

Theorising Women and War in Kurdistan. A feminist and critical perspective.

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Abstract

In this introductory article to the special issue Women and War in Kurdistan, we connect our topic to feminist theory, to anthropological theory on war and conflict and their long-term consequences, and to theory on gender, nation and (visual) representation. We investigate Kurdish women's victimisation and marginalisation, but also their resistance and agency as female combatants and women activists, their portrayal by media and scholars, and their self-representation. We offer herewith a critical perspective on militarisation, women's liberation, and women's experiences in times of war and peace. We also introduce the five articles in this issue and discuss how they contribute to the study of women and war in two main areas: the wide-reaching effects of war on women's lives, and the gendered representation and images of war in Kurdistan.

Keywords: female combatants, feminism, feminist theory, gender and nation, human rights, militarism, representation, sexual violence, victimhood, visualisation, war, women's activism, women's movements

Introduction

This special issue contributes to critical and empirical-based analyses of the present realities of Kurdish women in all parts of Kurdistan and explores the multiple effects and affects of war on women in the Kurdish regions. In doing so, we follow feminist and intersectional approaches to the study of violence and war. Readers might need to be reminded that Kurdistan is not a geographical entity with defined borders and Kurds are straddling the present state boundaries of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran (Dahlman, 2002). This issue covers all parts of Kurdistan, although, as the articles demonstrate, there are more empirical and theoretical works on Iraqi and Turkish

Kurdistan, to a lesser degree on Iranian, and very few on Syrian Kurdistan.¹ Hence, Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan have been covered more extensively in this introduction and, in order to avoid confusion, we have carefully indicated which part of Kurdistan is being discussed.

In 2009, Al-Ali and Pratt published *Women and war in the Middle East*, offering “a critical examination of the nature of the relationship between gender and transnationalism in the context of war, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction” (2009: 3). Their focus on Western interventions in the Middle East, international security agendas, transnational women’s solidarity, and the consequences of these developments for women’s lives and women’s movements, has become more relevant after the increase of violent conflict, and the involvement of a range of foreign states, in the region. In the decade since this book came out, the field of Kurdish studies has grown considerably, both in the number of empirical studies as well as in theoretical analysis (for example: Begikhani et al, 2010 & 2015; Hardi, 2011). At the same time, since the Arab Spring and the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Kurdish regions, notably Syrian, Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan, became once more the battle field of a range of conflicts between local and international actors. This has made the need for a more specific focus on Kurdistan, and a gender-oriented turn in Kurdish studies, even more pressing, in order to offer new understandings of the ways in which women and men are different actors in, and are affected differently by, war and post-war realities.

In recent years, Kurdish women have become highly visible in international media through different forms and representations. Images of female guerrilla fighters, of women in leading positions, of women in captivity of ISIS, of women as victims of state, family and community violence, escaping war and arriving as refugees and asylum seekers in Western countries, have circulated widely. We therefore believe that a new focus on the lived realities of women in different parts of Kurdistan, which are caused by war situations, are extremely relevant. Such a focus is necessary in order to gain new insights into the involvement of women in war, their victimisation, their everyday life in conflict zones and post-war realities, as well as their experiences of internal or transnational displacement. This special issue of the *Kurdish Studies* addresses these lived experiences of women in different Kurdish regions, and pays attention to the long-term consequences of wars and conflicts.

¹ Recently, Syrian Kurdistan has become an important focus of attention of scholars, who mainly focus on the developments in three regions in north Syria that became semi-independent in 2012, after the beginning of the Syrian war. They are often referred to as Rojava (Western Kurdistan), or the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS). In this article we use Syrian Kurdistan or Rojava when referring to this part of Kurdistan.

In this introductory article, we place the topic of women and war in Kurdistan in the wider literature of feminist approaches towards women and war, and of theorising the long-lasting effects of violence and its social and gendered consequences. We also address how Kurdish women's movements were set up in different parts of Kurdistan, and how they were strongly shaped by, and operated within, situations of war and conflict. Subsequently, we will discuss in two sections how some central theoretical topics related to women and war, namely *women, agency, and victimhood*; and *gender and nation* have come up in relation to the study of the consequences of war on women's lives and will investigate how these same themes emerge within the field of Kurdish studies. Whenever relevant, we will connect these topics to the articles included in this issue. Finally, in the last two sections, we present the main contribution that the articles in this issue have to offer, according to two themes: the wide-reaching effects of war and violence; and the gendered representation and images of war in Kurdistan.

Women and War: A Feminist Approach

Albeit there are certain regional and topical peculiarities, which will be outlined later in this introduction, a thorough discussion on women and war in different parts of Kurdistan and in the diaspora has to be embedded in the wider feminist literature on women and war, and on gender and war. 'Women and war' has been a focal point of feminist thinkers and scholars throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Classical feminist approaches to this topic have been focused on two notions: Women's bodies and sexualities as violable objects used as war strategies and women's active role and participation in war and militant organisations in defence of their communities, their nation and nationalist projects. The first notion is rooted in the traditional perception of gender roles, assuming that men are active subjects, soldiers, warriors and aggressors while women are passive agents of war, victims, weepers, mothers and wives located in the home front and are vulnerable to rape, aggression and slavery. The second notion adopts an approach which problematises these concepts, considering women as active agents physically and psychologically strong and able to participate in war and military activities. Both notions will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

There is an emphasis in many classical feminist theories and women's writings on conceptualisations of war as a male enterprise, associating men with war and women with peace (Elshtain, 1995). For example, Virginia Woolf, as discussed by Carter, considers nation and nationalism as masculine enterprises and male constructs (Carter, 1996). Woolf's supporters describe armies as 'bastions of patriarchal power' (Poulos, 2008) and argue that women are

pacifist by nature and should stand against the concept of militarism and war avoiding their destructive consequences. This argument presumes that women should put their hopes and aspirations in the hands of men to protect them against military aggression and occupation. Elshtain, while aware of the millennia of pre-industrial cultural history of women as family nurturers and subservient to men, criticises 'this pacifist maternal feminism'; she argues that it is the product of industrialisation and bourgeois state-nation ideology, which goes beyond the historical reality of nations and diverse experiences of women (1995).

New feminist theories often challenge the popular notion of gender roles, the female privatisation as well as the construction of a private/public sphere distinction and the division of labour between men and women (Patemen, 1983; Elshtain, 1995). These feminist scholars have tended to conceptualise the social realities of men and women focusing on women's agency; the partisans of this approach consider the participation of women in war and militarism as part of empowering and emancipatory projects. Their analyses counter essentialist approaches to women and war, which focus on the essential differences between men and women, advocating the pacifist and caretaking nature of women compared to war-loving men (Ruddik, 1989).

Globalisation and new information and communication technologies have challenged classical theoretical and analytical approaches, inviting feminist thinkers to reflect upon the new developments and encompass historical, national and cultural realities of women in relation to war and armed conflict across different disciplines (Zarkov, 2006). Traditional questions about the roles of women in war, militarism and armed struggle, and the impacts of wars and conflict on women, have been developed to address new social power relations in the globalised world and to relate the identity of female actors in war and militarism to feminist knowledge and theories. These reflections have led to new theoretical and political conceptualisations and marked a shift from previous feminist theory of women and war to a more critical conceptualisation of sexual victimisations and raped female victims on the one hand, and women's agency on the other (Zarkov, 2006).

Much recent feminist theory starts with conceptualising the geo-politics and situated experiences of women in relation to war and militarism, but additionally also looks at the relationship between gender and gender-based violence, and different political and social positionings based on race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, age, etc. Gender is always intertwined with other political and analytical categories (Butler, 1990) and studying the intersection of these categories is necessary in order to contest violence as well as subordination more effectively and construct subjectivity. The position and status of women are multiple and intersected in ways

that define their gender identity and their (lack of) access to power. When it comes to war, from the 1990s and based on the experiences of women in Bosnia, Rwanda, the Gulf War, armed struggles and terrorism, feminist thinkers have started to highlight the intersections of these different social identities and realities to gender-based violence and sexual violence.

In Kurdish studies, some authors have argued for a special focus on Kurdish women's experiences during war and post-war situations, as women and men have played different roles and were/are differently victimised and targeted in war and conflict in Kurdistan (see for example Begikhani, forthcoming, 2003, 2015; Hamelink, 2016; Minoos, 2013; King, 2013; Weiss, 2012, 2010; Mojab 2001). Also, because women are generally much less situated in positions of power, their relative powerlessness compared to men "leads to differences in their ability to cope with risks and manage their lives" (Hardi, 2011: 4). The many (internal and external) wars and conflicts that have been fought in Kurdish regions make the study of the consequences of these conflicts crucial to better understand present-day Kurdish society, and women's positions therein. This is highly important as women's narratives and gender specific experiences have not always been included in accounts of war (Hardi, 2011; see also Enloe, 2010; Cockburn, 2004). Furthermore, a thorough focus on women's experiences of war also makes visible the long-lasting and wide-reaching effects of war on the social fabric. In her exploration of women's narratives of the Anfal attack,² Hardi, for example, does not only look at women's experiences during and immediately after the Anfal campaigns. She also investigates the long-term consequences that the attacks had on women's lives, such as a change in status because of the loss of their husbands, which turned them into breadwinners for their families, and exploitation by society and relatives when working under deplorable conditions. Therewith she pays attention to the intersectional dimensions of women's experiences with war, as "women survivors of Anfal do not suffer merely in terms of their gender; they also suffer in terms of belonging to the poor and uneducated lower class" (Hardi, 2011: 3).

² *Anfal* is an Arabic word taken from Qur'an, *Surah* 8, literally meaning 'spoils/booty of war'. The Anfal campaign was the most notorious military operations conducted by the Iraqi army against the Kurdish population. The operation took place in the spring and summer of 1988. The campaign included a series of military offensives conducted in six geographical locations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. For more information on *Anfal*, see Begikhani et al (2010); Middle East Watch (1993); Randal (1997).

Kurdish women's activism in times of war and peace

Historically, Kurdish feminism was born and has been developed inside Kurdish nationalist organisations. As such, national liberation appears to traditionally have been the main aim of Kurdish feminist groups (Begikhani, 2003; Mojab, 2004). Because of the strong relationship between women's activism and the (armed) struggle for Kurdish rights and independence, this section discusses how women's activism has developed in different parts of Kurdistan, and how women activists in the different regions have addressed women's conditions related to war and violence. A discussion of women's activism contributes to our topic for different reasons. First, war conditions have tended to prevent the emergence of independent women's activism, as women activists were often forced to focus first and foremost on the achievement of basic human rights, rather than women's rights more specifically (Alinia, 2013). Secondly, as we will argue in a later section, continuing violence and insecurity are some of the long-term consequences of war that deeply affect Kurdish women's lives. Women's activism has therefore developed in the shadow, or as a direct consequence, of previous wars, and in the context of a "continuum of violence" (Bourgois, 2004), "tracing violence from peace-time to war-time and vice versa, and linking acute violence during armed conflicts with sexualized and domestic violence" (Al-Ali and Tas, 2017: 3; Alhamid in this issue). Also, Kurdish women activists assisted women and their families who were hit extremely hard by genocide, conflict and displacement, or helped women fight legal battles with the state because of missing and murdered relatives (Davidovic in this issue). And lastly, the participation of female combatants in armed struggle in Kurdistan has created a heroic imagination of the women activist, namely the armed Kurdish heroine, defending her nation (Glastonbury in this issue). This image of the armed heroine can be seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, female combatants state that their participation in armed struggle is in itself an example of their liberation from patriarchal control. On the other hand, their participation is part of a problematic increase of the militarisation of Kurdish society and of the "formation of a 'tragic mind' that perceives violence as the surest provider of justice and hope" (Bozarslan, 2004: 15 in Alinia, 2013).

Due to the large socio-historical and political differences between Kurds dispersed over different states, women's organisations have quite distinct histories in each state. Kurdish women's activism in Iraq and Turkey is better researched than in Iran and in Syria. The recent emergence of a strong focus on women's liberation, a space that was created as a direct consequence of the Syrian war, has led to new attention among scholars for both female combatants and women's activism as organised within the framework of the political organisation of Rojava (see below

under Gender and nation). Before discussing the developments of women's movements in Iraq and Turkey, some general remarks can be made. As Al-Ali and Pratt (2011) note, "due to the stigmatization of feminism in the Middle East, the terms 'feminist' or 'feminism' are rarely used and women adopt a variety of labels to describe the objectives of their activism" (2011: 340).³ Kurdish women's activism had emerged in the late nineteenth century among the urban Kurdish elite that advocated for women's rights as part of broader demands for Kurdish emancipation within the Ottoman Empire (Klein, 2001). However, these "urban Kurdish intellectuals and activists were forced to flee, persecuted and dispersed after the establishment of the Turkish nation state" (Alinia, 2013: 26). The loss of influence of the intellectual elite meant at the same time an increase of power for the tribal elite that was patriarchal in organisation and had little interest in women's rights, nor in Kurdish nationalism (Alinia, 2013, see also Hamelink and Baris, 2014).

When women's activism grew again in scope at the end of the twentieth century, the protection of women against male-inflicted violence related to honour became one of its important aims (Begikhani, 2015). Kurdish women in all regions began to be more vocal within political activism and became aware of the need for liberation of patriarchal structures, in society as well as in the political movement. They expressed the view that women's rights and emancipation had to be fought for side by side with, and on the same level as, liberation of the Kurds as a nation (Begikhani, 2005). Female combatants often attribute their participation in the armed struggle, at least in part, to an escape from family control, and sometimes in fear of being killed by male relatives. However, in Iraqi Kurdistan, where patriarchal structures and norms fashioned political organisations, most importantly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partiya Demokrata Kurdistanê*, KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*Yeketî Nîştîmanî Kurdistan*, PUK), women were for many years not allowed to participate in combat, but were actively involved in underground activities, nursing and in providing logistic support. In Iranian and Turkish Kurdistan, and later in Syria's Rojava, women have participated in politics and been actively involved in combat since the 1980s. In Turkey in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), and in Iran in The Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (*Komalay Şoreşgerrî Zabmatkeşanî Kurdistanî Îran*, Komala), the imagery of women and their participation in the political process and combat was used as a project of integrating women as active agents of the nation and the nation-building project.

³ This is less valid for Turkey, where feminism was a term used by Turkish feminists who adopted much of their ideas from Western feminists, see later in this section.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, a recognisable women's movement emerged after the creation of the "safe haven", which was established by the coalition powers in 1991 following the first Gulf War, when Kurds gained an important degree of self-governance with some level of constitutional rights (Begikhani, 2005; Alinia, 2013). Women's activism was predominantly the domain of urban and middle-class women, who tried to improve the conditions of vulnerable women of rural and working-class backgrounds (Hardi 2013: 49, see also Al-Ali, 2011; Fischer-Tahir, 2010; Mojab, 2009). One of the most important concerns of women's activists was the rise of honour-based violence and "honour" killings (Begikhani, Gill and Hague, 2015; Alinia, 2013; Mojab, 2004). Although the safe haven offered new possibilities for women to organise themselves, the political leaders of the PUK and KDP tried to "incorporate tribal leaders, leading to the emergence of 'neo-tribalism' in Iraqi Kurdistan after 1992" (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011: 343). The 1994-1996 internal war between the PUK and PDK led to a further politicisation and division of society. Subsequently, women's activism became divided along party lines, in spite of the women's march in 1994 between Sulaymaniyah and Erbil "to demand peace and reconciliation between the two parties" (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011: 344). The continuing strong bonds that persist today between women's movements and political parties remains a point of criticism and concern of women's activists. What is more, it was difficult for women's organisations to unite for common causes, as there often existed hardly any communication between them (Begikhani, 2010; Hardi, 2013). Alhamid (in this issue) pays attention to how women often were forced into marginalised positions because of external and internal conflicts and recurrent upsurges of tribal ideology. She argues that women emerged as symbols of the nation rather than as political agents (see also Mojab, 1998), and had difficulty finding ways to enter male-dominated areas, such as literary genres, which Alhamid's article focuses on.

On the other hand, women's activism has forged important changes since 1991, specifically in legal and constitutional domains. Notably, these could only be achieved because of the semi-independence of Iraqi Kurdistan and the relatively stable conditions since 1999. Over the last decade, crucial amendments have been made to the Iraqi Kurdistan Constitution concerning the punishment of killings based on honour, restrictions in polygamy, female genital mutilation, and child custody, although women's activists are highly critical of the lack of implementation of these laws. Hardi (2013), mentions three overall achievements of Iraqi Kurdish women's activism: "legislative reform, participation in the public domain, and women's position and image in the media" (2013: 51; for an overview of activities of women's movements in Iraqi Kurdistan and in the diaspora see Begikhani, Gill and Hague 2015). Iraqi Kurdish women have expressed little interest in collaborating with women's activists in the rest of Iraq, due to the historical

oppression of Kurds by Arab-dominated governments, and owing to a more secular rather than religious orientation⁴ (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011: 351). In short, women's activism in Iraqi Kurdistan has reached its current form in direct relation to earlier and current wars and conflicts, and scholars in Kurdish studies have therefore paid attention to the "connection between violence against women and socioeconomic marginalization, political persecution and the militarization of Kurdish society in Iraq" (Alinia, 2013: 38. See also Mojab, 2004; Begikhani, 2005).

In Turkish Kurdistan, Kurdish women's activists were initially part of leftist and Turkish political and women's organisations. However, in the early 1990s they began to organise separately from Turkish feminists and founded their own associations and journals. Several authors explain this development due to a feeling of alienation among Kurdish women towards Turkish feminists and their ideas (Çaha, 2011; Yüksel, 2006). Kurdish women aligned themselves with the black women's movements in Europe and the US by arguing that Turkish feminists, like Western feminists, ignored the problems of women who experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously, such as oppression because of race, class or religion (Çaha, 2011). They regarded Turkish feminists as part of the Kemalist nationalist establishment, lacking any recognition or awareness of the reality of Kurdish women's lives of discrimination, war, and forced displacement (Çaha, 2011, see also Yüksel, 2006). In addition to parting ways with Turkish feminists, the 1990s saw another development in Kurdish feminism, namely their moving away and organising independently from Kurdish political parties. In the 1980s, these parties had given them a platform to become part of the struggle for Kurdish rights. However, Kurdish women often felt insufficient recognition for the specific problems of women, and felt that within the political movement, they again had to face a subordinate position because of the male chauvinist attitude of Kurdish men. They felt that Kurdish men ignored women's problems and forced women to become genderless or masculinised activists. Moreover, they regarded nationalism in itself is a problematic ideology that has racist and anti-feminist elements (Yüksel, 2006).

Over the last decades, women's liberation in Turkish Kurdistan has become "a core aim of the Kurdish political movement and integral to their wider struggle for cultural and political rights" (Al-Ali and Tas, 2017: 8), and the movement started a process of 'double liberation' (national and women's liberation) (Sahin-Mencutek, 2016). This ideological turn was accompanied by important practical implementations. The PKK "sought to draw women in its ranks by recruiting

⁴ "Kurdish Iraqi women activists tend to reject Islam as a frame for their demands and agendas, whereas a large number of Arab Iraqi women are either members of one of the Islamist political parties or are merely pious women [who] advocate women's concerns through a framework of Islam" (Al-Ali and Pratt, 2011: 351)

a large number of young (often unmarried) Kurdish women” (Sahin-Mencutek, 2016: 480). At the same time, with the increased space for legal Kurdish activism within Turkey’s political establishment, successive pro-Kurdish parties introduced measurements to increase women’s participation on all levels in their organisation. Voluntary quotas for women in intra-party organs was followed up by co-leadership for all political positions within the Kurdish movement. Some Kurdish women explained the increased participation of women in the legal political movement as a consequence of the recruitment of female combatants. A Kurdish female town mayor who was interviewed in 2009 expressed this as follows: “Kurdish female guerrillas proved that women are capable of doing everything as men (...). They gave us confidence and a legacy to build on” (Sahin-Mencutek, 2016: 480).

Al-Ali and Taş (2017) found that in the most recent years, under the influence of the crackdown of the Turkish government on dissidents, some Turkish and Kurdish feminists have moved closer to each other. Because of the increased number of victims of state violence, among them Kurds and Turks, these women activists feel now connected in their struggle against state as well as male power, which they directly relate to each other. Many Turkish feminists have become more critical of the Kemalist foundation for Turkish feminism and have shown increased understanding for the plight of women with other backgrounds. Mutual understanding became a basis for combined calls for peace, for example the Women’s Initiative for Peace (Al-Ali and Taş, 2017). In short, we find that Kurdish women’s activism in Turkish Kurdistan developed in direct relation to the waves of violent conflict in the country (see also Davidovic, this issue), and that women activists had to operate within the often limited space they found within Kurdish as well as Turkish political life. The optimistic times of the 2000s and early 2010s created a space for legal activism and increased participation therein by Kurdish women, whereas the recent upsurge in violence and oppression in Turkey has again led to increased militarisation, but also to cooperation between Kurdish and Turkish feminists.

In Iranian Kurdistan, women began organising themselves under the Republic of Mahabad and founded the “Yaya Organisation”, aiming to develop literacy and an attachment to national identity among women. With the end of the Republic, the Yaya organisation disappeared, although some women continued to be active within the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (*Hizbî Dêmuokratî Kurdistanî Êran*, PDKI) (Mojab, 2001; Begikhani, 2003). During the 1979 revolution and after Khomeini came to power, Kurdish political activities increased and a variety of organisations were formed that liberated some cities such as Saqiz, Sinna, Mariwan. Women arranged themselves within these organisations and formed groups, including Sinna Women’s

Committee, the Mariwan Women's Union, and the Saqiz Women's Union (Begikhani, 2003). These groups were closely collaborating with their political male partners to deal with the general political situation. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Kurdish cities were attacked and Kurdish forces withdrew from the cities, leading at the same time to the collapse of the women's groups. The most active role of Kurdish women in military activities in Iran starts with the Marxist-Maoist Komala organisation, which was formally founded in the early 1980s (for an overview on the Komala, see Entessar, 2010). However, these women were more concerned about the ideology of their party, that is, the liberation of the working class and peasantry of Iran, than their own rights (Begikhani, 2003). Further research is needed to investigate more recent developments. However, it is clear from this short description that also in Iranian Kurdistan, women's activism developed in close alignment with political conflict.

Women, agency, and victimhood

As we saw in the first section, feminist literature on women's involvement in war has moved from an emphasis on how women are victimised during wars, to an agency-oriented approach. Attention is paid to the ways in which women are not only victims, but also active agents and participants in war, and how war situations can be transformative for women's position in society also after war has ended. Kurdish women's political participation and their resistance during war have often been presented as a possible way of empowerment and emancipation (Caglayan, 2007). Gökalp (2010) analyses the situation of Kurdish women living in Diyarbakir, Turkey, during and after war and displacement. She demonstrates how women use a democracy, rights and justice discourse with which they voice their demands for compensation after having been disowned and displaced by the state. "Paradoxically, [this] peculiar victim psychology has the power to liberate women by relating their life conditions to the state through rights discourses" (Gökalp, 2010: 565). Hamelink (2016) argues that Kurdish female singers (*dengbêjî*) were able to mobilise PKK discourse about the "oppressed" status of Kurdish women's lives, and the need for women's liberation, to change their own position and become more visible and public as female performers. These examples show how many Kurdish women have adopted and mobilised political discourses to attempt to improve their position in their local environment; to make themselves heard; and to convince male relatives of the justness of their demands. Following Gökalp (2010), a political discourse of victimhood of women, inflicted on them by state or male violence, can be liberating if women manage to mobilise such discourses to further their demands. Schäfers (2018) shows, however, that having a voice (as female

dengbêjs) does not necessarily translate into agency; visibility and audibility do not mean that women's voices are understood and heard in the way they intend.

When discussing women and war in Kurdistan, it is therefore important to scrutinise the notion of agency in detail. How may agency be conceptualised in settings that curtail and hinder action? How should agency be perceived when talking about the spaces of opportunity that occur during war? How may agency be understood in the context of Kurdish nationalist discourses that proclaim the liberation of women? And what does agency mean when women become victims of war violence, and are portrayed as such in local and international media? It is important to separate emic, that is local, understandings of agency, often presented in oppositional pairs such as the oppressed vs. the liberated, the emancipated vs. the backward and finally the aggressor vs. the innocent, from an analytic discussion of agency (Weiss, 2012). Agency in the emic interpretation is often understood as synonymous to resistance, and liberation is then understood as "the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will or other obstacles" (Mahmood 2001: 2006). Such understanding draws on a feminist notion of human action, which seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power. Resistance, whether organised or individual, is only one particular form of human action. Albeit inherently linked to power and domination, agency may not necessarily be focused on change but may as well aim towards continuity and stability. Social and gender norms, as well as power structures, are appropriated, negotiated and embraced as much as they are openly resisted. In studying women in the context of war, we therefore propose an understanding of agency that gives room to a much more complex and ambiguous understanding of the term, that allows us to explore how people act within and through social constraints, gendered norms and not least within the context of war and violence.

Agency in relation to Kurdish women and war can then be understood as the acknowledgement of people's ability to actively engage with an ever-changing social and political field in which several, often contradicting ideological discourses exist side by side (Weiss 2010). In heroic victimhood discourse, the victim has agency even when dead, such as the martyr (Weiss 2014). In human rights discourse the victim is presented as void of agency and in need of external intervention, and in feminist discourse, the victim becomes the economically deprived woman, oppressed by patriarchal structures, who contributes to her own oppression through what Kandiyoti (1988) has called the patriarchal bargain (Weiss 2012). Taking such a stance on agency enables us to go beyond the nationalist presentation of women as either victims of state violence or patriarchy on the one hand, or liberated women on the other. This analysis points to the

complexity in which women negotiate their positions, and that their gendered positions are also constantly changing.

This is evident in Davidovic' article (this issue) which demonstrates how Kurdish women are turned into political mothers and wives through the disappearance of their relatives. From the outset, Davidovic's narrative speaks to the growing literature on women's activism in which women become political subjects on behalf of their male relatives (Caglayan 2007, Aslan 2007), but the twist comes during the court case itself. Claiming justice for the violence perpetrated against their disappeared children and husbands, but unable to prove this, the women's only way of gaining recognition and retribution is by taking central stage. The Kurdish women entered the European Court of Human Rights as the relative of a victim of violence, but are, in the course of the court case, transformed into victims, whose own experiences of violence become the basis for recognition and retribution.

McGee (this issue) furthermore explores how women embrace and reject different notions of victimhood during the interviews he conducted with them. He investigates the German Admissions Programme that invited one thousand Yezidi women and children for care and treatment after having being held in captivity by ISIS. His article offers a critical perspective on the design of the programme that operates along particular understandings of victimhood in which women feature as the deserving victims, while men are far more ambiguous and difficult to place within categories of victimhood. The programme's sole focus on women, and the exclusion of men, failed to address some of the crucial wishes and interests of participants, and therewith hindered their rehabilitation process.

Gender and Nation

Images of women as heroic fighters, victims of wars, sex-slaves and refugees all bring to mind discussions on gender and nation, virtuously introduced by critical feminist thinkers such as Najmabadi (1993; 1997), Yuval-Davis (1997; 1989), Nagel (1998), Landes (2001) and others. Their main argument is that the social position of women is perceived as an important benchmark for measuring the development of a nation (see also Weiss, 2018a). In political ideology, the nation has mostly been imagined as feminine, as the mother, the bride or the virgin, all of which demand the fierce love and devotion of her (male) children. The nation in the image of the mother, who cares, protects and mediates, rearticulates "the notions of the children's duties to their parents into those of the duties of (male) citizens to the motherland" (Najmabadi,

1997: 460). The nation in the image of the bride or virgin who is in danger of being transgressed and raped and is in dire need of protection, becomes the object of male desire (Landes, 2001), and exclusive love (Najmabadi, 1997). This erotic love relationship is mostly unconsumed (Weiss, 2012); the nation is imagined as the bride before the wedding night, who can never be attained, and the act of fighting for Kurdistan, the symbolic bride, is sometimes described as a wedding (Aktürk, 2016).

Such images of the feminine nation speak mostly to an understanding of its people as male descendants. Although lineage always consists of both men and women, this gendered imaginary especially addresses the male descendants, the “sons of Kurdistan” (Aktürk, 2016), who were to defend their nation from exogenous threats, to sacrifice their lives for their homeland, and to defend their freedom, their honour and their women (King, 2008). Although in some parts of Kurdistan the idea that men are to protect the boundaries of the nation, and that women and their bodies are the gate keepers of these boundaries, seems to be strongly present (King, 2008), Kurdish feminists have been highly critical of such a depiction of gender roles in the region (Yüksel, 2006). The emergence of the female guerrilla fighter has played a pivotal role in changing the nationalist gender discourse. At least in discourse, the femininity of the female guerrilla fighters was set in opposition to the patriarchal oppression of their adversaries. These women were not the hyper-masculinised warriors, but the feminine heroes, whose feminine essence has become their main weapon. A similar representation of the female warrior can be found in recent imaginary of the “beautiful” and “heroic” female fighter against the “barbarous” and “misogynous” fighters of the ISIS in Western media. “While female combatants are portrayed [in French and British media] as stepping outside their traditional roles, the fact that their gender and ‘femininity’ are highlighted at the same time leads the audience to see their participation as something not only heroic, but as atypical behaviour for women” (Toivanen and Baser, 2016: 306). This imaginary in Kurdish as well as Western media represents female fighters in quite different ways than their male counterparts. When not depicted in active combat, the women are often presented laughing, dancing, hugging and enjoying the company of their fellow warriors. Their rifles, however, are always close at hand and mostly quite visible in the image frame. “The war has become female, and the formerly hyper-masculinized warriors have been vested with inherent (and stereotypical) female notions” (Weiss, 2018a).

This neo-Orientalist and sensational presentation of the Kurdish female fighters as ‘badass’ women has been heavily criticised by Kurdish feminists. “It is all too easy to fall into the media trap of fetishizing the female fighters of the all-women Women’s Self-Defense Brigades (the

YPJ) and the mixed-gender General Self-Defense Brigades (the YPG) in Kurdistan without considering the implications of women choosing to be fighters in a very patriarchal society [...] The YPJ are not only fighting against ISIS, they are fighting for feminism and gender equality - and they're doing it with ideas and bullets alike" (Dirik, 2015). Dirik does not, however, offer a critical perspective on how the PKK, YPG, and related groups, themselves mobilise the imaginary of heroic women for internal and external propaganda. Although indeed many women seem to be able to use their position as female fighters to advance their own emancipation and an increased level of gender equality, the authoritarian organisation of these political groups may at the same time enable (male or female) political leaders to "use women and their bodies pragmatically to advance their own interests" (Gökalp, 2010: 563). Moreover, gender emancipation within the ranks of the armed forces and the political movement, even if aimed for by many of the (female) combatants, may not necessarily result in increased gender equality in larger society, as the practices within the movement are not a lived reality for people elsewhere. Another critical point of concern is that women's emancipation in the service of political ideology may fail to strongly root in the society as a whole, as critics of the dominant political movement may not want to align with its aims and policies.

A more thorough analysis is needed to investigate how the political ideology of Democratic Confederalism, developed by PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan (Öcalan, 2017),⁵ influences political ideas about gender and nation among activists, combatants, and larger Kurdish society in Syria and Turkey. Democratic Confederalism proposes a political system of direct local rule, in which local communes are directly involved in, and responsible for, their own organisation (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013). According to this political ideology, nationalism is seen as a product of capitalist modernity and as fundamentally undermining the equal rights of all citizens. The current semi-autonomous region of northern Syria, and also the Kurdish-dominated municipalities in Turkey,⁶ are regarded as a testing ground for the practice of Democratic Confederalism (Baris, 2017).⁷ They have introduced women's councils, educate people on the need for women's liberation and on all levels of party leadership, implement a one man one woman co-chair policy (Knapp, Flach and Ayboga, 2016). Female combatants, through their bodies, then represent a new personhood in which Democratic Confederalism is seen as an

⁵ Öcalan was inspired by Murray Bookchin's ideas on Libertarian Municipalism.

⁶ Although still continuing in some municipalities, these initiatives are strongly curtailed by the oppressive and increasingly authoritarian regime of the AK party and its leader, Tayyip Erdoğan. Since the urban war between the PKK and Turkey's security forces in 2015, and the alleged military coup in Summer 2016, many Kurdish leaders have been fired from their positions and imprisoned (see also Protner in this issue).

⁷ Praised for its liberal agenda by many, the movement is criticised by others. "The personality cult built around their leader Öcalan, the hierarchical organization of the movement around one party, and their alleged intolerance towards other political actors in Syrian and Turkish Kurdistan generates plenty of criticism" (Baris 2017: 129).

example for the Middle East, and ultimately the whole world. Although the Kurdish nation no longer plays the central role it used to in PKK ideology, and independence is not actively pursued by the PKK and the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD) in Rojava, the female body may still represent a specifically *Kurdish* bravery, heroism, and renewal, at least in the eyes of much of the Kurdish following of this ideology.

Through the music of the diaspora Kurdish singer Helly Luv, Glastonbury (this issue) shows how in Iraqi Kurdistan, the image of the female fighter is mobilised in a quite different context, and for different purposes, then in Iran, Syria and Turkey; namely for its nation-branding project, in which Iraqi Kurdistan is presented “*as if* it is a nation-state”. Branding the nation of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) is performed for Western audiences and aims to show that the IKR is an exception in terms of liberty, democracy and women’s rights in the Middle East. Tapping into neoconservative American ideologies, brand Kurdistan offers a liberal, democratic alternative to the barbarism of ISIS. Glastonbury demonstrates that present-day nation-branding is not only a political project, but moreover an attempt to gain a place in the global capitalist market, in which ethnicity, nationality, and civilisation are turned into commodities. With her songs, Helly Luv manages to package this message in the form of a ‘marketable asset’ by using the imaginary of the liberal female fighter destroying ISIS and fighting for peace in Kurdistan.

The wide-reaching effects of war and violence

When writing about women and war, it is not enough to explore violent experiences of actual warfare or its immediate aftermath. On the contrary, an important contribution of this special issue to the study of war and violence is its focus on the long-lasting and wide-reaching effects of war and violence that permeate social relations, identities and political structures (Bourgeois 2004). Studying women and war, we will therefore have to expand our focus geographically, temporally and conceptually and explore several, interlinked analytical fields.

Dealing with gendered experiences of violence, Protner (this special issue) reminds us that war is not only fought on the “battlefield” or in the private spheres of the invaded. Today’s wars are fought transnationally as well as in cyberspace. Social media has become an integral part of warfare, as much as it has become central for resistance and peace movements (Weiss, 2018b; Sheyholislami, 2011). Additionally, migration and diaspora experiences are important dimensions of war situations, as political violence is part of the complex entanglement between refugee displacement, government policies and media imagery (Nolin, 2006). Diaspora populations can

play important roles in conflicts in the countries they originate from (Baser, 2015; Demir, 2012), and often have more immediate access to information than their relatives back home. Studying the gendered effects of war, authors have focused on the emergence and negotiation of gender roles in exile (Hajo et al, 2004), explored migration's impact on family relations and social networks (Ang-Lygate, 1996; Brettell, 2002; Olwig et al., 2012) and not least, highlighted the particular gendered vulnerabilities during migration and in refugee camps (Buckley-Zistel and Krause, 2017). The effects of war find their expression in specific migration regimes that favour particular types of refugees over others. McGee (in this issue), for example, explores how the female Yezidi survivor is cast as the ideal refugee type, innocent and docile, thus easy to govern. In contrast, the male refugee is often cast as the problematic and demonised migrant, as his innocence during war is regarded as questionable. Thus whilst the Yezidi women in McGee's article are offered protection and integration, their men are not, leaving them with the option to stay separated from their wives and daughters, or follow dangerous, illegal refugee routes to be united with them.

The impact of war is a long-lasting and affects people long after the actual fighting has ended. Memories of war are physically inscribed on the body and soul of the survivor of violence and may find their expression in physical impairment or trauma, hindering the survivor to move on. Experiences of violence and conflict are, however, also engrained into the social fabric and can impact several generations after the conflict took place (Hirsch, 2008). Memories of violence are transmitted from one generation to the next not only through public rituals and commemorations, but also through non-discursive, unconscious social performative practices (Pichler, 2011). In her study of Holocaust survivors, Kidron (2009) has shown how the suffering and trauma of genocide victims are handed down to next generations as deep memories. These are “nonverbal, intersubjective, embodied, and material traces of the past in everyday life, forms of knowledge that resist articulation and collective enlistment” (Kidron, 2009: 7). Violence and war create their own dynamic temporalities, in which conflicts and trauma become frozen. The metaphor of the frozen conflict is highlighted in relation to the disappeared (Green, 1999; Tully, 1995) and at times also the prisoners and their relatives. Unable to mourn the dead, unable to move on, the absence remains a constant reminder of the violence. As the disappeared are not declared dead, their spouses are neither married nor widowed, thus also inhabiting a liminal gendered space (Segal, 2016). The absence of a relative, either dead or alive, has often led to a redefinition of traditional gender roles, and cast also women into politics (Ramphele, 1997). Whereas only few Kurdish women have embraced the role of political widow or wifhood, the

mothers of the disappeared, prisoners and dead, have gained an important political role (Aslan, 2007; Weiss, 2010; Davidovic in this issue).

Additionally, anthropological research on conflict and violence has pointed to the wide-reaching effects of war and its manifestations in more hidden, or less obviously, connected forms of violence. Bourgois (2004) has argued that violence can only be understood as a continuum, where economic deprivation, limited access to health care and domestic violence should also be understood as responses to war and conflict. To highlight the interconnectedness of different forms of violence, and its effect, Kleinman et al. have coined the term social suffering, which they define as the result of “what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems” (1997: ix).

Alhamid (this issue) offers an important contribution to this topic. In her analysis of an Iraqi Kurdish novel, she shows how a male author takes up the topic of violence against women by describing a woman’s life and her experiences with abuse and male violence in intimate as well as shocking detail. She argues that Kurdish literature predominantly focused on macro issues related to the Kurdish national cause, “at the cost of micro-aspects” such as individual experiences of women and violence against women, a theme that remained largely absent from literary discourses. However, recently more (mainly male) authors have begun to “experiment with feminist issues and themes.” Alhamid takes us through the different chapters of the novel which describe the protagonist’s experiences with different men of different social and ideological backgrounds. The novel relates the violence, sexism and male dominance inflicted on her by these men, to the men’s ideologies and violent histories that are covered up, supported or institutionalised in a post-conflict society. The novel also shows how women are silenced and victimised because of structural inequalities that make it very difficult for women to speak up. The article supports the argument several feminist writers have made, namely, that the increase of gender based violence and domestic violence is a product of the violent history of Northern Iraq (Al-Ali, 2016; Lee-Koo, 2011; Begikhani, 2003, 2005).

Likewise, Davidovic’s article (this issue) is important in this respect through its investigation of the gendered long-term consequences of war, and their legal and international aspects. The disappearance cases of relatives she studies show that the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) often lacks gender sensitive language and attention to the intersectional dimensions of women’s victimisation, “Enforced disappearance is a perfect example of a violation that is often not perpetrated on a women’s body, yet (...) leaves life-long traumatic consequences”. Women

may also be disproportionately burdened by factors such as social stigma, marginalisation, lack of education, and other factors that have long-term effects on women's lives.

Additionally, our special issue points to the importance of investigating gendered consequences of war on the fringes of society. Most articles are focused on the margins, either because they are about minoritised groups such as the Yezidis (McGee) or the Saturday Mothers (Davidovic); or they are about long-term and unnoticed consequences of war, such as women's experiences in post-war situations (Alhamid and McGee); or because the processes described are beyond what we normally perceive as warfare, such as the war in cyberspace (Protner) and the use of war imagery used in music to brand the nation Kurdistan (Glastonbury). The articles then broaden our understanding of the structural consequences of war in societies and in the lives of individuals, even long after war has ended.

Gendered representation and images of war in Kurdistan

In this last section, we focus on the second important contribution that this special issue offers, namely its concern with representation and images that circulate locally and internationally, historically and in the present. At times, women succeed in actively engaging and appropriating these images and representations, thus gaining more freedom or recognition for their suffering, whereas at other times they are solely limiting and disempowering. Depictions of women (and their children) as vulnerable victims in need of protection, and men as their saviours, have often been mobilised during wars, mainly to legitimise violence, to underline the vulnerability of the female nation and to motivate men to fight by appealing to their masculinity. Through a lack of men for war or labour, women may also be depicted as necessary and able to perform such tasks, in order to persuade them to take action (Chetty 2004). Similarly, representations of Kurdish women during war have a long history with recurring depictions of the Kurdish woman as either a victim of war and/or patriarchal structures, or as the liberated female guerrilla fighter.

Historically, European accounts of Kurdish women have emphasised the freedom and strength of Kurdish women (Begikhani, 1997). They provide:

an oleographic representation of the Kurdish women often portrayed as antithetic to the Arab, Persian and Turkish woman, and focus on the high level of freedom enjoyed by the Kurdish woman. In these accounts, one sees a woman who can choose her groom freely, enjoys her family's esteem, takes care of the

home affairs, and even cleans her husband's weapons and his horse. She takes an active part in all festivities and dances (Galletti, 2001: 209).

Also within Kurdish (nationalist) literature, the pivotal role of women, their alleged former freedom and not least the importance of women in leading positions has been central, and the best known female leading figures have developed “into national symbols, exemplifying the moral superiority of the Kurds over their neighbors” (Bruinessen, 2000). Examples of such women, who also actively participated in (world) politics are Adela Khanim from Halabja, Kara Fatima who commanded a Kurdish contingent in the Crimean war, and Mayan Khatun, a powerful Yezidi leader (Bruinessen, 2000). Begikhani, in her doctoral thesis on the image of Kurdish women in European literatures (1997), relativises this orientalist representation of strong liberated Kurdish women, arguing that the image is a "myth" and does not have the force of the material reality (see also an interview with Begikhani on this subject in Mousset, 2017).

The representation of the female warrior, beautiful and at times sexually attractive, is also observed in more recent history. Allison (2001), explores how pictures of women in peshmerga costume were very popular in the early 1990s in Dohuk and Erbil. However, as the author notes, these women were mostly foreigners (Allison, 2001: 186). In Turkish Kurdistan, images of beautiful guerrilla fighters have received wide attention, as discussed above. Kurdish women were also often presented as victims of war, as struggling against multiple oppressions stemming from state violence, patriarchy, and economic deprivation, and as refugees. Investigating the recent circulation of images of Yezidi women, Buffon and Allison (2016) demonstrate that “Sinjari Yezidis’ narratives and subjectivities since 2014 are silenced across media representations in the West in favour of a ‘hyper-visibility’ (Baudrillard, 2005, 1990, 1982) of women’s ‘injured bodies’, which mobilises a specific narrative of victimhood” (2016: 177). They argue that the media narrative and imaginary presents Yezidi women as in need of saving (‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ (Spivak, 1994: 93 in Buffon and Allison, 2016, see also McGee, this issue). Furthermore, they show how some Western media, through hyper-visibility of the plight of Yezidi women sold as sex-slaves, “produce a pornographic effect” (pp. 182), by leaving out the historical context, by erasing the fate of Yezidi men, many of whom were killed and by denying Yezidis their own narrative of the destruction of whole communities. In this context, it is important to mention recently published (auto-)biographies such as Murad and Krajieski (2017), Baxter (2017), and Schürle (2016), in which Yezidi and Kurdish women narrate in detail and on their own initiative, their experiences of war, captivity, displacement, loss, and the rebuilding of their lives. These are examples of detailed accounts in which women give depth

and meaning to their life stories, contextualise and historicise them, and choose and own the (re)presentation of their own histories.

Protner (in this issue) introduces another important dimension to the gendered representation of war by focusing on the increased digitalisation of war, and war “fought in cyberspace.” Behind this lies the question of what images *do*, of how they obtain meaning, and how they function in times of war. Whereas Sontag (2002) argues for the unmediated effect of war images that “shock” and “haunt” us, Spyer and Steedly (2013) counter this by showing how images are always mediated and understood within frames of reference. They do, however, see a fundamental difference in the digital age when it is in the overall “enhanced visibility”, in the fixture of media on “violent imagery of global crisis” (2013: 17), and in the “affective power” (Ibid.: 27) of images because of the ways they enter our “skin” through the touch of our screens. Additionally, Butler (2009) argues that interpretation of media and photographs cannot be seen as a purely subjective act, “rather, interpretation takes place by virtue of the structuring constraints of communicability and affect” (2009: 67).

Protner builds on these ideas when investigating images of “perpetrator graffiti” made and circulated by Turkish Special Forces. During the 2015 urban war between the PKK and the Turkish military, these “militarised nationalist performances of masculinised domination and sexist graffiti” became widely known through online “sharing”. Protner shows how such images affect people in different ways, and that, because of the way we look at and touch them on our screens, they are symbolic violence that is “intense and systematic as well as intimate and personal”. She argues that feminising the enemy as well as sexual assault and humiliation are rooted in the nation-building process of Turkey, as the bodies of those not fitting into the state’s homogenising project are defined as impure. The desecration, photographing and online circulation of the enemy’s body and of the enemy’s invaded home, bring state violence as a routine into everyday life and therewith have affective power: “The cybertouch of the political violence is perceived, consciously and bodily, as a gendered invasion” that may enrage and mobilise people, but may also cause “political depression”.

Conclusion

In this article we have introduced the topic of 'Women and War' by placing it into the wider literature and theoretical gender-related approaches. We have examined historical developments within different parts of Kurdistan in order to explain how women organised themselves and became active during wars as well as armed struggles, and how they have been represented and

perceived in the collective imagination. The articles in this issue reflect cross- and multi-disciplinary approaches which bring rich theoretical and analytical insights into the topic 'Women and War', leading to new reflections on feminist theories. They pave the way for how new feminist knowledge might incorporate the problematic social and geopolitical realities and experiences of Kurdish women.⁸

As the articles demonstrate, Kurdish women have played multiple and diverse roles during wars and armed struggles with devastating consequences as well as problematic gender relations and social positionings. The experiences of Kurdish women in different parts of Kurdistan are characterised by activism, resistance and pain and are intertwined with women's multiple social identities based on their racial, religious, class, rural and urban status. While reflecting these experiences, the articles are a motivation for further studies that can reflect on how war and militarisation affect the lives of women and shape gender relations, structuring people's status and realities. It is our hope that in a time of an increased militarisation and willingness to engage in wars and violence in the Middle East, attention to the horrific consequences of these wars on the lives of millions of individuals may lead to a deeper realisation of the need for peace and long-lasting structures of stability.

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⁸ While preparing our special issue, the Weinstein affair emerged, which has added a new dimension to feminist knowledge as well as to women's perspective on agency and resistance to gender-related violence and rape, not only during war and conflict, but also in peace time.

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