

Jineoloji

The science of women's liberation in the Kurdish movement

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Jineoloji: The science of women's liberation in the Kurdish movement

After the first week I spent in northern Syria had come and gone, a friend of mine in the United States sent me an animated text message to check up on me: 'Yo! How's it going out there?! You staying safe??' Where to even begin was the question. There was so much I wanted to tell him at that moment about what had already been such a life changing first seven or eight days, but I knew I wouldn't be able to convey a great deal in both the limited amount of time I had to reply (wi-fi wasn't so easy to always find while on the road) and the fact that a text isn't exactly the best way to communicate profound emotions related to witnessing such monumental social change (there's no emojis for those revolutionary concepts that I know of that can do justice). My mind raced as I thought back over the days that felt like weeks, the week that felt like a year. Then, after about twenty seconds of thinking it over, I simply wrote back: 'Man, it's amazing. A deep social revolution. Women really do run things here.'

Well, that may have been a bit of an oversimplification. If anything, I blame our reliance on technology in which ideas have to be greatly compacted for any reductionism that comes with the sentiments expressed. Women of course do not 'run things' in Rojava – it's not as if the society has been turned upside down, especially overnight, so that a deeply patriarchal society has now become a matriarchal one (nor is that the goal). Also, I wasn't trying to romanticize the revolution, or to fall into the trap (which I will try my best not to do here in my writing) to be just another western man to somehow fetishize the role of women in the Kurdish military struggle, as so much of our mainstream press has done with its portrayal of the women of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). Still, the point I was trying to make to my friend maintains its validity: the Rojava revolution is fundamentally, at its core, about the liberation of women from the shackles of patriarchal degradation that is wrapped up, and inherent, in capitalism.

First impressions of the central role of women in the struggle

It didn't take long after my arrival in Rojava to see this concept in action. The first place I arrived at once crossing the border from Iraq into northern Syria was a military checkpoint that was guarded by women of the Asayish, or security of the democratic self-administration (I very nearly typed 'manned by women' here, which would have made for an embarrassing, and maybe revealing error about the kind of language we are often naturally driven to employ). It was difficult to comprehend that just a few hundred kilometres from this point, the fascist forces of Daesh [ISIS] still held the city of Raqqa and a considerable amount of territory in which women are confined to a life of slavery and drudgery.

After hours later arriving in the city of Qamishlo, I was told that the first order of business for me and the group of internationalists I was with was going to be to sit through a series of educationals to get a better sense of the foundations of the revolution that had been started half

a decade before (as I was to find out, this process has actually been ongoing for several decades). These would focus on what they deem to be key concepts, including the history of the Kurdish freedom movement, internationalism, and the women's struggle. The classes on the women's movement were to be divided into two sessions, one focusing on the history of the Kurdish women's movement and one on the 'science of women', referred to in Kurmanji as 'Jineoloji'.

The seriousness in which the comrades presented the education on the fundamental role of women in transforming society in the four parts of Kurdistan (that has now extended to Arab cities and villages that have been liberated by the YPG/J-led Syrian Democratic Forces) showed me very clearly that in this struggle, women's emancipation was no mere footnote, or something that was alluded to but which lagged behind in practice. I had known before coming to Syria that the Kurdish movement in both Turkey (or as Kurdish regions there are called, Bakur) and in Rojava practices a system of co-chairs, in which for every man elected to hold an office, a woman also has to be elected. I knew that there was a system of autonomous organization for women, of which the YPJ was but one example. But I was curious to really dive into understanding just what this official organizational structure means in tangible terms. Before seeing it in practice, however, the educationals provided a necessary framework for understanding how it was that this revolution was even made possible to begin with.

Making women's liberation a priority in the Kurdish Freedom Movement

If you get your only information about the world from the western mainstream media, you might be forgiven for believing that the reason why the Rojava revolution has been able to see women actively fighting on the frontlines against the so-called Islamic State is because 'the Kurds' have something inherent in them that allows this to be possible. Mainstream narratives seem to soft peddle, if not overly make the argument, that by their nature 'the Kurds' are more predisposed to gender equality than others in the region, especially Arabs. Of course, another element to the mainstream western press giving airtime to the role of the YPJ in the Syrian war is that it plays well with the establishment's peddling of Islamophobia, especially to equate Daesh with Islam, and mischaracterize the YPJ and 'the Kurds' as being the vanguard of a kind of secularism that is 'western' in orientation (you would be hard-pressed to find reports that mention the fact that the majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims).

The reason that a series of classes for internationalists arriving in Rojava on the history of the Kurdish women's movement is so essential is to provide a corrective for the kind of misconceptions brought forward by our beloved establishment news outlets. The reality is that far from 'the Kurds' having gender-equality in their genes (one can look at Iraqi Kurdistan today to make the opposite argument), the groundwork for the YPJ and every women's organization in northern Syria today has been laid by the more than 40 years of the Kurdish freedom movement organizing the people.

The long view of history

The hevals (comrades) were keen to point out if one takes the long view of history, the system of patriarchal oppression may at most comprise 2 percent of it, as various examples of social

organization and ways of living preceded the 'sexual ruptures' that gave rise to men's dominant position in society that we often think of as being somehow natural. Even to this day, evidence of these previous societies in Mesopotamia, some of them matriarchal, can still be seen in many mountainous regions of Kurdistan that were less susceptible to foreign invasions, thus allowing the communities to maintain their 'natural' beliefs (the Yezidis are one example of this).

To the revolutionaries in Kurdistan, it's insufficient to simply talk about the heroines of today or even of the past four decades. The examples given of women resisting patriarchy in the middle east starts much further back than one might expect. Nefertiti's resistance to the priests and the pharaoh in 300 BC is cited alongside examples such as Queen Zenobia's refusal to go along with Roman dictates in Palmyra in the third century. After the first division of Kurdistan, Xanimzade led the tribal resistance against the massacres committed by the Persian Empire, and she was followed by names such as Halime Xanim who resisted the rule of the Ottoman Empire.

The examples of 20th century Kurdish women who are the modern forerunners to women in the YPJ are seemingly without end. Adile Xanim helped bring together 56 tribes in a confederation in modern day Iran before her death in 1924. Zarife (1882–1937) was a widely known leader among the Alevi population who was executed due to a traitor giving her in to the Turkish authorities. The same year of the massacre of the Kurdish people in Dersim, a woman named Bese who had led an uprising threw herself from the rocks to avoid capture. In the next decade, women like Gulazer and Mina Xanim would play a key role in the establishment of the first Kurdish socialist state, the short-lived Mahabad Republic (1946).

Prior to the establishment of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in 1978, the story of Leyla Qasim served as inspiration to the women's struggle. Leyla started one of the first Kurdish Students Unions in Baghdad, and planned to hijack a plane to raise awareness of the Kurdish cause (comparisons can be drawn here to Leila Khaled, the Palestinian revolutionary whose act of political hijacking on behalf of the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Palestine helped to promote that national liberation struggle). She was caught before her plan could materialize and executed by the Iraqi state in 1974.

Kurdistan as a colony, women as the oldest colony

After the establishment of the PKK in the Turkish-occupied region of Kurdistan, the movement for Kurdish liberation was elevated to a higher level. The founders of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan among them, deemed the creation of the organization necessary as the existing Turkish left had largely viewed the Kurdish question incorrectly, putting national chauvinism in command. This clashed with the thesis of the newly established party, which stated that Kurdistan was a colony, and that a national liberation struggle was a historical necessity.

Among the founders of the Party was Sakine Cansiz, who would be murdered in Paris in 2013 alongside two other women leaders, Fidan Doğan and Leyla Şayleme. Sakine played a pivotal role in the development and growth of the organization, and a central role in the party's embrace of gender equality as a primary part of its makeup. Her leap into politics was itself an act of rebellion against the traditional family structure that aimed to keep her in bondage. Reflecting on her decision to become involved in political activities, she said "In a sense I abandoned the family. I did not accept that pressure, insisting on revolutionism. That's how I left and went to Ankara. In secret of course."

Sakine's relationship to Ocalan is important, as both were in leadership positions in the organization. It was the latter who through personal reflection and self-criticism of his own relationships with women began to question the patriarchal family structure in which women were always put in the position of being an object. He concluded that he needed to undergo a transformation by 'killing the man' inside himself, observing how society had made him the way he was. These reflections were in addition to looking back on other instances of women's oppression and subjugation he saw in his life, such as a childhood friend of his who was forcibly married to an old man, and seeing his mother live in what he saw as prison-like conditions within her own home. Most important to his decision to take up the issue of women's freedom on a higher level, though, was his relationship with Fatma, another founder of the party who he saw as someone he had used for his own interests.

Although Ocalan promoted the concept of 'killing the man' and advanced theoretical concepts relevant to women's liberation, including that women constituted the oldest colony, he also understood that he – and men, in general – could not lead this process. He is viewed within the movement as someone who has given his strength and development to the process, but who has also actively encouraged women to take up leadership of their own liberation in an autonomous way within the party and other organizations in the wider movement.

Theoretical basis of jineoloji

Today, the revolutionary movement that is grouped together in the Kurdistan Communities Group (KCK) in the four parts of Kurdistan advances the science of women, or Jineoloji, as a principle theoretical and practical part of the revolutionary process. However, this concept, adopted in 2008, was the ideological culmination of decades of experience in organizing.

In addition to Ocalan's concept of 'killing the man', another fundamental idea is that of the 'theory of separation' (both put forward in 1996) which holds that women should be able to have control of their own organizations. If it is held that revolution cannot be made FOR the people, but rather by the people, then it must be held that revolution cannot merely be made FOR women, but must be made by women. The separation theory also means that women should remove themselves from relationships based on hierarchies. One can see the seriousness today of this application, as romantic relationships and marriage within the ranks of cadre in the movement are non-existent. Part of this is to also protect the organizations from adopting a liberal approach to work and life.

Research into the role of women throughout the history of Mesopotamia also became a key part of the work of the movement towards the end of the 1990s. During the same year that Ocalan was captured in Kenya by the Turkish state, the PJKK (Kurdistan Working Women's Party) was created as a women's party, although it was later superseded by other autonomous structures such as the PJA (Free Women's Party). In the 2000s, new theories were developed including the 'theory of the rose' which held that women may 'look fragile but have thorns to protect themselves'. In the run-up to the new paradigm of democratic confederalism being adopted by the party and by the larger Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) in 2005, a 'paradigm of a democratic, ecological society on the basis of women's freedom' was advocated in 2003.

For self-defence; against liberal feminism and orientalism

By the time the first day of my education about women's freedom in Kurdistan was half way over, I could understand why it was so important to begin with these classes rather than dive right into visiting organizations responsible for concrete, day-to-day issues and organizing. The instructors frequently spoke about how revolution isn't about taking power and then building something new, but struggling to overcome the ideology of capitalism *while* organizing, something that the movement had been doing for decades before Rojava came to prominence in 2012 with the establishment of the democratic self-administration.

Key to understanding Jineoloji is that self-defence doesn't only mean taking up the gun, but actually manifests more frequently in building up structures and organization. As one leader in the movement told me with palpable revolutionary zeal, 'Self-defence also has to begin in the mind. If you see yourself as a victim, you can't overcome oppression.'

During the second day of education, there was an elaboration upon the history of feminist thought globally, including the first wave of the 19th and 20th centuries that focused on campaigns for the right to vote, equal civil rights, and workers' rights, the second wave (1970–1990) which was characterized by slogans such as 'the private is political' and 'my body belongs to me', and the third wave since 1990 in which the deconstruction of genders has taken centre stage.

Importantly, and of critical interest to those in my class who had come from western societies, were reflections on how the state has attempted to liberalize the radical women's movement by funnelling money to various organizations that has had the effect of bringing them within the framework of the capitalist system. In addition, the instructors spoke of the strand of liberal western feminism that often is orientalist in nature, and alluded to groups like FEMEN that equate Islam with women's oppression. Such groups promote the narrative of the imperialists who aim to subordinate the Middle East to their brand of capitalist modernity in the name of freedom. As one devoted Muslim woman who was also a dedicated part of the Rojava revolution was to tell me a few days later of her hijab, 'it's not important what's on my head. It's important what's in my head.'

Key components of Jineoloji (The science of women)

The flexible and undogmatic approach of the Kurdish freedom movement to the idea of revolution and women's liberation was made clear to me during the instruction I received on what Jineoloji means today as a science of women's liberation. For instance, to the initial confusion and frustration of some of the internationalists, the instructors often didn't have cut and dry answers to give to certain questions. After all, Jineoloji holds that there isn't some immutable one and only truth, but that the work done by revolutionaries in defence of humanity can give meaning to life and thus bring us closer to understanding the truth. However, they were clear about the fact that just because they don't see their as being 'one truth', this doesn't mean that one should lapse into the liberal approach of 'my truth' in which everyone's subjective analysis of reality has merit even if it's absurdly backward or reactionary.

Part of the analysis of Jineoloji is to realize that everything and everyone is alive, and to not fall into the dichotomy of the material versus the immaterial. This may seem like quite a metaphysical approach for comrades in the west who may be accustomed to much more materialist, and

often positivist, approaches. The ideology also recognizes unity in diversity, understanding that advancements are made with solidarity and cooperation, but not through crushing individuality (as opposed to individualism).

Jineoloji also recognizes the 'Principle of the Indefinite', which is that although the future cannot be predicted, humanity can analyse that there are different options and roads which can be taken and therefore we can intervene to change developments. Duality was spoken of often during instruction, and it was an idea that was kept resurfacing during my visit to Rojava. As I was told about the war that continues to rage and the revolution that is unfolding at the same time: 'by seeing that there's light, we become aware of the darkness. One cannot exist without the other. There are contradicting parts.' Other aspects to the ideology included not separating subject and object, as well as creating unity between emotional and analytical intelligence. As the instructor made clear, 'on the one hand, we criticize rationalism. Emotional intelligence played a key role in the Neolithic period. We can be both. We can both think and feel.'

Five principles of women's liberation ideology

These concepts help to illustrate the major theoretical work that has gone into creating this science of women, but the actual principles of the ideology can be underlined as the following:

Welatparezi

To reject estrangement, colonialism, assimilation imposed on women

Free Thought / Opinion

Woman must make their own decisions and make a mental break with the structures that dominate

Autonomous Women's Organizing

Only if women have the chance to organize themselves will patriarchy be overcome

Struggle for Change

Not merely making demands of the oppressor, but taking rights through struggle and creating alternatives

Aesthetic and Ethics

Women should not stick to patterns of beauty dictated by society or men

From Theory to Practice

Of course, theory without any kind of practical application is meaningless, and the Kurdish Freedom Movement has gone through a process of constantly refining and developing its theories related to emancipating half of the human race. Even within the movement itself, there have been no lack of incidents – including involving leadership – that have shown that revolutionary organizations themselves are not immune from patriarchal attitudes. For instance, in the beginning of women participating in the armed struggle in Bakur, many men within the PKK had an attitude that women were incapable of taking on certain tasks that were deemed to be 'manly'. The argument from some men in leadership was that women were too emotional and soft for warfare, and that therefore it was better to place them in non-guerrilla roles. Some commanders wanted their women comrades who did become guerrillas to wear scarves. One young woman fighter, Heval Beritan, heard about this and suggested that women build up their own guerrilla

forces. The autonomous organization and separation of the men from the women guerrillas that followed had the effect of meaning that men and women had to take care of all tasks now (for instance, men were now completely responsible for cooking).

The story of Heval Beritan is one that clearly illustrates that fact that women are at the very least on par with men in terms of being able to accomplish every revolutionary task and play every role. She was initially a journalist, but wound up a commander in warfare as she wanted to play a more hands-on role in the struggle. In 1992 during the South War, she fought until her last bullet and rather than submit to being captured by the reactionary forces of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), she threw herself from a mountain, committing revolutionary suicide in the same vein as Bese had done so more than fifty years before, during the battle of Dersim.

The lives of the Beritans, the Sakines, and the other countless women revolutionaries in Kurdistan provided the practical example for the women who went on to form the YPJ. Today's women's revolution in Rojava would have been an impossible dream without the examples of these shehids (martyrs) who gave their lives for the cause of not only freedom for Kurds, but for women everywhere. Every day, the soil of Rojava is nourished by the blood of women who fall in combat, side by side with their male comrades as equals. The self-sacrifice of those like Arin Markin, who blew herself up during the battle of Kobane rather than be taken prisoner by Daesh, illuminates the path of women, as does YPJ/SDF Commander Rojda Felat who is at the forefront of the ongoing Raqqa operation. Their examples are the practical manifestation of the ideology developed over decades of struggle, one that the movement believes has the potential to not only liberate the Middle East, but the whole of humankind.

The centrality of women's liberation in Rojava, Northern Syria

The scene couldn't be more jubilant. The sun shines brightly in a way that is simultaneously agonizing and unbearable, yet beautifully brilliant. Scores of packed cars and Toyota trucks with men and women clutching tri-color Rojavan flags make their way to a makeshift parking lot in the middle of what appears to be a seemingly endless field. The colors are vibrant and festive, indicative of the Kurdish nation's cultural traditions and identity. Smiles abound as thousands descend on a massive public gathering, one that everyone knew was going to take place on this day, even though the location had only been announced the previous night. Security is tight. After all, this is still a warzone despite the liberatory feeling that reigns supreme.

Over what is otherwise picture perfect scenery of Dirbesiye, the newly constructed Turkish border wall isn't far off. On that side of the divide that keeps this nation torn apart, Kurds are subject to the brutality of a colonial state they have been fighting for what seems like an eternity. Women too, Kurdish or Turkish alike, are subject to the demeaning policies of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP Party, an organization that proposed just last year that rapists should be pardoned if they marry their victims. Erdogan himself has proclaimed that women are not equal to men in blunt, and unmistakable terms.

Standing on this piece of free territory over the barely completed border wall, life couldn't be more different. Today is March 8th, International Women's Day. It's a day that is easily one of the most important in the calendar in northern Syria, along with Newroz and perhaps March 15th, the day that Abdullah Ocalan was captured in 1999.

Driving through Cizire canton to get to the festival, banners lined the roads proclaiming 'Adure 8' as a day to be celebrated. Walls brightened up the city of Amude painted with the most stunning murals marking the importance of this day. Women hold up half the sky, the old Chinese saying goes. Here, the desire for the slogan to be more than just words is palpable. It's not just that women have been given guns to defend their lives and their newly claimed freedom, although that's without a doubt an important component of it, perhaps the most visual representation of all of the work taking place within the society to raise women up to genuine equality. Women's autonomous organizations were among the first to be set up here, even before the revolution was announced in 2012. It's groups such as Kongreya Star that have entrusted themselves with the responsibility of putting together this festive display of celebration and struggle.

As I walk through the field filled with thousands of people from all ethnic backgrounds and age groups, that spirit of revolution I've alluded to before grabs me and takes full hold of me. I'm startled by the juxtaposition of the stage in front of me, in which a banner of Serok Apo (Abdullah Ocalan) hangs proudly behind it, and the border wall that I can make out maybe a few hundred meters behind it. The Turkish forces have hung a flag of the increasingly fascist Republic over it, as if the disgusting slabs of concrete weren't enough to cement the idea that the occupiers were always watching. And yet, Rojava's self-defence forces are ever vigilant and ready to do battle.

A young man I've just met from one of the Turkish communist parties that has sent militants to fight in Rojava puts his arm over me and tells me, 'on that side of the border today, women will be beaten and arrested for demonstrating. No matter if they're in Istanbul, Ankara, or Cizre. Same shit.' Here, though, women dance. Women sing. Women shout. Women demand their emancipation. As part of moving from object to subject, from oppressed to equals, women are in motion. They are the backbone of this revolution.

Kongreya Star

The day before attending the International Women's Day festivities, I was fortunate enough to be able to visit the head office of Kongreya Star in Qamishlo, both the capital city of Cizre canton and the Federation. As the women here are eager to tell me, the position of the women's movement in Rojava today wouldn't be even close to where it is if it wasn't for the work the movement had done over decades prior to 2012 in all four parts of Kurdistan. Here, the first independent women's organization Yekitiya Star had been founded in 2005, but they faced immense challenges in organizing freely due to opposition and restrictions from the Syrian state. This was the forerunner to the current organization that adopted its new name to reflect the entirety of the Federation.

As three women hevals are keen to tell me, theirs is a structure that aims to tackle hierarchy, and therefore organizes from the base. As the commune is the basis for the new society being set up in Rojava, it is within that structure that problems concerning women are first addressed (each commune has a representative of Kongreya Star within it). If, however, they cannot be handled within the commune, they then go to their regional Kongreya Star group. If the problem requires an even higher level of mediation or assistance, central Kongreya Star is then consulted. The aim of the organization as a whole is to tackle every problem that concerns the lives of women today in northern Syria, which is no small task given the backwardness that women have had to confront and attempt to overcome.

Undoing patriarchal mentalities in men

One of the most difficult aspects of organizing has been the resistance to the notion of women's empowerment that comes from men who are still rooted in traditional patriarchal mentalities. As one of the younger hevals explains to me, this is changing gradually, and a noticeable difference is already apparent in five years of organizing. She explains to me how even though the entirety of the Kurdish nation has been oppressed, men have had the power over women in the home. 'Men often don't want women working in politics, or outside of the home in general. There is a fear of them leaving their 'mother role.'"

It should come as no surprise that women receive education here about the history of the Kurdish women's movement and the theoretical basis for women's liberation in Kurdish society known as Jineoloji. What I found more surprising – and deeply impressive – is the lengths to which the organization is also going to educate men. I'm told that in the city of Afrin, there was just recently an educational strictly for men that focused on 5,000 years of male hegemony. There are classes across the whole of the region that last for weeks, or even months for those serious about 'killing the dominant male' inside themselves. These aim to do more than just educate –

they are akin to a form of rehabilitation to overcome reactionary attitudes toward gender roles and patriarchal oppression. The courses are given by both women and men, and aim to cut out attitudes ranging from extremely overt sexism to the more subtle but still sexist attitudes of ‘I need to protect her because don’t want to see her hurt’ (assuming the position of men is to protect women because of the superior role of men and asserting that women cannot defend or protect themselves).

The youngest of the hevals continues, ‘Male chauvinism is obvious even in those who talk about women’s liberation. They might be able to speak on it theoretically, but often can’t really back it up in practice.’ I find her words more than just relevant. How many of us men in the west who would call ourselves feminists, even those of us who have histories of many years in socialist and radical political life, fall short on questions of practice on this very issue? My experience has been that more than any other question, it is relations between men and women in which male ‘comrades’ often fall far short of the mark. To be sure, this cannot ultimately be rectified without revolution, and without a doubt the omnipresence of extreme sexism in our uber-capitalist societies can’t help but to taint even the most serious of male revolutionaries with a level of reactionary characteristics. Yet, it seems to me that the model employed here by Kongreya Star in how serious re-education for men is taken might be something that radicals in the west should consider beyond just simple theoretical pronouncements about equality.

Making women’s empowerment permanent

Although the idea of bringing men into the work being done Kongreya Star is an important component, men do not participate in any way in the organization’s structure. Just as the Women’s Protection Units (YPG) is an autonomous force fighting alongside the YPG that has its own structure of leadership, Kongreya Star makes decisions on its own without the input of men. As I’m told many times in Rojava, there are two struggles unfolding at the moment – a military one against Daesh, and a women’s struggle in all aspects of society. For the women’s struggle to be successful, it is up to women themselves to achieve and defend their free life.

Of course, there are concerns among the women of Kongreya Star here about the long-term vitality of the movement. As Heval Amuda says, ‘In many previous revolutions, women would play a very central role including in fighting. But at the end of the day, they would go home, back to their previous positions in the traditional family. We want to make sure that doesn’t happen here. Sometimes a woman can think more like a man than a man himself.’

The women here have all experienced the transformation of liberation that has taken place both inside of themselves and in the greater fabric of society. As they don’t hesitate to point out, in the beginning many of them didn’t believe themselves (and these are now leaders!) that women could do everything that men could. It was a process that meant eroding the uncertainty of being able to be equal slowly but surely, while building the self-confidence needed to assert themselves. They are quick to point out that their freedom is not the western, liberal conception of what it means to be liberated in which ‘I can go, do, and speak what I want’ but it is inextricably linked up with the collective liberation of the entirety the people. They are blunt about their objection to this concept in asserting that this westernized notion ‘isn’t freedom at all.’ Theirs is a fight that is ideological, philosophical, and above all practical, one that takes stock of the historical role of the entirety of the revolutionary movement.

The work of Mala Jin

A short walk from the central organization of Kongreya Star is the local Mala Jin, or 'Women's House'. This project was initially started by just four women, but today there are thousands who work in a number of these houses all across northern Syria. Their work focuses on giving women a place to come if they need help or strength, particularly in the fight against domestic violence and abuse.

As I'm told, prior to 2011 the levels of domestic violence were high as this was a time before widespread education about the rights of women that the democratic self-administration ushered in. With the coming of the revolution in 2012, a process began to see the domestic abuse numbers fall, though there was initially a considerable amount of threats by men against the house and its leadership because of the work they were involved in. These threats haven't completely been done away with yet today, but as I'm told the situation is vastly improved. Also, as a testament to the transformation of family relations, most of the women who come to Mala Jin today are not coming from abusive households, but are Arab women who were previously in the hands of Daesh.

At this particular house, there are eleven women who volunteer their time to assist with the work. As is the case everywhere in Rojava, everything is built from the bottom up. It is families and individuals who have donated not just their time, but their money and resources to help in building this and other houses across Rojava.

I'm stunned to hear just how hands on Mala Jin truly is in insuring the liberation of their sisters, going as far as to go to homes with force to physically liberate women who are confined by their husbands. Yet, even when men initially appear beyond the point of rehabilitation, there is always an attempt made at resolution. If a woman is taken to freedom, or she escapes from home by herself, there will usually follow a collective sit down with the man and the family. If these efforts of resolving the situation aren't successful, the man can then be taken to the Asayish (security service), but this is generally a last resort. Even then, a simple punishment is not the norm for men who have been engaged in domestic abuse, but restorative justice that attempts to actually change the man's thinking and behaviour is applied. In all cases, women and their children can be taken to houses where they can live in safety and security if they are under threat of physical or emotional suffering.

With the coming of self-administration, a gap was left in terms of the law. As I was to find out, many changes have taken place in this sphere as it applies to the role of women. One example has been the outlawing of forced marriages. While common prior to 2012, now families responsible can be fined, or even imprisoned if absolutely necessary. In an effort to overcome polygamy, all religious marriages must now be done together with a legal marriage to make sure that a man cannot marry more than one woman. I'm also told that while marriage between relatives wasn't unusual just half a decade ago, such occurrences today are few and far between.

Fear of freedom?

As I stand in the middle of such tremendous natural beauty the next day in Dirbesiye, I couldn't think of a more ideal place to be spending International Women's Day. Speakers take the stage to chants of 'Jin Jiyan Azadi' (Woman, Life, Freedom). Performers sing songs in Kurdish with the

passion and urgency of a people who have kept their national customs under wraps – but always still in their spirits – for decades. Young children born after the start of the revolution carelessly play in the fields. Are they oblivious to the major historical earthquake that's taking place here, one that they are part of whether they know it yet or not?

I ask a young woman comrade I've just met from the Turkish-based Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (MLKP) if she's encountered a fear from women in Rojavan society about grabbing hold of their own freedom. She seems perplexed, but I explain that I'm asking because of something that was said the day before at the Mala Jin. One of the women there had said that women are often fearful about coming to the house, but once they arrive, they're often so moved by their experience that they end up not only breaking free from their household shackles, but they end up joining the revolution in some organizational capacity. The MLKP heval nods an approving 'I understand' then cuts me off quickly saying, 'That's true for all of us. I also had to overcome that traditionalist family environment and the subjugation that comes with it. But once you take that first step, the leap to being a revolutionary doesn't seem that big after all. My family wanted to have me married off, but I became a guerrilla for the people.'

It seems that this 'leap' is precisely what the whole of society here has taken. The fear and uncertainty of self-administration, the doubts about women taking the reins, certainly had to exist at some point. But just as so many individual women now walk chin up with an unbreakable confidence, the whole of Rojava appears as such to me. Even with Turkish soldiers positioned not far off with tanks and heavy weaponry, a confidence of victory pervades this strip of liberated land and its people armed with forty year old Kalashnikovs and ideas that belong to the future of humankind. My newest heval has to abruptly leave, so we exchange the customary handshake and 'Serkeftin' (victory). She leaves me with one last message, a slogan that plastered on a number of buildings and banners across Cizire canton: 'If not now, when? If not us, who?' It's evident that for these women, there is no going back. Fear seems to have been vanquished. It seems contradictory for me to say so of a society that makes every statement it can to confirm its anti-hierarchical and anti-vanguard sentiments, but these women *are* the leadership – not merely of northern Syria, but I would argue the world. I am free of any level of doubt that they are in fact the vanguard force of humanity.

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