
The Kurdish Women in Turkey: Agency in the Face of Oppression

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Abstract:

Various scholarly contributions touched upon the role of women in resisting oppression and voicing their demands loudly. There is an overemphasis in the literature, however, on the peaceful responses by women, even in conflict contexts, which portrays an incomplete picture of women realities and prevent us – as researchers- from investigating the motives which make women resort to peaceful over non-peaceful means of resistance and agency. In this paper, we provide some insight on the resilient and resisting roles they played in responding to society and state oppression in Turkey. In this article, we seek to investigate how the different forms of oppression inflected upon Kurdish women has shaped their responses. The article finds that, the oppression which Kurdish women suffered due to their gender, but more, their ethnic identity motivated them to become active fighters in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) against the Turkish state and Turkish institutions as well as leaders in the PKK, thus reflecting their agency rather than submission or victimhood.

Introduction

Various scholarly contributions touched upon the role of women in resisting oppression and voicing their demands loudly. There is an overemphasis in the literature, however, on the peaceful responses by women, even in conflict contexts, which portrays an incomplete picture of women realities and prevent us – as researchers- from investigating the motives which make women resort to peaceful over non-peaceful means of resistance and agency. In this paper, we provide some insight on the resilient and resisting roles they played in responding to society and state oppression in Turkey. In this article, we seek to investigate how the different forms of oppression inflicted upon Kurdish women – as a result of their ethnic identity more than their gender- has shaped their responses. The article finds that this oppression motivated the Kurdish women to become active fighters in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and leaders, thus reflecting their agency rather than submission or victimhood. After reviewing the literature on women in conflict contexts, we explore in three sections the oppression inflicted upon Kurdish women and their armed/violent resistance and leadership roles.

Women in Conflict and Violent Contexts

In the 2000s, the literature on women in conflict and violent contexts highlighted that the gendered causes, costs, and repercussions of violence and conflict are often undermined in scholarly debates (Moser and Clark 2001). Since then, the increasing interest among scholars along with the changing nature of conflicts, where battlefields were brought to villages and civilian women and children, led to mounting attention to women in conflicts and violent situations, among wide range of victimized and vulnerable groups (Plümper and Neumayer 2006; Ward 2007; Thompson 2006). Rehn and Sirleaf (2002), El- Jack (2003), Plümper and Neumayer (2006), Kaufman and Williams (2010) and Kudakwashe and Richard (2015), for example, underscore women's exposure to economic problems during conflicts in addition to their poor accessibility to primary services and basic needs in coun-

tries like Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, East Timor, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Bosnia, and Palestine. Furthermore, they point to their exposure to sexual violence and mass rape during conflict times in countries like Chechnya, Bosnia, Kosovo, Burma, Democratic Republic of Congo, Darfur and Somalia. In many cases, women are intentionally targeted and victimized in a way that is meant to tear down the communities' 'fabric', spread terror in the hearts of both civilians and combatant groups and re-constitute the image of the opposing group as weak, humiliated, inferior, emasculated and feminine.

Scholars, such as Sharoni (2001) and Cockburn (2001), took a step forward to discover the roles of women in resisting oppression and responding to such gendered continuum of conflict and violence in post-conflict contexts. Cockburn (2000, 2002 & 2013) elucidates the dynamics of women civil society organizations and how civil society organizations are organized to respond to the needs of fellow women, including ensuring women economic security, combating violence against women and offering legal advice for women, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In her book *From where we stand: War, women's activism and feminist analysis*, Cockburn (2007) investigates more than sixty women organizations addressing war while emphasizing the reasons they are more inclined to organize separately from men. In *Antimilitarism: political and gender dynamics of peace movements*, Cockburn (2012) continues to explain the peaceful resistant roles of some women 'anti-war', 'anti-militarism' and 'peace' movements in Japan, South Korea, Spain and Britain and the elements and values they share. Despite offering a different discourse to the 'victimization', this assortment of literature does not fully capture other non-peaceful roles, which women play in conflict and post-conflict contexts.

As the major body of literature denoting the gendered causes, costs, and peaceful responses of women to armed conflict relatively grew, the scholarly work on women non-peaceful roles in conflicts and post-conflict contexts

have not grown equally. In a sense, this contributed to emphasizing the stereotyping of women as motherly and peaceful creatures. George-Williams (2005) and Hudson (2006) encourage, therefore, a more context-specific depiction of women roles that allows for roles beyond the assumed peaceful roles of women. Their ideas build on the Hilhorst and Frerks (1999) constructivist argument that gender differences are context-specific and not inherently peaceful as Fukuyama (1998) suggested. Hence, women's roles have to be analyzed within each context taking into consideration the changing socio-cultural, economic and political parameters. In Sierra Leone, for example, women were engaged in the planning and actual fighting activities (Mazurana and Carlson 2004). In Sudan, Rwanda and Eritrea, women played violent and revenge-related roles (Powely 2003; Bouta, Frerks & Bannon 2004). Women were actors in uprisings, liberation movements and even combatants in countries, such as El-Salvador and Sri Lanka (Moser and Clark 2001; Bouta, Frerks & Bannon 2004; Jansen 2006). It is important not to impose presumptions about any women's needs, priorities, behaviors or roles because these change from one context to another depending on the socio-cultural, political, security conditions and, hence, challenging any stereotypes in mind. In armed conflicts and post-conflict contexts, one has to look beyond the traditional lens that confines women within their stereotyped roles for women can be agents and major players through both peaceful and non-peaceful resistance against oppression. The following sections discuss the oppression inflicted upon Kurdish women in Turkey and their agency or armed/violent resistance and leadership roles in the PKK.

The Oppression inflicted upon Kurdish Women

According to Shahrzad Mojab (2000) "the Kurdish case can be distinguished from others by the brutality of national oppression. The Kurds have been subjected to genocide, ethnic cleansing, linguicide, and ethnocide, i.e., the deliberate killing of their language and culture." Soon after the creation of the new Turkish Republic in 1923, Mustafa Kemal's government has fol-

lowed repressive physical and symbolic “assimilation policies” towards the “Kurdish minority” in order to assimilate Kurds into the dominant nation (Mojab, 2000; Donmez 2007; Al-Ali and Tas 2017). Ethnic diversity was observed as a threat to the integrity of the country and the “Turkishness”. Thus, they were declared to be Turks, and their culture was to be Turkish. The Turkish state has banned the terms “Kurd” and “Kurdistan” and the term Kurd was detached from language and formal documents (Ibid). For instance, “mountain Turks,” was used to replace Turks and the Southeast was used instead of the Kurdish region. Moreover, the Kurdish language was forbidden and not to be spoken in public. In the 1990s, the activist and Kurdish member of Parliament Leyla Zana was sentenced ten years in prison when she spoke Kurdish while taking the parliamentary oath (Al-Ali and Tas 2017). Although the prohibition of the “Kurdish language” was not applied until 1983 constitution, speaking Kurdish was banned in the “southeastern provinces” since 1925 (Mojab, 2000; Donmez 2007; Al-Ali and Tas 2017). Consequently, the Kurdish farmers, for example, who sold their merchandises in urban marketplaces were fined for every “Kurdish word” they spoke. Also, there were constraints on Kurdish celebration of traditional holidays, dress and prohibitions on the use of the Kurdish language in media (Donmez 2007). This led to severe impact not only on the Kurdish women, through dismantling their cultural identity, but also on the all Kurdish people.

In addition to language, the Turkish state used the educational system and other institutions to ensure the Kurdish assimilation and make them ashamed of their linguistic and historical identity leading to the repression of the Kurdish people in general and Kurdish women in particular (Mojab, 2000). According to Westrheim (2008), through educational associations, the Kurdish society is being dispossessed of its “native language and, thus, is subordinated”. Despite the attempts of the state to teach Turkish in rural areas where ethnic Kurds dominate, the state minister for south eastern Turkey, Salih Yildirim, stated that half of the women living in the region do not

speak Turkish (Gökalp 2010). Being unable to speak the dominant language in a country leads one to be deprived of many resources and to miss the available opportunities provided. Kurdish women who cannot speak Turkish are deprived from several chances, including education, employment in official sectors or access to the public sphere. In that sense, language can be perceived as a type of social capital, or as Westrheim (2008) calls it “linguistic capital”, which Kurdish women tended to miss. In that sense, the Kemalist modernization project has resulted in marginalizing Kurdish women which motivated them, later, to become active fighters in Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK). According to Yüksel (2006), “on the one hand, their ethnic identity was dismantled; on the other, their Turkish counterparts became potential beneficiaries of these reforms oriented to the improvement of the civil and political status of women in Turkey” which resulted in the huge gap between the two groups.

Kurdish Women Non-Peaceful Resistance

In response to being denied their identity, in terms of Kurdish education and language, the Kurds’ nationalism expanded (Çaha 2011; Al-Ali and Tas 2017). The Kurds protested against the government in 1925, 1930, and 1937. However, each time, they were violently intimidated with the Turkish military burning the Kurdish houses and using artillery attacks on their villages. Thus, Kurdish activists were forced towards more underground activism from 1938 to the 1960s due to the state’s overwhelming suppression till the rise of the PKK in late 1970s (Çaha 2011). In the late 1970s, the PKK took up the Kurdish issue to the forefront by calling for establishing a separate “Marxist-Leninist Kurdish” state in southeastern Turkey where the vast majority of Turkey’s Kurdish people is concentrated (Tezcür 2010). According to Eyryce (2013), “From the beginning, the PKK described Kurdistan as an area under colonial rule, where tribal leaders and a comprador bourgeoisie colluded to help the state exploit the lower classes”. Thus, the PKK employed an anti-capitalist, anti-feudal, Marxist-Leninist national liberation discourse

to mobilize the poor rural Kurdish populations, peasants, youths and intellectuals. According to Dienel and Sharan (2010), the PKK started a violent insurgent war against the government in 1984, which was escalated further when its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was trapped in Nairobi in early 1999.

To the Kurds, armed struggle was the necessary for the establishment of Kurdish identity, which was based on a “traumatic collective identity” in relation to their enemy. According to Bloom (2012), “the common assumption that women are inherently nonviolent remains fixed in people’s minds. Even when women are implicated in violence, there is a tendency to assume that they are merely the pawns of men”. However, in the Kurdish case, Al-Ali and Tas (2017) found in their interviews an agreement that “the systematic and continuous repression of and state violence against Kurds contributed to the growth of the PKK and its popularity amongst disenfranchised Kurds, particularly young men and women”. According to Yüksel (2006), young women, frequently from the “urban areas”, took up weapons and involved in “political and military operations” conducted by the PKK in order to defend their identity. In the interview with Zeynep, a soldier in PKK, she explained her motivation to join the PKK was nationalism “I care very much about the interests of the Kurdish nation and for this I fight. I mean I fight not only for Kurdish women but also for Kurdish people. As a Kurdish woman, I perceive as my duty the fight against the ones who deny its existence” (Wood and Thomas 2017).

Since the establishment of PKK, women were recruited into it with a “Marxist-Leninist rhetoric” that was combined with ethnic nationalism and feminist and, as articulated in Öcalan speech, “freedom of a nation depends on the freedom of its woman” (Düzgün 2016). He determined that women’s enslavement is the main inconsistency that prevents social freedom and supported women’s emancipation and gender equality as the only way to reach a democratic change. Gonzalez-Perez (2008) argued that the “traditional feudal values” which are dominant in the Kurdish society reinforced

the male-dominant values which made woman powerless. Thus, Kurdish males occupied more superior positions within the family and society where women are responsible of doing all of the domestic work and bringing up children, even when they succeed in “gaining employment outside of the domestic” domain. Therefore, women’s enrollment in the PKK can be seen as a way to avoid family subjugation and gain more ‘gender equality’. In their interviews, Al-Ali and Tas (2017) found that young women perceived the PKK as a means to personal emancipation and more egalitarian gender relations than the traditional Kurdish relations as much as a political movement. According to Watterville (2002), Farr (2002), Barth (2002), and Bouta, Frerks and Bannon (2004), traditional relations between women and men tend to change in conflict times and military towards more equal gender relations compared to outside the military or pre-conflict. As one of the female fighters of the PKK put it, “I am now a free woman, brave and able to defend myself and my people. I fight for the enslaved woman, help their liberation from oppression” (Smits and Gündüz-Hogör 2010). According to Kurdish feminists, these women do not only struggle for the women rights, but they also struggle for their identity (Yüksel 2006). It is necessary to see the common ground between Kurdish women’s fight for their feminine and national identities. For Kurdish women, the “oppressed nation” and the “oppressed gender” are both correlated and are viewed as equal to each other. It could be stated that the junction of these two types of oppression constitutes the Kurdish feminist identity. In other words, the Kurdish feminist identity has been constructed upon the meeting point of these dual oppressions (Yüksel 2006).

Additional factors led to the radicalization of women roles in PKK. In some provinces (especially in Diyarbakır) the displacement process was reinforced in the last decades due to the struggle between the PKK and Turkish forces. Morgenstern (2009) claimed that from the 1980s to the 1990s, Turkish forces occupied big areas of conventionally Kurdish inhabited lands,

utilizing extensive methods to defeat any insurgence movement, including killings, mass arrests, torture, and rape of many women. An estimated 35,000 Kurdish people were killed by Turkish forces at that time (Morgenstern 2009). This number has grown between 1984 and 2016, to 50,000 deaths and 100,000 missing (Al-Ali and Tas 2017). Also, Turkish forces destroyed and evacuated 2664 villages in southeastern Turkey which led to several internal social and economic problems (Morgenstern 2009). In analyzing the impact of such practices on women, Al-Ali and Tas (2017) found in their interviews that young Kurdish women -and men- became “fearless as a result of their experiences during the 1990s, a period of prolonged acute conflict, widespread violence and large-scale displacement”. In addition, it becomes clear that since many Kurdish women lost their breadwinners, because they are either recruited in PKK, detained or killed by the Turkish forces, their roles in families have transformed being the key source to guarantee a suitable living to their family. Moreover, most of them have played a main role in agriculture production for “household economy”. Therefore, losing their lands due to their displacement, doomed that women lose their position as “providers for the household which increasing the burdens placed upon them” (Bloom 2005). This radical experience has contributed to the radicalization of the Kurdish women and increased their foreclosure thinking that only through violence they can protect themselves and bring their rights. It also led to the increasing acceptance of the PKK in their area among women and local people. For example, based on the video conducted by Mukan (2014), Salan, a soldier in the PKK, she stated that, “I went to the mountains to get the required education and training to fight against our enemy”. Moreover, Zelal, fighter in PKK, stated that “in the southeast region, the resistance has never stopped because of the massacres and displacement and the pain that was caused to our people, thus, we grow up for the resistance to protect our identity and to bring peace to our people” (Çaha 2011). The video portrayed the life of Kurdish women under the conflict and the oppressive context that they lived in. It also showed that how the discourse of “us versus them” has

increased among women which gave them a strong motivation to join the PKK.

Since the establishment of the PKK, it purposefully recruited Kurdish women (Cragin and Daly 2009). In an interview conducted with the expert, Mohamed Gomaa, he explained that “the PKK highly depends on women in suicide bombing missions due to that fact that women are less suspicious and they are less visible to inspection by security than men”. According to Bloom (2005), “on 30 June 1996, the first women suicide bomber associated with the PKK in Turkey killed six soldiers and wounded an additional thirty through a suicide bombing belt strapped to her stomach and built in such a way to suggest that she was pregnant”. As a result, eleven of the fifteen suicide bombings of the PKK between 1996 and 1999 were conducted by women (Sutton 2009). In 2004, the PKK had around 5,000 fighters with 1,100 women functioning as suicide bombers. If this shows anything, it shows the high degree the PKK relied on women as “suicide bombers” (Bloom 2005). Most importantly, the high prevalence of women within the PKK militaries contests the traditional image of militant acts as profoundly male dominated while women, when present, are merely victims.

Kurdish Women in Leadership

In the initial days of struggle, Kurdish women in the PKK functioned mainly in cleaning the camps, cooking and transmitting communication. However, with the intensification of the Kurdish insurgency in the 1980s, the roles of Kurdish women in the PKK quickly moved into more strategic roles (Gonzalez-Perez 2008). For instance, in the late 1990s, two of the PKK supporters in the Kurdish Diaspora ‘Hanan Ahmed Osman’ and ‘Zehra Saygili’ fundraised and facilitated the smuggle of money to the PKK as part of the ‘Kurdish Cultural Association in Montreal’ (Gonzalez-Perez 2008).

Kurdish women participated heavily in the leadership and decision making position in the Kurdistan Worker’s Party. According to Gökalp (2010),

the PKK has a rule that asserted the presence of women by 40 percent in the leadership council. They also played the role of Strategic visionaries. Strategic visionaries are individuals or senior leaders within the terrorist group who put strategies, publish pamphlets, and other documents that outline its worldview and direction (Cragin and Daly 2009). According to Cragin and Daly (2009), Kesire Yildirim was a founding member of the PKK and wife of its leader. She became a believer in both the Kurdish nationalist movement and Marxist–Leninist ideology. Hence, as the primary and only female member of the PKK’s dominant committee in 1978, Kesire Yildirim is recognized by most for inserting feminist ideals into the PKK’s strategic direction. Under her leadership, the PKK became a group that struggled to offer better chances for Kurdish rural females in Turkey (Cragin and Daly 2009). The Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan suggested that “women’s organizations create separate branches to promote rights and equality within the wider movement and society. These separate branches should not be just created within society but also within political parties and guerrilla movements” (Gonzalez-Perez 2008). However, as Al-Ali and Tas (2017) explains, despite that gender-based equality has been promoted in the writings of Öcalan, but this has only been a product of a long political struggle of the Kurdish women’s movement who has continuously challenged male political leadership. According to Yüksel (2006), in 1999 for the first time three Kurdish women were chosen as local mayors. This number increased in 2004 by 14 women mayors. After 2007, women became more powerful and visible. The 2007 elections resulted in 8 out of 26 Kurdish members of the Parliament being females. This signifies a change happening to the patriarchal culture and arguably ‘gender equality’.

Conclusion

Delimiting the experience of Middle Eastern women to stereotyped roles of women depicts an incomplete and inaccurate picture of the roles women play in reality and de-contextualizes their experience. The oppression inflicted upon Kurdish women does not only victimize them, but also spurs

their resistance and agency. In that sense, victimization and resistance seem to resemble two sides of the same coin. Allowing them to complete rather than compete enables us to piece together a layered and textured portrait of women's realities. Considering both discourses reveals the consequences of oppression or hardships women endure and the true scope of their responses. According to Sedghi (1994), there are multitudes of Third World women responses, which are specific to time and place and demonstrate continuous struggle against the domination and oppression exercised upon them not only by gender, but also by class, race and state. Through becoming active fighters and holding leadership positions in the PKK, the Kurdish women rose to resist the oppression -and the occasionally violent and repressive policies- of the Turkish state.

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