

**"WOMEN, LIFE, FREEDOM":  
THE STRUGGLE OF KURDISH WOMEN TO PROMOTE  
HUMAN RIGHTS**

By  
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## ABSTRACT

The Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), one of the most important secular socio-political movements of the Middle East, has addressed gender issues since its foundation in the late 1970s. However, the question of women's freedom acquired a central position after the 2000s, when the PKK underwent a deep ideological and structural transformation. A foundational tenet is "democratic confederalism", based on a democratic, ecological and gender-emancipatory system. For Abdullah Ocalan, the main leader of the PKK, democracy and freedom can only be achieved through the emancipation of women. Kurdish women have appropriated Ocalan's ideas and to a considerable extent, succeeded in promoting the empowerment of women and advancement of gender equality in the Kurdish societies directly influenced by the PKK: the diaspora and territories in Turkey and Syria. Although they still face a continuous and dual struggle against gender and ethnic oppression, Kurdish women have reached a high political status. As "*guerrilleras*", members of parliament, and human rights activists, they have disseminated the principles of gender equality throughout Kurdish society. In addition to adopting gender parity in all social, political and military Kurdish organizations, women established autonomous bodies within those organizations, which function through a strong transnational network from the battlefields in Kurdistan to the diaspora. Within this network, female activists in Europe play a central political role. They are the ones who are directly committed to gaining international political leverage, and with this aim the use of human rights conventions as a platform for dialogue constitutes an essential step forward. Furthermore, they play a major role in formulating Kurdish claims in universal terms backed up by human rights instruments.

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## DECLARATION

The work I have submitted is my own effort. I certify that all the material in the Dissertation, which is not my own work, has been identified and acknowledged. No materials are included for which a degree has been previously conferred upon me.



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## INTRODUCTION

In September 2014, the world finally began to recognize "Kurdish heroism". In the city of Kobane, in northern Syria, the brave Kurdish resistance against fierce attacks by the Islamic state (IS) began to be widely covered by mainstream media. Suddenly, Western democracies were introduced to "America's newest allies" (Watson and Tuysuz, 2014) against the fundamentalist Islamic terror: Syria's Kurdish minority. In addition to physically restraining IS's expansion, these fearless and determined combatants were cheered by the media as the heroic protectors of Western enlightened principles, freedom fighters against barbaric terrorists, defenders of secularism and democratic values against fanatical theocracy and totalitarianism - in sum, the very best of humanity" against "the very worst" (Wight, 2014). Moreover, western media headlines have ever since been obsessed with the participation of Kurdish female soldiers<sup>1</sup> in the struggle against IS, portrayed as the "angels of Kobane" and "the Islamic State's worse nightmare". The images of brave women standing alongside men, unveiled, challenging the most recent and perverse form of radical jihadism, could not but gain the greatest esteem in the eyes of the West.

However, neither the roots of the "Kurdish problem", nor the motivations and ideologies of those "Amazons of Mesopotamia" are explored properly by mainstream media. While the world remains silent on Western responsibility for Middle East conflicts, the media profits from sensationalist statements. The struggle for which thousands of Kurdish women and men give their lives dates far back and is extremely complex. It did not begin as a response to IS, nor is the fanatical organization the only opposing force to the Kurds. The appalling atrocity of IS has been bravely fought by Kurdish forces, with only occasional insufficient support from Western powers. However, even more difficult is the task of changing complex political and societal structures that encourage the birth of fundamentalist organizations

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to highlight that mainstream media confuses the *Peshmerga* women, who are the combatants of the regular army of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in Iraq, and the *Yapajas* (YPJ), the female units of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the main Kurdish party in Syria. The ones who fight in north Syria are the Yapajas.

and prevent Kurds from implementing the democratic principles they defend with such fierceness.

Kurdish women fight a continuous and dual struggle: against gender oppression within a traditional patriarchal society, and ethnic oppression as members of an oppressed people within a state. Women largely join the PKK to escape oppressive living conditions, but as social and political agents they consciously opt to join a liberation movement that is engaged in a deep social transformation through women's liberation.

Kurdish women are not the first female combatants, nor the only ones to be fighting at this very moment. Nonetheless, the contemporary Kurdish political movement, which comprises a guerrilla<sup>2</sup> army, is grounded on a particular ideology based on gender equality. The participation of Kurdish women is not restricted to front line combatants in a desperate war for survival. They are political agents across the various levels of the Kurdish movement. Furthermore, they created their own independent movement within this movement, as well as their own army, party and philosophy (Sellar, 2014). Thus, what makes it worth dying for Kobane is the concrete possibility to establish a revolutionary social project built on the ideology developed by Abdullah Ocalan (Dirik, 2014). Ocalan is the main leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) - an armed organization listed as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union.

This dissertation aims to ascertain the impact of Kurdish women activists on gender equality within the PKK, its affiliated organizations, and Kurdish society at large. In this sense, it contributes to the wider literature on the Kurdish contemporary political movement and examines the Kurdish women's movement through a human rights perspective. It also contributes to an anthropological perspective of the political mobilization of Kurds under the PKK, as it highlights the perceptions of the subjects involved and

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<sup>2</sup> The word "guerrilla" will be used to make reference to armed militants who represent local peoples struggling against colonialist and repressive regimes. Their aim is not only to overcome the state's forces, but also to establish a revolutionary project that dramatically changes the *status quo* (Gross, 2015, p.3-4). More detailed discussions on the organization, aims and tactics of the Kurdish guerrilla, as well as the larger structures that surpass the military wing, are explored in chapter one.

considers how they make sense of the PKK as a political project that responds to Kurdish yearning for liberation.

Various works address the development of a new ideological framework and the organizational reconstruction of the PKK (and its affiliated organizations) after Ocalan's imprisonment in 1999 (Casier and Jongerden, 2012; Akkaya, 2011; Akkaya and Jongerden, 2012; Grojean, 2014). The diaspora studies emphasize the positive steps made by the Kurdish movement to develop a human rights platform and establish a political dialogue (Baser, 2013a, 2013b; Khayati, 2008; Ostergaard-Nielsen, 2005). Although the development of a new political discourse on women's issues and the mobilization of women are mentioned, the first studies do not place the empowerment of women and their recently assumed roles as central elements in the process of transforming the PKK. Nor do the diaspora studies outline the role developed by women as political agents who contribute to the internationalization of the Kurdish issue and promotion of human rights within the Kurdish movement and in society at large.

Some studies focus on Kurdish feminism within the Turkish context (Çaha, 2011; Diner and Toktas, 2010), but they do not consider the influence of the women's movement within the PKK on the establishment of Kurdish feminism. Çaglayan (2012), whose article is part of a series organized by Casier and Jongerden (2012), is one of the few exceptions to focus on both the transformation of the Kurdish movement's ideological discourse from a gender perspective and how it served to engage women in the political struggle. She directly discusses some of Ocalan's ideas and the possible contradictions of the PKK's discursive transformation. To date, discussions on Ocalan's ideological framework on women's liberation, and how this framework is being realized by the Kurdish women's movement, have been taken up only by Kurdish women activists and academics (Dirik, 2014, 2015; Guneser, 2014).

Methodologically, the present work is essentially based on "cyber ethnography" and the analyses of primary and secondary sources. "Cyber ethnography" here can be understood as the observation of political activism through the Web, where the virtual space is used as an online fieldwork, through which it is possible to "follow" the actions of organizations, publishing

of ideas, and interactions between different actors. Primary sources consist of the online material produced by Kurdish activists and organizations (social and media) that make reference to their political projects and organized actions, as well as conference speeches, interviews, videos, institutional websites and Facebook pages. Also included are direct observations made by non-Kurdish activists. Moreover, Ocalan's writings are embraced in this category, as his ideas are analysed within the context of Kurdish ideological and political discourse<sup>3</sup>. Secondary sources consist of a selection of literature and online newspaper articles, including updated information on recent political developments.

The analyses presented in this dissertation are a result of five years of observation of the Kurdish question, during which I developed a particular interest in Kurdish women's activism. Since 2010, I have worked on the production of documentary films on various issues concerning the Kurds, which granted me the opportunity to visit the Kurdish regions in Turkey and Iraq (including the Kandil mountains where the PKK is based) on different occasions, for several days each time. During these stays I was able to observe the full engagement of women in political life and signals of the transformation of gender power relations within family groups. In Europe, I am in consistent contact with Kurdish activists from Turkey and Syria, as well as with Kurdish organizations, which allows me a continuous exchange of information. Being based in Strasbourg, France, I am able to follow demonstrations and actions addressed to the Council of Europe. Thus, I indirectly use information collected through varied "fieldworks" and interviews over a span of years.

The first chapter briefly reviews Kurdish history, highlighting important historical events that contributed to the emergence of the "Kurdish question", the circumstances that fomented the formation of the PKK, and the consolidation of the PKK as the most important contemporary Kurdish movement. The chapter also examines the conditions that motivated the

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<sup>3</sup> As I do not read Turkish, I was restricted to English compilations of Ocalan's writings, and to articles published on the PKK webpage. Despite the limitation, those materials provide a comprehensive understanding of Ocalan's ideas.

Kurdish dispersion after the 1980s, especially towards Europe, giving birth to an important transnational movement.

The second chapter explores Ocalan's main ideas on women's liberation and how they dialogue with human rights principles, particularly those of women's empowerment and gender equality. Addressing the ideological basis of this "gender-emancipatory system" is essential for understanding the transformation of the overall Kurdish movement. Likewise, it is fundamental for making sense of the Kurdish women's movement and understanding the basis on which an international political network was established.

The third chapter is divided in two sections. The first addresses the establishment of the Kurdish women's movement, from its emergence as a result of an "exile experience" (Van Bruneissen, 2000) that succeeded in combining women's experiences in Kurdistan and the diaspora<sup>4</sup>, to its rise to a solid transnational network. It also explores how Kurdish women have appropriated Ocalan's ideas and realized the principles of women's empowerment and gender equality. The second section addresses the women's movement in Europe and its role in promoting human rights in Kurdistan and the diaspora. Chapter three also includes a focus on the main activities in 2014 and 2015 of two women's organizations: the International Representation of the Kurdish Women's Movement, based in Paris, and the Women's Meeting UTAMARA, based in Germany. Those organizations were chosen on the basis of their well-recognized work and the range of activity in which they engage. While the International Representation is responsible for lobbying and diplomatic relations aiming at disseminating the women's liberation ideology, the UTAMARA centre acts on the community-base level, working to empower women from a bottom-up perspective.

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<sup>4</sup> The term "diaspora" references the Kurdish communities dispersed from their homelands, which maintain a collective memory and distinctive identity vis-à-vis the host countries, and are socially and politically committed to the homeland (Brubaker, 2005).

## **1. THE EMERGENCE OF THE KURDISH PROBLEM: AN INTERNATIONAL ISSUE**

The Kurds are an ethno-linguistic group inhabiting the regions of Upper Mesopotamia, the Zagros Mountains and South-eastern Anatolia, which are divided among the modern states of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. In the "cradle of civilization", various empires have struggled over millennia to expand and preserve their borders. In the early modern age, both the Ottoman and the Safavid Empires constantly used the Kurds for territorial occupation and defence, which led to the forced displacement and deportation of a large portion of the Kurdish population (Madih, 2007, pp. 12-14). Those imperial politics gave rise to successive Kurdish rebellions during the Ottoman Empire and long after its dissolution. Over time, sporadic rebellions gave birth to Kurdish nationalistic movements, and much later to new political projects, such as Ocalan developed. In a history marked by violence, repression and massacres, the word "resistance" became synonymous with Kurd.

But not only local powers sought to preserve their interests over the region. The area historically occupied by Kurds, and claimed as Kurdistan by 40 million people - the largest ethnic group in the world without its own state - is richly endowed with natural resources, including oil, gas and water. In the beginning of the 20th century, the geopolitical importance of oil-rich regions increased as oil began replacing coal as the most coveted natural resource. The role played by colonialist powers in the development of Kurdistan is of great significance. The current map of the Middle East was to a large extent redrawn according to Western interests, dramatically changing the lives of the diverse ethnic groups in the region. The unresolved "Kurdish question" concerns the global powers as much as it does Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran; it is an international problem (Uzun, 2014, p.9).

With the outbreak of World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the British and French were allowed to arbitrarily divide the Middle East. The regions of present-day Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine were placed under British mandate, with Syria and Lebanon under French mandate. With that, the Kurdish question - following the discussions about Mesopotamia (Iraq), Syria,

Palestine and Armenia - became a subject of debate among the great powers (Cigerli, 1999, p. 103).

In August 1920, the Allied Powers and Turkey signed the Treaty of Sèvres, which recognized a Kurdish region within the limits of Anatolia. Within six months, a commission composed of members appointed by the British, French and Italian governments would draft a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas (Article 62). It even established the right of the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 to claim independence (Article 64) (Treaty of Peace with Turkey, 1920). However, the proposed peace treaty was never ratified.

The Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923), led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk with the support of the Kurdish Notables<sup>1</sup>, succeeded in abolishing the Ottoman Sultanate and aborting the Treaty of Sèvres. In 1923 the warring parties signed the Treaty of Lausanne, which recognized the new Republic of Turkey in place of the former Ottoman Empire. However, the establishment of the modern Turkish frontiers did not take into account the political aims of non-Turkish nationalities, such as Armenians, Kurds and Greeks, who, like the Turks, had historically occupied the Anatolian region (Akçam, 2004).

From then on, the Kurdish regions were divided among four neighbouring states: Turkey (controlling the majority of the Kurdish territory), Iraq (under British mandate until 1932), Syria (under French mandate until 1946), and Iran<sup>2</sup>. In each of these countries, the Kurds would struggle against violent and oppressive policies, agitating for the right to speak their language and even the right to life.

Like other newly emerged states after the First World War, politically vulnerable and keen to preserve its recently acquired independence and territorial integrity, the Republic of Turkey heavily guarded the principles of

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<sup>1</sup> The notables were leaders "who exercised authority over local populations and possessed some sort of political power in their relationship to the state" (Ozoglu, 2001, p.384).

<sup>2</sup> Part of the Kurdish region was already under Persian control since the 16th century, when an agreement between the Ottoman and the Safavid Empires divided the Kurdish region in two great zones of influence.

unification and centralization. Any mobilisation of the Kurdish people<sup>3</sup> was considered a threat to state unity and repressed by the Turkish state. Furthermore, throughout the years various programs of "assimilation" of alternative identities were implemented, aiming at a complete "Turkification" of the state (Yildiz and Breau, 2010).

As early as the first year of the Republic, the government prohibited all schools, associations and publications that made use of the Kurdish language. At the same time, a Decree-Law prohibited the use of the words "Kurds" and "Kurdish" in all national publications as well as in daily usage (Akin, 2004). The Turkish Penal Code (TPC) was enacted in 1926, just after the suppression of the first Kurdish rebellion against the Republic of Turkey. Articles 141 and 142 of the TPC prohibited organizations and propaganda "seeking to destroy or weaken nationalist feelings", leading to an arbitrary suppression of the freedom of expression, and enforcing a means of harassment or persecution (Hensler and Muller, 2005, pp.20-21), as the courts interpreted it to include non-violent expressions of Kurdish identity (such as literature and music). The suppression of these rights was central to the growth of the "Kurdish problem" (Avebury, 1996) and remains so today.

### **PKK: The search for social change**

After a few years of preparatory mobilisation, a group of young men and women based in Ankara formally founded the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in November 1978. Headed by Abdullah Ocalan, the group of students, also including Turkish comrades, followed a Marxist-Leninist ideology and aimed at an independent Kurdistan.

The formative years of the PKK as an organization coincided with the martial law established after Turkey's third military coup in September 1980. Under martial law, the repression of the Kurdish population increased dramatically, evidenced in the number imprisoned and the extent of

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<sup>3</sup> The Kurds form the largest minority group of Turkey. According to Yildiz and Breau (2010), in 2010 it represented approximately 23% (15 to 20 million people) of the total Turkish population (69 million).

systematic torture. As described by Kutschera (1994, p.13), prisoners were brought to court in metal cages loaded on trucks and could hardly walk or stand. Several prisoners held hunger strikes for more than a month in year to protest the harsh prison conditions; some committed suicide by self-immolation. An authoritarian new constitution - which is still in force - was instituted in 1982, replacing the second Constitution from 1961. It severely limited individual rights, restricted press freedom, and reduced the influence of trade unions. The regime focused on breaking the Kurdish resistance, and took extreme measures to achieve its goals. All expressions of Kurdish identity were classified as terrorist activities (Eccarius-Kelly, 2002, p.91).

Within this context of political instability and authoritarianism, legal ways of organizing a national movement seemed to be exhausted, opening the path to armed resistance. Just prior to the 1980 coup Ocalan left through Syria to a Palestinian refugee camp in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, where he succeed in establishing a military training camp. The news of torture and persecution, as well as preparations of guerrilla warfare under Ocalan, encouraged mass support for the PKK. Many people joined the guerrilla, as it was considered a legitimate defence force against Turkish repression (Uzun, 2014).

After a few years of military, ideological and political training<sup>4</sup>, the PKK launched its military offensive against Turkey in 1984, attacking gendarme forts in the cities of Semdinli and Eruh. The assaults also marked the creation of its military branch, which developed into a professional guerrilla army. The Turkish regime responded in force, and more than ever the Kurdish problem was treated as a security issue rather than a matter of human rights. The following years were marked by violent clashes between PKK fighters and the Turkish army.

The military coup not only prompted an armed resistance, but also the establishment of a powerful transnational network favourable to the PKK. Due to intense repression and mass arrests, hundreds of thousands of

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<sup>4</sup> Ocalan stayed in Syria until 1998, when under international pressure he was expelled. The almost two decades of ideological and political training in Syrian territory accounts for the prominence of the PKK's ideology in Rojava. Finally, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) was founded in 2003 following the same principles of the PKK.

Turkish citizens entered Germany, France, the Netherlands and Belgium to escape persecution (Eccarius-Kelly, 2002, p.91). At the same time, high-level PKK militants were purposely sent to Europe in order to organize people in the diaspora. As early as 1985, the Kurdistan National Liberation Front (ERNK) was established with the aim of carrying out political development and mass mobilization. Peasantry, youth, women, tradesmen, workers, people abroad, elders, religious groups, each section of society should be organized. A network of community and cultural centres in Europe, backed by political, civil and cultural rights, made it possible to legally implement ERNK ideals. Simultaneously, those activities reinforced mass support for the PKK and allowed fundraising that financed and expanded the *guerrilla* activities in Kurdistan (Gunes, 2012).

Popular mobilization is one of the pillars of the PKK and one of the reasons for its success. As a *guerrilla* movement, the PKK includes both a military cadre of trained fighters and a political wing responsible for providing a multitude of supporting services. A *guerrilla* war cannot be effectively waged without the support of a vast political organization that far outweighs the size of the army. It is through this political network that the *guerrilla organization* raises money, buys arms, secures allies, and provides basic services to insurgents, such as health and education. *Guerrilla* tactics, therefore, comprise various facets operating on different levels, from military operations to economic warfare and public diplomacy. At the local level, insurgents are consistently trying to spread their ideology and recruit support. Nationally, they are engaged in gaining independence and overcoming a deep-rooted regime. Internationally, they cultivate support among the world community, which recently acquired a special prominence (Gross, 2015, p.4).

As Turkey invested in military repression and the suppression of political, civil and cultural rights, the PKK increased its popular support. From 1990 onwards, popular expressions of Kurdish identity took place across Turkish Kurdistan and throughout the diaspora, with the PKK as a vocal social movement. Despite the violent repression of the Turkish state for several years, mass celebrations of the *Newroz*, a New Year festival, continue to be held annually. In Europe, 50,000 to 100,000 people from various countries attend annual Kurdistan peace festivals and rallies (Gunes,

2012). The PKK succeeded to situate the Newroz as a Kurdish symbol of resistance and an affirmation of a unified Kurdish identity, constructing a counter-hegemonic apparatus against the hegemonic culture (Delal, 2005).

It is important to highlight that the Kurds have been continuously exposed to an "exile experience" and learned how to benefit from it. According to Van Bruneissen (2000), the awareness of Kurdistan as a homeland, and of the Kurds as a distinct people, has often been strongest among those Kurds who lived elsewhere, were exposed to modern ideas and had the opportunity to study in other languages. It was this exile experience that brought together educated Kurds from different national contexts and helped them to imagine a unified Kurdistan as a common homeland. It was precisely the exile experience that made it possible to transform Kurdistan from a vaguely defined geographical entity into a political ideal.

The emergence and consolidation of the PKK is based on this exile experience. It was far from the rural and provincial Kurdistan that a group of Kurdish university students, influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideas, developed their political principles. It is worth mentioning that the 1970s were marked by the emergence of social movements worldwide that questioned hierarchical social structures and aimed at more egalitarian societies. On a global scale, youthful political parties and organizations were created to target the old structures, which were pitted as symbols of oppression. Particularly, the world order was questioned, and colonized cultures increased their political awareness in search for change and political autonomy.

The PKK rapidly increased its legitimacy among people and attracted youth due to the fact that it targeted two sources of oppression: the Turkish state, seen as the colonizer, and the tribal Kurdish chieftains, the *aghas*, regarded as exploiters and collaborators of the state. Poor farmers were obliged to work for the chieftains with few opportunities for other types of work or schooling (Westrheim, 2008). Unlike most previous Kurdish political parties, which were organized around tribal leaders and structures, the PKK originated from the leftist movement in Turkey and its leaders derived from lower classes (Akkaya, 2011). The conservative ideologies imposed by traditional leaders were replaced by a revolutionary attempt to educate and liberate people (Westrheim, 2008).

With the collapse of Socialism, new global developments and political outcomes in Kurdistan, the party developed new strategies and adopted new paradigms. As a result of this transformation, it changed from a party to a congressional system. On the ideological level, it abandoned the goal of an independent Kurdistan and embraced the thesis of "democratic modernity", based on a democratic, ecological and gender-emancipatory system (Uzun, 2014, p.21).

Highlighting those positive aspects cannot allow an idyllic image of the PKK. As argued by Akkaya and Jongerden (2012), most of the works addressing the PKK tend to treat it as an anomaly rather than trying to make sense of it. Regardless of political views and personal affinities, it is a fact that in a very short time period, the PKK evolved from a small clandestine organization into a transnational social-political movement with thousands of armed guerrillas (men and women), an extensive mass media complex, and several civil organizations in Turkey, as well as in many European countries (Akkaya, 2011). Only through a critical review of the circumstances that motivated the creation of the PKK - and its ideological basis - can one understand the claim of a representative number of Kurds and begin to comprehend what is required to establish long-term peace and stability. Even if it can be argued that the PKK does not represent the entirety of the Kurdish population - it is difficult to imagine that such a numerous population could be homogeneously represented - it is unquestionably the main Kurdish political actor in the contemporaneity. Ocalan is recognized as the political and philosophical leader of the majority of Kurds in Turkey, Syria and the diaspora, which is evident in the ideological and political framework of various parties and civil society organizations.

In sum, three key elements have to be considered for a better understanding of why the PKK achieved a central position as the legitimate representative of the Kurdish population. Firstly, it emerged as a supra-tribal resistance that transcended social and geographic boundaries (Ozcan, 2002). Secondly, it is based on a political education that fosters personal development, dignity and a sense of empowerment (Westrheim, 2008). Thirdly, and not yet sufficiently explored at an academic level, it struggles for

a women's revolution. These three elements are interconnected and influence each other's development.

It is the third element that will be explored in the next chapter. Through the analysis of Ocalan's main ideas on women's freedom, I discuss how those ideas dialogue with the principles of women's empowerment and gender equality.

## 2. OCALAN AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION IDEOLOGY

Ocalan developed a comprehensive approach to women's liberation. His theoretical analyses are complemented by practical discussions on the ways through which women can be empowered. Besides developing a socio-historical analysis of the establishment of the patriarchal system and how women are oppressed by it, he encourages them to surpass engendered roles and create their own movements and institutions.

From a human rights perspective, women's empowerment can be understood as the bottom-up process of transforming gender power relations, through which women will be able to formulate and advocate their own visions for their societies, including gender norms. Thus, empowerment entails change, as to be empowered means to have been disempowered in the first place. In other words, it means gaining the ability to make choices, which requires alternatives - or the capacity for meaningful choice - and the ability to recognize that alternatives exist. In regards to gender power relations, this last condition is essential, as gender often operates through the unquestioned acceptance of power (Kabeer, 2005).

Ocalan's analyses of the process of enslavement of women aims to denaturalize gender power relations and encourage the transformation of these relations. His critical review of the history of civilization asserts that this 5000-year-history is essentially the history of the enslavement of women. Consequently, he asserts that women's freedom "will only be achieved by waging a struggle against the foundation of this ruling system" (Ocalan, 2013, p.9). According to him, the Neolithic Era was dominated by a matriarchal society<sup>1</sup> where the "mother-woman" had a privileged position. He claims that Neolithic peoples maintained a social order of equality based on communal property, sharing and solidarity, and a lack of institutionalized hierarchies; with the disintegration of the Neolithic society, women lost their position.

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<sup>1</sup> Although from an anthropological point of view no known societies are unambiguously matriarchal, archaeological evidence suggest that women were held in esteem prior to the rise of urban societies (Ahmed, 1992, p.11). However, it is not the aim of the present dissertation to discuss the scientific validity of Ocalan's arguments, but to show that he develops important arguments to deconstruct androcentric interpretations that claim a natural inferior social status of women.

Two "major sexual ruptures" took place during this historical process of gender enslavement. The first was the disruption of the home economy organized around the family-clan unit, which established a hierarchical division of labour, with women's work at the bottom. At the same time, mythological narratives emerged to legitimize the idea of men as rulers. With the development of institutionalized religions, this gendered imbalance of power was also institutionalized, and the patriarchal system became deep-rooted.

The establishment of patriarchy and the development of monotheistic religions led to the "second major sexual rupture", with the treatment of women as inferior becoming a "sacred commandment of god". The new monotheistic cultures adopted the system of concubinage and institutionalized polygamy. Christianity, and later Islam (with the multiplication of harems) contributed to the full implementation of sexist societies. Through a process of "housewifization", women became restricted to the private space of the house and to housework, and not seen as economically productive.

According to Ocalan, if history has already seen two major sexual ruptures, he predicts a third one in the future, this time "against the dominant male". The possibility of promoting a new "sexual rupture" is the motivating force of the Kurdish women's freedom movement. As an external observer, I ask: Why would men within the PKK agree to overcome gender power relations? Ocalan's analyses also aim to demonstrate that the enslavement of women leads to the enslavement of men. Gender enslavement was just the first type of enslavement in history. Within the process of accumulation of surplus and institutionalization of ownership, women's enslavement became the model for all other enslaved lives - that of children and men - and housewifization was extended to society as a whole. Therefore, housewifization became the institutional foundation upon which all types of slavery and moral corruption were implemented (Ocalan, 2013, p.27).

From the first civilizations to the establishment of modern capitalism, people lost their freedom. Capitalism is based on the exploitation of the labour force, with the nation-state as the ideal system for the exercise of power. Nation-states spread sexism, nationalism, and militarism: all

ideologies of power. In this sense, capitalism and the nation-state represent the dominant male in institutionalized form. Capitalist society is the perpetuation of the old exploitative societies based on continuous warfare against women (Ocalan, 2013, p.43). As an alternative to the nation-state model, Ocalan developed the paradigm of "democratic confederalism", whereby society is not controlled by the state, but is based on grassroots participation and a community-based decision-making process. Within this system, delegates to the general assemblies form the higher levels of representation and are limited to the duty of coordination and implementation of the collective will (Ocalan, 2011, p.33)<sup>2</sup>. This representational system is already in practice within all Kurdish organizations in Turkey, Syria and the diaspora, including the women's organizations.

If state is the highest level of the patriarchal system, family is the stem cell of state society. Through the patriarchal family, the state reinforces its power and apparatus, as slavery becomes entrenched within the family. When women are married they become the property of men and are barred from political, intellectual, social and economic arenas. Ocalan explicitly criticizes the traditional family culture of the Middle East, which he considers the main source of local problems. The traditional family arrangements are the foundational basis of the degradation of women, bringing inequality, illiteracy, family feuds, and honour disputes (Ocalan, 2013, pp.36-37). Thus, the traditional family is the perpetuation of state violence. For Ocalan, the transformation of society relies on the transformation of the institution of family through the abolishment of two practices: male ownership over women and children, and the obligation (imposed on women) to have children as a condition to sustain marriage. A truly democratic civilization will only be established through the development of meaningful family unions and the abolition of discrimination in family relations.

Ocalan argues that to defeat the oppressive system it is necessary to develop a new approach to women, men and their relationship, which will allow the "third sexual rupture". Killing the dominant male means killing "one-

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<sup>2</sup> According to Ocalan (2011), this alternative system is especially appropriate for the Middle East, where capitalist imperial powers will not be able to impose democracy. The elementary grassroots democracy is the only approachable to affect such change across diverse ethnic and religious differences.

sided domination, inequality and intolerance. Moreover, it is to kill fascism, dictatorship and despotism" (Ocalan, 2013, p.51). What is important to consider in Ocalan's theoretical approach is that he situates women's freedom as a primary goal. As already discussed, he broke with the nation-state model, which is viewed as contrary to a "gender emancipatory system" and inadequate to the establishment of free society. Contrary to nationalist projects that result in perpetuating hegemonic masculinity, and the silence regarding gender equality and sexuality in national liberation movements in the Middle East, Ocalan directly addresses women's freedom as the first step to transform society. In this sense, he argues that the question of state cannot be tackled previously to the question of family. They are interrelated issues that make up social phenomena and need to be analysed as a whole. A bottom-up transformation is required.

Ocalan emphasizes: "the solutions for all social problems in the Middle East should have woman's position as focus" (Ocalan, 2013, p.52). The realization of the third sexual rupture is the moment to implement gender equality, which is the fundamental component of freedom and democracy. Gender equality means women having the same opportunities as men in all fields, including the ability to participate in the public sphere. For Ocalan, who criticizes the very basic process of housewifisation, women shall be liberated from all forms of subjugation and fully restore their position in society, especially in political life. But this political participation is not restricted to joining "male-made" institutions. Women should establish their own organizations and develop their own political platforms. This requires a comprehensive political organization, including all levels of society: human rights groups, social organizations, local governance, and political parties. Hence, Ocalan recognizes the specific needs and interests of women and enlarges the notion of gender equality, approaching the necessity to implement gender equity. He encourages a transformative change beyond equality of opportunity, as he endorses that women shall be able to independently organize themselves, discuss their own needs, and find their own solutions.

Moreover, political action can only be successful with a parallel effort on the ideological level. The patriarchal mentality - and the nation state

model - must be overthrown in order to establish a democratic, gender equal, and eco-friendly society. According to Ocalan, this can only be achieved through the development of "the science of women", or "*Jineoloji*" in Kurdish. Which means, in other words, an epistemological process aimed at the radical transformation of the dominant male mentality within scientific knowledge. Thus, scientific branches centred on women's issues and perspectives - such as women social sciences, women history, history of women sexuality and so - should be developed, and "women's academies" created as alternative access points to education.

Finally, in a clear calling for participation in the liberation movement, Ocalan asserts that it is up to women and youth to ensure the transformation and democratization of the Middle East. In a leadership position, women have the double potential to overcome the social inequalities of the region, and promote the reconciliation of society globally.

In the next chapter I address the establishment of a transnational Kurdish women's movement and its role in promoting gender equality and human rights. As concrete examples, I focus on the activities developed by two organizations in the diaspora.

### **3. THE KURDISH WOMEN'S MOVEMENT: A HISTORY OF RESISTANCE**

In 9 August 2013 three Kurdish female activists were murdered in the centre of Paris, in an apartment that hosted the Kurdistan Information Office: Sakine Cansiz, founding member of the PKK and political refugee in France; Fidan Dogan, representative of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) in Paris; and Leyla Saylemez, member of the Kurdish Youth Movement. They were cruelly shot in the head just one month after the beginning of the "Imrali Peace Process", the peace negotiations undertaken by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's Prime Minister at the occasion, and Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the PKK. After two years of investigation the prosecutor of Paris finally made his final submission, and for the first time the French justice evoked the possible involvement of a foreign intelligence service in a political murder committed in France. Already denounced by Kurdish activists and by the Turkish media itself, which published several pieces of evidence, the National Intelligence Organization of Turkey was quite likely responsible for the crime (Seelow, 2015).

Whoever is proven guilty, the crime was intentionally planned in order to sabotage the peace process. Moreover, it had a deeper symbolic meaning: it targeted women, not men. The Kurdish women are symbols of resistance, and the pillars of a revolutionary social project that has been successively put in place by the PKK, the political parties and the various civil society organizations that follow the same ideological principles. In fact, those principles, which include gender equality, are far from being privileged by the Turkish political framework, especially by the AKP, Erdogan's party. President of Turkey since 2014, Erdogan is widely known to negatively address women and narrowly define their supposed role in society. For instance, he claimed at a summit in Istanbul that gender equality is "against nature" and that according to Islam the "role" of women is maternity (Dearden, 2014). Just a few days ago, the Deputy Prime-Minister Bülent Arinç told a female MP from the People's Democratic Party (HDP) to "shut up as a woman". She was responding to him during an extraordinary session to discuss recent terrorist attacks (Today's Zaman, 2015). Although absurd,

these comments are not surprising since Erdogan had already stated that women should have three children, and that abortion rights, as well as access to the morning-after pill, should be limited (Dearden, 2014).

Since the emergence of the PKK, Kurdish women have been consolidating their new position in Kurdish society - and consequently in Turkish society as a whole. They have proven to be political agents perfectly capable to act and make decisions side-by-side with men. They equally take up arms to defend their rights as Kurds (and as women); they are elected as politicians; they head various administrative and human rights organizations; they are arrested and tortured as much as men, and they equally resist in the name of a broader struggle. If they choose, they are all of that and also wives and mothers. Gradually, women engaged in the liberation movement are succeeding to filter down into society principles of gender equality, explicitly defended by Ocalan.

Besides her historical position as one of the founders of the PKK, Sakine Cansiz owes her recognition to her brave resistance to brutal torture in the Diyarbakir Prison, where she remained for about 11 years and continued to lead the Kurdish movement. Between 1981 and 1989, 34 of her fellow inmates died of torture, and hundreds suffered lasting injury. When released, she joined the PKK training camp in the Bekaa Valley, and afterwards the armed struggle in Northern Iraq, where she started to organize the women's movement inside the organization. Known as "a legend among PKK members" (Letsch, 2013), she was an example of strength and determination to be followed by Kurds, men and women. Her dignity and political conviction motivated her contemporaries and the younger generation.

Killing Sakine Cansiz and the other two prominent female Kurdish activists was above all a symbolic murder; an attempt to literally silence women and re-establish (male) order. However, despite the shock and public outcry, Kurds - and Kurdish women - never gave up. The assassination of the three women in Paris resulted in permanent protests and continuous struggle to solve the case. Indeed, it reinforced the Kurdish motivation to "fight for freedom".

In this last chapter I discuss the establishment of an organized and mobilized Kurdish women's movement. After analysing key issues to understand its emergence and operation as a transnational network, I focus on the activities developed by organizations in the diaspora, particularly in France and Germany, and how they have contributed to promote gender equality and human rights.

### **From the mountains to Europe: The establishment of a transnational Kurdish women's network**

In addition to the emergence of the PKK and its consolidation as a social-political movement, the Kurdish women's movement must be analysed in its transnational dimension. Due to the political situation in Turkey and the historical denial of fundamental human rights of its Kurdish population, the "exile experience" (Van Bruinessen, 2000), particularly in Europe, was a key element for the establishment of a Kurdish women's liberation movement. This experience led to the organization of women in a united front (Sellar, 2014), which functions cooperatively - from the *guerrilleras* on the battlefields to women's organizations in the diaspora. Without understanding the emergence of this solid network and its transnational operation, one cannot properly address the role developed by women in the diaspora and how they have contributed to enhance gender equality within Kurdish society and society at large.

Women participated in the PKK since its foundation, and in the early 1980s their participation in the guerrilla forces was already increasing rapidly. When the PKK launched its military offensive in 1984 women were among the ranks. As members of an oppressed ethnic minority they felt motivated to join a liberation movement. To be Kurdish was banned, and for women social inequalities and discriminatory politics have severe impacts. In a patriarchal society with very strict gender roles, joining the PKK meant much more than liberating Kurdish people; it seemed a possibility for changing a reality where women had very limited rights, and were always treated as inferior to men. The educative element of the PKK, which specifically target patriarchal structures and ideologies, was an important element of attraction for women.

As argued before, the PKK fosters the establishment of independent organizations for women, headed by women, and very rapidly women were empowered through a network of political education. Westrheim (2008) cites the fact that during the first years of war female guerrillas went to the villages not only to recruit women but also to make them aware of their subordinate position in a patriarchal society. This process of "consciousness raising", as analysed by the author, is a fundamental aspect of the PKK, and moved the arena of education and resistance from the traditional classroom to the various spheres of sociality, including the mountains, prisons, streets of Kurdistan and the diaspora. I would highlight that this process is especially important in regards to gender issues. The "consciousness raising" about the oppressive patriarchal system is the backbone of the Kurdish women's movement, from the mountains to the diaspora. Kurdish women are aware of the historical and social origins of the patriarchal system, and they are daily discussing the ways to overcome it. Furthermore, they are engaged in raising a new consciousness among men.

Besides joining the military front, Kurdish women at the same time actively engaged in political activities all around Kurdistan and in exile. However, due to the denials and bans of the Turkish government, it was in Europe - not Kurdistan - that the women's organizations were first established. The Union of Patriotic Women from Kurdistan (YJWK) founded in 1987 in Germany, aimed at developing women's self-organization and struggling for women's liberation (KJB, 2011).

Women's political engagement and participation in *guerrilla* fighting developed in tandem. For those women trapped in an authoritarian society where armed oppression is the norm, taking up arms seems to be an essential step to defending themselves and transforming society. But this is not limited to targeting State forces and winning a military war. This is a way to change the position of women in society, including the freedom movement itself. As stated by a male guerrilla: "We didn't want to accept it at first. Women by nature are physically weaker, and in war that hits you like a boomerang [...]" (Damon, n.d). For Ocalan, however, the participation of women in the *guerrilla* forces is a way for overcoming those "sexist mind-sets within the freedom movement [...] the synthetic dependence of women to

men" (Nurhak, n.d.). It can be argued that this was the first level of promotion of gender equality within the Kurdish society in the PKK era. Although supported by Ocalan, Kurdish women themselves had to struggle to convince men that they were equal comrades, and thus legitimize their full engagement in warfare. Women's participation in guerrilla increased qualitatively and quantitatively, leading to the formation of women's guerrilla units in 1993, and later to a women's own army, the Free Women's Army.

The awareness of an intertwined struggle - political and military - was conducive to the establishment of a more comprehensive women's organization, which would be able to include *guerrilleras* as well as representatives of political and social organizations. In 1995, the Kurdistan Free Women's Union (YAJK) (with the participation of Sakine Cansiz) was formed in the mountains of Kurdistan. At this point women had already gained some experience from the formation of their army. The new organization would be an important element in the process of developing women's own social and political perspectives instead of copying male organizations or reducing the female army to a back-up force. At the same time, this broader organization would play a central role in establishing an international network (that would be able to act as a united front), as it aimed at incorporating both the experiences on the battlefield, and at the international level (KJB, 2011).

This international representation fostered the association with other women's organizations. Consequently, the incorporation of human rights language and the development of an expertise to access human rights mechanisms marked the growth and maturation of the Kurdish women's movement. Through the partnership with the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), based in Paris, Kurdish women were represented at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China. In her statement the president of the federation condemned the imprisonment of female political activists in several countries, including Kurds in Turkey, specifically Leyla Zana<sup>1</sup>. As highlighted by Kilic Nursel (2014), a

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<sup>1</sup> Leyla Zana was the first Kurdish woman to gain a seat in the Parliament of Ankara. In 1994 she became internationally famous for being arrested and imprisoned (10 years) after pronouncing her inaugural speech in the Parliament in Kurdish.

female Kurdish activist, it was the first time that Kurdish women were able to make their voice heard at the international level and aligned with a universal feminist language.

The end of the 1990s was a decisive moment for the Kurdish women's movement. On the symbolic date of the 8th of March 1998, Ocalan announced the "Women's Liberation Ideology" in which he integrated the struggle of Kurdish women with the struggle of women all over the world<sup>2</sup> (Nurhak, n.d). Several educational seminars were promoted by YAJK to discuss and enhance those principles, and primarily to promote "the transformation of men". It is important to highlight that the situation of the PKK fighters in the Kurdish mountains, a *de facto* stateless region, was a force for the development of a revolutionary ideology. Breaking off from the sovereign system fomented the construction of new values and systems of thought. This process of education is particularly significant for female fighters (Nurhak, n.d.), since women in Turkish society have less access to formal education than men. According to the "Functional Adult Literacy and Women's Support Programme" (Unesco, 2011), in 2011, still 3 million adults over the age of 15 in Turkey could not read or write their own names, amongst which the majority were women. Of the 3.8 million adults who only have an elementary school education, 70% are women.

Flach (2007 cited in Westrheim, 2008, p.28) stresses that the majority of women who joined the PKK in the 1990s were illiterate<sup>3</sup>. They were motivated by *guerrilleras* who visited the villages to inform them about the PKK and teach them literacy. After joining the movement, studying - and developing a stronger political consciousness - became an essential element of the struggle. Without knowing why you fight, you cannot cope with the hard life in the *guerrilla*. In this sense, it is important to emphasize the considerations made by Westrheim (2008) on the concepts of critical and

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<sup>2</sup> Its basic principles were already addressed in chapter two.

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, as pointed out by the author, the women who joined the PKK in the 1970s and 1980s were university or high school students. As analysed before, the PKK was formed by a group of educated students who were in contact with universal revolutionary ideals. The alternative educational system developed by the organization would be a fundamental mechanism to spread these ideals and recruit new activists.

political literacy and how they are put into practice within the alternative education system developed by the PKK. The educative process is never neutral. In a culture of silence, oppressive education takes place, which means that people are taught to accept the hegemonic discourse. For a critical education, however, consciousness and transformation are fundamental. It aims at breaking the silence and making people aware of their conditions and democratic rights, allowing them to participate in decision-making processes. The PKK does not only teach people to read and write. It teaches them to critically and politically "read" their reality, encouraging them to use knowledge as a tool for changing society.

Moreover, critical and political literacy do not only reach illiterate people, but everyone. This is key to understanding the social and political strength of the Kurdish women's transnational network. Even in the diaspora, where women have full opportunities to be educated, the process of critical and political literacy continues to play a vital role. The educational activities, such as seminars, workshops, and the extensive use of the media work towards the dissemination of Ocalan's ideas, which critically address issues like state, capitalism, patriarchy, and religion, and reinforce the main goal to liberate women. Women in Kurdistan and in the diaspora are taught to critically understand, through the study of history, why patriarchy was established as the "natural" system, and in doing so they are also taught to restore the value of women within society. Finally, people do not simply "receive" education. They actively participate in the construction of the education process through the permanent sharing of their own knowledge and experiences.

It was exactly the critical exercise over the engagement of women in the military actions, self-organization, the ability to defend themselves and develop free thought (Nurhak, n.d.) that led to the establishment of the first women's party in 1999, the Kurdistan Working Women's Party (PJKK). The party would change its name twice as a result of its ongoing reformulation and concurrent widening of perspectives and practical activities. Following the principles of the "Women's Liberation Ideology", it also took into account the experiences of non-Kurdish women, opening itself to the universal struggle of women. In 2002 the party prepared a draft for a "Women's Social

Contract", which was introduced to other women's organizations through several conferences and other activities. Additionally, the group worked to reinforce joint actions with international organizations and develop a human rights language within the movement.

Equally important, as argued by Çaglayan (2012, p.15), is the fact that the concept of a women's social contract - as distinct from a social contract made by men - leads to a new social organization in which women are subjects rather than objects. Contrary to what commonly defines ethnic-national processes, in the Kurdish case the women who set forth bidding conditions for men to abide by. More significantly, the formulation of a contract represented a key achievement to the Kurdish women's movement. As already discussed, Ocalan emphatically addresses the necessity to "change man's mentality and life. [...] Gender revolution is not just about woman" (Ocalan, 2013, p.51). Despite the remaining difficulties to overcome the limits and framework of patriarchy (Guneser, 2014), the women's social contract reinforced the practical means to put into practice the women's liberation ideology. In 2004, the women's party was renamed the Kurdistan Women's Liberation Party (PAJK), which is still in use.

The Kurdish women's movement is continuously restructuring itself. The development of new paradigms within the overall Kurdish movement - notably democracy, ecology and women's freedom - demanded the establishment of a flexible and comprehensive women's organization that transcends party structures (Guneser, 2014). With this aim, an umbrella organization called the High Women's Council (KJB) was created in 2005 with the participation of women from all parts of Kurdistan and the diaspora. Structurally, it aimed at functioning as a coordination point between the ideological women's party (PAJK); the self-defence forces, the Free Women's Units Star - YJA Star (a development of the Free Women's Army founded in 1993); the social and political mass organizations, the Free Women's Union (YJA) (which developed from the Kurdistan Free Women's Union (YAJK), founded in 1995); and the Young Women's Organization (a result of the establishment of the KJB). In 2014, KJB would change its name to Kurdistan Women's Communities (KJK).

Before addressing the experience of women's organizations in Europe, it is worth summarizing the organizational structure of the Kurdish women's movement. This will help to clarify the position of the diaspora organizations within the transnational network, and how they contribute to spread the women's liberation ideology and to put into practice its principles.

With the objective to build up "a democratic confederation in order to establish a democratic, ecological society based on gender equality" (KJB, 2011), the KJK coordinates the work developed by the various women's organizations in the different areas of struggle. As a confederative organization, it plays a leading role in directing the movement throughout its various axes of action, towards the achievement of a "women-centred social democratization". As such, the alliance with international organizations and the formation of a transnational network for the development of common projects is a fundamental strategy.

The ideological and political party, the PAJK, is responsible for spreading the women's liberation ideology and educating female cadres on its principles. It carries out research, including studies of literature, culture, art, politics, diplomacy, economy, and the press. It encourages the establishment of women's academies to develop an alternative educational system. The PAJK is also responsible for the implementation of an interdisciplinary approach that breaks with the patriarchal historiography - which means putting into practice the concept of *Jineoloji*, or "science of women", as developed by Ocalan (discussed in chapter two).

The Free Women's Units Star is the armed branch of the women's movement. It characterizes itself as the "field of legitimate self-defence" of the freedom struggle. With the violent conditions of life in Kurdistan and the Middle East, where Kurds (and especially Kurdish women) are exposed to myriad threats, attacks, and violations of fundamental human rights, taking up arms is seemingly essential for the protection of women, as well as men and children. As synthesized by a *guerrillero* that I met in the Kandil Mountains in 2010, "in the Middle East if you do not take up guns nobody listens to you". The women's movement, as well as the overall Kurdish movement, is engaged in establishing long-standing peace through democratic and political means. However, laying down weapons is not yet

deemed a viable solution. The recent political developments, wherein Turkey declared war against both the Islamic State (IS) and the PKK (levelling them as equally terrorists), make the shared feeling of insecurity among Kurds understandable. The last peace negotiations were stalled in the worst way last July. For years now, Kurds have been intensively fighting an unfair war against IS, which invades cities, destroys archaeological and historical monuments, beheads people and brutally exposes their bodies on the Internet, kidnaps women and children, turns women into sexual slaves, and imposes obscurantist interpretations of the Islamic faith. Patrice Franceschi (2015), a French writer and humanitarian activist who visited Kobane several times since the beginning of the struggle, defines the war between IS and the Kurds as the war of "Islamist fanatics" against "democratic fanatics". In his book he captures a detailed description of the daily lives of the Kurdish combatants, and critically questions why the West has not been fully supportive of Kurds, who tirelessly fight for the same values claimed as "our" values. The role of women in war and their position in Kurdish society is a key aspect addressed by Franceschi, who poetically defines them as the "Fire Female Amazons". In the opposite direction of the critical considerations made by the author, Turkey has engaged in savage fighting against the PKK and the Kurdish political parties, but far less against the Islamic State. Almost every day, the Turkish Air Forces conduct strikes - more than 150 by the middle of August - in Northern Iraq and on its own territory against the PKK bases. In the same time period, there were only three bombings in Syria targeting the Islamic State. War, and this one particularly, is above all politics, where propaganda has as much weight as weapons (Semo, 2015).

Since the beginning of this new wave of "war on terror" in July 2015, the Turkish state has committed several human rights violations and war crimes. Kurdish villages were bombed, killing dozens of civilians, including children. Turkish forces arbitrarily arrested dozens of Kurdish militants and politicians. At the same time, the Turkish right's political strategy has served to consolidate sexism and misogyny. Verbal attacks on left-wing women and male chauvinism in mainstream media are dominant on the political scene (Tremblay, 2015), and on the battlefield Turkish misogyny assumes even

more violent proportions. On August 10, Kurdish women and women's rights groups in Turkey were shocked and enraged at an act of sexualized torture committed by Turkish police as photos of the corpse of a female Kurdish militant were leaked online. According to those who prepared her body for burial, it is likely that after she was shot, she was stripped of her uniform, dragged by the neck with a rope through town, and abandoned in the town square. Afterwards, she was photographed and the photos of her naked and bloodied corpse were purposely exposed online at an attempt to humiliate the Kurds - and especially Kurdish women (Ackerman, 2015).

Finally, the Free Women's Union (YJA) and the Committee of Young Women gather the social and political mass organizations (including those in the diaspora) that struggle daily to promote human rights and change society from the grassroots. From the smallest levels of the organization within villages, neighbourhoods, and districts, they are organized under assemblies and councils. They work to guarantee cooperation and solidarity from the smallest local organizations to the largest transnational assemblies. Through the development of campaigns, social projects, and legal assistance, the grassroots organizations under the YJA take direct action against the violation of women's rights, such as honour killings, domestic violence, forced marriage, rape, circumcision, stoning to death, and polygamy. They also act on behalf of the self-determination of the Kurdish people and their cultural rights. The youth organizations, in their turn, in addition to working on the various issues mentioned above, aim to mobilize the new generations to "incorporate the dynamism of youth with the consciousness of women's freedom for playing an active role in changing and transforming the society" (KJB, 2011). Which also means promoting the sense of responsibility for the historical continuity of the women's struggle.

As already argued, Kurdish women's political awareness developed alongside their sense of self-protection. What substantially differentiates the Kurdish women's groups - and the overall Kurdish movement - from other armed groups, is the fact that despite the use of weapons their main goal is by no means to perpetuate war. Since the beginning of the 1990s the PKK, under the philosophical and political leadership of Ocalan, has been trying to establish peace and dialogue. This is evidenced by the several unilateral

ceasefires declared by the PKK and the continuous restructuring of the movement to establish more democratic configurations and incorporate a human rights language. Above all, the development of the women's liberation ideology as the basis of the movement is proof of its commitment to democracy. Despite the context of armed conflict and ethnic repression, Kurdish society has been gradually changing from the bottom; people are raising awareness of the fact that peace can only be achieved if the microstructures of power are transformed - and which are fundamentally based on gender oppression. Thus, the principle of gender parity was established in all levels of the representational system of the PKK, as well as in all political bodies and civil society organizations in the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Syria, and in the diaspora. Two co-chairs, a man and a woman, head every organization. Moreover, women have established autonomous bodies and organizations in Kurdish regions and the diaspora.

Kurdish women in the diaspora play a central role in addressing Kurdish issues through a human rights approach, agitating and organizing to put the "Kurdish question", and particularly Kurdish women's issues, on the international agenda. Consequently, they are main actors in the process of strengthening the Kurdish women's movement. The last section of this dissertation focuses on the activities developed by specific Kurdish women's organizations in Europe and their role in promoting gender equality and human rights.

### **"Liberation for Sinjar Women is Liberation for Humanity": The role of the diaspora in promoting human rights**

The 2000s were decisive for the structuring of Kurdish women's organizations in Europe and the strengthening of Kurdish women's representation as a whole. Popular assemblies, as well as various civil society organizations, associations and foundations were created and organized under umbrella organizations at national levels, leading to the establishment of a major umbrella organization, the European Kurdish Women's Movement (TJKE). The European organization held its second General Assembly in June 2015, with the participation of 115 delegates from

several European countries. The "construction of free life and democratic nation" was identified as its main field of struggle, making specific reference to the support of the "Rojava Revolution" and the resistance against the Islamic State (ANF News, 2015).

Thus, the TJKE highlighted the importance to reinforce the campaign "Liberation for Sinjar Women is Liberation for Humanity". Headed by a transnational coalition of Kurdish feminist organizations, the campaign was launched in September 2014, a month after the massacre committed by IS in the Yazidi city of Sinjar. With no international aid, the Kurdish fighters from the PKK and the Syrian Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG), and its women's brigade, the YPJ, opened a humanitarian corridor from the Shengar Mountains in Iraq to Rojava, rescuing ten thousand people. However, hundreds, possibly thousands of people were abducted by IS. Hundreds of men were killed and others forced to convert to Islam under death threats. Hundreds of women and girls were sold, given as gifts or forced to marry the fighters or their supporters. Many of them have been subjected to torture and ill treatment, including rape and other types of sexual violence. Up to 300 had managed to escape by the end of 2014, but the majority continue to be held captives (Amnesty International, 2014).

The campaign aims at raising awareness of public opinion on the atrocities committed by IS and pressing any party with influence on IS to secure the immediate release of the captives. It also calls on the UN and the member states to condemn the countries that give financial, logistical and military support to IS, such as Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. As concrete actions, it requests psychological and therapeutic treatment for women, and the deployment of doctors, lawyers and sociologists for the establishment of long-term projects (Roj Women's Association, 2014).

Besides the support to the current struggle in Syria, two political claims permanently shape the diaspora's political agenda: "freedom for Ocalan" and "lift the ban on the PKK". On 13 February 2015 an international petition for the liberation of Ocalan and political prisoners in Turkey was presented to the Council of Europe. Launched in 2010 by the "International Initiative Freedom for Ocalan - Peace in Kurdistan", supporters managed to collect 10.3 million signatures, including as first signatories several renowned

politicians, human rights activists and scholars. The next day more than 10.000 people from France, Germany, Switzerland, and Luxembourg gathered in the streets of Strasbourg to claim the liberation of Ocalan<sup>4</sup>.

Women were actively involved in the petition process, from the collection of signatures to its presentation in Strasbourg. For instance, the spokesperson of the demonstration was a female Kurdish activist, H el ene Erin. She insisted that Kurds also demand a political status for Kurdistan and the removal of the PKK's name from the European Union's terrorist list. Moreover, she stressed that the demonstration was in solidarity with the Kurds who are fighting against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (L eonard, 2015).

Various authors raised the fact that the Kurdish diaspora is highly committed to bringing visibility and support to the Kurdish cause (Baser, 2013a, 2013b; Curtis, 2005; Eccarius-Kelly, 2002; Khayati, 2008; Van Bruinessen, 1999, 2000). This continuous "homeland orientation", as observed by Khayati (2008), is a key element of the discourse and practices of the Kurdish diaspora. However, the social and political commitment to one's place of origin acquired a broader meaning in the Kurdish struggle, especially among women. It is not limited to solving local problems; above all, it is ideological. Kurds in the diaspora are committed to their territory, which is inseparable from the reproduction of Kurdish identity, and the struggle for the right of self-determination. Yet they are aware that the Kurdish problem - and the problem of all peoples in the Middle East - is deeper, and society must be changed from the foundations. In this sense, the "Rojava Revolution" has a strong symbolic appeal to Kurds. It offers the concrete possibility to building up a new model of society, based on democratic values, secularism, and gender equality. In sum, it means putting into practice the ideas developed by Ocalan.

The Islamic State, on the other hand, is more than a war enemy and invader. It is the materialization of a barbaric male mentality, a "threat to all humanity" physically and ideologically. But the fundamentalist organization is

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<sup>4</sup> Since 1999, public demonstrations are held all around Europe on or near the date of Ocalan's imprisonment (15 February).

just the maximal expression of this mentality. In the various countries of the Middle East, including those with good relations with the West, women are often subject to discriminatory legislation and/or practices, and institutionalized violence. For Kurdish women, the AKP (the Turkish president's party) and IS share the same "savage mentality". Whereas the *guerrillas* are engaged in bringing down the barbaric reign of IS, the women's organizations are politically engaged in overthrowing the AKP's mentality (ANF News, 2015).

The Kurdish women's movement, acting as a united front from Kurdistan to Europe, is engaged in a long-term process of transforming society, which means on an immediate level the Kurdish territories in Turkey and Syria. In this sense, the organizations in the diaspora play a central role. As examined by Ostergaard-Nielsen (2006, p.8), they are the ones who are directly committed to gaining international political leverage, and with this aim, the use of human rights conventions as a platform for dialogue constitutes an essential step forward. In the Kurdish case, women were especially engaged in the transformation of the PKK into a socio-political movement (rather than a military offensive), and they continue to play a major role in formulating Kurdish claims in universal terms backed up by human rights instruments.

Generally speaking, the women's organizations in the diaspora are committed to two levels of action: lobbying and diplomatic work, which focus on bringing the women's liberation ideology into public spheres; and developing socio-cultural projects and activities, which aim at empowering women from a bottom-up perspective. Joint activities, such as campaigns, are often developed. Below I will address the institutional objectives of two women's organizations in Europe, which operate on different levels of action, as well as some specific activities and projects developed by them since 2013.

### *International Representation of the Kurdish Women's Movement*

The International Representation of the Kurdish Women's Movement, based in Paris, was founded in 2013 in Zurich, Switzerland. It is responsible for lobbying and diplomatic relations aiming at disseminating the women's

liberation ideology. The objectives of the organization can be grouped in six major focus areas: peace and conflict resolution; equality; dialogue and political activism; women's rights; self-determination; and mobilizing public opinion. The establishment of political networks and the development of joint activities with various women's organizations at the international level are key action strategies for accomplishing its objectives (Delahaie, Kilic and Akkaya, 2014, pp.92-93). Nursel Kilic, member of the International Movement, explains that the organization is also part of the European Kurdish Women's Movement (TJKE), but it has the specific role of communicating with non-Kurdish women worldwide. In sum, the organization is committed to informing and raising public awareness about women's rights in order to promote "the evolution of mentalities and the construction of a (global) society free of relations of domination" (Kilic, 2015).

It is important to highlight that the objectives of the organization are based on a human rights platform, with two objectives specifically focussing on implementing human rights instruments: the CEDAW and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which addresses the impact of war on women and their pivotal role in conflict management, conflict resolution, and sustainable peace. Furthermore, the principle of self-determination is addressed at two levels: the right to self-determination of the Kurdish people, and women's right to self-determination. The latter can be understood as women's reproductive rights, which comprises the right to legal and safe abortion, birth control, and access to good quality reproductive healthcare.

As discussed above, the women's organizations in Europe are permanently engaged in the campaigns "freedom for Ocalan" and "lift the ban on the PKK", which are viewed as basic conditions for the promotion of longstanding peace in Kurdistan. Due to the current political situation, the "Rojava Revolution" and the resistance against the Islamic State were added to the agenda as matters of urgency. The International Representation plays a central role in sustaining public visibility around the political and ideological issues behind the scenes. The promotion and participation in conferences, publishing of written material, campaigns, public demonstrations, press interviews and Internet activism are main mechanisms to ensure that visibility.

One week after the assassination of the three female activists in Paris, a public march was organized from the Kurdish Cultural Centre in Paris, on Enghien Street, towards the Kurdistan Information Office, on Lafayette Street, where the crime took place. Since then it continues to be held every Wednesday from 1pm. According to Kilic, who co-organizes the march:

This march was organized quite naturally. For two years the purpose of this manifestation is to protest against the silence surrounding the case, the silence of the Turkish state, the silence of the French state, the silence of Europe surrounding a case where three women defenceless, three revolutionaries, three feminists, died. And also one of the fundamental objectives is to raise public awareness [...]. It's really a recall, a way of attracting the attention of people passing by... [...]. The march will continue until the case is solved (Rue 89, 2015).

The "Wednesday's March" is a good example of the persistent character of Kurdish activism. Just a few days after the crime, various Kurdish organizations in Kurdistan and the diaspora, as well as international human rights organizations (Amnesty International, Women's Alliance, International Federation of Iraqi Refugees), the European coalition left Front (GUE/NGL Group), the Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC), and Stephen Smellie, a Scottish trade union activist, issued public statements and open letters repudiating the act and lobbying for a thorough and fast investigation. Moreover, one year later a "European Demonstration March for Truth and Justice" amassed thousands of people in Paris. But it is the "Wednesday's March", despite its small scale, that stands as the tireless demonstration of Kurdish women's resistance and denial of silence. Due to the permanent process of lobbying, advocacy and public demonstrations, a few steps were made in order to solve the case, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. Nevertheless, the "Wednesday's March" will continue to be held until "truth is revealed" and "justice is made".

In January 2014, the International Representation of the Kurdish Women's Movement, together with the International Free Women's Foundation and partner organizations in France - "Femmes Solidaires" and France-Kurdistan Solidarity Association - organized a conference entitled "Taking action to oppose the killing of women in order to end femicide". The conference, which paid tribute to the three Kurdish activists murdered in

Paris, was held at the French Senate under the auspices of Éliane Assassi, president of the Communist, Republican and Citizen group (CRC). Various subjects were addressed, such as the history and concept of femicide, political murders in France and their legal aspects, strategies and modes of struggle against the slaughter of women by women's organizations in Kurdistan and France, and the recognition of femicide as a crime against humanity. Women activists from Iran and Djibouti also shared their experiences (ANF News, 2013).

The International Representation also co-organized in Rome, in October 2014, the conference "Practicing Freedom Against the Endless War of the Patriarchal System: Kurdish Women in Iraq, Syria, Europe", with the partnership of Kurdish international and local associations, and Italian non-governmental organizations. The conference, which resulted in a publication with the same name, focused on the themes of femicide and the struggle against the patriarchal system; resistance against the Islamic State and the construction of a democratic society; the Sinjar massacre; the Rojava's Revolution; the implementation of CEDAW; and the role of women's organizations and activities before the international bodies for human rights.

Kilic represented the organization at the "First Conference of the International Feminist and Secular Network", which was held in Paris in November 2014. She joined the session "Femicide, from Judicial Terminology to Weapon of War. History and Foundation". The event counted the participation of journalists, sociologists, and women's associations from ten different countries (Femmes Solidaires, 2014). In an interview to the website 50/50, Kilic highlighted that "the Kurdish women claim themselves feminists and in favour of secularism. They fight against all the religious fundamentalists" (Kilic, 2015).

Since the 1970s, women have actively participated in the struggle between the PKK and the Turkish state. But their participation has not been limited to defending themselves and the Kurdish people. They have been deeply engaged in enhancing democratic values within the PKK and in Kurdish/Turkish society as a whole. If recent years have been especially difficult for women - the political assassinations in Paris, the Sinjar massacre, the continuous threat posed by the Islamic State to women's integrity, and

the reinforcement of AKP's misogynist policy - they also highlighted the transformative potential of women's liberation ideology.

Kurdish women in the diaspora are committed to raising public awareness on the current conflicts in the Middle East and gaining support for the Kurdish cause. Which means, for instance, calling on NATO to force Turkey to stop its undeclared support to the Islamic State and to shift its policy towards the PKK, resuming the peace process (Rûdaw, 2014). Women in the diaspora are committed to bringing visibility to the fact that supporting the Kurdish cause is supporting democratic values, and thus all of humanity. Kurds are fighting the Islamic State on the ground and blocking its territorial expansion, which makes it imperative to support Kurdish control over Rojava, the Syrian Kurdistan.

The International Representation of the Kurdish Women's Movement, together with other Kurdish women's organizations and activists, have taken a central position in informing public opinion about the "Rojava Revolution". Moreover, they are responsible for informing people that this Revolution was already on course before the attacks of the Islamic State, and that defeating the fundamentalist group is not the end of the process. The "Rojava Revolution" is the attempt to establish a new society in the Middle East, based on democracy and gender equality. For Kurds, it offers the concrete possibility to put into practice the ideas developed by Ocalan. For Kurdish women, the "Rojava Revolution" is above all the materialization of the women's liberation ideology.

Kilic Nursel, as representative of the International Representation, prepared an informative text to be shared online and to guide further interventions on the Kurdish women's movement and the "Rojava Revolution". It criticizes the sensationalist approach of the media and highlights the history of feminism among Kurdish women:

The Kurdish women in Rojava are fully committed to the struggle and are one of the pillars of the so-called "Democratic Autonomy of Syrian Kurdistan". They have access to all levels of self-government within the three Kurdish cantons<sup>5</sup>. It's a revolution within the revolution. This inter-revolution is the result of the Kurdish feminist tradition developed for nearly 40 years. [...] In the recent weeks the women of Rojava are the topic of the media.

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<sup>5</sup> Administrative division of the Kurdish territory in Syria.

They're largely photographed but the real meaning of their struggle tends to be neglected. They're not just beautiful and charismatic figures, they're living shields that sacrifice themselves for the freedom of their people, and the protection of women and children. [...] (Kilic, 2014).

Kilic also explains the Kurdish struggle within the Syrian's civil war and the project to establish a political "third way" in the country, free from the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad and the Islamic fundamentalism:

Within a context of civil war, and taking into account that the opposition to Bashar al-Assad did not take into consideration the demands of the Kurds, a project of democratic autonomy started to be implemented in July 2012 in the Kurdish areas of Northern Syria. This project, led by the PYD, includes all ethnic groups in the region and aims at establishing a third way to free people from the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad and the Islamic fundamentalism. [...] In January 2014, pushing back the first Islamist military attacks, the autonomy of Rojava was proclaimed, and a democratic system established. A constitution was adopted recognizing three cantons, or sub-regions, with three million inhabitants: Djézireh, Afrin and Kobanê. The main values of this social contract are: equality [...]; education [...]; collective rights [...]; respect for identities [...]; secularism [...]; gender parity in all institutions [...]; and local self-governance (participatory democracy) [...] (Kilic, 2014).

### *Women's Meeting UTAMARA<sup>6</sup>*

The Women's Meeting UTAMARA was created in 2006 by a network of Kurdish and European women. Based in the small city of Bonn, Germany, it aims to develop solutions to the diverse problems faced by women in Europe, Kurdish and non-Kurdish: adaptation to the host countries, domestic violence, trauma from war and genocide, honour killings, sexual mutilation, sexual torture, rape, and all other kinds of violence against women. A series of activities are carried out throughout each year to address these problems - many of them taboo - with the objective to raise general awareness and encourage the victims to claim their rights through specialized mechanisms. The group also aims to strengthen solidarity among women through various mechanisms: regional and international campaigns; themed events; weekend

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<sup>6</sup> Information about the UTAMARA centre, its activities and projects are available at the website of the institution.

seminars; courses; holiday camps; conferences; and symposiums. Five main programs offer support to the victims:

- Counselling migrant women victims of violence: since 2009, the centre has developed the project "Violence is not a Fate: learning together with women". It offers supportive counselling, information and peer support groups for women with traumatic life experiences, such as war and domestic violence. Individual consultation can be held personally or by phone, anonymously or not. Co-creating solutions with the woman seeking help is a fundamental value and key strategy.
- Psychological support: many women who are exposed to violence feel hopeless, guilty, ashamed and/or afraid. To overcome these feelings and build up new life alternatives, the centre offers psychological counselling.
- Legal assistance: many women who are exposed to violence are not aware of their basic rights, which limit their claims and demands. UTAMARA advises women on violence protection law, right of residence, immigration law, family law, social law and general equality law.
- Structural assistance: UTAMARA gives women the necessary information on the host country's bureaucratic structure, guiding them to related institutions, including support around children and family needs.
- Contacts with other counselling centres and agencies: UTAMARA provides information on Help Desks and state counselling centres specialized on sensitive issues related to cultural backgrounds, such as forced marriage and honour killings.

Although especially concerned with assisting women in Europe, UTAMARA is also engaged in enhancing women's rights in Kurdistan. The centre is a member of the campaign "Liberation for Sinjar Women is Liberation for Humanity", headed by a transnational coalition of Kurdish feminist organizations. While organizations such as the International

Representation of the Kurdish Women's Movement carry out diplomatic activities, UTAMARA develops local activities and long-term aid projects to be implemented in the Kurdish areas. For instance, in August 2014 the centre organized an informational day on the situation of women in the war against the Islamic State. Held in the town of Neuwied, it offered an information booth and a performance on the women's slave markets aimed at driving public attention to the brutal violence to which women in Iraq and Syria are exposed. The centre set up a bank account for raising funds for the promotion of humanitarian aid to refugees, particularly the hundreds of thousands of women and girls who have fled from the Sinjar region. Moreover, it permanently provides people with information on the situation on the ground, personally or by phone. As many of the women assisted by UTAMARA come from the Middle East, the centre aims at giving specialized support for those concerned about the condition of family and friends.

UTAMARA has deep experience with refugee women, and some of its activities are especially designed to help them to overcome the trauma of war. Besides the permanent support available at the centre (psychological, legal, etc.), it acts to improve the basic conditions of refugee women's daily lives. With this aim, it joined the feminist organization "Women in Exile & Friends" in the programme "Refugee Women are Getting Loud! Action Tour Across Germany" developed during the summer of 2014. In addition to public demonstrations to draw attention to the situation of refugee women and children, a group of delegates visited several accommodations for asylum seekers in different German cities, where they spoke with female residents about their problems and concerns. Those women, who had already suffered the impacts of war and the traumatic experience of fleeing, are exposed to humiliating experiences, discrimination, and social exclusion in the host countries. Furthermore, even in Europe they are still exposed to violence and sexual harassment. After the obligatory period of up to three months in an "initial reception centre", where the procedures for asylum demand take place, refugees are accommodated in one of the two types of accommodation available in Germany: the "collective accommodation shelters", and the "decentralized accommodation (apartments)". However, there is no legal obligation to provide separate facilities for families, single

women or other vulnerable groups in the collective centres (Asylum Information Database, n.d.). After the tour, the women's organizations addressed a series of demands to the relevant authorities, including the abolishment of collective centres and the exclusive accommodation of refugees in apartments.

The centre develops specific activities focusing on young and older women. According to the United Nations (2011), the number of people aged 60 and over is increasing faster than at any other time in history. But the increase in numbers has also shed light on the lack of adequate protection mechanisms, policies and programmes to address the challenges faced by this age group. Poverty is the most pressing challenge to the welfare of older people, and it can reach dire levels when age is experienced alongside gender, ethnic, and health status discrimination. During the celebration of the International Women's Day in March 2014, the UTAMARA centre promoted an open conversation on the issue of poverty and older women. At this occasion, it focused on the negative consequences of the patriarchal structures on women's empowerment in economic life. Under the title "Poverty Among Old-Age Women: Working for a Lifetime and Aged Badly Off!?", women from different generations and ethnic backgrounds, many of them migrants, exchanged views and personal testimonies on interrupted work histories due to child-bearing and situations where they did not work due to cultural barriers. An action-oriented session, the discussion included potential solutions, such as alternative forms of housing, access to child care facilities, and part-time work.

Issues concerning young women were addressed in a weeklong summer camp organized in the same year. Women aged 15 to 25 years old, from different backgrounds, helped to organize and participated in various seminars and recreational activities. Seminars included discussions on sexism and prospects for action, self-confidence, "beauty" in capitalist societies, and conflicts on cultural identity. In regards to the last issue, many young women who are born or raised in Europe are more oriented to a "European way of life", which may conflict with traditional family values. Through UTAMARA's efforts, women learn about their rights - for example,

the prohibition of forced marriage - and are encouraged to study and learn a profession.

In accordance with the principles fostered by the women's liberation ideology: "changing men's mentality and life", UTAMARA promotes activities exclusively directed to men to support them to eliminate patriarchal attitudes and behaviour. A weekend seminar entitled "Strong Men Say NO to Bride Price and Forced Marriage" was organized in 2013. With 25 participants from different regions of the Middle East and varied age groups, the presentations were conducted in Kurdish, Turkish and Arabic, always making use of examples from everyday life. The discussions were divided in three panels: history of patriarchal oppression, forms of violence against women and their impacts on society; women's history and history of gender roles; and solutions to overcome violence in society today. As highlighted by the organizers, the seminar was specifically designed for men who reject violent behaviours and seek alternative options. This self-selection ensured their full involvement in the discussions of practical issues, such as bride price and forced marriage. Some even admitted to having requested payment for their daughters, but were open to reconsider it as a major factor contributing to domestic violence and gender inequality, which in its turn has a negative effect on society as a whole. The seminar was supported by the regional representative of the Ministry of Migration and Integration.

The centre's time-limited activities can germinate into long-term projects. For instance, the men's weekend seminar developed into the project "NO to Bride Price, Forced Marriage and Honour Killings!". Despite the efforts of various civil organizations and the government to prevent and combat violence against women, women and girls are still victims of these crimes in Germany. The project targets women in a vulnerable situation, particularly from the Middle East, whose religious and sociocultural backgrounds legitimize bride price, forced marriage and crimes in the name of "honour". It also targets their families (including men), and their environment. In total, the objectives of the project aim to impact 3000 people. Based on a participatory methodology, the disseminators of the project are women with migrant backgrounds who are capable of teaching intercultural skills. Although previous projects focused on the evaluation of trauma caused

by violence, war, and migration experiences, the current focuses on the prevention of the three forms of violence mentioned above. There are three main types of activities. Educational seminars, with discussions on the impacts and consequences of violence on the individual and social levels, are held for groups of women, men, and mixed gender groups. There also discussions on the mechanisms and possibilities in each municipality to prevent or intervene in cases of violence. The second is the work of press and public relations, which is done in partnership with the municipalities and with the inclusion of native languages, and aims at reaching a broader public. And third, the project works to establish a network of action through the participation of disseminators, specialists and existing institutions.

## CONCLUSION

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) emerged as a response to years of intensive repression of the Kurdish people. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the Kurds were deprived of territorial, cultural and political rights. The military coup of 1980 increased the repression, with thousands of people imprisoned and submitted to systematic torture. Within a context of political instability and authoritarianism, legal ways of organizing a national movement seemed exhausted, opening the path to armed resistance. The PKK rapidly gained broad popular support and evolved from a small clandestine organization into a powerful transnational social-political movement, including armed *guerrillas* (women and men), a media complex, and civil society organizations. The successful popular mobilization can be mainly attributed to three factors: its emergence as a supra-tribal resistance; the promotion of political education; and the commitment to gender equality. In the 2000s the PKK switched from being a party to a congressional system, abandoned the aim of an independent Kurdistan, and embraced the thesis of "democratic modernity", based on a democratic, ecological and gender-emancipatory system.

Based on the new paradigms, Ocalan developed a comprehensive approach to women's liberation. Besides the ideological discussions he encouraged women to surpass gender roles and create their own movements and institutions. This ideological framework is devoted to democratic values, such as secularism, women's empowerment and gender equality. Moreover, Ocalan directly addressed the fact that the transformation of men's patriarchal mentality is one of the most important steps to establish a democratic society.

In addition to the emergence of the PKK and its consolidation as a social-political movement, the Kurdish women's movement must be analysed in its transnational dimension. Due to Turkey's political situation and the historical denial of fundamental human rights of its Kurdish population, the "exile experience", particularly in Europe, was a key element in the establishment of a Kurdish women's liberation movement. The exile

experience led to the organization of women in a united front, from the *guerrilleras* on the battlefields to women's organizations in the diaspora.

Although supported by Ocalan, Kurdish women themselves struggled to convince men that they were equal comrades, and in doing so legitimized their full engagement in warfare. They successfully established the principle of gender parity in all levels of the representational system of the PKK, as well as in all political bodies and civil society organizations in the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Syria, and the diaspora. Two co-chairs, a man and a woman, head every organization. Moreover, women have established autonomous bodies.

The Kurdish women's movement, acting as a united front from Kurdistan to Europe, is engaged in a long-term process of transforming society. Organizations in the diaspora play a central role, committed to gaining international political influence and leveraging human rights conventions as a platform for dialogue. Furthermore, women were especially engaged in the transformation of the PKK into a socio-political movement from its roots as a military offensive, and they continue to play a major role in formulating Kurdish claims in universal terms backed up by human rights instruments.

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