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Faculty of Social and Political Sciences

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Master Program in

«Mediterranean Studies»

**Kurdish women fighters of Rojava: The rugged pathway to
bring liberation from mountains to women's houses¹.**

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Corinth, January 2019

¹ Reference in the institution of Rojava, Mala Jin (Women's Houses) which are viewed as one of the most significant institutions in favour of women's rights in local level.

Πανεπιστήμιο Πελοποννήσου

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«Μεσογειακές Σπουδές»

**Κούρδισσες γυναίκες μαχήτριες της Ροζάβα: Το δύσβατο
μονοπάτι για την απελευθέρωση από τα βουνά στα σπίτια
των γυναικών.²**

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Κόρινθος, Ιανουάριος 2019

² Αναφορά στο θεσμό της Ροζάβα, Mala Jin (Σπίτια των Γυναικών) τα οποία θεωρούνται σαν ένας από τους σημαντικότερους θεσμούς υπέρ των δικαιωμάτων των γυναικών, σε τοπικό επίπεδο.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved brother, Christos, who left us too soon but he is always present to my thought and soul.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

DFNS	Democratic Federation of Northern Syria/Federaliya Demokratîk a Bakûrê Sûriyê
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham/Daesh
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party/ Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê
KRG	Kurdistan Region of Iraq/Hikûmetî Herêmî Kurdistan
PJKK	Kurdistan Women's Workers Party/Partiya Jinen Karkera Kurdistan
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party/Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê
PYD	Democratic Union Party/Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces/Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk
TEV-DEM	Council of Western Kurdistan and Movement for Democratic Society/Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk
YJAK (YJA-STAR)	Union of Free Women of Kurdistan/Yekîneyen Jinên Azad ên Star
YPG	People's Protection Units/Yekîneyên Parastina Gel
YPJ	Women's Protection Units/Yekîneyên Parastina Jin

Kurdish women fighters of Rojava: The rugged pathway to bring liberation from mountains to women's houses.

Keywords: Northern Syria, Rojava, Kurdish women fighters, YPJ, emancipation, liberation, violence, armed struggle, feminism, gender.

Abstract

Kurdish women fighters of YPJ units in the de-facto autonomous region in Northern Syria, mostly known as Rojava, have become prominent in the West during the liberation of Kobanî in early 2015. Most attention has been paid to their struggle against ISIS, whilst their historical background has been often neglected and their feminist struggle has been understated. The aim of this MA Thesis is to delve into the relationship between the participation of Rojavan female fighters in the armed struggle and their further empowerment and emancipation. The examination of the history of the Kurdish women's liberation movement, as well as of the ideological framework within which their struggle takes place will contribute to better understand this relationship. Furthermore, we argue that the participation of Rojavan women in armed struggle is differentiated from similar female armed movements which experienced backlashes in a post-conflict/liberation period, due to its historical context and ideological framework, alongside the fact that women's active participation is currently fostered and their emancipation is taking institutional forms implemented at present instead of being postponed to an uncertain and remote future if and when the prioritized goal will have been achieved.

Κούρδισσες γυναίκες μαχήτριες της Ροζάβα: Το δύσβατο μονοπάτι της απελευθέρωσης από τα βουνά στα σπίτια των γυναικών.

Σημαντικοί Όροι: Βόρεια Συρία, Ροζάβα, Κούρδισσες μαχήτριες, YPJ, Χειραφέτηση, απελευθέρωση, βία, ένοπλος αγώνας, φεμινισμός, Φύλο.

Περίληψη

Οι Κούρδισσες μαχήτριες των μονάδων YPJ στην de facto αυτόνομη περιοχή της Βόρειας Συρίας, γνωστή κυρίως ως Ροζάβα, έγιναν ιδιαίτερα γνωστές στη Δύση κατά τη διάρκεια της απελευθέρωσης του Κομπάνι στις αρχές του 2015. Η μεγαλύτερη προσοχή δόθηκε στον αγώνα τους κατά του Ισλαμικού Κράτους, ενώ το ιστορικό τους background συχνά αγνοήθηκε και ο φεμινιστικός τους αγώνας υποβαθμίστηκε. Ο σκοπός αυτής της διπλωματικής εργασίας είναι να ερευνήσει τη σχέση μεταξύ της συμμετοχής των γυναικών της Ροζάβα στον ένοπλο αγώνα και της περαιτέρω ενδυνάμωσης και χειραφέτησής τους. Η εξέταση της ιστορίας του Κουρδικού γυναικείου απελευθερωτικού κινήματος καθώς και του ιδεολογικού πλαισίου μέσα στο οποίο ο αγώνας τους λαμβάνει χώρα θα συμβάλλει στην καλύτερη κατανόηση αυτής της σχέσης. Επιπλέον, υποστηρίζουμε ότι η συμμετοχή των γυναικών της Ροζάβα στον ένοπλο αγώνα διαφοροποιείται από παρόμοια γυναικεία ένοπλα κινήματα τα οποία βίωσαν οπισθοδρόμηση σε μεταπολεμική ή μετα-απελευθερωτική περίοδο, λόγω του ιστορικού και ιδεολογικού της πλαισίου, παράλληλα με το γεγονός ότι η γυναικεία ενεργή συμμετοχή προάγεται τώρα και η χειραφέτησή τους παίρνει θεσμικές μορφές που εφαρμόζονται επί του παρόντος αντί να μετατεθούν σε ένα αβέβαιο και μακρινό μέλλον εάν και όταν ο πρωτεύων στόχος θα έχει επιτευχθεί.

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“Women and weapons, women and war, women and the struggle for national liberation, women and death – that had a special significance. Kurdish women would free themselves from their enslavement by fighting.”

Sakine Cansiz³

“Jin – Jiyan – Azadî”⁴



Figure 1. Joey L. (2015) *PKK Kurdistan Workers Party Patrol, Makhmour, Iraq - Guerrilla Fighters of Kurdistan*⁵

³ (Cansiz 2018: 206)

⁴ “Women – life – freedom” is a popular Kurdish slogan, pronounced by Kurdish women in Rojava (Northern Syria) and in Bakur (Southeastern Turkey) during demonstrations, protests etc.

⁵ Source: <https://joeyl.com/blog/all/post/guerrilla-fighters-of-kurdistan> (Accessed on 20/12/2018).

INTRODUCTION

This MA thesis seeks to investigate the relationship between the participation of Kurdish women in armed struggle in the de-facto autonomous region in Northern Syria, Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (Federaliya Demokratîk a Bakûrê Sûriyê in Kurdish) (DFNS) – mostly known as ‘Rojava’- during the Syrian conflict and the enhancement of the position of women in Kurdish society, their further empowerment and emancipation.⁶

Specifically, we will seek to examine whether and how the active participation of Kurdish women in the self-organized, all-female protection and defense – military - units of YPJ (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin/Women’s Protection Units) affect - and to which extent - the further female empowerment and emancipation, in terms of active participation, representation, defense of their rights and proliferation of opportunities within the Kurdish and Syrian society.

We argue that the participation of Kurdish women in armed struggle in Rojava is differentiated from similar female armed movements which experienced backlashes in a post-conflict or post-liberation period, mainly due to its historical context and ideological framework, alongside the fact that women’s active participation is currently fostered and their emancipation is taking institutional forms implemented at present and is not postponed to an uncertain future if and when the prioritized goal will have been achieved.

It should be underlined that the Rojavan experiment, and in particular women’s liberation movement, flourishes in a region (Middle East) where patriarchal structures are deeply entrenched and reinforced by religion and in many cases by state (Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, 2017: 97). In addition, the whole endeavor is taking place in the midst of one of the cruelest and prolonged modern wars, the Syrian conflict, in which a range of regional and international state and non-state actors have been involved, and under a blockade held by Turkey and partially by Iraq (including Kurdistan

⁶ Rojava could be literally translated as “land of the sunset” (‘roj’ means ‘sun’ or ‘day’ in Kurdish and sun is a prominent symbol in the Kurdish mythology, depicted also in the midst of the Kurdish flag) (Schmidinger 2018: 2). Rojava is also used to design the “Western Kurdistan”, considering the Kurdish consideration of their land as “Great Kurdistan” comprising the Western part (Rojava) - de facto autonomous region - in Syria, the Northern (Bakur) in Turkey, the Southern (Bashur) in Iraq – which is officially recognized as an autonomous region within Iraq – and the Eastern (Rojhelat) in Iran.

Region of Iraq) with severe socio-economic consequences (Schmidinger 2018: 8, 217, 255). Hence, its prominence and its viability under these particular conditions are noticeable.

Regarding Kurdish female warriors, we should stress that although most Western mainstream media discovered recently Kurdish female combatants,⁷ the latter have been active since roughly 40 years. Their historical and ideological background has been often intentionally and repeatedly neglected, while their feminist struggle has been understated. Indeed, Rojavan women warriors are usually presented by media and some scholars solely as young, beautiful and cheerful creatures (Rakusen et al. 2014, Gol 2016) - replicating thus sexist stereotypes - who are fighting against the evil, i.e. Jihadists.

With this dissertation we aim to contribute to the knowledge and literature, as well as to the understanding regarding Rojavan women fighters and the impact of their armed struggle on the women's empowerment in the region. The topicality of the subject is evident, since Syrian war is ongoing and there is international interest respecting its continuity and its future, particularly following the Turkish invasion launched in January 2018 and its current occupation of Efrîn canton of Rojava. In addition, given the claims of the 4th feminist wave and the recent international women mobilizations,⁸ we seek to shed light on the Kurdish women liberation movement in Rojava, whose achievements should be studied and supported by global feminist movements.⁹

Nevertheless, since the movements of women fighters constitute actually a global phenomenon from Latin America to Africa and Asia, the question raised has also to do with the post-war/liberation era regarding women's situation. In this regard, we

⁷ Most Western media discovered Kurdish female warriors mainly during Kobane's battle against ISIS. With regard to the medias' misrepresentation of female warriors, exclusively focusing on their young age, appearance, hairstyle, smiling and outfit, and neglecting their historical and ideological context, a number of articles have been written in order to criticize this western – often orientalized - stance vis-à-vis Kurdish female warrior (Dirik 2014).

⁸ However we do not argue in favour of a universal feminism according to which all women share the same concerns and experience the same problems, disregarding thus "the varied and complex social reality of women" (hooks 1991:29). As McTighe (in Yuval-Davis 1997: 127) puts it: "as women, we are the same and we are different".

⁹ In the Rojavan case, it is noteworthy that within a very short period, in the midst of a war many radical changes took place in favour of women's rights and gender equality. There are certainly a lot of thing to be done, but women's movement managed to progress quickly despite the particularly unfavorable conditions. It should be also noted that Kurdish women's movement has already strongly inspired other feminist movements, such as the Turkish one (Al-Ali and Tas 2018: 18).

will seek to conduct a brief comparison between the Rojavan and the Iraqi Kurdish case, as well as to examine other cases of female struggle within similar liberation movements, such as that of the Tigers of Tamil (LTTE)¹⁰ in Sri Lanka, Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS) and Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN). Thereby, we tend to stress the importance of the political and ideological contexts, as well as the preparedness, adaptability and reform willingness of the society in terms of gender-based hierarchy and roles.

In order to address the aforementioned issues, a combination of methodological tools would be ideally adopted. However, the ongoing nature of the Syrian war has been the main hindrance. Field research has been therefore considered as non-feasible due to a few serious impediments: the Turkish incursion and occupation of Efrîn render particularly dangerous a trip there; the borders with Turkey are closed and only access via Iraq is rather complicated and risky; moreover the time limits of this MA thesis could not render possible a long sojourn in order to accomplish an accurate and in-depth field research.¹¹ Considering these obstacles, we will focus mostly on secondary research data, drawing on existing literature and documentaries.

This MA dissertation is divided into five parts: the first one discusses the theoretical framework of the relationship between the political violence and its emancipatory impact namely in Arendt's, Fanon's and Yuval-Davis' thinking, as well as of other scholars by examining the concepts linked to violence in gender terms along with their deconstruction in practice by women engaging in armed movements. The second one outlines the historical context of the Kurdish women movement in Turkey by focusing on the role of ideology of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) and its leader Abdullah Öcalan in its development.

Furthermore, PKK's presence in Syria is examined in the next chapter in order to highlight its impact firstly on women's politicization, and secondly on the establishment of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The creation and the gender

¹⁰ Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were active from 1976 till 2009. LTTE has been listed as terrorist organization by more than 32 states, including US, EU and Canada. In particular, US government designated LTTE as Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 1997, along with a number of militant groups and organizations, including the PKK (U.S. Department of State, Stanford University).

¹¹ As Schmidinger (2018: 10) stresses currently sojourns are permitted only for brief periods and one has to be always accompanied by local people for security reasons.

implications of the all-female militia units of YPJ are examined at the end of this chapter.

The fourth chapter discusses how the perseverance of women's emancipation is ensured within the Rojavan society in order to avoid experiencing backlashes and setbacks currently and in post-war period, while it presents briefly the hindrances and limits regarding the Rojavan experiment. The last chapter attempts a comparison with similar movements, as well as women's situation in Iraqi Kurdistan in order to stress the importance of ideology and the role of the parallel growing participation of women in everyday politics and all realms of life.

CHAPTER 1

Theoretical Framework: Violence and Emancipation

1.1 Political violence and the Kurdish case

Human history has been replete with violence, which has taken various forms and has been associated with most political ideologies. Concepts and boundaries related to its nature, its use and its legitimization, alongside its contextualization have been rigorously studied and analyzed, while questions have been raised with respect to the relationship, and the features thereof, between violence and emancipation, mainly with women's one.

In the present dissertation, the form of violence under examination is the political one since the case of armed struggle within the national liberation framework constitutes political violence. According to Della Porta and other scholars though there is not a unanimous definition for the term of "political violence", but attempts to shape its meaning, since it can include a wide range of actions and subjectivity (1995:2). Furthermore, there are divergent views on which kind of acts are considered as violent; or better as Žižek puts it: "violence is distributed between acts and their contexts" (2008: 213). For instance, Badiou in its *Theory of Subject* views as (first "moment" of) violence the action of breaking with the predominance of individualism in ideological terms (violence of de-individuation) when one becomes militant and the "I" becomes thus "we" (Wright 2011: 13).

Nevertheless, herein, political violence is associated with emancipatory politics and is examined through this prism. Specifically, in the Kurdish case,¹² mostly within the political framework of at the time Leninist-Marxist PKK, violence has taken initially the form of revolutionary violence, guerilla war, and its use has been associated with

¹² It is not within the scope of this dissertation to investigate the several reasons for opting for the armed struggle on behalf of Kurds; however it should be noticed that PKK's violence and its popularity among parts of Kurds are largely explained as consequences of the State's coercion and persecution, of the impossibility of carrying out opposition in legal terms and of the feeling that finally armed struggle was the last resort (Bozarslan 2000: 9 and Marcus 2007: 39, 132, 208). As Bozarslan (2000:9) claims: "Violence is a consequence of the power relations, the impossibility of questioning and changing mechanisms of national and political domination and subordination by other means than violence".

the Kurdish identity assertion and the subversion of the Turkish state (Marcus 2007). Regarding the ongoing Syrian conflict, violence used by Kurds, namely by PYD's military wings People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units, is justified as means of self-defense and protection of people and territories.¹³ As for the Kurdish female fighters, their participation in armed struggle has aimed not only at fighting against people's enemies in terms of defense but also against patriarchal structures serving thus as means of empowerment and emancipation.

1.2 Violence and emancipation

In general terms, there are divergent opinions with respect to the emancipatory and transformative effect of violence. According to some scholars, political violence – within particular boundaries - can be viewed as means of social change and liberation, while for others its very nature undermines, if not hampers, this process.

Arendt believes that violence can have positive transformative effects if its – under control - use serves short-term goals; she considers it though particularly dangerous when it serves a revolution (2000: 48, 141). She stresses the instrumentality of violence and thus the constant need for guidance and justification through the pursued goal, whilst she differentiates it from power which needs legitimacy (since justification is inherent in political communities' existence),¹⁴ undermining thus the empowering nature of violence. She argues that power, just like action, requires the equal co-existence and the collective action, which is in absolute contradiction with the nature of violence (2000: 32, 105, 112-118). As she asserts: “Violence can destroy power but it is utterly incapable of creating it”, while violence occurs when power is in jeopardy (2000: 118, 116). Finally, Arendt considers violence as a human phenomenon, but totally anti-political (2000: 48).

The Arendtian argument that violence factually engenders more violence could be reflected in the concern over the Rojavan experiment and the fear of the further

¹³ Öcalan has re-attempted to justify the use of violence by formulating his theory of rose, according to which violence serves as means of legitimate self-defense, and not attack, evoking the rose whose thorns guarantee its defense and protection (Knapp et al. 2017: 180). Apart defense's military dimension, Öcalan links the ability of self-defense with the preservation of identity and political consciousness alongside a democratization process (Öcalan 2011: 30).

¹⁴ According to Arendt, another distinction between power and violence is that the former needs great numbers whereas the latter relies mostly on implements (2000: 101).

prolongation of the militarization in society (2000: 49, 141-142). As Yuval-Davis stresses militarization of the population increases the levels of violence, in particular the domestic ones, in society (1997: 107).

On the contrary, Fanon, focusing on people of Third World colonized countries undergoing decolonization struggles and witnessing mainly that of Algerians against French colonialism (1954-1962), views violence as a necessary means of the oppressed in order to gain initially their - temporarily lost - identity, dignity and furthermore to accomplish their national liberation struggle (Roberts 2004: 149, Fanon 1963: 94). Necessary can be perceived as inevitable, as Sartre asserts in the preface of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963:21), and violence as the only means able to efface the marks of the colonizer's violence. The necessity of armed struggle is also highlighted by feminists from the Third World who argue that oppressed people have not actually the privilege of opting for means of non-violent struggle in order to gain their national liberation (Yuval-Davis 1997: 114).

Fanon, as a psychiatrist experimenting various therapies and approaches (Hudis 2017:86-98), examines from a psychological aspect the "cleansing force of violence" which liberates - as a first phase of a two-phase process, referred as "two-stage theory of liberatory mediation"- psychologically the oppressed (by restoring his self-respect) before he uses it finally in a (de-) constructive way (Fanon 1963: 71, 94, Roberts 2004: 142).

In the anti-colonial context, Fanon considers violence as necessary means for liberation, recognizing in it a transformative power, because it entails the action of "seizing", and not that of being offered what it has been deprived (White 2007: 859),¹⁵ which underlines the dialectic within this process implying the consciousness-raising and agency experience while acting (violently) in order to gain freedom and independence. The colonized as he struggles for his freedom, acquires confidence, new awareness, self-respect and becomes stronger. As Gilly claims in the introduction of *A dying Colonialism* "Liberation does not come as a gift from anybody; it is seized

¹⁵ He distinguishes however the necessity of violence: in colonized countries such as Algeria or Kenya he argues that violence is necessary while in other African countries its use would not be suitable (Hudis 2017: 128).

by the masses with their own hands. And by seizing it themselves are transformed” (1965:2).

1.3 Women and armed struggle

Based on Fanon’s thought, who detects serious empowering and emancipatory features in participation in violent struggle, we argue that similarly Rojavan women fighters struggle in order to reclaim and assert not only their national – Kurdish - identity but also their feminine one, both having been diminished and neglected, as well as to gain *respect*. As Sharoni stresses, women gain along with respect, “visibility for their contribution to the national struggle” (2001: 90). Within this framework, visibility could be associated with identity. The emphasis on the respect has been given by Kurdish female fighters, who, in many interviews, have underscored the armed struggle as a means in order to gain, inter alia, respect, which initially in the battle context emerges in the form of fear on behalf of men.¹⁶

In particular, it is said that ISIS jihadist fighters believe that one of the greatest humiliations which could engender a post-life punishment – i.e. not going to heaven- is to be killed by a woman (RT Documentary 2015, Knapp et al. 2017: 184-185, Strauss 2016: 11, Graeber and Ögünç 2016: 28). Nonetheless, there is criticism with regard to this assertion (Beauchamp 2015). It is noticeable that ISIS has established its own all-female battalions, albeit in limited scale and acting under particular circumstances, since 2014 (Adalat in Schmidinger 2018:205, Al Arabiya 2014). Therefore, in order to avoid any misinterpretation, we should underline that humiliation and embarrassment as feelings engendered by the fact of being killed by a woman stem actually from the conservative and patriarchal framework within which battles take place and they are not thus restricted to the Islamist one. Nonetheless, regardless of the nature of the reason, jihadists are particularly concerned about not to be captured or killed by women, viewing them with a feeling of fear. That feeling, in reverse, reinforces women, who are transformed into an active agent whom men have to seriously consider.

¹⁶ As author Arzu Demir argues: “There are always men thinking that women are slaves, but when women are an armed force, men are scared of them” (Nordland 2018).

Fanon links violence, inter alia, with *agency*, the ability one has to act, which also implies the ability to make decision for oneself and which in Fanonian thought is developed during the process of the armed struggle (Roberts 2004: 143). Arendt, however, does not agree, since she considers agency and action as incompatible with violence; agency and activity can be actualized by the power and not by the violence within the human condition (Roberts 2004: 150).

Nevertheless, agency in armed struggle is opposed to the state of subservience and passivity, traditionally associated with women, and challenge their stereotypical portrayal as mere victims of warfare. It is noteworthy that the rhetoric of women's salvation during or projected as justification to a warfare (Tickner 2011: 51),¹⁷ particularly present in western colonial narratives (Sayigh 1981: 263, Abu-Lughod 2002), and protection is deeply patriarchal and discriminatory (white men save brown women from brown men).¹⁸ By engaging in armed struggle, women challenge this narrative of salvation and its patriarchal, racial and class components - underlining thus the intersectional nature of women's struggle - and attempt to shape by themselves the conditions and their liberation according to their own value system and will. Furthermore, it is in this self-determination and self-organization that female agency is breaking with its subordination and as Badiou, referring to the 1871 Parisian Commune, puts it "destroys the order of subjective incapacity" (2006: 400).

From a feminist standpoint, some feminist scholars argue though that Fanon's concept of violence is masculinist and denies female agency since in his book *A dying Colonialism* (1965) he views Algerian female participation in violent struggle in instrumentalist terms, undermining thus women's agency, and considering revolutionary violence as a masculine exclusivity. However, other scholars view emancipatory effect of female engagement in revolutionary violence in Fanon's work (Roberts 2004: 152, Fanon 1965: 5, 59-60, White 2007: 861), while we should not ignore that unlike the patriarchal tendency which has excluded systematically women

¹⁷ The obsession of 'saving' was particularly intense in colonialism, drawing its origins from the 'missionary work'. In particular, during the French colonialism in Algeria the obsession of women's saving was indicative. In general terms however, woman has always been target of colonialism which has repeatedly used the woman question in order to justify its rule (Abu-Lughod 2002: 784).

¹⁸ Phrase coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?". "Saving brown women" emerged many times as justification of wars' declaration; the most recent example was that of 2002 US declaration of military intervention - the so-called "War on Terrorism" - against Afghanistan, after the 9/11 attacks (Cooke 2002: 469, Abu-Lughod 2002: 784).

from history, Fanon wrote on Algerian women's important roles played during the war highlighting the psychological transformation of some of them and asserting their right to autonomy (White 2007: 859).

Moreover, Fanon suggests that struggle is not only force against another force, but a sphere of *solidarity*, individual and collective transformation, and politicization. Within this context, Sharoni (2001: 91-92),¹⁹ has underlined the creation of new ties between individuals, notably between women, in the course of the (armed) struggle, which engender solidarity, togetherness and produce thus more confidence empowering women. Indeed, a great number of female Kurdish fighters argue that during the battles, comradeship, mutual aid and support run high (Knapp et al. 2017: 191).

1.4 Gender (de-)constructions in armed struggle

Another concept linked to violence is masculinity, accompanied with the exclusivity of violence's use in gender terms within the militaries and the liberation movements. In addition, the preparedness of dying for one's country, considered as the ultimate citizen's duty,²⁰ has been pivotal in masculinities' construction and reserved to men (Yuval-Davis 1997: 117), while military training consisted in denigrating anything deemed as feminine (Tickner 2001: 57). Hence, women, by engaging in armed struggle, assert in the same time, agency and rupture with patriarchy since one of its most exclusive masculine fields is the (direct) participation in war and all forms of armed struggle.

In this framework, Yuval-Davis argues that in fact women have been largely active in warfare and armed movements and there have been female warriors throughout history;²¹ however there have also been particular gendered constructions regarding their nature (traditional, social fixed gender differences with regard to the physical force, endurance etc.) and their roles in warfare. Indeed, men have been constructed

¹⁹ Sharoni (2001) has studied the women's involvement in Palestinian (notably during the Intifada) and in Northern Ireland liberation movements.

²⁰ According to Tickner (2001: 57) the concept of "heroic masculinity" dates from ancient Greeks.

²¹ Bloom also agrees on that; she underlines the long history of women's involvement in political violence by referring the examples of Russian Narodnaya Volya in the 19th century, the Baader-Meinhof group in Germany, the Italian Red brigades etc. (2007: 94).

as naturally associated to war, while women to peace (Yuval-Davis 1997: 94),²² which has had impact on their roles, generally more supportive or subordinate for the women (Bloom 2007: 94), and on the boundaries within an armed movement or a military. Moreover, as Cockburn stresses, gender roles in war are based on the sexual division of war, akin to that of labour (2010: 105).

The dichotomy of the “front” and “rear” regarding the battlefield is another gendered constructed separation, which has deprived women from fighting on the frontline. Thus, women who finally fought in frontline or led men to battle have been perceived as unnatural and exceptions. Besides, with respect to this consideration, as Alison underlines, the mere fact of the use of the qualifier “female combatant” reflects their rarity and its unconventional character (2004:447).²³

The common dichotomies of combat/non-combat or front/rear when referring to the roles of women and men in the military or the armed struggle, have been strongly deconstructed in cases such as in Latin America, Sri Lanka and Kurdistan, where women have undertaken the same roles with those of their male counterparts, invalidating thus in practice fixed gender differences relating to physical force, endurance etc.

1.5 Political ideology and armed struggle

Regarding women’s participation in armed struggle and its implication with their social empowerment, Yuval-Davis stresses the role of political ideology of the project which is related with their engagement in armed struggle, along with the nature of the armed force (formal armies or national liberation movements) (1997: 97). She argues thus that unlike the formal national armies, differences based on gendered constructions are transcended more easily within informal military forces, and that among the main motivations for women to join the military is the opportunity of self-

²² With regard to this conceptualization, since we examine the case of Kurdish women, Öcalan (2013: 24, 38-39) implies also that women are associated to peace (their main fields of activities are peaceful and fruitful), by denouncing masculinity’s linkage with warfare and the subsequent seizing and depredation. Moreover, as Tickner (2001: 58) stresses, some radical feminists argue that “women have a special affinity with peace”, while others repudiate women’s participation in men’s wars.

²³ Regarding the use of the term “female fighter” and its alleged unconventional character, postmodernism feminists, who study the gender constructions through language, would argue that the use of the term and the particular – scientific and media - interest on women joining armed struggle stem from the fact that we have socially constructed women as an homogenous category being “nonviolent”, “caring”, “showing empathy” etc. (Whaley Eager 2008: 20).

empowerment in physical and emotional terms, while those who joined guerilla forces considered the participation in the armed struggle also as a means to establish new identity, develop new skills and enhance their social position (1997: 102). Wood and Thomas (2016: 31) appear to agree with Yuval-Davis; they also stress the crucial role of the political ideology adopted by a group in determining the extent and the prevalence of female participation in rebellion, as well as their deployment in combat roles.

Moreover, according to Yuval-Davis' distinction of two types of revolutionary movements (1997: 103) one could argue that the Kurdish one is similar to the type in which women are used as a symbol of liberation and for that reason they are highly encouraged to participate in armed struggle.²⁴ She also suggests that women's incorporation in militaries and warfare implies, at least in symbolic terms, gender equality in national level and equal participation of all societal parts in military (1997: 98).

Hence, the role of political ideology is important, if not crucial, in the shaping of the armed struggle and of the relationship between the violence and its transformative effect. That is to say, the armed struggle's emancipatory nature relies on and depends upon the ideological framework within which the armed struggle is conducted, because that shapes the ways, the organization and mostly the pursued ends. In particular, Wood and Thomas argue that the political ideology is also crucial in determining the extent of women's participation (2016).

Regarding political ideology's role in women's participation in armed struggle we should notice that mainly two ideologies have contributed to recruit massively women within their movements, albeit their different context: nationalist and leftist movements.²⁵ Nationalism being inherently engendered, according to multiple scholars, oppresses women and constructs their ideological roles and their boundaries. Moreover, nationalism imposes to women the main duty and responsibility of the reproduction and the preservation of the community via their role as mothers. Hence, the linkage between woman and nation is mirrored on the twofold concept of

²⁴ The second one refers to movements in which women are viewed as symbols of national culture and tradition and thus they are encouraged to undertake supportive roles (Yuval-Davis 1997: 103).

²⁵ The intersectionality of the ideologies is though noteworthy, since ideologies interact, as for instance nationalism can intersect with leftism (nation-liberation movements) or Islamist ideologies.

motherhood-nationhood, which burdens the woman with the “sacred” responsibility of the preservation of the nation via the reproduction. The woman within this framework personifies the nation (Abdo 1991: 26-27); her body is transformed into and deemed as a property –akin to land - to be defended or a trophy to be carried off in the course of wartime (Douzou and Yusta 2018: 14).

Within this context, it should be stressed that sexual violence against women is frequent during conflicts. In particular, women have not only been abducted in order to supply sexual services to military personnel or fighters, but rape has been also often viewed as a systematic military strategy in order to undermine the purity of a nation, mainly in cases of ethnic wars (Tickner 2001: 50), or to mortify the enemy, considering women as “passive parts of the land that men protect” (Dirik 2015b: 56, Weiss 2010: 58).

As for the nationalism, Abdo distinguishes two types thereof: the institutionalized, official state nationalism and that of a liberation movement, seeing in the latter opportunities and space for women’s emancipation (1991: 22). Kurdish liberation movement belongs undoubtedly in the latter; however we should notice that in its first steps it was viewing women as carriers of nationhood and culture. Although Öcalan has strongly supported women, the fact that he identified oppressed women with Kurdistan evokes the women’s conceptualization, present to nationalist rationale.

The conceptualization or the use of women in armed movements in order to achieve particular goals constitute part of a criticism of those viewing female participation in armed struggle as instrumentalized or utilitarian serving merely a group’s goal. Hence, some scholars reject or undermine the empowering effect of women’s participation, by examining, inter alia, the reasons or the conditions under which this engagement has been made and by arguing that it is often conceded due to lack of individuals or utilized in order to gain particular strategic or further benefits, such as more sympathy or mediatization (Bloom 2007: 100). For some scholars, that was the case of Algerian women during the independence war or that of female suicide bombers (Bloom 2007).²⁶ Certainly, this approach and interpretation is limited since it

²⁶ Bloom who wrote on female suicide bombers, argues that women’s participation in suicide bombings challenges seriously the stereotype of the “naturally peaceful” women. However, after examining (Bloom 2007) women’s motives, and particularly the claims for violence’s empowering

obscures seriously women's agency by representing them merely as victims and puppets.

Regardless of the different interpretations over the reasons and conditions for their engagement, it is undeniable that women are empowered through their participation in armed struggle and they are transformed into active agents and historical subjects (Vervenioti 1999: 381). Besides, political crises historically create new spaces and more opportunities for women to explore the relationship between their positions in the conflict and in the society and consequently they not only challenge, but also transcend the socially established roles and the tasks deriving from them (Sharoni 2001: 92, Vervenioti 2006: 163).

Finally, the importance of historical conditions and political contexts in shaping and dictating the form as well as the substance of the women's struggles (Yuval-Davis 1997: 125) should be certainly highlighted. In the Kurdish case, both historical and political contexts have been crucial in the evolution of the Kurdish women struggle.

effect and for opting for this means of fight in the cases of LTTE in Sri Lanka, of 'Black Widows' in Chechnya and of Palestinian women, she rejects finally any emancipatory effect of the female participation in suicide bombings, since instead of challenging the patriarchy, it constitutes evidence of its power operating in fact under it.

CHAPTER 2

Kurdish Women Movement: Flowering in the streets and growing on the mountains

2.1 Kurdish women's liberation movement: Turkey

Syria's upheavals, as part of the 2011 Arab uprisings, had one of the most negative outcomes: the Syrian civil war, which has been swiftly transformed into a conflict with regional and international involvement rendering its end more uncertain. Concerning women's rights, according to feminist scholars, although women played a significant role in Arab uprisings, in the wake of the revolutions, their condition and rights have been generally undermined. Kurdish women of Rojava seem to constitute though an exception to this grim outcome (Tank 2017: 405, 426). However, despite the fact that most media discovered the Kurdish female fighters during Kobanî siege on September 2014, they neglected to refer that Kurdish women have been engaging in armed struggle since many decades within the Kurdish liberation movement.²⁷

Hence, it is evident that we cannot examine the case of the Kurdish female combatants out of the particular socio-political context and without examining the history of the Kurdish women's liberation movement linked with the emergence and establishment of the PKK in Turkey and the thought of its leader Abdullah Öcalan.

Indeed, Kurdish women's involvement in the national liberation movement has a long history (Açık 2013: 2),²⁸ initially in Turkish and Iranian Kurdistan. In Turkey, women's politicization has its origins in the 1970s leftist movements whilst women liberation movement grew mainly out of the Turkish and Kurdish student's and workers' movement of the 1970s. Sakine Cansiz (1958-2013), co-founder of PKK, in

²⁷ Dirik (2014) refers to this selective attention given by the media in an article in Aljazeera in which she criticizes, inter alia, the (orientalist to some extent) stance of Western media vis-à-vis the Kurdish women's fight.

²⁸ We focus herein on the modern Kurdish women's activism since we examine their participation in armed struggle; however, it should be mentioned that Kurdish women's activism first emerged in the late 19th century, during the Ottoman Empire, among the urban Kurdish intellectual elite, later persecuted after the establishment of the Turkish state (Begikhani et al. 2018: 11).

her memoirs, “*Sara, My whole life was a struggle*” (2018) depicts thoroughly the students’ and workers’ movement in Turkey in the 1970s, within which Kurdish women had increasingly active role and participated in equal terms with men.

2.2 PKK and women’s politicization

PKK, the main Kurdish political actor at that time and one of the most important currently, was founded in 1978 - during a secret meeting in Fis village, in Southeastern Turkey - and launched its guerilla struggle in August 1984. Throughout 1980s and 1990s it recruited massively women as guerilla combatants, emphasizing thus the importance accorded to gender issue by PKK from the outset (Açık 2013: 115, Marcus 2007: 47, 74, Al-Ali and Tas 2018: 9). In particular, according to Marcus (2007: 172-173), Kurdish female presence in politics and rebellion in Turkey begun to rise after 1989, mainly due to two factors: firstly, because at that time PKK entered universities and urban areas and secondly, because the detention, torture and execution of thousands of men, as a result of the Turkish state’s harsh repression, forced women to undertake more active role in society and contributed largely to their politicization and radicalization.²⁹

During the peak of the Kurdish urban *serhildan*,³⁰ between 1990 and 1993, women became more visible in the public realm mostly through their militancy whilst a number of independent Kurdish women’s groups, Forums and journals emerged (Açık 2013: 116, Duzel 2018: 4).³¹ It is noteworthy that Kurdish women in Turkey, akin to black women in Europe and US, organized their movements separately arguing that Turkish women – like the Western ones – ignored the multifaceted oppression and discrimination the former face in terms of race, class and religion (Çaha cited in

²⁹ Leyla Zana constitutes one indicative example; she was strongly radicalized and became active after her husband’s arrest, later she was the first woman of Kurdish origin elected as a deputy of Turkish Parliament in 1991. She attracted even more attention by speaking in Kurdish and wearing a handband in Kurdish flag’s colours (red, green and yellow) during the oath-taking ceremony (Marcus 2007: 165, 173).

³⁰ “*Serhildan*” in Kurdish means ‘uprising’, ‘rebellion’ (akin to Arabic Palestinian term of “*Intifada*”).

³¹ Açık (2013: 116) refers the journals *Roza* (the first to be published), *Yaşamda*, *Özgür Kadın* (YÖK) and *Jûjin* published by Kurdish women in Turkey in the 1990s for about a decade. Al-Ali and Tas (2018:15) add to those publications *Jin u Jiyan* and mention that these Kurdish women’s journals were distinguished from the Turkish feminists ones and one of their central criticism was over the male domination within the Kurdish society.

Begikhani et al. 2018: 13).³² Furthermore, Kurdish women have experienced both ethnicity and gender-based discrimination within the Turkish feminist and the Kurdish nationalist movements respectively (Grabolle-Çelike 2018: 242).

In short, the linkage of women's liberation with the national one within PKK's ideological framework, typical within national liberation movements, has been proved crucial in politicizing, mobilizing and finally engaging largely women in armed struggle. Although women's identification with nation and national culture may imply their instrumentalization or their perception through an essentialist lens (Açık 2013: 118), this relation entails though factually dialecticity, since their mobilization and militancy transforms them, reshapes and redefines their roles and ultimately empowers them.

The emphasis on women's empowerment has been mainly given by Öcalan, whose standpoint in favour of women's rights has been intense and vocal since the beginning, while he has stressed strongly that women's liberation was the main responsibility of Kurdish movement and that Kurdish revolutionary struggle would be impossible without women's participation. Furthermore, Kurdish leader expressed his admiration for Palestinian women's struggle in his earlier writings in the early 1990s (Al-Ali and Tas 2018: 10). As a result, more and more women, morally empowered by Öcalan's stance, begun to join the armed units of PKK to the extent that by 1993 women constituted one third of PKK's armed forces (Duzel 2018: 4).

Regarding women's commitment to armed struggle, while men relatives - mainly fathers and brother - restricted women's lives in terms of education, labour and social life within Kurdish conservative society, it was difficult though to prevent the latter from joining the armed forces in order to fight for Kurdish liberation. Considering that PKK insisted in protecting girls' virginity - a deeply patriarchal perception besides - even the most conservative Kurdish families were therefore reassured (Marcus 2007: 173- 174). Indeed, this stance, along with the prohibition of sexual relations among members of PKK fighters, allowed in fact many families to be open about not to hinder their daughters' decision in joining the armed struggle (Marcus 2007: 198).

³² The intersectionality tool is used in order to understand and better deal with forms of oppression which are interlinked and suggests a holistic approach to tackle them (Dirik 2015a).

From women's perspective, besides their nationalist and liberatory aspirations, patriarchal control, violence and forced marriage were among the motives for joining the armed forces of PKK (Grabolle-Çelike 2018: 243).³³

Hence, within the conservative Kurdish milieu, going to the mountains constituted, among others, the only solution for many young women to take control of their own lives, attributing thus a strong emancipatory effect to their decision to join the armed struggle (Duzel 2018: 4, Marcus 2007: 195). The importance of the young age of the women deciding to be involved in armed struggle should be highlighted; as Vervenioti argues in the preface of her book *Resistance Woman. The women's entrance into politics* (2013:13) referring to Greek women fighters during the Resistance (1941-1944), young girls aged 14-20 have not yet fully internalized gender-based roles. That plays an important role in their decision and affects their conduct.

2.3 Women's liberation: necessary condition for a democratic society

Following the 1993 ceasefire declared by PKK, its political and ideological program shifted; inter alia, the thesis of the pursuit of a separate state was abandoned and the priority was given to the liberation struggle, mainly to women's liberation, which was accompanied by relevant discourses (Çağlayan 2012: 18). A discursive shift has been evident in Öcalan's statements and writings: the earlier conceptualization of women has been faded away in his later writings. In this regard, while in 1980s he spoke to militant men about their behavior towards women, one decade later he spoke to women militants about men (Çağlayan 2012: 15).

The abandonment of the aspiration of a separate state, after the capture and imprisonment of Ocalan in 1999, led to a further anti-statism linked to the thesis that hierarchy and statism are incompatible with women's nature (Öcalan 2013: 73). The woman was set in the center of the PKK's narrative: "The level of women's freedom and equality in a society defines the levels of freedom and equality of all parts of society" (Öcalan 2013: 77).

³³ According to Szanto (2016: 309) poverty has also been an incentive for Kurdish women in Syria to join the armed forces of YPJ. Szanto argues in favor of a correlation between the poverty and the engagement in armed struggle by pursuing a comparison between fighters in Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan.

This narrative has been further reinforced by the construction of the mythological golden age of Kurds as a matriarchal society, located in the Ancient Mesopotamia, in the Neolithic age, in which the main actors were women, living in absolute freedom. According to Öcalan, this society is viewed as it was ruled by a sort of primitive socialism, since the social ethos of matriarchy prohibited the property (source of social inequality).³⁴ This society was based on the principles of solidarity and communalism and was aligned with the respect of the environment (Öcalan 2013: 19). Öcalan does not hesitate to argue that the features of modern Kurdish women originate in fact from this old historical tradition (Öcalan 2013: 53).

Moreover, Öcalan equating family to a male state on a small scale strongly criticized the traditional Kurdish tribal and feudal family structures for constituting a serious impediment for women's liberation (Al-Ali and Tas 2018: 10, Öcalan 2013: 49, 54-55).³⁵ Finally, in Öcalan's eyes women represent the most ancient colony, which has though never constituted a nation (2013: 49, 75).

2.4 Autonomous women's institutions

Overall, a number of bodies was established on one hand by embracing PKK's ideas and on the other as a response to the intra-organizational tensions with respect to the gender issue: in 1993 a women's army with its own command center was founded, Union of Free Women of Kurdistan (Yekîneyen Jinên Azad ên Star) (YJAK), today known as YJA-Star (Knapp et al. 2017: 72-73).³⁶ Later, in 1995, the first conference of Kurdish women took place in a cave in Qandil Mountains, in Iraq. It was in these mountains where women set their base of the Free Women Movement (Union of Free Women of Kurdistan) and created their own, female, ideological, cultural and military institutions (Sauley 2016) supported by PKK; Kurdistan Women's Workers Party

³⁴ This idea, along with those of major sexual rupture and the patriarchal nature of the family and the marriage (Öcalan 2013) appear to have evolved from Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private property and the State* (Heywood 2007: 449).

³⁵ According to the patriarchal typology of Kandiyoti (1998), Kurdish society fits the description of "Classic Patriarchy", typical in South and East Asia, as well as in North Africa and Muslim Middle East. Kurdish society is characterized by a gender-age hierarchy, views marriage as a transaction between families and places a great importance on honor and shame. Male relatives consider as their right and duty to control all aspects of women's lives (Grabolle-Çeliker 2018: 239-240).

³⁶ Star is a reference to Ishtar, the ancient Mesopotamian Goddess (Knapp et al. 2017: 101). Çağlayan (2012:18-19) explains the connection between the first women goddesses in Mesopotamian mythology, symbolized by stars and called "sterk", the goddess Ishtar and the Kurdish word "sterk" (meaning also 'star').

(PJKK) (Partiya Jinen Karkera Kurdistan in Kurdish) was formed in 1999 (Strauss 2016: 10). One year before, Ocalan had established the “Free Woman” model for achieving female empowerment, whilst invited men fighters to “kill the man” inside (Duzel 2018: 5).

However, according to Al-Ali and Tas until 2004 there have been intense and long disputes between women activists and male members within the Kurdish movement regarding the women’s question, i.e. over their equal political representation etc. Sakine Cansiz was concerned from the beginning with the disparities faced by women and their struggles (Al-Ali and Tas 2018: 11, 15). However, in 2004 radical changes took place within the Kurdish movement introducing innovative policies and systems, such as the co-chairing system, the establishment of the 40% quota for women’s representation.³⁷ These policies are currently implemented in Rojava’s democratic confederalist system.

To summarize, the increasing centrality of gender equality in the political framework of Kurdish movement is related to the transformation of the ideology and the political aims of the movement: the national liberation context has been transformed into a radical democracy movement grounded on the principles of the democratic confederalism, whose main pillars are the ecology, the feminism and the multiculturalism. The active participation in decision-making and administration of all parts of society has emboldened and empowered the formerly marginalized societal parts, such as the youth, the women and the ethnic minorities.

Moreover, women’s militancy and participation in armed struggle has contributed in the creation of conditions which permitted women to claim radically equal representation (Al-Ali and Tas 2018: 17). Some Kurdish women argue that female fighters’ recruitment has had a great impact on the rise of women’s participation in legal political movements (Begikhani et al. 2018: 13-14) because as a Kurdish mayor has put it, their engagement in armed struggle “proved that women are capable of doing everything as men” (Sahin-Mencutek in Begikhani et al. 2018: 14).

³⁷ The 40% quota was finally implemented in 2007.

CHAPTER 3

Rojavan women fighters: taking up arms against external and internal enemies

“Your only choice is between two sets of violence.

One that empowers you, one which enslaves you.”

Henry Naylor,

Angel³⁸

3.1 PKK in Syria

In order to discuss and understand Rojavan women’s movement, it is important to take into account the indisputable impact of the PKK’s ideology on the Kurdish movement in Syria. PKK’s and its leader’s, Öcalan, long presence in Syria from 1979 until his forced fleeing in October 1998 (Marcus 2007: 49, 271) influenced and politicized deeply the Kurds of Syria. Additionally, the 2004 Qamishlo unrest triggered their intensive militancy (Schmidinger 2018: 74-78, Tejel 2009: 115, 123)³⁹ and finally during the Syrian uprisings they viewed the Syrian conflict as an opportunity, by fostering a so-called Third way (they did not cooperate neither with the Assad regime, nor with the rebel forces),⁴⁰ to establish an autonomous region aligned with the principles of the democratic confederalism under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

With respect to Kurdish women, the arrival of PKK in Syria in 1980s had a great impact on them; a number of whom, emboldened by Öcalan’s support, became politically active for the first time by joining PKK and undertook several political - often clandestinely- activities (Dirik 2018b: 224, 237). In addition, since one third of

³⁸ Naylor 2017:102.

³⁹ It was following the 2004 Qamishlo riots that first units of YXG were created and later, in 2012, was transformed into YPG (Knapp et al. 2017: 174).

⁴⁰ There is however a criticism and skepticism vis-à-vis Kurdish relation with the regime, mainly after the withdrawal of the latter in 2012 (Schmidinger 2018: 91).

the PKK fighters were women, as aforementioned, Kurdish women experienced their presence and undoubtedly were influenced, whilst arrests of politically active men (similarly to Turkey) resulted in their politicization.

Ideologically, although the PKK was initially struggling for the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, it has later realized that in the midst of a global politico-economic transformation the solution of an independent state does not constitute anymore a panacea to the problems related with statelessness. Instead, PKK suggests the democratic confederalism paradigm— somewhat a stateless democracy (Dirik 2017: 143) - which was inspired by anarchist and libertarian Murray Bookchin's (1921-2006) work and influenced deeply imprisoned Öcalan - and has been finally embodied for the first time by PYD in Rojava (Kaya and Lowe 2017: 284).

3.2 PYD and the project of Democratic confederalism

In the wake of the withdrawal of the regime from Northern Syria,⁴¹ PYD has sought to implement this new political paradigm by establishing the Council of Western Kurdistan and the Movement for Democratic Society (Tevgera Civaka Demokratik, TEV-DEM), the umbrella body of the administrations of Rojava, in July 2012 and by declaring the autonomy of the region in November 2013.⁴² The proclamation of the autonomy of the three cantons, Efrîn, Kobanî and Jazira, took place on January 2014 and in 2016 the Declaration of the autonomous Democratic Federation of Northern Syria was established.

The political project of democratic confederalism - based on Bookchin's communalism - that PYD has been attempting to implement, aims at promoting the peaceful coexistence of various people and the citizens' active participation in decision-making and administration of the region, grounded upon the principles of direct democracy, self-governance, feminism, ecology and multiculturalism.⁴³

⁴¹ The exact backgrounds of the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the region of Rojava remain though unknown until today (Schmidinger 2018: 91).

⁴² July 2012 represents the beginning of the Rojavan Revolution. It should be stressed that the Rojavans do not seek to establish a new state. According to the Article 12 of the Social Contract: "The Autonomous Regions form an integral part of Syria. It is a model for a future decentralized system of federal governance in Syria." (Muslim in Bouquin et al. 2017: 88)

⁴³ According the preamble of the Rojavan Social Contract, the region of Northern Syria is inhabited by Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Arameans, Turkmen, Armenians and Chechens (Dirik et al 2016: 137).

Democratic confederalism is opposed at the capitalist, patriarchal and statist paradigm, rejecting strongly the centralization and the bureaucratization (Öcalan 2011).

The defense of the aforementioned principles is ensured, in legal terms, by the joint drawing up and signing of “Social Contract”, which serves like Constitution of Rojava.⁴⁴ Self-governance is enacted in local communes through neighborhood, village and district councils, committees, cooperatives and academies; each of these bodies has two co-presidents – a man and a woman -, whilst women’s council constitute separate and autonomous structures. It should be stressed that this form of self-organization had been partially taking place under PKK’s initiative even before PYD’s establishment; Kurds activists had thus already acquainted themselves with some forms of democratic autonomy (Dirik 2018b: 225, Knapp et al 2017: 121-132).

Feminism has a prominent role in the democratic confederalism project. This has been fostered by the ideological and political program of PKK which since its beginning has viewed the women’s liberation as pivotal in the national liberation struggle and not as a secondary goal which would be sidelined and accomplished if and when the goal of national liberation has been achieved.

Specifically, according to PKK’s leader, women are considered to be the first colony in the human history and their housewifization the oldest form of slavery; their liberation would thus constitute the indispensable condition for the human one, since no liberation is feasible and meaningful without the women’s liberation. Unlike the Marxist theory which sets as major priority the abolition of the classes, Öcalan considers the abolition of the patriarchy and the male domination (depicted in his concept of “killing the dominant man”), inherent in the nation-state, as central in socialism and crucial for the human liberation (Öcalan 2017: 35, 67-72, 75, 77).⁴⁵ Within this framework, the establishment of the all-female defense militia, YPJ, in Rojava, represent the embodiment of PKK’s core tenet: freedom and social justice can only be achieved through women’s liberation.

⁴⁴ Available at: <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/> (Accessed: 22/12/2018)

⁴⁵ The fact that it is a male leader, Öcalan, who promotes the women’s liberation and has elaborated a complete theory in order to support it, has been criticized by Western feminists (Schmidinger 2018: 213).

3.3 Women's Protection Units, YPJ (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin)

“We don't want the world to know us because of our guns, but because of our ideas. [...] We struggle to change the society's mentality and show the world what women are capable of.”

Sozda, YPJ Commander in Amûde⁴⁶

One year after the Kurdish revolution in Northern Syria, on April 2013, YPJ (Women's Protection Units) was emerged from People's Protection Units (YPG) armed forces in order to be transformed into a separate all-women's army, akin to YJA-Star in Turkey.⁴⁷ Women had been though previously active either by joining YPG's mixed units either by organizing themselves into small groups (Bedir Mulla 2018: 17), despite initial distrust on behalf of the conservative Kurdish society. Notwithstanding, society has gradually accepted women's involvement in armed struggle and recognized their competences and determination.

A great number of women's units and military academies have been established since the creation of YPJ units. Indeed, a military academy for their training was established in each canton, similar to those for men, under the name “Şehîd Şîlan Academy” after PYD leader Şehîd Şîlan Kobanî killed in 2004 in Mosul. Furthermore, Defense Academies and YPJ recruitment centers have also been set up everywhere in Rojava.

Organizational and military structure has been borrowed from PKK's guerrilla army while Kurdish women warriors from Turkey came to support the nascent female units, underlining thus the strengthening of transnational links in the course of time. This transnational transcendence has been all the more evident later when Kurdish women fighters alongside PKK and YPG fighters crossed the border in order to create a safe

⁴⁶ Dirik in Tank 2017: 427.

⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that Kurdish defense units, named as “People's” and not as “Kurdish” forces, echo the communalist model of Rojavan administration, rejecting the national predominance of one part of the population of the region (Cebe 2016). Unlike national armies, people's protection units serve and defend the people and not the state (Knapp et al. 2017: 180).

corridor for Yazidi to escape from ISIS attack in Sinjar (Üstündağ 2016: 205, Grabolle-Çeliker 2018:249).

The women's recruitment excludes minors, mothers and women facing serious health problem.⁴⁸ Women join the YPJ units voluntarily; conscription, which is the case for men between 18 and 30 years old, is socially disapproved for women (Knapp et al. 2017: 181). In general, their training lasts six months and includes not only military instruction, but gives a major emphasis on political and ideological education, central in PKK's program (Akyol 2016). It is noteworthy that the importance of political education accompanying armed struggle has been pivotal in Fanon's thought (White 2007: 877).

While the major goal of YPJ has been evidently the self-defense in midst of the Syrian conflict and the jihadist threat, participation in these units has also marked a rupture with feudal and patriarchal values, still present in Kurdish society, and paved the way for further progress in all realms of women's everyday life with respect to gender equality.

In fact, rupture with the dichotomies of public/male and private/female spheres is evident at the female involvement in armed struggle, as well as with the gendered divisions of power and labour which are destabilized and become more porous and flexible. The subsequent rifts on male monopoly of power, since it belongs to the public-political realm - as opposed to the powerless female private-domestic realm-, challenge seriously the patriarchal mindsets (Sharoni 2001: 85, 94).

The incorporation of formerly oppressed people - as it has been the case of women within a patriarchal context - into the army and their participation in all levels of fight, apart its practical and military value, entails a particular emancipatory symbolism and implies equality (Kocabiçak in Dirik et al. 2016: 63).

Rojavan women who have hitherto been confronted to a double (even multifaceted considering class differences) discrimination, ethnicity and gender based, in Syrian conflict they struggle against not only the "external enemy" (i.e. ISIS) but also the

⁴⁸ In practice the law concerning minors has been though sometimes circumvented. In June 2014, YPG/YPJ signed an international convention banning the recruitment of minors (under the age of 18) into their ranks (Knapp et al. 2017: 193).

“internal” one – the patriarchal Kurdish society -. Effectively, female fighters are breaking with the conservative and sexist norms by seriously challenging the constructed gender-based roles, as well as the dichotomies and symbols thereof, as for instance the use of weapons that has been not only considered as men’s monopoly but has also constituted a masculine symbol, or the traditional dichotomy of victim or peacemaker attributed in women during wartime (Tank 2017: 408).

In this sense, female warriors have so far proved that they are absolutely competent in battlefields displaying courage, endurance and determination, as well as in leading of military campaigns. In the meantime, they have not abandoned, nor sidelined their twofold struggle. Rojda Felat, joint top commander of the military campaign aimed at liberating Al-Raqqa – de-facto capital of ISIS from 2014 until 2016 – has always pointed out the importance of women’s liberation and underlined the women’s role in all military operations (ANHA 2018). Kurdish women, just like in the past Palestinian and Irish women activists, sought to and managed to link their struggle for national liberation with gender equality (Sharoni 2001: 92).

Certainly, the mere use of the guns and the undertaking of several military tasks do not automatically translate to the rupture with patriarchal norms; it is a whole process including education, consciousness raising, self-reflection and politicization which is taking place inside these units and transforms women into active agents eroding and breaking with patriarchal norms. Regarding their instruction, as aforementioned above, it is not limited in military terms; it comprises political and ideological alongside physical and military education (Knapp et al. 2017: 190); the Kurdish word *perwerde*, used within the Kurdish liberation movement, depicts this form of education, beyond the formal one (Dirik 2018b:230).

Moreover, the confidence in themselves, gained in the course of their participation in armed struggle, certainly empowers them and contributes to their visibility. As a woman fighter admits, participation in all-female militias is viewed as an escape from a prison, while their participation has made them realize that they are absolutely equal to men (Knapp et al. 2017: 177-178). Their ascension to the highest positions and ranks of military hierarchy - Rojda Felat, Narin Afrin, Jiyan Afrin to name but a few - (Platt 2014), which are traditionally male-dominated, has strengthened them and has resulted in their larger recognition and acceptance by the conservative society, which

in turn is undergoing a radical transformation (Shahida Adalat, Ruken Ahmed in Schmidinger 2018: 205, 236). As a result, Kurdish society is bearing growing respect for female combatants.

The rupture with the ultimate patriarchal rationale of salvation has also been prominent in women's empowerment and emancipation. Being able to protect themselves, and in many cases in a better way than men, has been of great importance and further symbolism. Self-defense invalidates in practice the need for protection, salvation and finally domination, which are central in patriarchy. Particularly with regard to the sexual violence, frequent during wartime, women fighters are able to better organize and protect themselves. In addition, thanks to female solidarity and compassion, women could better assist women-victims of sexual violence – as in the case of Yazidi women raped by ISIS members and managed to flee - who are often rejected and marginalized within the Kurdish conservative society.⁴⁹ It comes as no surprise that Yazidi women have subsequently formed their own, all-female, defense units, akin to Rojavan ones (McKernan 2016).

Lastly, in order to stress the importance and the impact of the female involvement in armed struggle on women's empowerment, we could mention the case of Kobanî. It is remarkable that the city of Kobanî which became somewhat symbol of Kurdish resistance and was to a large extent responsible for the great Kurdish female visibility globally, had formerly been a particularly conservative and patriarchal society. Yet, the number of female fighters in Kobanî was identical to that of male, while in Efrîn women fighters were 35-40% of total fighters (Knapp et al. 2017: 105, 178).

Briefly, the impact of women's involvement in armed struggle has been crucial on their empowerment and paved the way for establishing parity in the society. Female agency, self-confidence, self-identification, politicization and respect have been gained and fostered through their participation in the armed struggle eroding thus patriarchy. Women combatants' struggle, alongside men, to protect their homeland and themselves has been extended in the joint project of the construction of a new society purged from domination, hierarchy, patriarchy, and citizen apathy. This is

⁴⁹ Within the conservative Kurdish society, rape is considered as a great disgrace and it is widely believed that a woman victim of rape has no right anymore to live (Sauloy 2016). Therefore, women are facing a stalemate: dealing with their (physical and psychological) trauma while being threatened by their environment.

what distinguishes in fact Rojavan women fighters' case from similar movements in history. That is, although women had participated largely in revolutions and liberation armed struggles, their enhanced position was in jeopardy once the primary goal has been achieved. The various attempts through which gender equality has been ensured and reinforced in Kurdish society are pointed out below.

CHAPTER 4

Going down from the mountains to Mala Jin

“Men and women are equal in the eyes of the law”.

Article 28, Charter of the Social Contract⁵⁰

4.1 Guaranteeing the continuity of emancipation

It has been evident that within the YPJ units gender-based equality has been largely accomplished and women have managed hitherto to assert themselves as active, reliable agents. However, historical experience has oftentimes denoted that women experienced backlashes in post-struggle era, because either women’s liberation was considered as part of a larger cause, either the return to the former roles and hierarchies was considered as stabilizing factor, mainly in post-colonial contexts (Dirik 2018a: 148). In other words, women often returned to their prior to the conflict or revolution situation in a post-conflict/liberation era, or even worse in some cases their position was further undermined. Considering that experience, the question and the challenge raised concern the continuity and guarantee of their emancipation within the society, mainly in a post-war period.

As a Cuban feminist wrote in one of her poems in post-revolution period (cited in Abdo 1991: 20): “To you, the revolutionary man and the soul of freedom in this age: Here I am going back home to be reconstructed – again – as a traditional woman”. Nazira Gawryia, co-president of the executive council in Amûde (Jazira canton), appears to agree with that; however she believes that Rojavan case differs: “As soon as the revolutions were over, women returned to the kitchen and men were put in the most important positions again. But in our revolution, women were leaders and this

⁵⁰ “The Charter guarantees the effective realization of equality of women and mandates public institutions to work towards the elimination of gender discrimination.” Available at: <https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/>

presence of women is something that we want to maintain beyond the revolution” (Sauloy 2018).

The preservation of women’s liberation in a post-conflict period depends actually on various factors; the politico-ideological framework of the liberation struggle seems though to be of outmost importance. Regarding the Rojavan women case, although the war has not been yet over, its main difference rests upon the prominence given to feminism, both in theory and praxis. PYD seeks to transform society’s mentality while is attempting to implement and guarantee the current equality - strenuously acquired during women’s fighters struggle in the mountains and the battlefields - within the society.⁵¹ Finally, women struggle to ensure their enhanced position and to preserve their achieved accomplishments via their active presence in politics, participating in political positions on all levels, as Asya Abdullah, Co-chairperson of PYD, puts it (in Schmidinger 2018: 210).

4.2 Institutions and legal framework ensuring women’s liberation

“We did not give these rights to the women.

They fought for them”

Abdul Karim Omar⁵²

In order to foster and ensure women’s agency and liberation, gender equality has been embraced in legal framework, in several institutions in favour of women’s rights as well as in symbolic actions in various areas of everyday politic, providing thus tangible results. Women have become active in all realms of life and participate in all structures, regardless their education status, age and former experience. It should be

⁵¹ The traditional and historical locus of guerilla struggle are the mountains, given their geographical and morphological features. In the Kurdish case, the nexus of the armed struggle have been the mountains, mostly those of Turkey and Iraq; besides the headquarters of the Kurdistan’s Workers Party (PKK) are in Qandil Mountains in Iraq.

⁵² Co-chairman of the Foreign Relations Commission of DFNS (Sauloy 2018).

stressed that in general terms participation in parliamentary and local politics increase their visibility both in symbolic and pragmatic terms.

The decentralization, pivotal in democratic confederalism, has played a major role in what Dirik calls “re-articulation of politics” in Rojava (2018: 228) by enabling the creation of democratic bodies and mechanisms in all levels: communes, neighborhoods, districts and People’s councils, which operate according the principles of gender equality - guaranteed besides by the Rojavan Social Contract – and in which women participate largely. Additionally, the inclusive character of the councils, central in direct democracy and communalism, invalidates in practice (gender) discriminations and fights against exclusions (Knapp et al. 2017: 124-129).

Gender equality, a central principle of the DFNS, is also ensured in legal terms. In 2012, gender-based discrimination, forced marriages, polygamy, child marriage, domestic violence, bride price and honor crimes were banned. Furthermore, parity is present in the Social Contract, elaborated and signed in 2014.⁵³ Specifically, it provides legal defense of women’s rights through its articles, namely articles 23, 27, 28 and 29 which recognize and guarantee the gender equality. Articles 65 and 87 set minimum quota of 40% of women in all mixed institutions of the Judicial Council and all governing bodies, institutions and committees. All institutions of Rojava, from the commune to the city’s council, operate according to the co-chair system: leadership is vested in two persons, one man and one woman (Knapp et al. 2017: 106). In particular, only women have the right to elect the woman co-president, whilst all people elect the male one. It is also noteworthy that women’s councils have right to veto with regard to a decision taken by a popular council (Dirik 2017: 149, 150).

The establishment of institutions for women in every region is pivotal in order to better enable their dissociation of patriarchal power and violence (Knapp et al. 2017: 101). However, women’s organization is not something novel in Rojava; the Yekîtiya Star (Union Star), an autonomous movement umbrella of Rojavan women, was established in 2005. In 2015 it changed its name into Kongreya Jinen Azad (Congress of Free Women), or most commonly Kongra (Congress) Star, in order to be more inclusive in ethnicity terms. All women active in social, political and military terms

⁵³ Inspired by Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (Originally entitled in French: *Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique*) (1762).

are members of Kongra Star, whose structure mirrors that of TEV-DEM (Gupta 2016). Additionally, it has established Academies providing instruction within the jineologi (women's science) framework and assisting illiterate women in order to become educated and empowered (Knapp et al. 2017: 101-103, Dirik 2018b: 229). Hence, women organize their own female structures, ideological and politic ones, while they set up their own radio stations, newspapers etc. in order to address women's issues and reach all women.

One of the most prominent structures is the Women's houses (akin to People's houses/Mala Gel), Mala Jin in Kurdish, which aim at resolving conflicts related with women in local level. Its uniqueness consists in its democratizing nature: it seeks to involve the community in resolving issues tied in with domestic violence, forced marriages and other crimes against women through debate and negotiation, before having to recourse to trials (Üstündağ 2016: 206, Court and Den Hond 2017). It should be highlighted that conflicts resulted from patriarchal violence are judged by women judges (Knapp et al. 2017: 170).

The existence of Mala Jin empower women in practice and provide assistance to those needing to deal with domestic problems. In a recent documentary of Sauloy (2018) we can witness even elderly women participating in these debates and articulating anti-patriarchal discourses against men who had not been formerly acquainted in similar rhetoric. In this sense, a serious attempt to erode and de-construct patriarchal mindsets is taking place, while practice issues are also addressed. Moreover, the participation of elderly women in councils and various structures is highlighted and praised by Sauloy (2018) and Dirik (2018b: 230); that provides an evidence of ongoing shift of mindsets regarding gender issues.

It is noticeable that there is a coordination and collaboration between Women's Houses, Courts and Women Security Forces (Asayîşa Jin). The latter, part of Asayîş mixed forces (Internal Security Forces), was created in 2013 and has been focusing mostly on security situations involving women, since women tend to speak more openly to women about domestic or sexual violence (Bedir Mulla 2018: 37, 41,

Knapp et al. 2017: 103, 216).⁵⁴ The instruction and formation of (mixed) Asayîş in police academies include courses based on gender equality and feminism (Graeber 2017: 142).

Education is grounded on women's science, jineologi/gy, a concept coined by Öcalan in 2008. Its creation and development seeks to fill the gap in social sciences which neglect women's issues and promote a male-dominated narrative. Moreover, it aims at developing and suggesting an alternative methodology in social sciences while it articulates a strong critique towards Western feminism. Academies for women, but also for men in order to (re)educate and teach them feminist principles, provide courses based on the radical feminist framework of jineologi (Neven, Shäfers 2017).

Another remarkable example of both symbolic and practical importance is the creation of the Women's village (Jinwar) in Qamishlo (de-facto capital of both DFNS and Jazira canton), which opened its doors for the first time on 25 November 2018 (International Day against violence against women). Jinwar is an ecological, self-sustaining, free women's village, comprising 30 homes, as well as institutions and workshops, constructed by women and aimed at hosting solely women and mothers with their children (Jinwar - Free Women's Village Rojava 2017, Rûmet 2018).⁵⁵

In the same vein, economic emancipation is crucial and is fostered through cooperatives for women since 2012, in order to empower women to be independent economically. Although their outcome in economic terms has not yet been reliably assessed, their significance in terms of gender politics should surely not be underestimated (Schmidinger 2018: 120-121, 211).

It is highly remarkable that the emancipation project of Rojavan women is deemed as successful by women of ultra-conservative societies, such as that of Al-Raqqa; indeed in Tebqa, district of Al-Raqqa, one year after its liberation from ISIS, Arab women are organized and form their own structures, as it has been the case of the Academy of women of Syria (Sauloy 2018, Tzemach Lemmon 2018).

⁵⁴ According to an instructor of an Asayîş Academy in Rimelan we should distinguish police from Asayîş since the former defends the state's interest, whether the latter society's interests (Knapp et al. 2017: 213).

⁵⁵ Available at: <https://jinwar.org/>.

4.3 Hindrances and limits

Notwithstanding, despite the ongoing progress, there are hindrances and limits which require our attention in order to avoid being trapped into idealization and glorification. It should be thus clarified that men's resistance to change constitutes a serious barrier (Al-Ali and Tas 2018: 18). Indeed, many of the aforementioned measures and institutions are not always welcomed by men. For instance, quota-implementation or co-chair system are not readily accepted by men, who often argue that society is not ready to accept women representing them (Grabolle-Çeliker 2018: 244). The tension and conflicts during debates in Mala Jin emphasize this reality and remind to women that patriarchal mentalities are deeply ingrained and die hard (Nordland 2018). Al-Ali and Tas (2018) argue additionally that despite the progress, abuse of power persists among male political and military leaders.

Discrepancies is a danger which could undermine the feminist project. As a PKK active member stated in 2017: men outwardly appear as progressive; in their houses they continue though having violent or macho behavior (Al-Ali and Tas 2018: 16). Support for women usually comes from women, as men tend to support their male comrades. The persistence of sexist mindsets and conducts constitute certainly a hard reality; however it is evident that mentalities of thousand years cannot disappear at one blow.

Moreover, the ongoing character of the Rojava experiment and the Syria war, within an unstable geopolitical context, render the future quite uncertain in a post-conflict era. The position and the challenges of Rojava put in jeopardy its socio-political project; none of the three states surrounding Rojava desire its autonomy and its radical political program, while there is also serious skepticism on behalf of parts of its population. Additionally, economic problems given the prolonged war alongside Turkey's embargo, undermine further its future. As political representation does not lead automatically to gender equality and justice within a society, the same applies for the participation in armed struggle. Being an equal member within an armed group is not automatically translated into an equal society in gender terms.

As Begikhani, Hamelink and Weiss stress (2018: 10) the image of the female armed fighter could be viewed as a "double-edged sword", because although female fighters

state that their participation in armed struggle constitute per se an example of their emancipation and repudiation of the patriarchal order, at the same time this participation contributes to the further militarization of the Kurdish society, which would have negative outcomes for the female condition.

Açık (2013: 6-13) although she recognizes a certain emancipatory effect of women's participation in the national liberation movement, she considers as intentional their representation as central political agents within this struggle. Moreover, she points out their linking with nation by deconstructing the creation of Kurdish historiography and their relative instrumentalization by focusing on their radical political actions (e.g. suicide bombings). She detects thus limitations in their struggle and emancipation, since the extent of the latter depends on the benefit the national liberation acquires from it (Açık 2013: 24, 25).

Finally, according to Begikhani (2018: 18) particular attention should be given to the authoritarian nature of PYD and the fear of using women to advance their own interests.

However, as Tank (2017: 426) stresses, irrespective of the outcome of the Rojava democratic experiment and the possible inconsistency between theory and praxis, considering that the democratic confederalism vision is tested on the ground for the first time, the engagement of Kurdish people in the whole process brings about serious shifts concerning the traditional understandings and mentalities of gender within Kurdish society.

CHAPTER 5

ROJAVA - SIMILAR MOVEMENTS AND IRAQI KURDISTAN

5.1 National liberation movements and Feminism

Examining similar movements and the post-conflict/liberation women's condition contributes to a better understanding of the impact of women's armed struggle on women's situation in Rojava hitherto – albeit not in a post-conflict period- , while highlights the importance of particular conditions alongside their limits. The findings of previous experiences, compared to the current experience of Rojava, underline the former deficiencies and draw the attention on the necessity of concurrent requirements in order to extend women's empowerment and principles of gender equality from the battlefields to the society. This begins with the involvement and active participation of women in all realms of society and is tied to a further context including education on gender equality, establishment of a legal framework defending women's rights, services providing practical assistance along with constant control over the application of all implemented measures and policies.

As it has been aforementioned, women have largely participated in armed struggle within national liberation movements throughout history, detecting within which socio-political space and opportunities for addressing women's issues, fighting gender discriminations, enhancing their position and asserting their identity. Yet, at the end of the day, once the war or revolution is over, comparable experiences have showed that women often return to their prior, traditional roles and the private sphere of home (Eager 2008), they are remarginalized, or as in the post-independence Algeria their condition has been even exacerbated. "Their fight alongside by men does not guarantee their inclusion as equal citizens" (Wilfred in Alison 2004: 458) and their empowerment has been considered as temporary which does not generate a real societal shift in gender roles (ibid). In this respect, Açıık (2013) stresses that it is true that national liberation struggles rely heavily on the mobilization and support of all

parts of the society, especially of the women; that does not imply though that women will involve automatically and in parallel in a women's liberation movement.

In the Rojavan case, a range of interplaying factors and conditions have affected Kurdish women's politicization and militancy. This interplay is crucial since it is actually that combination of factors which leads to the emergence of the liberation and emancipation imperative within national liberation movements. That suggests an explanation on why although some national liberation movements recruit women or rely on their participation, women's liberation is not set on political debate, nor claimed, as in the case of IRA in North Ireland. Alison (2004: 455-456), who studied and wrote on women as agents of political violence in the cases of ethno-nationalist military organizations IRA and LTTE (Sri Lanka) emphasize the role of an official interest and commitment in feminism within the movements carrying out a liberation struggle, which provide therefore conditions for feminism's development as it was for instance the case of Sri Lankan LTTE.

Al-Ali (2012: 28) goes one step further by underlining the crucial importance of women's representation in transitional bodies and structures as well as their insistence on women's issues, during a post-revolution/war period, in order to ensure that women's rights and gender-based issues will not be sidelined, nor understated. In this sense, Kurdish women's participation in politics, as well as their strong representation in all bodies and institutions in Rojava, appear to guarantee the defense of their rights and achievements in a post-conflict era.

We should however point out that civil wars which in many cases follow wars or revolutions, as in Greece or Algeria after the Second World War and the independence respectively, jeopardize women's situation and their achievements. In particular, in Algeria, according to Turshen (2002) and White (2007) the aftermath was marked rather with regression than progress with respect to Algerian women, who despite their participation and contribution to the liberation struggle, their place was seriously subverted.⁵⁶ Concerning Algerian female combatants, albeit the respect

⁵⁶ Fanon (1965: 59-60) argued that Algerian women's participation has seriously affected the relations between the two sexes by putting them in a new base and woman's self-determination and identity has been re-established. However, the fact that Fanon died one year before Algeria's independence, deprived him from experiencing the next day of the independence with respect to women's place.

accorded by population, they were not considered as suitable wives to be; the similar stance has been met within LTTE movement (Alison 2004: 458). That highlights the strong persistence of societal gender-based stereotypes and mindsets.

Vervenioti (1999) argues that Greek women who have participated in Resistance have retreated to the private sphere in post-war period. This was partly due to the hostile environment which has been shaped in post-civil war towards the combatants of EAM-ELAS given the defeat of the left movement during the Greek civil war. Moreover, considering the conservative norms and value system at the time, the Greek society was proven unprepared, lacking receptiveness and unable to reconsider and finally accept the new dynamics and the new female roles. Female fighters' action was silenced and its importance was undermined.

Additionally, patriarchal mindsets resisted even within liberation movement; as a combatant argues: "After the defeat of the movement, male comrades became masters again. Our yesterday's comrades became men" (ibid). Nevertheless, Vervenioti (2006:14) underlines that overall, the women's participation in the Greek resistance rebellion had a serious impact on the change of the social and male perspective regarding the women's social position.

Regarding Kurdish women's case in Rojava, the risk of a prolonged civil war and its repercussions remain.⁵⁷ The tribal nature of some regions of Rojava could put in danger the ongoing feminist project. However, the considerable work which is currently made in terms of education and women's involvement in politics cement their position and safeguards their advance.

5.2 Comparison with women's movement and situation in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

A comparison with another Kurdish women's movement would be fruitful in order to stress the importance of ideology and the place feminism has wherein, and that stateness does not translate automatically to more rights for women, as Western liberal theories tend to claim. This brief comparison would also seek to deconstruct

⁵⁷ In the beginning Syrian war was a civil one; given thought the international implication of superpowers and regional powers such as US, Russia, Iran, Turkey etc. its nature has changed.

Western approaches and generalizations which regard Kurds as a homogenous group of people who embrace liberal value system and secularism.

DFNS and Kurdistan Region of Iraq (ruled by Kurdistan Regional Government/Hikûmetî Herêmi Kurdistan, KRG) are both considered as de-facto states; however, unlike Kurdistan Region which is fully recognized, DFNS is not recognized (nor by Syrian regime, nor the opposition, nor the other Kurdish parties under the umbrella of Kurdish National Council, KNC, nor internationally). Moreover, as in all regions of Middle East, in both Kurdish societies, in Rojava and in Iraqi Kurdistan, patriarchal structures are deeply entrenched; yet in the case of Rojava the influence of the ideology of the PKK has been crucial in imparting and instilling progressively ideas of gender equality and the importance of women's issue, into some parts of the population.

Certainly, the sociopolitical and economic conditions differ. The wider region of Iraq experienced consecutive wars which contributed to the militarization of its region (Begikhani and Hague 2017: 518) at the expense of gender equality. Additionally, according to Szanto (2016: 309) the enhanced economic situation of Iraqi Kurdistan, evidently wealthier than Rojava, appears also as deterrent for women to claim their rights and address gender issues. Class factor plays besides an important role in the involvement on armed struggle since mostly working-class people are those who undertake the (armed) struggle for freedom; the same applies to women.

As for female fighters, although there is a historical tradition of participation in armed struggle in Iraqi Kurdistan, the conservative political framework, notably that of Kurdistan Democratic Party (Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê, KDP), and the backward social situation deprives Kurdish women of the opportunities to enhance their position and to pursue their further emancipation via armed struggle. It is indicative that while there has been an overflow of photos through media featuring Kurdish women fighting in Rojava, there were only photos of male Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan. Besides, Peshmerga fighters replicate the patriarchal tradition of women's salvation by disparaging additionally Syrian Kurds "for needing women to defend their homeland" (Szanto 2016: 309). Indeed, Peshmerga fighters exclude currently women from fighting on the frontlines (Knapp et al. 2017: 202, Neurink 2014).

The differences between Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan with regard to women's condition are striking and are related to the ideological and political frameworks and narratives of their national liberation movements which have shaped their different paths, alongside to the historical context (Kurdish genocide, militarization of Iraqi region) (Begikhani and Hague 2017: 518). The centrality of nation-state alongside the liberal and capitalist aspirations of KDP have shaped and defined particular gender boundaries, considering women rather as nation symbols than political agents (Begikhani et al. 2018: 12).

Regarding the women's situation, in Iraqi Kurdistan honor-based violence (HBV) and killings are widespread and the rates of female genital mutilation (FGM) are particularly high (Kaya 2017: 8, Neuhof 2016, Morris 2013); ⁵⁸ the latter is considered by organizations of human rights as "one of the main manifestations of gender inequality and discrimination related to historical suppression and subjugation of women" (Yasin et al. 2013). Honor-based murders and atrocities are taking place, while women are forced to commit suicide in cases deemed as damages to the family's honor (Begikhani and Hague 2017: 511-513). Murders of outspoken and successful women between August and September 2018 in Iraq could be viewed within the conservative and hostile to gender equality context of the region (Z. Al-Ali 2018).

The need for a formal legal context and an effective mechanism of control seems necessary in order to reverse the predominance of the customary law which is present in these societies and is linked with the context of honor and the control of women's lives. Services of support for both victims and families are also essential. Furthermore, education based on gender equality plays an important role.

Rojava has made hitherto great progress, in really short time, towards these issues as analyzed in previous chapter. In Iraqi Kurdistan, despite the fact that since 2000 serious steps have been taken in combating legally honor-based and domestic

⁵⁸ Despite the fact that the term of "honor" is particularly complex, shaped according many factors and can have different meanings, honor-based violence is essentially a type of gender-based violence which in fact reinforces gender inequality (Begikhani and Hague 2017: 511, 518, 519). In general terms, the spectrum of the honor-based violence is very wide including inter alia physical violence, assaults, forced marriages – even with a man by whom a woman was raped – abandonment, forced virginity test or hymen repair, imprisonment or murder in case of adultery, forced suicide, confinement and constraints of basic rights (Begikhani and Hague 2017: 509).

violence and female genital mutilation (2011), little progress has been recorded so far, since most of these measures either have not yet been implemented either they are not effectively monitored (Begikhani and Hague 2017: 516, Kaya 2017: 9, 17). With respect to polygamy, only some restrictions have been introduced with regard to this issue by KRG; in Rojava though polygamy is prohibited. Finally, Rojava's progressive decision of appointing women judges for gender-based crimes is totally justified, especially if someone considers that male judges do not usually implement the new laws providing gender equality in Iraqi Kurdistan (Kaya 2017: 9).

Moreover, it appears that differentiated stances towards gender equality policies and empowerment of women's participation exist between the two regions. In Rojava, PYD, which sets parity as political priority, promoted laws, quotas etc. and fostered the establishment of institutions in local level in favour of women's rights. Women's presence in their own liberation movement, defense units and structures since many decades had in fact promoted, paved the way and generated the conditions for these achievements.

In contrast, KDP's liberal, capitalist and nationalist project has set different priorities and views women's situation as means serving them. Kurdish women's involvement in everyday politics remains limited. Lastly, the majority of measures in favour of gender equality have been resulted under the domestic - by activists and civil society- and, namely, international pressure and has functioned as an incentive in order to gain international legitimacy which would be beneficial to its pursued statehood. (Kaya 2017).

CONCLUSION

Kurdish women's engagement in armed struggle is certainly not something novel. With respect to our initial question, one could assert that the Rojava ongoing experiment which has attempted to guarantee parity and female active participation via several institutions, laws etc. constitutes somewhat an evidence of the impact of women's participation in liberation movement and mainly in the armed struggle on the enhancement of their position in society.

Kurdish female fighters embody Fanonian thought of self-liberation through a purifying violent struggle which transforms them into agents and carriers of their own freedom. "Woman does not want to be liberated by others, by men, because she is aware that freedom which has been given is not freedom" (Vervenioti in Strobl: 2011); freedom has to be seized by women because the dialecticity within their struggle empowers and finally liberates them.

Indeed, according to Fanon it is within the process of radicalization and politicization that the agent acquires its self-consciousness, confidence and respect and is transformed into a revolutionary subject. Similarly, Kurdish women mobilized and politicized; through this process they became aware not only of their rights as Kurds but also, and mostly, as women, being confronted with both state's and society's oppression. This procedure is called shrewdly by Kişanak, co-mayor of Diyarbakir, as "enlightenment of women" (Al-Ali and Tas 2018: 13).

With respect to Rojava, Üstündağ argues 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".

Nevertheless, we should be cautious against romanticized and idealized notions of freedom and gender equality given the contradictions and the different interpretations within the Kurdish political movement (Al-Ali and Tas 2018: 20). In this sense, we did not seek to romanticize nor idealize the Rojavan experiment; that was besides evident in chapter 4.

In conclusion, albeit its hindrances and limits, the progress of the Rojava experiment alongside the importance of the suggestion of an alternative sociopolitical paradigm

having as pillar, inter alia, the gender equality, are undeniable. Kurdish women in Northern Syria have managed to assert themselves and to claim their deprived identity, respect and self-determination. They were factually forced to take up arms in order to fight and protect themselves against the visible and invisible enemies: jihadists, whoever has threatened their homeland alongside patriarchal mindsets. The latter appear as particularly resistant. However, Kurdish women seem determined and empowered since their struggle made them realize their potentialities by breaking with traditional dichotomies and gender boundaries. The formation of the self-defense units has invalidated the narrative of the salvation by others, i.e. men. This re-shaping of roles and re-thinking about gender issues has moved into society and has been embodied by institutions and structures.

Lastly, herein, we sought to stress the emancipatory effect of Kurdish women's armed struggle by going back to the history of the Kurdish women's liberation movement in order to highlight its link to the current female struggle and emancipation. The role of the PKK's ideological project at the time and of the democratic confederalism currently has been crucial for the development of women's politicization and militancy. Structures and systems such as Mala Jin, co-presidency, women judges for gender-based cases, Jinwar village etc. are unique and pioneering not only in Middle East region, but also globally.

Last but not least, Kurdish women fighters in Rojava did not emerge suddenly as mainstream Western media claimed. The history of Kurdish women's liberation movement has been long and their path to liberation has been particularly rugged and harsh, marked and traumatized by repression, imprisonments, tortures and murders. Despite all the hindrances, the challenges and the limits, we tend to believe that their struggle will not retreat and will continue to inspire and (should) be supported by feminists worldwide.

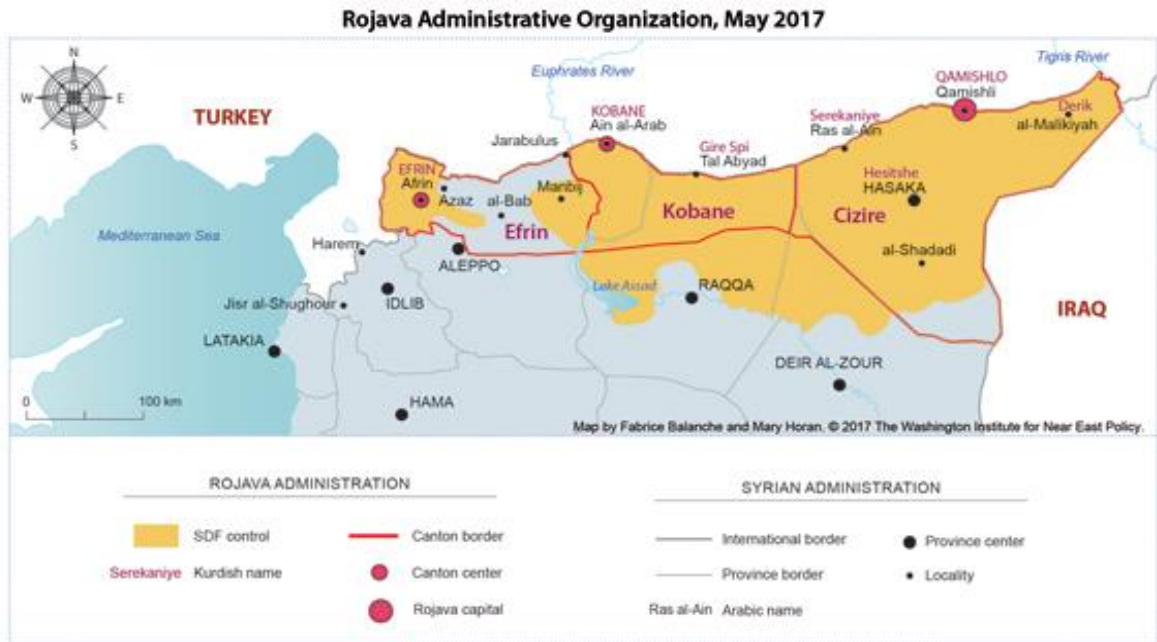
2014 August 2014	Attack of ISIS and massacre of Yazidi people in Iraqi mountain of Sinjar (Şingal) Escape corridor by PKK and YPG/J for Yazidi
October 2015	Establishment of Syrian Democratic Forces (Hêzên Sûriya Demokratîk, SDF)
2014 – 2015 January 2015	Battle of Kobane against ISIS Recapture of Kobane ⁶⁰
17 March 2016, Rimelan	Declaration of the autonomous Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (Federasyona Bakurê Sûriyê, DFNS)/Rojava The Social Contract of Rojava Cantons in Syria
13 August 2016	Liberation of Manbij (city between Efrîn and rest of Rojava, occupied by ISIS since 2013)
August 2016	Turkish evasion in Jarablus
December 2016	Change of the name of “Rojava” region into “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” ⁶¹
17th October 2017	Liberation of Raqqa (former de-facto capital of ISIS) by SDF coalition
January 2018	Turkish military Operation against Efrîn canton

1.1 Table of significant dates and turning points concerning Syrian conflict and Kurds.

⁶⁰ Considered as a turning point in the war (Schmidinger 2018: 110).

⁶¹ For being more inclusive, indicating that non-Kurds are an essential part of the newborn society (Cuvelier in Bouquin et al. 2017: 27).

APPENDIX II



Map of DFNS/Rojava by 2017, The Washington Institute for New East Policy⁶²

⁶² Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-kurdish-path-to-socialism-in-syria> (Accessed on 20/1/2019).

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