

Falling from grace: Gender norms and gender strategies in Eastern Turkey

Nerina Weiss

Abstract

This article calls for a critical scholarly engagement with women's participation in the Kurdish movement. Since the 1980s, women have appropriated the political sphere in different gender roles, and their activism is mostly seen as a way of empowerment and emancipation. Albeit legitimate, such a claim often fails to account for the social and political control mechanisms inherent in the new political gender roles. This article presents the life stories of four Kurdish women. Although politically active, these women do not necessarily define themselves through their political activity. Thus they do not present their life story according to the party line, but dwell on the different social and political expectations, state violence and the contradicting role models with whom they have to deal on a daily basis. Therefore, the status associated with their roles, especially those of the "new" and emancipated woman, does not necessarily represent their own experiences and subjectivities. Women who openly criticize the social and political constraints by transgressing the boundaries of accepted conduct face social as well as political sanctions.

Keywords: Kurdish movement, women activists, gender roles, feminist critique, Turkey

Falling from Grace

About a year after I had returned from my fieldwork in Eastern Turkey, a local friend called in order to inform me about the most recent scandals.

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Zehra, a former guerrilla fighter, had married and become a *persona non grata* in the political community. This was indeed important news! It was hard to believe that Zehra, who had enjoyed such an exceptional status within the small Kurdish community where I had worked, should have fallen from grace. She had come to the little town shortly after her release from jail. As high-ranking cadre, the “party” had supposedly sent her to inspect the local political structure and to “tidy up” among the officials.¹ Zehra took her call seriously and reserved the right to criticize both the mayor as well as other officials of the Democratic Society Party (*Demokratik Toplum Partisi*, DTP) for their hypocrisy and lack of sincere engagement for the Kurdish cause. Zehra was highly respected and honored, although mostly disliked for her harsh criticism of local politics. Zehra had accused too many high-profile party officials of using the party structure for their own personal advantage, instead of sacrificing their lives for the Kurdish cause, as did the guerrilla fighters. In our conversations, Zehra often put the polluted local party with its intrigues, hypocrisy and selfishness in opposition to the purity of the guerrilla movement.

Although so strict in her critique of local ideology and commitment, Zehra did not advocate a strict prohibition of sexual relations among party members. On the contrary, Zehra did not see why she as a female cadre should be expected to stay single and dedicated to her political party. She was not comfortable with her ascribed subject position as an *erkek-kadın*, a man-woman, and did not want to be different from other “normal” women. Unlike other female cadres who feared society’s reprisals if they broke this norm, Zehra therefore repeatedly claimed her right to marry and to form a family of her own; finally, she arranged her own marriage with an influential political activist. Not surprisingly, the announcement of their wedding plans caused great uproar. Both she and her husband were removed from their political positions and Zehra, the queen (*kraliçe*), as she herself later described her former social status, was accused of disloyalty, betrayal and treason. Zehra had been expelled from the party and from society.

Transforming Gender

Women’s participation in the Kurdish movement has mostly been presented as a possible way of empowerment and emancipation.² Through

1 During my fieldwork, many Kurdish interlocutors used the term *parti* when talking about either the PKK or the DTP. Only from the context was it possible to understand to which of these two organizations the speaker referred. I might sometimes follow my interlocutors’ example and use “the party” for the entire Kurdish nationalist movement. It is however not my intention to treat the DTP and the PKK as one and the same movement.

2 Handan Çağlayan, *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2007).

their active involvement in politics, women are expected to develop from the often uneducated and suppressed object to the empowered woman who has gained self-respect and negotiated her position within the public sphere. Yet, this view, which is also reproduced in the DTP's party line, is problematic. This paper can be seen as a critical engagement with party discourses on empowerment and emancipation, as emancipatory processes are enmeshed with the introduction of new mechanisms of control over women's bodies and lives.³

In the following, I will present the stories of four Kurdish women and the ways in which they negotiate their social position within a small Kurdish community in Eastern Turkey. Although politically active, these women do not necessarily define themselves through their political activity. They do not present their life story according to the party line presented above—that is, they do not recall their life story as developing from the uneducated, oppressed woman to the liberated, strong and self-conscious activist. In the interviews, these women rather dwelled on the different social and political expectations, contradictory role models and complex contexts with which they have to deal on a daily basis. These women act in the context of multiple constraints, as they have to deal with local perceptions of honor and shame and are repeatedly exposed to police and military interventions. These women negotiate their position within the political sphere and try to protect themselves and their dignity against violations by the Turkish state. Simultaneously, they are expected to live up to the gender ideal dominant in the Kurdish movement. These ascribed statuses, however, do not necessarily correspond to the women's own experiences and subjectivities.

Gender is highly important in nationalist discourses,⁴ and in her elaboration on the construction of ethnicity and gender in the recent Balkan wars, Žarkov has pointed out that “the Other of nationalism is never only ethnic, but also always gendered and sexualized, albeit in ambiguous and conflictual ways: a (female) rape victim is always female and ethnic at the same time, but her ethnicity and her femininity may bear different significance in different contexts.”⁵ Žarkov has not only shifted

3 Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Veiled Discourse-Unveiled Bodies,” *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 3 (1993); Yeşim Arat, “Gender and Citizenship. Considerations of the Turkish Experience,” in *Women and Power in the Middle East*, eds. Suad Joseph and Susan Slyomovics (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

4 Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, *Woman, Nation, State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Afsaneh Najmabadi, “The Erotic *Vaṭan* [Homeland] as Beloved and Mother: To Love, to Possess and to Protect,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 3 (1997).

5 Dubravka Žarkov, *The Body of War: Media, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Break-up of Yugoslavia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

our focus to the contextual aspect in the production of gender and ethnicity, but also highlighted the symbolic meaning of physical bodies in conflict: "the physicality of the ethnicized body can hardly be separated from the symbolic meanings vested in it."⁶ In the Kurdish community under study here, the military and the police often very consciously violated local perceptions of good and evil, codes of modest conduct, and purity and pollution. As so often in a conflict situation, these violations were highly gendered and sexualized. Thus, houses were mostly searched at night, without giving the inhabitants time to dress adequately. Soldiers entered the houses with dirty shoes and searched the rooms with dogs. Several reports have documented the sexual violation of prisoners,⁷ and the sexual mutilation of female guerrilla fighters.⁸ Also, often women are not questioned in their homes or village, but instead taken to police stations without a trusted male companion.

Sexual violation has been discussed as a weapon in war and a means of torture during interrogation and humiliation during custody.⁹ Rape, the sexual mutilation of corpses, or the claim to have abused women is often meant to symbolically humiliate the men of a society and society at large. Men are de-masculinized as they are unable to protect their women.¹⁰ It is against this background of the linkage between woman-honor-nation that we might understand sexual violence against women by the Turkish state and the party's control of women's movements.

Instead of presenting women only as the victims of this struggle—subjected to both external and internal war, *i.e.*, oppressed by the Turkish state as well as by Kurdish patriarchal structures¹¹—this paper follows a feminist approach in elaborating on the heterogeneous subjectivities and gender roles among Kurdish women. As mentioned above, I am interested in how women navigate within different ideological and spatial contexts and the strategies that they use. As Bordo has pointed

6 Ibid.

7 Chris Kutschera, "A Silent Scream: Interview with Leyla Zana, First Kurdish Woman Member of the Turkish Parliament," *The Middle East Magazine* 1993.

8 Judith Wolf, "Aspekte des Geschlechterverhältnisses in der Guerilla der PKK/KADEK unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Ehrbegriffs," in *Gender in Kurdistan und der Diaspora*, eds. Siamend Hajo, et al. (Münster: Unrast, 2004).

9 Maria B. Olujic, "Embodiment of Terror: Gendered Violence in Peacetime and Wartime in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1998).

10 Wolf, "Aspekte des Geschlechterverhältnisses"; Necla Acik, "Nationaler Kampf, Frauenmythos und Familienmobilisierung: Eine Analyse zeitgenössischer kurdischer Frauenzeitschriften aus der Türkei," in *Gender in Kurdistan und der Diaspora*, eds. Siamend Hajo, et al. (Münster: Unrast, 2004); Ruth Seifert, "The Second Front: The Logic of Sexual Violence in Wars," *Womens Studies International Forum* 19, no. 1-2 (1996).

11 Shahrzad Mojab, "Vengeance and Violence: Kurdish Women Recount the War," *Canadian Woman Studies* 19, no. 4 (2000).

out, the “prevailing configurations of power, no matter how dominant, are never seamless but are always spawning new forms of subjectivity, new contexts for resistance and transformation of existing relations.”¹² Thus, in spite of the gendered violations by the Turkish military and the prevailing patriarchal structures within Kurdish society, the conflict has also opened up a new social context to women. Especially the Kurdish political arena has provided a context for women to appropriate new space. Women have become active participants in the political and armed struggle; they have taken up political offices and challenged the male dominance within the party itself. However, as in other revolutionary and nationalist movements, so also in the Kurdish movement have feminist issues for a long time been “treated secondary to the national struggle.”¹³ Honor has played (and to a certain extent still plays) a crucial role. “Local” or patriarchal perceptions of honor linked to women’s modest behavior and the integrity of land are reproduced within and symbolically linked to a wider nationalist context.¹⁴ However, in the Kurdish case there is not only a symbolic link between women and the nation, but also in terms of kinship, in daily life and within the nationalist and party discourse. Thus, mothers of guerrilla fighters present themselves as mothers of the nation, the guerrilla fighters are addressed as sons and daughters of the nation, and the party itself sometime acts as an extension of the kin group or *aşiret*. I argue, along with Yuval-Davis,¹⁵ that much of the party’s control over women and their movement may be understood within a framework of nationalist forms of kinning. This is especially important for the political activity of young unmarried girls. A party official explained their strict rules of “modest conduct” as follows: “If we do not make sure that we respect local values and show that we protect the women and their honor, parents would decline sending their daughters to us.” As we will see in the case of Ayşe, parents often agree to their daughters’ political activities exactly because “the party is us,” the community,¹⁶ where the same standards of modesty and honor are enacted as at home.

After the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, voices within the Kurdish party ranks demanded a stronger focus on women’s issues *per*

12 Susan Bordo, “Review: Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 1 (1992): 167.

13 Mojab, “Vengeance and Violence.”

14 Wolf, “Aspekte des Geschlechterverhältnisses”; Acik, “Nationaler Kampf, Frauenmythos und Familienmobilisierung.”

15 Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997).

16 The political claim of the party as a representation of the community becomes especially visible in demonstrations when slogans such as *PKK halktır* (The PKK are the people) are repeatedly chanted.

se,¹⁷ thus leading to a transformation of party politics as well as an opening for women's active participation in the Kurdish nationalist movement. Since the 1980s, political motherhood has been employed in the leftist movements in Turkey,¹⁸ and several mothers' organizations with affiliation to the Kurdish movement are currently active.¹⁹ In the 1990s, women started to join the guerrilla, and by the time of my research in 2005/6, the politically active young woman had become a well-established gender norm.

In most municipalities headed by Kurdish mayors, projects for women were implemented and women's organizations established. However, few feminist organizations have succeeded in operating over longer periods of time in the community described in this paper. Although such incentives were welcomed with great enthusiasm, most failed due to deficient organization and internal conflict. Other initiatives were taken over by men, and women were assigned positions with fewer responsibilities within the organization. The liberation of women was still often perceived as connected with and defined through the liberation of the nation. This became very visible on March 8, the International Women's Day, when only a single banner addressed women's rights *per se*, while most other signs referred to women's political role: "Emancipated women are an emancipated society" (*özgürleşen kadın, özgürleşen toplumdur*), and "women are the guarantors of peace" (*kadınlar barışın teminatıdır*). The influence of feminist thought on society at large is thus rather weak and generally confined to words rather than expressed in action.²⁰

In this paper, I will present the life stories of four women who constitute role models, such as the honorary male, the political mother, or the guerrilla fighter. These women have employed different strategies to negotiate the boundaries of gender, as well as to protect themselves, their dignity, and their families. They very creatively play with a variety of ideologies and discourses, and switch between ideas of honor on the one hand and Marxist-inspired discourses of gender equality on the other. Women act as agents, in the sense that they act within relations of social

17 Çağlayan, *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tannıçalar*.

18 Lale Yalçın-Heckmann and Pauline van Gelder, "Das Bild der Kurdinnen im Wandel des politischen Diskurses in der Türkei der 1990er Jahre: Einige kritische Bemerkungen," in *Kurdische Frauen und das Bild der kurdischen Frau*, eds. Eva Savelsberg, Siamend Hajo, and Carsten Borck (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000).

19 Ibid; Özlem Aslan, "Politics of Motherhood and the Experience of the Mothers of Peace in Turkey" (MA Thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2007).

20 Unfortunately, my evaluation does not mirror Çağlayan's positive analysis of the feminist impact in the municipalities then having a DEHAP mayor. Handan Çağlayan, "Voices from the Periphery of the Periphery: Kurdish Women's Political Participation in Turkey" (paper presented at the IAFFE 17th Annual Conference on Feminist Economics, Torino, Italy, 2008).

inequality, asymmetry and force, in their subversion of and resistance to the Turkish state and their negotiation with patriarchal ideals of womanhood. These women do not only resist male dominance and state oppression, but also subject themselves to gender norms. They appropriate the gender norms and thus give new meaning to them.²¹ The women described here have internalized the discourse on honor and shame and adhere to the rules of “culturally accepted feminine conduct,”²² or in Butler’s terms, conduct regulated by gender norms. They move within the framework of the society’s and the party’s control, as well as the military’s gaze, constantly renegotiating social boundaries and appropriate gender norms. Gender is here understood as a performance which is contextual and regulated by culturally defined norms.²³ The performative and temporal aspect of gender roles opens up possibilities for transformation and change, as gender norms have to be repeatedly enacted and performed in order to be valid. To quote Butler: “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relations between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.”²⁴

I see agency not only as resisting power structures and finally liberating the self,²⁵ but rather as “a reiterative and rearticulatory practice,”²⁶ immanent to power. In this Foucauldian perception, power is ubiquitous, all-encompassing, orchestrating the settings of everyday life, and structuring people’s consciousness.²⁷ Within this power framework, the agent may resist and imply different subject positions to negotiate and transform power relations. However, the agent can never free herself of a power relation. Thus, even in the emancipatory process, as the women’s movement within the Kurdish national movement is often presented,

21 Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival,” *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001).

22 Deniz Kandiyoti, “Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies,” in *Gendering the Middle East*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (London: Taurus, 1996), 9.

23 Judith Butler, “Further Reflections on Conversations of Our Time,” *Diacritics* 27, no. 1 (1997).

24 Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 520.

25 Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power and the Acting Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

26 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15.

27 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977); “Afterword: The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, eds. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982).

new constraints and new control mechanisms are at play.²⁸ This becomes especially visible in Zehra's case. A role model for the "new woman" who has seemingly freed herself from patriarchal constraints, Zehra is an independent and self-confident woman. In fact, however, Zehra is not free, as her status as "the queen" was loaded with expectations and she herself has been subjected to strict social control. Zehra felt obliged to fulfill her duty as role model and to live up to the expectations of gender norm.

A short note on my fieldwork is in order here. I first met Zehra in 2005, while I was living for a year in a small Kurdish community in Eastern Turkey. We met again in 2008, when I had the possibility to follow up on her story and grasp more insight into her life story. During my anthropological fieldwork among Kurdish activists,²⁹ I conducted more than 50 semi-structured interviews with political activists, villagers, Kurdish sympathizers, and health workers; later, I followed up on a number of key informants in informal conversations and biographical interviews. Since the early 1980s, the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish military have fought a war in the Kurdish-dominated areas of Eastern Turkey. Over these decades, the conflict and politics as such have become an integral part of domesticity and the everyday experience in the Kurdish community.³⁰ Although fighting is still going on in other regions, the community I describe here has returned to post-war "normality." Armed incidents between the warring parties are rare; however, the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state continues as a political, symbolic and ideological struggle. Kurdish political activists still face police harassment, and research among these activists is not welcomed by the local military and police forces. Therefore, it was of the utmost importance to secure the well-being of my interlocutors. Most were more than willing to share their knowledge and experience with me, as long as I could guarantee their anonymity. Most interviews were therefore not recorded on tape or film, and I did not record the names of the interlocutors in my field notes. Self-evidently, all names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

28 Arat, "Gender and Citizenship. Considerations of the Turkish Experience"; Deniz Kandiyoti, "Emancipated but Unliberated? Reflections on the Turkish Case," *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (1987); Najmabadi, "Veiled Discourse-Unveiled Bodies."

29 Being the Kurdish mayor's guest, I was automatically positioned within the Kurdish population. Contacts to the police and the military were superficial and limited to checkpoints, roadblocks and endless bureaucratic meetings concerning my research permit and the organization of a social project. The majority of my interlocutors were members of the DTP; many were supporters or sympathizers of the Kurdish guerrilla. They saw the guerrilla as an integral part of the nationalist family and only very few of the people I met dared to openly confront and criticize the PKK and the Kurdish nationalist movement.

30 Julie Peteet, "Icons and Militants: Mothering in the Danger Zone," *Signs* 23, no. 1 (1997).

Ayşe

Several of the young unmarried women I met have been politically active within the party. Young unmarried women have used the Kurdish party setting for their political activity. They join meetings, lectures and discussions. They participate in public events such as Women's Day, Mothers' Day, and Newroz, as well as in hunger strikes. These girls are familiar with the party's agenda and the emerging women's movements. Gender equality is an ideal,³¹ and sexual relations and marriages between active members are unwelcome and sanctioned with (temporal) exclusion from the party, and in a few cases even with expulsion from the area. The party line propagates the development of "the new human being." Women and men are expected to disengage from the backward nature of woman- and manhood, to find a new gender balance and become emancipated. For women, this implies that they free themselves from patriarchal structures and actively engage in the liberation struggle.

At the same time, and in order to secure the local population's support, the Kurdish movement has also adopted and integrated local values and perceptions of honor and shame. Several of my interlocutors stressed that "the local population is not yet ready for the Party's radical ideas. We need the population's support; therefore, we adopted their traditional way of thinking." In this way, they explained the prohibition of sexual relationships between cadres and the severe punishment of any infringement on codes of honor and modesty. The literature in general does not link the prohibition of sexual relationships to the adaptation and integration of local values of honor and shame; rather, the prohibition is explained by a total commitment to the Kurdish case. Furthermore, within the guerrilla, pregnancy and children would prevent women from actively participating in the fighting.³²

Young women justify their political involvement with the party ideology of gender equality and the political importance of women's participation. As Bordo has argued, labeling and naming are important for the enforcement of norms: "The body is not only materially acculturated, but is also mediated by language. [...] we are always 'reading' our bodies through various interpretive schemes."³³ The women therefore claim equality both with regard to gender and social status within the party. A way of showing this is to address fellow party members, their senior in age and rank, as *heval* (comrade).

31 Fatmagül Bertay, *Kadın Olmak, Yaşamak, Yazmak* (Istanbul: Pencere, 1991).

32 Acik, "Nationaler Kampf, Frauenmythos und Familienmobilisierung"; Karin Leukefeld, "Solange noch ein Weg ist...": *Die Kurden zwischen Verfolgung und Widerstand* (Göttingen: Die Werkstatt, 1996).

33 Bordo, "Review: Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies," 167.

I never met Ayşe personally. By the time I had come to the small town, Ayşe had already left the community in order to join the guerrilla movement. The way in which other politically active young women and her mother described her, always talking in awe and with high respect of her, woke my curiosity. She had been one of the young women, “one of us,” as other interlocutors would say. Handan, her mother, described her as a “usual” girl who had been veiled and crocheting *dantel* (lace), i.e., preparing her dowry. Like many of the other young women, Ayşe had grown up in a political environment. Her father had been an active supporter of the guerrilla fight, and several of her family members participated in demonstrations and celebrations organized by the Kurdish nationalist movement.

What made Ayşe admirable was that she had literally embodied the disciplinary practices and perfectly managed the different gender norms and political contexts.³⁴ She had succeeded in moving between contexts, simultaneously being the chaste and dutiful daughter and an active and independent activist. As we will see, Ayşe played with established gender norms and, while not breaking any rules of modest conduct, claimed her right to gender equality and emancipation.

Coming of age, Ayşe wanted to become more involved with the Kurdish movement and turned more active in the then Kurdish party. With small groups of both male and female party members, she visited the surrounding villages. They educated the villagers in political ideology, human and women’s rights, and collected signatures for different petitions.³⁵ This activity continued often until late in the evening, and the lack of transportation and bad roads sometimes made an overnight stay inevitable.

Her parents were uneasy and afraid. However, their uneasiness did not relate to her reputation or purity. Both parents were well-acquainted with the moral code of the party and agreed with their daughter’s political activism. Their fear focused on something else: Ayşe had become active at the end of the 1990s, the most dangerous years of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict. Handan, her mother specified: “I told her: You are a man and I trust you. (*Sen erkeksin, sana güveniyorum.*) Nobody can do you any harm. But I am afraid of the soldiers—beware of the soldiers!”

It was the Turkish soldiers who, aware of the moral code of behavior, consciously broke it. They did not respect the local perceptions of right

34 Sandra L. Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, eds. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988).

35 During my fieldwork in 2005/2006, these petitions aimed at protesting the precarious jail conditions of Abdullah Öcalan.

and wrong; they polluted and broke the social order of things. Handan could list a number of examples: house searches during which soldiers entered the houses at night, with dirty shoes and sometimes even with dogs; the mutilation of guerrilla corpses and the denial of a decent funeral with Islamic rites; and what she feared most, the sexual violation of women. Danger was thus coming from outside, while Ayşe would be safe among her own people. Her mother knew that Ayşe enjoyed the respect of her *hevajs* as well as the local population. Inherent in Handan's explanation was the understanding of the party as part of the national family,³⁶ sharing the same moral codes and enforcing control over sexuality, as was done in her own family. Ayşe's subject position as an *erkek*, an (honorary) male, would prevent any immoral behavior within her community.

Ayşe, not yet a cadre, refused to marry. Afraid to lose her entirely to the movement and to protect her from all dangers, her mother sent her to relatives in Western Turkey. The mother had hoped in vain to shield her from any political activity. Far away from the controlling gaze of the military and her family, Ayşe established contact with members of the PKK and secretly joined the guerrilla in the camps of Northern Iraq. This was unlike most of the other young women I knew, who later resigned from their political activities and married.

Fatma

Marriage and children often put an end to a woman's relatively free movement in the political/public space. It is generally unacceptable for a young mother to be political active in the same way as unmarried girls. Especially during the first years of marriage, young women therefore often only join party events and activities on special occasions. Having a more restricted space does not imply that these women are unaffected by politics and do not have to deal with different political contexts. On the contrary, as young wives of political activists, they are especially exposed to encounters with the military and the police.³⁷ Politics have become an integral part of everyday life,³⁸ and the young wives employ different strategies to negotiate their place within the public sphere and to protect themselves and their dignity. As the following example will show, Fatma, a young villager and mother of four, stressed her subject position as young mother in encounters with the military.

36 Yuval-Davis and Anthias, *Woman, Nation, State*.

37 See also Mojab, "Vengeance and Violence."

38 Peteet, "Icons and Militants"; Suad Joseph, "Women and Politics in the Middle East," *MERIP Middle East Report* 1986.

Fatma is married to a Kurdish activist. Coming from a religious and apolitical family, she learned about party ideology from her husband. He encouraged her not to remain secluded, but to become politically active and to move freely between village and town. Fatma shares many of her husband's views and values. Conscious of the prevalent gender norms and expectations towards a young mother, Fatma does not follow his encouragement. In contrast to her husband, neither her own family nor her in-laws accept the gender norms propagated by the movement as valid for her. Fatma feared that neither they nor the other villagers would accept such "liberated" behavior, and that "people might talk."

One winter night, Fatma witnessed her husband's arrest. The family had already gone to sleep, and as the soldiers demanded entrance, Fatma tried to negotiate with them. In her nightgown, she asked the soldiers to wait until they were properly dressed. The soldiers agreed, but demanded that she let in a female soldier in the meantime. As she opened the door to the female soldier, masked soldiers stormed in and forced her husband to get dressed while they beat him. Fatma herself was not allowed to cover herself properly or to retreat, but had to stand at the entrance in her nightgown, exposing her body to the gaze of unrelated men. In her account of that night, Fatma put equal stress on her husband's arrest and the violence against her own body. While he was being beaten, her body was exposed in a way that was shameful and humiliating for her.

The soldiers took away her husband, leaving her with no information where to find him, or what would happen to him. She was left alone with two small children and pregnant with yet another. Together with a female relative, Fatma set off to follow her husband's traces. She learned that he and other prisoners had been brought to a hospital, where a doctor examined their tortured bodies and then "confirmed" that no torture had taken place. The hospital was heavily guarded and the prisoners shielded from the public. Fatma acted on her motherhood and pretended to go into premature labor. Screaming and seemingly in pain, she approached the prisoners. She pretended to faint, distracting the guards, and managed to catch her husband's eyes and communicate with him in a non-verbal way, before he was dragged off and a doctor came to her assistance.

Fatma recalled how she felt calmer: she had managed to trace her husband. He was alive and, according to the circumstances, well. Her husband was sentenced to several years in prison, and visiting him entailed a nightmare scenario. She was strip-searched by male guards and remembers her relief when a female guard intervened and took over the

search. Fatma hated this humiliating situation and swore never to visit her husband again. After her baby was born, however, Fatma resumed her visits. Despite the danger of being caught, she smuggled letters in and out of prison and thus resisted and subverted the surveillance of the Turkish security forces. Hiding them in the diapers of her newborn was one of the methods she used. During our conversation, Fatma put her hand on her stomach and expressed pride in her conscious act of deceiving the guards in the hospital and the prison. As her story shows, her subject position as a young wife not only protected her from and subverted the controlling gaze of the military; it also made her very visible to the soldier's gaze and exposed her to the prison guard's sexual harassment.

Fatma's life story is by no means exceptional. As I have mentioned above, transgressions of moral norms have often been highly sexualized, and the sexual humiliation of women has been used to humiliate society as a whole. A high percentage of women supported and signed the petitions against the precarious jail conditions of Abdullah Öcalan, and the Turkish police and the military were aware of this fact. During the time of my fieldwork, the police selected several women from the villages, mostly mothers of young children, and escorted them to police stations outside the villages. There, the women were questioned and told to stay away from further party activity. It was clear to all involved that there had been no need to question them at the police station. The act of pulling them out of their usual social context was seen as a deliberate act of intimidation and a transgression of moral codes. In several interviews, women expressed their discomfort with this close contact with the Turkish military and the police. These were situations that any woman would want to avoid. The women themselves talked about these contacts in terms of transgression, something that was against the moral code and diverged from modest conduct. They felt attacked in their womanhood and sexuality. The tactics of the police were rather effective, as several women refused to sign further petitions and were reluctant to meet visiting party members, hoping to escape further police harassment.

Handan

Post-menopausal women and mothers of grown-up children (preferably sons) have traditionally been less restricted in their public movement and less exposed to sexual harassment by the military and the police. Elderly women enjoy a strong position within the family and in society in general. Being perceived as asexual, elderly women may take on a rather dominant role within their family, and also in the public and the politi-

cal sphere.³⁹ Their movements are far less restricted than those of young married women and mothers of young children.

Handan, the mother of Ayşe, therefore presented her encounter with soldiers and police forces slightly differently. Handan had become politically active through her daughter. Ayşe had often taken her to meetings and encouraged her to take an active part in the discussions and events. By the time Ayşe had left to become a guerrilla fighter, Handan was well-acquainted with the party ideology and had learned to navigate between different political contexts. Handan's life story shows how she, as an elderly woman, demanded respect from the military as well as society, at the expense of her own, personal pain, however.

As soon as Handan and her husband became the parents of a guerrilla fighter, security forces started to harass them constantly. Their house was searched, soldiers stopped by to query them, and the police repeatedly forced the couple to appear at the police station for interrogation. Handan did not recall these encounters as humiliating, at least not in sexual terms. She had not been interrogated as a wife, but as a mother, and most of the time her husband had been present. Usually, her husband had also done most of the talking with the security forces: "Each time they called us, they asked the same questions, and each time he gave the same answers." Handan, on the other hand, refused to communicate with the soldiers and created as much of a distance as possible between her and her interrogators. She refused to accept the tea that was offered to them at the police station: "You can keep the tea for yourself. Hopefully we will never meet again!" Handan knew to play with her subject positions in order to navigate different contexts and protect her family against transgressions and violations. Handan was aware of her heightened social position as elderly woman. Unlike Fatma, the prisoner's wife, who was repeatedly sexually harassed and humiliated, Handan's age made her "immune" against such transgressions. On the contrary, Handan claimed respect from the soldiers, as she "could have been their mother."

As her story continued, it became clear that Handan also managed other political contexts very well. She knew how to use her political contacts to strengthen her social position. Handan frequently referred to what Yuval-Davis has called nationalist forms of kinning.⁴⁰ As she described Ayşe's political activity within the party as "within the nationalist family," she presented herself as the mother of the nation.

39 Peteet, "Icons and Militants"; Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

40 Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*.

While Handan stayed in the background in encounters with the military, she presented herself as the driving force and main actor in negotiations with the guerrilla, the middlemen, and the Turkish border guards. Her husband seemed to play no role in the following events, to be related below, and it was only at the end of her story that I learned that he had accompanied her. She described him as by then old and very ill, incapable of taking charge.

Handan did not accept that her daughter had gone off to the mountains and decided to follow her to Northern Iraq to bring her back home. She established contact with middlemen who knew of her daughter's whereabouts and could arrange her own journey to the training camps across the border. "They would not trust anybody, but they trusted me," she proudly remembered. In the camp, she met her daughter and the other girls of the unit. Ayşe refused to return home, but asked her mother to stay for a few days. For those few days, Handan became the mother of all "those girls, who did all kinds of difficult tasks in their male cloth." For Handan, these guerrilla fighters were not strong heroes: they seemed far too young, fragile and longing for their mothers. Handan thus stayed, caring for the girls as if they all were her daughters: "They were all my children there, and I was a mother to them all."

Handan knowingly or unknowingly adopted a nationalist discourse on motherhood. She became a political mother. Relating to all the guerrilla fighters in the camp, Handan positioned herself within the national family.⁴¹ By choosing the subject position as a political mother, Handan became a central figure in her own society. Her new role was publicly acknowledged, and she was elected to be the "mother of the year." Like other mothers of fighters before her, Handan was now encouraged to talk at political meetings and to share the story of her sacrifice.

The figure of the suffering mother is a central icon in many nationalist struggles,⁴² and it has been equally present within the Kurdish and the Turkish political discourses.⁴³ However, within the Kurdish discourse, the icon of the suffering mother has developed from a pure symbol of the violated homeland to a new "patriotic" motherhood, based on women's active participation in the public struggle and the "national family." The political mother is not only "reduced" to the reproduction of national culture, but her motherhood is essentialized and reified as peaceful, gen-

41 Ibid.

42 Peteet, "Icons and Militants"; Begoña Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

43 Yağcı-Heckmann and Gelder, "Das Bild Der Kurdinnen."

tle, and willing to compromise.⁴⁴ The politically active mother presents the political struggle and the Kurdish nationalist movement as rooted deeply within society and is one of the strongest symbols in the protest against injustice and war.⁴⁵ Among Kurdish (and Turkish) nationalists, the dead became “martyrs” and the mothers’ despair was turned into the “fury that will strangle the murderers.”⁴⁶

As I have argued elsewhere,⁴⁷ not all mothers of martyrs become political mothers. The woman’s ability to act in the public sphere and to talk not only about her own pain, but also about society’s trauma is a crucial norm for this social status. Currently, several mothers’ organizations, such as the Peace Mothers, attempt to disengage from such nationalist discourses and to emphasize their experience as mothers in the hope of mediating a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem.⁴⁸ Handan was not a member of any of these organizations, but had been approached and encouraged by party members to appear in public. Although Handan accepted this new public role as political mother, she struggled to live up to the expectations attached to it. She had yet to learn how to separate her personal pain, her fears and longing for death from another more political version of her suffering, a suffering which did not only embrace Ayşe, her own child, but all the “sons and daughters” in the mountains and prisons.

Saying farewell to her daughter was very hard. Handan could not bear the loss of her child and did not want to face a future of constant anxiety, with little or no information about her daughter. Life had become unbearable for Handan, and upon her return she fell into a deep depression. “The *amca* [her husband] became very ill—he is still in the hospital. I lay down to die. For days I refused to eat and waited for death to come. But it did not come. Now I am up again, doing what I have to do, but I cry a lot.” As soon as Handan had revealed her deep desperation, Ronia, another woman who had been present during our conversation, immediately put her in her place: “Finally you have become the mother of a guerrilla fighter. You have to be strong now. If you are weak, who else can be strong?” Ronia reminded her that the pain of being the mother of a fighter and eventually of a martyr was not private suffering, but a public affair. Handan had to become fully aware of the price she had to pay for adopting this new political gender role.

44 *Ibid.*, 90.

45 Yuval-Davis and Anthias, *Woman, Nation, State*.

46 Ece Temelkuran, *Oğlum Kızım Devletim: Evlerden Sokaklara Tutuklu Anneleri* (Istanbul: Metis, 1997).

47 Nerina Weiss, “Hierarchies of Suffering: Dealing with Pain in the Kurdish Nationalist Discourse.”

48 Aslan, “Mothers of Peace.”

Zehra

Let me finally return to Zehra who appeared in the introduction to this paper. When the former guerrilla fighter announced her wedding plans, she was accused of treason. No doubt, the timing of her marriage and the accusations was not coincidental. Zehra had blurred certain “lines of demarcation”⁴⁹ and transgressed the “boundaries of culturally accepted feminine conduct.”⁵⁰ As a cadre—that is, an active member of the guerrilla movement—she was not allowed to marry, even less so to a fellow party member. But why, then, did former male guerrilla fighters cease to be cadres and marry during my fieldwork? And why should Zehra not be allowed to do the same?

Zehra had joined the guerrilla in her early teenage years and then spent ten years in jail. She had come from a very “traditional” family. Her father had several wives, and Zehra had not even been registered when she was born. She was illiterate when she joined the movement and learned how to read and write in the mountains. While in prison, Zehra began her formal school education and finished high school upon return from prison. Zehra stayed only a few months with her family and was soon sent to the community described above. As I have mentioned in the introduction, Zehra enjoyed great respect in the small communities. People did not always like her—in fact, there were many who disliked her—but everybody respected her. She was the queen who dared to criticize both the mayor and high party officials. Her opinion was always asked and considered, and she moved around freely; she could even go to a picnic or spend her leisure time with an unrelated male, without provoking any suspicions or rumors. On the contrary, Zehra told me rather upset: “I went on a walk with X, and his fiancée called. She became jealous when she learned that he was on a walk with another woman. X, however, without even thinking, calmed her down and said: ‘Don’t worry. You don’t even have to think about it. She is not a real woman. She is a man-woman (*erkek-kadın*). Do not worry about her.” Zehra was not happy about this ascribed identity, which implied an incomplete, a-sexualized womanhood; in fact, Zehra was rather alarmed that society denied her femininity. Being addressed as an *erkek-kadın* did not conform to her own self-perception as an attractive woman who wished for a future as wife and mother.

I asked my interlocutors to describe the difference between the status of an *erkek* and that of an *erkek-kadın*. It became clear that these as-

49 Michael Herzfeld, “Within and Without: The Category of “Female” in the Ethnography of Modern Greece,” in *Gender and Power in Rural Greece*, ed. Jill Dubisch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

50 Kandiyoti, “Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies,” 10.

cribed identities have long existed in both Turkish and Kurdish culture. My interlocutors' definition of the terms *erkek* and *erkek-kadın* reflect Hassanpour's analysis of gender terms in the Kurdish language.⁵¹ While being a man—or, in Ayşe's case, like a man—could thus be translated as “a woman having the bravery and knowledge of a man,” being a man-woman seems to address a woman's transgression of gender boundaries. A woman that “crosses into male territory” is thus addressed as a woman “who imitates men [...] [and] looks like a man in stature”⁵² and “who has a boyish behavior.”⁵³ To summarize, while a woman addressed as an *erkek* has the male characteristics of bravery and self-control, an *erkek-kadın* transgresses gendered boundaries and imitates men without having internalized the necessary (positive) characteristics of a man.⁵⁴

While Hassanpour does not address issues of sexuality or a-sexuality, this link was drawn by Zehra herself, who saw her status as an *erkek-kadın* incompatible with marriage. The asexualization of women who transgress gender boundaries and enter “male territory” is also a common feature of times of social change. Feminist researchers have argued that social changes mostly have been designed from a male point of view, where the women have formed the Other,⁵⁵ who had to be controlled and categorized.⁵⁶ When thus women appropriated new (public) space and challenged traditionally male domains, the female body has often been asexualized, masculinized and purified.⁵⁷ Whereas Ayşe or Handan had appropriated the political context in the framework of the political family, Zehra was more difficult to position. She had fought and killed in the mountains and served a sentence longer than most of the men in her community. Not many female guerrilla fighters had returned

51 Amir Hassanpour, “The (Re)Production of Patriarchy in the Kurdish Language,” in *Women of a Non-State Nation: The Kurds*, ed. Shahrzad Mojab (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2001).

52 M.A. Şirwan, “Qamûsî Şêx Reza,” (Unpublished, London, 1998), cited in Hassanpour, “The (Re)Production of Patriarchy in the Kurdish Language.”

53 Hêdi, “Daydîfe Mirdim: Zarawey Jinanî Mukriyan,” (Unpublished, Krefeld, 1997), cited in Hassanpour, “The (Re)Production of Patriarchy in the Kurdish Language.”

54 Herzfeld describes at length an example from Crete, where a woman had entered a coffeehouse, screaming at the “proprietor about his son's violence against her own boy. One of the patrons commented that she was a ‘male-female’—she had violated the spatial conventions not by entering the coffeehouse, but by doing so as an unrelated female and by behaving in an aggressive way more appropriate to a man. Her behaviour, however, confused the lines of demarcation; it would have been appropriate at home, even if directed at her own husband, and it would have been appropriate in public had she been a man.” Herzfeld, “Within and Without: The Category of ‘Female’ in the Ethnography of Modern Greece,” 220.

55 Simone de Beauvoir and H. M. Parshley, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 1997).

56 Jorun Solheim, *Den åpne kroppen: om kjønnsymbolikk i moderne kultur* (Oslo: Pax, 1998).

57 Ibid; Susan Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body,” in *Body/Politics. Women and the Discourse of Science*, eds. M. Jacobus, E. Fox Keller, and S. Shuttleworth (London: Routledge, 1990).

from prison—at least not to this small community. Their relative freedom within the public sphere challenged the traditionally male domain on a much larger level, as Ayşe or Handan had done. In addition, as former guerrilla fighter, Zehra had proved her willingness to fight and risk her life for the Kurdish community. Through her active involvement in the guerrilla struggle, Zehra had also shown that she had liberated herself from patriarchal structures.⁵⁸ For many in the community she had become the queen (*kraliçe*). This title resembles that of Zilan, the Kurdish militant who conducted the first suicide attack against the Turkish military. Through her determination and self-sacrifice, Zilan had become a *tanrıça*, a goddess and a new symbol of the women's fight for freedom.⁵⁹ Zehra was another Zilan, a role model for the double struggle for freedom. She had become “that [woman] who fights becomes free, that [woman] who is free becomes beautiful; that [woman] who is beautiful is loved.”⁶⁰ However, like other female ex-guerrillas, Zehra herself experienced her position as that of the ascetic, asexual hero, whose movements and actions were again subject to strict scrutiny and control. She did not want to be only a beautiful, mystic hero, but she actually wanted to be loved.

When I returned to the Kurdish community two years later, things had not changed for most female guerrilla fighters. They did not see any possibility of getting married in the near future. Their reluctance was further strengthened by the experiences of Zehra, who had once again broken the boundaries of socially expected conduct. Zehra had married an active member of the local Kurdish party and given birth to her first baby. The way to a “normal” life as a woman—marrying and being a mother—had not been an easy one, however. Mary Douglas has repeatedly pointed to the danger of boundaries and the fear and sanctions that a transgression of these boundaries evoke.⁶¹ As soon as the news of their engagement became public, Zehra turned into a *persona non grata*. She was accused of being a spy and working for the military; according to rumors, the guerilla even condemned her to death, a sentence that later on was converted into the expulsion from both cadre and party membership. Dethroned, as she herself described her position, and dispossessed of her status and prestige, she married. Very few people attended the

58 For a detailed analysis of the manipulative power discourses around women's sacrifice and liberation, see Acik, “Nationaler Kampf, Frauenmythos und Familienmobilisierung.”

59 Çağlayan, *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar*.

60 Abdullah Öcalan, “Diriliş Başarıldı Sıra Kurtuluşa,” *Seçme Raporajlar* Vol. 2, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/20051880/ABDULLAH-OCALAN-SEÇME-ROPORTAJLAR-C%4%B0LT-3>, 60

61 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

wedding, and those who did, as Zehra bitterly observed, came for the sake of her husband, not for herself. When I re-united with Zehra, she had lost her faith in her former friends and admirers. She lived in seclusion and interacted only with a few of her husband's close friends. Zehra had switched between contexts seemingly impossible to combine. It is yet too early to say if this situation is a temporal one and in which form Zehra might become politically active again in the future.

Conclusion

To conclude my discussion of the way in which women negotiate their place within the public sphere, one last question remains: Why did Ayşe succeed in being an *erkek*, while Zehra failed to perform her role? From the outset, the similarities between these two women are striking. Both appear to be strong women who went further than their peers in appropriating public (male-dominated) contexts. Both had been guerrilla fighters at some stage in their life. And this is also where the difference between them is located. Ayşe had moved within the established gender norms of the political party. When she finally joined the guerrilla movement, she moved into the ranks of heroes and future martyrs and was admired for this. Zehra, on the other hand, returned to society. She had moved into the center stage of the political community and turned into a queen.

While Ayşe walked the beaten path in her movement from a young political activist to a guerrilla fighter, Zehra apparently moved in the opposite direction: she chose to marry somebody of her own choice, a man from the party ranks. Through this act, Zehra confused "lines of demarcation."⁶² Her choice to marry could be interpreted as a conscious return to an oppressed life within patriarchal structures. The liberated queen willingly returned to her chains, which she so effectively had broken earlier. Zehra did not see her wish for a "normal" life as a step backwards.

The emerging literature on women's participation in the Kurdish movement has been critical of the party line of women's engagement and liberation and called for a closer look at the different subjectivities and roles that women employ. However, there has been little focus on the new constraints and power mechanisms enmeshed in the political role models of the liberated, new woman. Zehra had gone much further in her critique of the party system and not only critiqued "corruption" among the ranks, but also questioned the "sacred" gender politics itself.

62 Herzfeld, "Within and Without: The Category of "Female" in the Ethnography of Modern Greece," 220.

For her to marry and become a mother did not mean to defy the achievements of the Kurdish movement in terms of gender issues and to return to a state of the unliberated self; rather, for her, to get married could be interpreted as her strongest critique of the underlying patriarchal structures within the Kurdish movement, and as a way of proving the party ideology of the new free and powerful woman who has been liberated from social and patriarchal constraints. Judith Butler has argued that a performative understanding of gender roles opens up possibilities for transformations in well-established gender norms. Time will show whether Zehra's new role will anchor and literally "norm-alize" her position within the political community.

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