

The Contribution of Women in the Rojava Revolution: A Study on Their Role in Building a Democratic and Feminist Society

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Abstract

Rojava is a budding democracy in a war-torn country. It is a region in the north and east of Syria comprising three cantons, namely Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira, that follow decentralized and grassroots democracy. One of the most remarkable aspects of this revolution is the participation and leadership of women in all areas of society. The administration of Rojava runs on a commune system, and women play an equal role in the workings of this system. This paper aims to explore the contribution of women in the Rojava revolution and their role in building a democratic, egalitarian, and feminist society. It examines the historical and social context in which the revolution emerged, the ideology and principles of democratic confederalism, and the structures and practices of self-governance implemented in Rojava. The paper also analyzes the specific contributions of women in different domains, such as politics, economics, education, and defense. It argues that the active participation of women in the Rojava revolution has been crucial for its success and sustainability in addition that their struggles for gender equality and women's liberation are inseparable from the broader struggle for social justice and freedom. In conclusion, I shall put forth an overall observation and my suggestions. This is secondary research based on secondary data collection, for this paper researcher has gathered the existing articles and information from the official website of AANES, and other Kurdish websites, analyzed it, and further brought together relevant studies that support the researcher's hypothesis. the paper delves into the recognition of women in forming the idea of a confederal state and working in a direction to make it a successful model of governance. The study will highlight the contribution of women in the north and east of Syria exclusively because it is relevant to the topic; however, the researcher acknowledges the contribution of feminists in the rest of Syria. Besides, there is a lack of studies in this field, and this paper would add volume to the area of research.

Keywords: canton system; commune system; confederalism; egalitarianism; decentralized democracy; female liberation; gender equality

1. Introduction

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) or The Democratic Autonomous Administration (DAA) or Rojava, is a budding democracy in the war-torn country of Syria. In July 2012, "the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), step into the administrative and security gap left by the withdrawal of Syrian government staff and troops from Kurdish majority areas in northern Syria. The PYD's vision and its model of direct democracy then dominated local governance, security, and civil organization in the predominantly Kurdish area of northern Syria." (Allsopp 2019) Rojava means "western" in Kurdish, referring to western Kurdistan. Officially, the region is not recognized by the Syrian government or any country except the Catalan Parliament (Catalan Parliament 2021), "By 2015 the revolution in Rojava had withstood the test of time and averted catastrophe, despite all odds stacked against it. Many leftists and revolutionaries across the globe had come to view it as an enduring, Middle East-changing, radically democratic political alternative. The legendary People's and Women's Protection Units (the YPG and YPJ) had driven the forces of the Islamic State (ISIS) out of Kobanî with the help of coalition air support. " (Oveysi 2019).

The early history of Kurds is disputed, but their ancestors have lived in the same region for epochs. Moreover, the Mesopotamian text indicated the mountain tribes with a name resembling "Kurds" (Britannica March 2022). Being the fourth largest ethnic group in West Asia, after Arabs, Persians, and Turks. Kurds are mainly found in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Germany. The Kurdish people have been the first victims of colonialist agreements; the majority of the chaos in the Middle East over the past hundred years is because of the Skye and Picot agreements. A secret document drafted in the final year of WWI and proposed by British officer Mark Sykes and French diplomat François Georges-Picot (Britannica May 2022). The arrangement was approved by France and Britain in 1916, fracturing the Levant region into two spheres of influence and altering the map of the Middle East, leaving several ethnic groups, mainly Kurds, stateless. Later in 1920, the Treaty of Sèvres was signed. The Treaty of Sevres (10/08/1920) was a pact between the victorious allied powers and the Ottoman Empire. The treaty ended the Ottoman regime and obliged Turkey to relinquish all its rights over the Arab, Asian, and North African regions. The pact further demanded independence for Armenia, an autonomous Kurdistan, and the rights of Thrace in Greece. This treaty originally set aside part of Turkey as a Kurdish region; however, this decision was aggressively objected to by Turkish nationalists, after which, in 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne was signed by the Allied Powers, which amended the previous treaty. Forming present-day Turkey, the treaty denied statehood to several Kurds, after which they were fragmented into different regions.

The Kurds have been facing continuous persecution. Until the 1990s, Kurds in Turkey were denied citizenship. The Kurds in Iraq endured genocide orchestrated by Saddam Hussein in the late 80s, and while the Kurds in Iran wanted to establish their government, the

Iranian government severely suppressed the movement. In Syria, anti-regime sentiment has been present among the Kurdish population for a long time. The Syrian administration has never officially acknowledged the existence of Kurds in Syria. In 1962, over 120,000 Syrian Kurds were stripped of their citizenship (**Human rights watch 1996**), leaving them nationless. They were mainly classified into two groups, namely, Ajanib and Maktoumeen (Ajanib (foreigners) were those who provided limited documentation. Maktoumeen (unregistered or illegal) under the Nationality Law of 1969) (**Nationality Law 1969**) The government attempted to resolve these issues in 2011 by granting all Kurds citizenship (**Decree no. 49**), but only an estimated 6,000 out of 150,000 stateless Kurds have been given nationality. The Kurds in Syria have lived without cultural or linguistic freedom. The Kurdish language (Kurmanji) was banned from being taught in school or spoken in public, and anybody found guilty faced arrest until the year 2011.

In July 2012, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units (YPG and YPJ) stepped into the administrative and security gap left by the withdrawal of Syrian government staff and troops from Kurdish majority areas in northern Syria. The PYD's vision and its model of direct democracy then dominated local governance, security, and civil organization in the predominantly Kurdish areas of northern Syria. It was a vision based on the teachings of imprisoned Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan and guided by a broad revolutionary project involving a myriad of associated political, economic, civil, and military organizations across the region. (**Allsopp 2015**) The Kurdish struggle for autonomy and self-governance intensified during the 1980s and 1990s when the PKK launched an armed struggle against the Turkish state and established a stronghold in northern Iraq.

2. YPJ

From a political point of view, during the 1970s and 1980s, Kurdish women began to be politically active. The armed movement developed by the PKK during the 1980s, along with the development of ethnic-based political parties during the 1990s, formed the basis for numerous women to move from the "domestic" and private spheres to the public ones. The struggle for their identity, language, and culture created individual consciousness and personal independence; these factors helped women move from the ethnic struggle to the struggle for women's human rights. In these years, women started acknowledging their "double discrimination", as women and as Kurds. Since the 1990s, the feminism that nowadays permeates the Rojava cantons has grown along the political lines of the PKK. (**Dean 2019**)

The world was in awe when they saw the Kurdish female fighters fighting and defeating ISIL. These female fighters knew their battle was not just against ISIL but also against the misogynist ideology of the Arab world that never acknowledged their existence and the Western world that stereotyped middle eastern women as oppressed, in short, "Damsel in Distress." (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin, Women's Protection Unit of the Democratic

Autonomous Administrations (DAAs). The YPG's female brigade was set up in 2012). The YPJ is an all-female militia that includes Kurdish women and women from other ethnic groups and has been doing battle against Daesh for the last half-decade in Rojava. The momentum towards autonomy for the territory began to take shape during the Arab Spring in Syria when Kurds from different political and social backgrounds joined in the uprising. Not to be left out as history unfolds, Kurdish women also made their mark in the form of "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi!" the motto of the Kurdish Female Movement, which translates as "Woman, Life, Freedom". The Democratic Autonomy of Rojava was then proclaimed in January 2014 under a social contract. From a political perspective, Rojava is a de facto autonomous region that consists of three confederated and self-governing cantons: Kobane, Jazire, and Afrin (**Dean 2019**). Abdullah Ocalan writes in his book that "the extent to which society can be thoroughly transformed is determined by the extent of the transformation attained by women. Similarly, the level of women's freedom and equality determines the freedom and equality of all sections of society. For a democratic nation, women's freedom is of great importance too, as a liberated woman constitutes a liberated society. A liberated society, in turn, constitutes a democratic nation. Moreover, the need to reverse the role of man is of revolutionary importance." (**Ocalan 2013**)

2.1 YPJ vs. ISIS (ISIL)

In January 2014, ISIS declared Raqqa the capital of its emirate. The situation was tense in the territory as ISIS was strengthening its roots. That was the time when the People's protection unit, in collaboration with US-backed forces, started fighting against ISIS. The women of the PYD have been recognized for their all-female fighting force, the YPJ; they have been heralded for their bravery on the battlefield. Al Jazeera reported that Kurdish soldiers from the YPJ had singlehandedly killed over 100 Islamic State fighters. In the defense of Kobani, it was reported that up to 40% of the resistance fighting force against ISIS was made up of Kurdish women. (**Marjan Darabi**) The YPJ has been instrumental in the battle to take back Kobani from ISIS. These women fighters know that, if captured, they will be raped and killed; therefore, they fight knowing that they must succeed in battle or become suicide warriors to avoid being captured. The YPJ is also thought to be feared by ISIS, which believes that if a female kills them in battle, it will be a disgrace and dishonor and will prohibit them from entering paradise. (**The Kurdish project**)

2.2 YPJ vs. Turkey

The conflict between the YPJ and Turkey has been ongoing for several years, as Turkey considers the YPJ and its parent organization, the YPG, to be terrorist organizations linked to the PKK. Turkey sees the YPJ and YPG as extensions of the PKK, which has been fighting for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey since the 1980s and considers them to be a threat to its national security. The allegations simply cannot be overlooked because PYD, YPJ and YPG have shown their loyalty towards Abdullah Ocalan leader of PKK and they have been following his ideology.

In January 2018, Turkey launched a military operation called "Operation Olive Branch" (Kelly 2018) against the YPG and YPJ in the Afrin region of Syria, which resulted in the displacement of thousands of civilians and the loss of many lives. Turkey claimed that the operation was necessary to secure its borders and prevent the establishment of a Kurdish state on its southern border, which it sees as a threat to its territorial integrity. Besides, another reason for such attacks at the borders is to create a space where Turkey intends to return all the Syrian refugees that fled Syria during the Arab Spring. The conflict between Turkey and the YPJ has continued in other parts of Syria, with Turkey launching multiple military operations against the YPG and YPJ in the northeast of the country. The YPJ has continued to resist these attacks and has called for international support to defend its people and its territory. The conflict between the YPJ and Turkey is complex and multifaceted, with political, ethnic, and geopolitical dimensions. The YPJ sees itself as a defender of Kurdish autonomy and women's rights, while Turkey sees it as a terrorist organization and a threat to its national security. The conflict is unlikely to be resolved without a political solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey and a broader settlement of the Syrian conflict.

3. The co-chairs

The goal of the revolution in Rojava has been to build up a system that genuinely represents all parts of society, according to the concept of the "democratic nation". Which is cooperation and co-governance between all ethnicities, groups, beliefs, and religions. According to the political philosophy of Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan, gender equality must be at the heart of this effort. This fundamental assertion has resulted in the successful implementation of a system called co-chairing in North and East Syria. The idea of co-chair was first introduced by the PYD, the dominant political party in Rojava, as a way to implement the principles of democratic confederalism. It is designed to ensure gender parity and the participation of women in decision-making, as well as to challenge patriarchal norms and structures of power. The co-chair system applies to all administrative units and councils, including the local councils, the cantonal councils, and the regional council. Each co-chair is responsible for coordinating the work of the council, ensuring that all members are heard and represented, and implementing the decisions of the council. Under the co-chair system, institutions at every level of government are headed by both a man and a woman. As a result, there is no place in the political system where the needs and will of both women and men are not acknowledged. This is a unique system in the world and a living laboratory for true gender equality. The success of this model has encouraged its adoption across all the institutions of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. From 2016 onwards, every level of the autonomous administration, from communes to the executive and general councils, instituted the co-chair system. What's more, the autonomous administration has implemented a quota system: 50% of participants in all institutions must be women. Nowadays, across the AANES, men, and women share joint responsibility for every aspect of governance: discussing issues, developing solutions, and making decisions together. (Civil Diplomacy Center)

The co-chair system seeks to transform power dynamics by redistributing power more equitably. It recognizes that power imbalances have often disadvantaged women and perpetuated gender-based discrimination. Through shared leadership and gender parity, the system challenges traditional notions of power and promotes a more inclusive and egalitarian society. Moreover, The co-chair system aims to ensure equal representation and decision-making power for both men and women. It challenges traditional patriarchal structures that have historically marginalized and excluded women from positions of authority. By having a male and a female co-chair in leadership roles, the system recognizes the importance of including diverse perspectives and challenging gender hierarchies. The co-chair system challenges and disrupts traditional gender norms and roles. Promoting women's leadership and participation in political and public spheres challenges the notion that women should be confined to private or domestic spaces. It encourages the recognition of women's capabilities and contributions beyond traditional gender roles.

The co-chair system has been praised for its effectiveness in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in Rojava. It has also been recognized as an innovative model of democratic governance that challenges traditional notions of power and authority. However, it has also faced criticism from some quarters, with some arguing that it can lead to gridlock and inefficiency if the co-chairs are unable to agree on important decisions. It is a challenge for women to have the responsibility of sitting as co-chairs, mainly because their experience in terms of economic, political, and social matters is nil. However, these women are coping well. Overall, the co-chair system is a key element of the self-governance structures in Rojava and reflects the commitment of the Kurdish forces and their allies to building a democratic, egalitarian, and feminist society in a region that has been ravaged by war and conflict.

4. Social contract

The social contract is based on the principles of democratic confederalism; it emphasizes the principles of direct democracy, gender equality, ecology, pluralism, and the decentralization of power and includes provisions for the protection of human rights, the establishment of democratic self-governance, and the promotion of economic, social, and cultural rights.

Some key features of the social contract in Rojava include:

4.1 Democratic Self-Governance: The social contract of Rojava envisions a system of decentralized self-governance in which power is distributed among local and regional councils that are elected by the people. These councils are responsible for making decisions on a range of issues, including security, education, healthcare, and environmental protection.

4.2 Gender Equality: The social contract of Rojava recognizes the importance of gender equality and seeks to promote the participation of women in all aspects of political,

economic, and social life. It includes provisions for the establishment of women's councils as well as quotas for the participation of women in political and public life.

4.3 Human Rights: The social contract of Rojava affirms the importance of human rights and includes provisions for the protection of civil and political rights, as well as economic, social, and cultural rights. It also recognizes the rights of minorities, including Arabs, Assyrians, and Armenians.

4.4 Ecology: The social contract of Rojava recognizes the importance of environmental protection and includes provisions for the conservation of natural resources, the promotion of sustainable development, and the protection of biodiversity.

4.5 Separation of Power: The separation of powers is a key element of this system, ensuring that no single branch of government has too much power and that each branch acts as a check and balance on the others. The three branches of government are the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, and each branch has distinct powers and responsibilities. The legislative branch is represented by the People's Council, which is the highest legislative body in Rojava. The People's Council is composed of representatives from all sectors of society and is responsible for making laws and policies. The executive branch is represented by the Democratic Self-Administration (DSA), which is responsible for implementing the laws and policies that are passed by the People's Council. The DSA is composed of several ministries and departments that oversee different areas of governance. The judicial branch is represented by the People's Court, which is responsible for interpreting the laws and ensuring that they are applied fairly and impartially. The People's Court is independent of the other branches of government and is responsible for protecting the rights and freedoms of all citizens.

However, there is a huge glitch in the social contract. Article 15 of the social contract declares the YPG to be the sole military force of the three cantons and does not mention the YPJ, the women's unit, here the question arises; if Rojava is built on the ideology and principle of feminism and Jineology then why does it not give YPJ like powers of YPG? And which ultimately questions the whole revolution.

Besides feminism is an integral part of the social contract in Rojava, guiding the region's commitment to gender equality, women's empowerment, and challenging patriarchal norms. While the implementation and realization of these feminist principles may face challenges and variations in practice, the social contract in Rojava represents a significant effort to build a society based on gender equality and women's rights. The social contract of Rojava is a key element of the self-governance structures in Rojava and reflects the commitment of the Kurdish forces and their allies to building a democratic, egalitarian, and sustainable society in a region that has been ravaged by war and conflict. However, it has also faced criticism from some quarters, particularly from the Syrian government and its allies, who see it as a threat to their territorial integrity and sovereignty.

5. Jineology and Jinwar village

Jineology and Jinwar village are both concepts associated with the Kurdish women's movement and the ideology of democratic confederalism, particularly as developed by Abdullah Ocalan and practiced in the context of the Kurdish struggle for self-determination. Jineology refers to the science of women or women's science. It aims to study and understand the historical, social, and cultural aspects of women's lives and struggles, to challenge and overcome patriarchy and gender-based oppression. Jineology promotes women's empowerment, leadership, and participation in all areas of life while advocating for gender equality and the elimination of violence against women. The form of feminism which has become part of the establishment within Rojava – as described by jineology – is substantively different from the "neoliberal" feminism that has most successfully infiltrated political, economic, and cultural institutions within Western contexts (**Budgeon 2015; Prügl 2015; Rottenberg 2014**). Neoliberal feminism focuses on the effects of gender inequality on individuals and introduces measures designed to increase the chance of an individual woman accessing the social power held by some men. By contrast, jineology "regards itself as both a continuation of the feminist struggle and as an alternative to a branch of feminism which has not broken with capitalism" (**Kongreya Star 2016**). Jinwar village is an embodiment of the principles and ideas of Jineology. It is a women-only village located in the western part of the ed-Derbaish district in al-Hasakah canton in northern Syria, close to the "Kebaz Hills," whose foundation was laid on November 25, 2017, famously known as the village for the soldier's widow, in the predominantly Kurdish region. The village was established in 2018 by Kurdish women as a communal living space and a practical implementation of women's liberation and self-governance. Jinwar Village aims to create a space where women can live free from patriarchy, gender-based violence, and societal norms that limit their autonomy. The village operates on the principles of collective decision-making, ecological sustainability, and women's empowerment. Women living in Jinwar engage in various activities, including farming, gardening, education, and communal work, while fostering a sense of solidarity and sisterhood. The establishment of Jinwar Village represents a concrete effort to create an alternative model of society based on gender equality, self-governance, and communal living. It is seen as a living example of how Jineology and the principles of democratic confederalism can be put into practice, challenging existing social structures and hierarchies. However, it's worth noting that the implementation of these concepts and the existence of Jinwar village have also faced criticism and controversy. Critics argue that such projects may reinforce gender segregation and separatism or that they are limited in their ability to address broader social and political issues. The views on Jinwar village and its significance vary among different stakeholders and observers. "Every mother has a story full of hardships and pain, but the village makes them forget all their worries because we are all here together." Some women have come from nearby villages, where they have fled abusive households or no longer have the means to support their children. Others are the wives of martyrs who died fighting the Islamic State, like Fatimah. And still, others come from an international non-

Kurdish diaspora who have had run-ins with Kurdish women in countries like Spain or Germany, including Arabs, Armenians, and Circassian women. (**Rosen 2021**)

Jinwar is a groundbreaking experience that contains many elements that offer free an ecological society, together with the contradictions and difficulties encountered on the path of communalism in the circumstances of ongoing conflict and an embargo. Here, the social ecology project is EE strategic as it helps to create a new society Anna model of self-defense. The issue of self-defense catalyzes most of the efforts, including economic ones, of the autonomous administration. The parasitic dynamics are backed by the thousands of displaced people, a situation that shows no sign of easing. Jihadist forces and the Turkish military disrupt the supply of drinking water: the Turkish state exercises this form of blackmail during the summer season by blocking the stream that runs alongside the Ginever settlement, as reported by Jinwar's council... (**Cioni 2021**)

Conversely, the village has also faced challenges, including the ongoing conflict in the region and the threat of attacks by extremist groups. Despite these challenges, Jinwar remains a symbol of hope and resilience and a testament to the power of collective action and the struggle for women's liberation.

Conclusion

The Rojava revolution and the participation of women in it are not without challenges and difficulties. The ongoing conflict in the region and the threat of attacks by extremist groups and hostile state actors pose significant challenges to the Rojava experiment. Despite these challenges, the Rojava revolution and the participation of women in it remain a beacon of hope and inspiration for those struggling for democracy, social justice, and gender equality around the world. It is too early to predict any definite conclusion for the region because the region is only a decade old, besides lot has been spoken about the region but it hasn't gained any formal recognition from any country. Nevertheless, it has a lot to offer the world, and the kind of governance this region administers stands out as a possible model for governance throughout the region. Rojava has demonstrated the benefits of a decentralized political system that gives local communities greater autonomy over decision-making. By empowering local communities, individuals are better able to shape the policies and practices that affect their lives. Western countries can learn from Rojava's example by exploring ways to decentralize power and promote local autonomy within their political systems. ways to promote greater democratic participation and inclusion, such as by implementing alternative voting systems or participatory budgeting processes. To promote greater gender equality and feminist principles within their political systems. exploring ways to prioritize environmental sustainability and mitigate the impacts of climate change within their political systems.

Acronyms

WWI (First World War)

ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria)

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ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)

PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party)

PYD (Democratic Union Party)

SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces)

YPG (People's Protection Units)

YPJ (Women's Protection Unit)

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