

## KURDISH WOMEN: AGENTS OF CHANGE IN THE FIGHT FOR IDENTITY, LIBERATION, AND EQUALITY

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**Abstract:** This study explores the transformative role of Kurdish women as both political actors and armed combatants in the struggle for gender equality, national identity, and liberation. Following the establishment of a no-fly zone over Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991, some Kurdish women's organizations began to assert political demands for gender equality alongside national autonomy, which opened space for political activism and rights advocacy. The ideological shift introduced by Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the PKK, through concepts such as *jineoloji* and democratic confederalism, redefined women's roles from private to public, militarized, and politically empowered spheres. Organizations like the YPJ (Women's Protection Units) embody this shift, blending military resistance with social revolution. The war against the Islamic State further amplified their global visibility, though Western narratives often overlook the deeply political and anti-patriarchal motivations underpinning their participation. Women's emancipation is central – not incidental – to the Kurdish revolutionary project, challenging both liberal feminist and anti-militarist paradigms. Despite persistent cultural conservatism and systemic violence, Kurdish women continue to reshape norms by linking feminist struggle with national liberation. Their engagement questions dominant models of statehood, identity, and gender, offering a radical alternative rooted in both armed resistance and ideological transformation.

**Keywords:** Kurdish women, *jineoloji*, gender equality, democratic confederalism, PKK, YPJ (Women's Protection Units), patriarchy, national liberation.

**Résumé :** Cette étude explore le rôle transformateur des femmes kurdes en tant qu'acteurs politiques et combattantes armées dans la lutte pour l'égalité des genres, l'identité nationale et la libération. Historiquement marginalisées au sein des cadres patriarcaux et tribaux, les femmes kurdes ont de plus en plus affirmé leur autonomie, notamment après l'établissement d'une zone d'exclusion aérienne au Kurdistan irakien en 1991, qui a ouvert un espace pour l'activisme politique et la défense des droits. Le changement idéologique introduit par Abdullah Öcalan, fondateur du PKK, à travers des concepts tels que le *jineoloji* et le confédéralisme démocratique, a redéfini les rôles des femmes, les faisant passer de sphères privées à des sphères publiques, militarisées et politiquement autonomes. Des organisations comme les YPJ (Unités de Protection des Femmes) incarnent ce changement, alliant résistance militaire et révolution sociale. La guerre contre l'EI a amplifié leur visibilité mondiale, bien que les récits occidentaux négligent souvent les motivations profondément politiques et anti-patriarcales qui sous-tendent leur participation.

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L'émancipation des femmes est au cœur – et non accessoire – du projet révolutionnaire kurde, remettant en question à la fois les paradigmes féministes libéraux et antimilitaristes. Malgré un conservatisme culturel persistant et une violence systémique, les femmes kurdes continuent de redéfinir les normes en liant lutte féministe et libération nationale. Leur engagement interroge les modèles dominants d'État, d'identité et de genre, offrant une alternative radicale ancrée à la fois dans la résistance armée et la transformation idéologique.

**Mots-clés :** Femmes kurdes, jineolojî, égalité des sexes, confédéralisme démocratique, PKK, YPJ (Unités de protection des femmes), patriarcat, libération nationale.

### **Rezumat**

Această lucrare explorează rolul transformator al femeilor kurde ca actori politici și combatante armate în lupta pentru egalitatea de gen, identitatea națională și eliberare. Istoric marginalizate în cadrul structurilor patriarhale și tribale, femeile kurde și-au afirmat din ce în ce mai mult autonomia, în special după stabilirea unei zone de excludere aeriană asupra Kurdistanului irakian în 1991, care a deschis un spațiu pentru activismul politic și advocacy-ul drepturilor acestora. Schimbarea ideologică introdusă de Abdullah Öcalan, fondatorul PKK, prin concepte precum jineolojî și confederalismul democratic, a redefinit rolurile femeilor de la sfere private la sfere publice, militarizate și politice. Organizații precum YPJ (Unitățile de Protecție a Femeilor) întrușchipează această schimbare, îmbinând rezistența militară cu revoluția socială. Războiul împotriva Statului Islamic a amplificat vizibilitatea lor globală, deși narațiunile occidentale trec adesea cu vederea motivațiile profund politice și anti-patriarhale care stau la baza participării lor. Emanciparea femeilor este centrală – și nu incidentală – în proiectul revoluționar kurd, provocând atât paradigmele feministe liberale, cât și cele antimilitariste. În ciuda conservatorismului cultural persistent și a violenței sistemice, femeile kurde continuă să redefiniească normele prin legătura dintre lupta feministă și eliberarea națională. Angajamentul lor pune sub semnul întrebării modelele dominante de stat, identitate și gen, oferind o alternativă radicală bazată atât pe rezistența armată, cât și pe transformarea ideologică. (Română)

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Femei kurde, jineolojî, egalitate de gen, confederalism democratic, PKK, YPJ (Unitățile de protecție ale femeilor), patriarhat, eliberare națională.

## **1. Historical and Socio-Political Context**

While traditionally constrained by patriarchal norms within Kurdish tribal societies, Kurdish women have, particularly from the mid-20th century onward, played increasingly prominent roles in political and military movements. Their participation has ranged from involvement in guerrilla warfare – most notably within organizations like the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – to leadership in civil society and grassroots mobilization, reflecting a complex and evolving dynamic of gender, nationalism, and resistance. Available evidence suggests that prior to 1991, documented Kurdish women's political activities primarily addressed national autonomy, with explicit gender equality demands emerging more prominently in the post-Gulf War period. Moreover, before 1991, Kurdish women like Leyla Qasim, a Kurdish activist, and early PKK members engaged primarily in nationalist movements with little explicit focus on gender. The establishment of a

„no-fly zone” over Iraqi Kurdistan, supported by the international community after the Gulf War, created new space for women’s mobilization.

Furthermore, post-1991, following the Gulf War and the emergence of the Kurdistan Regional Government, women’s organizations such as the Kurdistan Women's Union began foregrounding legal reform and gender rights, thereby enabling Kurdish women to articulate specific demands for political participation and access to education. This shift effectively marked a transition from participation in national liberation of the Kurdish women to articulating autonomous feminist agendas within Kurdish political structures. Kaya (2017) argues that despite progressive legislation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, implementation is hindered by patriarchal judicial structures and lack of political will.

As such, Kaya (2017) discusses the legislative advancements in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, such as the amendment of the Iraqi Personal Status Law, which is a legal framework that governs matters related to family law, and the introduction of the Law against Domestic Violence in 2011, enacted by the Kurdistan Regional Government to address and combat domestic violence within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Kaya (2017) observes that *"male judges, who do not always fully implement the new laws, govern most courts,"* and that *"the judiciary's partiality and the government's lack of interest wear down the spirit of campaigners."* These observations underscore the gap between legislative reforms and their practical enforcement, compounded by entrenched patriarchal norms within the judicial system.

While the emergence of Goran initially energized Kurdish women’s activism by challenging traditional parties and advocating for feminist issues, several scholars argue that the movement's transition into formal politics compromised its reformist potential. Al-Ali and Pratt (2011) highlight that Goran's entry into government structures diluted its impact on advancing women’s rights, leading to tensions between activists inside and outside the political system. Similarly, Saleem and Skelton (2019) note that Goran’s integration into the Kurdistan Regional Government exposed it to co-optation by dominant parties like the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), undermining its ability to challenge existing clientelistic networks. Abdullah Azeez (2018) critiques Goran for failing to deliver on its promises, describing it as a party that shifted from reformist rhetoric to conventional politics, which alienated many supporters, including feminist activists.

Mufid (2016) further emphasizes this decline, documenting how Goran lost its innovative edge as it became entangled with established power structures, weakening its challenge to patriarchal norms and tribal influences. While some women – particularly those close to the KDP and PUK – believe these parties have contributed to improving women’s rights gender equality policies often remain symbolic. Although women have become more visible in the public sphere, this does not necessarily translate into tangible improvements in their living conditions. Activists emphasize that, despite political advances, laws against violence toward women are inadequately enforced, and domestic violence and

honor killings, which continue to be documented by human rights organizations are frequently treated as private family matters rather than civil law issues. This reflects a systemic failure to protect women's rights in Iraqi Kurdistan (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011, p. 346).

Since the 1980s, many Kurds have taken up arms in defense of their people's aspirations for statehood. This nationalist resistance has also offered a platform for women's emancipation, particularly within the Kurdish freedom movement. During the Syrian Civil War and the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS/Daesh), Kurdish women fighters emerged as powerful symbols of both military resistance and gender liberation. The prominence of figures such as Asiya Abdellah, co-president of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and Nassrin Abdalla, commander of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), especially after their 2015 visit to the Élysée Palace, helped project an image of Kurdish female fighters as defenders of progressive values against jihadist extremism (Tank, 2017, pp. 405-408).

However, the broader socio-political conditions that facilitated women's prominent roles in this armed struggle remain underexplored. The Rojava experiment in Northern Syria, rooted in democratic confederalism and influenced by Abdullah Öcalan's feminist ideology, created a unique environment where gender equality was positioned as central to political transformation (Tank & Baser, 2016). As Sayegh (2020) notes, Kurdish women in Rojava were not merely symbolic participants but active agents in redefining power structures, contributing to governance, education, and security.

Periferias (2025) emphasizes that this movement for women's emancipation was deeply interwoven with the broader Kurdish struggle for autonomy and was not simply a product of wartime necessity. Rather, the war provided an opportunity for an already existing ideological commitment to gender equality to manifest in practical, visible ways. Shahvisi and Sayegh (2020) also argue that the Western fascination with Kurdish women fighters often simplifies the depth of their struggle, reducing it to spectacle while ignoring the long-term feminist organizing and the ideological roots underpinning their involvement.

## **2. The Apoist doctrine**

Kurdish political organizations in Syria and Turkey belong mainly to the so-called "Apoist" movement. These organizations adopt the political theories of Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the PKK, who developed concepts of democratic confederalism that the PYD has attempted to implement in Rojava. A fundamental component of his doctrine is the term *jineoloji*. This term which is often described as the "science of women" within the Kurdish women's movement, is a neologism that does not originate from classical Kurdish linguistic roots. Instead, it combines the Kurdish word *jin* (meaning "woman") with the Greek term *logos* (meaning "reason," "word," or "science") – a deliberate synthesis intended to reframe knowledge production from a feminist and decolonial perspective (Käser, 2020). This linguistic construction underscores the ideological ambition behind *jineoloji*:

to create a transformative epistemology rooted in women's experiences, but global in its critique of patriarchal systems.

As articulated by the Jineoloji Committee Europe (2018), the creation of jineoloji was part of Abdullah Öcalan's broader intellectual project to challenge positivist, patriarchal, and Western-centric social sciences. Rather than relying on Western feminist theory alone, jineoloji aims to localize and universalize knowledge by re-anchoring it in Kurdish revolutionary practice while adopting critical tools from broader intellectual traditions, including Greek philosophy (Periferias, 2025).

Shahvisi and Sayegh (2020) emphasize that jineoloji is not just a theoretical innovation but also a lived political strategy in Rojava, where it informs education, governance, and grassroots organizing. In this context, the hybrid etymology of the term mirrors the hybrid nature of its political praxis—combining indigenous, feminist, and revolutionary knowledge systems. Tank and Baser (2016) further note that this intellectual project serves not only to empower Kurdish women but also to resist dominant narratives imposed by colonial or state-centric knowledge structures.

In essence, the term jineoloji has become a conceptual and symbolic foundation of the Kurdish women's movement, representing its broader ideological commitment to women's liberation. Far from being limited to feminist theory as developed in Western academia, jineoloji is deeply embedded in the Kurdish sociopolitical context and aims to construct new epistemologies rooted in women's lived experiences and collective struggle (Käser, 2020). This ideology fundamentally rejects gender hierarchy, arguing that women should not be confined to domestic or reproductive roles but are entitled to equal participation in the political, military, and social spheres (Jineoloji Committee Europe, 2018).

Drawing on the critique of gendered public/private divisions common in feminist sociology, jineoloji opposes the traditional confinement of women to the private sphere – a domain historically associated with unpaid care, household management, and the reproduction of labor (Tank & Baser, 2016). Instead, it advocates for women's full and visible engagement in the public sphere, particularly through direct participation in political decision-making and military defense.

This ideological vision has been operationalized by Apoist political organizations such as the PKK and PYD, which actively train women as political leaders, commanders, and ideological educators. These organizations emphasize the formation of the "free woman" (*jinê azad*) – a liberated political subject no longer subordinate to patriarchal norms (Periferias, 2025). Through institutions like the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and gender co-leadership structures in Rojava, the Kurdish women's movement has embedded feminist principles in political praxis (Shahvisi & Sayegh, 2020). This has allowed women not only to participate in but to reshape the political and military spheres that traditionally excluded them.

### 3. Women in the PKK and PYD

The PKK welcomed women into its armed forces as early as the 1980s. According to Marcus (2007), an international journalist who studied the PKK, noted that by the 1990s, women accounted for around a third of the PKK's strength. In Syria, only two years after the formation of its armed wing, the PYD set up a women's fighting corps, the YPJ, which incorporated several thousand women. The women soldiers of the PKK and PYD are often portrayed as emblematic of a radical reconfiguration of gender roles in Kurdish society. However, their participation is marked by stringent internal codes that reflect both ideological commitments and sociocultural compromises. These women are expected to be highly disciplined militants, deeply devoted to the Kurdish liberation struggle and to the ideological teachings of Abdullah Öcalan. As Marcus (2007) explains, recruits undergo intensive study of Öcalan's theories on gender, nationalism, and personal transformation, which frame their participation not only as military engagement but as a process of political and personal re-education.

In the women's units, camaraderie is strongly cultivated, but romantic or sexual relationships – particularly with men – are explicitly prohibited. These rules serve multiple functions. On one hand, they reflect an austere form of military discipline common to revolutionary movements. On the other, they represent a calculated cultural negotiation with traditional Kurdish society. As Marcus (2007) notes, some researchers interpret these restrictions as a way to ensure that the movement can be entrusted with young women without raising concerns about their "honor." By maintaining a strict code of sexual conduct, the PKK and PYD reassure conservative communities that their daughters are not being morally compromised, even as they break with conventional gender norms through armed struggle and public activism. One such researcher is Vera Eccarius-Kelly, who discusses the dual strategy of the PKK in balancing militant objectives with gender inclusivity. Eccarius-Kelly's work provides insight into how the PKK's gender policies serve both ideological and practical purposes, including ensuring the "honor" of women fighters in the eyes of conservative Kurdish society. Her analysis suggests that the PKK's gender policies are not merely a reflection of military discipline but are also strategically designed to gain societal acceptance and support for women's involvement in the movement.

These measures thus reflect the dual pressures under which Kurdish women militants operate: the internal ideological mandate to reject patriarchal structures, and the external social imperative to maintain collective legitimacy in a deeply honor-based culture (Käser, 2020; Tank & Baser, 2016). What emerges is a unique hybrid of radical feminism and culturally grounded accommodation—one that allows women to participate in revolutionary politics while upholding values recognizable to traditional Kurdish norms.

Although these organizations have developed an ideology favourable to the integration of women fighters, we must not forget the contextual necessities of this choice. For Kurdish organizations in Rojava, for example, it's a question of finding recruits to continue a war that began twelve years ago, claiming many

victims among the combatants. It's also a question of rebalancing the balance of power in the face of more numerous enemies such as the Turkish army, which since 2016 has mobilized more than ten thousand soldiers for each intervention in Syria. For the women fighters themselves, it's a question of not remaining passive in a battle that determines their place in society. This was particularly true during the rise of the Islamic State. By occupying military positions, many women have entered the public sphere in Rojava, leading to a change in mentality regarding the role they can play in society.

#### **4. Emancipation through struggle**

It's worth noting that the ideologically apoist PYD has taken numerous measures in favor of gender equality since the establishment of an autonomous region, such as the co-presidency by a man and a woman of all political decision-making bodies. It is likely, however, that the PYD's egalitarian vision will spread throughout the entire population of Rojava thanks to the commitment of women fighters. Numerous sociological surveys and reports by journalists report a growing acceptance among female soldiers' families of their commitment, even though it runs counter to traditions that confine women to the private sphere of the home. Survivors of conflict zones, particularly within the Yazidi community, have expressed a notable shift in how they perceive women's societal roles – especially after being liberated by the YPJ during the fight against the Islamic State. The YPJ's role in rescuing Yazidi women and children from mass enslavement and genocide has not only had practical humanitarian implications but has also altered cultural attitudes toward gender. Testimonies from Yazidi survivors suggest that female fighters are no longer viewed simply as passive victims or caretakers but as agents of justice and protectors of the community (Periferias, 2025; Käser, 2020).

This transformation in perception is particularly powerful given the deeply patriarchal structure of both Yazidi and broader Kurdish societies, where women's participation in armed struggle was traditionally taboo. The direct involvement of women in acts of resistance, protection, and post-conflict rebuilding has redefined their social identity from that of dependents to active citizens. As Shahvisi and Sayegh (2020) emphasize, these moments of rupture created by conflict – and the ideological leadership of the Kurdish women's movement – enabled survivors to reconceptualize the role of women as central to societal regeneration, justice, and self-determination.

Furthermore, Käser (2020) notes that in interviews and fieldwork, survivors often spoke with admiration and respect about YPJ fighters, referring to them not only as liberators but as moral exemplars. In many cases, the image of the „female liberator” challenged longstanding ideas about honor and gender by associating women with bravery, sacrifice, and leadership. This ideological shift, supported by the *jineoloji* framework, represents one of the more enduring social impacts of the Kurdish women's movement beyond the battlefield. It is still too early to measure the lasting effects of integrating Kurdish women into the public sphere through military involvement. However, the current experience of a mixed

army and, more generally, of a mixed political structure, seems to be rolling back the deep-rooted prejudices of a gendered division of society that excludes women from public life.

According to Tank (2017), a specialist in the region, it was against the backdrop of the Turkish state's repression and widespread imprisonment of Kurdish men that Kurdish women became politicized, first taking on the role of ardent defenders of their communities, and then in recent years becoming involved in the YPJ. At the same time, the ideology underpinning Turkish activism has changed significantly in the years since Öcalan's arrest, evolving from Marxism-Leninism to a radically different political theory based on three fundamental principles: democratic foundations, ecology and women's emancipation. Indeed, the evolution in revolutionary thought that took place following Öcalan's imprisonment not only tolerates but exalts and defends women's political participation. Building on the notion of the social contract, Öcalan's concept of democratic confederalism privileges the community as the primary political entity, reducing state centralism in favor of direct or "bottom-up" governance (Tank, 2017, pp. 407-408). But fundamentally, Öcalan's many writings also expound the theory that capitalist and state oppression emerges with the establishment of patriarchy and the ensuing enslavement of women (Tank, 2017, p. 410).

In a chapter entitled "The revolution is feminine", Öcalan begins by saying that "no social group has been as physically and psychologically exploited as women" (Öcalan, 2010, p.1). Tracing the history of patriarchy over the past 5.000 years, from ancient Mesopotamia to today's capitalist system, Öcalan proposes a historical narrative linking patriarchy to state formation over 5.000 years, drawing on archaeological interpretations that remain contested among scholars, and promotes the abolition of gender hierarchy as one of the fundamental pillars of Kurdish liberation politics (Öcalan and Happel, 2011, p. 20).

From the perspective of the Kurdish women's movement, feminism is not merely a struggle for gender equality within existing systems but a foundational critique of civilization itself. As Al-Ali and Käser (2020) argue, it represents "the uprising of the oldest colony" – a radical notion that views the historical subjugation of women as the original form of oppression, preceding and enabling the emergence of hierarchical structures such as the state, class society, and capitalism. Within this ideological framework, patriarchy is not one oppression among many, but the root from which all others emerge.

This analysis draws directly from Abdullah Öcalan's ideological writings, where he places the subordination of women at the center of his critique of power and domination. He argues that without dismantling patriarchy, it is impossible to achieve liberation from capitalism or authoritarianism, since these systems are built upon and perpetuate gendered inequality (Jineoloji Committee Europe, 2018). Feminism, then, becomes a revolutionary act – not only for women but for society as a whole.

This idea is elaborated through the theory of jineolojî, which reframes women's history and knowledge as the suppressed foundation of human



civilization. Käser (2020) emphasizes that jineoloji is not an accessory to class struggle or nationalism but a guiding political philosophy that challenges the entire architecture of modern oppression, from militarism to market logic. It is through this lens that feminism is elevated to a total liberation project – a rebellion not only against male domination but against the institutional and economic systems that evolved through it.

Crucially, this means that freedom for the Kurdish people is inextricably linked to the emancipation of women (Tank, 2017, p. 415). For Öcalan, patriarchy, the state and capitalist domination go hand in hand, meaning that there is no way out of today's world other than women's emancipation, both as a source and a method of freedom (Öcalan and Happel, 2011, p. 27). Clearly inspired by socialist feminism and the ideas of Engels, Öcalan's subsequent theoretical works put the question of women's emancipation at the heart of his revolutionary vision for a new Kurdish society (Engels and Untermann, 1902, pp. 150-154). As researcher and progressist Dilar Dirik explains, women's emancipation is conceived as a fundamental political objective rather than a by-product of the more general liberalization movement towards Kurdish political autonomy (Dirik, 2018, pp. 147-148). And as the first region in which Öcalan's ideas can be applied, Rojava has become a unique and still ongoing experiment in self-governance, in which a focus on gender equality offers a radical alternative to the religious conservatism that dominates elsewhere in the region (Dirik, 2018, pp. 147-148). Since 2012, the women of Rojava have been involved in every stage of decision-making and community-building, from drafting the constitution to establishing women's unions and academies to promote gender awareness, to establishing sustainable agriculture, to increasing the ranks of the army. Women also have a right of veto over decisions affecting them, and there are quotas stipulating that at least forty percent of political decision-makers in key administrative bodies must be women (Nilsson, 2018, pp. 265-267).

It seems that this presentation is somewhat exaggerated, however. Kurdish society is predominantly Muslim and socially conservative, despite Öcalan's secular ideas and insistence on gender equality. Female Kurdish fighters have spoken out clearly about the judgments and social ostracism suffered by women who join the army (Nilsson, 2018, pp. 269-270). Despite his popularity among left-wing intellectuals and progressive scientists, Öcalan's ideas represent only one aspect of the spectrum of Kurdish political opinion. Understanding the motivations of Kurdish women fighters requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond simplistic narratives often found in journalistic accounts. Central to this understanding is the influence of Abdullah Öcalan's pro-feminist ideology, which has fundamentally reshaped the political consciousness of many women within Kurdish armed movements. Öcalan's thought emphasizes the liberation of women as a prerequisite for broader societal transformation, positioning gender emancipation as both a personal and collective struggle embedded in the fight against all forms of domination (Käser, 2020; Jineoloji Committee Europe, 2018). This ideological framework coexists alongside two other explanations frequently

cited in academic and media discourses. First, many Kurdish women fighters are motivated by a direct response to the extreme misogyny and brutality perpetrated by the Islamic State (IS). The IS's imposition of conservative, patriarchal values and its systemic violence against women galvanized many Kurdish women to take up arms, defending not only their communities but the very possibility of women's freedom (Gunes, 2017; Marcus, 2007). This defensive motivation situates female combatants as protectors of both territory and gender rights.

Second, some scholars and journalists argue that Kurdish women fighters view the conflict against IS as an opportunity to assert their agency and demonstrate their equal capabilities within traditionally patriarchal societies. Armed struggle becomes a vehicle for social recognition and political empowerment, enabling women to challenge entrenched gender hierarchies through active participation in military and political spheres (Öcalan, 2011; Müller, 2019). This perspective highlights the strategic and symbolic dimensions of women's involvement in the conflict, framing it as both a practical and ideological breakthrough.

Together, these explanations reveal the complex interplay between ideology, reactive mobilization, and aspirations for gender equality that drive Kurdish women fighters. They embody a unique synthesis of feminist theory, cultural resistance, and pragmatic empowerment that has garnered global attention and scholarly interest alike (Shahvisi & Sayegh, 2020; Tank & Baser, 2016).

### **5. Kurdish Women's Responses to Islamic State: Religious and Secular Motivations**

The contrast between the bravery of women, uncovered by headscarves and carrying guns, and the extremism of their opponents is a common theme in reports on Kurdish women fighters. Scholars have noted how the femininity of Kurdish women is often emphasized or even fetishized in relation to male representations of war (Tank, 2017, pp. 420-421). And while the generally secular orientation of the Kurdish political project makes it possible to dissociate "good" and "bad" Muslims in the Middle East, the underlying radical left-wing positions of Kurdish revolutionary thought seem to be neglected (Tank, 2017, p. 423). Kurdish women fighters' resistance against the Islamic State (IS) is deeply intertwined with a nuanced negotiation of religious identity that challenges extremist narratives while reclaiming faith as a source of empowerment rather than oppression. Nilsson (2018) captures this complexity, quoting Kurdish women combatants who reject IS's brutal use of religion: "It's not a problem to fight and defeat the Islamic State. The Islamic State uses the name of religion to destroy Islam. Islam has nothing to do with beheadings and the enslavement of women. You must treat your prisoners well. They are terrorists and will go to hell" (Nilsson, 2018, p. 273). This statement not only repudiates the violent distortions of Islam propagated by IS but also reclaims the faith as compatible with principles of justice and humanity.

Nilsson (2018) further explains that Kurdish women's participation in armed struggle reveals how religious sentiment can transcend its traditional

association with patriarchal social roles. Instead of preserving restrictive gender norms, religion becomes a catalyst for women's active involvement in conflict and political resistance. This redefinition disrupts common assumptions that religious adherence inherently enforces women's subordination, demonstrating how faith and feminism can co-exist within the Kurdish women's movement.

In this context, the defense of religion, the nation, and women's rights become inextricably linked initiatives. Kurdish female fighters embody this intersection by positioning their struggle not only as a battle for territorial liberation but also as a fight for the moral and social regeneration of their communities. Their resistance underscores the rejection of IS's ideological monopoly and affirms an alternative vision of Islam that embraces gender equality and social justice (Krämer, 2018; Can & Yildiz, 2020). This intersection of religious identity and military resistance aligns with broader Middle Eastern feminist scholarship, which emphasizes the diverse ways in which women navigate faith, culture, and politics (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Kurdish women fighters exemplify a political praxis where religious devotion reinforces rather than hinders their revolutionary roles, challenging simplistic binaries of secular feminism versus religious tradition (Özyürek, 2015).

At the same time, Kurdish culture's emphasis on "long history" and folklore highlights mythological narratives of utopian past worlds, and alternative forms of knowledge production, in a way that sets it apart from the secular Western paradigm. (Al-Ali and Käser, 2020, pp. 20-21). In their exploration of *Jineoloji* – a "science developed in the service of women" according to Öcalan – Al-Ali & Käser explain how stories related to Mesopotamian, Sumerian and Babylonian times are passed down through generations and celebrated as important cultural reference points shaping the histories and identities of the Kurdish people. Mythology is frequently evoked to support Öcalan's idea that there was once a time free of hierarchical gender relations, and to support contemporary aspirations for a matriarchal society in which women exercise freedom and power as they did before the advent of the capitalist state (Al-Ali and Käser, 2020, pp. 23-24). Indeed, *Jineoloji's* teaching is designed to reveal "lost truths" and challenge the Enlightenment's privileging of ontological rationality and scientific thought, re-establishing the importance of alternative, women-centered epistemological sources such as emotional intelligence and the idea of women's instinctive connection to the natural world (Al-Ali and Käser, 2020, p. 27). Without openly asserting the existence of supernatural worlds, Öcalan's teachings nonetheless have quasi-religious resonances. Fulfilling the role of a spiritual leader or deity, Öcalan's theory of patriarchy and the state has a vast and universal scope, claiming to explain thousands of years of human history leading up to the present, and offering a way to recover that lost utopian era through education (the *Jineoloji*), introspection (where both men and women unlearn internalized power structures), resistance (to domination), and sacrifice ("killing the male"), on the only path to achieving an ultimate, transformative goal. According to Öcalan, "killing the dominant male is the fundamental principle of socialism. That's what killing power

means: killing one-sided domination, inequality and intolerance. It also kills fascism, dictatorship and despotism" (Dirik, 2018, p. 150).

## **6. Fighting religious extremism with liberalism?**

Another source of motivation often attributed to Kurdish women fighters lies in the struggle for equal rights and recognition vis-à-vis men. According to Nilsson, Kurdish women see their participation in the war as a chance both to reclaim their religion and to strengthen their *agency* as Muslim women (Nilsson, 2018, p. 275). From this point of view, the war provides a rare window of opportunity to increase this agency, change the perception of their abilities and reinforce respect for their contributions to what remains a traditional and highly patriarchal society, regardless of ideological aspirations to the contrary. Nilsson shows that Peshmerga women often cite gender equality as their main motivating factor, and that they don't reject but compensate for their role as "good Muslim wives and mothers" by proving that "even Muslim women can be fearless warriors" (Nilsson, 2018, p. 275). For Dirik, "women's struggle against the Islamic State is not only military, but also philosophical, existential. They are resisting not only the Islamic State and its feminicide policy, but also the patriarchy and rape culture that prevail within their own community" (Dirik, 2018, p. 151).

As Dirik and Tank point out, resistance to patriarchy in the Kurdish context does not fit neatly into the liberal feminist "robust like men" framework that prevails in Western discourse. It's common to think that women's participation in European wars had a modernizing effect on these societies, improving women's agency and expanding their rights, including the right to vote (Tank, 2017, p. 420; Dirik, 2018, p. 151). But applying this copy-and-paste version of history to the Kurdish context risks overlooking and depoliticizing the radical political ideology underpinning the Kurdish independence movement, in addition to the tangible political advances in gender equality already underway in territories such as Rojava (Tank, 2017, p. 420; Dirik, 2018, p. 151). Participation in combat does give rise to a questioning of gender norms within conservative Kurdistan, but many female combatants have also explicitly expressed the idea that the Kurdish vision of a new society requires them to take responsibility for their own defense (Tank, 2017, p. 421).

The liberal feminist framework of analysis is therefore inappropriate, as it tends to perceive the motivation to fight in terms of individual ambition rather than political mobilization, thus paradoxically denying the agency it aims to recognize. At the same time, Kurdish women's participation in combat breaks with more radical forms of anti-militarist feminism, in that it recognizes the need to deploy "coercive power" when necessary. In the Kurdish context, political autonomy is the essential guarantee of women's protection, but political autonomy itself requires military defense. The key element then lies in the fact that women's emancipation is an integral part of Kurdish revolutionary thought and practice, and not a side-effect of the social changes caused by the conflict (Dirik, 2018, p. 151; Dirik, 2020). Nilsson (2018) says that "the violence perpetrated against women

by the Islamic State has encouraged more Kurdish women to join the front, thus challenging their role as victims within the war, and expanding their identity from mere caregivers to protectors" (Nilsson, 2018, p. 272). But following Öcalan's ideas and the lessons of the *Jineolojî*, there is, at the outset, nothing inferior about typically feminine practices such as caring. Indeed, Öcalan's political project aims to restore "simple women carers" to their rightful place, and to a high level, within the social hierarchy. Once again, there is a risk here of excessively romanticizing the ideological motivations at play. There is a significant gap between the teachings of Jineolojî and the everyday lives of women in Kurdistan, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish analysis from propaganda in existing work on the subject. Nevertheless, Öcalan's political theory and the example of Kurdish female fighters do indeed compel us to rethink the motivations of war beyond the defense of the nation-state.

As Tank (2017) eloquently puts it: *"The idea of building a society in which gender equality is a founding pillar strengthens the determination of Kurdish women in their fight against Daesh, by giving them a role in constructing an egalitarian future in which they fully participate politically. This perspective is profoundly different from one that views their involvement solely through the lens of gender victimization or mere resistance"* (Tank, 2017, p. 410).

## **7. Conclusion**

Although Kurdish female fighters first came into the international spotlight in 2014, during the siege of Kobani and the fight against the Islamic State, women have been active in Kurdish political life – including in activist campaigns for independence – for decades. The imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, articulated the idea that oppressive structures such as the state and capitalism are rooted in patriarchy, meaning that the freedom of Kurdistan is inseparable from the freedom of women. Defeating patriarchy is thus seen as an essential step in creating a new society, and it is within this ideological context that the renowned female fighters of the greater Kurdish region have emerged.

Rather than framing Kurdish women's liberation solely through familiar paradigms of gender equality, this vision is embedded in a broader political project that challenges the centrality of the nation-state as the ultimate expression of freedom, even as it incorporates militarized struggle. It would be reductive to interpret the participation of Kurdish women fighters only as a reaction to the religious extremism of the Islamic State, or as a pursuit of gender agency in ways that neatly align with Western feminist trajectories. Instead, their motivations are multifaceted and overlapping – shaped by the long history of Kurdish political resistance, daily confrontations with gender-based oppression, and the socio-political volatility of the region. For this reason, it is not sufficient to say that Kurdish women fighters were motivated merely in response to the religious extremism of the Islamic State, or by the opportunity to challenge gender norms and assert greater agency in the same way as Western feminist movements. The

motivations driving Kurdish women to participate in war are complex and constantly overlapping, rooted in the history of the Kurdish independence movement as well as in daily struggles against the devaluation of women and the abuses justified by religion, all within a highly unstable regional context.

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