



Article

# The Kurdish Women's Movement in Turkey and Its Struggle for Gender Justice

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at the Kurdish women's struggles for gender justice at the intersection of two diverse social movements in Turkey: the Kurdish national movement, on the one hand, and the Turkish feminist movement, on the other. It argues that the Kurdish Women's Movement (KWM) has functioned as a powerful process of learning for both men and women in the Kurdish community and in the larger society. It has destabilized and transformed the feudal-patriarchal relations and norms in the Kurdish community, the lingering sexism in the Kurdish movement, and the majoritarian constraints in the Turkish feminist movement.

**Keywords:** women; feminist movements; Kurds; Turkey; gender justice

## 1. Women in the Emerging Kurdish Nationalism

Among Turkey's Kurds, as in many other places around the world, women's activism emerged and developed in the context of nation-building and the struggle for national self-determination since the early 20th century. Debates on Kurdish nationhood pointed to women as important actors, both in terms of reflecting the level of "modern progress" and defining the boundaries of the national community. In the words of Janet Klein, "Demonstrating the distinctness of Kurdish women vis-à-vis Turks, Arabs and other Muslim-Ottoman groups was an important part of the Kurdish nationalists' attempts to denounce and reject arguments and policies that claimed otherwise and to prove to the world that the Kurds deserved official recognition of their special status as a separate nation" [1] (p. 37). Seen as "pure Kurds", unaffected by outside influences, women were assigned a clear role in nation-building: to be the nation's cultural signifiers, on the one hand, and the mothers and educators of the nation's children, on the other [1] (p. 35). The first Kurdish women's organization, the Society for the Advancement of Kurdish Women, was founded as a branch of the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan in 1919 (run by members of the nationalist elite in exile in Istanbul), according to Shahrzad Mojab. Through its magazine *Jin* (Kurdish for "woman"), it functioned as a major platform for the development and circulation of ideas about the special role of women in the "national awakening" until its closure by the newly-established Turkish republic in the context of a severe crackdown on all nationalist activities after the 1925 Kurdish revolt [2] (p. 86).

In search of national representation models, Kurdish nationalist writers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries often argued that Kurdish women had historically enjoyed a more equal position and respect in the family and in society than other Middle-Eastern women, pointing out as proof the existence of female tribal chieftains such as Kara Fatma, Perikhan Khatun, and Shemsi Khatun, among others. Yet, as Martin van Bruinessen has emphasized, in the past Kurdish women could acquire high social status only by birth or marriage; obtaining a tribal leadership position was possible only after the death of their husbands, and women of humble origins were not able to rise to a higher position by their own effort. It is therefore a fallacy to conclude from a few cases in which Kurdish women had achieved extraordinary influence that Kurdish society has an ingrained gender egalitarian trend [3].



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## 2. Turkey's Kurdish Question

The Kurdish question in Turkey is related to the second-class economic, social and cultural status of the Kurds, who make up some 18% of the population in this country. They have experienced continuous oppression, inequality and denial of basic human rights since the establishment of the Turkish republic in 1923. From the very beginning, their demands for rights and equal citizenship were branded as "separatism". Early rebellions against the state's assimilation policies in the 1920s and 1930s were brutally suppressed.

With the emergence of political pluralism in the 1960s, the Kurdish struggles for recognition began to take shape. They expanded under the influence of the regional anticolonial movements, on the one hand, and of the growing Turkish leftist movement, on the other hand. Most of the Kurdish leftist activists started their political careers as members of the Worker's Party of Turkey (Türkiye İşçi Partisi, TİP). In 1978 one of the leading Kurdish activists, Abdullah Öcalan, and his comrades founded the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK), aiming to establish a free, independent Kurdistan. Having suffered enormously at the hands of the military junta after the 1980 coup (which cracked down on both the Turkish left and the Kurdish activists), in 1984 the PKK launched an armed struggle against the Turkish state. The conflict had a high human and material cost. During the security regime imposed by the government in Southeast Turkey in the 1990s, some 3000 Kurdish villages in Turkey were wiped from the map. According to official figures, 353,000 people were displaced during the conflict, while international observers and Turkish NGOs estimate that the total number may be as high as 1 to 4.5 million [4] (Since the conflict reignited in the summer of 2015, until July 2018, some 3971 people were killed, including 455 civilians. According to Kurdish sources on the ground, the number of the internally displaced persons has reached at least 350,000). The death toll reached over 40,000 people. The conflict has cost the economy of Turkey an estimated USD 300 to 450 billion [5].

The emerged Kurdish political movement (KM), which includes the PKK as its military wing and a score of political parties and cultural organizations as its civic branches, has used both peaceful political activities for civil rights and PKK-led guerrilla warfare. In its initial stages, it prioritized national liberation and the establishment of an independent socialist Kurdish state, while from the early 2000s onwards it focused on democratic federalism and local autonomy within the Turkish state. In the analysis of Jongerden, the PKK's new ideological and political program of "radical democracy" included three intertwined projects: democratic republic, democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism. The struggle for a democratic republic disassociated democracy from nationalism and endorsed a new constitution, in which citizenship is defined in terms of civil rights rather than ethnicity. The projects of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism focused on an emancipatory politics of connectivity rather than state-centered politics [6]. Abandoning its state-centered ideology of national liberation, the PKK combined economic justice with identity claims in its struggle for an anticapitalist, people-oriented and women emancipatory society.

## 3. The Rise of the Kurdish Women's Movement

It was only through participation in the rising leftist activism in Turkey in the 1970s that a limited number of Kurdish women acquired autonomy and agency outside their familial and tribal circles. From the late 1970s onwards, more and more women gained both organizational experience and political identity in the context of the KM. This trend was solidified in the 1990s, when the ideology of gender equality became an essential component of the KM's struggle for democratic rights.

The Kurdish Women's Movement (KWM) is therefore embedded in the KM. It appeared as an autonomous structure in the 1990s as a result of several interrelated developments. From the 1980s onwards, Turkey underwent rapid urbanization, liberalization and the expansion of education to larger sections of society. Many women graduated from universities, entered new professions and became active in the public arena through

a range of newly-created feminist NGOs. These social transformations expanded to the predominantly Kurdish Southeast, too, even though to a lesser extent, because of the special security regime under which the region was placed between 1987 and 2002. In the 1990s, Kurdish women started joining the armed resistance against the Turkish state in greater numbers, on the one hand, while their presence in the public and political arena increased and led to the formation of various civic associations, on the other. From the very beginning, women participated in the successive legal political parties representing the Kurdish population. The KWM interacted with the left-wing Turkish feminist movement, which led to the emergence of shared platforms around issues such as combating violence against women, enhancing women's education and employment rates, and peace-building.

The controversial effect of the nationalist movements on gender equality has been extensively documented in scholarly literature. Even though women often play important roles in struggles for ethno-national liberation, after the victory the masculine nationalist establishments either roll back women's emancipation or fail to fulfill earlier promises for women's equality, urging women to return to their traditional roles in the family and community [7,8]—as the cases of Algeria, Mozambique, and Namibia, to name but a few, indicate. In a nuanced analysis on women in the Kurdish national movement, Handan Çağlayan has argued that women were both empowered and restricted by the nationalist project. Having embraced the twin goal of national and women's liberation, Kurdish female activists had to wage a war on both the oppressive, militaristic Turkish state and the sexist mentality and masculine domination within the Kurdish national movement. Women were glorified as symbols of the nation and as such they were expected to shed their emotional side (erotic love, for example, has been seen as a sign of weakness and banned among the PKK guerrillas) and to completely dedicate their lives to the national struggle [9]. In the apt observation of Deniz Kandiyoti, women are often both agents and hostages of nationalism [10]. Those inherent limitations notwithstanding, the potential of nationalist movements to create opportunities for women in terms of increased political presence and recognition, strengthened "collective feminist consciousness" and enhanced women's positions in their communities, is an important factor in transforming gender regimes [11] (p. 473).

Following Nancy Fraser's perspective which interprets identity claims for recognition (ethnic and gender, among others) with pursuit of justice [12], I argue that the KM gradually reformulated its ethno-nationalist project in a more universalist key that prioritizes demands for human rights and equal citizenship for all disadvantaged groups—women, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. Since the capture of its founder Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, the KM has undergone a significant politico-ideological shift which has turned it into an anti-systemic movement. Its current struggle for a stateless bottom-up democracy, cooperatives-based economy, gender egalitarianism and environmentalism has increased immensely its popularity and impact among Kurdish communities, but also among other marginalized groups in Turkey. Consequently, the legal political party representing the KM, the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) achieved unprecedented electoral success in the May 2015 general elections.

Kurdish women's activism is located in three major fields: armed resistance, the formal political arena, and civil society. While those fields are often closely interrelated and mutually constitutive, given their shared ideology and goals, they use distinct methods and forms of struggle. It can be argued that the militarized, nationalist Turkish state and its classification of Kurdish struggles as a major security threat have buttressed the precedence of Kurdish women's armed resistance over the other two spheres of struggle, even though women have important gains in the political and the civil society spheres, too. Women's struggle for peace, for example, has formed an important site of resistance outside the armed wing, and has been a major arena of interaction and cooperation between Kurdish and Turkish feminists.

To be sure, assumptions of a homogeneous Kurdish subjectivity notwithstanding, Kurdish nationalism is not a unified project in and by itself. Gender and class, as well as political and generational divides form important lines of tension, negotiation and rearticulation of the meaning of Kurdishness. Particularly “gender” as a shifting corpus of expressions and representations of femininity and masculinity within social relations of power became central to the reformulation of relations of power within the Kurdish community and to visions of Kurdishness. Central to this prominence of the gender question is the politicization of large sections of Kurdish women in Turkey as a consequence of their double marginalization: by the state’s assimilation policies and practices of denial, oppression and political violence against its Kurdish citizens, on the one hand, and by the patriarchal regime circumscribing and negating female agency, on the other. The rise of women’s centrality in the KM was prompted by the powerful ideology of gender equality, which was introduced by Öcalan and was embraced, further developed and put into practice in the KM’s organizational structures by female activists.

Kurdish female guerrillas formed the core of the KWM because of several interrelated structural factors: firstly, the militarized and masculinized Turkish state nationalism; secondly, the largely reactive to the Turkish nationalism militarized Kurdish nationalism (the PKK emphasis on military resistance and armed self-defense since 1984, except for a few short periods of peace negotiations), and, last but not least, the Kurdish patriarchal gender order, which relegates women to secondary roles and focuses on their child-bearing, nurturing, and serving roles. It seems that in overwhelmingly militarized, patriarchal environments women can be recognized as equal only if they themselves take up arms.

It has been argued by a number of authors that conflict and war make women more vulnerable to deprivation, marginalization and exploitation. In the case of Kurdish women in Turkey, the dislocation and forced migration during the warfare in the early 1990s, the political and physical violence, and the wide-scale social exclusion because of both the patriarchal social structure and the lack of Turkish-language skills, had a combined effect of greatly increasing the disadvantages those women experience in comparison to their Turkish counterparts. Empirical research in Turkey has confirmed that violence and government policies have deepened gender inequalities, while forced migration and the concomitant impoverishment have increased violence and patriarchal control [13].

Importantly, however, the challenges and the disadvantageous situation neither completely silenced Kurdish women nor robbed them of their agency. On the contrary: the arrests, mass demonstrations and political repressions after the 1980 military coup and in the early 1990s prompted a new stage of the Kurdish resistance in which women became active participants. Many women, who protested against the imprisonment or murder of their family members, were arrested, tortured and sexually assaulted in custody, and often jailed, too. The prisons became important places of political education. In the words of Aliza Marcus, “The detention of tens of thousands of Kurdish men thus forced women to take a more active role in family and society. They not only had to worry about feeding their family, but also they were thrust into the unruly, difficult bureaucracy of Turkey’s judicial and prisons systems, where rough treatment by guards and police radicalized them” [14] (pp. 172–173).

The life trajectory of the prominent Kurdish politician Leyla Zana is a good illustration of how Kurdish women turned from housewives into political activists. Zana [14] (p.173), [15] was the mayor of Diyarbakır’s wife, who was married off by her father at the age of 15 and did not even speak Turkish. Her husband’s arrest forced her to care on her own for two small children. She participated in prison protests and learned Turkish. Her arrest and torture in custody only strengthened her personality and she dedicated herself to politics, becoming the first woman elected to parliament from a Kurdish political party and a symbol of Kurdish women’s struggles. Leyla Zana was awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 1995.

Many Kurdish women who suffered forced migration after their villages were burned and their male family members were arrested or murdered, had to build a new life from scratch for themselves and their children in challenging urban environments. Thus war and displacement inadvertently empowered those women by making them take responsibilities beyond their limited household roles, and by enhancing their social and political agency as they developed a rights-based civic consciousness [16]. Furthermore, as Mehmet Gurses has powerfully argued, while the violence and war in the Kurdish region destroyed lives and property, they also undermined traditional patriarchal structures, values and norms by transforming gender roles and identities as many women became fighters, organizers, mayors, deputies and co-chairs [17] (pp. 49–72).

Generally, in the 1990s the PKK successfully mobilized increasing segments of the Kurdish female population. Women started joining the PKK armed resistance en masse and became visible in political rallies of the Kurdish political parties, in street marches and in demonstrations in front of prisons [18].

Handan Çağlayan applies a critical approach to the ideological discourse of the mobilization process in the KM, arguing that Kurdish women's double marginalization, as ethnicity and as gender, turned their struggles into resistance against both the Turkish state and the Kurdish patriarchy. The construction of "Kurdish woman" as an identity has thus been embedded in personal social and political processes. The Kurdish political mobilization in particular provided an essential venue for agency and socialization opportunities, the space for which is generally extremely limited in a patriarchal social system. Furthermore, women's political activism affected in significant ways both the gender discourse in the KM and the ongoing redefinition of Kurdish identity in a gender egalitarian key. Women powerfully insisted that the struggle for Kurdish identity should include women's rights and the elimination of violence within the family [9]. To my mind, this radical redefinition and transformation of the Kurdish gender system in a way which opens more space for women and elevates their social, cultural and political status, even though still a work-in-progress, marks the most profound social impact of the KWM.

#### 4. Women Guerrillas

A handful of women joined the Kurdish armed struggle from the very beginning. Their number, however, was very low before the PKK started to expand its presence in universities and urban centers in the late 1980s and to engage in publishing and in the formal political process in the early 1990s, which helped attract more women in its ranks [14] (p. 172). By 1993, women reached about one-third of the PKK's armed forces.

This was an extraordinary development, given the strong patriarchal structure and culture of Kurdish society where fathers, brothers and husbands controlled women's lives, underage marriages prevailed, and pre/extra-marital relationships were punished by death. What were the conditions that made it possible for women to turn from oppressed second-class human beings into conscious political subjects who engaged in armed rebellion? A major factor was the PKK's socialist ideology which powerfully emphasized women's emancipation on a par with the class struggle and national liberation. The founder and long-term leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, wrote of how men in Kurdish society treated women as slaves and strictly controlled the lives of their female relatives. He famously proclaimed: "no revolution can take place while women are slaves" and "the liberation of women is the liberation of Kurdish society" [18]. In the observation of Massoud Sharifi Dryaz, while the earliest texts by Öcalan on women's emancipation linked the latter to national liberation, after 1999 Öcalan focused on a historical analysis of society, and saw in the capitalist system a major factor for female slavery (for example in his book, *Bir Halkı Savunmak (Defending a Nation, 2004)*). Women's liberation was defined as a prerequisite for the liberation of Kurdistan. Since the state was constantly reproducing masculinity, it had to be fought against for gender equality to be achieved. The KM therefore became the guarantor of women's autonomy [19].

Öcalan's ideas about women's emancipation intertwined with claims that the PKK revolutionary struggle would be impossible without women's joining in and inspired a growing number of women to take up arms. Endowed with a new sense of worth, many young women saw the PKK as an acceptable form of escape from their restricted lives, especially from marriages forced on them by their families, Aliza Marcus points out [14] (p. 174).

Öcalan's powerful ideological promotion of women as equal participants in all spheres of life was taken to new levels by female activists within the KM. The establishment of women's armed units and of successive women's political organizations attested to the growing presence and recognition of women within the PKK.

In the account of Anja Flach, a German sociologist who spent two years as a combatant in the PKK in the mid-1990s and took part in the formation of the women's army, Kurdish women joined the armed struggle for a variety of reasons. The majority sought to escape the suffocating patriarchal control in their families, and particularly impending forced marriages. Some of them sought revenge for the torture and death of family members and close relatives at the hands of the Turkish military or police. Others wanted to fight the oppression of Kurdish identity, and others were inspired by the new consciousness of women's rights. Some joined to fight for the freedom of Kurds but later started emphasizing women's equality. Flach concludes that Kurdish women had their own identity which motivated them to formulate women-specific goals beyond the fight for national liberation. Particularly after 1999, when the guerrilla struggle was reformulated as self-defense, women began to refer to the struggle for gender justice as a primary motive for joining the PKK [20] (pp. 64–70). According to a survey quoted by Flach, at the end of the 1990s the majority of women in the PKK, 70%, were from Turkey, 20% from Syria, and 8% from Iran. Of the total number of women in the PKK, 40% were without schooling, 30% had finished primary school, 12% had finished middle school, 8% had a high school education, and 10% were university graduates. As many as 80% reported that they had experienced violence in family [20] (p. 73).

Obviously, for conservative families it was difficult to let their daughters "go to the mountains", or to accept it if the daughters had not asked for their permission—which was often the case. Two factors have made it easier for those families to come to terms with their daughters' joining the armed struggle: the legitimacy which the PKK has gained among Kurdish people and its strict policy forbidding sexual relations [9].

In the observation of Flach, many of the women who joined the PKK in the 1980s and the early 1990s had to wear a headscarf at home; they felt that discarding traditional clothes was liberating, cut their hair and tried to look like men. From the mid-1990s onwards, however, with the establishment of a women's army and the development of a new identity of a woman-fighter, women stopped emulating men. Following the principle that 10% of the fight is against the enemy and 90% against the old personalities, and recognizing the centrality of political education within the PKK, women introduced training in gender equality for their male comrades [20] (pp. 83–87).

With the establishment of a women's army in the PKK in 1995, the gender division in work was abolished. Men had to undertake "women's work" like cooking and washing clothes, and vice versa [20] (p. 107). Sexuality was seen as an arena for male hegemony and thus as wielding intrinsically political power, therefore sexual relations, including marriages, were banned. However, in the rare cases when relationships happened, women were those who got blamed and expelled [20] (pp. 114 ff.).

By the late 1990s, some 30% of the new recruits in the PKK were young women, who worked, trained and fought on equal terms with the men, sometimes serving as camp commanders. Even though women rarely reached the upper echelons of power, their equal participation in the rank and file challenged the masculine power structures in the larger Kurdish society [21] (p. 148).

To sum up, with Flach, the motivation of women to join the PKK spanned different perspectives, which also changed with time. In the 1980s, most of the men and women joined the PKK to fight Kurdish oppression and to look for an alternative life model. Middle-class women saw in the PKK a viable alternative to other leftist organizations because of its focus on women's emancipation. In the early 1990s, young women joined the PKK in order to escape forced marriages and family violence, to oppose the oppression of Kurds or to avenge martyred relatives. From the mid-1990s onwards, many middle-class women developed gender consciousness which led to a strong emphasis on women's equality and rights. With the formation of a women's army with its own commanders, women acquired leadership responsibilities. The ideological promotion of women's rights by Öcalan and the incessant efforts and hard work of women to develop strong positions and autonomous structures produced a radical break with the traditional gender roles within the PKK [20] (pp. 131–135).

Women's participation turned the PKK into a broad social movement. Furthermore, with its emphasis on gender emancipation and social justice, the PKK reached beyond ethno-national boundaries, which is also why a number of Turkish leftist women joined (as opposed to the fewer Turkish men) [20] (p. 68). The presence of women in the PKK influenced men's behavior, changed the party's gender ideology and brought nuances in the armed struggle. For example, women emphasized in particular that civilians and animals should be spared during military operations [20] (p. 112).

After Öcalan was jailed in 1999, a section of the PKK's male leadership attempted unsuccessfully to roll back the gains of the women. Öcalan suggested a special focus on the transformation of men's consciousness. He pointed out that "the men's question is a bigger problem than the women's question . . . to analyze the notions of men's dominance and power is at least as important as the issue of women's slavery. A man is much less prepared to change himself than a woman" [22] (p. 74).

Overall, the PKK's guerrilla war did not yield a military victory. After the mid-1990s, both the Turkish army and the PKK were able only to hold the status quo. The PKK's actual contribution has been in the advancement of women's rights and in the building of a new consciousness among the Kurdish people. With its transformation into a broader KM, it sought, on the one hand, to install political and civil society organizations which would gradually make redundant the state institutions, hierarchies and power structures and, on the other hand, to organize the relations between the individual and society in a new way [21] (pp. 138–139). After 1999, the KWM placed a stronger emphasis on the need to fight for gender justice for all women in Turkey, which marked a new, more inclusive stage in its development and coincided with the PKK's ideological turn away from narrowly defined nationalist goals and towards embracing the ideology of radical democracy and democratic confederalism.

On a more general note, given that the armed struggle against the oppression of the Turkish state is central for Kurdish self-awareness (I was told on several occasions when interviewing Kurds about the Kurdish-Turkish peace process in 2015 that "In order to reach peace, you need to be strong and to have your own army" (about the peace process 2013–2015 see [23])), it is understandable why women guerrillas are highly respected in the patriarchal Kurdish society and thus play a key role in the reshaping of the traditional gender regime. Importantly, Kurdish female guerrillas play significant roles beyond mere fighting: they educate both men and women about gender equality in the family and society. They also discipline men who beat their wives or take a second wife. (The PKK often acts as a substitute police and judiciary force, as many of the Kurds, and Kurdish women who suffer domestic violence in particular, are reluctant to complain to the Turkish police.) Furthermore, the immense respect for the female guerrillas in Kurdish society confers better receptivity of women's rights among men and more confidence in women.

After 1999, the PKK undertook important changes aiming to develop more democratic and decentralized organizational structures. Women's organizations strengthened their autonomy. The Kurdistan Women's Liberation Party (Partiya Azadiya Jin a Kurdistan, PAJK) took over the coordination of the ideology and cadre education, wherein gender-related issues were emphasized within the overall education program [20] (p. 53).

During the recent fight against the Islamic State in the Middle East, female fighters from the PKK and its affiliate in Syria, the Women's Protection Units (Yekineyên Parastina Jinê, YPJ), made the headlines in Western media with their stamina and courage. Analysts have warned against a Western-centric romanticization of Kurdish female rebels, which obscures many aspects of their struggle and history, while the Kurdish female fighters have opposed the appropriation of their images by capitalist consumerist magazines [24].

The participation of women in the armed struggle shattered understandings of the military as a male-only arena, buttressed women's positions in the KM, and consequently opened opportunities for leadership in the political and civil society fields.

### 5. Women in Pro-Kurdish Party Politics

It is hardly surprising that Kurdish women had to take up arms and establish themselves as credible combatants in order to be able to challenge in earnest the feudal-patriarchal structures of male dominance in the Kurdish community. Women's recognition was initially enabled by their rank-and-file participation in the Kurdish armed resistance against the militarized, oppressive Turkish state. Gradually, the Kurdish recognition struggle diversified; it developed legal party-political and civil society dimensions in which women were active participants and took leadership positions, too.

Already the first Kurdish women's organization, the Free Women's Union of Kurdistan (Yekîtiya Azadiya Jinên Kurdistan, YAJK), sought inclusion in the international women's movement through its participation in the UN Women's Conference in Beijing in the same year in which it was established, 1995. In 1999, the first women's party was established under the name Kurdistan Working Women's Party (Partiya Jinên Karkerên Kurdistan, PJKK). It was renamed Women's Liberation Party (Partiya Jina Azad, PJA) in 2000 and transformed into the Kurdistan Women's Liberation Party (Partiya Azadiya Jinê ya Kurdistanê PAJK) in 2004. In 2005, a new confederate umbrella women's organization, the High Women's Council (Koma Jinên Bilind, KJB), sought to include Kurdish women's political organizations from Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, as well as from the diaspora in the West. It describes itself as a part of the world women's movement [18]. I am not able to analyze here the work of those multiple PKK-affiliated female organizations as I have not had access to their activists or any first-hand sources. My discussion of women's participation in the party politics of the Kurdish movement is focused on the legal pro-Kurdish parties established in Turkey, and more precisely on the BDP/HDP (The Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi, BDP) was a sister party of the HDP, active between 2008 and 2014), which was active at the time of my research, as well as on the Congress of Free Women (Kongreya Jinên Azad, KJA), formed in 2015.

The pro-Kurdish party politics in Turkey started in 1990 with the establishment of the People's Labor Party (Halkın Emek Partisi, HEP). After it was banned in 1993, several successive parties appeared: the Democracy Party (Demokrasi Partisi, DEP), banned in 1994, the People's Democracy Party (Halkın Demokrasi Partisi, HADEP), banned in 2003, and the Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi, DTP), banned in 2009, among others. In the observation of Nicole F. Watts, "This cycle of formation-closure-formation meant that pro-Kurdish parties maintained an uninterrupted presence in the Turkish political system in years to come". Importantly, these parties were secular in both ideology and social composition, and were positioned between the Turkish center-left and the KM. They were led by "urban, middle- and lower-middle-class men and women who had gained status and political capital through professional and civic activities" [25] (pp. 69–71). Research on the ground has shown that even though women at various levels of decision-making and leadership organs were younger and educated, the great majority

of Kurdish women in the parties of the 1990s were uneducated and poor, as opposed to women in Turkish politics [9] (pp. 151–154).

With every successive Kurdish party, women sought to institutionalize deeper gender equality policies. Those policies were advanced through the activism of the women's councils, and through the application of the co-chair system and the voluntary quota for women [26]. According to Dryaz, women's involvement in pro-Kurdish parties was encouraged by the KM as a symbol of liberation and revolution as well as of Kurdish culture. Women were in the front rows of demonstrations and marches, dressed in the traditional red-green-yellow colors. The politicization and political participation of women marked the acquisition of new roles beyond those of wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters [19]. In the observation of Çağlayan, even though women were discriminated against in the male-dominated Kurdish politics, the Kurdish political mobilization provided them with the opportunity to get out of their traditional roles despite the sexist features of the nationalist mobilization, and thus empowered them [13] (p. 30).

Continuous bans and political intimidation notwithstanding, the pro-Kurdish parties gradually expanded their support in both municipal and general elections, wherein the number of Kurdish women elected as mayors and MPs increased. An important first step was the election of three female mayors in towns with strong tribal structures in 1999, and in 2004 the female mayors increased [13] (p. 29). A score of women's research and implementation centers as well as women's cooperatives appeared in the female-run municipalities to provide legal consultation, rehabilitation, free health care, employment facilitation courses, while newly-founded independent women's organizations began work against domestic violence and honor killings, building alliances with Turkish feminists [13] (p. 30).

Women's branches of the Kurdish parties worked hard and used their influence to put in place in 1994 a 25% quota for women in all decision-making positions, which was consequently raised to 40% in 2005. The quota principle and the introduction of a co-chair system, wherein all leadership positions are shared by a man and a woman, buttressed the representation of women in both parliamentary and local elections. In 2014, the application of those two mechanisms became mandatory for all structures of the KM, not only for party politics.

Sahin-Mencutek has pointed out that the high women's representation in the BDP was a combined function of the specific party ideology and the mobilization strategies of the KM, which created conditions for women's self-assertiveness and rising to positions of power. The adoption of a voluntary party gender quota further contributed to women's empowerment [11] (p. 471). The BDP/HDP had an exceptional place on the Turkish political scene in terms of number of women in elected offices, party organs and leadership positions, a pioneering role of sorts in Turkish politics [11] (p. 475).

In February 2015, 501 female delegates established a new body of the KWM, the Congress of Free Women (Kongreya Jinên Azad, KJA). The Congress had a specific organizational structure modeled on a democratic confederal principle. Local communes, neighborhood and town councils formed its operational units. It included a 101-member Standing Assembly, a 45-member Executive Council, a nine-member Coordination Council, and three commissions which sought to bring in and address women-related issues in the economy, politics, society, ecology, religion, language, education, and human rights. In order to assure a widest possible representation, it ran 20% quotas for young women as well as for women of different religious and ethnic minorities. According to a member of the KJA Standing Assembly, "the larger goal is to change the social control on women through new legal approaches. Women in Turkey are killed and raped every day. We consider women to be the most ancient oppressed nation. We have issues even in the KM. Women and men are *hevalo* (comrades), yet men often try to domineer. Öcalan made our work easier, but we did a lot of work, too" [27].

Another female activist pointed out: “There has been a continuous struggle between men and women within the KM. Men have undergone ideological and political transformation, they have accepted gender equality in theory, but they still have difficulties to apply it in practice. The KWM is a process of learning for men, too” [28].

Women’s councils have been important formations in the KWM. They elect the pro-Kurdish parties’ female candidates for MPs, mayors, and other decision-making positions. They intervene in all cases of men’s violence against women, in cases of polygamy, etc., and deal with women’s complaints and experiences of discrimination. “We prevent such men from pursuing a political career”, clarified a female politician. “And all men take training in gender equality”. However, women also do “self-criticizing meetings”, and can take each other to task for power-mongering [29].

Women’s councils function as a central body in the implementation of gender equality policies within party politics. They are allocated 50% of the BDP’s budget and their decisions are binding. They select all female candidates for office on both local and national level. They lobbied for the introduction of a women’s quota (40% since 2015) as well as of a co-chair system. The legality of the co-chair system was challenged by the state until the so-called “democratic package” introduced in 2013 recognized it for political parties, even though not for local governments and civil society organizations. At the local elections in March 2014, out of the elected 101 BDP mayors 98 had a female co-chair. Women co-chairs pay visits to local families and encourage women to approach the formal administration, thus building greater trust with their constituencies. The rising number of women in decision-making positions through the introduction of new standards of women’s representation in party politics is contributing to the transformation of the culture of politics in Turkey. Some non-Kurdish leftist unions and associations have also introduced the co-chair system. Most importantly, the new understanding of women as political subjects capable of leadership also works to strengthen the voice of women’s activists within the KM and to change the public and political arena into a more gender-equal space [29].

At the 2014 local elections, the pro-Kurdish BDP secured a solid base in the Kurdish provinces, wherein female representation figured prominently with its 23 female mayors and 54 female deputy mayors. This party had 44% female candidates as opposed to the 1% female candidates of all other parties in Turkey. In the whole of Turkey, three women became mayors of larger municipalities: Gültan Kışanak of the BDP in Diyarbakır, former Family Affairs Minister Fatma Şahin of the AKP in Gaziantep, and Özlem Çerçioğlu of the CHP in Aydın [30]. Furthermore, a Syriac Christian, the 25-year-old Februniye Akyol, was elected co-mayor of Mardin on the BDP list, becoming the first Christian woman to govern one of Turkey’s 30 metropolitan municipalities.

In the observation of Kariane Westrheim, a major reason for the success in the recruitment and mobilization of the Kurds in the KM more generally, and of the KWM in particular, is their self-understanding as a collective educational movement and their attendant focus on political education. The women’s structures contributed significantly to the education of Kurdish women in the context of poor educational opportunities for Kurds within Turkey’s assimilation-driven school system. Thus, the KM functioned as a learning environment which instigated personal, social and political change [31].

## 6. Women in Civil Society

In the late 1990s, numerous Kurdish civic associations appeared in which women sought to organize themselves autonomously. They focused on research and publications on women’s issues, education, health, and legal counseling.

The major women’s magazines at the time—*YÖK (Yaşamda Özgür Kadın, Free Woman in Life)*, *Roza*, *Jujin* and *Jin û Jîyan*—discussed important topics related to the role and rights of Kurdish women, even though they differed in their ideological outlook and political positions within the KM. According to Neçla Acık, *YÖK* targeted women sympathizing with the PKK. It relied on party resources and networks for its publication and distribution,

while the other three magazines belonged to Kurdish feminist groups which relied on occasional funds from European women's organizations and on their own loose networks to distribute their publications. In terms of ideological differences, *YÖK* focused on how Kurdish women could contribute to the national resistance, while the feminist magazines emphasized the struggle against sexist and racist practices, including violence against women within the Kurdish community [32] (pp. 115–116).

According to Ömer Çaha's analysis, *Roza* sought to clarify the relations of the KWM with the KM, on the one hand, and with Turkish feminists, on the other. Its writers pointed out the secondary position to which women were relegated by sexist actors within the KM who sacrificed women's rights in the name of the national liberation and perpetuated the culture of patriarchy. Turkish women, on the other hand, were accused of racism and lack of sensitivity to the specific problems of Kurdish women as members of an oppressed ethnic group. The writers in the *Jujin* magazine added a class dimension to their analysis of Kurdish women's subordination. Emphasizing a socialist feminist approach, they saw both the leftist Turkish feminists and non-patriarchal Kurdish men as important allies in their struggle for gender equality. *Jin û Jiyan* focused on the practical problems of Kurdish women: health, legal issues, human rights violation. It criticized the patriarchy both of the Kurdish society and the Turkish state. Taking a broader perspective than the other two magazines, *Jin û Jiyan* supported the implementation of women-related international agreements, in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), challenging conservative moral values and traditions which subjugate women. It promoted an "egalitarian feminism", dialogue and common platforms with all oppressed women. Despite certain ideological differences, the three magazines shared certain points. They held the Kurdish tradition responsible for the subordination of women and strongly criticized the state policies towards the Kurds which aggravated the situation of Kurdish women: forced migration, educational and language policies, assimilation, the torture and rape of women in custody. The education in Turkish was seen as particularly harmful for the survival of the Kurdish identity and Kurdish women were tasked with the transmission of the Kurdish language, culture and national values to the younger generations because of their limited access to the Turkish educational system. The state educational activities through the so-called Multi-Purpose Social Centers (Çok Amaçlı Toplum Merkezi) were seen as aiming, on the one hand, to eliminate the Kurdish language by educating women in Turkish, and, on the other hand, to suppress Kurdish women's fertility through birth control [33] (pp. 162–169).

Generally, the Kurdish feminist publications focused on problems which were seen as specifically related to Kurdish women because of their ethnic identity: war, abuse, rape, forced migration, everyday humiliation. They criticized the Turkish feminists, who ignored those problems of systematic oppression and thus became partners in crime with the Turkish state. Turkish feminism was seen as "colonialist"—*Jujin*, for example, published an article under the title "*The Colonialist Turkish Feminism*", while an author in *Roza* claimed: "Our similarities with Turkish women are less than our differences". Major differences with Turkish feminists included approaches to motherhood: while Turkish feminists often saw motherhood as a reinforcement of traditional gender roles, for the Kurdish feminists it was a sacred institution that keeps a society alive and also plays a key role in the transmission and preservation of the suppressed Kurdish language and culture. However, all magazines criticized in strong terms the elements of traditional Kurdish culture which reinforced male domination: child marriages, forced marriages, polygamy, and the payment of a price for the bride. A second difference with Turkish feminists was related to views on modern education: Kurdish female activists saw education in the Turkish language as de facto destruction of Kurdish national identity. A third line of contention evolved around Turkish feminists' insistence on women's participation in the public sphere, which Kurdish feminists saw as a step towards assimilation. Last but not least, authors in *Roza* noted that campaigns against domestic violence towards women could not be a top priority for Kurdish women's struggles as opposed to the pervasive

state violence and oppression against the Kurds as an ethnic group. For Kurdish women, the experiences of being members of the “oppressed gender” thus converged with the experiences of being members of the “oppressed nation” [33] (pp. 172–176).

The thematic focus and approaches in the Kurdish feminist magazines between the late 1990s and early 2000s (when those magazines were discontinued, mainly because of the lack of funds) show which Kurdish women’s issues were seen as most pressing at the time. Particularly interesting is the contentious perspective towards Turkish feminists, which shifted considerably from the mid-2000s onwards, when cross-ethnic feminist alliances appeared. Those new alliances were built mostly among leftist feminists who were able to overcome nationalist prejudices and fears and to dedicate their efforts to cooperation and the building of shared platforms around pressing social issues. More particularly, leftist Turkish feminists recognized the double oppression of their Kurdish counterparts, while Kurdish feminists started to recognize that domestic violence against women, as well as women’s limited education and participation in the public sphere, especially through employment, were major impediments to gender emancipation. Feminists on both sides agreed that conflict and war not only destroyed communities but affected disproportionately women and children and therefore the struggle for peace should be a top priority.

A major point of contention between the KWM and Turkish feminists has been the KM’s ideology of self-defense which Turkish feminists perceive as justification of combat and even as glorification of arms. As a Kurdish activist explained to me, “Turkish feminists began to shift attitudes and understand us better after Kobane (Kobane is a Kurdish city in Northern Syria which in the autumn of 2014 became the site of heavy fighting between the so-called Islamic State and the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), with the participation of many PKK fighters from Turkey). After all, we see self-defense as applying to every kind of decision-making, to social life, and also to peace. We want an umbrella organization with Turkish feminists, as we don’t want cooperation on specific occasions only, but sustainable joint action” [29].

The social work of the KWM has been carried out through Women’s Academies, which focused on literacy and political training; cooperatives, which sought to develop local economic initiatives allowing women to develop economic independence [34]; and numerous women’s associations, which focused on the fight against domestic violence and provided shelters for women victims of such violence. The first all-female press agency in Turkey, JINHA (Jin News Agency), was set up in 2012 with an explicit aim to expose and challenge misogynous attitudes and language in the official press. Unfortunately, almost all of those organizations, including the KJA, were shut down by a decree in November 2016, under the state of emergency in the wake of the failed coup attempt of July 2016. Consequently, they have either stopped working or have sought to continue their activities in a clandestine manner. Inevitably, the scope and volume of their work has been dramatically curtailed.

Bi-communal activist networks and organizations include human rights and women’s NGOs such as the Human Rights Foundation, the Women for Peace Initiative, The Time Has Come (Vakit Geldi), and KAMER, among others. During the peace process of 2013–15, Kurdish female activists played a central role in the country-wide feminist struggles for peace, wherein they insisted on a definition of peace which goes beyond the cessation of the bloody conflict between the Turkish state and the militant Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and includes democratization through decentralization, regional autonomy, inclusive citizenship, and equal rights for women and all minorities [35].

## 7. Conclusions

The KWM in Turkey has undergone remarkable transformations since its inception in the 1990s. Its growth and institutionalization as an autonomous organizational structure within the KM have become possible through its progressive ideology of gender justice, the support of a male leadership committed to women’s emancipation, and the dedicated work

of its members. The formation of Kurdish female political subjectivities has been embedded in women's participation in both armed rebellion and peaceful struggles. Women have led a wide range of civic initiatives and have been active in the political arena, including in high-ranking positions, through the pro-Kurdish parties.

In spite of continuous state repression, the KWM has developed its own autonomous ideology and practices, which function as a powerful process of learning for both men and women. It has challenged and undermined traditional patriarchal regimes in the Kurdish community, the lingering sexism in the Kurdish national movement, and the majoritarian constraints in the Turkish feminist movement which has often failed to recognize ethnic-based state discrimination against Kurdish women. From the mid-2000s onwards, Kurdish female activists started to build alliances with Turkish (mostly leftist) feminists. They have worked together on gender-related issues such as violence against women and female empowerment through education and access to employment as well as in the sphere of peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Through its indomitable work for women's emancipation, the KWM has generated an ongoing redefinition of Kurdish identity in a gender egalitarian key and has left its mark on the nation-wide struggles for gender justice. Despite the collapse of the peace process and severe crackdown on Kurdish political and civil society organizations and on Turkish human rights activists since 2015, the commitment to gender justice seems to endure among the Kurdish and Turkish feminists. It remains to be seen whether a vibrant political exchange and coalition building across ethnic lines will survive the onslaughts of Turkey's deepening authoritarianism.

## 8. Methodology Note

The theoretical arguments of this paper are embedded in an empirical perspective developed through extensive on-site research and networking (over 12 months of living and research in Istanbul between 2012 and 2015, and visits to the cities of Diyarbakır, Ankara, Konya, and Istanbul in May–June 2015). Employing sociological and ethnographic perspectives, the paper draws on personal conversations, newspapers, social media, analysts' blogs, policy reports, and academic literature.

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