



Parahyangan Catholic University
Faculty of Social and Political Sciences
Department of International Relations
Accredited A

SK BAN – PT NO: 3095/SK/BAN-PT/Akred/S/VIII/2019

**The Role of the Kurdish Independence Movement
in Shifting Women's Roles in North Syria**

Undergraduate Thesis
Proposed for the Undergraduate Thesis Defense

Written by
Dzaky Putra Wirahman
2017330127

Bandung
2021



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Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik
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The writer of this undergraduate thesis hereby states that this body of academic work is derived from his own original idea and academic process. This undergraduate thesis is a result of his research process as elaborated within the body of work itself, and that it is written to as a fulfilment of prerequisites needed to graduate from Parahyangan Catholic University's International Relations Bachelor's Degree program. This body of work is original and cites sources as per the legal and academic standards of referencing other bodies of work expected of a valid academic work.

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Bandung, 13 January 2021



Dzaky Putra Wirahman

Abstract

Name: Dzaky Putra Wirahman

Student Number: 2017330127

Title: **The Role of the Kurdish Independence Movement in Shifting Women's Roles in North Syria**

The Syrian Civil War is a protracted armed conflict that, as of the writing of this thesis, been ongoing since 2011. A de facto government that controls Northern Syria, also commonly known as Rojava, has been established. This quasi-state is administered by the PYD, a branch of the irredentist Kurdish Independence movement which since the early 1900s has tried to establish a sovereign nation state for the Kurdish people. The Kurds as an ethnic minority inhabit the region and are linguistically and culturally different from many other ethnic groups that are native to the Near East – and as such, they have a unique social structure. A long-established and well-attested facet of Kurdish society is the significance of women and their roles within Kurdish society. This research was conducted to answer the research question: **‘What role has the Kurdish independence movement played in Northern Syria to facilitate shifts in a woman’s role in society?’** Kurdish women enjoy a relatively higher degree of respect in society compared to women of other ethnic groups in the region. During the course of the civil war, the Rojava-based government has fielded thousands of volunteer women soldiers to fight in the frontlines, a rarity in Near Eastern societies. The Rojava government has also introduced communal decision-making reforms which necessitate more women’s involvement. This research, guided by the theoretical lens of constructivism, has found that radical cultural revisionism done by the PYD has changed many cultural and social aspects in Rojava society. This cultural revisionist movement is motivated to structural social changes, which has facilitated the shifting of a woman’s role in society.

Keywords: Syria, Kurd, Kurdish Nationalism, YPG, YPJ, PYD, Rojava, Women, Feminism, Syrian Civil War, culture, social change

Abstrak

Nama: Dzaky Putra Wirahman
NPM: 2017330127
Judul: Peran Gerakan Kemerdekaan Kurdi dalam pergeseran peran wanita di Suriah Utara

Perang Saudara Suriah adalah konflik bersenjata yang sejak 2011 hingga masa penulisan skripsi ini, masih berlangsung. Sebuah pemerintah *de facto* telah mengontrol daerah Suriah Utara, yang juga dikenal sebagai Rojava. Negara kuasi ini dikelola oleh PYD, cabang dari gerakan Kemerdekaan Kurdi yang sejak awal tahun 1900-an telah mencoba untuk mendirikan negara bangsa yang berdaulat bagi rakyat Kurdi. Suku Kurdi adalah etnis minoritas yang asli dari wilayah tersebut dan secara bahasa dan budaya berbeda dari banyak kelompok etnis lain yang berasal dari Timur Tengah – dan dengan demikian, mereka memiliki struktur sosial yang unik. Salah satu sisi unik masyarakat Kurdi yang sudah lama dikagumi dan terbukti adalah betapa pentingnya perempuan dan peran mereka dalam masyarakat Kurdi. Penelitian ini dilakukan guna menjawab pertanyaan penelitian: **‘Peran apa yang dimainkan oleh gerakan kemerdekaan Kurdi di Suriah Utara untuk memfasilitasi pergeseran peran wanita dalam masyarakat?’** Perempuan Kurdi menikmati tingkat penghormatan yang relatif lebih tinggi di masyarakat dibandingkan dengan perempuan dari kelompok etnis lain di wilayah tersebut. Selama perang saudara, pemerintah yang berpusat di Rojava telah menurunkan ribuan tentara perempuan sukarelawan untuk bertempur, hal yang jarang terjadi di masyarakat Timur Tengah. Pemerintah Rojava juga telah mengimplementasikan undang-undang yang memberi perempuan lebih banyak wewenang dalam proses pengambilan keputusan komunal. Penelitian yang menggunakan teoritis konstruktivisme ini menemukan bahwa revisionisme budaya radikal dilakukan oleh PYD telah mengubah banyak aspek dari budaya dan struktur masyarakat Rojava. Gerakan revisionis budaya ini dimotivasi oleh perubahan sosial struktural, yang telah memfasilitasi pergeseran peran perempuan dalam masyarakat.

Kata-kata Kunci: Suriah, Kurdi, Nasionalisme Kurdi, YPG, YPJ, PYD, Rojava, Perempuan, Feminisme, Perang Saudara Suriah, budaya, perubahan sosial

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List of Abbreviations

FSA	Free Syrian Army
HPG	Hêzên Parastina Gel, People's Defence Forces
IS	Islamic State
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
PKK	<i>Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê</i> , Kurdistan Worker's Party
PYD	<i>Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat</i> , Democratic Union Party
YJWK	<i>Yekitiya Jinên Welatperezên Kurdistan</i> , Union of Patriotic Women of Kurdistan
YPG	<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Gel</i> , People's Protection Unit
YPJ	<i>Yekîneyên Parastina Jin</i> , Women's Protection Unit

Preface

I have finally finished my undergraduate thesis after almost a year of research. This thesis, titled ‘The Role of the Kurdish Independence Movement in Shifting Women’s Roles in North Syria’. I have undergone the research using the lens of a wealth of knowledge and academic insight that can only be characterised as a culmination of 3 years of being in the International Relations program.

I chose this specific issue not just due to my long-standing interest in the Middle East Region and fascination toward the Kurdish people and their culture, but also because I see the universality of how this issue can be applicable in regards to how gender issues can have immeasurably positive effects on the world when taken very seriously. I used to be a person that scoff at the idea of highlighting gender issues, but thanks to undergoing this program in the first place, I was able to see the error of my ways of thinking and see that in order to impart positive change on the horrendously flawed status quo of society in general (wherever that may be), the issue of 50% of the world’s population should indeed be highlighted and thoroughly studied.

This research is not an airtight-perfect one as my academic capabilities dictate, and hence I will accept any forms of criticism regarding its substance and will hope to use said criticisms as means of further improving the material itself, and myself in the future regarding academic pursuits.

Bandung, 6th January 2021

Dzaky Putra Wirahman

Acknowledgements

Thought I'd end up with Son. But it wasn't a match. Wrote some songs about Velly, now I listen and laugh. Even almost got married, and for Titi I'm so thankful. Wish I could say thank you to Mega, cause she was an angel. Ok seriously, writing this part was no walk in the park. I can only gloss over and not write as much as I'd like for fear of this devolving into its own subchapter but here goes.

Firstly of course, I want to thank my family for their untiring love and support. Thank you Mama, Papap, Alita and Aya for not disowning me no matter how many times I mess up – hope I can finally make you guys proud eventually.

For my esteemed educator, Mba Nophie, I want to thank you so much for not only having the patience to bear with me as a thesis counsellor, but also for imparting immeasurable change in even the way I perceive the world. Gender studies class actually changed my perception of the world in the long run and has made me a better person for it.

Other Unpar-based lecturers I want to thank especially on the grounds of somewhat more personal connections I have made with include Mas Nara, Mas Apres, Mba Sylvia, Mas Pur, Mas Gi, Mba Prisca and Mas Syarif. I may be just one of the countless faces you have taught over the years, but I personally feel we connected a little more than that on a character-development basis – but maybe that's just me.

I want to thank my cute little de facto 'circle' of Syrian delegates – they have been more friends than just group work partners to me over the years. Ahoy my fellow South BDG king, you're definitely one of the most fun introverts I've ever met. BT my little brother, proud of how far you developed since semester 1, glad to have played a part in it. Cilla my badass gal, our relationship of outwardly intimidating pirate-and-terrorist is so underrated. Dana my unintentional comic relief, I am so blessed to have met and learn from a guy as multidimensional and willing to learn as you. Dea my little daughter figure, I'm so glad you've been able to throw away toxic from your life to accommodate better people in the long run. Helmut my edgelord game-master, I've always been grateful to have you as a friend and I genuinely think you're more awesome and kingly than you let on. Meggi my mei guan

xi dispenser, you're a great person who's way smarter, stronger and lovable than you make yourself out to be. Last but not least Aldi my cinnamon roll, the most helpful, tender, warm sweetheart around and I hope all the best to you for whatever you want to do.

I want to thank Nadya for her time with me where I learned to love myself more overtime and giving me so much needed love and confidence in a time where I felt I was nothing but a failure. I want to thank Sonia who still does linger in the back of my heart despite everything. Never has a person impacted me so much in so little time.

I want to thank Vinanti for being an amazing sister-like figure to me and always being there to support me and help prop me up, even at my lowest points. I want to thank Efraim for being such a good friend who is such an inspiration but also a healthy competitor whom I can rely on as also a wholesome yet challenging conversation partner.

Speaking of challenging, insightful conversations I want to thank the amazing women I've had the pleasure of even knowing: Deandra C.R., Jessica Ruth, Eugenia Effendy and Gaby Alva for also being such great conversation partners who have helped me grow as a person from your perspectives alone. Thanks for ensuring this hetero CIS dude ain't ever going to fall back into the rabbit hole of American-centric conservatism.

I want to thank some great people who have befriended me, even since the earlier days of me being an awkward, fish-out-of-water Unparian: Tasyar, Wener, Rafi, Velly, Gibral and Dapol especially come to mind. I know we don't spend much time as much as we used to because we've each found social circles we 'click' more with. I want to thank y'all for befriending the weird foreigner and y'all know I always got love for y'all.

I have very dear friends across the seas that I also want to thank for their continued closeness to me despite our great physical distance. Pasha, my fellow 'lost Indo' who I always see as an intelligent, fun, insightful conversation partner. I hope we get to have Nasi Padang together again soon! Spaseeba Roman, the big brother I never had for your continued support and kindness despite the strangeness that is me. Last but not least I want to thank Emir, one of the people I've had the pleasure of growing up with and watching develop. This thesis' content is partly dedicated to you of course and you know it.

Chapter I

Introduction

1.1 Background

The Syrian government, as of February 2020 have managed to wrest back control of the country's territories. This current upper hand however is preceded by a period of anarchy whereupon government of its sovereign territory was limited to only a few concentrated areas while the much of the country was ruled by a collection of armed factions that form quasi-states.¹

Among these numerous factions that took advantage of the chaos to build a power base, was the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). ISIL itself is a part of the Islamic State (IS) organisation which has defined itself to be an international terror syndicate operating in various other states from Libya to Indonesia. IS aimed to establish a global Islamic Caliphate under its leadership, and has radicalised many civilians the world over to commit terror acts and even travel to Syria in order to become frontline fighters in their campaign to dominate Syria and Iraq.²

¹ Kareem Shaheen, "String of Losses in Syria Leaves Assad Regime Increasingly Precarious," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, June 11, 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/11/syria-losses-east-assad-regime-precarious>

² Organizing A training course atc countering isis radicalisation activities through the cyberspace [tender documents : T38026662]. 2017. *MENA Report* (Feb 27), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1890782132?accountid=31495> (accessed March 1, 2020).

At their peak in May of 2015, ISIL claimed a territory of 100,000 square kilometers – an area larger than the state of South Korea.³ Seen by virtually every sovereign nation state in the world as a terrorist organisation, ISIL operated like a rogue state within the areas they control in a similar fashion the Taliban controlled much of Afghanistan in the late 1990s – taxing citizens, regulating economic activities, controlling municipal governments and implementing their extreme form of Islamic Sharia law.⁴

Many civilians were victimised by the ISIL regime as much of their liberties were taken away by ISIL’s strict interpretation of Islamic Sharia law. For instance, women were not allowed to be in public without a male guardian, and apostasy and drunkenness were offences that have capital punishment prescribed for them.⁵ Aside from such draconian laws, the issue of ISIL’s abduction of ethnic and religious minority women to be made into sex slaves are well-documented and made various headlines worldwide.⁶ Such laws and policies implemented by ISIL’s rogue-state governance can be seen as not only a feature of Islamist extremism, but also a feature

³ Jones, Seth G., James Dobbins, Daniel Byman, Christopher S. Chivvis, Ben Connable, Jeffrey Martini, Eric Robinson, and Nathan Chandler, *Rolling Back the Islamic State*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1912.html. Also available in print form.

⁴ “The Raqqa Diaries: Life under Isis Rule,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, February 26, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/26/the-raqqa-diaries-life-under-isis-rule-samer-mike-thomson-syria>)

⁵ “The Raqqa Diaries: Life under Isis Rule,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, February 26, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/26/the-raqqa-diaries-life-under-isis-rule-samer-mike-thomson-syria>)

⁶ Nadia Murad, “I Was an Isis Sex Slave. I Tell My Story Because It Is the Best Weapon I Have | Nadia Murad,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, October 6, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/06/nadia-murad-isis-sex-slave-nobel-peace-prize>)

of extremely misogynistic governance that can only be a result of a pre-existing patriarchal culture.

One of the most defining aspects of the Middle Eastern region is a strong adherence of patriarchal cultures and social orders in the region by most of its populations from various ethnicities. Patriarchy is a social system whereupon males have an inherent advantage over females in terms of social, economic and political mobility. Such a social system is often characterised by favouritism of the male gender, expected subservience from female members of society, and a predisposition to have male members of society be the default leaders and decision-makers for entire communities or even polities.⁷

Misogyny in patriarchal culture is a symptom as the diminishing of a woman's status in a society is done in order to enforce the male-oriented patriarchy espoused by said culture. One of the traditions that could be labelled as misogynistic in nature is that women were not to speak to their father-in-law during the earlier stages of their new marriage. This was a traditional obligation that was meant to be done to honour her new family, and her silence could only be broken once she gains the approval of her husband's family by way of housekeeping, bearing children or contributing to the household's primary means of livelihood.⁸

⁷ Abdullah Öcalan, in *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (Cologne: International Initiative, 2013), p. 4.

⁸ Michael Gunter, "Gender Issues in Kurdistan," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, January 1, 2020, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2019/12/30/gender-issues-in-kurdistan/>.

1.2 Identification of the Issue

Kurdish society holds elements of both patriarchal, and to a degree, matriarchal tendencies. As has been attested by Western scholars, Kurdish women enjoy more degree of freedom and emancipation compared to their Arab, Turkish and Persian counterparts. For instance, a very commonly known phenomenon is that Kurdish women were not made to wear the Chador veil that covers their faces. Women are also allowed to travel freely without the guardianship of a male, something that is all too common with the many other neighbouring ethnicities that live alongside the Kurds in their traditional homelands. Kurdish women are also free to marry the woman whom they choose, and it is common for Kurdish women to freely marry those outside their own tribe or community out of their own desire. Polygamy, a practice common in Arab, Turkish and Persian societies of the pre-20th century was also rare in Kurdish communities.⁹

However, this does not necessarily mean that the Kurdish traditional society is completely free of misogynistic traditions. Misogynistic traditions in Kurdish culture, as is often the case with misogyny in any other culture, exists as a means to exert domination over women by placing them imbuing them with lower prestige and power solely for the fact that they are women. Traditional Kurdish culture may have some matriarchal aspects, but it is by and large a patriarchal culture.¹⁰ Domestic

⁹ Ibid: 109.

¹⁰ Abdullah Öcalan, in *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (Cologne: International Initiative, 2013), p. 13.

violence against women is also an issue that happens within Kurdish communities. Although Kurdish women are often free to choose their spouses out of love, forced marriages still happen in many cases, particularly in the pre-20th century and especially so during the Ottoman Empire's regime. This is due to the fact that the Ottoman Empire codified family laws based on the traditional conservative interpretation of gender roles in Islam throughout their territories.¹¹

In a region that predominantly practices and enforces a strongly patriarchal social order, the appearance of the YPJ is an oddity. Women have traditionally not taken up arms and fought wars in the Middle East as the local cultures typically view women to not have a place in the battlefield.¹² The YPJ's uniqueness lies not only as its identity as a female-only militia group, but also the fact that it is sponsored by some sort of government, albeit not an internationally recognised one, and also the fact that it has often spearheaded military operations as opposed to being reserved for other purposes of war such as logistics. The fact that the YPJ has also recruited women from other nationalities, have shown that the Middle Eastern norm of not having women fill fighting roles in war is at least, in the local context of Northern Syria, changing.

¹¹ Lokman I. Meho and Kelly L. Maglaughlin, in *Kurdish Culture and Society* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001): 78.

¹² Bengio, Ofra. 2016. Game changers: Kurdish women in peace and war. *The Middle East Journal* 70, (1) (Winter): 30-46, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1758013076?accountid=31495> (accessed February 20, 2020).

This surge of foreigners coming to Rojava to fight in the ranks of the YPG and YPJ is due to a range of factors such as the fact that the belligerent being fought against is the globally despised IS and the fact that the Rojava government promises to bring about a just democracy within their territories.¹³ Countless media have reported the triumphs of the Rojava government against IS, further providing incentives for foreigners to swell the YPG and YPJ's ranks. The promise of a democracy to be implemented in such a turbulent region is also another factor in bringing recruits into the Rojava fold. The Rojava government has even joined a coalition force called the Syrian Democratic Front, further highlighting their idealistic side.¹⁴

The case of the YPJ in recruiting and arming women to fight frontline roles against Islamist insurgents may be seen as an endemic, context-specific case due to the scale of the IS insurgencies and the global fear they have created.¹⁵ However, that does not make the case any less interesting as the YPJ fighters have not only managed to score victories on the battlefield, but also reshape the way people view the conflict from around the globe. Idealistic recruits may view the involvement of women in fighting IS as a good enough incentive to join the ranks of the YPG and YPJ.

¹³ Romano, David, and Hussein Tahiri. 2009. The structure of kurdish society and the struggle for a kurdish state. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41, (2) (05): 346-347, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/195600366?accountid=31495> (accessed February 20, 2020).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The common general perception of women in conflict zones have been in the light of them being victims. Especially in a region like the Middle East where the indigenous culture is strongly patriarchal and women often take a sort of backseat role in many walks of life.¹⁶ The active involvement of the YPJ has shown to many observers not only the complicated nature of the region and its conflicts. The phenomenon has also shown that in a state of anarchy, new actors with new ideologies can fill some power vacuum to assume control over security matters and reshape the way the society works in the area.

The issue being analysed in this research pertains mostly to the cultural and social changes that occur in the context of Kurdish society and how women are perceived in them. Women's roles have also shifted as the Syrian Civil War progressed since its outbreak in 2011. This academic research delves into the social and cultural implications that are exerted by newly-introduced concepts within the Kurdish society of Northern Syria and other Kurdish populations in adjacent regions and countries. The main objects of analysis in the conduct of this research are Kurdish women's roles in society and how they have been affected by the introduction of the new ideas that will be elaborated in Chapter 2.

¹⁶ Dirik, Dilar. 2017. Self-defense means political autonomy! the Women's movement of kurdistan envisioning and pursuing new paths for radical democratic autonomy. *Development* 60, (1-2) (09): 74, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2053754587?accountid=31495> (accessed February 20, 2020).

1.2.1 Issue Limitation

The issue at hand, that being the shifts in gender roles for women of Northern Syria, is going to be narrowed down to examination of how the Kurdish Independence movement has played a role in said shifts. This research intends to descriptively analyse the way certain social and cultural shifts actively promoted by the Kurdish independence movement has resulted in more wide-reaching gender role shifts in Northern Syria specifically.

The research focuses on the region of Northern Syria because said region has become the epicentre of what has been termed as the ‘Rojava Revolution’ wherein the Syrian chapter of the Kurdish independence movement has asserted some control over the area and implemented socialist democracy with feminist ideas being one of the guiding principles in its governance. The research also chooses to limit the examination of this phenomenon to the time prior to the Turkish incursions of the area which began in 2019. This is because said Turkish military acts have dismantled many of the Kurdish independence movement’s established bodies of governance and social institutions – therefore either limiting the effects said institutions has had in shifting a woman’s role in society, or even undoing them altogether using military coercion.

1.2.2 Research Question

Based on the issue at hand, the research question formulated here is **‘What role has the Kurdish independence movement played in Northern Syria to facilitate shifts in a woman’s role in society?’**

1.3 Aim and Use of the Research

1.3.1 Aim of Research

This research hopes to shed further light into the intricacies of the driving force behind female Kurdish fighters that assume combat roles in Northern Syria. Much media coverage regarding their military victories give only one aspect of their role – as frontline combatants in an armed conflict. Historical, social and cultural contexts are often not focused on in much of the media coverage. This research delves into the three aforementioned factors more deeply in order to comprehensively describe the driving force behind the rise of female combatants.

1.3.2 Potential Use of Research

This research can hopefully exemplify how an array of social, historical and cultural factors influence the shift in gender roles within a society. By choosing to focus on the headline-grabbing Kurdish case, this research hopes to amplify the importance of how certain political movements can shift gender roles, even in regions where gender roles are rigidly enforced through centuries of culture, social norms and even laws.

1.4 Literature Review and Framework

1.4.1 Literature Review

For this research, three literatures were studied and analysed for review purposes. The three literatures in question are the journal articles *Game Changers: Kurdish Women in Peace and War* from *The Middle East Journal* by Ofra Bengio, *The Core of Resistance: Recognising Intersectional Struggle in the Kurdish Women's Movement* from the *Contexto Internacional* by Bruna Ferreira and Vinicius Santiago and *Self-Defense Means Political Autonomy! The Women's Movement of Kurdistan Envisioning and Pursuing New Paths for Radical Democratic Autonomy* from *Houndmills Development* by Dilar Dirik.

In Ofra Bengio's *Game Changers: Kurdish Women in Peace and War* the role of women in Kurdish society is explained to be relatively less repressed than the role of women in their neighbouring Arab, Turkish and Iranian societies. Bengio expressed that this notion has long existed since even before the surge of academic literature about the Kurds in 2001.¹⁷ However she also argues that the notion of truly 'liberated' Kurdish women has long existed due to Western scholars that romanticise the Kurds in general. In reality, the experiences of Kurdish women and the roles they assume in society are very much dependent on the context of where they live and which religious background they hail from. It is noted that conservative countryside-

¹⁷ Bengio, Ofra. 2016. Game changers: Kurdish women in peace and war. *The Middle East Journal* 70, (1) (Winter): 30-46, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1758013076?accountid=31495> (accessed February 20, 2020).

born Muslim Kurdish women tend to share similarly repressed lives not dissimilar to the ones lived by Arab and Turkish women. Traditional Kurdish society is still patriarchal and therefore to an extent, repressive toward women. In more urbanised areas however, the role of Kurdish women in society is more greatly varied as the context of living in a city has given them, along with many other women from different ethnic backgrounds more flexibility in terms of the education they can attain and their economic opportunities. Occasionally, Kurdish women are even noted to have attained a high government office which is usually a product of Ottoman laws which does not prohibit women from inheriting their husband's position in certain territorial divisions. Bengio then argues that the main game changer in Kurdish female emancipation is the rise of Kurdish nationalism. The foundations of the Kurdish nationalist movement were rooted in Marxist doctrines which uphold egalitarianism. The ideologue of the Kurdish nationalist movement, Abdallah Ocalan is even noted to have directly state that female emancipation is of utmost importance in order to build his idealised Kurdish nation. The Kurdish nationalist movement therefore complements the drive for female emancipation. This complementary relationship however, Bengio argues is not an oddity in the context of the developing world. This is due to the fact that nationalist movements in said places often try to break the mould of a conservative, traditional social order. This condition hence became a prime precondition to enable the rise of female empowerment in a region typically seeped in strongly patriarchal traditions.

In *The Core of Resistance: Recognising Intersectional Struggle in the Kurdish Women's Movement*, Bruna Ferreira and Vinicius Santiago argues that Kurdish women's self-agency to liberate themselves and take up more roles in society is a byproduct of encountering complex systems of oppression.¹⁸ Ferreira and Santiago stated that the difficulties faced by many Kurdish women aside from misogyny are very much a systemic problem complemented by socioeconomic class issues and the overall discrimination faced by Kurds in general. The paper stated that Kurdish women have been sidelined by the main players of Kurdish independence. The PKK has attempted to implement systematic egalitarianism which was hoped to be the remedy to the sexism Kurdish women face. However, many Kurdish women face difficulties after they participate in politics by being full members of the PKK. One of the overarching difficulties come from the fact that the PKK are viewed as terrorists by the Turkish government, which then complemented the pre-existing sexism these women face in the first place. Another issue is on a more domestic level, as Kurdish women who actively participate in these political movements are shunned or even outright marginalised by their own families. This latter problem is more pronounced in rural, more traditional Kurdish communities. This intersectional problem encountered by Kurdish women has resulted in a stronger sense of self-agency that culminated in the creation of Kurdish female movements such as the YPJ. The YPJ in this case is a byproduct of Kurdish women that take it upon themselves to create an

¹⁸ Ferreira, Bruna, and Vinicius Santiago. 2018. The core of resistance: Recognising intersectional struggle in the kurdish women's movement. *Contexto Internacional* 40, (3) (Sep): 479-500, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2242710297?accountid=31495> (accessed February 20, 2020).

organisation that seek to bypass the many systemic prejudices they face. Ferreira and Santiago also credited the women of the YPJ as being true heirs of women who joined the PKK almost half a century prior. The women who joined the PKK overcame great barriers in the form of conservative centuries-old patriarchal traditions. The women of the YPJ on the other hand are literal frontline fighters in a struggle for national self-determination and a challenge to the notion of masculinity being part and parcel of an armed struggle. The idea of the female YPJ fighters is also, according to Ferreira and Santiago, a challenge to the common foundational perceptions of modern nation-building, which they argue is usually very much male-oriented and male-dominated in nature.

The last literature is *Self-Defense Means Political Autonomy! The Women's Movement of Kurdistan Envisioning and Pursuing New Paths for Radical Democratic Autonomy* by Dilar Dirik. In this journal article, Dirik argues that the armed Kurdish women's movement in Northern Syria, Iraq and Southeastern Turkey is a manifestation of the female frustration against extremely patriarchal organisations such as ISIL and the increasingly tyrannical Erdogan regime in Turkey along with the injustices they bring about against women.¹⁹ Dirik states that the women's movement in the Kurdish context have been in many areas that range from the militaristic YPJ to the much older Union of Patriotic Women of Kurdistan (YJWK). These

¹⁹ Dirik, Dilar. 2017. Self-defense means political autonomy! the Women's movement of kurdistan envisioning and pursuing new paths for radical democratic autonomy. *Development* 60, (1-2) (09): 74, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2053754587?accountid=31495> (accessed February 20, 2020).

organisations, according to Dirik are reactionary in nature due to the many injustices that women face in the region that encompasses Southeastern Turkey, Northern Syria and Northern Iraq: in other words, the hypothetical lands of 'Kurdistan'. Within the context of female combatants fighting against IS, Dirik argues that the drive to take up arms is not only reactionary to IS' many atrocities against women, but also a culmination of a long-existing wave of feminism that has always inherently existed within the Kurdish independence movement. The idea of breaking down traditional norms to allow women to fill combat roles may be a pragmatic solution implemented to bolster the ranks of the armed wing of the Kurdish independence movement. It is also done in order to exact an air of inclusivity that the Kurdish independence movement hopes to achieve, which would serve to its benefit as it stands in stark contrast to the usually exclusivity-ridden regimes of the region. By having women fill combat roles and participate in politics, it also bolsters a more clear-cut political leverage for the Kurdish independence movement in context to the way the world sees them.

Overall, the three literatures describe in detail the role women have in the Kurdish independence movement and the conflict that surrounds it – particularly the one against IS in Northern Syria. Bengio's historical approach to explaining female roles in Kurdish society and the subsequent independence movement gives deeper insight the long-term context of how Kurdish women differ from their neighbouring Arab and Turk women. Bengio then credits the inclusivity of the Kurdish

independence movement as being a prominent feature in a developing world's nation building. This is then contradicted by Ferreira and Santiago's paper which then highlights the overall struggle women have in Kurdish society and the larger society as a whole. Ferreira and Santiago's paper suggests that the aforementioned struggle is then the very thing that kickstarted the high level of self-agency Kurdish women have which then culminated to the formation of the YPJ. This outlook is, in a way, supported by the third literature by Dirik, that also affirms the idea of the Kurdish women's movement as being a reactionary movement that emerged in light of a tyrannical patriarchy that has rooted itself within the region. Dirik's statement differs than Ferreira and Santiago as Dirik states that much of the reaction is aimed toward strongly patriarchal organisations and increasingly repressive governments, whereas the latter argued that instead of being purely reactionary and belligerent, the movement also came forth due to a strong sense of self-agency in the part of the Kurdish women themselves. These three literatures have given differing views on the emergence of the Kurdish female fighters and the YPJ: with Bengio taking on a historical approach, Ferreira and Santiago taking on a social-psychology approach and Dirik taking on a critical postmodernist approach.

This writer believes that in keeping in mind the three literatures that has been reviewed above, a comprehensive, multifaceted interpretation of the issue at hand will be produced. The three literatures exhibit a degree of utmost importance for history, social-psychology and postmodern critical thinking which attempts to dissect the

philosophical aspects that fuel the political and ideological components of the issue. This range of diversity of the literatures in question is something this writer believes is what is most necessary in order to have a steady referential framework heading into the depth of this research. The writer believes that by cross-referencing from the three differing focuses offered by the literature pertaining the issue of Kurdish female fighters, a better degree of triangulated objectivity regarding any conclusions made in this research can be achieved.

The writer has identified that the three literatures, despite providing multifaceted perspectives on the subject matter lacks a conclusive explanation on the role the Kurdish Independence Movement has played in shifting a woman's role in society. This research gap is the very thing that this research is designed to explain with descriptive analysis.

1.4.2 Theoretical Framework: Constructivism

The main social theory that is used to systemise the analysis of this research is Constructivism. This theory is derived heavily from epistemology, a school of science dedicated to the in-depth analysis of how knowledge is processed, derived and produced through human rationale.²⁰ Constructivism, as an International

²⁰ Catherine Twomey. Fosnot, *Constructivism: Theory, Perspectives, and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005): 14.

Relations theory, was first put forth by Nicholas Onuf in 1989. The theory postulates that the international order is shaped by what he terms as ‘the world of our making’.²¹

Onuf postulates that concepts that are often regarded as ‘social facts’ such as language, culture, beliefs, norms and traditions are inherently manmade concepts which as a whole constructs the ‘world of our making’. Anything outside of these concepts are what he considers as ‘brute facts’ which are in other words things that occur even without any human intervention, creation or factor. The brute facts according to Onuf would inherently shape the human condition, but mostly on a primordial instinctual level. The social facts however, especially in the context of a modern society, is the primary factor that influences how an individual rationalises the world and designate themselves in terms of what role or position they themselves have in the world.²²

Onuf’s theory of constructivism postulates that because social constructs are inherently primary components in shaping an individual’s understanding of the world, it means that said constructs also influence the nature of international politics. International politics is shaped by the domestic politics of the involved states, and according to Onuf, said politics are in turn the product of the society’s rationalisation and navigating of the ‘world of our making’ that he purports. Therefore to understand the nature of international politics itself, Onuf proposes that a close examination of

²¹ Nicholas Onuf, in *Making Sense, Making Worlds Constructivism in Social Theory and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 23.

²² Ibid: 45.

social constructs and even deconstructing them are very important steps in order to really understand the basic foundational nature of social orders.²³

For instance, according to Onuf, dissection of a language is important to further understand how users of said language rationalises the facts they are confronted with. By delving into the foundational rationale of how certain things are designated specific names and labels, Onuf posits that it provides an understanding of the language user's inherent bias and interpretation of the subject at hand.²⁴ Other foundational social constructs Onuf believes should be examined to provide a better understanding of the society at large is identity.

1.4.3 Theoretical Framework: Feminist Constructivism

For the purpose of this research, the writer has chosen to focus primarily on scrutinising the identity of being a woman. Hence, to build upon the previous theoretical framework, the writer has chosen to include also the framework of Feminist Constructivism.

Feminist Constructivism is a theory which merges the epistemologically-based theory of constructivism, along with Feminism. Feminism, as an ideology, posits that women are inherently subject to being treated as being 'lesser' than men because of their gender identity. This theory also posits that social constructs that are built upon a patriarchal model of society would perpetuate this inequality between

²³ Ibid: 28.

²⁴ Ibid: 67.

men and women.²⁵ Using this lens of perspective, Feminist scholars have built upon it to result in the theory of Feminist Constructivism that was postulated by Birgit Locher and Elisabeth Prügl as a Feminism-infused addition and also critique to Constructivism as an International Relations theory.²⁶

Locher and Prügl argued that in order to properly be able to deconstruct social facts, the lens of Feminism is necessary. This is because societies have segregated different genders to differing roles and hierarchies in society. Locher and Prügl postulated that while Constructivism tend to focus on the ontology of social facts in a positivist epistemological lens, it fails to focus on gender differences and the discrepancies social hierarchical and power structures have in affecting politics.²⁷

In Feminist Constructivism, focusing on the way a society shapes itself and designate certain roles and hierarchies to different genders is key to fully deconstructing the way a society's power dynamics operate – which in turn can provide a more clear explanation in the way said society's politics influence international politics in general. By being able to tackle this social fact of gender segregation, Feminist Constructivism attempts to provide a better understanding on gender roles and how it has affected the way international politics work.²⁸

²⁵ Chris Beasley, *What Is Feminism?: an Introduction to Feminist Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2011).

²⁶ Birgit Locher and Elisabeth Prügl, "Feminism And Constructivism: Worlds Apart Or Sharing The Middle Ground?," *International Studies Quarterly* 45 (2001): pp. 111-129.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

1.4.4 Conceptual Framework: Gender Roles

Gender Roles are social roles that have been pre-mediated to be deemed acceptable, normalised and expected for a person based on their gender identity. With gender roles, a certain gender is therefore socially expected to fulfil a certain function that is explicitly normalised and therefore to be expected in order for said society to operate as it is expected to.

Gender Roles are often enforced on a social and cultural level, although in certain instances, the state also codifies laws and regulations that seek to maintain this classification of social roles. Within Gender Roles, certain vocations and professions are often heavily skewed to be fulfilled by a specific gender, and breaking of said expectations can result in some sort of social shunning or even outright discriminatory acts. This is because breaking gender roles can often be interpreted by the society as ‘breaking traditions’ and the social order itself, which is often then associated with derogative conditions such as ‘anarchy’ or ‘degeneracy’.²⁹

Gender Roles not only rigidly dictate what kind of vocation, profession or social roles people of certain genders are, but it also influences power structure and relations. Due to Gender Roles often designating certain genders to fill specific positions in society, a certain gender can therefore be predisposed to have immediate advantages. This is because if certain roles are only expected to be filled by one

²⁹ Chris Beasley, *What Is Feminism?: an Introduction to Feminist Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2011): 71.

specific gender, and that position grants the holder of said position power, it would then mean automatically that said gender will inherently be occupying a position of power in said society.

1.4.5 Conceptual Framework: Jineology

Jineology, otherwise also known as the science of women, is the feminist ideology adopted by the Kurdish Nationalist movement.³⁰ The concept was originally termed by Abdullah Öcalan, one of the main progenitors of the modern Kurdish Nationalist movement. As have been mentioned in the previous sub-chapter, the Kurdish Nationalist movement's primary vanguard is a Marxist-thinking movement. As expected from a Marxist-thinking movement, universal egalitarianism is a point of view that is highly espoused by Kurdish nationalists. Abdullah Öcalan, the former leader of the PKK has even espoused for a complete restructuring of gender roles in society, even famously stating that "a country can't be free unless the women are free".³¹ Due to this belief, Öcalan, the PKK and many other elements of the Kurdish Nationalist movement advocate for the concept of Jineology.

In practice, Jineology is implemented by the abolishment of strongly patriarchal traditions by Kurdish Nationalist movements wherever they hold autonomy, be it Syria or Iraq. The Rojava government for instance has illegalised

³⁰ Ferreira, Bruna, and Vinícius Santiago. 2018. The core of resistance: Recognising intersectional struggle in the kurdish women's movement. *Contexto Internacional* 40, (3) (Sep): 479-500, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2242710297?accountid=31495> (accessed February 20, 2020).

³¹ Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 2006): 29.

forced marriages, polygamy, female genital mutilation and the practice of honour killing.³² In addition to this, Kurdish community centres throughout Turkey and Syria teaches Jineology as a concept, incorporating elements of self-defence also in the teaching process for women to protect themselves from the unfortunately common crimes of rape and honour killings they are often targeted in. In terms of decision-making, Jineology is implemented in the community level as in Kurdish-controlled Rojava, the community decisions are also required to involve at least 40% women's vote. In addition to education and legal implementation, perhaps the most sensationalised component of Jineology in action is the formation of the YPJ itself.³³ It is important to note that the YPJ's very etymology means 'Women's Protection Unit'. Although like the YPG, they are known to battle their opponents whom they view would harm any people of any gender or identity, the YPJ has also become a safe haven in a sense for women who seek to escape difficult family situations and forced marriages. Many such vulnerable women flock to the ranks of the YPJ as either volunteer militias or filling the many support roles such as logistics and management that is required for such a cohesive military force to function in the first place.³⁴

³² Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Syrian Kurds Tackle Conscription, Underage Marriages and Polygamy," ARA News, November 16, 2016, <http://aranews.net/files/2016/11/syrian-kurds-tackle-underage-marriages-polygamy/>.

³³ Evangelos Aretaios, "The Rojava Revolution," openDemocracy, March 15, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/rojava-revolution/>

³⁴ Bengio, Ofra. 2016. Game changers: Kurdish women in peace and war. *The Middle East Journal* 70, (1) (Winter): 30-46, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1758013076?accountid=31495> (accessed February 20, 2020).

The reception of Jineology amongst local communities however has been a mixed bag. Although many women, mainly Kurdish women and war widows have been very much accepting and affirming of these ideas, many of the more conservative-minded sections of local communities are not as receptive. This is primarily due to not only the fact that the very concept of Jineology aims to tackle the status quo of gender roles in a region dominated by predominantly strong patriarchal cultures, but also because Jineology seeks to dismantle the traditional notion of 'honour'.³⁵ Abdullah Öcalan purports that the idea of a woman's 'honour' is in fact a form of misogyny meant to be internalised by the patriarchal society that seek to continue colonising women and all, if any, emancipatory rights they have. Öcalan states that the idea of honour as interpreted in the many contemporary Kurdish societies of the Near East is nothing more but a form of masculinity that victimises women for the male's own shortcomings. Phenomena such as honour killings and wide-scale, long-term family and tribal feuds that erupted due to some form of 'lost honour' because of a woman's sexual activity or otherwise is a symptom of the colonising nature of a patriarchal society that thrives on a strongly male-oriented order and use women as scapegoats for disputes and insecurities that often have little to do with the woman herself.³⁶ This, according to Öcalan, is done to preserve a repressive order within hierarchical societies the world over as his main argument states that any societies where women cannot be free, is therefore unable to free itself.

³⁵ Abdullah Öcalan, in *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (Cologne: International Initiative, 2013), p. 23.

³⁶ Ibid: 40.

Overall, as have been narrated in this chapter, the Kurds are an ethnic group with a wide range of unique characteristics that dichotomises them from other neighbouring ethnic groups in the Near East. The Kurdish culture also places a level of significance on women that is not seen in other ethnic groups in the region. Moreover, the introduction of the concept of Jineology incorporated by the Kurdish Nationalist movement has further placed the status of women in Kurdish society, especially in Rojava, to be further elevated and warranting of more respect. In the next chapter, the writer will be analysing the cultural and social changes within the Syrian Kurd society that have taken place due to the dissemination of relatively new ideas like Jineology and the impacts of the protracted armed conflict that has taken place in Syria since 2011.

1.5 Research Method and Data Collection Technique

1.5.1 Research Method

This research uses a qualitative method in order to reach as conclusive and detailed an answer. Using descriptive analysis, data that has been gathered are compiled into a series of interpreted, detailed parameters. This was hoped to have yielded a comprehensive description of the role of the YPJ female fighters in Rojava.

1.5.2 Data Collection Technique

This research relies predominantly on literature analysis. Scholarly journal articles, books and credible media sources are the data collected to then be analysed. For the purposes of understanding the Kurdish cultural shifts, it is also of utmost importance that analysis of Kurdish-written accounts and texts are to be treated as primary sources. It is important to note that the media sources that are taken into account are to be media companies that are not based in Turkey or Middle Eastern countries due to them having an already negative branding of the Kurdish independence movement, which would then result in strongly biased, and very possibly inaccurate data.

1.5.3 Systemisation of Research

This research is systemised in such a way that the constructivism theory is used as a framework for analysing the social and cultural shifts that occur which affects Kurdish women in Syrian society to take up arms and play a more active role in securitising the Northern Syrian region of Rojava. Historic explanations and sociological theories such as Feminism are also going to be used in order to conclude a more comprehensive explanation regarding the past and present roles of Kurdish women.