the normative mode of politics. This aligns with Chatterjee's assertion that the imagined nationalist community of nationalism is authorized as

the most authentic unit or collective. Nationalist ideologies tend to dominate and encompass various political perspectives, often forcing women's activism to conform to nationalist ideals to be recognized as political (as quoted in Radhakrishnan, 1992, p. 78). However, the hostile environment of Iranian society, especially in Rojhelat, prompts additional motivations for women's activism. Pervasive social inequalities and the aspiration to combat gender disparities have resulted in the articulation of women's demands within leftist movements and in the continuity of the process.

In the absence of democracy in Iran, the two ideologies of nationalism and socialism have created an environment conducive to social change. It can be argued that over the extended duration of Kurdish women's activism, women have mobilized within predominantly male-dominated institutions to advocate for women's interests. This trend paralleled the phases of mass mobilization in both Rojhelat and Iran and can be attributed to adversarial socio-political conditions, the limited advancement of women's organizations, and comparatively low levels of literacy. In Katzenstein's terms, the manifested Kurdish women's networks that exist within male-dominated institutions and often reject the term "feminist," are a classic case of unobtrusive mobilization (Katzenstein, 1990). This form of mobilization can be seen as one end of a continuum, as other types of socio-political engagement within institutions may be more explicitly feminist. While the term "unobtrusive mobilization" may partially define this type of activism, prolonged periods of decline, a hostile milieu for activism, and a deep-rooted connection to the Kurdish national movement warrant an analysis through the lens of abeyance. Utilizing the concept of abeyance allows us to integrate subjective elements, such as memories and narratives, alongside material factors, offering a comprehensive understanding of the survival of activism in periods of stagnation.

The Rojhelat example reveals that, after an initial surge of visibility, Kurdish women's activism—alongside the Kurdish national movement—waned. Yet, subsequent developments significantly influenced its geographical boundaries, tactics, goals, and activities. After the failed battles with Iranian armed forces, memories, socio-political factors, surviving organizations, and committed militants shaped a new phase, leading to the emergence of new activists from the next generation in civil society spaces. These transformations indicate that, despite difficulties, a very fragile but vibrant space of citizenship exists that may bear fruit in the long term.

While free spaces began to emerge during the reform era, the non-democratic environment of the Islamic Republic posed significant obstacles to the creation of opportunity spaces in Rojhelat. Individual actions by women activists therefore became paramount. Their mainly socio-cultural activities, given the banning of other spaces, played a vital role in the transition of experiences of the previous generations. Over an extended period from 1945 to 2020, the persistence of their aims, tactical repertoires, and collective identities across the first, second, and third generations can be ascribed to the political environment of Rojhelat and those relations facilitated through cultural activities. It is essential to note that the transmission of generational knowledge, a crucial indicator of a movement in abeyance, occurred primarily through committed activities serving as resistance centers in the challenging Iranian environment.

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CHAPTER 11

Citizenship from Below: The Impact of Kurdish Women's *Small-Scale Activism*

Wendelmoet Hamelink

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes Jila Hosseini invited us to her home. She knew that we were seriously interested in literature; each time we were with five to seven girls. She couldn't invite men, she already had a lot of problems because of her husband. We read poems there and discussed literature. She also opened up a lot about her private life to us. In those gatherings at Jila Hosseini's home, I discovered not only my literary identity, but also my gender identity. (Novelist Essmat Sophie talking about literary gatherings in the late 1990s in Sanandaj, Rojhelat/Iranian Kurdistan; interview in English in Norway, 2023.)

In this chapter,¹ I explore how small-scale women's projects create alternative affective spaces for exercising and performing citizenship. During my research, I investigated projects initiated by women that aim to support and empower women within their own environment and networks, both local and transnational. Women involved in such activities often attempt to operate outside existing political and civil society organizations as they are dissatisfied with the results these achieve, do not want

¹Although most of this chapter is new, it is based on partly the same data as used for the article "Challenging Gender Regimes Through Small-Scale Activism. Alternative Citizen-led Projects in Kurdistan/Türkiye" by Hamelink, Şen, Kaczorowski and Bocheńska, 2025. There are a few overlaps in examples and analysis.

to be part of such organizations, or define their activities as distinct from those of the organizations. They do not necessarily define themselves as activists but have a strong intrinsic motivation to change women's lives, either because of the "moral outrage" (Weiss, 2018) they feel about their own experiences of oppression and limitations, or because they have seen this happening in other women's lives. To encompass such actions, I use Bain and Podmore's broad definition of activism: "Activism can be understood as defiant actions used by individuals and social groups to bring about political or societal changes and/or create spaces of visibility, opportunity and hope" (2021, p. 1308).

This chapter offers examples of different projects established by women and shows the "work" these projects do in the lives of women and how they expand the spaces women occupy. I also explore how women use affective strategies to connect with others and how this makes them value their projects as meaningful. Each intervention occurs on a small or micro-scale, but rather than defining this as a lack or weakness, it is, I argue, what makes them successful. The above quotation provides the first example: The poet Jîla Hosseini invited girls to her house, read and discussed literature with them, and talked with them about her experience of being a woman in an oppressive marriage. This small *act* (in the sense used by Isin (2008)) made an impact on Essmat Sophie, who "discovered not only [her] literary identity, but also [her] gender identity" in her teenage years. While the general literary gatherings that Essmat joined in Sine/Sanandaj were mainly of men—the few women who came were exceptions—and although her brother tried to prevent her from attending, she did not feel restricted in this small home gathering. The act of reading literature and poems together in small groups of women also created the opportunity to talk about other topics that could not be discussed when men were around: Jîla Hosseini felt able to share with the girls her difficult experiences of domestic violence. The interviews contained many such examples from all over Kurdistan of small acts with a big impact; the many women involved in such actions give reason to believe that they have formed an effective and forceful strategy to change women's positions in Kurdish society from within.

As Mimi Sheller argues in the context of the Caribbean, "intersections of race, gender and sexuality continue to form a key nexus of political struggle" (2012, p. 88). She observes that "beyond the overly simplistic dualism of either violent rebellion or hidden resistance, a third realm of public, non-violent *citizenship from below* emerges" (p. 68). The high-risk context in which many Kurdish women operate, which often also affects

them when living in Europe, differs from more democratic contexts: Since the state often acts as a threatening force, participants need to manage and channel their emotions toward the state and authorities. The fact that they themselves, their family, friends and acquaintances, and well-known activists have been imprisoned, tortured, attacked, bombed, interrogated, and otherwise mistreated results in a history of violence (violence as an institutional domain, Walby, 2009) that intersects with other inequalities and further reinforces the reproduction of structural inequalities. Another important factor is the economic pressure under which many of our participants report living. Their activism is mostly self-financed despite already high levels of economic insecurity and need. This chapter argues that women's experiences of living on the margins have made them creative in using these marginal spaces to their own advantage. It can therefore be termed citizenship from below in the sense of Sheller's research (see also Dag, 2023, on self-governing from below).

The first and central argument of this chapter is based on the idea that my interlocutors mobilized positive emotions to work toward change. I, therefore, follow Alessandro Pratesi in seeing emotions as "a crucial link between the micro- and macro-levels of social reality" and as having the ability "not only to explain people's behavior and social order but also to set the possibilities for social change" (Pratesi, 2018, pp. 64–65). I argue that the motivation with which many women undertake these activities and build emotional bonds with other women, thereby strengthening their collective position, emerges from the everyday reproduction of inequality for women and Kurdish people. Due to the continuous reproduction of inequalities in daily interactions, the research participants were aware of the long-term investment required to change inequalities on a micro level. Rather than trying to address large macro-level structures through social or political movement activism, they consciously mobilized micro-level and positive emotional interactions to work toward direct change. Social movements and political activism act on the level of hopes and ideologies through which structural change may be achieved, working from the assumption that only mass action can forge change. However, the research participants were more interested in intervening on a micro level in everyday affective practices and interactions between people. This is reminiscent of theories of micropolitics (Scott, 1990) and tactics in everyday life (de Certeau, 1980) that show how small and often invisible acts of resistance are capable of changing power dynamics on a macro level.

The second main argument of this chapter is that beside the affective strategies used by women as a starting point for collective action, these personal encounters also entail *activist placemaking* (Drysdale et al., 2022). I borrow ideas about placemaking from the literature on LGBTQ activism, which has contributed significantly to conceptualizing how queer activism challenges the heteronormative production of spaces (Blidon & Brunn, 2022; Cvetkovich, 2003). It may be argued that some of the gendered inequalities experienced by minoritized women are comparable to those experienced by LGBTQ persons. Hemmings, for example, analyzed bisexual space-making through the following questions: “How do sexual, gendered and raced subjects ‘take up space?’” How are queer subjects produced in both discursive and actual spaces? What imaginative as well as actual geographical spaces do the disenfranchised create and occupy? (2002, p. 46). These questions are valid for any subaltern community pushed to the margins. Yilmaz (2023) recently argued for the need for “queering the field” in Kurdish Studies, as this “can provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of violence” and “enables an examination of the nuanced power dynamics that shape Kurdish experiences of oppression, violence, and war” (2023, p. 57). Since “cultural space is not necessarily geographically locatable” (Hemmings, 2002, p. 13), this is a question not only of claiming *geographical spaces* but also of reclaiming *practices intervening in space*, such as hearing a woman shouting in the marketplace or seeing a woman riding a bicycle. Such small-scale actions, through taking space, can impact gender relations on a macro level.

As I will further show below, a narrow focus on certain types of political activism in Kurdistan has made small-scale practices invisible and understudied. By focusing on these small-scale acts and understanding them as forms of activist placemaking in which women (re)claim, (re)invent, and (re)create certain spaces as areas of new involvement and activism, this chapter reveals seemingly mundane or everyday practices and shows their effect on the lives of women. Through the deliberate and creative use of small-scale actions, women expand their opportunities from the bottom up; “marginality is productive of political subjectivity” (Turner, 2016, p. 143). The examples given in this chapter shed light on four important characteristics of the women’s initiatives. The first two focus on the inward and intimate dimensions of small-scale activism, and the last two on its outward-facing, more visible dimensions. I follow here Julia Zielke (2022), who understood “dwelling activism” (the struggle for equal access to

housing in the UK) not only as a “loud and radical collective struggle” but also as rooted in the personal struggles of precarious communities that start in the intimacy of the home with “inward-facing practices of thinking, understanding and togetherness” (p. 1071).

First, the small-scale initiatives entail affective strategies through which women connect to other women and, thus, spread ideas, skills, and patterns of behavior, not through institutional or state structures but through small-scale, personal interactions and emotional bonds. This can be called affective citizenship. Second, the research participants (the initiators of small-scale activist projects) involve women in new activities or extend the space for them to do so, thus creating new structures that make women freer and less dependent. I call this placemaking: an increase in citizenship practice by creating new spaces from within. Based on these two inward-looking dimensions that mainly impact the direct participants, I argue that small-scale activism then extends to impact macro-structures in society. Thus, third, the women expose others in society to unexpected, unknown, or unusual gendered acts, such as women advertising products in the market or engaging in exercise or sport in public spaces, referred to as “rupture” by Isin (2008). I refer to these as outward-facing practices of citizenship, challenging gender norms. Since examples of this dimension of small-scale activism can be found across all sections and we have analyzed it elsewhere (Hamelink et al., 2025), there is no individual section dedicated to this dimension. Finally, the article connects the activities of women not only from different regions, mostly Bakur/Turkish Kurdistan and Rojava/Syrian Kurdistan, but also those from Başûr/Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojhelat/Iranian Kurdistan² who currently live in the diaspora. Kurdish women increasingly have cross-border encounters with women from different regions, either because they meet in the diaspora or because women from one Kurdish area migrate to another. Slowly, a more transregional Kurdish space is emerging in which women can be seen as the forerunners in making meaningful connections to change women’s lives, imaginations, representation, and positions within society. This can be labeled transregional or transnational citizenship. As will become clear from the examples in this chapter, these four dimensions are often

²Divided across four Middle Eastern states, the Kurdish homeland, Kurdistan, is often identified by Kurds by referring to the four points of the compass, thus challenging the divisions imposed by state politics. Following this lead, we use these names in our book interchangeably.

interconnected, but exploring them as different aspects of “citizenship from below” reveals more clearly how they work as strategies that create new citizenship practices, and how they intersect and work together.

This chapter is based on the life stories and narrative interviews with 35 women, 3 of whom identified as LGBTQ; the majority were from Bakur/Turkish Kurdistan, but they also came from other regions of Kurdistan and the diaspora. All interlocutors were anonymized for this chapter, apart from two writers and an artist when I refer to their literary or art works. Although Kurdish women operate in different national contexts and under different gender regimes and consist of various religious and linguistic groups—and thus do not form a homogenous group—I argue that they share certain features; therefore, it is rewarding to analyze their stories and initiatives within one chapter. Most notably, they share a common intersectional struggle against oppressive nation-state regimes as well as the patriarchal structures within Kurdish society that limit their freedom. These shared characteristics highlight the importance of a comparative perspective to enable broader claims about small-scale activism rather than a focus on the context of only one of the nation-states Kurdistan is part of. Moreover, the material shows that the interlocutors and their acquaintances increasingly make cross-border connections through small-scale activism, carry out interventions from and in Europe, and/or are actively involved in attempts to improve the lives of Kurdish refugee women who live temporarily or permanently in countries not of their birth. Kurdish men and women are therefore increasingly creating, and operating in, a transnational space in which they share affective strategies for citizenship, activism, and resistance.

KURDISH GENDERED CITIZENSHIP AND SMALL-SCALE ACTIVISM

The social movement literature has predominantly focused on the power of the collective and the characteristics necessary for movements to have the potential to effect social change. Charles Tilly et al. (2020) have argued that movements are characterized by a combination of four elements: (1) continuity of campaigns and claims expressed; (2) public performances (marches, petitions, etc.); (3) public display (visible advertising of the movement’s goals); and (4) a strong organizational basis. Islah Jad (2018) follows this view when she writes of Palestinian women that “it is through

organized, collective and sustained acts of resistance that oppressed and marginalized social groups gain more power. In a situation in which a whole society is constantly under external threat, there is a vital need for collectivity” (p. 22). However, although social movements in Tilly’s sense exist in the Middle East, they require a political opportunity that is seldom present under authoritarian regimes, as the latter “have expressed little tolerance toward sustained collective dissent” (Bayat, 2010, p. 9). Asef Bayat presented social movement theory as Eurocentric as it “draw[s] on Western experience” (p. 4), suffers from Orientalist views that “depict the Muslim Middle East as a monolithic, fundamentally static, and thus ‘peculiar’ entity” (p. 3), and therefore does not have adequate tools to discover and understand different forms of activism in the Middle East. He, therefore, introduced the term “social non-movement” to refer to dissident actions under severely authoritarian regimes that “interlock activism with the practice of everyday life” (p. 11). He defines the social non-movement as:

The collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leadership and organizations (...) In the Middle East, the non-movements have come to represent the mobilization of millions of the subaltern, chiefly the urban poor, Muslim women, and youth. (Bayat, 2010, p. 15)

Within Kurdish activism, collective and mass action have, however, often been prioritized as the best strategy to fight inequality and oppression. Due to the highly visible character of the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*; Kurdistan’s Workers’ Party) as a Kurdish mass guerilla movement operating since the early 1980s, the collective, political, and violent character of Kurdish activism has received ample attention in the media as well as in academic analyses. This focus has sometimes distracted from other initiatives among Kurds that fit better with Bayat’s theory of non-movement, albeit with certain differences, as I will argue below.

Since the PKK has dominated the face of Kurdish activism over the last 40 years, I will pay some attention to the way in which the PKK (and the Kurdish movement connected to it) has focused on collective activism, as opposed to other types of resistance which is the topic of this chapter. This will show more clearly why, in the context of this history, I see it as crucial

to highlight small-scale activism. The PKK is eager to emphasize the collective character of its activism and presents itself as a mass movement for the lower social classes, women, and the poor (see, e.g., Erel & Acik, 2020; O'Connor, 2021; Tezcür, 2015). It describes itself as a bottom-up movement (Jongerden, 2015) in which those within the PKK have pushed for change. Gültan Kışanak, a female Kurdish politician imprisoned since 2016 (see Chap. 1), also described the PKK women's movement as a grassroots movement that developed into a political movement, noting that "the resistance started in prison and merged with the women defending their livelihood" (interview with Kışanak in Käser, 2021, p. 47), thereby emphasizing the intersectional character of Kurdish women's activism, which fights for Kurdish rights and women's rights and combats poverty and economic underdevelopment. Next to its grassroots character, the belief in mass action is an important part of PKK ideology and practices.

Dilar Dirik (2022), for example, gives an activist and insider account as well as an academic analysis of the Kurdish Women's Movement within the PKK and writes against "system feminism" that "fails to protect against fascist ideologies" (Dirik, 2022, p. 12). She also criticizes movements that "present themselves as leaderless and horizontal" (p. 12) and recent trends within feminism that celebrate "individualist heroism" (p. 6). She believes that such endeavors cannot lead to radical change and that "women cannot expect to achieve liberation on their own terms if they do not become a collective and autonomous force in wider struggles for justice" (p. 5). She sees the mass women's movement within the PKK—comprising a wide network of organizations across many different villages, towns, and cities in Kurdistan, and built up over decades—as a road not only toward Kurdish women's liberation but also for women worldwide to follow.

In my own interviews and those conducted by others (e.g., Käser (2021), Geerdink (2018)), PKK members and fighters present the movement's cause as a collective endeavor that transcends personal wishes and lives. Their militant identity comes strongly to the fore in how they talk about women's liberation through the movement. For example, throughout the interview with Şilan,³ a PKK activist from Rojava/Syrian Kurdistan in her mid-40s, her focus on women's liberation and the need for women to become leaders for social change was notable, as was the way in which

³Interview in Kurdish in Europe, 2022. Country not mentioned to protect the identity of the participant.

she subordinated her own experiences and subject position to the movement's struggle. She did not want to speak of personal experiences and saw herself as a "rose in a field of roses," in which the collective, not the individual, is important. This focus on the collective differs from small-scale initiatives, whose participants validated individual experiences and emotional connections with the other women involved. Although positive emotional bonds have also been emphasized as important within the context of the guerrilla struggle, camaraderie (*hevallî*) is part of a conscious subordination to the goals of the movement and a "subjectivation" in which PKK members discipline the mind and body through party education (Käser, 2021, pp. 100–101).

Although the PKK has developed a *theoretical model* intended to be bottom-up and to give power to local communities, sometimes presented as a grassroots movement and a movement from below (Dirik, 2022) as described above, it may also be argued that the PKK's hierarchical *practices* contradict such a reading. As Hanifi Baris states, "This hierarchical organization leaves little room for democratic processes (...) Personality cult of 'the leadership' is another weakness" (2021, p. 186). Weiss (2010) showed how this affects gender relations within the PKK, for example, "the strict prohibition of sexual relations among party members" (p. 56) on pain of expulsion from the party. One research participant, a woman who moved to Germany during her early 20s and became involved in PKK activism while living in Germany, articulated the movement's hierarchical dimension:

[They are] children who are engaged in the struggle for Kurdistan. They are doing that struggle and over there they become part of a hierarchical organization. (...) I also entered the organization although I never became a member, since I'm not a hierarchical person. I came there directly with a women's philosophy, I met them with that female antenna. Because I already experienced violence from my mother and from my brother. (...) People shouldn't use power hysterically. (Interview in Istanbul in Turkish, 2022)

Like many other research participants, she linked her current subject position and beliefs, namely anti-hierarchical, to her earlier life experiences and situated her subject position in opposition to the PKK's hierarchical character which, she believes, requires reform. In my long-term contact with Kurdish women from many areas of Kurdistan, I found other women who voiced perspectives that offer an alternative to the hierarchical

character of the PKK and its belief in mass action. One example is Faxriye (a woman in her early 40s who had set up an artist collective), who commented:

[Political parties] want us to take part in the hierarchy of that structure. It doesn't matter which side, how well equipped the individual is, what they are. Everything is centered on numbers. The more you increase your numbers, the stronger you are. Again, we are confronted with the phenomenon of power. (Interview in Diyarbakir in Turkish, 2021)

Moreover, the PKK was and is not the only political player and is not equally active in all regions; in Rojhelat/Iranian Kurdistan and Başûr/Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, other political movements and parties have an equally large, or larger, following. In Rojhelat, small-scale actions that do not attract regime attention have been particularly important since the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Chap. 10), but can arguably also be regarded as important strategies to remain outside the often conflicting domain of Kurdish party politics.

Many participants differentiated themselves not only from political actors but also from NGO initiatives and women who were active in larger NGOs that managed to secure funding, often from Europe. They felt that these NGOs effected no real change for women despite their financial capacity (however, NGOs also can be crucial, see the previous section of this book). Various authors have highlighted the problem of “NGO-ization,” defined by Jad (2018) as the “fragmentation and demobilization of all social movements (...) spreading values that favor dependency, discourage self-reliance, and introduce new modes of consumption.” The effect of NGO-ization in Kurdish communities has been particularly well analyzed for Iraqi Kurdistan (Mojab, 2009) where NGOs were established earlier than in the rest of Iraq and received extensive support from international organizations (Ali, 2018). While they created new platforms for women's liberation (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011), many felt that they served political parties and did little to improve the everyday life of Kurdish women (Ali, 2018, p. 220). This view was reflected in the interviews. Participants originating from Başûr/Iraqi Kurdistan talked about the corruption caused by the presence of hundreds of NGOs in the region, which they regarded as empty “fronts” created simply to apply for funding with no organizations behind them. In Bakur/Turkish Kurdistan, too, participants were critical of NGOs that they saw as inefficient, incapable of

reaching women on the ground, and sometimes a form of self-enrichment for their leaders.

In all these different contexts, many participants voiced their resistance to the dominance of party politics and the guerrilla struggle; they opposed NGO-ization and searched for different ways of working toward positive change in women's lives—not through large collective action and political or social movements, or the claims of NGOs that publicize their interventions in international language designed to appeal to funding agencies—but through the small, the everyday, and the ordinary. They fought for change, not in the collective appeals of protests and clashes, or the emotions aroused in such moments, but through engagement with women in their daily lives, through everyday friendship, sharing, and enduring relations of support. They saw power and strength in the small togethernesses that Kurdish women establish when working and setting up small businesses and cooperatives, visiting each other in their homes, doing agricultural work or art, or sharing skills. At the same time, many saw these actions as ways to find alternatives to citizenship of a state that they do not feel they belong to, as we have explained elsewhere (Hamelink et al., 2025). While listening to their stories and finding out more about their initiatives, it increasingly struck me as meaningful that the research participants emphasized the need for emotional connections with other women as part of their initiatives.

Despite similarities with Bayat's definition of social non-movement, there are important differences. I highlight in this article that my research participants were not unaware of the possible impact of their actions: They deliberately aimed for change through small-scale initiatives. I position small-scale activism between social movements and social non-movement: It is deliberate action but does not aim at large collectives; the women fight for change, but not through highly ideological goals; they support other women and find inspiration in that support, not because of the large collective, but because of the intimate, everyday, and long-term sharing of resources, both material and non-material. This chapter therefore highlights the small-scale actions that many Kurdish women undertake almost daily, to the extent that it has, in many circles, become normalized to support, share, and aim to change women's lives for the better. I argue that this strong intrinsic motivation to act for positive change in women's lives stems partly from "moral outrage" about women's marginalization and oppression (Weiss, 2018). The latter can form a starting point to "contest forms of conclusion" and "struggle for participation" (Erel & Acik, 2020,

p. 486). The participants' narratives show that they often relate their initiatives to their own life paths, in that their experiences with gender- and ethnicity-based inequalities motivated them to work for change in their own lives as well as for other women. Although this reading follows directly from the research methodology, in which participants were asked to tell their life stories and make connections between their personal experiences and the actions they undertook, the approach seemed to resonate with participants' understandings. In the second part of this chapter, I will outline three of the four dimensions that characterize small-scale activism as explained above, and analyze each of them through examples found during the research.

GENDERING AFFECTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Dersim (a woman in her mid-40s originally from Dersim but living in Amed/Diyarbakir) set up a business that sells agricultural products such as tomato paste, fruit jams, and dried eggplant. Alongside her team of 12 permanent female employees, she hires up to 300 women to work in the harvesting season. She aims to improve her employees' standard of life and form a close-knit supportive community. She emphasized during the interview that the support system built up through the business is not a by-product, but a goal in itself:

The women tell their life stories and what they experience. And I can say that we also meet outside the workplace, we talk to each other, we call each other, we go to weddings and celebrations together. And that is also what keeps us together, it's not only working from 8 to 5 but also helping each other when there is a problem. (...) I enjoy it a lot. Why? I have seen with my mother that she is someone who always has a plate ready for any neighbor who passes by. When at the end of the day a woman says to me, 'I'm so happy that you are here, you have created this,' then it makes me so happy. That is the real reward. (Interview in Turkish in Diyarbakir, 2021)

Through her business project, Dersim created a workplace for women who had often had no previous paid employment and had difficulty gaining "permission" from male relatives for such activities. Since almost everyone working here was female, it was more accessible for women living under such restrictions, a form of placemaking that I will analyze further below. At the same time, the above quotation shows that there is

more to such initiatives than simply creating a safe space; it also involves emotional bonding, partnership, and solidarity (Galip, 2022), and Dersim places this in a generational perspective, as she had learned such solidarity from her mother (see Weiss, 2018, for an understanding of activism and emotions as an intergenerational process).

Other ways in which women showed their emotional involvement in their work environment include collaborating with other women to devise how they can be employed despite restrictions imposed by male relatives, and by showing flexibility to accommodate childcare or household tasks. The women also gave examples of how they defended other women when their husbands or other men protested against their involvement. Faxriye, an artist in her early 40s who worked in healthcare, took over the tasks of a female colleague who wanted to attend literacy classes but could not get permission from her manager, taking her colleague's place while she was in classes. These actions of solidarity have created working environments that allow women to participate more fully in the public domain, despite the limitations faced. I found many similar examples across the projects and activities of my research participants: They built their initiatives around emotional bonds of support and solidarity through which the women gained the opportunity to participate more fully in the public sphere.

The term “affective citizenship” has been used in democratic contexts where the welfare state has been replaced by neoliberal governance that has introduced a narrative in which responsibility for welfare and care tasks shifts from the state to “good citizens.” This narrative becomes increasingly imbued with imaginations of “affective subjects,” who are expected to carry out care tasks with love and compassion⁴ (Marchesi, 2021). Although the activities of my research participants contained elements of compassionate care or “do-good volunteerism” (Marchesi, 2021), I found that their concern was directed primarily at forming a group based on sharing and solidarity in which they played an equal part. They, therefore, played a different role than the NGO workers and volunteers in Chap. 9, who developed hierarchical relations with the refugee women whom the projects were intended to support, invoking tropes of women in need of saving (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Marchesi, 2021) or “Orientalist tropes about

⁴ Milena Marchesi diverges from this imagination by showing how “improper affect” in the form of anger and frustration is as much part of affective citizenship as “the rhetoric of affective citizenship [that] links its potential to produce a better, more cohesive society to the cultivation of benevolence, compassion and empathy in citizens” (2021, p. 27).

the allegedly passive, suppressed, and silent Muslim woman” (Schäfers, 2018, p. 7). Such NGO projects were also active in Bakur/Turkish Kurdistan in the interviewees’ environment.

The interviewees, however, often commented that they were fighting against the image of (Kurdish) women as incapable and in need of “saving,” and actively sought more equal forms of solidarity. For example, Faxriye organized an art collective and repeatedly emphasized its non-hierarchical character and aims: “We want everyone to be part of this work, it doesn’t matter who produces it. I don’t own this work, I don’t own it as ‘mine.’”⁵ Indeed in the online version of the collective, her name was rarely mentioned, and she put others forward to engage in media interviews to present and promote the collective. This deliberate orientation toward equality and structures of solidarity in the design of projects can perhaps be explained from the subject position of Kurdish women, many of whom have spent most of their lives under restrictions from state repression and state violence against Kurdish people as well as a restricting gender regime (Alinia, 2013; Alizadeh et al., 2022; Hamelink et al., 2025; Maktabi, 2010; Shakiba et al., 2021; Walby, 2009). It seems that these experiences made the participants sensitive to hierarchical relations and power structures, which they therefore wished to abolish. Affective citizenship, from this position of injustice, therefore, also incorporates negative emotions of anger, sadness, and resistance that form a basis for action.

During the interviews, when asked about their motivation for becoming involved in activism, most participants explained that this was rooted in earlier experiences of oppression, either by themselves, their mothers, or other women in their social environment. Experiencing or witnessing inequality motivated them to stand up for other women. Weiss (2018) has argued that Kurdish activism among diaspora Kurdish communities in Europe was activated partly by “moral outrage” about intergenerational experiences of oppression in the home country (see also Toivanen & Baser, 2019). Given the emotions articulated in the interviews, not only in the diaspora but also in Kurdistan, moral outrage seems a fitting term. For the participants, this outrage stemmed from the injustice they often witnessed from early childhood—such as confrontations with the state through police raids, the imprisonment of relatives and demonstrations, or confrontations with male oppression through prohibitions, limitations, or domestic and sexual violence. Moral outrage also stemmed from the

⁵ Interview in Turkish in Amed, 2021.

stories the participants heard from their parents and other relatives about injustices suffered in earlier times and transmitted over several generations. The women's small-scale activism was, therefore, motivated not only by positive examples of sharing and compassion but also by moral outrage at injustice.

Another example of affective citizenship, and its gendering, is seen in the story of Dîlan, a woman in her early 50s who lives in Germany and launched a village reconstruction project to build a female-owned village in Dersim (Bakur/Turkish Kurdistan), her region of origin (see Chaps. 5 and 7 for more about this region. See Chap. 3 for more about Jinwar, a women's village in Rojava/Syrian Kurdistan). Together with over 25 women, she bought a large plot of land and, at the time of the interview, was attempting to obtain the necessary building permissions. Each participant bought her own plot, but the idea behind the village is to build a women's collective based on solidarity:

Our project is not about property, it is a women's project that has a philosophy, that also includes advice to women and other things. So we included women by choice. We want people who like to socialize with each other. We already have experienced unrest elsewhere. Let's not have that in our village and let's live according to our own philosophy. (...) We do this together as women. As women in a world ruled by men, in a male society and male political system, we are just trying to exist. (Interview in Turkish in Istanbul, 2022)

Her description speaks of solidarity, socializing, togetherness, peace, and recognition of women's hard work and positions. According to Dîlan, the project has several aims. First, it is about increasing women's property ownership, as the plots and houses will only be owned by women, who will then pass them on to other female relatives or friends. Second, the village is about creating a peaceful female-focused atmosphere which fosters trust and self-confidence by sharing experiences and skills without male domination. Third, it aims to encourage cultural projects and exchange, focused on Kurdish culture and language in a country dominated by Turkish culture. It also aims to nurture inter-Kurdish connections by including women who are not originally from Dersim. Finally, it aims to create a more ecological lifestyle in which women produce their own food and sell natural products to each other and to visitors.

Through the village project, the participating women also engage with governance, citizenship, and land. Dîlan emphasized that the project does not focus on ownership as an aim in itself but is intended for women to build a community according to their own vision:

Thank God that in Turkey it is nowadays legal for women to inherit, but it is still necessary to fight for it within the family. (...) You don't necessarily need to found a big country by means of big wars. Because these things have been tried, and what was the result? It only resulted in more deaths. Did we win anything? We don't even have one village. So I thought, let's [as Kurdish people] at least have one village. Let women also have ownership.

This quotation combines views about women's limited access to land and inheritance with the lack of ownership of Kurdish communities of "even one village." Dîlan believes that fighting for land and independence has led only to death, without gaining any land on which Kurdish people can live peacefully in their own way. In the following section, I will refer to this as activist placemaking which, in this case, has a direct geographical character and aim. Apart from its placemaking aims, however, the village project also "genders" property ownership and builds an affective community of women who strive for solidarity, sharing, and self-expression.

Since the 2022 interview, we have remained in contact. The project saw many setbacks, including financial difficulties and the challenges of obtaining the necessary permission to build, but also challenges in understanding one another and collaborating in a project with a strong ideological undertone and aim. Due to its ideological setup, the project may be more vulnerable to internal strife than business cooperatives where the participants may, while aiming for emotional connections, have an economic rationale that makes them perceive a benefit despite a certain dissonance. Nevertheless, the village project is an important example of Kurdish women mobilizing affective strategies to widen their spaces as women and as Kurdish people, becoming active agents in community building and acts of citizenship.

At the beginning of this chapter, I showed that the PKK as an organization, in common with many of its members, focuses on collective and mass action, and that this often takes a strongly hierarchical form. As Weiss (2018) showed, this form of activism is rooted in—sometimes transgenerational—moral outrage about injustice. The small-scale initiatives described by participants, examples of which I have given in this section,

show a different response to experiences of injustice than mass action and the accompanying rage and sadness. Witnessing injustice made these women sensitive to inequality and motivated them to create more democratic and equal forms of community-building from the grassroots. They saw themselves as equal members of the community they built, not as do-gooders “saving” women in need. They made no big promises but kept their actions deliberately small, creating the potential for emotional connections and support between the participating women. They “gendered” affective citizenship by focusing on the particular situation of women and LGBTQ persons who needed certain conditions to be able to find spaces for participation in the public domain. Therefore, in the small-scale initiatives proposed by many women in Kurdistan, we see a different form of affective citizenship emerge, one specific to living under an authoritarian regime combined with a patriarchal gender regime that leaves little space for resistance (Bayat, 2010). Rather than engaging in mass action, party politics, or a guerrilla struggle, the participants strategically found niches where they could implement female-oriented projects that gave many women opportunities to engage in public life. The examples shown in this section show that affective strategies went hand in hand with activist placemaking, on which I will focus in the following section.

ACTIVIST PLACEMAKING: WIDENING SPACES FOR CITIZENSHIP PRACTICES

“Buy my products, buy my products,” came the sound of a woman’s voice through a megaphone placed next to a saleswoman sitting with her goods on a street market in Silêmanî (Başûr). In June 2018, the artist Avan Omar (who lives in the Netherlands) established the art intervention *Hawar* (The Scream) in this northern city of Iraqi Kurdistan, where women, like men, sell products (second-hand clothes, and herbs and vegetables grown in their own gardens) in the streets, but feel embarrassed to advertize them in the same way. The saleswomen used to tell her that “women should not shout in the street” and that they “should not raise their voices.” She therefore recorded their voices, or her own voice, and let the recording play through a megaphone at the places where women were selling their goods. Hearing the voice of a woman promoting her products actively interrupted and widened the public space of the market to include women more equally. That artists can actively and successfully engage and

intervene in social life, social space, and representation—and thus change gendered practices—is shown for example in Ann Cvetkovich’s analysis of the art project *Herstory Inventory* (2023) (see also Cvetkovich, 2003).

Before moving on to analyzing the work of placemaking in the lives of women, I will first turn to how women talk about the impact of isolation and lack of access to places and placemaking. In an interview with Bêrivan, a young artist recently settled in the UK after escaping war in Syria and poverty in Lebanon, she made it clear how depressing it was for her to have no access to places. She arrived in Beirut as a 12-year-old teenager with her parents and sister, and stayed there for eight years before moving to the UK. Her parents had difficulty finding work in Lebanon, which forced the young Bêrivan and her sister to work as well. There was no money for education (which was only accessible in the form of expensive private schools), and they needed enough money to pay for rent and medication. Inflation and the economic crisis in Lebanon made life very expensive, especially for Syrian refugees who were often regarded as a burden by the local population (for comparison, see Chap. 9). Bêrivan and her sister therefore spent all their time working: “I have lived in Lebanon but that’s it. I didn’t have a nightlife, life with friends, no. Just home, work, home, work, that’s it. And that is why I got depression.” Her lack of access to places (she mentioned nightlife, school, going out with friends, and traveling), and comparing this with the access others in her environment had to such places, made Bêrivan feel desperate. It was then a place that offered her some comfort: “My life was too dark. I remember I was going to the church with my Christian friends and then I just found a bit of hope in the church.” Although the war in Syria and the family’s poverty-stricken conditions in Lebanon were the main reasons for her isolation, many other women describe a lack of access to places in daily life without these factors. Often, responsibilities for children, household and care tasks, and restrictions imposed by their husbands or other family members were mentioned as reasons why they or other women in their environment were mainly confined to their homes.

As documented and described by scholars in queer theory, activist placemaking (Blidon & Brunn, 2022) has the ability to counter and reverse gendered limitations, often not through large-scale or visible actions, but through everyday interventions (Drysdale et al., 2022, p. 8; see also Giesecking, 2020). Queer theory focuses on the challenges experienced by LGBTQ individuals when in everyday spaces in which heteronormativity is continuously reproduced, while the placemaking practices

of LGBTQ persons have “been made invisible, ignored, destroyed and degraded” (Giesekeing, 2020, p. 12). In one example from my research, a trans woman who lived in Amed had to constantly move house when the landlords found out she was transsexual. At the same time, the street was a dangerous place for her, which made her frequently lock herself into her apartment, from where she was, however, often evicted. She had a small network of women who would help her find a new place to live, and this was of great importance to her as a person living in constant instability and danger. Most of our examples, however, do not concern LGBTQ persons but the placemaking practices of women who experience restrictions in daily life in terms of the places they can visit. In the patriarchal family system characteristic of Kurdish society—and other Middle Eastern societies—girls and women are traditionally expected to be guided by their male guardians in economic and legal matters, as well as when going into a public space (Maktabi, 2010; Ramadan, 2023). In many countries in the Middle East (but not in Türkiye), male guardianship is officially arranged by family law. Besides the law, “norms and traditions may limit women’s mobility and impose constraints on their access to economic opportunities, services, and resources” (Ramadan, 2023, p. 311). It depends on the social context, whether the area is rural or urban, and on individual families as to whether women are expected to follow these norms and whether these are enforced by family members.

Zêrin described this vividly when talking about how she transformed her life by divorcing her husband. During her married life, she lived either with her husband’s parents or very near to them. Her husband and his family controlled her whereabouts tightly, restricting her movements and options. She wanted to continue with her education and began going to secondary school, but this was fiercely opposed by her husband. By humiliating and controlling her, and threatening to take her children from her if she resisted their decisions, they made Zêrin feel she had little choice but to comply with their wishes. After 12 years of marriage, however, she fled, leaving her three children behind. With her husband and his family, she had moved to a city in western Türkiye, and now returned to Amed, where she came from, and moved in with her mother. She finished high school, went to follow-up courses to gain further qualifications, and, in the meantime, fought to get her children back. After she had found a job and saved some money, she found an apartment to live in alone, planning to get the children to live with her. This time, she was pushed back by her own

relatives, who felt that people would “talk badly about me if I left their house as an unmarried woman.”

She went ahead with her plans and put pressure on her husband and his family to send the children to live with her. After many years of separation, they were reunited and slowly built up a new bond. The limitations Zêrîn experienced were, although initially imposed by her husband’s and her own relatives, also supported by societal gender norms (Olcer, 2020). We have explained this elsewhere (Hamelink et al., 2025) by using the framework of gender regime theory (Walby, 2009), which offers insights into how a variety of institutional and other power relations, combined with structural and systemic forms of inequality, form the gender regime at a certain time and place. In this case, the restricting norms around visiting other places and living alone were limiting Zêrîn’s choices. When education is regarded as a potential opportunity to meet other men, or living alone can make people in the surroundings “talk badly” about a woman, and when relatives feel the need to make female relatives comply with such rules to protect their good name, this places women under constant pressure to adapt their behavior to existing gender norms and expectations. Although for many years previously, Zêrîn had complied at least partially with her in-laws’ expectations, she now withstood these norms by finishing her education and moving to her own accommodation, even when told not to do so.

Knowing that many women face similar problems, she started initiatives in her close surroundings that were suitable for women who had little access to other places. For example, she began organizing Pilates classes and a reading group for women in the courtyard of the building where she lived. The women joining only needed to come down from their apartments and could do so when male relatives were not at home. This small act already made an important difference for many women living there:

The women’s lives consisted of cleaning and cooking and preparing for their husbands, nothing else. They didn’t have any social life. (...) We did Pilates and went for walks together. They all came. (...) After a while, I realized that something was missing: books. We gathered in the garden where it was very pleasant and we started reading for one or two hours. Now they all have bookshelves at home. And 21 women who were not educated have got their primary school diplomas.

In what Deniz Kandiyoti describes as “bargaining with patriarchy” (1988), the research participants used strategies by which they, to some degree, complied with the gendered limitations imposed on them but at the same time tried to expand their space of action. This also illustrates how “the intimate zone is, through and through, socially produced, maintained, and transformed” (Plummer, 2003, p. 70).

Like Zêrîn, other women talked about the difficulties women experience in accessing places and about the need to make activities accessible to them. They aimed to create new or alternative spaces that women would be able to visit without being restricted by their families. For example, Faxriye, an artist in her mid-40s living in Diyarbakir, presented her art activities as a collective created not by herself but by all the women involved. She started organizing art workshops at home and later bought an apartment specifically to host women to become involved in art. Although she was not against including men, she felt that it should initially be a women-only space, so that it would be easier for women to visit. Like the example of Jîla Hosseini’s literary gatherings in Sine, with which I started the chapter, this creation of a women-only space was a strategy to enable women to get out of their houses, meet with others, discuss and share daily life experiences and other topics, and learn new skills (in these cases related to literature and art).

CITIZENSHIP AT LARGE: TRANSREGIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

For many participants, activism and caring for others have become so much a natural part of their daily lives that Hêlîn, for example, says she feels empty when not engaged in the common good of their community, in the diaspora as well as in Kurdistan. She is a woman in her mid-40s from Iraqi Kurdistan, and worked in a women’s organization for immigrant women and women’s rights in the UK:

Only half of you is here, and your other half is always back there. Maybe I have been on the street a thousand times [for demonstrations] against the war in Iraq, against the economic sanctions, for women’s rights back in Kurdistan, to change the law. (...) As a person, when I am not active, I feel there’s something missing. (Interview in London in English, 2022)

Participants living in Kurdistan who had not moved abroad expressed similar views about how activism had shaped their lives. As we have seen previously, it is often early-life experiences of oppression, police raids, the imprisonment of relatives and friends, and social restrictions in family and social contexts that inspired them to become engaged with improving the lives of women and LGBTQ individuals. Over recent decades, this engagement increasingly forms a starting point for transnational networks. Although Hêlîn established an organization that initially targeted only Iraqi Kurdish women refugees, it later merged with another organization for migrant women and offers services to women from many, mostly Arabic-speaking, Middle Eastern countries. In other cases, participants started initiatives involving Kurdish women born in other regions than themselves.

There are various reasons for the increased connections across borders and in the diaspora. First, the possibilities for traveling across national borders within Kurdistan have improved, also for women. More women are educated, have jobs, and are economically independent (Yasun, 2018), and from our material, it seems that it has become more accepted for women to travel unaccompanied by relatives. The overall economic situation has also improved, though it remains vulnerable to fluctuations and crises. Second, there has been an increase in cultural and political activities, events, and festivals organized in different Kurdish regions and visited by Kurds from elsewhere, caused in part by the establishment and development of Iraqi Kurdistan as a semi-independent governance. For example, Sorê can now commute between Amed and Hewlêr (see below), which would have been almost unimaginable 20 years ago. Third, migration flows have continued, caused by the large-scale destruction of livelihoods in many regions. This has been accompanied by increased contact between Kurdish people from different areas (Eccarius-Kelly, 2002; Erel & Acik, 2020), and although levels of success have varied (see Chap. 9), many participants saw these new connections as a positive feature. The most recent large population movements have been the influx of hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds into Iraqi Kurdistan and Türkiye (Oztig, 2022), and the thousands of Yazidis from Iraq who became refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan, Türkiye, and Syrian Kurdistan (Zebari et al., 2020). In this section, I will give various examples of new networks formed in Kurdistan and the diaspora, some more recent due to the above-mentioned migration flows, others formed over recent decades. They show that the connections made between women from different areas often start from

individual contacts made within close surroundings. From such connections, new projects emerge that include Kurdish women from other parts of Kurdistan.

A telling example of transnational connections formed through the participants' initiatives is the book project set up by Houzan Mahmoud that resulted in the publication of *Kurdish Women's Stories* in 2021, which includes 25 self-written/self-told stories by women from all over Kurdistan. With this book, Mahmoud intended not only to shed light on women's histories but also to bring together the experiences of women who had not been able to communicate with each other:

You might not believe it, but I [only] met Başûris and Rojavais in London. There was no connection, no communication because of the imposition of borders, because of limitations placed on us. (...) In my time I never met anyone from Rojava, Rojhelat or Bakur. You simply could not travel there and they could not travel to us. (...) So I thought that it is very important to reconnect through a book, through our text.

Reading the women's herstories in her book from all these different places in Kurdistan, it becomes easier to discover connections between the places and stories.

The internationalization of Kurdish connections is also seen in the story of Sorê, a journalist and film-maker from Amed in her mid-20s, who made many new contacts within a few years, traveled to and lived in different regions, and eventually returned to Amed where she plans to stay for now. Her real goal was to move to Başûr/Turkish Kurdistan, which she regarded as "her state," while in Türkiye, "I've never felt that this is my state (...) I've always had these stories of leaving in my mind."⁶ Sorê grew up in a political family: Her father often traveled for political work, and her uncle was in prison for political reasons. Her father supported and encouraged her to develop her own path (see also Chap. 8). As a student of Film Studies in Istanbul, she became involved in a Kurdish association, started organizing a weekly film discussion group around Kurdish movies, and developed her own command of Kurdish from a language only used at home into one she used professionally. Through the association, she became involved in organizing a Kurdish film festival, where she met other

⁶Interview in Turkish in Amed, 2021.

film-makers and visitors “from South Kurdistan, from Rojhelat, Rojava” with whom she still collaborates.

After finishing her studies, she moved to Amed in 2015, a disastrous year for the city in which the war between the PKK and Türkiye’s army destroyed part of the old center, Sur, and the bombings continued for many months. Many associations were closed down or banned, and it became increasingly difficult to organize cultural activities. At the same time, large numbers of Rojava Kurdish and Iraqî Yezidi refugees had settled in the city, which led to new encounters between Kurdish women from different regions (see Chap. 9). Sorê and a friend began a film workshop for teenage girls in the Yezidi refugee camp. These new connections between Sorê and her friend and the Yezidi refugees were made easier through their shared knowledge of Kurmanji. If it were not for the war with ISIS, and the subsequent emigration from Yezidi areas in Iraq, it is unlikely that Sorê would ever have met Yezidis from Şengal, especially not in Amed. Later, she moved to a Yezidi camp in Başûr/Iraqî Kurdistan where she offered help to families living there and organized activities for the children, and started working in Başûr, while also continuing to be involved in Bakurî Kurdish movies. Working both in Hewlêr and in Amed, she often traveled between the regions (a bus ride of approximately eight hours, including a border crossing with long waits). Her traveling lifestyle, youth, and attractive looks led people to assume that she was a (non-Kurdish) woman available for sexual interaction; eventually, an assault made her leave Başûr: “At that moment, I decided to go to Europe.”

Sorê indeed moved to Europe and applied for asylum based on the ongoing court cases against her in Türkiye. Like many others in Türkiye, she was prosecuted for her involvement in demonstrations, including those following the 2011 Roboski massacre and its aftermath, and the war in Kobanê in 2014. However, the sudden change caused by moving to Europe with little preparation and becoming a “refugee” took a high psychological toll on her, and she returned to Türkiye voluntarily after six months and began working for an NGO. With the court cases continuing, she could only hope that she would not be given a heavy sentence. At the time of the interview, she was teaching journalism to young women in various towns and cities in Bakur. She concluded, “For me, Diyarbakir is everything, Kurdistan is everything.”

Sorê’s storyline exemplifies how, at least for some Kurdish people, Kurdistan as a geographic entity is more of a reality than may appear from a political map. Some Kurdish women have become highly mobile and

discovered new work and life choices by making use of opportunities to move between different countries and Kurdish regions, and to the diaspora in Europe. They manage to build new networks and connections and try to use their assets for the benefit of other women as well. Sorê's sudden move to Europe as a result of sexual assault also shows that women continue to be vulnerable to sexual prejudice and assault, especially when traveling alone. Through the extensive Kurdish networks across the European diaspora, Europe can be an option for escape in such vulnerable situations as Sorê described (for comparison, see Hamelink & Güngör, 2022, where we found that sexual assault and the risk of assault could become reasons for emigration during the Syrian war). It is also a strong example of how different vulnerabilities intersect: As a young Kurdish woman traveling alone, many people in Başûr/Iraqî Kurdistan saw her as not adhering to the usual gender norms (she distinguished this from the situation in Bakur which she described as safer in this respect). In the meantime, she was also engaged in a legal battle due to the court cases against her.

Living in the diaspora can cause people to reconsider their community ties and feelings of belonging, leading them to decide to return, like Sorê, or to make other choices after coming in contact with people whose views differ from the ones they are used to. Dilan, mentioned earlier in the village project, moved to Germany to marry a man from her home region. Although she comes from a Zaza family from Dersim (see Chaps. 5 and 7), she grew up in a Kemalist environment where her family and others no longer identified as Zaza or Kurdish, but as Alevi. When she discovered more about her origins after moving to Germany, she began to see her background in a different light and to explore her Kurdish roots:

After you come to Europe, you get to know political people and they tell you: you are from Dersim, you are Zaza, you are a Kurd. For a long time, I was in shock. (...) I even packed my bags and decided to go to Diyarbakir and Batman and everywhere to see it. (...) They always defined us as terrorists so you get confused of course. Then I completely rejected that 'Atatürkçü' [Kemalist] identity and I went to Dersim and talked with the elderly people, our grandmothers and grandfathers.

Back in Germany, she met Kurdish women from other places and became part of a Kurdish women's group. Dilan's story is another example of the renegotiation of Kurdish citizenship (Section IV), showing that this renegotiation can also take place within the individual. It led her to

adopt a different subject position later in life, based on and leading to new information and new connections. The new connections eventually led her to initiate the village project, a transnational initiative that includes women living in the diaspora and Kurdistan, and works intersectionally through its aims of women's liberation, property ownership for women, and pan-Kurdishness from the grassroots, from below.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I investigated the small-scale activist projects that my research participants undertook to create conditions that allowed more women to participate in a broad range of activities in the public sphere, ranging from art projects to business cooperatives, from film-maker training to Pilates classes, from collaborating in writing a book with Kurdish women's stories to setting up a women-only village. The strategies the women used had both inward- and outward-looking dimensions; the participants predominantly started their projects from the intimacy of the home or the immediate neighborhood, where they focused on creating lasting bonds between small groups of women. They tried to create spaces that women could easily access, where they would not be hindered by the gender norms that often limit women's freedom. From these inward-facing dimensions, the projects then had an outward impact on wider society by challenging gender norms, for example by giving more women the chance to participate in the labor market or by creating transnational connections that may make women more mobile in the future, as we saw in the case of Sorê, who began traveling to Başûr after she had made connections with Kurdish film-makers from there and other areas of Kurdistan.

Previous research has often focused on the mass character of Kurdish activism and the Kurdish Women's Movement, and we know from this research that the Kurdish movement attracts many women as members, voters, political and social leaders, protestors, guerrilla fighters, and in many other capacities. Other research demonstrates the involvement of women in civil society and NGO work in different regions in Kurdistan, and in the ebbs and flows of civil society engagement in Kurdistan, which is strongly impacted by regime repression and control, the economic climate and availability of funding, and Kurdish party politics attempting to dominate and mobilize civil society actions for political agendas. In this chapter, I wanted to shed light on the involvement of women in small-scale actions that often remain invisible but are an important aspect of

Kurdish women's engagement in which numerous women seek alternative ways to improve women's lives, not through large, loud, and visible activism but through acts of citizenship embedded in everyday life. From that position, they manage subtly to disrupt the hegemony of state citizenship that is often difficult to access on equal terms, for Kurds as well as women.

The concept of affective citizenship, and the gendering of citizenship, was useful in illuminating how emotions that are recognized as important elements in steering, mobilizing, experiencing, and practicing citizenship played an important part in enacting citizenship through small-scale activism. In the first place, the participants articulated that their efforts to widen spaces to enable women to fully participate in the public domain arose from moral outrage from having witnessed or experienced state and patriarchal oppression, often in their early life, as well as from the intergenerational transmission of such experiences. Often, the participants said they had witnessed police raids and state violence; some had experienced forced displacement and the destruction of their villages and livelihoods, and others had lived through domestic violence in childhood or their marriages. Many had heard stories from their mothers, grandmothers, and other relatives about domestic and sexual violence, restrictive gender norms, early and forced marriages, as well as state violence and oppression in earlier decades. Using a life story approach in the interviews, it was possible to gain a long-term perspective on why the participants had made certain choices and on what experiences their choices were built.

Second, the participants made it clear that they wanted to use that moral outrage to build new communities and bonds of solidarity that could counter existing hierarchical structures. By building egalitarian relationships with other women and LGBTQ persons, the participants felt they were building support networks capable of resisting both gendered limitations and constant and intrusive state pressure. A wide range of personal examples were given in the interviews, including court cases brought against the participants; the arrest and imprisonment of themselves, relatives, or friends; police raids on their houses and neighborhoods; the banning and closure of organizations they had been involved in or founded; experiences of genocide and flight in the case of Başûr/Iraqi Kurdistan; war and forced migration to other cities or countries in the case of Rojava/Syrian Kurdistan. All these personal examples took place in an environment of general havoc and upheaval that affects the entire Kurdish population; as a consequence, the participants were impacted not only by events

in their own lives but also by more general insecurity, state violence, and economic instability.

Therefore, the “enacting citizenship” of Kurdish women can only be understood in the context of violence and authoritarianism that have profoundly impacted Kurdish communities over the last century. Although these experiences vary in each region of Kurdistan, women are increasingly establishing connections and comparing experiences with women from other regions. These discoveries and the new bonds created have in themselves the potential for empowerment, as shown in some of the examples in this chapter (see also Chaps. 2 and 8). Enacting citizenship at large, across borders and ethnic, cultural, and religious communities, is often a result of war, violence, and forced displacement, but may eventually also lead to positive developments in the form of new connections that could inspire a more cross-border approach to address the limitations under which many Kurdish women live. Small-scale activist projects are able to create alternative spaces of thinking, imagining, and acting that go beyond the already well-trodden paths of mass movement and guerrilla struggle that have not yet led to the liberation many Kurdish women strive for, in terms of emancipation both as women and as citizens.

Finally, the use of the queer concept of activist placemaking was crucial in this chapter for several reasons. It highlighted the difficulty and the importance of women having access to places, access that is strongly gendered. It shows the intersectional character of women’s struggles to overcome limitations, with public places often inaccessible to them because of the different aspects of their marginalized subject positions as women and as Kurds, combined sometimes with other inequalities such as being queer, living in rural areas, or having limited financial means. In conclusion, I briefly revisit the example of the artist Avan Omar, who through her project *Hawar* intervened in the public space of the market in a city in Başûr/Iraqi Kurdistan where she shouted women’s voices through megaphones. She understood perfectly how the saleswomen’s intersectional position of being women, from rural areas, and living in poverty, pushed them to the bottom of the hierarchy and erased them from public space, making them invisible even when they were present, as in the market. She therefore made use of activist placemaking to counter their downtrodden position and pull their voices back into the public space, enacting citizenship from below with and for the women who needed it most. She used her own transnational subject position as a Kurdish woman living in the diaspora in Europe, who could see with different eyes and had an easier gendered

position, to intervene in the space of her home country. With this example, we have come full circle: mobilizing her transnational connections to establish a bond with the market women, she enacted affective citizenship and activist placemaking to powerfully perform citizenship from below.

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CHAPTER 12

Women, Life, Freedom: Portraying Kurdish Women

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INTRODUCTION

The pictures in this chapter form an independent series in this book referring to Kurdish women's resilience and creativity, without being directly part of the chapters. They depict women's lives in Kurdistan and the diaspora; seven of them being made by Kurdish female photographers who show their own interpretation of women's activities. Information about the photographers can be found in the section "About the authors and photographers."

The photographs were selected from two exhibitions we organized in the scope of the ALCITfem project: *Jin, jîyan, azadî—Women, Life, Freedom. Kurdish women's work through the eyes of Kurdish female photographers* (Asia and Pacific Museum, Warsaw, Autumn 2023); and *Women in Exile* (Gamle Munch Community Centre, Oslo, March 2024).

The first exhibition showed women from all age groups and all Kurdish areas in a variety of professions, paid or unpaid. Women are shown in their work contexts, which can be the home, the land, and the field, and at

other times the factory, government office, or laboratory. All the pictures were made by Kurdish women photographers who were asked to freely elaborate on the theme “professional life of Kurdish women.” By showing this under-represented side of women’s lives in Kurdistan, the photographers give an artistic response to existing archival, news and research collections (for example Kurdistan Photolibrary by Chris Kutschera, or *Kurdistan in the shadow of history* by Susan Maseilas).

The second exhibition showed, amongst others, the work of Benyamin Farnam, who created a series of photographs in summer 2023 in Oslo. He portrayed women from different Kurdish regions as established citizens and at the same time as activists. What drives these women to continue with, or be involved in, activism, and how do they give voice to their ideals? The series show activists who focus on the improvement of life in their homeland, as well as women who are engaged in political, social, women’s and LGBTQ activism in Norway.



Şilan Ehmad (26) is from the town Dêrik. She started her career of kick boxing in 2019. She loved her career despite criticism from the community. After winning gold, bronze and silver medals from various tournaments at the level of several countries including Iraq, she ended her career as a kick boxer and is now a boxing coach. Women in Rojava first challenged themselves and then society to achieve their goals. By Khabat Ibrahim, Dêrik 2023, Rojava. All rights reserved. The material is copyright protected and not governed by the same CC license as the rest of the work being published by Springer Nature



Kübra Başkala (29) is a botanist. In 1988, her family had to move from Van to Kocaeli in Western Turkey due to economic concerns. Later, the family moved to Istanbul. But in 2018 Kübra returned to Gevaş, near the city Van, together with her cousin Elif. They started planting beans with the ancestral seeds they collected by traveling from village to village. She also works as a barista in Muğla. By Fatma Çelik, Bakur. All rights reserved. The material is copyright protected and not governed by the same CC license as the rest of the work being published by Springer Nature



Woman on her way to the highlands in the summer months. Mount Mereto, Otlak Highlands. By Fatma Çelik, Bakur 2018. All rights reserved. The material is copyright protected and not governed by the same CC license as the rest of the work being published by Springer Nature



Seher Aydar is a Norwegian politician of Kurdish descent, who is a member of the Rødt political party and was elected to Parliament in 2021. She has previously been politically active within organizations that focus on women's and Kurdish rights. By Benyamin Farnam, Oslo 2023. All rights reserved. The material is copyright protected and not governed by the same CC license as the rest of the work being published by Springer Nature



Fatma Temel (24) is a tattoo artist from a village near Dêrik, (Mardin province) specialized in *Deq* (tattoo in Kurdish) motifs which were traditionally used on women's hands, faces and breasts. She conducted research on regional motifs and their meaning by talking with many elderly Kurdish women. Today, Fatma has a tattoo workshop in Diyarbekir, where she uses the traditional ingredients of breast milk, ash and needles. She also studies journalism at Dicle University. By Angel Istek Alcu, Diyarbekir 2022, Bakur. All rights reserved. The material is copyright protected and not governed by the same CC license as the rest of the work being published by Springer Nature



Tuğba Ok (22) is a soccer player. She started at Amedspor club in the seventh grade of secondary school. Although people around her perceive soccer as a ‘men’s sport’ and say that her body is becoming more and more like ‘men’s’, she continues with passion. Today, with the support of her family, she plays at Amedspor Women’s Football Team. She says: “for me, running after that ball is running after your dreams, your future, your beliefs.” By Fatma Çelik, Bakur. All rights reserved. The material is copyright protected and not governed by the same CC license as the rest of the work being published by Springer Nature



“When you lose what you have, you will be creative in making it.” Najber Esmail (29) works at the Prosthetics Center in Qamişlo. She lost her leg during the war and therefore hopes that she can bring hope to others who lost their limbs. By Khabat Ibrahim, Qamişlo 2023, Rojava. All rights reserved. The material is copyright protected and not governed by the same CC license as the rest of the work being published by Springer Nature



Naxşin Mohammed Amîn is a veteran technician and master at the Silêmanî Transformer Workshop. She is connecting transformer coils. By Sara Namo, Silêmanî 2022, Başûr. All rights reserved. The material is copyright protected and not governed by the same CC license as the rest of the work being published by Springer Nature



Fariba Rashidi is an activist from Kurdistan and Rojhelat, Iran. She applied for asylum in Norway in 2010. She has engaged in the fight against forced marriage, honor killings and supports political prisoners. In addition, she works voluntarily to support asylum seekers in difficult situations. By Benjamin Farnam, Oslo 2023. All rights reserved. The material is copyright protected and not governed by the same CC license as the rest of the work being published by Springer Nature



Begard Reza is a Swedish-Kurdish activist, originally from Başûr, with experience from feminist and anti-racist organisations. She has been involved in the fight for Kurdish rights and has contributed to asking attention for the women's fight against IS. Begard is also general secretary of Salam - an organization for queers with a Muslim background. By Benjamin Farnam, Oslo 2023. All rights reserved. The material is copyright protected and not governed by the same CC license as the rest of the work being published by Springer Nature

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