

Why the Rojava Revolution is a Women's Revolution

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“These Remarkable Women Are Fighting ISIS. It's Time You Know Who They Are”
This was the title of an article published in the October issue of the women's magazine **Marie Claire. The Week** titled the female fighters of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) *“The Kurdish feminists fighting the Islamic State”*. There is hardly an internationally known newspaper, magazine or broadcaster that has not sent their reporters in recent months to Rojava Kurdistan – Northern Syria – to document these *‘Amazons of the 21st century’*.

The phenomenon of armed Kurdish women fighting the Islamic State has been uncovered by the world press and the public realm due to the IS-attack on the Southern Kurdish/Northern Iraqi, predominantly Yazidi town of Sinjar/Shingal at the beginning of August and across the border to Rojava, where in September the battle for Kobanê had begun.

Since then we all have in mind the pictures of the uniformed, brave, young, smiling women, bearing arms, ready to resist any brutal attacks by IS. These pictures disclosed also a kind of orientalist view, asking how it's possible that in such a ‘retarded, feudalist, patriarchal society’ armed women are leading the resistance against Islamic State, which at the same time is waging a femicide, a war against women.

To understand this seemingly contradiction, we have to take a look at the revolution of Kurds in Rojava, which began in mid-July 2012, when democratic counter institutions that had been carefully build over a long period finally came to power.

The Revolution of Rojava consists of two parallel processes. On one side we have the struggle of Kurds for national liberation and self-determination. We have the armed People's and Women's Protection Units as defenders of the revolution against attacks by both, regime forces and fundamentalist organizations like the Nusra Front or Islamic State. But on the other side we have a struggle for the creation of an alternative system based on gender-freedom, democracy, pluralism and ecology. These two processes are strongly bound together. They reflect the conviction that there can't be national liberation without social transformation.

As all kinds of social hierarchies, power relations, exploitation and oppression have their roots in the enslavement of women, the creation of an alternative system that is based on freedom, equality, participation and democracy needs women to be the main subjects of this process. In short: Real revolutions need to have a female character. Otherwise they would not be able to prevent the reproduction of the existing system's structures.

Revolutions are not only about demolishing existing structures, but also about creating and establishing alternative structures. In our concrete case this needs special mechanisms, consciousness and women's empowerment. Neither the Women's Protection Units nor the whole Women's Revolution in Rojava did simply fall from the sky. The revolution has a background, which is often left aside.

Let's firstly have a look at the ideological background. The PYD (Democratic Union Party) as the main political force in Rojava declared many times that even they are an independent force; they are influenced by and share the ideology of the Kurdish Freedom's Movement. The concept of Democratic Confederalism as it has been developed by the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), Abdullah Ocalan, aims to liberate society in Kurdistan by overcoming state and power structures. According to his writings, main subjects

of this struggle – again – can only be women as the 5 thousand years old patriarchal, statist system founded itself on the denial of women’s lead socialization. Rethinking the reasons for the breakdown of Real Socialism, Ocalan, who started peace talks with the Turkish state in 2013, came to the conclusion that the nation state can’t be the way to freedom as it constantly reproduces power relations. That’s the main reason why the Kurdish Freedom’s Movement changed its strategy and concentrated on developing a communalist project in Kurdistan, which is based on a democratic, ecologic, gender-liberated paradigm.

Influenced by this paradigm, the democratic movement of people in Rojava is trying to establish communalist, libertarian and pluralist structures with the participation not only of Kurds, but all ethnic and religious groups living there. The main idea is that every individual, social group and ethnic has a legitimate right of self-determination. In this context they founded a system of Canton based Democratic Autonomy. Each of the Cantons Kobanê, Cizîrê (Jazira) and Afrîn, which share the Social Contract of Rojava Cantons as a kind of constitution, has its own administration. At the head of each Canton, we have co-prime ministers; a man and a woman. This co-presidency system does not only reflect the will of women, but also the different ethnics who’s homeland Rojava is. For example the co-prime ministers of the Canton Cizîrê are a former female guerilla fighter and the sheikh of a big Arab tribe. Every political position is assumed by co-presidents. This principle has two main aims. On one hand, it ensures women’s participation in decision-making processes at every level. But on the other hand, this is a main mechanism for preventing the centralization of power and for democratizing politics.

In all towns of Rojava, there are local people’s councils and communes that aim to strengthen democratic self-government, collective will and decision-making. Within all councils and also canton administrations in Rojava there is a women’s quota of 40 percent, which aims to ensure the participation of women in the political process. Beside quantity there are also a lot of different mechanisms to empower women qualitatively. Yekitiya Star, which is the umbrella women’s movement in Rojava, is organized in nearly every village. They started to organize women at the grassroots level, making a lot of education activities, where they aim to strengthen women’s knowledge and consciousness in the fields of politics, health, rights, violence, culture, economics etc.

There are a lot of different women’s institutions, which consider themselves as part of the women’s movement but work autonomously. For example there are women’s academies that educate both men and women and aim to overcome social sexism and eliminate gender discrimination by analyzing male mentality and given roles. There are women’s foundations, which develop social projects in answer to the needs of women. Especially the different mechanisms for social education play a key role as they are the place where the consciousness for the revolution renews itself. For example in the academies that train defense and security forces, half the educational time is dedicated to equality of the sexes.

If we want to understand how it was possible for women in Rojava to give their revolution a female character, we have to take a look at the Kurdish Women’s Liberation Movement. This movement that organizes itself in form of a confederal system called Kurdistan Women’s Communities (KJK) contains of different components, embracing the whole struggle of and by women. One very essential component is the ideological party of women (PAJK), which constantly develops intellectual production, analyses the existing patriarchal, statist, capitalist system in all its forms and improves the Women’s Liberation Ideology. By doing so, it feeds the female activists with ideological nourishment.

Another main component is the woman's guerilla army. Founded in 1995 in the mountains of Kurdistan the woman's guerilla army, with its own structures, commandership, headquarters, training academies etc. marks the starting point for the Women's Protection Units in Rojava also. The women in Rojava consider the female guerilla fighters as an example, showing that women in conflict are not only victims or perpetrators but subjects in self-defense. Today, the YPJ with its completely independent internal structures and thousands of young women as members exists, because 20 years ago in the mountains of Kurdistan, in spite of all internal and external difficulties and obstacles, women have built the world's first woman guerilla army.

Only in this context it is understandable that it was possible for the women of Rojava to build up their own autonomous structures in all walks of life and struggles within the shortest possible time.

Another important thing in understanding the nature of the Revolution in Rojava is the concept of self-defense, particularly for women. I started my speech mentioning the pictures of YPJ fighters, carrying Kalashnikovs and M16 weapons. But for the Kurdish Freedom Movement, self-defense is not only about arms. Self-defense is a principle of primary importance and not limited to the armed struggle, although it determines the principles of the armed guerilla struggle and the strategy of legitimate (active or passive) self-defense.

Moreover self-defense is seen as a way of life. It's about defending yourself, your values, your aims and dreams against all kind of attacks – also potential ones. It's about creating the room for these values to grow. At the end it's about protecting life. This might look as a contradiction but in fact this is the dialectics of life in Kurdistan and in all other parts of the world where people resist for freedom.

In this regard self-defense gains special importance for women. Because in this context self-defense also means to be a subject, to fight back, to say no and to act. It's an action. For women, self-defense is something extremely indispensable. It's a tool and life style at the same time. It is instrument and objective. This right, which every being on this planet owns, is denied via power relations. If we look at gender relations the way the woman's right to defend herself not only against different kinds of attacks (psychological and physical attacks, sexual abuse, economical exploitation, exclusion from politics etc.) but also to create the life she wants in a freeway, is being rejected becomes clear.

In this context – and to come to an end – women's self-defense in Rojava and elsewhere is not only about protecting yourself with a weapon against armed attacks. In a deeper sense: It's also not only about defense. It's about creating. Creating life. A new life. An alternative live. If we measure the self-defense struggle of women against IS in this context, then we need to see that this resistance has a universal character. IS is not attacking only Kurds and not only Kurds are fighting against IS. IS with its black flag in its black world tries to absorb all other colors. For this campaign this black gang has chosen a place which has been a homeland of diversity for centuries.

It's also the place where the Neolithical Revolution began, where the goddess culture has its roots, where under the pioneer role of women humankind became a society.

The offensive of the so-called Islamic State is a war against women, too. This is shown by the fact that in the places they have occupied, the very first thing they have done is to impose misogynist fatwas. Thousands of Yazidi women and girls were abducted in Shingal and sold in markets as sex slaves! Countless women in Northern Iraq and Syria were raped and beheaded by them. This feminicide as practiced by the barbarians of the IS is not arbitrary - it

is systematic and is based on ideology. In this context, the IS stands for the most unrestrained, extreme and grossest form of patriarchy, sexism and feudalism. It represents an ideological worldview in which women are in no way to be considered as human beings with rights and freedoms - they can only justify their existence by being sex slaves. Women as objects who are merely intended to satisfy the sexual needs of men. This is their only reason for existing. The political, social, economic and cultural 'order' of the IS has as its foundation exploitation, oppression, enslavement, power and domination.

If we want to understand the struggle of the Kurdish women against the IS (and in this context, the attacks against the IS and its attempts at capturing Rojava), then we must keep in mind the ideological contradictions. For in Rojava, especially in the battle for Kobanê there is a collision of two ideologies, two worldviews, two visions of the future that clash with each other. The one has the freedom of women as the center-point, the other their enslavement. One has the patriarchal paradigm; the other adheres to women's liberation ideology.

Therefore and to come to a conclusion, the women defeating IS today in Rojava are at the forefront in creating a democratic Middle East. Because they are defending a new system; created not by forces on power but by the people and the oppressed itself. They are forming an alternative in a Middle East, sandwiched between local status quo forces, fundamentalists and neocolonial imperialists.

All the women in Rojava who today defend their country, their people, themselves, their dreams and their project of a new future are at the same time subjects of this creation process.

They are not roses or angels or Amazons.

They are women; struggling women.