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DIALECTICS OF STRUGGLE CHALLENGES TO THE KURDISH WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Nadje Al-Ali & Latif Tas

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Dialectics of Struggle: Challenges to the Kurdish Women's Movement

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Abstract

Our paper engages with the complex relationship between national liberation and women's rights movements as an instance to recognise the significance of intersectional political struggles and claims. In our specific case study, we critically explore attempts by political activists and elected representatives of the Kurdish political movement in the Middle East and its diasporas to challenge patriarchal and masculinist ideology and practices. Our work aims to recognise the recent commitment to gender equality, while complicating the often simplistic glorification of women's roles within the Kurdish political movement in the context of Turkey but also northern Syria, both ideologically inspired by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), and particularly by the writings of its founder Abdullah Öcalan. Based on two years of multisited fieldwork in Diyarbakir, Istanbul, Berlin and London, our collaborative paper sheds light on the dialectic processes through which the Kurdish political movement is engaging in the translation of its political principles of democratic confederalism and gender equality.

Introduction

Women, in many different historical and cross-cultural contexts, have mobilised for a more equal distribution of power and resources, and greater democracy. However, they have had to confront the stark reality that struggles for national liberation might not translate into a recognition of the specific gender-based forms of marginalisation and exclusion they are systematically facing. Even those movements that self-consciously try to create more horizontal ways of mobilising and doing politics are often endemically gender-blind.¹ The tensions and complex relationship between national liberation and feminist movements has been subject to much debate.² Historically, positions have oscillated between those voices categorically stating that national liberation movements were antithetical to gender-based claims and those who argue that national liberation movements potentially open up spaces for feminist activism. More recent scholarship has moved away from categorical statements and has approached the complex relationship in a more nuanced manner. However, the specific insights and arguments developed in this wide-ranging feminist scholarship have, by and large, not been endorsed by mainstream social movement theorists. Moreover, insights into the significance of recognising multiple interrelated power configurations and inequalities, as well as the call for a simultaneous engagement in these multiple struggles and claims, have been central to transnational feminist approaches and politics,³ but not social movement theory.

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¹ Catherine Eschle, *Global Democracy, Social Movements, and Feminism* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001); Mahati Kuumba, *Gender and Social Movements* (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press, 2001).

² Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Cynthia Cockburn, 'The Anti-Essentialist Choice: Nationalism and Feminism in the Interaction between Two Women's Projects', *Nations and Nationalism* 6/4 (2000), pp. 611–29; Cynthia Cockburn, *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2007); Lina Sunseri, 'Moving Beyond the Feminism versus the Nationalism Dichotomy: An Anti-Colonial Feminist Perspective on Aboriginal Liberation Struggles', *Canadian Woman Studies* 20/2 (2000), pp. 143–8; Sylvia Walby, 'Gender, Nations and States in a Global Era', *Nations and Nationalism* 6/4 (2000), pp. 523–40; Ranjoo Seodu Herr, 'The Possibility of Nationalist Feminism', *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 18/3 (2003), pp. 135–60; Nira Yuval Davis, 'Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations', *Croatian Journal of Ethnology and Folklore Research* 40/1 (2003), pp. 9–35; Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, 'Between Nationalism and Women's Rights: The Kurdish Women's Movement in Iraq', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4/3 (2011), pp. 339–55; Theresa O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development and Activism in Revolutionary Movements* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Raashida Gull, 'Of Feminism, Colonialism and Nationalism in India: Drawing a Relationship', *International Journal of Social Sciences* 19/1 (2014), pp. 119–31.

³ Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation? Women and the Occupation of Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

In this paper, we aim to contribute to the wider literature on social movements and the ongoing project to centre a gendered lens and feminist approach within the disciplines of history, politics and international relations. Our analytical focus is on rethinking the relationship between national liberation movements and gender-based claims and struggles, which we view as crucial to understanding tensions and dynamics within many social movements in different historical and cross-cultural contexts. Moreover, our paper aims to stress the significance of intersectionality both in terms of analytical approaches but also political claims. More specifically, our paper explores the intersections between political claims linked to national liberation and women's rights movements.

We will discuss these wider conceptual issues in reference to the complex and shifting relationship between the wider Kurdish political movement in Turkey and Kurdish women's rights mobilisation. We will illustrate the radical shift within the Kurdish political movement, from the historical marginalisation of women to the centring of gender equality. This shift is taking place within a transformation, both in terms of official rhetoric and ideology but also political practise, from a nationalist independence movement to a movement pursuing radical democracy. Our work aims to recognise the recent commitment to gender equality while complicating the often-simplistic glorification of women's roles within the Kurdish political movement in the context of Turkey, but also northern Syria, both ideologically inspired by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and particularly by the writings of its founder Abdullah Öcalan. Our paper sheds light on the dialectical processes through which the Kurdish political movement in Turkey is engaging in the interpretation and translation of gender equality.

We have elsewhere discussed the history of the Turkish–Kurdish conflict, the gendered nature of violence and conflict and various gendered attempts at peace.⁴ Here, we would like to mention that the situation in recent years has not only been bad for the Kurdish political movement, but also for other opposition groups in Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's regime has increasingly moved away from being a liberal reformist and democratic government to becoming markedly authoritarian. Despite the initial commitments to human and women's rights, democratic values and a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question, we have more recently seen ample evidence of Erdoğan's intolerance of gender equality, democratic principles, minority rights and the rule of law. Erdoğan's desire to create a new constitution that will enhance his own power is illustrative of his ambition to establish an authoritarian dictatorship that readily instrumentalises religion and nationalism to gain populist support.⁵

⁴ Nadje Al-Ali and Latif Tas, "War is like a Blanket..." Feminist Convergences in Kurdish and Turkish Women's Rights Activism for Peace', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13/3 (2017), pp. 354–75.

⁵ Robert Fulford, 'Erdogan is turning his country into an Islam-tilted dictatorship', *National Post*, 6 March 2015. Available at <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/robert-fulford-erdogan-is-turning-his-country-into-an-islam-tilted-dictatorship> (accessed 10 October 2017); Dexter Filkins, 'Erdogan's March to Dictatorship in Turkey', *The New Yorker*, 31 March 2016. Available at <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/erdogans-march-to-dictatorship-in-turkey> (accessed 1 April 2016); Robert Ellis, 'Turkey has reached new levels of journalist repression – yet the EU willingly lets itself be fooled for a deal', *Independent*, 21 March 2016. Available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/turkey-has->

The Turkish state in its various iterations has pursued a number of different gender regimes. The most recent shift is linked to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) abandoning an official commitment to gender equality, however partial and problematic previously, and now overtly promoting conservative and discriminatory attitudes and policies towards women, for example by supporting local patriarchal traditions and tribal structures as well as men's domination over women. For Erdoğan, a 'pure nation' requires a traditionalist approach, one which regards women as the carers, mothers and housewives of the nation.⁶ He has attacked and condemned young people, liberals and the LGBTQ community as part of his wider authoritarian shift. Following the coup attempt on 15 July 2016, described by Erdoğan as 'a gift from God',⁷ a brutal and unprecedented crackdown on all political opposition, the media, the judiciary, the education sector and the intelligentsia more generally has left over a hundred thousand people suspended from their positions and tens of thousands imprisoned, including most of the respondents we have quoted in this paper.

Meanwhile, the centrality of gender equality within democratic confederalism has been pursued most radically in the context of the Kurdish movement in northern Syria. The Rojava experiment has received much international attention,⁸ but only limited consideration has been given to the political and ideological underpinnings linked to Öcalan's writings. In the context of Turkey, and despite the ongoing and intensified conflict between the state and the Kurdish political movement, a decade of relative peace has allowed, in parallel to the armed struggle and mobilisation, for the development of a powerful and significant Kurdish women's movement as part of a broader legal and political movement. The emergence of the People's Democratic Party (HDP), the Kurdish-led umbrella party of progressive constituencies, also allowed for a contestation of gender equality within

reached-new-levels-of-journalist-repression-yet-the-eu-willingly-lets-itself-be-fooled-a6944501.html (accessed 22 March 2016); Alon Ben-Meir, 'Turkey's Elected Dictator', *Huffington Post*, 20 July 2016. Available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alon-benmeir/turkeys-elected-dictator_b_11093160.html (accessed 10 February 2017); Yuksel Sezgin, 'How a constitutional amendment could end Turkey's republic', *Washington Post*, 24 January 2017. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/24/how-a-constitutional-amendment-could-end-turkeys-republic/?utm_term=.d1056c3eef6d (accessed 10 February 2017).

⁶ 'Turkey president Erdogan: Women are not equal to men', *BBC*, 24 November 2014. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30183711> (accessed 10 February 2017); 'On Erdogan and Muslim mothers', *Aljazeera*, 28 November 2014. Available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/11/erdogan-muslim-mothers-20141128194830365312.html> (accessed 10 February 2017).

⁷ New York Times Editorial Board, 'The Counter-Coup in Turkey', *New York Times*, 16 July 2016. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/16/opinion/the-counter-coup-in-turkey.html?_r=0 (accessed 11 February 2017); Marc Champion, 'Coup Was "Gift From God" for Erdogan Planning a New Turkey', *Bloomberg*, 17 July 2016. Available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-07-17/coup-was-a-gift-from-god-says-erdogan-who-plans-a-new-turkey> (accessed 11 February 2017).

⁸ Meredith Tax, *A Road Unforeseen: Women Fighting the Islamic State* (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2016); Tom Anderson and Eliza Egret, *Struggles for Autonomy in Kurdistan: Corporate Complicity in the Repression of Social Movements in Rojava and Bakur* (London: Corporate Watch, 2016); Michael Knapp, Ercan Ayboga and Anja Flach, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

the realm of local, regional and national politics. Yet, based on our ongoing research, there is evidence that at times of acute conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish movement in Turkey instances of domestic and gender-based violence have increased, as evidenced for example by a higher number of cases brought to various alternative community courts and institutions run by the Kurdish political and militia movement.⁹

Historically and cross-culturally, highly militarised societies tend to privilege certain forms of masculinity and social conservatism. We have also seen links between militarisation of societies and increases of gender-based violence as part of a wider continuum of violence.¹⁰ While the political developments in northern Syria might challenge our established understandings of the relationship between militarisation, social conservatism and high levels of gender-based violence, it is important to recognise that we are witnessing evolving processes in rapidly shifting contexts, and that it is too early to assess the implications of the highly militarised context on women, and more long-term gender norms and relations.

Given the above developments, a rapidly changing empirical context has provided the shifting background against which we have carried out the research for our wider project on the gendered aspects of violence and mobilisations for peace in the context of the Turkish–Kurdish conflict. We engaged in the multisited qualitative empirical research between February 2015 and November 2017 in four different locations: Diyarbakir (Amed), Istanbul, London and Berlin. As part of our project, we carried out in-depth open-ended interviews with Kurdish and Turkish political activists, some of whom were also MPs, co-mayors, academics, journalists and lawyers, as well as former and active PKK guerrillas, in addition to five focus group discussions. In total, our research involved 80 respondents, of whom 52 were female and 28 male. In this paper, we will also draw on the writings of Abdullah Öcalan, as well as in-depth interviews with Gültan Kişanak, a long-time women's rights activists, former MP and co-mayor of Diyarbakir; Ayla Akat, a lawyer, former MP and prominent women's rights activist; Selahattin Demirtaş, co-leader of the HDP; and Fırat Anlı, former co-mayor of Diyarbakir, as well as some other leading members of Kurdish movement in Turkey who preferred to remain anonymous. At the time of writing, Kişanak, Akat, Demirtaş and Anlı, alongside many other Kurdish MPs, co-mayors and women's rights activists we interviewed, were being detained by the Turkish government in the context of the wider crackdown on any form of dissent or political opposition to President Erdoğan and the AKP government. Many co-mayors were replaced with government appointed 'trustees'. Meanwhile, Öcalan has been a prisoner on İmralı Island since February 1999.

⁹ For further information on informal Kurdish court processes and institutions, which constitute not only alternative dispute resolution, but also concrete practices of democratic confederalism, see: Latif Tas, *Legal Pluralism in Action: Dispute Resolution and the Kurdish Peace Committee* (Abingdon: Routledge / Ashgate, 2014); Latif Tas, 'Resolving Family Disputes in the Gurbet: The Role of Kurdish Peace Committee and Roj Women', *Onati Socio-Legal Series* 3/6 (2013), pp. 111–35; Latif Tas, 'One State, Plural Options: Kurds in the UK', *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 45/2 (2013), pp. 167–89.

¹⁰ Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*.

In what follows, we provide a brief historical and empirical context to the Kurdish women's movement in Turkey, sketching the wider political context in which Kurdish women's rights activism emerged and developed. A discussion of the Kurdish movement's initial attitude towards women and gender-based claims will engage with both the ideological underpinnings and gender norms as expressed by Abdullah Öcalan, as well as gendered political practices and shifts within the PKK. It is against this historical background of a movement that marginalised women's specific forms of exclusion and struggles that we will analyse the more recent shift foregrounding gender equality and justice as central to the wider political movement and struggle. Here we will share some of the reflections of Kurdish activists who are part of the HDP.

The Emergence of the Kurdish Women's Movement

The Kurdish women's movement has historically mobilised against repression and marginalisation by the Turkish state as well as conservative gender norms and relations within Kurdish society. A strong autocratic Sunni-based and right-wing leadership has been the main soul of Kemalism and the new Turkish state since its establishment.¹¹ The Kemalist movement originally emerged to challenge the ruling Ottoman elite and included ethnic and religious minorities. Yet, it soon created its own political elite and forms of exclusion.¹² Kurds, Alevis and women have historically been on the margins of the Turkish nation state despite the fact that women were central to the Kemalist project of modernisation.¹³

Marginalised and estranged by the Kemalist modernisation project in Turkey,¹⁴ Kurdish women initially became politicised in leftist movements during the 1970s, followed by larger scale mobilisation through the PKK in the second half of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s. From the 1980s onwards, the Kurdish political movement was very successful in mobilising women for protest, and a significant number of women from a range of socio-economic backgrounds enlisted for active combat.¹⁵ Women were also important

¹¹ Ergun Özbudun, 'Antecedents of Kemalist Secularism: Some Thoughts on the Young Turk Period', in Ahmet Evin (ed.), *Modern Turkey: Continuity and Change* (Opladen: Leske Verlag, 1984), pp. 25–44; Perry Anderson, 'Kemalism', *London Review of Books*, 11 September 2008. Available at www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n17/print/andeo1_.html (accessed 10 February 2017); Celia Kerslake, Kerem Oktem and Philip Robins (eds), *Turkey's Engagement with Modernity: Conflict and Change in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave, 2010).

¹² Sencer Ayata, 'Patronage, Party and State: The Politicisation of Islam in Turkey', *Middle East Journal* 50/1 (1996), pp. 40–56.

¹³ Metin Heper, *The State and Kurds in Turkey: The Question of Assimilation* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Latif Tas, *Legal Pluralism in Action*.

¹⁴ Metin Yüksel, 'The Encounter of Kurdish Women with Nationalism in Turkey', *Middle Eastern Studies* 42/5 (2006), pp. 777–802.

¹⁵ Aysel Altınay (ed.), *Homeland, Nation, Women* [Vatan, Millet, Kadınlar] (Istanbul: İletişim, 2000); Necla Açıık, 'National Struggle, Women and the Myth of Women's Activism: An Analysis of the Journal of Contemporary Kurdish Women in Turkey' [Ulusal Mücadele, Kadın Mitosu ve Kadınların Harekete Geçirilmesi: Türkiye'deki Çağdaş Kürt Kadın Dergilerinin Bir Analizi], in Aksu Bora and Asena Günal (eds), *Feminism in Turkey in the '90s* [90'larda Türkiye'de Feminizm] (Istanbul: İletişim, 2002);

organisers of meetings and demonstrations, and participated in mass protests. As Gültan Kışanak, Fırat Anlı and other Kurdish politicians and activists told us, one of the main aims of the Kurdish women's initial mobilisation was to promote national liberation. Within this struggle women felt compelled to show their 'tough male face' and became sexless combatants and activists. Abdullah Öcalan, in his earlier writings of the early 1990s, expressed his admiration for the role of Palestinian women during their struggle, and expected Kurdish women to take on a similar role.

In many different historical and cross-cultural contexts of conflict and war, social and political spaces opened up for women to take up new roles and positions. This was also the case for Kurdish women. Women became active fighters and organisers of mass protests, but were initially still marginalised in the decision-making structures of the PKK and the armed units. As Handan Çağlayan eloquently shows in her insightful article on the changing discourse on women within the PKK,¹⁶ Öcalan's earlier writings criticise traditional Kurdish tribal family structures, which in his view have been an important barrier to women's freedom. Çağlayan traces the discursive shift, highlighting that Öcalan declared in his later writings that women should play new roles within Kurdish society and within the nationalist movement, shifting away from patriarchal control of the family towards creating a stronger bond to the party and the political movement.¹⁷ This shift has been characteristic of many gender regimes within modernising post-colonial state-building projects.

Women in this vision ceased to be merely mothers of their children and wives of their husbands, but became mothers and wives of the Kurdish nation. With this transformation, prevailing social norms about *namus* (honour) became even more important.¹⁸ Women were not only responsible for safeguarding the honour of their families, but they also became symbols of the nationalist movement and the Kurdish nation's *namus*. Moreover, Öcalan called on men and women to shift their focus away from honour in relation to women, towards the defence of the honour of the Kurdish nation. In contrast to his later writings in which he radically changed his conceptualisation of women, Öcalan appears to have initially viewed them as weak and dangerous, a potential distraction for men during the revolution.¹⁹

Yüksel, 'The Encounter of Kurdish Women with Nationalism in Turkey'; Handan Çağlayan, *Mothers, Comrades, Goddesses: The Women's Movement in Kurdish Construction of Identity* [Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar: Kürt Hareketinde Kadınlar ve Kadın Kimliğinin İnşası] (Istanbul: İletişim, 2007); Omer Çaha, 'The Kurdish Women's Movement: A Third-Wave Feminism within the Turkish Context', *Turkish Studies* 12/3 (2011), pp. 435–49; Handan Çağlayan, 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess: Gender Constructions in Ideological–Political Discourses of the Kurdish Movement in post-1980 Turkey, Possibilities and Limits', *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (2012).

¹⁶ Çağlayan, 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess'.

¹⁷ Abdullah Öcalan, *Women and Family Issues* [Kadın ve Aile Sorunu] (Istanbul: Melsa Yayınları, 1992).

¹⁸ Çağlayan, 'From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess'.

¹⁹ Öcalan, *Women and Family Issues*.

For the leadership of the Kurdish movement, women could not be trusted without first earning that trust, and there could be only one type of loving relationship: between individuals and the homeland.²⁰ All other lovers and relationships were regarded as treacherous and a potential risk to the organisation in its struggle to achieve freedom. The perceived purity of women became even more significant and sexuality even more of a taboo. According to Öcalan's earlier writings, sexual desire is a weakness and potential threat to the success of the movement and the national liberation struggle. However, the risks linked to giving in to desire were not just applicable to women anymore but started to be applied to men as well.²¹ The control of sexual desire and urges has been a central tenet of the Kurdish political movement, especially amongst the armed wing. Both male and female fighters are supposed to refrain from engaging in sexual relations, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

On the ground, women started to mobilise in increasing numbers during the 1990s. Women from different social classes, age groups and educational backgrounds – including many university students – were not just organising and leading demonstrations, but even constituted almost 30 percent of the Kurdish guerrilla movement.²² However, a former female guerrilla and Kurdish women's rights activist explained to us in September 2015 that 'when Kurdish women started their movement in the 1990s, the national cause was the first aim, it came above everything.' Although there were some exceptional women leaders, most prominently Sakine Cansız, one of the co-founders of the PKK, who were concerned with the specific struggles and inequalities facing Kurdish women from the beginning of their involvement, women's organisations were created mainly to support the needs of the national liberation movement.²³ Cansız told us in December 2012 in Berlin that during the 1990s, a period of intensive state repression and violence against Kurdish communities, women increasingly took to the streets to protest, mobilising in great numbers. Kişanak also reminded us of this period: 'Women organised and led many demonstrations against state brutality in villages and towns. Many of our female and male friends were arrested, tortured and killed.'²⁴

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Abdullah Öcalan, *Kurdish Love* [Kürt Aşkı] (Istanbul: Aram, 1999), p. 19.

²² Nihat Ali Özcan, *PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party): History, Ideology and Method* [PKK (Kürdistan İşçi Partisi) Tarihi, İdeolojisi, Yöntemi] (Ankara: ASAM, 1999).

²³ Pauline van Gelder and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, 'The Image of Kurdish Women in the Framework of the Transformation of the Political Discourse in Turkey in the 1990s: Some Critical Evaluations' [90'larda Türkiye'de Siyasal Soylemin Donusumu Cercevesinde Kurt Kadınlarının İmajı: Bazı Elestirel Degerlendirmeler], in Ayşegül Altınay (ed.), *Homeland, Nation, Women* [Vatan Millet Kadınlar], pp. 308–38; Necla Acık, 'National Struggle, the Myth of Woman and Mobilising Women: An Analysis of the Contemporary Kurdish Women's Journals in Turkey' [Ulusal Mucadele, Kadın Mitosu ve Kadınların Harekete Gecirilmesi: Türkiye'deki Çağdaş, Kurt Kadın Dergilerinin Bir Analizi], in Aksu Bora and Asena Günal (eds), *Feminism in Turkey in the '90s* [90'larda Türkiye'de Feminizm], pp. 280–2.

²⁴ Our full interview with Gültan Kişanak was published by *OpenDemocracy*. See: Nadje Al-Ali and Latif Tas, 'Kurdish women's battle continues against state and patriarchy', *OpenDemocracy*, 12 August 2016. Available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/nadje-al-ali-latif-tas-g-ltan-ki-anak/kurdish-women-s-battle-continues-against-state-and-patriarchy-> (accessed 25 August 2016).

Öcalan and the Kurdish movement more broadly were successful in bringing women out of their homes and making them the soldiers and activists of the movement. However, while women moved away from their traditional roles as mothers and homemakers and became active carriers of Kurdish identity, even sacrificing their lives for the national cause, traditional gender norms and relations did not simply disappear. Women's roles, identities and subjectivities continued to be defined by the movement's male leadership and by male comrades and relatives, while nationalist aims circumscribed their struggle. Nazan Üstündağ makes the argument that the establishment of an independent women's army and political institutions 'disrupted channels of secrecy, transformed relations with locals, and effectively developed an opposition to the abuse of power'.²⁵ While this shift might have been the case in some contexts, and while women's militancy contributed towards making claims about equal representation, our research findings provide evidence of the continued abuse of power amongst both male military and political leaders. A long-term female guerrilla told us during an interview in October 2017:

I myself have faced gender discrimination within the military and within the political movement. For example, women's success was not always welcome. I am a successful military leader, and some of my male comrades did not like it. During one specifically risky battle, our male military commander deliberately posted my female battalion and I in a very dangerous location. It was very clear from the beginning that the enemies were close by and that we were going to be in danger. He was not happy about my success and feared that I would become his commander in the future. We were forced to fight without sufficient weapons. We lost three of our fighters, and only about managed to survive with a lot of luck. When those of us who survived returned, my military commander told me he wished we were dead. These attitudes might have decreased since then, but there is still some level of resentment and resistance against successful female fighters.

Male resistance has also been apparent in the context of the political movement. Despite the fact that many Kurdish women sacrificed their lives, engaged in self-immolation, faced torture in prison, and joined hunger strikes against the state, they continued to be marginalised within the movement. Yet, it is important to stress that this marginalisation of women within the wider political movement was an important contributing factor to the emergence of an increasingly influential and powerful Kurdish women's movement. Female voices of dissent started to proliferate in the 1990s, alongside the creation of several women-only units and organisations.²⁶ Kişanak stresses the achievements of women during a tense period of political crackdown and oppression of Kurdish communities during the 1990s:

²⁵ Nazan Üstündağ, 'Self-Defense as a Revolutionary Practice in Rojava, or How to Unmake the State', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 115/ 1 (2016), pp. 197–210 at p. 200.

²⁶ Acık, 'National Struggle, the Myth of Woman and Mobilising Women'; Metin Yüksel, 'The Encounter of Kurdish Women with Nationalism in Turkey'; Çaha, 'The Kurdish Women's Movement'; Çağla Diner and Sule Toktas, 'Waves of Feminism in Turkey: Kemalist, Islamist and Kurdish Women's Movements in an Era of Globalization', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 12/1 (2010), pp. 41–57.

The state was oppressive and applied considerable pressure. Women experienced those difficulties and paid a huge price. Women organised and led many demonstrations against state brutality in villages and towns. Many of our female and male friends were arrested, tortured and killed. They had to defend themselves during their trials. They read and researched about their rights. Women not only learnt about Kurdish rights and freedoms, but as women who were simultaneously oppressed by the state and by society, they recognised their own rights, their equality to men and their freedom. This was an important element of the enlightenment of Kurdish women. We have gained confidence and trust in ourselves. We did not simply follow established policies but also took part in creating new ones. We went out to the streets with new innovative slogans. We challenged not just the state's perspective but also the established rules of society.

Although all of our respondents stressed Öcalan's support of women's independent organisations and gender equality throughout the 1990s, our reading of his earlier writings reveals a more ambiguous and problematic relationship to women and gender issues. His arrest in February 1999 put the Kurdish movement into a deep crisis.²⁷ This led to a reconsideration of ideology and tactic in Öcalan's writings and the wider movement, crucially including a reconceptualisation of the role of women and gender relations within the struggle. His imprisonment and attempt to defend himself against the Turkish authorities seeking his execution might have initiated this radical rethinking. However, in our view, the criticisms towards male hegemony by Kurdish women and their mobilisation during the 1990s would have also contributed to his radical shift in thinking about gender-specific roles. Initially influenced by Marxist–Leninist thought, in his more recent writings Öcalan appears to have been particularly inspired by Murray Bookchin, the American anarchist and social ecologist. Other influential thinkers and movements often quoted include the American anarchist Emma Goldman, Immanuel Wallerstein, V. Gordon Childe, Fernand Braudel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, the Frankfurt School and the Zapatistas.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go in depth into Öcalan's shift away from the commitment to armed struggle and an independent Kurdish state to a political solution aimed at radical democratic transformation within the existing nation state boundaries. However, crucial in the context of this paper is the fact that his conceptualisation of 'democratic confederalism' and 'radical democracy'²⁸ is based on his critique of the capitalist and patriarchal nature of nation states. In his prison writings after 2004, the nation state is not the solution and should not be the aim of struggle as he considers it to be the main vehicle for patriarchal oppression and capitalist exploitation. He goes so far as referring to man as 'a mini nation state'.²⁹

²⁷ Renee In der Maur, Jonas Staal and Dilar Dirik, *Stateless Democracy with the Kurdish Women's Movement* (Utrecht: BAK and New World Academy, 2015), p. 20.

²⁸ For detailed discussion of democratic autonomy, see for example: In der Maur et al., 'Stateless Democracy with the Kurdish Women's Movement'; Anderson and Egret, *Struggles for Autonomy in Kurdistan*; Knapp et al., *Revolution in Rojava*.

²⁹ Abdullah Öcalan, *How to Live Volume I* [Nasıl Yaşamalı I. Cilt] (Istanbul: Mem Yayınları, 2000); Abdullah Öcalan, *Holy and Damned City* [Kutsallığın ve Lanetin Şehri] (Istanbul: Mem Yayınları, 2001).

After his arrest and imprisonment, he developed the idea that simple majoritarianism can easily lead to populism, which in turn might lead to the oppression of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, such as women, the poor and the socially marginalised. Yet, the aim of what is coined ‘democratic confederalism’ is to provide a democratic and egalitarian framework for all people, including minorities and specific social groups, particularly women, to have autonomy and be able to organise freely. The ideological pillars of this consensus-oriented and multicultural political framework are ecology, more specifically a commitment to preserve the environment, as well as feminism, that is a commitment to gender equality and justice.³⁰ In his later writings, Öcalan advocates an intersectional approach to the Kurdish question in which marginalisation on the basis of ethnic minority status needs to be understood and challenged not only in the context of wider capitalist exploitation but also patriarchal domination. Here he seems to break from most other national liberation movements that conceptualised gender-based claims as secondary to the wider struggle. Historically, women have experienced backlashes within national liberation movements, as case studies from Eritrea,³¹ Vietnam,³² Nicaragua,³³ Palestine³⁴ and Algeria³⁵ have illustrated.

According to Öcalan, women should establish separate women’s organisations within society, but also women’s branches within political parties and guerrilla movements. It would be misleading to perceive the emergence of independent Kurdish women’s organisations simply as a result of his change of heart and recommendations. Without doubt though, his support has provided an important ideological and political basis from which Kurdish women have been able to gain legitimacy for their struggle.

In his new vision associated with his later prison writings,³⁶ Öcalan not only foregrounds gender equality as central to the political project of radical democracy, but also urges that participatory politics should involve women as well as other marginalised communities, such as ethnic or religious minorities. He advises men to abandon their traditionalist perspective, the ‘primitive ideology of men and masculinity’.³⁷ While his writings can be criticised for essentialising women’s nature and roles as well as for idealising motherhood and women’s commitment to peace, they have been a powerful tool for Kurdish women’s rights activists in challenging male hegemony within the movement.

³⁰ Abdullah Öcalan, *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan: Kurdistan, Woman’s Revolution and Democratic Confederalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

³¹ Victoria Bernal, ‘Equality to Die For? Women Guerrilla Fighters and Eritrea’s Cultural Revolution’, *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 23/2 (2001), pp. 61–76; Sondra Hale, ‘Liberated, But Not Free: Women in Post-War Eritrea’, Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen (eds), *The Aftermath: Women in Post-War Reconstruction* (New York: Zed Books, 2002), pp. 122–41.

³² Karima Omar, ‘National Symbolism in Constructions of Gender: Transformed Symbols in Post-Conflict States’, *Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy & International Relations* 5 (2004), pp. 49–68.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Frances Hasso, ‘The Women’s Front: Nationalism, Feminism, and Modernity in Palestine’, *Gender and Society* 12/4 (1998), pp. 441–65; Tami Amanda Jacoby, ‘Feminism, Nationalism, and Difference: Reflections on the Palestinian Women’s Movement’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 2/5 (1999), pp. 511–23.

³⁵ Zahia Smail Salhi, ‘The Algerian Feminist Movement between Nationalism, Patriarchy and Islamism’, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 33/2 (2010), pp. 113–24.

³⁶ Öcalan, *The Political Thought of Abdullah Öcalan*.

³⁷ Öcalan, *Holy and Damned City*.

Activists Challenging Patriarchal and Masculinist Ideology and Practices

The radical shift in political transformation within the Kurdish movement, particularly the attempt to achieve more equal political representation for women and ensuring their involvement in decision-making, became more significant after 2004 following a long battle between Kurdish women activists and male members of the Kurdish movement. Prior to this period, some positions were given symbolically, but even those were mainly given to the wives or daughters of famous politicians. Leyla Zana's election to the Turkish parliament in 1991 was part of this pattern.³⁸

In 1996, the Kurdish movement created a separate women's military branch to increase the participation of female combatants. Kurdish women activists also started publishing women's journals, such as *Jujin*, *Roza*, *Jin u Jiyan* and *Ozgur Kadin*, as a way to distinguish Kurdish women's organisation from the Turkish feminist women's movement,³⁹ but also to critique male domination within the Kurdish movement – although still framed within a nationalist framework. This critique later developed into a system of political representation. In 1999, three Kurdish women were elected as local mayors for the first time. This number tripled in 2004 after radical changes were implemented within the Kurdish movement, including the introduction of the co-chairing system. Despite the fact that a 40 percent quota for women's representation had become policy of the movement since 2002,⁴⁰ women had to wait until 2007 for its implementation. Gültan Kişanak, Ayla Akat, Selahattin Demirtaş and Fırat Anlı, as well as several others of our respondents, bemoaned the tendency within the movement to put up strong resistance against women's participation in decision-making and leadership positions, despite Öcalan's instructions.⁴¹ However, increasing numbers of women kept pushing and insisting at all relevant meetings to implement a co-chairing system. Based on our interviews, women seem to have referred to both their participation in armed struggle and the political movement as well as the more recent writings of Öcalan, which provided ideological and political support for change.

It is important to stress that despite the official commitment to equal representation, many obstacles remained until the 2007 elections. Fırat Anlı, former male co-mayor of Diyarbakir agreed with many of our female respondents that Kurdish women have to be

³⁸ Kurdish women's rights activist Leyla Zana was elected as MP in 1991. She was the wife of Mehdi Zana, a former mayor of Diyarbakir, who also went to prison in the 1980s for his political positions. When Leyla Zana was first elected, her social status as wife of a famous Kurdish politician was the main reason for her election. Of course, she later became a very important Kurdish figure and politician in her own right. As an elected MP, Zana had to face prison in 1990s, where she stayed for almost a decade, just like her husband and many other Kurdish politicians.

³⁹ Yesim Arat, 'From Emancipation to Liberation: The Changing Role of Women in Turkey's Public Realm', *Journal of International Affairs* 54/1 (2000), pp. 120–1; Acik, 'National Struggle, the Myth of Woman and Mobilising Women'; Yüksel, 'The Encounter of Kurdish Women with Nationalism in Turkey'.

⁴⁰ Handan Çağlayan, '40 Percent Female Citizenship in the Democratic Society Party as a Quoting Example [Bir Kota Örneği Olarak Demokratik Toplum Partisinde 40% Kadın Kotası]', in B. Ünlü and O. Değer (eds), *İsmail Beşikçi* [İsmail Beşikçi] (Istanbul: İletişim, 2011).

⁴¹ Al-Ali and Tas, 'Kurdish women's battle continues against state and patriarchy'.

‘twice or even three times better than their male counterparts to reach the same position’. After three decades of marginalisation and struggle, Kurdish women activists asserted that accepting only a few symbolic positions for women would not result in equal rights and radical change. According to Kişanak, women activists suggested that the women’s movement should select its own candidates. After long and harsh discussions, Kurdish women appeared to have won this battle, despite the continued resistance by some men in the movement. Women activists created a women’s election committee in parallel to the previously existing general election committee, and women’s branches began to select their own candidates. In a watershed election in 2007, 8 out of 26 Kurdish MPs elected were women.

Kişanak stressed that many of their Kurdish male friends were not against women’s equality in theory, but have created many obstacles when it came to practice. She added that ‘resistance is not simply coming from society, but it is also coming from some of our male friends within our political movement.’ Her views and experience resonated with that of several of our respondents, who also complained about men’s behaviours and attitudes at home and in family contexts. For example, one active PKK member stated in Berlin in 2017:

Almost all men in the community have problems with their wives and daughters at home. Outwardly, they might look progressive, but their wives and daughters come to us and complain about their macho, and often violent, behaviour at home. They also tend to turn a blind eye when a male colleague is engaging in unacceptable behaviour, such as violence against women. They think that support for women’s issues can only be provided by women. Recently, we protested in front of a court when a Kurdish man was tried for killing his wife. Hardly any men showed up to support us. Sexism continues within the community, even amongst supposedly progressive activists.

After the 2007 elections, the Kurdish women’s movement continued its battle against masculine hegemony and patriarchal norms and values. In the 2011 election, even more women gained power, and in the 2014 local election as well as the 2015 general election, they reached almost equal representation in the HDP, as well as at the levels of municipalities and villages.

During our fieldwork, we observed that co-chairing did not merely result in a cosmetic exercise of ‘add women and stir’. We were moved by the genuine attempt to redress power inequalities. Beyond gender, the movement seems to also make an effort to address inequalities linked to ethnic and religious minorities and generations. During a visit to Mardin, a city in Southeastern Turkey close to the Syrian border, we spoke to then-co-mayor, Febrüniye Akyol, a 27-year-old Assyrian woman, who expressed her appreciation for the movement’s inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities, such as herself.

The growing significance of gender equality as a political aim and the increase in women’s representation took place in the context of the transformation from a national liberation movement into a movement pursuing radical democracy, as outlined by Öcalan. This radical transformation also coincided with several attempts at peace between the Kurdish

movement and the Turkish state, following the arrest of Öcalan in 1999 and subsequent declarations of a ceasefire by the PKK. In the following years, particularly between 2009 and 2015, there were several opportunities to reach peace with varying levels of success.⁴² Despite the fact that the Kurdish armed struggle persisted, and while it continued to mobilise many young female fighters, the political–legal wing of the Kurdish movement began to develop.

Meanwhile, many Kurdish women’s rights activists started to get involved in electoral politics, and various iterations of Kurdish political parties emerged such as the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) which existed in 2008–14,⁴³ following the closure of the Democratic Society Party (DTP) for its alleged links to the PKK. The most recent political party representing the political aims of the Kurdish political movement is the HDP, founded in 2012. While Kurdish-led, the HDP does not brand itself as a Kurdish party, but as a progressive, inclusive and pro-minorities party with a strong emphasis on gender equality. Many of our respondents have been active members of the HDP. As Zeynep Sahin-Mencutek illustrates,⁴⁴ the high level of women’s representation in the BDP – and we would also argue the HDP – needs to be understood in the context of the close relationship between Kurdish political parties and the wider Kurdish political movement. Women’s militancy and their contribution to armed struggle have helped create conditions in which women could make radical political claims to equal representation. Yet, despite a close relationship between the PKK and the HDP, there are clearly tensions and differences in tactics and approach. It is also important to stress that the HDP itself contains a broad spectrum of positionalities and political views.

The women we spoke to are aware that increased political representation does not automatically lead to gender equality and justice within Turkish and Kurdish societies. Ayla Akat explained that ‘every month, 20 to 30 women are killed in Turkey. State violence is an important contributor to violence within families. Men embody the authoritarian attitude and physical violence of the state. Our male comrades are also representing the power of the state.’ Akat concluded our interview on a positive note: ‘One way or another, we will achieve change. We believe in this. We know that the Turkish state is very patriarchal, and that 70 to 80 percent of the Turkish and Kurdish population is very conservative.’

Clearly, the issue of sexuality and sexual freedom remains taboo within the Kurdish movement, including women’s rights activism. Social conservatism translates into a continuum of violent control over women to the moral imperative of ‘sexless militants’. When asked about sexuality, Selahattin Demirtaş told us in London, just a few days before his arrest in

⁴² For a detailed discussion of peace processes between different Turkish governments and Kurdish movement, see: Latif Tas, ‘Peace Making or State Breaking? The Turkish–Kurdish Peace Processes and the Role of Diasporas’, *Journal of Review of Social Studies* 3/1 (2016), pp. 25–66; Yilmaz Ensaroglu, ‘Turkey’s Kurdish Question and the Peace Process’, *Insight Turkey* 15/2 (2013), pp. 7–17.

⁴³ The BDP was renamed and transformed into the Democratic Regions Party or DBP (Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi).

⁴⁴ Zeynep Sahin-Mencutek, ‘Strong in the Movement, Strong in the Party: Women’s Representation in the Kurdish Party of Turkey’, *Political Studies* 64/2 (2016), pp. 470–87.

November 2017: ‘Social conservatism and taboos around sexuality continue and we need to address them in the future. However, while we are struggling with acute conflict and violence by the state, it is impossible to focus on these issues. Many of the women who have been trying to address the issue of sexuality have been arrested.’

Despite ongoing struggles and challenges, the achievements of Kurdish women’s rights activists have been significant and inspiring. In addition to having firmly put women and gender equality at the centre of the wider Kurdish political movement, both in terms of representation and content, they have established independent women’s branches, committees, organisations, journals and websites. They have been instrumental in raising international awareness about the plight of Kurdish communities in Turkey and have been at the forefront of challenging the increasingly authoritarian regime of the Turkish state. Kurdish women’s rights activists have also been successful in transforming the Turkish feminist movement from a largely Kemalist and nationalist movement that was historically often oblivious to the specific forms of marginalisation and discrimination Kurdish women faced. Many young Turkish feminists we talked to stressed that they have learnt a lot from Kurdish women’s rights activists, and that their feminism has become much more intersectional as a result.

Conclusion

In the context of this paper, we have mainly focused on the Kurdish political elite, female guerrillas and long-term women’s rights activists who, while pointing to the ongoing challenges within the movement, particularly in terms of ongoing resistance by men, express their commitment to the ideological shift from a national liberation movement to a movement pursuing radical democracy. We are aware that the armed wing of the Kurdish movement also pursues the idea of gender equality exemplified by sexless militants, often escaping the conservative gender norms in their places of origin. Based on our research findings, we argue that the women and men we talked to have reflected on the ideological shift, and many have lived and experienced the obstacles and barriers caused by men resistant to change. They show us that change within the movement is not merely a matter of the movement following Öcalan’s writings, but a result of a dialectical process between women’s struggles within the movement and the support of Öcalan. We understand from our conversations that many of the young female recruits to the armed struggle are merely reiterating the ideas and slogans taught to them in their training camps.

Interestingly, we found that long-term militants and political activists within the movement tend to engage more critically with the wider political and armed movement than some scholars of the movement and diaspora activists. While many of the women we interviewed, including those with decades-long involvement as either militants or activists, pointed to contradictions and challenges for women, there seems to be a more dogmatic attitude amongst some advocates of, and late converts to, the movement. Our research highlights that different women are positioned differently vis-à-vis Öcalan’s writings, and while they might at first sight make similar statements, the underlying political

and social experiences vary drastically. Crucially, we suggest that the processes linked to interpreting, translating and circulating Öcalan's writings are constitutive of a dialectical process between ideology and political practice that is influenced not only by the different positionalities of political actors but also by historically varying political conditions.

We are aware that our research on the Kurdish political elite, activists and female fighters does not capture the sentiments and wide-ranging views amongst wider Kurdish society in Turkey. As Ayla Akat cautioned, 'revolutions can always be killed by their own elites'. There is a risk that the new Kurdish political elite that has been involved in electoral party politics and a legal political struggle is perceived to be out of touch with the plight of many Kurds who have experienced an increasingly brutal crackdown at the hands of the Turkish state and who will not abandon the idea of an independent Kurdish state. Social conservatism, particularly in relation to gender norms and relations, remains prevalent. However, the Kurdish women's movement is attempting to be present at all levels of society, not only engaging in political struggle but also humanitarian aid, the provision of services, welfare, employment, the assistance of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees, and establishing alternative forms of dispute resolution. The latter has been an important aspect of Kurdish resistance against the state, as alternative courts and dispute resolution are often referred to the institutions of the Turkish (or any) state.⁴⁵

Historically, women's and gender-specific claims have been sidelined in social and political movements except for self-declared women's rights and feminist movements. We should recognise the significance of a movement that is aware of the historical pitfalls of other revolutionary movements, is critical of its own previous gender norms and relations, and attempts to break the pattern of side-lining gender-based claims as secondary. Based on our observations, practical steps to address inequalities, such as male and female co-leadership, are more than mere cosmetic exercises and can change both representation and the content of what is considered political. However, we are also acutely aware of the severe limitations in a context where conservative gender norms persist within Kurdish society, and where the Turkish state is brutally cracking down on Kurdish communities, arresting and imprisoning the leaders and activists promoting gender equality and radical democracy, while pursuing an increasingly conservative and patriarchal regime.

Our paper challenges the widely held view that the writings of the male leader, that is Abdullah Öcalan, gave rise to Kurdish women's rights activism and the transformation of the Kurdish liberation movement. In contrast, our research shows a far more dialectic dynamic in which Kurdish women started to resist male domination within the PKK and the wider movement, Öcalan himself being influenced by their mobilisation. In addition to the recognition that tensions between feminist and national liberation movements 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,⁴⁶ our case study reveals that women's rights movements might grow

⁴⁵ For a detailed discussion and wider example of this subject, see: Tas, *Legal Pluralism in Action*; Tas, 'Resolving Family Disputes in the Gurbet'; Tas, 'One State, Plural Options'.

⁴⁶ Al-Ali and Pratt, 'Between Nationalism and Women's Rights'.

out of male-dominated national liberation movements. Here our findings resonate with that of Theresa O’Keefe’s who explored the republican feminist movement in Northern Ireland.⁴⁷ Her research shows that the republican feminist movement developed as a response to attempts to marginalise and silence women.⁴⁸ However, in the case of the Kurdish women’s movement in Turkey, we also see the potential for gender-based claims to influence and even transform the content and processes linked to a wider national liberation movement.

Finally, our paper reveals that a recognition of multiple interlocking power inequalities and struggles can give rise to a convergence of feminist and national liberation – or other wider social movement – claims. In the context of our case study, we could detect not only a recognition that marginalisation and forms of oppression linked to ethnicity, gender and class intersect, but a more radical awareness that these different power configurations are mutually constitutive of each other. Conceptualisations of gender-based justice and inequality being at the core of radical democracy and freedom are clearly radical ideas translated into radical political practices. However, we would also caution against romanticised and idealised notions of freedom and gender equality given the contradictions, tensions and diverse interpretations within the Kurdish political movement and any other context of social movements engaged in multiple interlocking struggles and claims.

⁴⁷ O’Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development and Activism in Revolutionary Movements*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

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A frame with photos of Sakîne Cansiz, one of the co-founders of the PKK, and two other female Kurdish activists, Fidan Doğan and Leyla Söylemez. They were shot dead in Paris, France, on 9 January 2013.

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