

Women in Rojava between the Governance Philosophy of Syrian Kurdistan and the Utopia of Öcalanism

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Abstract

Kurdish women are often portrayed as among the freest when compared to women in other Muslim societies, yet a central debate remains as to whether this—particularly in the Syrian context—results from the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan or from remnants of older matriarchal traditions. Scholarly assessments are divided: external (non-Kurdish) researchers sometimes offer more generalized and positive conclusions, including references to Vladimir Minorsky’s claim that attitudes toward women serve as an indicator of a people’s moral order. Nonetheless, Kurdish society, like many traditional societies in the Middle East, remains structurally patriarchal. In Iraq and Turkey, more negative practices are frequently reported—such as female genital mutilation and so-called honor killings—often explained by the longer historical entrenchment of Kurdish communities in those regions. The study situates gender relations within a historical-sociological framework, tracing the impact of the Ottoman period and earlier political formations. During the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras, political authority in the Islamic world was often exercised by non-Arab elites, which in certain cases enabled aristocratic women to participate in philanthropy, education, and institution-building (e.g., mosque-schools). The Ottoman arrangements for governing Kurdish regions (1514–1851) strengthened tribal and clan-based structures, in which loyalty to lineage competed with religious loyalty and social order was regulated through custom and sanction. This produced a paradox: relatively freer social interaction between the sexes could coexist with strict codes of “honor” and severe penalties disciplining women’s sexuality and behavior. Focusing on Syria, the analysis highlights the importance of education and political regimes. While there are examples of women’s activity in religiously based schooling (al-katatib), women’s systematic marginalization was reinforced by limited access to education and the dominance of formalistic religious-legal interpretations. After the Ba’ath Party came to power (1963–2024), discriminatory policies toward Kurds—especially the consequences of the 1962 census in Hasakah—generated mass statelessness that disproportionately affected women through unregistered marriages, legal insecurity for children, restricted access to healthcare and education, and repression of the Kurdish language and activism. Against this backdrop, women’s participation in official politics often remained symbolic and quota-based. The core argument is that the enhanced role of women in Rojava cannot be convincingly explained by “residual matriarchy,” but rather by an ideological confrontation with clan conservatism through the Öcalanian project: the program for women’s liberation, the concept of Jineolojî, and institutionalized mechanisms for women’s participation (quotas, co-chair systems, women’s bodies, and legal reforms). Finally, the text addresses the media dichotomy between the heroization of Kurdish women fighters and the victimization of women enslaved by ISIS as part of a broader struggle over meaning and legitimacy in the region.

Keywords: Kurdish women, Öcalanism, Patriarchy, Rojava, women’s liberation.

1. Introduction

The Kurdish woman is among the freest when compared to women in other Islamic societies. She enjoys a wide range of social, civil, economic, and above all political rights. The major question is whether this situation—specifically in the case of Syria—is due to the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan or represents a remnant of an unextinguished matriarchal legacy. Very often, different authors defend contradictory positions, with non-Kurdish researchers tending to be more positively inclined toward generalized assessments. In this light, the opinion of the already cited Russian Kurdologist Vladimir Minorsky is noteworthy, as he states: “The study of the status of women is very important for determining the morality of any people, and this, of course, also applies to the Kurds. In this respect, they are more tolerant than all other Muslim peoples.”

Nevertheless, like all traditional societies in the Middle East, the culture of this ethnic group remains patriarchal, and within Kurdish families and communities it has been considered “natural” for men to enjoy the greater share of power. Information about Kurdish women in Iraq and Turkey appears to be significantly more negative, likely because the ethnic group has lived in these territories for a longer period. For example, female genital mutilation continues to this day in Iraqi Kurdistan, with between 37.5% and 58.5% of women having undergone this humiliating procedure, despite efforts to curb this deeply entrenched social phenomenon. One may turn to the novel *Mariam* by the Iraqi Kurdish writer Sabri Silfani to understand the consequences of this violence, which drives women toward suicide. Meanwhile, Kurdish towns and villages in southeastern Turkey top the list of honor killings throughout the country. In Diyarbakir and the surrounding regions, approximately 70 honor killings are carried out annually.

Researcher Ruzhin Musa links the formation of a closed, social, and tribal environment in the Kurdish regions of the Ottoman Empire with the emergence of the so-called “Kurdish emirates.” These inherited a specific collective psychology directly influenced by the diminishing role of religion during the period of rule of the Ayyubid Kurdish dynasty (1171–1260) and that of the Mamluks (1250–1517). At that time, the capital of the caliphate was Cairo, and the Commander of the Faithful was obligatorily an Arab. The strongman of the state, most often bearing the title of sultan, belonged to various Islamized ethnic groups on the periphery of the caliphate. These included Circassians, Tatars, Armenians, Kurds, Bulgarians, Greeks, and others. Very often, their sisters and daughters enjoyed the freedom to engage in activities that Arab rulers had previously forbidden to their own women.

2. The Kurdish woman is among the freest when compared to women in other Islamic societies

Chroniclers mention the name of Princess Dayfa Khatun, daughter of the Ayyubid Sultan al-Malik al-Adil Safadin (1145–1218), who, as regent for her son, ruled the Syrian city of Aleppo for six years. She founded the famous Firdaws Mosque-School in the city, which attracted numerous hafizes, historians, faqihs, and other ulama. A similar role was played by Princess Ghaziya Khatun bint Malik Kamil (d. 1219), who ruled the city of Hama for 35 years. She laid the foundations of two schools that became sanctuaries for many ulama. Historiographers add at least ten more names of aristocratic women who established cultural, scientific, and religious institutions. The list of women related to Mamluk sultans, renowned for their charitable activities, is no shorter. The prevailing hypothesis suggests that women belonging to ethnic groups other than Arab, Turkish, and Persian were exceptionally active in spheres that were in principle monopolized by men.

In 1514, Sultan Selim I, thanks to the efforts of the Kurdish mullah Idris al-Bidlisi, took control of the Kurdish regions. He concluded an agreement stipulating that governance of these areas would remain in the hands of princes and sheikhs, while the Turks would control strategic locations. This arrangement remained unchanged until 1851, when hereditary feudal domains were finally abolished.

This historical period reveals two major transformations in society and their direct consequences for the prevailing model of relations among members of the family collective. First, a matrix for an alternative social hierarchy emerged. This concept came to the forefront in response to circumstances difficult for the local population, associated with acts of plunder, looting, and destruction linked to the Tatar-Mongol invasions of the Middle East. The collision between loyalty to lineage, tribalism, clanship, and familism on the one hand, and loyalty to religion on the other, intensified. Already during the Ayyubid period, religion began to slightly recede, while tribalism equalized its influence within the transitioning Islamic society. In this way, a new power model was formed, preserving the coherence of the social (group) unit. This occurred through the dominance of a complex of rules, customs, and traditions centered around the extended clan structure and its branches, on the one hand, and the organization of the clan members' livelihoods on the other. According to the aforementioned Dutch anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen, the reason for the dominance of clan loyalty, so widespread in Kurdish regions, may lie in "the very nature of Kurdish society."

Since the Ayyubid era, the schools that were established—including those founded by women—provided religious education. Women were not admitted to them, which resulted in widespread ignorance and illiteracy among women. Consequently, negative religious imperatives, misunderstanding of legal rulings concerning women, and traditional interpretations of religious texts played a role in establishing a set of specific roles, functions, and standards. These, in turn, contributed to the formation of particular social and cultural orientations and functional models for women. Thus, legal interpretations, rulings, and opinions regarding women's roles continued to revolve around formal approaches to religion and ethics, without attention to the essence of religious texts or their true meaning. As a result, the interests of Kurdish women were confined to the everyday life of their family and tribe, since "the Ottoman administration played a fundamental role in the backwardness of Kurdish culture and education, because it prohibited the publication and printing of books in the empire."

All of this contributed to the reconfiguration of power relations between men and women. On the one hand, the man became the foundation of clan and tribal affiliation, through which male dominance in Kurdish society was materialized. On the other hand, the woman began to derive her role and social power from the kinship ties of her father, brother, and husband, as well as from the moral conduct prescribed by the religious ideal. Thus, the woman directly drew her power potential from her connections with a male relative, who was obliged to protect and defend her as the leader of the family collective.

In the writings of travelers and Orientalists, we find a unique and clearly articulated body of knowledge about Kurdish society and the nature of its relationships, especially with regard to the political aspects prevalent during the Ottoman era. These writings offer a consistent and well-documented attempt to understand Kurdish society, including its military, administrative, religious, and socio-economic dimensions. Most travelers and Orientalists conclude that Kurds treat their women with great respect. The British traveler Major E. B. Soane (1881–1923) notes in his memoirs: "Kurdish women enjoy a degree of freedom comparable to that of women in almost any European country. Among them are beautiful and courageous horsewomen, capable of using a rifle."

Among Western Orientalists, the view has gained ground that women's participation alongside men in armed combat is another manifestation of their freedom. The Russian scholar

Pyotr Lerch (1884–1928) even went so far as to claim that Kurdish women took part “in the bloody and fierce battles against the military forces of the Turkish pasha, charged with subduing tribes that periodically rebelled.”

However, this assumption does not rest on an accurate understanding of the historical, political, and social conditions experienced by Kurdish tribes and clans at the time. Each clan had its own rules, values, and alliances—both internal and external with other tribes and clans. This transformed the clan group, whose members were mutually dependent, into a social structure founded on absolute loyalty as the sole guarantee of individual security and daily subsistence. In this context, women’s participation in combat was a necessity rather than a choice, imposed by the historical and political circumstances of Kurdish society. As for the acceptance of women as tribal leaders within the Kurdish community, this stemmed from their close kinship ties within the extended tribal lineage and from the specific circumstances facing the tribe—such as the absence of its natural leader due to arrest or continuous resistance against repeated attacks (Galily & Schwartz, 2021).

It is also necessary to note the opinion of the renowned British traveler, diplomat, and politician Mark Sykes, who likewise expressed views on the Kurdish woman. He observed that “her freedom of expression, movement, and appearance is subject to a set of strict tribal rules and customs.” Sir Sykes emphasized that “the liberation of women derives from lofty and rigid values that are universally accepted.” The British-appointed governor of the Iraqi city of Kirkuk in 1919, Major Noel—who was actively involved in collecting cultural monuments, folklore, and ethnographic data about local Kurds—even claimed that “the punishment for adultery is death in all cases, based on a set of principles and foundations, and on nothing else.”

It is worth emphasizing that the linkage between tribal honor—or what is referred to as Kurdish law—and female morality, on the one hand, and the severe punishments imposed on women by the tribe itself, on the other, served as guarantees for the emergence of a distinct and unique moral discourse. This discourse facilitated free interaction between the sexes, in stark contrast to the highly Islamized regulations applied by Arabs and Turks. Natural (non-restrictive) contact between men and women thus became possible. Family relations and certain traditional customs within Kurdish society reveal much in this regard.

Early marriage is a widespread tradition among Kurds. In some cases, a girl is engaged while still an infant, with a headscarf adorned with coins tied around her head. Social custom prioritizes marriage to a cousin, known as *al-mukhayra*. Marriage between cousins takes precedence over alternative unions. Another custom is *al-mubadala* (exchange), or *bardili*, whereby two families agree to exchange a daughter for a son in order to avoid paying a dowry. The issue of the dowry remains one of the most complex and costly aspects of Kurdish marriage, which some interpret as a reflection of the wife’s high status. The custom of *al-taftifa*—elopement—also exists in Kurdish society, whereby a girl flees with her lover and the couple subsequently attempts to appease their families and clans. This frequently ends with the killing of both individuals for violating tradition.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new dynamics began to emerge in Syrian society and, correspondingly, within the local Kurdish community. Two social models became established, linked to transformations in the economy and property relations. These were embodied by the city and the village. In large urban centers, an institutionalized economic paradigm prevailed, characterized by overt feudalism. Large landowners resided in cities, and their social group was defined primarily by economic parameters. Conversely, in smaller agrarian settlements, clan-based organization continued to dominate, rooted in Kurdish tribalism. Thus, the socio-economic factor came into direct confrontation with the ethnic one. Kurdish women were able to intervene much more actively in ethnic life than in economic life, which was directly reserved for men.

In this context, the synergy of numerous active Kurdish women is observed in the creation of the so-called *al-katatib* in Syria's agrarian regions. These were schools in which, alongside reading, writing, arithmetic, and other basic knowledge for children, Islamic sciences were also taught. To some extent, they may be compared to the monastic schools in Bulgaria during the National Revival period. What is particularly noteworthy is that active Syrian Kurdish women were able to transform their own homes into such educational institutions, which inevitably elevated their role within the family, the clan, and the local community. Among them were Hojja Wasila, Umm Abd al-Jalil al-Buti, Hojja Umm Zahid al-Karmi, Hojja Kamila Mulla Rasul, Hojja Amina Wanli, Hojja Sara Sira Qutrash, and many others. All of them bore the title *hojja* before their names—a term of Persian origin meaning “great” or “eminent.” When part of a family name, it is understood to signify a “scholar” or “sheikh” (Knapp & Ayboga, 2016).

Despite religious pressure, Kurdish traditions allowed women to be engaged outside the home alongside men, including on the battlefield. If we trace Kurdish historical records that elaborate on accounts of uprisings concentrated in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, we find that women's presence is limited to fleeting references that serve the context of men's heroic deeds as military leaders. It appears that Kurdish feminist heroism lacks empirical grounding with regard to Syria. Such grounding emerges only in 2011, following the Kurdish intifada in that country.

3. Women are largely absent from Kurdish political and historical imagination, except as the wives of certain leaders, after which their role is generalized and applied to all local Kurdish communities

Women are largely absent from Kurdish political and historical imagination, except as the wives of certain leaders, after which their role is generalized and applied to all local Kurdish communities. This is the case with Adila Khanum (1859–1924), the wife of the ruler of Halabja. A similar pattern appears in the case of Besa Khanum, the wife of Sheikh Riza, who led the uprising of 1937–1939 in the Turkish city of Dersim. One account of the Kurdish rebellion against the rule of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk recounts that Besa Khanum resisted until the fighters under her command were surrounded, after which she was forced to throw herself from a mountain peak out of loyalty to the Kurdish cause.

A comparable case is that of Mina Khanum, the founder of the Kurdish Democratic Women's Union. She was the wife of Qazi Muhammad (1893–1947), the founder of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad, which existed for approximately eight months in 1946 on the territory of present-day Iran, with the support of the former Soviet Union. The prominence of these Kurdish women was due exclusively to their aristocratic origin and to the fact that they were wives of tribal leaders, princes, and commanders. At the same time, the reality at the level of lower-status social groups was fundamentally different. The two images of Kurdish women presented by global media confirm the dichotomous and antagonistic genesis of this social group.

There is broad scholarly consensus that the pioneer of the feminist movement in Syrian Kurdistan was Roshan Badirkhan (1909–1992). She was the wife of Prince Celadet Bedirxan, whose life inspired many intellectuals. He descended from a Kurdish aristocratic family and was the creator of the *Hawar* alphabet—the Kurdish alphabet based on Latin characters. This script was adopted by Kurds using northern dialects, most notably Kurmanji, Zaza, and several other Kurdish groups.

Roshan graduated from the Teachers' College in Damascus, and in 1934 she became a member of the Syrian Women's Union. In 1955, she co-founded the Kurdish Association for Cultural Development and worked in Aleppo on the establishment of the Kurdish Association for Knowledge and Solidarity. In 1957, Roshan represented the Kurdish people at the Athens Anti-Imperialist Conference. In 1971, she founded the Kurdish Women's Union in Iraq. Alongside her

awareness-raising activities, she collaborated with the journal *Hiwar* and the newspaper *Al-Hurriya*. In 1947, she worked at Radio Damascus, translating from Kurdish and Turkish into Arabic. She passed away in the coastal city of Baniyas and was buried in the Kurdish quarter alongside her husband.

Between 1927 and 1957, numerous associations and clubs were established among Kurdish communities in Hasakah, Qamishli, Aleppo, Amuda, and Damascus, alongside the circulation of the newspaper *Hiwar* and the magazine *Ronahi*. Roshan Badirkhan's name consistently stands at the core of these initiatives.

With the rise to power of the Ba'ath Party—following a prolonged period of political instability marked by successive coups—the situation of women in Syria deteriorated significantly. Despite slogans of freedom, socialism, and social equality, the treatment of Kurds was overtly discriminatory. This was primarily due to the ideology of nationalism espoused by the Ba'ath Party, which ruled Syria from 1963 to 2024.

The most concrete manifestation of this discrimination against Kurds was the revocation of citizenship from tens of thousands of individuals as a result of the 1962 census in Hasakah province. This act by the Ba'athist government institutionalized a clear form of discrimination: the confiscation of identity documents; the denial of civil rights; the loss of voting rights; exclusion from public life; restrictions on foreign travel; deprivation of property rights; exclusion from public employment; and denial of access to education.

The tragedy was even more severe for women, who were stripped of the right to marry foreigners or individuals with unregistered birth dates—a common occurrence among Kurds in Syria. The census divided Kurds into citizens and stateless persons. In terms of ethnic identity, they were officially registered as “foreigners,” thereby depriving the Kurdish minority of formal recognition as a distinct collective identity.

These circumstances drastically undermined Kurdish women's ability to lead normal lives. A large proportion of their marriages were categorized as “unregistered,” rendering them legally invalid. Consequently, birth certificates fell under the same legal status, affecting the legal standing of children as well. Stateless parents thus transmitted statelessness to their offspring. Once subjected to such discriminatory conditions, women were denied access to adequate healthcare. State hospitals refused to treat patients suffering from serious illnesses such as cancer or those requiring kidney dialysis and similar treatments.

The Ba'athist regime implemented the same policy of social exclusion in the sphere of education. Measures targeting women included arbitrary expulsion from schools, denial of access to higher education, and prohibition from practicing the teaching profession. These policies also encompassed bans on the use of the Kurdish language and punitive measures against those who published books and journals in Kurdish. Repressive actions by security forces—including arrests and torture—were imposed on many Kurdish women who defied these restrictions.

In 2004, women participated in the uprisings in Qamishli against Ba'ath rule, including the toppling of Assad's statue in the city of Amuda. Hundreds of thousands of men and women stood side by side in the streets of Hasakah, Aleppo, and Damascus. Kurdish women actively participated in the intifada against Ba'athist rule in Rojava—joining demonstrations, assisting in hospitals, and supplying food to areas besieged by government forces.

During this “Ba'athist” period of Syria's development, it cannot be denied that some female presence existed in the country's party-political life. However, it was largely marginal, superficial, and clearly part of a symbolic “women's quota” designed to project a democratic façade of Syrian politics. While women's party membership was formally acknowledged, it remained peripheral—even when women occupied high-ranking positions. Female participation in Kurdish

political parties was mainly recorded during election periods or ceremonial occasions, such as International Women's Day.

Perhaps the most significant reason for this limited engagement was the absence of democratic experience within the party-political movement as a whole, coupled with an atmosphere of fear and intimidation stemming from the brutality of security forces and the repressive practices of the Ba'athist regime against political activists. Women's involvement in party activities often began during their educational trajectories, whether at universities or institutes. The chosen field of study became a crucial factor in stimulating women's interest in political ideologies and orienting them toward those that best aligned with their social, historical, and cultural affinities.

Against this backdrop, many Kurdish political parties adopted quota systems within their organizational structures. Officially, women's representation was set at approximately 30%, including leadership positions. In practice, however, these quotas were rarely enforced. Instead, a collision emerged between the broader Arab and Syrian criteria for the (non-)inclusion of women and the Öcalanian framework, which explicitly prioritizes women over male counterparts.

Empirical data comparing women's representation in leadership positions within political formations adhering to Öcalanian norms and those that do not demonstrates that the enhanced role of women in Rojava is not the result of residual matriarchy or remnants of a deformed agrarian society. Rather, Kurdish clan conservatism has been subjected to a direct and forceful challenge by Öcalan's revolutionary ideology—not through its gradual erosion under modernity, but through deliberate ideological confrontation.

On 8 March 1998, just months before his arrest, Abdullah Öcalan formulated the *Program for the Ideology of Women's Liberation*, aimed at mobilizing and attracting more women to the ranks of the PKK. In 2009, Öcalan introduced the term *Jineolojî* ("the science of women"), derived from *jîn* (woman, in Kurdish) and *lojî* (science). Thus emerged the specialized field of *jineology*, which is taught at the University of Rojava—established by the Autonomous Administration in the city of Qamishli—as well as in other educational institutions.

The Syrian branch of the PKK, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), inherited Abdullah Öcalan's principles regarding women's participation, as developed within the parent organization. Öcalan's ambition to attract women into what had traditionally been considered a "male" sphere of military and political activity was motivated by the Marxist-Leninist leader's desire to combat religion. According to Öcalan, religion "enslaves" women, reducing them to housekeepers and instruments of biological reproduction within the family. In this sense, Öcalan dismantles the conservative social model, even going beyond the level of natural emancipation generated by the specific conditions of a closed ethnic group. (Lemmon, 2021)

For this reason, the PKK actively recruits women into military operations, and female combat units are perceived as the antithesis of the retrograde family cell in which women are expected to endure the domination of husbands, fathers, brothers, and male guardians, as prescribed by Islamic tradition. The inclusion of Öcalan's wife, Kesire Yıldırım, in party activities served as a personal example, demonstrating his commitment to challenging the conservative norms traditionally prevalent in Kurdish society.

The response of many women to the ideas of the PKK and their decision to choose an alternative social life in the Qandil Mountains was largely motivated by their refusal to enter forced marriages and submit to male dominance. When the male head of the family refused to allow a girl to leave, the PKK encouraged her escape from the parental home. Öcalan's ideology offered women freedoms and life opportunities unavailable to them if they remained in their native villages. The PKK itself assumed the role of guardian, providing alternative care and protection for women.

Thus, women were assigned fictitious (partisan) names, allowed to move through regions outside their places of origin, and permitted to interact with individuals beyond the confines of their traditional clans. In this way, social diversity was guaranteed. At the same time, marriage within the PKK was prohibited, thereby relieving women of traditional familial social obligations. Consequently, the parent party became their “family,” to which they were expected to devote themselves entirely. In particular, joining the armed wings of the PKK was perceived as a substitute for family life and as a guarantee of an alternative social existence. Virtually all military structures derived from the PKK officially use this concept either as a synonym or as an integral part of their designation. This applies equally to the Syrian formations, namely the YPG, YPJ, and SDF (Routledge, 2014).

The practice of recruiting PKK members through seclusion did not always receive support within Kurdish society. The Qandil Mountains witnessed numerous suicides among women who had joined the organization. At the same time, isolation and party structures hindered public disclosure of such cases, as accusations that the PKK operates as a sect or a mafia-like organization are not uncommon. For example, Turkish analyst Fuad Uğur directly compares the recruitment methods of the PKK—particularly of women—to those employed by the terrorist Islamist organization ISIS.

The Syrian face of the PKK, the PYD, founded on 20 September 2003, implemented a radically different policy toward women compared to other Kurdish parties in Syria. Initially, its leadership focused primarily on recruiting women into military structures. After 2013, however, emphasis shifted toward women’s social, economic, and political engagement. This shift was driven by the establishment of the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), officially recognized as the female military wing (Soane, 1909).

At its extraordinary conference held on 16 June 2012, the PYD adopted the principle of joint (male–female) party leadership and established a mandatory 50% women’s quota in all governing bodies, including the highest organ—the General Council. Following the declaration of the Autonomous Administration in 2013 in the Jazira region, a Ministry for Women’s Affairs, known as the Women’s Institution (WI), was established. The activist Amina Omar was elected as its first leader and, in 2018, became co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)—the legislative authority of Northeast Syria.

4. The Women’s Institution is composed exclusively of women and does not operate under a joint leadership system, but is headed by a single female president

The Women’s Institution is composed exclusively of women and does not operate under a joint leadership system, but is headed by a single female president. This structure is justified by the “need to address women’s issues from a female perspective in order to eliminate patriarchal and authoritarian thinking.” The institution adopts the concept of the democratic nation as a guiding principle, striving to establish social justice and democracy, eliminate retrograde concepts that hinder social development, and work toward a democratic society free from gender oppression and environmentally sustainable.

The Women’s Institution consistently coordinates and cooperates with women’s and human rights organizations to advocate for women and achieve its goals of justice and equality. It played a significant role in drafting the Law on the Protection of Women, drawing upon legislation from neighboring countries, which was subsequently adopted by the legislative body. This law contains provisions absent from the national legislation of Arab states. It explicitly aims “to protect women from oppression and ensure full equality with men in all matters.”

Through its 30 articles, the law mandates “equality between men and women in all areas of public and private life,” including political rights and the formation of organizations “in accordance with the social contract,” “obtaining women’s consent for laws concerning them,” “equality between men and women in the right to work and equal pay,” and “equality of women’s and men’s testimony in judicial proceedings.”

The law further stipulates the “prohibition of marriage without the woman’s consent,” “abolition of dowries and their replacement with joint responsibility for shared life,” “civil regulation of marriage contracts,” “prohibition of polygamy,” “ban on unilateral divorce,” “criminalization of honor killings,” and “the imposition of strict and equal punishment for adultery committed by either spouse.” Moreover, “discrimination is considered a criminal offense punishable by law. Democratic self-administration is obligated to combat all forms of violence and discrimination by developing legal mechanisms and services to ensure protection, prevention, and rehabilitation for victims of violence.”

The Women’s Institution also participated in drafting the Citizenship Law, which includes provisions directly affecting women. According to this legal framework, “both parties are granted equal rights,” “marriage is prohibited before the age of eighteen,” and “a woman has the right to custody of her children until they reach the age of fifteen, regardless of whether she is married or not” (Strasser & Akcinar, 2023; Tsekov, 2025).

Among the most notable activities of the Women’s Institution (WI) is the establishment of a network of “*women’s economic associations*.” One of the primary objectives of this initiative is to allocate a portion of the arable land belonging to the Autonomous Administration to these legal entities and to provide financial assistance for the opening of low-cost restaurants in numerous Kurdish cities (Emirat Press, 2023).

A wide range of organizations play an important role in encouraging women’s participation in public life in Syria, particularly in Kurdish-populated areas. Many of these organizations have established branches beyond the territories governed by the Autonomous Administration. One of the earliest and most prominent among them is Kongra Star (KS; in Kurdish *Yekîtiya Star*, meaning *Star Congress*). This organization represents a confederation of women’s organizations operating in Rojava. The name *Star* “refers to the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar and, in contemporary usage, alludes to the celestial stars.” These structures have played a crucial role in the significant progress achieved in gender relations in the region. Their work is grounded in the assertion that “*without the liberation of women, a truly free society is impossible*.”

One of the founders of KS is Ilham Ahmed, former co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council and current “foreign minister” of the Autonomous Administration. The activities of Kongra Star focus on organizing revolutionary women’s committees that prioritize women’s economic opportunities and personal development. Their objectives include raising awareness and enhancing women’s capacity for self-defense. The organization operates in Rojava and throughout Syria, while aspiring to become a model for women’s activism across the entire Middle East.

Kongra Star has established several academies, including the flagship Yekîtiya Star Academy. Founded in 2012, this educational institution offers training in the already mentioned field of jineology. The curriculum places particular emphasis on economics and the role of women as a key factor in their own development. The student body is diverse, ranging from young university graduates to older, illiterate individuals. Teaching methods at the academy emphasize the individual authority of instructors and encourage interactive relationships between teachers and learners, following the pedagogical approaches of John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Each program concludes with a final course called “*The Platform*,” during which participants declare their intention to take part in the Rojava revolution.

Kongra Star maintains coordinators in Rojava, Aleppo, and Damascus, as well as representatives in Iran, Lebanon, and Europe, including Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Their dual objective is to remain informed about the status of women worldwide while also exporting experience where needed. Kongra Star aspires to evolve into a global women's organization. Its activities are organized not only through academies, but also through communes, councils, associations, and committees. The committees function as operational units that generate ideas across the organization's various sectoral policies. These include the Education Committee, Social Committee, Committee for Relations and Democratic Political Agreements, Defense Committee, Legal and Justice Committee, Economic Committee, Finance Committee, Culture and Arts Committee, Media Committee, Health Committee, and Environmental Committee. These structures were created to organize women across all aspects of public life. Each committee operates according to its own autonomous organizational structure and discipline, adapting its work to specific needs.

The Syrian Women's Council (SWC) is the second Kurdish organization active in this field. It was established on 8 September 2017 in the city of Manbij by approximately 240 women. Its branches extend throughout the entire territory of the Autonomous Administration. Its explicit aim is to undertake tasks that were previously unfamiliar to local women. In this context, the SWC operates a branch in the al-Hol camp, where the families of captured ISIS fighters are detained. SWC representatives there lead a project aimed at the resocialization of these families, with a particular focus on the children of former members of the terrorist organization. This task is exceptionally complex, as local populations perceive the detainees in al-Hol as a "ticking time bomb," given their indoctrination in deeply entrenched Islamist religious beliefs.

The Syrian Women's Council has earned the trust of the community and achieved positive results and a strong reputation among Syrian women. It participates in significant local events throughout the country, as well as in international and regional initiatives aimed at increasing awareness of the hardships and suffering faced by Syrian women. The organization also performs political functions, as its representatives participate in negotiations concerning the future of Syria, particularly in the complex dialogue between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the government in Damascus.

A similar organization is the Women's Council of North and East Syria (WCNES), established on 14 June 2019 in the city of Amuda. It functions as a holding structure encompassing ethno-confessional local women's organizations, including Kurdish, Arab, Syriac, Armenian, Chaldean, and Circassian women. During the founding conference, participants wore traditional attire representing their respective ethnic identities. The forum's slogan—*"The Union of Free Women: A Guarantee for a Democratic Syria"*—conveyed a powerful message advocating the inclusion of representatives from all parties, civil organizations, and the full mosaic of ethnic and religious communities within the region governed by the SDF and the Autonomous Administration.

Another comparable organization is the Zanubiya Women's Gathering (ZWG), founded on 1 July 2021 by 150 representatives of local political and military factions in the ISIS-liberated city of Raqqa. The name *Zanubiya*, referring to Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, was chosen as a unifying Syrian symbol representing the diverse ethnicities and nationalities of eastern Syria. The organization defines itself as *"a political, social, and environmental organization aimed at uniting the energies of Syrian women to improve their status in all fields and to confront all forms of physical and cultural genocide."* Its forum slogan—*"Through the struggle of organized women, we will defend our revolution and build peace"*—was adopted in three languages: Arabic, Kurdish, and Assyrian.

The organization also seeks to consolidate social values, achieve justice and equality, and ensure women's full participation in public life. Its broader objective is to build bridges to

women's structures in those territories of the Autonomous Administration where Kurds constitute a minority—namely the regions of Tabqa, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Manbij.

5. Conclusion

Over the past fifteen years, a dual form of overexposure has become evident: on the one hand, the heroization of women fighters of the YPG, and on the other, the hyper-visibility of Yazidi concubines—sexual slaves of ISIS. The image of the Kurdish woman holding an automatic rifle has been strongly promoted, most notably in the television series produced by former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her daughter Chelsea Clinton, based on Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's book *The Daughters of Kobane*. With similar emphasis on courage, the experienced Lebanese journalist Assil Tabbara speaks of Nesrin Abdullah, the commander of the YPG women's unit from the "hero city."

At the same time, media sensations have included interviews broadcast by the Saudi television channel Al Arabiya with Yazidi girls abducted by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as well as with his official wife, who recounted the horrors experienced inside the terrorist's household.

Öcalanism has become deeply embedded in the consciousness of Syrian Kurdish women. It has created a cognitive paradigm that is unlikely ever to be eradicated, regardless of how the structures of the Autonomous Administration are integrated into those of a future Syrian government. The female world of the SDF represents an alternative to that constructed by the Islamist forces of ISIS. The Battle of Kobane embodies a collision between the radically emancipatory Öcalanian feminism—highly unconventional for the region—and the enslaving humiliation and oppression of women that constitute one of the foundational pillars of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's pseudo-caliphate.

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