

# **Women and nationalism: How women activists are changing the Kurdish conflict**

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## **Introduction**

The present study attempts to treat the parallel development of nationalistic and social movements in the example of Kurdish nationalism and its relations to the new socio-cultural demands of women. Like the majority of third world regions, the Kurdish women movement has not emerged independently from other political actors (R. Ray and A. C. Korteweg 1999). In this paper, I try to understand the contribution of women activists in the construction of Kurdish conflicts. To explain this relation, first the paper begins with the historical background when women activists entered the Kurdish movement in Turkey after the 80s. Second, it analyzes the ideological discourse of the PKK on women and the role that it could play in the Kurdish conflict. Third, we will show that gender relations in reality do not necessarily match with official PKK gender discourse. And finally, we discuss the ways in which women activists are redefining the role of women in the movement by their presence in the public sphere and through micro actions.

## **Entry of women in the Kurdish movement**

The founding of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in 1978 and then its strategy to launch the armed struggle (1984) against the Turkish military regime is the beginning of a new era of national combat in the history of Kurdish national movement. Nine years later in 1987, the first women organization, calling itself the Patriotic Women Union of Kurdistan (YJWK<sup>2</sup>), was created inside PKK. Although their ground referred for sphere of activity was all Kurdish areas, they has not yet succeed in making their presence felt outside of Europe (Women's Manifesto 2003). The 90's were very decisive for the massive entry of women into the movement. The emergence of the Kurdish political party (DEP) and the popular revolts (Serheldan) in 1990-93, makes signals the origin of a new dynamism in Kurdish society in Turkey. The rate of women participation in the armed struggle increased noticeably. Estimates speak of the presence of approximately 2000 women fighters (15-20%) for the years 93-94. Whereas in 1987, 1% of the PKK "martyrs" were women (20 of 2000) (Grojean 2008: 526-27; Kutschera 1993: 220; Galletti 2001; Beran, D. 1995). The increased number of women among the guerrillas, require a transformation of YJWK, which was reorganized under the name TAJK<sup>3</sup>. During the first National Women's Congress in March 1995, YJAK<sup>4</sup> the first military-political organization of Kurdish women was created under presidential control of the PKK

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(Women's Manifesto 2003). The YJAK defines itself according to three principles: patriotism, the national fight and commitment to the party (PKK). In the Second National Congress of Women in March 1999, the organization became autonomous under the name of PJKK<sup>5</sup>.

The active presence of Kurdish women made itself felt in the political arena. Following the founding party of pro-Kurdish HEP<sup>6</sup> in 1990 for the first time a Kurdish woman parliamentarian was elected (Kutschera 1994). Despite the systematic prohibition of Kurdish political parties<sup>7</sup>, the associational and worker's union activities and the mobilization capacity of these parties do not cease to develop. In October 2002, HADEP organized gatherings between 100 to 500,000 people in Istanbul and about 500,000 in Diyarbakir (Cigerli, S. & Le Saout, D. 2005). Women's involvement was encouraged by the Kurdish movement on one side as a symbol of liberation and revolution and on the other side, as symbols 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. This is the beginning of an exit from the traditional social position of woman as wife, mother, sister and daughter of men. The military is no longer defined as a male sector and women are not longer solely linked to peace. Women claim their place simultaneously on the battlefield and in politics. In this context, the awakening of female consciousness in Kurdistan does not begin with the educated middle class, at least not for those women involved in the Kurdish movement.

Following the PKK's decision to announce unilateral ceasefire after Ocalan's arrest, a period of calm settled in Kurdish areas (Bozarslan, H. 2009). New associations in the socio-cultural activities emerged gradually. Most of these associations were concerned with the social and psychological situation of Kurdish women, including victims of violence and forced migration<sup>8</sup>. In 2004, making pressure from it's the female branch, DEHAP agreed a gender quota system of 40 percent for women and furthermore a female co-presidential position for each presidential post held by a man. Following this rule, in 2007 eight of the 20 deputies elected in 2007 on the list of the DTP were women. This was crucial in the participation of women in power positions and also announced very strong psychological in ensuring support for the women's movement.

### **Kurdish Woman in PKK Ideology**

The theory of "Women's emancipation " and "national liberation" was already used in other anti-colonial movements: the case of FRELIMO in the Mozambican war of independence, the Zulu nationalist party in South Africa, Palestinian nationalism, the

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<sup>5</sup> Partiya Jinên Karkerên Kurdistan/ Women Workers' Party of Kurdistan

<sup>6</sup> The People's Labour Party

<sup>7</sup> HEP in 1994; the Party for Freedom and Democracy (OZDEP) in 1993; the Democracy Party (DEP) in 1994 and the Party of the People's Democracy (HADEP) in 2003.

<sup>8</sup> In 2010 at least, there are six associations in Diyarbakir which are directly involved with the problems of Kurdish women, their education, health, family and juridical problems.

Basque national liberation movement (ETA), and the Algerian nationalist movement (Harry G. West 2000; R. Ray and A. C. Korteweg 1999). In all these movements, at different times, the liberation of women was incorporated in the program of the organizations. Nevertheless, the style of women's mobilization and their capacity for action in these movements are not at the same level. However, every one of these movements has formed different perceptions of femininity and has offered the various interpretations of the relation between nations and woman.

For the first time, in the year 1986, the earliest texts on the emancipation of Kurdish woman appear in the writings of Ocalan<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, it was during the 90s and especially after his arrest by the Turkish government. In the construction of his ideological views on women, Ocalan focuses on an historical analysis of human society. In this context, he observed that, in the Neolithic period, society predominantly was structured according to a agricultural, matriarchal system giving women a sacred position as the creative source of life. "Natural society" was organized around the identity "woman-mother", in harmony with nature and agricultural activity. Contrary to a culture of violence and war dominated by men, female governance was based on peace and the refuse of violence. The domestic system "wife-mother" was the first victim of the hierarchical society set up by the patriarch of mankind. This is the beginning of an historical "counterrevolution" leading to the deprivation of women in their personality and their Identity. Ocalan argued that capitalism should be considered as the continuation of female gender slavery. The slavery system was imposed in early history on women and then was transmitted to men. They are pushed back from the public space to institutionalize the male monopoly on politics, economy and society. So, the authority of man spread its borders from the family to the state (Ocalan 2004). In this discourse, women's liberation is a prerequisite for the liberation of Kurdistan which is no longer looking for independence, but seeking to establish the "democratic autonomy". For PKK militants, they are facing a gender regime in which the state is a reproduction of masculinity, so in achieve an equal system, it seems entirely normal to orientate the direction of the fight to the "Men-State" sovereignty.

### **The contradiction of organizational discourse and gender relations**

The interpretation which we have given at the synergy of national struggle and the Kurdish women's movement can be change according to time and space. As Michel Wieviorka (1993) said, "nationalism and social movement may be in opposition, amalgamate or articulated". This relation becomes particularly complicated when we understand the distance which often exists between organizational gender discourses and

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<sup>9</sup> The new reflections of Ocalan about the man-woman relationship are interpreted as the result of ten years of tension between him and his wife Kesire Yildirim herself a member of the PKK's central committee until the third congress in 1986.

"gendered relations", which are not always necessarily consistent with each other (Yuval-Davis, N.1997: 39).

Despite all the discursive availability of the Kurdish movement, women activists are finally a part of the historicity defined by dominant males who claim a new freedom for women. The Kurdish movement becomes the guarantor of women's autonomy, while on the other hand it tries to determine the content of this autonomy. This is a challenge for the agency of women in the construction of female identity independently.

However, everyday relations within the movement are getting rid of male domination and gender-inequalities. In many cases, we see the constraints that limit women's participation in their engagement as combatants. It is not easy to prove herself as a warrior in a tradition in which war is seen as a male affair. A commander of 350 PKK fighters in 1993 admitted: "*women have certain disadvantages physically, but they are highly motivated. Azyma, also recognizes that even in a movement like PKK too "progressive", the fact that women ordering men sometimes causes problem*" (Kutschera 1993). When it comes to guerrilla tactics, men don't trust completely contribution of women in the war (Grojean 2008: 526-27). The "historical role" given to women, requires them to become the real "border guards" of the PKK in order to reproduce the symbolic codes of "new Kurdish woman"; although this is far from traditional model of femininity, they must always remain within the framework of the Kurdish national project (Yuval-Davis, N.1997: 23). Women engaged in political action increasingly complain about the lack of willingness of men to apply the movement discourse." *Even if male says, they are democrat and they support the women rights, it is clear that in their practical life they do not respect their own idea*". (Beyan 28, SELIS activist). The influence of traditional culture does not cease to exist in relationships between the sexes. The protective way in which men view their female activists may face in cases of physical threat a strong challenge for women, who no longer wish to be considered as the honour of Kurdish men. Although the discordance between social reality and ideology within of the Kurdish movement has not result in an open ideological challenge from women activists, they have actively worked to reform and broaden the movement practices as well as program.

### **Reshaping the public sphere by daily interactions of Kurdish women activists**

My broad purpose is to suggest that even though the presence of women in public space could represent a strategy of certain organizations, it helps the Kurdish woman to "regain its historical place" in public. The patriarchal system in the Kurdish society historically did not allow many opportunities for women to appear in public life where the discussion about main issues of society took place. Except for a few examples of powerful women (Mojab 2001), Kurdish women's participation in power issues took place behind the scenes. With the considerable entry of women in the movement of Kurdish mobilization, however they have progressively taken important positions on the socio-political spheres. We argue that entering in a collective action provokes the challenging of

gendered power structure, which eventually strengthen the position of women in public space.

Women's participation in politics and war creates an expansion of women's autonomy and it changes the nature of relationship that they keep with the family. There are new institutional structures which serve to replace traditional ties with family members and relatives. However, the gender equality embraced by the discourse of this new institution is not necessarily reflected in real life. The gendered division of labour and roles as defined in the movement are challenged by micro actions. These practices are the methods by which the current structure is changed without confronting radically the existing ideology. As the rate at which new practices are emerging, they could cross the already existing boundaries. These actions are the bases of the construction of a new female identity redefining power relations institutionalized in everyday life. This process of reorganization of social relations is realized through attitudes, gestures and words sometimes extremely overdramatized. All these processes of new patterns of infra-politic behaviours may represent the beginning of a repositioning of women in relationships within the organization. The way a man behaves towards a woman on the public stage becomes a criterion demonstrating the degree of his integration into the organization. An old fighter who washes dishes and cooks in the presence of several young fighters; district chairman who gets up to display his respect towards a younger activist of eighteen years old; the conference of the women's movement in which men are forbidden...are some examples of the institutionalization of the patterns of micro actions in the redirection at the daily interactions to the benefit of the female gender.

However, it might be more enlightening to pay attention to the potential consequences of these micro-actions on Kurdish conflict from a holist perspective. We endorse the hypothesis that the actions of the Kurdish women do not remain limited to "practical gender interests" (cited by R. Ray and A. C. Korteweg 1999: 49), on the contrary, women's participation in collective action allows them to contribute to the redefinition their role in the Kurdish political project. While placed at the centre of conflict, Kurdish women claim the repositioning of their status in the national project to achieve the next stage which will be national liberation. Perhaps we can even talk about the processes of the feminization of the Kurdish movement. What I do wish to assert is that at the feminization of the movement appears in response to the historical dominance of the men. The mechanism through which they attempt to come to terms with the dilemma of how to negotiate a balance between universality of women and Kurdish particularity.

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