

## Reconsidering Nationalism and Feminism: The Kurdish

### Political Movement in Turkey<sup>1</sup>

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#### Abstract

Feminist scholars have documented with reference to multiple empirical contexts that feminist claims within nationalist movements are often side-lined, constructed as “inauthentic” and frequently discredited for imitating supposedly western notions of gender-based equality. Despite these problems, some feminist scholars have pointed to the positive aspects of nationalist movements, which frequently open up spaces for gender-based claims. Our research is based on the recognition that we cannot evaluate the fraught relationship in the abstract, but that we need to look at the specific historical and empirical contexts and articulations of nationalism and feminism. The specific case study we draw upon is the relationship between the Kurdish women’s movement and the wider Kurdish political movement in Turkey. We are exploring the ways that the Kurdish movement in Turkey has politicised Kurdish women’s rights activists, and examine how Kurdish women activists have reacted to patriarchal tendencies within the Kurdish movement.

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## Keywords

Ethnic nationalism, feminism, Kurdish women's movement, Turkey, PKK, Middle East

## Introduction

The fraught relationship between feminism and nationalism has been subject to much debate in both academic and activist circles, often resulting in, what Yuval-Davis (2003: 27) suitably called, a 'dialogue of the deaf'. Many feminist academics and activists have been categorical in judging nationalism to be antithetical to women's liberation (Enloe 1989; Parker and Yaeger 1992; McClintock 1996). Western feminists, frequently in opposition to their own government's national and international policies, tend to view nationalism as a vehicle to further patriarchy. Meanwhile, feminists located in the global south, particularly in contexts of anti-colonization and anti-occupation struggles, but also national liberation movements of ethnic and religious minorities, have pointed to the inextricable link between national and women's liberation. Kumari Jayawardena's classic *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986) provided an important intervention in this debate. Through various historical and empirical case studies, the edited volume illustrated the various ways feminists were involved in dual struggles, fighting for women's rights and gender-based equality in the context of national liberation struggles.

More recent scholarship has moved away from generalised assertions about nationalism principally being good or bad for women and gender-based struggles,

pointing instead to variations within nationalist movements as well as the range of feminist positions in any given historical and empirical context (Cockburn 2000, 2007; Sunseri 2000; Walby 2000; Herr 2003; Yuval-Davis 2003; Al-Ali & Pratt 2011; O’Keefe 2013; Gull 2014). Adopting Anthony Smith’s distinction between “ethnocentric” and “polycentric” nationalism (1983), Ranjoo Seodu Herr, for example, distinguishes between justifiable and unjustifiable nationalisms. She contrasts the expansionist unjustifiable nationalism, built on essentialist notions of ethnic belonging and supremacy, with anti-essentialist pluralistic and, what she conceptualises as justifiable, forms of nationalism. Importantly, she stipulates that nationalist movements must pursue dual goals: self-determination, and the recognition and respect for the nation in the international arena as external goals; and internally, they are ‘to secure an inner environment in which the members of the nation can enjoy equality amongst themselves and work with one another to promote collective prosperity’ (Herr 2003:149). Herr stresses that these two goals are not separate, but intimately connected. In her view, disagreements among the co-members “are normal and healthy elements of national life, and sincere efforts to democratize the political process are indispensable prerequisites for attaining the twin goals of nationalism (ibid).”

Despite this ideal(ized) intersection of external and internal goals, feminist scholars have argued that, in reality, feminist claims within nationalist movements are often side-lined, constructed as “inauthentic” and frequently discredited for imitating supposedly western notions of gender-based equality. Even in armed liberation struggles, where women play active combatant roles, women tend to experience

backlashes, as case studies from Eritrea (Bernal 2001; Hale 2002), Vietnam (Omar 2004), Nicaragua (Omar 2004), Palestine (Hasso 1998), Sri Lanka (Alison 2003) and Algeria (Salhi 2010) illustrate. Omar, looking at the Vietnamese and Nicaraguan examples, argues that ‘women, once active combatants in national revolutionary movements, are pushed aside because their elevated status during times of conflict does not conform to the traditional gender roles that consistently reemerge after nationalist wars’ (2004: 50). Bernal in the context of the Eritrean armed liberation struggle states in relation to women ex-fighters: ‘They fought side by side with men and killed enemy men. Their morality is suspect, their femininity is doubtful, and their ability to behave as obedient wives is questionable. Although national liberation has been achieved, the emancipation of women is at best incomplete’ (2001: 61).

However, in the context of the Kurdish women’s movement in Iraqi-Kurdistan, we can see that the tensions between feminism and nationalism cannot be resolved *per se*, but require an intersectional and in-depth empirical approach to grasp the full complexity and nuances of a specific context at a particular historical moment. These include the configuration of social and political forces that make up nationalist parties, as well as women’s movements and the types of nationalism and feminism articulated by these different forces. The differences between women activists in Iraqi Kurdistan not only relate to debates over strategies to maximize women’s rights but also to different notions of Kurdish nationalism, ranging from patriarchal to more egalitarian values (Al-Ali & Pratt 2011).

Moreover, the case of the Kurdish women’s movement in Iraqi-Kurdistan also shows that we need to pay attention to the way that both nationalist and feminist movements

are not static but might transform over time responding to changing political economies. The shift from national liberation movements to institutionalised state-building is often detrimental to women's rights and frequently involves a shift towards more conservative gender norms and relations and the marginalization of women in the political process. Al-Ali & Pratt's findings resonate with Dhruvarajan & Vickers (2002: 251), who make the point that women have made advances in some nationalist movements, particularly in their non-Western, anti-colonial form and typically as long as they were not modernising, state-building projects.

In our analysis of the specific case study we are interested in, namely the Kurdish women's movement in Turkey; we are also informed by Theresa O'Keefe's (2013) detailed and insightful analysis of republican feminism in Northern Ireland. She highlights the complex nature of the relationship between feminism and nationalism, arguing that nationalist movements can nurture feminism, albeit sometimes in a reactive manner. Her research shows that feminist nationalism is partly a response to the patriarchal norms found within nationalist movements: 'Feminism developed and gained strength precisely because of the attempts to marginalise and silence women. It was made meaningful, in part, because of nationalism's patriarchal tendencies, and any attempts to suppress feminism actually gave it oxygen' (2013: 186).

### **Research design and methodological considerations**

In what follows, we are building on the recognition that we cannot discuss and evaluate the relationship between feminism and nationalism in the abstract, but that we need to look at the specific historical and empirical contexts and articulations of

nationalism and feminism. We are following feminist approaches (Al-Ali & Pratt 2009; Mohanty 2013) that stress the significance of intersecting configurations of inequality and marginalization. Using intersectionality as an analytical lens allows us to pay attention to multiple hierarchies of power in any given empirical context. In relation to our specific case study, we pay particular attention to the ways that the marginalization of women in the context of patriarchal power relations intersects with the marginalization of ethnic minorities, such as Kurds within Turkey, based on Turkish nationalism as well as political authoritarianism.

The specific case study we draw from is the relationship between the Kurdish women's movement and the wider Kurdish political movement in Turkey, referred to by many of our respondents as 'North Kurdistan'<sup>4</sup>. While we are more sceptical than O'Keefe about the long-term implications for feminism in relation to nationalist demands, we are interested in exploring the ways that the evolving Kurdish political movement in Turkey has politicised Kurdish women's rights activists, and how Kurdish women activists have reacted to patriarchal tendencies within the Kurdish political movement. We stipulate that Kurdish women activists have developed a gender awareness that has given rise to a strong Kurdish feminist movement, which, in turn, has been influencing the wider Kurdish political movement, crucially including a shift away from an emphasis on nationalism.

Given the significance of the Kurdish diaspora and the transnational character of Kurdish political mobilization, we decided to engage in a multi-sited qualitative

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<sup>4</sup> The Kurdish political movement, as well as many Kurds, refer to different parts of Kurdistan as 'North Kurdistan' or Bakur (South-eastern Turkey), 'South Kurdistan' or Bashur (Kurdish Region of Iraq), 'West Kurdistan' or Rojava (northern Syria), and 'East Kurdistan' or Rojhelat (North-western Iran)

research in four different locations: Diyarbakır (Amed), Istanbul, London and Berlin. Between February 2015 and December 2016, we carried out in-depth, open-ended as well as oral history interviews with Kurdish and Turkish political activists for our larger project on the relationship between peace and women's rights activism, in addition to engaging in five focus group discussions. Amongst our Kurdish respondents were MPs, co-mayors, academics, journalists, and lawyers. In total, our research involved 72 respondents, of whom 50 were female and 22 male. For this article however, we just considered material based on the interviews with 52 Kurdish respondents, focusing mainly on those activists who are based in South-Eastern Turkey, the centre for the conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish political movement, but also referring to some interviews carried out in the diaspora. Both respondents inside Turkey and in the diaspora were either former militants linked to the PKK, or activists and politicians linked to the legal-political branch of the Kurdish movement, particularly the progressive Kurdish-led People's Democratic Party (HDP).

While our discussion and analysis is grounded in the broader range of interviews, in this article we also draw extensively from in-depth oral history interviews with Gültan Kişanak, a long-time women's rights activists, former MP and co-mayor of Diyarbakır; Ayla Akat, lawyer, former MP and veteran women's rights activist; and Fırat Anlı, co-mayor of Diyarbakır. Oral history interviews allowed us an in depth engagement and exploration of the experiences of a number of key figures in the current Kurdish political movement. Oral history is often used as a qualitative research method in feminist research to unearth silenced, marginalised or excluded knowledge. During the writing of this article Kişanak, Akat and Anlı, alongside

many other Kurdish MPs, co-mayors and women's rights activists we interviewed, were detained and arrested by the Turkish government in the context of the wider authoritarian crack down on any form of political opposition and dissent to President Erdoğan and the AKP government. While we mention the names of those respondents who gave us the permission to do so, we have anonymised other respondents in this article.

### **A rapidly shifting context**

The Kurdish population, constituting the largest ethnic minority in Turkey, have engaged in numerous uprisings after the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, all of which have been violently repressed by the Turkish state. While many Kurds were forced to assimilate and discard their Kurdishness, Kurdish nationalist sentiments endured and were strengthened by the violent repression, forced migration, relocation, economic and social discrimination and the lack of recognition of cultural rights, such as the ban on the Kurdish language and cultural activities (Updegraff 2012; Ensaroglu 2013; Tas 2014; Aslan 2015). Mobilized and strengthened in the context of wider leftist politics in the 1960s and 1970s, Kurdish nationalism became more visible, but was fiercely fought by the Turkish generals who seized power in a military coup in 1980, following previous coups in 1960 and 1971. Brutal repression, involving the detainment and torture of thousands of Kurdish nationalists, outlawing the use of Kurdish in public and even in private conversations, contributed to the rise of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK, *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*), the militant Kurdish political group founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978 (Knapp et al. 2016).

The PKK initially started as a militia and Marxist-Leninist organisation that engaged in armed resistance, combining revolutionary socialism with Kurdish nationalism, aiming to create an independent Kurdish state. While the PKK continues to function as an armed guerrilla organisation despite several declarations of cease-fire, the wider Kurdish political movement has employed non-violent forms of resistance and has been active in the political and legal sphere. A number of Kurdish political parties have emerged in recent years. The parties have been ideologically linked to the PKK yet have developed their own political elite and non-violent practices. The most recent example of the Kurdish-led yet broader progressive coalition of the People's Democratic Party (HDP), has constituted a significant shift in Kurdish politics.

In more recent years, the PKK as well as the wider legal and political Kurdish movement in Turkey has shifted from an emphasis on Kurdish nationalism and independence to the idea of democratic confederalism, or radical democracy within existing state boundaries (Akkaya & Jongerden 2012). According to leading Kurdish political figures we have interviewed inside Turkey and in the diaspora, democratic confederalism promotes the idea of radical participatory democracy with principles based on multi-culturalism, anti-statism, social ecology and feminism. Several commentators have noted the influence of the communalist ideas of US social-ecologist Murray Bookchin, and that of other revolutionary anarchist thinkers, such as Emma Goldman, in addition to the influence of revolutionary movements such as the Zapatistas, on Öcalan's recent writings. After his arrest in 1999, Öcalan began to criticise the concept of the nation-state and the PKK's stated goal changed from the establishment of an independent Kurdistan to the notion of democratic

confederalism (Akkaya & Jongerden 2012; Anderson & Egret 2016; Knapp et al. 2016). Much emphasis has been put on the significance of external influences and philosophies on Öcalan's prison writings produced in solitary confinement on Imrali Island, and the impact of his writings on the Kurdish political movement, including the women's movement. However, in this article, we will try to show that the experiences and struggles of Kurdish women's rights activists have themselves contributed to a shift in the ideology and political practise of the wider Kurdish political movement.

The empirical context for our specific case study has been rapidly and radically shifting since we conceived of our project in the beginning of 2015. At the time, a peace process between the Turkish government and the Kurdish political movement was on its way following peace negotiations (Tas 2016a, 2016b). As we have shown elsewhere, these negotiations were problematic and unsuccessful for various complex reasons (insert reference). Following the elections of June 2015, when the HDP managed to gain 13 percent of the vote, thereby stopping the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) from gaining an absolute majority, a brutal crackdown on Kurdish villages and towns in south-eastern Turkey brought the peace process to an abrupt halt. President Erdoğan's heavy-handed election tactics in the run-up to the repeat elections in November 2015 allowed the AKP to regain its single-party majority.

The intensified persecution of the Kurdish political movement since June 2015 has been accompanied by an increase in authoritarianism, Turkish nationalism and a repression of dissent and political opposition, most notably of academics and

journalists. However, since the failed military coup in July 2016, the Turkish government's targeting of Kurdish politicians, human rights defenders and Kurdish co-mayors and women's rights activists, as part of its wider onslaught against democratic forces and voices, has taken a sharp turn for the worst (Yeginsu & Timur 2016). The contested referendum results of 16 April 2017 have provided President Erdoğan with more power and means to pursue his authoritarian politics.

Meanwhile, the ongoing conflict and worsening situation in Syria is playing a crucial role in shaping the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. The success of the sister party to the PKK in Syria, namely the Democratic Union Party (PYD, *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*), the most significant and successful opposition to ISIS in neighbouring northern Syria (Rojava) and its attempt at building an alternative egalitarian society based on principles of democratic confederalism, have contributed to the Turkish government's initial support for ISIS and its ongoing attacks on Kurdish troops and fighters in northern Syria. Developments in Iraq, especially in terms of the effort to contain and defeat ISIS, are also crucial in understanding and contextualising Turkish-Kurdish dynamics within Turkey and more broadly in the region. As we will illustrate in the below, the shifting context has had an impact on the relationship and development of Kurdish nationalism and feminism in Turkey.

### **Kurdish women's double struggle**

Kurdish feminist organizations emerged partly as a reaction to both the oppression by the Turkish state as well as the nationalist and often patronizing attitude of the Turkish feminist movement. Despite the critique of Kemalism as patriarchal and

authoritarian by the more radical and autonomous Turkish feminist organizations that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, our Kurdish respondents all stressed that the specific plights of and challenges for Kurdish women's rights activists were largely ignored or dismissed by third wave Turkish feminists (Yuksel 2006; Diner & Toktas 2010; Çaha 2011). According to Arat (2008), Kurdish feminists collaborated with Turkish feminists on certain major issues, such as violence against women. However, while the limitations of the Turkish feminist movement became the subject of Islamic feminists' critique of its authoritarian secular character, it was Kurdish feminists who pointed to its ethnocentric 'Turkishness' (Diner & Toktas 2010).

Marginalised and estranged by the Kemalist modernization project in Turkey (Yuksel 2006), Kurdish women became initially politicised in leftist movements during the 1960s and 1970s, followed by larger scale mobilization through the PKK in the second half of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s. The PKK's strategy of a long term 'people's war' required the mobilization and active participation of women (Çağlayan 2007, 2012; Şahin-Mencutek 2016). Within the first decade of the establishment of the PKK, women's participation in armed struggle increased rapidly from one percent in 1987 to 15-20 percent in 1993, which translated into about 2000 women fighters (Kutschera 1993). A few years after the establishment of the PKK, a group of women in the PKK created the Kurdistan Union of Patriotic Women (*Yekitiya Jinen Welatparezen Kurdistan*, YJWK) and, later, the Kurdish Women's Liberation Movement, which was dissolved by the PKK in 2000. By 1995, the Free Women of Kurdistan Troops (*Yekitiya Jinen Azad a Kurdistan*, YJAK), a military branch composed exclusively of female combatants, was founded. Women fighters were no

longer under the direct command of male guerrillas and were able to make their own decisions. This development gave women significant self-confidence and led to significant ideological, political, and social transformations (Çağlayan 2007, 2012).

Several of our respondents pointed out that one of the co-founders of the PKK, Sakine Cansız, was a woman who was concerned with the specific struggles and inequalities facing Kurdish women from the beginning of her involvement. Ayla Akat, lawyer, former MP and long-time women's rights activist told us: 'Sakine Cansız was one of the people directly involved in the creation of different women's branches. Her personal experience of torture in a Turkish prison in the 1980s, and then of the Kurdish guerrilla movement, played an important role in her work for women's rights' (Tas 2016b). However, women's involvement as 'sexless militants' (Çaha 2011: 438) and asexual political activists for the Kurdish nationalist cause, initially translated into a side-lining of gender-based forms of inequalities and discriminations. As one of our respondents, a former PKK militant and now activist in Berlin, stated in July 2015, the PKK forbade any sexual contact among fighters who were to respect strict equality, but also ignored gender-specific concerns and needs.

The emergence of critical women's voices within the Kurdish political movement and the emergence of independent women's organizations was clearly also a consequence of patriarchal structures within Kurdish society and Kurdish political organizations (Çaha 2011; Diner & Toktas 2010). Veteran political and feminist activist Gültan Kişanak became an MP for the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) in 2007

and was elected as the first female co-mayor of Diyarbakır in 2014. She remembers the early phases of Kurdish political mobilization in Turkey:

Since the beginning of the Kurdish political movement in Turkey, women have taken active and important roles. However, we should accept that in the 1970s and 1980s women's rights were sacrificed for the sake of general political and national aims. The slogan was to first have a revolution and then make some improvements in women's rights and gender equality. [...] Key roles for women were not taken by women themselves, but 'given' by a male-dominated political leadership. After any success or political achievement, women were easily forgotten and forced back into the home to continue in their 'traditional' roles (Kışanak et al. 2016).

The side-lining of women's issues within wider revolutionary and nationalist movements has been documented widely in many different empirical contexts, as we mentioned above. Most of our respondents who had been involved in the movement for several decades concurred with Kışanak's assessment that the Kurdish political movement was initially replicating a global revolutionary tradition that viewed women and gender-related equality as secondary to its wider aims. This notion also resonates in Çaha's (2011) analysis of the first three Kurdish women's magazines that emerged in the late 1990s, *Roza*, *Jujin*, and *Jin u<sup>^</sup> Jiyan*. Çaha illustrates that all three magazines criticize not only traditional feudal values in Kurdish society, but also revolutionary progressive Kurdish men. Based on the views expressed in the various articles published in the magazines, Çaha (2011:446) argues that women's individual and gender-based interests were perceived to go hand in hand with their national interests.

What becomes apparent is that the earlier criticisms of Kurdish women's rights activists towards the patriarchal nature of the movement was articulated within the

broader framework of a national liberation struggle. Initially, women did not challenge the main ideological underpinnings of the movement, particularly in terms of its national liberation and independence aims.

Our respondents differed in terms of their level of criticism towards the historically male political leadership and patriarchal culture within the movement. While many of our respondents expressed their frustration with Kurdish men in the movement, all Kurdish women's activist and politician we talked to stressed the continuous support of Abdullah Öcalan. Everyone we talked to acknowledged the impact of Öcalan's ideas especially in relation to his more recent prison writings, which emphasise the centrality of gender-based equality. Öcalan crucially states:

The extent to which society can be thoroughly transformed is determined by the extent of the transformation attained by women. Similarly, the level of woman's freedom and equality determines the freedom and equality of all sections of society [...]. For a democratic nation, woman's freedom is of great importance too, as liberated woman constitutes liberated society. Liberated society in turn constitutes a democratic nation. Moreover, the need to reverse the role of man is of revolutionary importance (Öcalan 2013: 57).

By the time of his arrest in 1999, Abdullah Öcalan would have witnessed the important contribution of Kurdish women to the Kurdish struggle but also their internal struggles within the movement. Since his period in solitary confinement on Imrali Island, Öcalan has published several writings in which he has engaged with the critique of patriarchy developed by the Kurdish women's movement (Öcalan 2011, 2013, 2015). In his writings, he conceptualises the nation state not only as a "colony of capital" but also an extension of patriarchy. His model of democratic autonomy

without a state, which promotes the idea of decentralised self-government by councils and cooperatives, as well as confederalist models of co-existence and cooperation, puts gender equality at its centre (Öcalan 2011). Yet several of the other women we talked to emphasises that the achievements of the women's movement were not merely handed down through a shift in ideology by the male political leadership, however supportive, but had to be fought for over many years of hard struggles.

The 1990s, for example, were extremely tense and violent in terms of the conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish political movement, including the forcible evacuation of 3000 Kurdish villages and the displacement of anything between 1-4 million Kurds depending on the sources (Kurban 2012:7). Not just Kurdish guerrillas, but thousands innocent male and female civilians were killed by government forces (Belge 2016). Our respondents' recollections about this period are in line with Dryaz' assessment that women's involvement was encouraged by the Kurdish movement as a symbol of liberation and revolution but also as a symbol of Kurdish culture: "In parades and demonstrations they occupied the first rows by dressing up in the red, green and yellow colours which constitute a recognizable Kurdish symbol" (Dryaz 2011).

Kiřanak and others remember the 1990s as a time when women organized and led numerous demonstrations; they were arrested in large numbers, tortured and even killed. It is during the 1990s that women become politicized on a large scale and learnt about their legal rights. Women's increased participation, both in armed struggle but also protests and demonstrations, in which they developed creative and innovative slogans, challenged not only the Turkish state, but also previously

accepted gender norms and roles within Kurdish society (Çağlayan 2007, 2012).

Several women we talked to stressed that women's political participation in the 1990s, despite or possibly because of brutal state repression at the time, gave women more confidence in their political roles. However, some respondents also mentioned that they became more aware and conscious of the sexism and misogyny existent amongst Kurdish male political activists and politicians.

As mentioned earlier, the radical ideological shift from above, which, in our view, was as much inspired by the actual experiences and struggles of Kurdish women's rights activists as by outside political philosophers and revolutionaries, did not automatically translate into gender-based equality. Kurdish women continued to struggle within the wider political movement to gain recognition. Kişanak recalls the difficulties faced by women's rights activists within the movement:

It might be difficult to believe but when I look back at my own experience and story, the hardest time for me as a woman was not in prison. It was not my time at university or when I was working as a journalist. But it was the struggle we had to fight for in order to get a women's quota for MPs. During the time before the 2007 general election when we made our first important moves towards a quota, our male friends were happy about our hard work. We were organizing meetings and demonstrations, and were facing the police on a daily basis as we worked hard in our political and gender struggles. In the 2007 general election... [w]e wanted an equal number of male and female MPs. The 40 per cent quota for women had been one of our party policies since 2002, but its implementation had been postponed to the next election. We did not want any further postponement. We wanted the policy to be put into practice. Our attempts created a big discussion within the Kurdish political movement.

Kişanak's recollection challenges the widespread notion that radical changes in the political leadership and wider struggle of the Kurdish movement are directly linked to the writings of Öcalan. Clearly, as Çağlayan (2007, 2012) and others have shown, Öcalan's focus on the centrality of gender-based equality for the wider project of democracy and liberation greatly helped Kurdish women's rights activists to make their case and persuade the men in the movement. But our research suggests that it took more than his writings for the men in the movement to slowly accept women not only symbolically or in token positions, but as proper counterparts and political actors and leaders. In 1999, three Kurdish women were elected as local mayors for the first time. This number increased significantly in 2004 when there were 14 women mayors. In 2004, the system of co-chairing started, even though it was not legal yet and not widely accepted.

Several of our respondents stressed that the 2007 elections were revolutionary. Women became more confident as co-chairs and men started to accept them as equals. Zeynep Şahin-Mentucek (2016) has argued that the mobilisation strategies of the wider Kurdish political movement provided the conditions for Kurdish women to become more involved in formal party politics and to insist on the implementation of a gender quota. While we broadly agree with her analyses, we would like to add that Kurdish women's active struggle within the wider Kurdish political movement and the emergence of a powerful Kurdish women's movement also contributed to the success in their involvement in party politics. Moreover, our respondents emphasized that it was not simply a matter of a quota and co-chairing, but that the actual style and work of parliament changed. Women, for example, did not ask for permission

anymore to speak on important subjects such as the defence budget. Even after successful elections in 2007, Kurdish women activists had to struggle against ideas of tokenism and using women for symbolic effect.

Again, according to our respondents, the writings of Öcalan helped women to justify their demands for more equal representation and proper political participation. But the writings alone did not lead to these goals automatically but had to be fought for step by step by Kurdish women's rights activists. The male co-mayor of Diyarbakır, Firat Anli, told us in September 2015:

The main victory of Kurdish women was not just against the state stopping Kurds to be assimilated; it was against patriarchal men and society. Patriarchy and autocratic nation states have similar mind-sets, similar souls and similar aims. Both are based on inequality and the imposition of hegemony and one single identity. Both approaches are very selfish and do not want to share power and positions equally. The Kurdish women's movement has managed to transform Kurdish patriarchal men as well as the patriarchal mind set of the Turkish state.

The experiences of Kışanak, and others we talked to who have been active in the Kurdish political movement for many years, reveals that from the outset there were tensions within the Kurdish liberation movement linked to differing views about strategies and tactics but also different gendered positionalities, needs and experiences. It is also apparent that the nationalist Kurdish political movement gave rise to a growing and increasingly influential women's movement, which, in turn has transformed and shaped the wider political movement in parallel with the ideological shifts developed by Öcalan.

### **Beyond nationalism?**

While all activists we talked to agreed on the need for independent women's organizations and institutions, we noticed a range of positions and a continuum of views regarding the importance of an independent nation for Kurds. On one side of the continuum, many activists would emphasize that nationalism was bad for women, whether Turkish or Kurdish nationalism, and that a pursuit of radical democracy, justice and egalitarianism was a priority in their struggle for women's rights.

According to official PKK ideology, capitalism and the nation-state represent the dominant and exploitative male in its most institutionalized form. The Kurdish academic and activist Dilar Dirik puts it the following way (Maur et al. 2015: 27-8):

Many people think that a national cause — a national liberation movement or nationalism — is incompatible with women's liberation. I agree, because nationalism has many patriarchal, feudal, primitive premises that in one way or another boil down to passing on the genes of the male bloodline and reproducing domination, to pass on from one generation to another what is perceived as a "nation." Add to that the extremely gendered assumptions that accompany nationalism, which affect family life, labor relations, the economy, knowledge, culture, and education, and it becomes evident that it is a very masculinized concept.

However, some of the Kurdish women activists whom we had conversations with were more ambiguous in their views and seem to hold on to the close relationship between national liberation and women's liberation. For example, this middle-aged veteran activist and former PKK militant, now based in Diyarbakır, told us in September 2015:

We are part of a nation whose identity has not been recognised for almost a century. The women of the Kurdish nation have also not existed, according to the dominant state structure. Without the recognition of a national identity, it is not possible to focus on issues for Kurdish

women. For that reason, when Kurdish women started our movement in the 1990s, the national cause was the first aim. The national cause came above everything. But after some time, we recognised that even our Kurdish male comrades, who were taking part in demonstrations with us, were also acting as representatives of authority. Small branches of the hegemonic state were actively oppressing women in every household, community and workplace. Then we decided that we needed to fight against two authorities: the state and masculine authority at the same time.

The co-mayor of Diyarbakır, Firat Anli also recognized that many Kurdish people want to put the aims and needs of Kurdish nationalism before gender-based equality and rights of minorities. He explained to us:

[S]ome of our members have been questioning whether it is our business to support modernist, leftist, or socialist ideology and the rights and needs of women and poor people. They want us to focus first on the national identity of Kurdistan. For them nationalist needs are the most important and should come before everything else. They believe this approach would help produce a Kurdish independent state. Then, after that, they suggest we could focus on other things, including gender equality. This strong nationalist ideology exists among many Kurds and the continuation of state violence helps this approach to gain power.

We found that within the diaspora there seemed to be more emphasis played on the importance of creating an independent state for Kurds as a pre-condition to achieve not only freedom from oppression but also gender-based equality. A Kurdish female activist and lawyer who used to be a former PKK militant, and is now based in Berlin stated in July 2015:

It is not time for Kurds to have multiple political ideas and opposition; it is time to create a Kurdish state under one umbrella of Kurdishness. Without creating a safe place for Kurds, multiple voices and division can only help our enemies and not the Kurds. All rights,

including gender equality, democracy and rule of law can be discussed after our national liberation.

In a similar vein, a male Kurdish activist from London, who has been critical of the Kurdish political movement, particularly the PKK's recent policies, argued:

Nothing is more important than to have our own state. The PKK and the Kurdish movement are so obsessed with their old-fashioned Leninist ideology, and communal life. They claim that men and women are *heval* [friend] but cannot be lovers. This is against our natural life of human being. They have claimed that they have created gender equality. But this is not true either. The Kurdish population is declining because of their anti-sex policies. They have given up creating an independent Kurdish state. These actions are not for the benefit of Kurds.

Diasporas are often more fiercely nationalist than people who remain, given their forced migration trajectories and their ability to take more antagonistic political positions in situations of relative safety. However, even amongst some of those we talked to inside Turkey, the brutal crackdown on Kurdish towns in South-Eastern Turkey and the Kurdish political leadership, including MPs of the Kurdish-led progressive People's Democratic Party (HDP) and co-mayors of Kurdish towns, increased the view amongst many that peace and democracy are impossible within the context of the Turkish nation state.

At the same time that nationalism is still a strong mobilising force amongst Kurds, the ideas and practices put forward in the prison writing of Abdullah Öcalan, developed and initially put into practise by Kurdish women's rights activists in the context of their struggle with the Turkish nation state and the male Kurdish political movement, have influenced Kurdish women activists and wider Kurdish politics beyond Turkey.

Most prominently, the ideas of the centrality of gender-based equality for radical democracy and the rejection of the nation state as an extension of both capitalism and patriarchy has been central to the vision and practices used within the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) in northern Syria (Rojava). The establishment of women's councils, academies and cooperatives and the sharing of all leadership positions between men and women are integral to the attempt to build a radically democratic, multi-cultural and egalitarian society in northern Syria (Maur et al. 2015; Knapp et al. 2016). While it is beyond the scope of this article to focus on the way that these ideas are articulated in the political and social organization of the cantons of Jazira, Kobanî, and Afrin, as well as the Shahba region in northern Syria, it is important to recognise that the so-called Rojava revolution and women's prominent role within it, is inspired and informed by the dynamic between Kurdish women's rights activists and the wider movement linked to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and struggle. Beyond South-Eastern Turkey and northern Syria, these ideas and practises are also known and discussed amongst Kurdish women's rights activists in northern Iraq ('South Kurdistan') and North-western Iran ('East Kurdistan'). Within the Kurdish diaspora, especially in places like the UK and Germany with large numbers of political opposition activists, Kurdish women's rights organizations flourish and attempt to develop independently while also influencing the larger Kurdish diaspora organizations.

Recognizing the transnational reach and scope of Kurdish women's rights activism, the movement has attempted to create umbrella institutions to reflect the scale of Kurdish women's mobilization and need for independent spaces. Shortly before

embarking on our research, the Free Women Congress (KJA – *Kongreya Jinen Azad*) was established as an umbrella organization and attempt to provide a more institutionalised framework for the Kurdish women’s movement. The former MP, lawyer and prominent women’s rights activist Ayla Akat explained to us in September 2015:

It was not enough for us anymore to just come together during International Women’s Day, or on one or two other occasions during the year. It was, and is, necessary to have a strong committee, with institutions dealing with women’s issue on a daily basis. It’s not just about focusing on specific problems and having demonstrations. It is about the creation of a new sort of politics, a new kind of education, new spaces for skill development, and equality in every part of life for women... It is not enough to just have a few positions as a lip-service... These very bad political and social structures have to change... We need to destroy the politics, which justifies this violence and exclusion.

In recent years, the Kurdish women’s movement promotes the idea of *Jineoloji* women’s science, often described as “the creation of a women’s paradigm” which was first introduced by Öcalan in ‘The Sociology of Freedom’ (2009). Attempting to develop the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of the transformative practises and politics developed by Kurdish women activists, the women cadres and wider Kurdish political movement adapted and developed the term *Jineoloj*. The concept is built on the principle that without the freedom of women within society and without a real consciousness surrounding women no society can call itself free’ (Nurhak 2014). According to three members of the Women’s Academy<sup>5</sup> we

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<sup>5</sup> The Women’s Academy was founded by Kurdish women’s rights activists in the district of Sur in Diyarbakır (Amed) in June 2010. It has been a centre of research and education, and as a vehicle to support activism against gender-based violence and to further gender-based equality and justice. There are now many Kurdish women’s academies established.

interviewed in Diyarbakır in September 2015, women's academies have been established in many places in South-Eastern Turkey and northern Syria to develop the concept of *Jineoloji* and to discuss a range of relevant topics, such as women and history, women and politics, women and science etc. In 2016, the Women's Academy in Diyarbakır established the journal *Jineoloji*, soliciting contributions from Middle Eastern and western-based feminists in addition to writings by Kurdish women activists. Aside from the more internationally-oriented intellectual endeavour, the concept is also employed in the education programmes of male and female cadres involved in the armed wing of the movement as a tool to stress the significance of gender-based equality being central to freedom and democracy. Öcalan's vision of *Jineoloji* hinges on a critique of the methods used in "traditional social sciences" and imitations of feminism.

It is questionable how far Abdullah Öcalan has familiarised himself with the epistemological shifts in the social sciences and humanities over the past decades as well as the various strands in global feminist thought and activism. Long before Öcalan's call to challenge scientific knowledge production, postmodern, post-structural, Marxist, postcolonial and transnational feminist epistemologies and politics had already unsettled positivist notions of objectivity. Moreover, many feminist theorists and activists across the globe have criticised and challenged premises of liberal and imperialist feminisms. Yet, the notion of *Jineoloji* does not seem to build on these various critical stands of thoughts but appears to presume a Kurdish exceptionalism and the attempt to ethnicise the political experiences and struggles of Kurdish women. Kurdish women's rights activists might or might not be

aware of the short-comings of the writings but it is practically impossible to find anyone openly criticizing Öcalan's writings. We speculate that Öcalan's special position in the Kurdish imagination and struggle is closely linked to his long-term political exile and imprisonment, but also his revolutionary ideas that have provided the Kurdish women's movement with invaluable ideological and political tools and support.

Another Kurdish activist and journalist, Ayse Gökhan, pointed to the historical isolation of Kurds, which contributed to the intellectual and political separation from wider global feminist thought and activism:

Of course Kurds have been a closed community and Kurdistan has been a closed area for a long time. When some people started calling us 'feminist' we did not know what the word meant. We did not even know if this was a compliment or an insult. Later we recognised that the work we do and the ideas we have were part of feminism. We were feminist without even knowing about the word. It is not words, which make you feminist. Only your actions only can show if you are a real feminist or not (Diyarbarkır, September 2015).

Akat and Kişanak, as well as some other women's activists of different generations, had the chance to travel abroad and meet with women's rights activists in regional and global *fora*, thereby recognizing the long trajectories of feminist struggles in many different parts of the world as well as the range of different feminisms. Yet, it became apparent that many of our respondents equate feminism with white western liberal feminism, as opposed to its Marxist, postcolonial or transnational feminist strands.

Although we are sceptical about the epistemological foundations and theoretical contributions of *Jineolojî* - based on our respondents' assertions about the centrality

of the project - we would argue that it plays an important role. It provides an ideological basis for Kurdish women's rights activists to develop their struggle and find the necessary support amongst the male political leadership as well as the Kurdish population more broadly. However, we also recognize that despite these discursive, ideological and experiential foundations for a politics that centres gender-based equality and justice, their translation and implementation into everyday lives within the political movement, but even more into society more broadly, proves extremely challenging. A Kurdish female activist closely linked to the HDP, stated in Diyarbakır:

There are many difficulties of implementing changes. Women don't only suffer at the hand of the state and its policies. Violence and oppression continue in every part of society, from different institutions and men, who are also representatives of the state. Violence from the state, state policies and institutions, patriarchal society and finally men are the main reasons for the establishment of the Democratic Free Women's Movement.

Here, we would add that in terms of political practice, the Kurdish women's movement is translating the concept of intersectionality into concrete every day strategies and struggles. Kurdish women's rights activists not only recognize that patriarchy, nationalism, authoritarianism and capitalism represent intersecting systems of inequality but their campaigns, organizations and tactics all reflect intersectional politics. For example, we observed feminist consciousness-raising sessions being combined with education about the history of Kurds, while also planning income generation and welfare provisions as part of the programmes and activities of women's organisations. While the intersections of gender (women) and ethnicity (Kurdish) are clearly the two privileged categories our respondents referred to, class is

also perceived as an important marker of difference and inequality. However, as became evident in some of our interviews, class and gender seem to be conflated at times, with women designated as a class in and of itself. Consequently, the struggle for gender equality is also perceived to be struggle against class inequalities.

Yet, unlike the republican feminism that grew out of the Irish republican movement as O’Keefe (2013) discusses in her work, the Kurdish feminist movement has not tackled issues linked to reproductive rights and sexuality. Given that women’s roles as biological and symbolic reproducers of nation states and ethnic communities (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1987) is key to nationalism in its various articulations, we speculate that Kurdish women’s rights activists will not be able to radically transform Kurdish society outside, either the armed wing or the political cadres, unless they start to address issues linked to sexuality and morality. According to our respondents inside Turkey and in the diaspora, both Kurdish male and female fighters are tasked to be celibate during their struggle, and have to become sexless beings in order to live egalitarian lives. Meanwhile, reproduction and broader sexual relations within wider Kurdish society have not been challenged systematically.

Clearly, the bracketing of sexuality and reproductive rights out of the Kurdish women’s rights struggle, and that of the wider political movement is a bargaining with conservative patriarchal gender norms and an attempt to not alienate prevailing notions of morality, honour and propriety. As Çağlayan (2012) demonstrates in her work, Öcalan’s writings in the 1990s engages in a critique of “the traditional family”, particularly in relation to women’s honour (*namus*). By shifting away the focus from sexuality and romantic love to the protection and defence of the homeland, Öcalan not

only encouraged men to privilege the revolutionary liberation struggle over the control of women's bodies, he also removed the barriers for women to participate in the struggle (Çağlayan 2012:12). However, this reconceptualization of *namus* was not only based on the idea that love and sexuality are dangerous distractions from the national struggle, it also led to new forms of control over both women's and men's bodies. While militant Kurdish women who died in combat or during suicide attacks became the new national heroines and symbols of the Kurdish nation, women who remained in villages and towns continued to be circumscribed by conservative norms and attitudes towards gender relations and sexuality, even if women's status and political participation increased. Kurdish women activists are also challenged to desexualise themselves (Şahin-Mencutek 2016: 480-1). The issue of sexuality largely remained a taboo subject amongst the women and men we interviewed, although some are more open to discuss issues linked to LGBTQ rights.

### **Conclusions: From feminist nationalism to feminist transnationalism?**

Rather than conceptualizing nationalism and feminism as two separate, often competing or contradictory political movements, our analysis points to the dialectic relationship between the two. A Kurdish feminist consciousness and movement emerged in the context of several intersecting dynamics: the oppression and specific gender regime linked to the Turkish state, the Kemalist and Turkish nationalist character of the Turkish feminist movement, gendered forms of oppression and inequalities within Kurdish communities as well as the patriarchal tendencies of and unequal relations with men in the Kurdish political movement. At the same time that Kurdish women activists started to set up their own journals, branches and

organizations, they also influenced and changed the wider Kurdish political movement. Despite their commitment to the Kurdish nationalist cause, Kurdish women developed a sophisticated and nuanced critique of the patriarchal nature of the nationalist movement as well as the nationalist character of the Turkish feminist movement. While the Kurdish women's movement in South-eastern Turkey has played a pivotal role in challenging and transforming the wider political movement, Abdullah Öcalan and women's rights activists themselves have been involved in the attempt to ethnicise the Kurdish women's rights struggle by developing the notion of *Jineoloji*. These developments require us to rethink simplistic and homogenizing depictions of the relationship between nationalism and feminism.

While our analysis is informed by Handan Çağlayan's work (2007, 2012) about the shift in gender ideology in the Kurdish political movement from the 1980s to the 1990s, our research shifts the focus from Öcalan's writings to the experiences and contributions of Kurdish women activists. Our research illustrates that Kurdish nationalism developed and transformed over the past decades in a dialectical relationship with the emergence and development of the Kurdish feminist movement. The relationship is complicated by the fact that the Kurdish political movement is far more heterogeneous than often portrayed with a range of different positions and relationships to the PKK. For example, we found that the Kurdish women's rights activists we talked to had differing experiences of armed struggle. While some got politicized in the context of becoming female militants within the PKK, others become involved within the broader Kurdish legal and political movement, which, at the time of our research, was much less militarized and invested very differently in

finding a political solution to the conflict with the Turkish state. We also found that our respondents had very different relationships to the recent ideological shift developed in Öcalan's prison writings. While some women seemed to refer to the writings as a form of dogma, others appeared to use it to back their own positions, which had clearly developed as a result of long-term political struggle and experiences. This point is often overlooked in analysis, as the reference to Öcalan's writings is frequently mistaken as a straightforward dogmatic adherence, while our analysis points to a much more complex and diverse picture.

The specific case study of the Kurdish political movement in Turkey also provides further evidence that the relationship between feminism and nationalism cannot be assessed abstractly nor categorically, but needs to be looked at historically and in a specific empirical context. The broader context in Turkey and the region have significantly impacted on this complex and entangled relationship that has evolved over time. We could detect significant shifts in attitudes even during our 2 years period of fieldwork. At moments of lower scale conflict, spaces are clearly opening up for feminist demands and initiatives to promote gender-based justice and equality. However, more acute and heightened violence and conflict, as it unfolded in Turkey after the elections of June 2015 and the failed coup of July 2016, provide more incentives for nationalist sentiments and activism, and often lead to the marginalization of gender-based claims.

Furthermore, an empirically-grounded analysis helps us to understand not only heterogeneous positions, but also internal contradictions and frequent gaps between official rhetoric and more private and individual views and opinions. The Kurdish

movement loosely linked to or inspired by the PKK has officially not only abandoned violent struggle but also its commitment to an independent nation state called Kurdistan and is favouring a non-ethnically based radical democracy and a confederal system within the borders of existing nation states (Maur et al. 2015; Knapp et al. 2016). However, in reality, nationalist sentiments are still strong and existent in a context where the Turkish government has engaged in the most brutal and ferocious crack down on the political and legal branch of the Kurdish political movement. Given the extreme challenges posed by the Turkish state, much of the activism, campaigns and initiatives by Kurdish women's rights activists based in Turkey are directed towards the Turkish state despite their commitment to a transnational struggle for radical democracy and gender equality.

Regionally, Kurdish nationalism has been strengthened by the fact that Kurds, who are engaged in armed resistance against ISIS in northern Syria and Iraqi-Kurdistan, have also been under attack by the Turkish army. It is apparent that there exist contesting views about the idea of a Kurdish independent state, and these views are often only expressed in private as they differ from the official script.

We agree with O'Keefe (2013) that much of the literature that explores the relationship between nationalism and feminism focuses on the negative impact of nationalism on women, and fails to analyse carefully women's agency. Our article reveals the transformative processes within the Kurdish nationalist movement, which have led to the politicisation of women and the emergence of a feminist identity and a collectivity engaged in feminist action. Kurdish feminist nationalism in turn developed a critique of nationalism while the political leadership also distanced itself

from the nationalist trope. In that process, Kurdish feminist nationalism transformed into what one might coin a Kurdish transnational feminism. As we pointed out, this transformation has not been without tensions and contradictions. Notwithstanding the internal contradictions and the limitations we have pointed to, especially in relation to the lack of overtly critical engagement with the writing of Abdullah Öcalan, and not tackling issues of sexuality and morality, there is no doubt that Kurdish women's rights activists together with the wider Kurdish political movement have developed an impressive feminist critique and interventions in terms of the masculinised and patriarchal character of the nation state and patriarchal and authoritarian leadership.

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