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## ECOLOGY, EMPOWERMENT, AND RESISTANCE: WOMEN IN THE ROJAVA REVOLUTION

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into practice in the northeast of Syria<sup>4</sup>, the role of women gains crucial importance, alongside ecology and genuine democracy.

## INTRODUCTION

“The gender revolution simultaneously signifies the liberation of both men and women. It entails a revolution within the revolution, as the system reproduces itself within the individual, male and female, and in the relationship between them.”

(Öcalan; 2013:52).

This statement encapsulates one of the most significant reflections that the Kurdish Liberation Movement<sup>1</sup> reached after a long and profound process of critical analysis spanning over a decade. During this time, the presence of women within the movement increased<sup>2</sup>, gaining more strength over time. As a result, the movement distanced itself from the Marxist-Leninist doctrine that had guided the PKK<sup>3</sup> until then and underwent a transformation of its ideological foundations, giving rise to a new paradigm and model of political and social organization: Democratic Confederalism.

The work of Abdullah Öcalan was pivotal in theorizing the perspective of this paradigm, which emerged from a critical analysis of various theories, ideologies, studies, and reflections. These included Wallerstein's world-system theory and Murray Bookchin's model of libertarian municipalism. This new paradigm aimed to find a new path toward democratizing societies and overcoming capitalist modernity.

In this new paradigm, which has been put

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The research has been conducted through the analysis of the experiences and lived realities of different women in Rojava, with the main objective of this study being to understand the role women have assumed in the Rojava Revolution, specifically in establishing a new democratic and transformative project, and the impact it has had on their identities and emancipation process.

The research follows a qualitative methodology, which allows for a deeper exploration and understanding of the subjective transformations experienced by women, as well as the underlying conceptions and reflections that guide an alternative political and social organization.

Information has been collected through both secondary and primary sources. On one hand, an extensive literature review has been carried out, and on the other hand, in-depth interviews have been conducted. The voices represented in this material come from key informants (female guerrillas, political representatives, and activists), experts on the subject (academics), and representative people of territory (Rojava's population not directly involved in the guerrilla or political organizations).

This research has taken focus on the gender perspective for its development, academically evolved since the second half of the 20th century. For this reason, and due to

1. The Kurdish people constitute the largest nation without a state of their own in the world.
2. During the 1990s, the intensification of the conflict and the increase in repression towards the PKK and the Kurdistan Liberation Movement led to a higher participation of women in the guerrilla.
3. In 1978, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan) was founded in Turkey with the aim of establishing a socialist Kurdish nation-state. Since then, it has played a significant role in the articulation of the Kurdish Liberation Movement in the different occupied areas: Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq.
4. The outbreak of the Arab Spring created a power vacuum in 2013, allowing the establishment of the autonomy of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, better known as Rojava, which means “West” in Kurdish.

the subject of our research, it is centered on the experiences and lived realities of women. Likewise, the theoretical framework guiding our study is primarily based on materials created by women.

## **THE FORMATION OF EMANCIPATORY IDENTITY**

### **WHAT IS THE STARTING POINT?**

Kurdish women have been subjected to double oppression due to both their national identity and their gender identity, which represent two sides of the same coin. On one hand, they have a weak identity associated with the patriarchal system of domination. On the other hand, they have a strong identity associated with the role of women leading the community. This latter identity has contributed to the construction of the emancipatory identity of Kurdish women, which is formed in connection with the reconstruction of their Kurdish identities and promotes the emancipation of all existing diversities in Rojava.

### **HOW DOES THE EMANCIPATORY IDENTITY EMERGE AND GET CONSTRUCTED?**

According to Lerner (1986), appropriate historical conditions must be present for feminist consciousness to arise, and women must also have the space and social experience on which to base their ideas. If we analyze the historical trajectory of women and the Kurdish people as a whole, we can observe how these historical conditions are found in the intensification of conflict and repression towards the Kurdish people.

In this context, the process of recognizing the Kurdish identity stems from the interaction among left-wing Kurdish students, both male and female, who have the opportunity to organize and develop a discourse that serves

the resistance of their identities, often linked to the secrecy of being Kurdish individuals in countries like Turkey. Moreover, the guerrilla movement provided women with the space and experience to develop feminist consciousness and the need to fight not only for national emancipation but also for women's emancipation. As a result, it paved the way for the creation and significant proliferation of their own organizations, both on a political, economic, and social level.

Similarly, Villarme (2002) explains how the formation of a new moral identity starts with a process of awareness, where, firstly, there is a distancing from the learned characterizations – achieved through the creation of their own structures by women. Secondly, there is an aspiration to locate and redefine their identity – accomplished through the recovery of the 'strong face' of their identity. Finally, an identity is built using given conceptual elements, and with the help of imagination, a new framework of interpretation is created. This is concretized in *Jineoloji*, defined as the study, science, or sociology of women's liberation that aims to overcome gender dichotomies that have served to justify relations of domination, with patriarchy as its most complete manifestation.

## **EMPOWERMENT AND EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN IN ROJAVA**

Following Gerda Lerner (1986), we understand 'women's emancipation' as freedom from the oppressions imposed by sex (both biological and social constraints), self-determination (the freedom to make decisions about oneself) and autonomy (having one's own status and independence).

Indeed, 'empowerment' entails, in its definition, the acquisition of greater power, allowing individuals to gain control over their lives, achieve the ability to take action, and

define their own agendas (León, 1997).

Empowerment should encompass both individual and collective change, and as Magdalena León (1997) argues, empowerment as self-confidence and self-esteem must be integrated into a sense of community, cooperation, and solidarity. It is essential to consider the historical process that has created the lack of power; this highlights the need to alter social structures and, therefore, recognize the imperative for change.

## WOMEN AND DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM

With the establishment of Democratic Confederalism in Rojava, we can observe how women have achieved power in political, economic, and social spheres, as well as in the realm of ideological production.

In the political sphere, this has been facilitated by the *hevresok* system or dual leadership at all levels of decision-making, the 50% quota for women in mixed-gender organizations, the existence of autonomous women-only institutions, and the self-management of security and defense through the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) – which has internationally promoted the production of gender perspective analyses in the study of conflicts and theories of war.

In the economic and ecological domain, women's involvement has been coordinated through the *Yekitiya Star*, an umbrella institution that since 2005 has been coordinating women's participation in a range of organizations focused on comprehensive development and self-sufficiency.

## WHAT KIND OF POWER ARE WOMEN DEVELOPING?

J. Rowlands (1995) identifies four types of power: (1) power *over*, (2) power *by*, (3) power *with*, and (4) power *from within*. The first is a zero-sum power, where an increase in power

for one person implies a loss for another. The rest are defined as positive-sum power: the growth of power for one person increases the total available power.

According to the conceptualization proposed by Batliwala (1997), 'power over' is defined by control over material goods (physical, human, or financial - such as land, water, people's bodies, labor, money, and access to these resources), intellectual resources (knowledge, information, and ideas), and ideology (beliefs, values, and attitudes). Women have developed this type of power thanks to the implementation of a real and radical democratic system that allows them to control material goods just like men can decide about them. Moreover, this has been made possible through the creation of an autonomous and parallel women's organization. In this way, they also have the ability to control knowledge, information, and ideas. Additionally, through *Jineoloji*, women acquire their own values and beliefs, generating their own ideology. The most practical example where women have managed to put this type of power into practice is in the *Jinwar* project.

On the other hand, the three types of positive-sum power are also being developed. 'Power by' is used to bring about changes through a person or group leader, motivating and inspiring others in a kind of chain of mutual support. This is achieved through figures like Abdullah Öcalan, Sakine Cansiz, Leyla Zana, etc. Likewise, 'power with' - which refers, following the principle that the whole can be greater than its parts, to achieving shared solutions - is implemented with the principle of consensus as a fundamental basis for decision-making. 'Power from within' - the ability to resist the power of others through the rejection of undesirable demands - is represented in resisting external threats as a community, the legitimacy of communes

to make their own decisions, the capacity for minority participation, women's resistance within their own families, as well as in the guerrilla and political spaces.

### SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES IN BUILDING AN ECOFEMINIST SOCIETY

The ecological situation in the Kurdish territory in northeastern Syria is not favourable to begin with. The land and the environment have been damaged as a result of policies of plunder and extractivism that have been carried out on it. Additionally, the area experiences what is termed a 'low-intensity war,' which involves continuous Turkish state-led boycotts through the burning of crops and the use of water as a weapon.

Some of the advancements that women have led towards establishing an ecologically sustainable economy based on social principles include the socialization of land, the formation of communes, agricultural cooperatives, livestock cooperatives, and women-led production of food and textiles (Warshin, Shieler, Dastar, Adar, and Lorin). Furthermore, there have been efforts to diversify crops, utilize organic waste, and adopt other ecological practices. Projects and campaigns have been developed to overcome obstacles that hinder food self-sufficiency. Examples of these initiatives are 'Feed the Revolution,' #Feedtherevolutions, Make Rojava Green Again, and 'Water for Rojava.' Through these efforts, women stand

out as pioneers in establishing an alternative economy based on the principles of a sustainable ecological model.

Another great success of the Kurdish women's movement is the creation of *Jinwar*, a very concrete project aimed at putting the ideas of liberation into practice and creating a new way of life where women bring their own ideas to fruition. In *Jinwar*, women find a place to empower themselves, as they take control of all aspects that concern their lives, always in relation to the community.

### CONCLUSIONS

The emancipation of women in Rojava progresses hand in hand with the emancipation of the Kurdish people. Despite the persistence of traditional values, a constant pedagogy driven by deeply democratic principles is underway. Their worldview, similar to the concept of 'Buen Vivir' (Good Living), embodies the strength of indigenous peoples who are fighting against neoliberalism and resisting the destruction of their ways of life.

The advancement of women's emancipation in Rojava is not only a significant step towards gender equality but also serves as a powerful force in shaping a society built on genuine democracy and the preservation of cultural identity and values. As women in Rojava continue to actively lead and participate in political, economic, and social spheres, they exemplify the potential for creating a more equitable and sustainable society that embraces diversity and inclusivity.

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