

COLONIALITY AND SOLIDARITY: AN INTERSECTIONAL STUDY OF THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TURKISH FEMINIST MOVEMENT AND
THE KURDISH WOMEN'S MOVEMENT SINCE THE 1980s

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the relationship between the Turkish Feminist Movement (TFM) and the Kurdish Women's Movement (KWM) since the 1980s. Specifically, it offers a contrapuntal history of their face-to-face encounters narrated through a critical decolonial intersectional lens. I explore how Turkish and Kurdish anti-patriarchal subjectivities were formed historically, how they represent the (post)colonial self and the Other today, how coloniality racializes their core ideas on statehood, patriarchy, and women's liberation and informs their solidarity work. I observe that the KWM aims to present Kurdistan as a transformative counter-topography to the Turkish nation-state, its foundational ontology, as well as its socialist and feminist opposition. Working with interviews and observations made in a two-year-long fieldwork and primary texts of the movements, I trace the feminist negotiations that take place on the Diyarbakır-Istanbul axis, the political capital of Northern Kurdistan and the cultural capital of western Turkey respectively. Inspired by radical anti-colonial/anti-racist traditions of Black, Indigenous (including Kurdish), Third World and other feminisms of color, I first examine the respective approaches of the TFM and the KWM to intersectionality of oppression. Second, I attempt a deconstructive analysis of the constitution of "postcolonial whiteness" within the TFM and Turkish feminist gestures to justify essentialisms and boundaries of solidarity. This dissertation finds that anti-system Turkish feminisms continue to be shaped by a race-and-coloniality-denying, universalist ontology, despite a shift from a developmentalist to a multiculturalist frame after the 2000s. Turkish feminist relations with the KWM reproduce Turkishness, statehood, and colonial interdependence in subtle forms, even as most Turkish allies identify as anti-nationalist. On a political level, I argue that engaging with Kurdish and other Indigenous women's situated knowledge and critique might help Western-centric, gender-primary Turkish feminism and other feminisms emerging in dominant (post)colonial nations transcend a political horizon delimited by state recognition, and move towards community-oriented, pluriversal/confederal coalitions accountable to Indigenous self-determination. More broadly, this work seeks to further an academic tradition in the Third World/postcolonial context that takes racism and coloniality as a point of departure in analysis and examines whiteness not only in relation to the West, but also non-Western, postcolonial modes of identification.

Lay Summary

This dissertation examines the relationship between the Turkish Feminist Movement (TFM) and the Kurdish Women's Movement (KWM) since the 1980s, from the vantage point of their face-to-face encounters. Working with interviews and observations made in a two-year-long fieldwork, I trace the feminist negotiations that take place on the Diyarbakır-Istanbul axis. I find that the anti-nationalist TFM continues to be shaped by race-and-coloniality-denying, universalist ideas and practices, even after the 2000s when it became more culturally inclusive. I argue that engaging closely with Kurdish and other Indigenous women's knowledge and critique might help Turkish and other feminisms emerging in dominant (post)colonial nations question their self-centrism and move towards community-based coalitions accountable to different cultural worlds and Indigenous self-determination. It is hoped that this work furthers anti-colonial, anti-racist feminist scholarship in the Third World/postcolonial context.

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Berrak Cavlan Erengözgin.

The fieldwork reported throughout the dissertation was conducted under Ethics Certificate H12-02788 of UBC's Behavioral Research Ethics Board. The certificate was granted for the project entitled Politics of Kurdish and Turkish Women.

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To women fighting for freedom

Chapter 1 · Introduction

1.1 Theoretical approach and the argument

When I set out on this study, one of the things that intrigued me as a Turkish researcher was the question: Despite the progress in the Kurdish-Turkish feminist relationship since the early 2000s, why had no one told a “contrapuntal” (Said, 1994) story of their face-to-face encounters? Seeing as no one else had, I thought I might undertake it. Rewriting this history from the vantage point of these encounters intrigued me because it is precisely in those spaces that the political limitations or the potential of coalition-building emerges or vanishes. How were Turkish and Kurdish anti-patriarchal subjectivities formed historically? How do they represent the (post)colonial self and the Other? How does coloniality racialize their core ideas on statehood, patriarchy, and women’s liberation, and structure today’s feminist exchanges? And what kind of a counter-topography is produced through this contact? These were the driving questions that guided me towards reconstructing the historical conversation between Kurdish and Turkish women since the 1980s.

I came to this research with a five-year work experience (2005–2010) in the Housing & Development and Social Services Departments of *Şaredarîya Bajarê Mezin Amed* (Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality). This experience allowed me to establish contacts with women activists both from western Turkey and Kurdistan and participate in numerous multiethnic political meetings. This was also the time when I started questioning my Turkishness and the terms of my presence in Kurdistan. I realized that Marxist historical materialism and Turkish socialist-feminism, which had previously influenced me, did not explain the conflicts and entanglements of the Kurdish world that I was visiting. I gradually awakened to the fact that Kurdish women described Kurdistan as a colony (*sömürge*). This experience changed how I viewed myself as a woman and a Turkish person. I was increasingly curious about the experience of other women allies, especially how their relationship with the Kurdish Women’s Movement (KWM) changed the essence and form of their solidarity work.

This dissertation does not look at the more mainstream nationalist ((neo-)Kemalist, conservative, neoliberal, etc.) majority of the Turkish women’s movement that deny the existence of Kurdish people and condemn their struggle as terrorist activity. Instead, it focuses on self-identified anti-nationalist progressive feminist groups that are either neutral or sympathetic to the Kurdish struggle and are inclined toward solidarity. I employ contrapuntal decolonial intersectional analysis to delve into the asynchronous contemporaneity of the two struggles, which are independent in their rhythm even as their space and time are shaped simultaneously and interdependently by the ordering of asymmetrical colonial relations in western Turkey and Northern Kurdistan.¹ It bears noting that this method of analysis is quite unpopular in Turkish academia and activist circles, as it recognizes Kurdistan as an internal colony. Needless to say, this is dangerous territory to tread. The stakes get higher depending on the extent of engagement; a

Turkish person could, for instance, risk her ground in mainstream or even progressive society, for “racism and colonialism are often seen as outmoded paradigms of the 1970s Left, and those who bring them up are seen as overly political and not sufficiently academic” (Duruz, 2020; see also Yarkin, 2019). And then there is the question of direct state punishment, which ranges from social death (losing one’s job) to actual death with incarceration in between. Except for the publications of the Kurdistan Freedom Movement (KÖH) and some younger Kurdish scholars; mainstream leftist, liberal or feminist academic or activist literature in Turkey almost never treats colonialism as a subject or tool of analysis. Only a smaller tradition within the Turkish Left – which is indeed home to some veterans of the Turkish Feminist Movement (TFM) – recognizes Kurdistan as a colony (see Section 1.4).

Turkish feminists started publicizing recollections of their own past as early as the 1990s. Kurdish activists and feminists, however, could only begin to share their rich oral history and reflections with the Turkish public more systematically in the 2010s because the Turkish state’s ban on the distribution of KÖH writings was only temporarily relaxed during the peace talks that began in 2013 and collapsed amid brutal urban warfare in 2015. Another important reason for the late appearance of such recollections was the dire conditions of the ongoing war between the state and the armed Kurdish opposition, during which Kurdish feminists directed their writings at insider sympathizers, rather than an outside audience that was largely unfamiliar with or even openly hostile to the anticolonial resistance. These recent theoretical and activist texts from the KWM illustrate members’ willingness to engage with Turkish feminist history, epistemology, and activism. Turkish feminists, on the other hand, continue to narrate their own story as something independent of the KWM. During my field research, both sides resented the other for lacking a deeper understanding of the other’s emotional and intellectual worlds, historical learnings, feelings of excitement, defeat, sorrow, joy, or fear (see İpek, 2011). Yet, it was almost always the Kurdish activists, most respondents conceded, who showed a greater interest in linking their own resistance to that of the women in Turkey. “We see the gains of Turkish feminists as our gains, but they see ours as something external to them, as if it is not theirs as women,” Kurdish activist Neslihan told me, while also lamenting that many Turkish feminists remain guarded towards their movement:

Kurdish women have tons of projects: nation-building, democratic autonomy, self-defence, call it whatever you want. Is there a social restructuring by women going on? Yes. Are they active in more than a hundred municipalities? Yes. Are there dozens of organizations and institutions for women? Yes. If you really want to establish a dialogue with the KWM, I think there is nothing more desirable than sitting down with us, hearing this experience out and responding to it from your side. Doing this should come naturally if you truly want to invigorate feminism. But I am very critical that they even write about Colombian guerillas but not the Kurdish. Women’s participation in guerilla movements at the far end of the world can draw their attention [but not the Kurdish women’s participation]. Go to a [Turkish] feminist’s home now, and you’ll see dozens of books about the women in El Salvador, in the IRA, the Zapatistas [EZLN] and so on. Before bringing up the Kurdish issue, ask them if they would want to meet those women. They will say ‘yes!’ What about Kurdish women then? Why not? Are they bad because they are close by? This is precisely where the problem lies. Before 2000, the [feminist] friends that we are in dialogue with now also had similar difficulty. Through numerous

exchanges, this has been overcome with a certain group, but of course we need more than this. This requires mutual trust. I think their *guarded* [italics mine] attitude towards Kurdish women persists. They imagine us as the national, not the feminist. It's such an inadequate approach! (Neslihan).

Turkish feminist Behiye, however, thinks that members of her community are no longer negligent of Kurdish women:

Today we have built the bridges, but in the 1980–1990s, Kurdish women were not really feminist yet, and we remained a bit blind to women of Kurdish identity due to our concern about defending an autonomous political space from the Left. It can be said, as is already said by outsiders, that we were too trapped within the universal female subject construct of second-wave feminism; sisterhood meant disregarding the differences among women. Perhaps it has some truth to it, but I truly believe the main reason was our concern about creating our own space back then (Behiye).

Is Turkish feminist ethnocentrism really a thing of the past? What does colonial difference mean for the TFM today? How does colonial-racial positionality play out in their decisions on what to include in the feminist struggle and what to exclude?

In the present work, I argue that Turkish feminisms continue to be shaped by a race-and-coloniality-denying, universalist ontology, despite a shift from a developmentalist to a multiculturalist frame after the 2000s. And their political relations with the KWM reproduce Turkishness, statehood, and colonial interdependence in subtle, covert forms, even as most Turkish allies identify as anti-nationalist and progressive. The Eurocentric Turkish tradition largely dismisses the insights of anti-racist, decolonial scholarship and activism both in Kurdistan and the world. When Turkish feminist scholars show any interest in the KWM, it is typically with the goal of knowing and critiquing the Other *over there*, rather than challenging the epistemic authority of the knower to transform her politics *here and now*. As such, their representation provides a fragmentary and reductive glimpse that falls short of presenting the Other as an anticolonial, radically intersectional, and spatio-temporal whole. I further argue that engaging with Kurdish and other Indigenous women's situated knowledge and critique might help Western-centric, gender-primary Turkish feminism and other feminisms emerging in (post)colonial contexts transcend a political horizon delimited by state recognition and move towards community-oriented decolonial coalitions.

My theoretical goal is to better understand the ontological and epistemological arguments of the KWM, engaging thoroughly with the primary texts produced by civilian and guerilla members of the movement and the extensive interviews that I have conducted with 60 KWM activists. I intend to document the colonial ambivalences that the KWM works through while deeply entangled in three logics of patriarchy (Western, Turkish, and Kurdish), each structured by different modes of white supremacy. The KWM's decolonial existence is rooted in the awareness that the Turkish ethno-economic order is dependent on colonial denial, appropriation, and dispossession of Kurdish people. I want to look at how Kurdish indigeneity lives, perceives, and conceives her own experience and turns it into a unique revolutionary experiment with global implications. My second goal is to analyze the anti-nationalist or

multiculturalist Turkish feminisms from the vantage point of their encounters with the KWM and the latter's interpretations of the relationship. I have attempted a deconstructive analysis of the constitution of "postcolonial whiteness" within the TFM and Turkish feminist gestures to justify essentialisms and the boundaries of solidarity. Contrapuntal reconstruction of the history of the relationship through a decolonial intersectional lens reveals how the asymmetrical colonial interdependence is perpetuated by the distancing or merging moves of "innocent" Turkish activism. The KWM aims to present Kurdistan as a transformative counter-topography to the Turkish nation-state, its foundational ontology, as well as its socialist and feminist opposition. To study the unexamined binaries that unconsciously reproduce Turkish-supremacy, one ought to be a student of the KWM that unsettles these binaries from within the epistemic world of the internal colony.

My political goal is to encourage the Turkish/Turkified allies to think about the ethical responsibility and accountability that arises from hearing the critique and demands of the Other. This is possible by facing the Turkish denial of ethnonational and epistemic situatedness of self-constitution and that of the Turkish nation-state. Inability to analyze the postcolonial form of coloniality and whiteness/racism that racialize the interdependence among women in Turkey, not only marginalizes the feminist/women's agenda of the Kurds but also undermines Turkish efforts at women's liberation.

1.2 Research methods

My dissertation is based on archival research (on a variety of documents in the possession of women's organisations), library and online research, and field research carried out over a period of two years (2013–2014), which involved participant observation and in-depth interviews. For much of my multi-sited fieldwork, I was based in Amed (or Diyarbakır,² per the Turkish state), the political capital of Northern Kurdistan. I volunteered with KWM, working in their Amed office, and attending meetings, events, etc. as an observer. In 2014, I spent six months in Istanbul and a month in Ankara in western Turkey to interview my Turkish participants in these cities that are known to be TFM strongholds. While in Istanbul, I also attended Women for Peace Initiative (BİKG) meetings and activities.

I have conducted 124 semi-structured interviews with 65 Kurdish activists (four men, one transgender) mostly located in Amed, 54 Turkish feminists, and 9 Turkish socialists based in Istanbul and Ankara (see the Tables 1, 2 below). Throughout this dissertation, a single name (pseudonym) without date indicates that an interviewee is being quoted. These interviews lasted 2–3 hours on average (1 hour on a few occasions, 4–5 hours on some occasions, and up to 10 hours on rare occasions). Whenever possible, I split the interview into two parts. The first part focused on gathering the life story of the research participant in the form of biographical interview. The second part was about getting the details of specific research concepts, questions, and key conflicts or events that the participant emphasized in the first part. I have attempted to

include the cross section of each group in terms of status in the organization, class, age, length of activism, etc. KWM activists worked in different areas of the movement from grassroots to municipality, women's organisations to regional and national parliaments. In the TFM, 4 (neo)Kemalist feminists did not identify as anti-nationalist, and 4 socialist and 2 Muslim women did not identify as feminist. The rest of the participants self-identified as anti-nationalist feminists, either liberal, socialist, Muslim, radical, or independent. All interviews were conducted in Turkish.

	KÖH	Kurdistan Freedom Movement	Late 70s–present
Civilian Kurdish Women's Movement	KWM	Kurdish Women's Movement	Late 80s–present
	DÖKH	Democratic Free Women's Movement – Umbrella organisation of women, disbanded itself to form the KJA	2003–2014
	KJA/TJA	Free Women's Congress – Democratic confederal system of women, renamed as Free Women's Movement after the 2016 state-ban	2014–present
Civilian Kurdish Political Parties and Regional Congress		HEP› DEP› HADEP› DEHAP› DTH› DTP› BDP› DBP 1990 1993 1994 2003 2004 2005 2008 2014–	1990–present
	DTK	Democratic Society Congress – Based in Amed	
Armed Kurdish Organisations	PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party	1978–present
	KCK	Kurdistan Communities Union – Democratic confederal system of Kurdistan	2005–present
	KJB	Women's Higher Union – Umbrella organization of women	2005–2014
	KJK	Kurdistan Women's Communities – Democratic confederal system of women	2014–present
Kurdish-Turkish Joint Women's Organisations	(Early) AMARGİ	Amargi Women's Academy/Cooperative – Disbanded in 2012	2001–2006
	BİKG	Women for Peace Initiative	2009–2016
	KÖM	Women's Freedom Assembly	2015–2017
Kurdish-Turkish Joint Political Organisations	HDK	Peoples' Democratic Congress – Union of pro-Kurdish left-wing political movements, organisations, and parties	2011–present
	HDP	People's Democratic Party – Political wing of HDK and the third largest party in the Turkish parliament	2012–present
	KESK	Confederation of Public Workers' Unions	1995–present
	IHD	Human Rights Association	1986–present
Turkish Feminist Movement	TFM	Turkish Feminist Movement – Kadın Çevresi, Pazartesi Magazine, Mor Çatı, KADAV, Perşembe Grubu, Amargi, Feministbiz, Filmmor, AFK, FKÇ, Sharfliler, Çatlak Zemin, etc.	Early 80s–Present
	SFK	Socialist Feminist Collective	2008–2015
	IFK	Istanbul Feminist Collective	2010–2015
Turkish Women's Movement	TWM	Includes socialist, (neo)Kemalist, Islamic, liberal organisations and individuals	Late Ottoman–present
Turkish Leftist/Socialist Parties	ÖDP	Freedom and Solidarity Party	1996–present
	Others	SYKP, SDP, ESP, EMEP, Halkevleri, Kurtuluş, Devyol	1960s–present
Turkish Mainstream Political Parties	AKP	Justice and Development Party – Religious conservative	2001–present
	CHP	Republican People's Party – Kemalist secularist	1923–present
	MHP	Nationalist Action Party – Ultra-nationalist	1969–present

Table 1: Map of the movements/organisations cited in the study

Kurdish Political Sphere	KWM (DÖKH/TJA)	60	Political party, municipalities, labor unions, women's centers/ cooperatives, local assemblies, communes
	VAKAD, Roza, KAMER, Hebun	5	
Turkish Political Sphere	SFK	15	
	Amargi	9	Two of them KWM activists
	Socialist Parties	9	ESP, SDP, SYKP, EMEP, ÖDP, TÖP, Halkevleri
	Mixed	26	BİKG, Mor Çatı, KADAV, KA.DER, Filmmor, FKÇ, İFK, AFK, YDK, TKB, TKDF, Kaos GL, Başkent Women's Platform, Muslims against violence against women, various women's NGOs, independent feminists
		124	

Table 2: Organisational distribution of the research participants

Kurdish activists are experienced in working with Turkish researchers, and possible assimilation, appropriation and misrepresentation in their scholarship and its political outcomes. Cautioned by the KWM about some of these things, I worked hard to ensure respectful engagement, accountability, and reciprocity in my research. In terms of accountability, volunteering for the KWM gave me the added opportunity to debate ideas in depth and get oral feedback on the ways I analyzed my findings. When disagreements occurred, I made every effort to include and engage with my participants' comments and criticisms. I considered these moments of conflict as productive puzzles that emerged in the field where assimilating moves became more visible to think and labor through.

1.3 Research outline

This study will be presented in three main parts that look at the historical (Chapters 2 and 3), theoretical (Chapters 4 and 5) and political (Chapters 6, 7 and 8) encounters between the KWM and the TFM. Each part will document and discuss how the Turkish recognition and denial of ethnocultural difference works and also gets challenged. **Chapter 1** presents the late Ottoman/early Republican colonization of the Kurdish ancestral lands and the rise of the anticolonial resistance. **Chapter 2** tackles the emergence of both movements during the 80s; the originary entanglements of domination and violence through which they came into existence and the key concerns that defined their respective struggles for women's liberation. This will be an inter-spatial, multi-sited analysis connecting the guerilla and the civilian sites in Kurdistan to the Turkish sites in western Turkey. **Chapter 3** will continue with the 90s when both struggles evolved into a movement, gained popularity in their respective national realms, and started institutionalizing. I argue that the ideological and political preferences, models of organizing and ethnoracial positionalities that matured through the 90s are key to understanding the encounters of the 2000s that the rest of the study focuses on. **Chapter 4** is about the essentializing, binary representations of the colonial Other mainly in Turkish feminist academic writing, in comparison to how Kurdish activists embody, represent, and defend an indivisible truth in terms of race, nation, class and gender. I

will show that this discrepancy racializes the claims to feminism in Turkey. **Chapter 5** carries over the analytical inquiry from the preceding chapter, delving deeper into the differing conceptions of “primary oppressor” and its relation to the state-system. I look at how spatio-temporal ontologies of Kurdish and Turkish feminists, one nurtured by pre-/anticolonial insights, the other rooted in the postcolonial state culture, affect their understandings of nation-state, patriarchy, history, systems of domination, and activism. **Chapter 6** tells the story of Women for Peace Initiative (BİKG) as the longest lasting platform shared by Turkish and Kurdish feminists. Through analysis of its internal and external negotiations, disputes, and clashes around definitions of peace and modes of political action, I will grapple with the limitations of universalist, compartmentalized approaches to mobilizing Turkish nationals for peace versus the opportunities that pluriversalist intersectional approaches might offer. **Chapter 7** details the issue of deracialization, that is, the unnamed Turkishness that I have observed in BİKG activism. The chapter will trace how racial invisibility operates to shape the relations with the KWM in the broader context. The discursive and conceptual gestures of the allies that help denialist representations of the colonial self, uncoupled from nation and race, will show how covert forms of whiteness, race and coloniality are reinvented in “progressive” postcolonial coloniality. **Chapter 8** will zoom into the other main issue I observed at BİKG: the contestations around modes of organizing. The chapter will take a closer look at the TFM’s approach to organizing, in relation to the grassroots, larger society and alliance politics. This will help examine the extent to which the gender-primary, aspatial, mergerist tendencies of the TFM may or may not respond to the KWM calls for place-bound, strategic (as opposed to tactical, ad hoc), confederal coalitions based on an understanding of mutual decolonial intersectional liberation.

1.4 Historical backdrop: Formation of Turkish postcolonial state, internal colonization of Kurdistan, and the rise of anticolonial resistance

Although never formally colonized, Turkish nation-state came into existence after century-long indirect encroachment in Ottoman affairs by European imperial powers. Thorough cultural, political, economic control and military and debt relations paralleled colonial dynamics in many ways, and disrupted the ecological, economic, and socio-cultural continuities of the empire from the 19th century onwards (Çapan & Zarakol, 2017; Kandiyoti, 1991, 1998; PKK, 1978; Gelvin, 2011). When it came to Turkish Independence (1918–1923), a Western-educated “anti-imperialist” Turkish ruling elite instituted a secularist, Turkish-supremacist state to resist the British and French partitioning of the Ottoman Empire. This dissertation conceives Turkey, in both its Western-oriented Kemalist and anti-Western Islamist faces, as a postcolonial nation-state born out of ambivalent semi-colonial relations with the West that has imposed a “secularizing nation-state system across the post-independence Muslim world” (Thobani, 2020, p. 17). Not surprisingly, “(most in) Turkey accepted the ‘norms’ produced by the West as being universal and the ‘European gaze’ as the authoritative standard by which *one should be judged*, or

alternatively, against which *one should rebel*” (Çapan & Zarakol, 2017, p. 196). Accepting these norms was largely a “survival tactic,” as Deringil, and also Çapan and Zarakol argue, to cast Turkey European, white, and “modern,” and not *postcolonial*, fearing the fate of former Ottoman territories that were now under League of Nations mandate.³

As the nineteenth century neared its end, the Ottomans adopted a colonial stance toward the peoples of the periphery of their empire. Colonialism came to be seen as a modern way of being. For the Ottomans, colonialism was a survival tactic, and in this sense the Ottoman Empire can hardly be compared to the aggressive industrial empires of the West. In a sense theirs was much closer to the ‘borrowed imperialism’ of the Russian Empire, another ‘also ran’ compared to the British and the French. It was a survival tactic because the Ottomans were fully aware that if they were not to become a colony themselves they had to at least qualify for such ‘also ran’ status. It is this in-between status that I will refer to as the “borrowed colonialism” of the Ottoman nineteenth century (Deringil, 2003, p. 313).

Deringil remarks that few scholars have tried to come to grips with the specifics of the Ottoman adoption of the “mindset of their enemies,” namely, colonialism and orientalist discourses,⁴ especially during its administrative centralization and modernization in the 19th century. I would add that even fewer have explored the continuity into the Turkish Republic through the Armenian Genocide and the colonization of the Kurdish people and their land.⁵ These events fell between the “cracks of colonial archeology of knowledge” (Deringil, 2003, p. 314). This adopted mindset instructed the nationalisation of culture, identity, territory, and sovereignty, through genocide, internal colonialism, repressive secularism, and integration into global capitalism. As such, the Armenian Genocide (starting in 1915), which resulted in the physical extermination of more than a million Armenians, as well as the denial of Kurdish existence via the erasure of their cultural and political history and sovereignty, became the two constitutive events of the racial Turkish state between 1915 and 1925.⁶ After the delimitation of the Republican borders, Kurds became the region’s – and arguably, the world’s – largest population denied the right to self-determination. At present, around 20 million Kurds live in Northern Kurdistan and Turkish metropolises, accounting for about half the globe’s roughly 40 million Kurds.

Beşikçi (1990) has described Kurdistan as an “international colony,” as Kurdistan lacks even the legal status of a colony due to the concerted efforts of British and French colonialisms and the Turkish, Persian and Arab regional allies that jointly benefited from the division of Kurdistan into four.⁷ The parts in Iraq and Syria remained under British and French mandate until the independence of these countries. According to Beşikçi, what differentiates Kurdistan from a classic colony is this double colonial-bind, that is, the international and regional level multi-state interests that ensure the land remains enslaved and fragmented, not temporarily but forever. Another difference he identifies is that the Kurds’ foes not only wish to “divide and rule” but “divide, rule, and annihilate” the people’s selfhood, communal characteristics and right to be a nation. In fact, artificial division of ethnic groups by imposed national borders, and dominant nations of the emerging countries turning the land of marginalized stateless peoples into internal colonies is typical of many postcolonial states that were colonized or experienced

Western imperialism during their formation. Kurdish scholar İsmet Şerif Vanlı calls it “poor people’s colonialism,” which he terms as a type of colonialism in many Third World states directed against sizeable minorities within their artificial frontiers inherited from imperialism (Sidaway, 2000). Contrary to European external colonialisms where naming the colony is part and parcel of the colonizing mission, in internal colonialisms, it is the denial and erasure of the cultural and political history and sovereignty of the colonized that is definitive.⁸ These postcolonial nation-states use particularized modes of control, imprisonment, displacement/resettlement, schooling, policing, and economic divestiture to ensure the ascendancy of a nation and its white elite in the metropole by colonizing her periphery (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Today’s sub-imperialist, neocolonial Turkey rises on such history of denial, internal colonization, and various forms of postcolonial identification with Western whiteness.

Houston (2009, p. 32) reminds us that an important local circuit of knowledge that secures a “sovereign subject status” for Turks, Persians, and Arabs is their representation of Kurds. He criticizes the overwhelming focus of postcolonial theory and the orientalist critique on the discursive dynamics that secure a sovereign subject status for the West and neglect other local circuits.⁹ Ahıska (quoted in Çağlayan, 2007, p. 192) agrees, noting that “Turkish identity has been constructed not only by means of an imagined generalization that objectifies itself for the West, but at the same time against its own East that it tried to control by homogenizing.” Similar to Western colonialism, Turkish secularist modernization construed its unmodern Others: the Kurds (Sirman, 2010, p. 29) and traditional Muslims. It instituted cultural, military, and administrative practices to separate the “respectable” nationals who complied with the ethnoreligious identity imposed by the founding Kemalist doctrine from the criminals, bandits and, much later, terrorists who resisted such an identity. Indeed, Turkey’s Kurdish, Islamic,¹⁰ and socialist movements were the three major counter-movements to resist denial, expulsion, dispossession, forced assimilation and extermination on respective anticolonial, anti-laicist, and anti-capitalist grounds.

Under the Ottoman rule Kurds were divided into *hükümet*s or emirates (autonomous), *sancaks* (semi-autonomous), and nomadic tribal confederations (Bruinessen, 1991; Jwaideh, 2006; McDowall, 1996). This system of (semi-)autonomous rule in Kurdistan, dating back to the early 16th century alliance of Sunni Kurdish notables with the Ottomans against the Safavids, survived about three centuries. Despite the empire’s top-down modernization and centralization reforms during the 19th century, Kurds managed to preserve their culture, history, language, and in part social organization and self-government mechanisms until the establishment of the Republic (Bayır, 2018; Jongerden & Verheij, 2012). Kurds were still among the “privileged subjects” of the empire in the sense that they were part of the dominant (*millet-i hakime*) Sunni Muslim religious group. After 1891, the Ottoman state mobilized Kurdish regiments to prevent Armenians from forming a state in Western Armenia and eventually help conduct the Armenian Genocide (which also targeted other Christian communities) who historically lived on the

same land as the Kurds (Çelik & Dinç, 2015; Klein, 2011; Ünlü, 2018b). Likewise, in the Turkish War of Independence, modern Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk), convinced the Kurds to enter an alliance with the Turkish military forces by promising Kurds autonomous status in the Republican regime.

Despite these historical alliances, however, highly defensive political orientation of the Turkish ruling elite, who witnessed loss of Ottoman territories, nationalist rebellions of former subject populations, and aggressive pressures from European powers and Russia, saw Kurds as a severe threat to the territorial integrity of the new-born Turkish nation-state. Accordingly, the Republic's first Constitutional Law (1924) not only publicly denied the promise of status but also prosecuted the witnesses to Mustafa Kemal's pledge, as well as the tribal leaders, sheikhs (religious leaders), and nobles in the newly established Independence Courts (*İstiklal Mahkemeleri*). Mustafa Kemal and his circle crafted a top-down, centralized, internally colonial state based on the idea of a homogenous unitary nation that privileged Sunni Muslim Turks as the sovereign nation and denied the existence of any other ethnocultural, religious or national entity within its borders:

Kurds were no longer members of a 'sibling nation,' but 'Mountain Turks,' who had 'forgotten' their Turkishness or were in 'denial' of their Turkish origins and who needed to be told the 'truth.' ... The Kurdish language, traditional dress, folklore and any expression of Kurdish culture were banned and reconstructed as 'Turkish.' ... All references to a territory called 'Kurdistan,' which had been widely acknowledged during the Ottoman era, were removed from maps and official documents, and Turkish names gradually replaced the names of Kurdish towns and villages (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008, p. 7).

Thousands of Kurds had to flee to Syria following the 1925 Sheikh Saîd Rebellion, the first Kurdish response to Turkish Republican nationalism, which Turkey crushed with a massive display of military force. Mustafa Kemal (quoted in Özsoy, 2013, p. 105) put it, "Our duty is to immediately Turkify those within the territories of the Turkish national homeland. We will extirpate any elements who may oppose the Turks and Turkism. The quality we seek in those who would serve the country is first and foremost that he be a Turk and Turkish." The new Republican government used the "civil war-like environment" (Tunçay, 1992) that accompanied this rebellion and many others in the 1920s and 1930s¹¹ to install an authoritarian one-party regime that imposed extensive censorship and waves of arrests across the country, to silence the opposition, weaken religious power, promote "modernization," and foster Turkish national identity.

After the rebellion, the Kemalist regime was quick to enact a legal framework to bolster colonial population control, entitled, the 1925 Eastern Reform Plan and Resettlement Law (*Şark Islahat Planı*). The plan mandated that "Kurdistan must be administered in colonial style [*müstemele usulü*] by the General Inspectorates [*Umûmî Müfettişlikler*]" (Bayrak, 1993, p. 471, 2009). Öcalan (2012) views this secretly prepared plan as a "coup of white Turks"; an abrupt ban on the Kurds, Kurdistan, and any legacy or name related to Kurdishness "by morbid methods." Kurdish people "as a constitutive element of the

Republic and one of the ancient peoples of the land were now faced with being left without a homeland” (ibid., pp. 151–152). The plan called for the mass forced displacement and dispossession of Kurds (see Üngör, 2011). With the objective of creating a governable territory by reshaping the demography, “favorable nationals” like Laz, Circassian, Georgian, Azeri, and Balkan peoples were to be resettled in place of the displaced. The plan detailed the formation of five General Inspectorates, the institution of permanent state of emergency, the military fortification of the region, the Turkification of local courts and all ranks of the bureaucracy,¹² the creation of Martial Law Courts and Independence Courts, the disarmament of Kurds, a ban on the Kurdish language,¹³ the forced assimilation of especially girls in boarding schools,¹⁴ a ban on foreigners’ entry to the region and so on. During the multiparty system after the 1950s, colonial control was largely secured via comprador Kurdish intellectuals who promoted Turkification, and Turkish political parties that recruited Kurdish landowners and tribal leaders. The tribal feudal structure, in turn, was used against the rebellious movements. Its economic forces of production hampered and natural resources plundered, the region was treated as a stockpile of cheap labour and raw materials (İnce, 1996, p. 58). Until 1952, Northern Kurdistan was administered by the General Inspectorates with absolute authority over civilians, military, and the judiciary.¹⁵ The military coups of 1960, 1971, and 1980, which transformed Kurdish provinces into militarized zones, continued with the State-of-Emergency Regime (OHAL) which lasted from 1987 to 2002 across all of Kurdistan (Jongerden, 2010, p. 20).

Turkish state discourse initially phrased the nearly two-century history of Kurdish rebellion as “reactionary politics, tribal resistance or regional backwardness” (Yeğen, 1996, p. 216). “Kurds and Kurdish society were denied any indigenous structure or autonomy and were ‘studied’ as degenerated components of the greater Turkish nation” (Houston, 2009, p. 26). Since the 1990s, Kurds have been designated as terrorists and the proxy of imperial enemy powers. This change in discourse coincided with the Kurdish resistance’s success in gaining popular traction under the leadership of the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK). Kurdish activists were part of the Turkish Left until the Revolutionary Cultural Eastern Hearths (DDKO) experience in 1969–1970. Kurdish radicalization started after many in the movement realized that reformist politics were no longer possible after the 1971 military coup, and specifically after the fall of Iraqi Kurdish leader Mustafa Barzani’s 1975 revolt (Bozarslan, 2012). Feeling that the very survival of Kurdishness was at stake, newly emerging Kurdish organizations¹⁶ abandoned the more liberal earlier discourse on rights, economic exploitation, and underdevelopment by asserting that Kurdistan was a colony, demanding national independence and organizing separately from Turks due to perceived chauvinism in the Turkish Left (Ünlü, 2014).

At the time, future PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was a student leader in the Turkish capital of Ankara and a sympathizer of the Revolutionary Youth Federation of Turkey (*Dev-Genç*). According to Öcalan,

the socialist movement in Turkey underwent a period of chaos and fragmentation after the notorious state massacre of prominent *Dev-Genç* leaders in 1971. As a tribute to the legacy of the suppressed *Dev-Genç*, Öcalan sought to foster Kurdish socialist self-organization (see Jongerden & Akkaya, 2011; Sayın, 1998). The most influential offshoots of *Dev-Genç* – *Dev-Yol* and *Kurtuluş* – differed on the coloniality of the Kurdish question. For *Dev-Yol*, Turkey’s relation to Kurdistan could not be one of “colonizer and the colonized” but “oppressor and the oppressed,” since Turkey was a dependent country in a vassal-like, semi-colonial relationship to Western capitalist imperialism, and it was not capitalist based on its internal dynamics (Jongerden, 2016).¹⁷ *Kurtuluş* recognized the colonial status of Kurdistan, however, due to the low development level of the revolutionary forces, and the existence of economic, social, and political relations between the two peoples, it advocated a united, centralized organization for the Turkish and Kurdish proletariat (İnce, 1996, p. 59). Kurdish revolutionaries received the idea of organizing under one umbrella as a subtle form of social chauvinism (ibid., p. 57).

Class-reductive, race-and-coloniality-denying Turkish socialisms considered Kemalism as “progressive, anti-imperialist, and even anti-feudal” (Ünlü, 2012, p. 23). Conception of Kemalism as anti-imperialist obstructed the ability to theorize collaboration of the Turkish ruling elite with the imperialist European powers in constructing an internally colonialist, capitalist socio-polity in Turkey. The PKK, however, from the very outset highlighted the coloniality of the Turkish regime. Öcalan and his friends founded the PKK in 1978. Their founding manifesto described Kurdistan as a colony divided among the nation-states of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria in the aftermath of World War I. It characterized PKK’s struggle as one in which it was allied with the peoples of Turkey against the Turkish state and its collaborators, namely, the Turkish bourgeoisie, the state bureaucracy, and the Kurds like tribal chieftains, landlords, and notables with a stake in the Turkish state. It sought to primarily represent the dissent of the poor and rural segments of *Kurdistani* society by courting workers, peasants, women, and youth “enslaved by the colonialist and feudal-comprador order” (PKK, 1978).

Shortly before the 1980 coup, which crushed the radical Turkish and Kurdish Left, Öcalan fled to Syria before setting up guerilla camps in northern Lebanon. From there, he trained cadres while also building up forces in the Kurdish countryside in preparation for 1984 – the start of guerilla warfare against the Turkish state. Until the early 1990s, the PKK followed a “protracted people’s war strategy” to achieve an independent socialist Kurdish state that would unify all parts of Kurdistan. Later, the organization underwent an ideological change and restructured itself as a non-state freedom movement fighting for democratic confederal autonomy.

Part 1 · Historical Encounters

Chapter 2 · The 1980s: Women Emerge as Anti-Patriarchal Forces

Turkey's 1980 coup d'état provided a critical turning point that shaped the future trajectories of the radical Turkish and Kurdish Left, the anti-Kurdish Kemalist establishment, as well as other (ultra)nationalist forces in Turkey. The coup leaders crushed Turkish socialists and democrats, terminated the political lives of many, murdered, tortured, or exiled thousands. In the metropolises, the putschists eagerly embarked upon a neoliberal path that hindered any immediate possibility of a fight-back by the Turkish radicals; in the colony, meanwhile, they unleashed war. While nationwide martial law was formally lifted in 1987, authorities immediately imposed OHAL¹⁸ in Northern Kurdistan to maintain military control (Jongerden, 2010). In its fight, the PKK steadily gained more influence, earned greater legitimacy, and developed more organizational competence across Kurdish lands. For many Turkish leftists, the party's success came as a shock. Initially, many took a wait-and-see approach, viewing the matter as something that concerned Kurds alone and as a distraction from their own task of organizing the Turkish working class. They also feared that engaging too much with the separatist PKK could estrange their social base (İnce, 1996, pp. 64–65).

But there was another shock for Turkish leftists: the rise of Turkish feminists, whose separate organizing they typically perceived as unnecessary and a distraction to the wider socialist struggle. The Kurdish women's struggle, by contrast, was invisible to all Turkish progressives. For both feminisms, the post-coup period created more room for mobilization. The symbolic, semantic, and material at(de)tachments rooted in the 1980s had a lasting impact on the long-term herstories of becoming a movement that this research will analyze in detail. The two feminisms were affected by the coup in substantially different ways: one evolved into a women's movement that has become hegemonic in Northern Kurdistan, while the other has become the self-identified feminist component of a larger women's movement in Turkey's west. This chapter will look at their respective stories of emergence that are entangled in two different national realms that are connected and separated by the forces of colonial interdependence. I want to locate the originary at(de)tachments that set them down different paths. To trace the deeper roots of this divergence, however, I will start by exploring the narration of late-Ottoman and early-Republican first-wave feminism in the Turkish feminist historiography.

2.1 Notes on decolonizing feminist history-writing in Turkey

Turkish feminist historian Çakır argues that “women's history-writing should...be liberated from the discourses of modernization and nationalism, and the invented myths and images belonging to [the

Ottoman] period” (2007, p. 74). My study argues the opposite. I believe liberation from national entanglement is not possible simply by ignoring it as a background narrative and focusing on an abstract “gender struggle.” On the contrary, what is needed is to highlight and politicize the ethnonational construction of Turkish womanhood – and not just its overtly colonial Kemalist constitution, but also its developmentalist or multiculturalist contemporary forms that are implicitly colonial. By the same token, a study of Turkish feminist historiographers’ omissions regarding the constitution of Turkish and Kurdish identities at the turn of the 20th century, may offer insights not only into the first-wave antagonisms, but also the politics of ongoing feminisms in Turkey.

Turkish feminists examine the rise of the feminist first-wave in roughly three periods: from the mid-19th century to the Second Constitutional Era in 1908 (the early Ottoman women’s movement), from 1908 to the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 (Ottoman feminism) and from 1923 until women’s enfranchisement in 1935 (early-Republican feminism) (Zihnioğlu, 2003; Sirman, 1989). This piece of herstory was completely erased from the official state narrative and replaced by the notion that women’s rights were bestowed, top-down, by Mustafa Kemal. The consensus that Kemalist reforms saved women was not open to discussion. This was closely related to another founding postulation, which mandated the erasure of any continuity between the Ottoman and Republican periods. The secular Republic was supposed to represent a brand-new, modern, Westernized order that had severed all ties with the Islamic past (Altınay, 2000a). The feminist historiography that emerged in the early 1990s, however, revealed that there actually *was* a vocal Ottoman women’s movement, some of which self-identified as feminist, that continued into the Republic.¹⁹

Conflating Western colonialism with a “modern way of being,” the Ottoman state conceived its periphery as a colonial setting, especially in the second half of the 19th century (Deringil, 2003). Concomitantly, when it came to defending Muslim-Turkish domination over Ottoman Armenian, Greek, or Kurdish land, it was not uncommon for Turkish feminists of the time to adopt explicitly aggressive, chauvinist, and humiliating language that celebrated Turkish-supremacy. One such example was Nezihe Muhiddin, a prominent Muslim Turkish woman²⁰ who has been highlighted by Turkish feminist historiographers as a late-Ottoman and early-Republican feminist. She strongly articulated the interwoven nature of her gender and ethnonational interests in her support of a boycott of non-Muslim shopkeepers that the pan-Turkic Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, *İttihak ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) launched. In early 1910s, she regularly appeared at the conferences to exhort women to empower the national economy and explain the virtues of the producing, working woman (Zihnioğlu, 2003, p. 75). As the multi-ethnic Ottoman state faced dissolution, Muhiddin asserted that political independence depended on the cultivation of the economic activities of the Muslim-Turkish element. Her increasingly exclusive and racially narcissistic tone paralleled the growing Turkish nationalism that emerged after 1908.²¹

Ottomanist nationalism, which was based on more egalitarian, multi-ethnic, and decentralist ideals, gradually gave way to culturally and biologically supremacist, centralist, and authoritarian Turkish nationalism. In her writings from 1925 on, Muhiddin powerfully reproduced the commonplace rhetoric that glorified the national leader (Zihnioğlu, 2003, pp. 231–232). When the Kemalist regime suppressed the Sheikh Saîd rebellion in 1925, Muhiddin expressed her gratitude to the government for intensifying its policies of Turkification, noting: “Now onwards there is no possibility for the old to rise from the grave. Sheikh Saîd’s disgusting rebellion was the squirm of reactionism in its death throes. The mighty hand of the Republic cut its agony short which otherwise could possibly have been prolonged” (Zihnioğlu, 2003, p. 76).

Turkish feminist researcher Zihnioğlu provides ample historical evidence of Muhiddin’s racial agenda and her support for homogenizing Kemalist modernization. But whenever Muhiddin’s exclusionism becomes apparent, Zihnioğlu adopts an apologetic tone on her behalf to “rescue” her as a “feminist” as framed in today’s gender-primary TFM (Turkish Feminist Movement). Even in the face of accounts of “explicit racial narcissism,” she concludes that pre-Republican Muhiddin was an Ottomanist, at worst a “defensive nationalist” or a “cultural nationalist” with ideas that were more advanced than those of the biological racists of the time before becoming a “liberal Republican” following the collapse of the empire. Zihnioğlu dismisses Muhiddin’s ethnocentric choices as merely reflecting her time’s political tendencies. Her feminism is rendered “innocent” in these words:

What makes Muhiddin important bringing her up to the present is not her political ideas or tendencies and not even her fictional literary work as someone whose women’s rights militancy had surpassed her love for literature. What makes her important today is her struggle for women’s rights as an effective thinker and activist. In both periods [Ottoman and Republican], her effort for women’s rights came before her political choices. She adopted a critical perspective on political regimes with regards to women’s rights (Zihnioğlu, 2003, pp. 64–65).

Kurdish feminist Özgökçe, however, takes a very different view of Muhiddin. Bothered by the exclusivist privileging of Muslim-Turkish women figures’ visibility in feminist historiography and the Turkish writers’ rendition of Muhiddin’s supremacist attitudes, she wonders if it is all part of an “official feminist history”:

Muhiddin embraced the politics of the Committee of Union and Progress and supported its actions. In the process of nation-building, she had a special contribution to the constitution of an exclusionist Turkish woman identity with her nationalist language used in her essays, books, and speeches. She has worked on women’s ideals and political rights but ignored all other groups that formed the Ottoman women category. Despite the contributions she has made to the Kemalist modernization project, when she crossed the lines drawn by Kemalists for women, she was silenced by an eradication project. Even though she served the national politics of her time, due to her insistence on women’s political rights, she became a victim of the sexist politics of the government and was ignored by the male history of the time and thereafter (Özgökçe, 2011).

This difference in the framing of Muhiddin’s contribution to history is telling. Zihnioğlu portrays her as a feminist, thereby not really nationalist, by giving primacy to her fight for gender rights against the nationalist male elite. While she sidelines how Muhiddin’s racial supremacy shaped her gender politics

by suggesting that her political ideas were not what made her important, Özgökçe invites us to adopt a more intersectional analysis by underlining her contribution to an exclusionist Turkish woman's identity. The apologetic label of "defensive nationalism" that Zihniöğlu attributes to Muhiddin under the historical circumstances amid the CUP-conducted Armenian Genocide and the massacres and deportations of Kurds silences the concerns of these Other women, their discrimination and repression²² (Orun, 2016, p. 91).

Many non-Turkish or non-Muslim researchers in Turkey have criticized Turkish feminist historiography's almost total lack of inquiry into non-Turkish or non-Muslim women's herstory²³ (Alakom, 2001; Ekmekçioğlu & Bilal, 2006; Kandiyoti, 1998; Maksudyan, 2019; Orun, 2016; Özgökçe, 2011). Turkish feminist academic Berktaş finds this criticism meaningful and adds that the ideology of nationalism was hegemonic in Ottoman lands from the early 19th century, and Turkish nationalist movement always went hand in hand with Turkish feminism in parallel to the disintegration of the Empire: "This demonstrates a certain reality and, at the same time, shows the limitations of the women's movement in Turkey" (2015, p. 97). She criticizes recent feminist history-writing for emphasizing the difference between the Ottoman and Republican times and attributing the nationalism solely to the latter. Highlighting the continuity, she writes: "The 'women's question' is part of the nationalist project in the pre-Republican period as well, and this phenomenon substantially characterizes both Ottoman and Republican feminisms" (2015, p. 105). Or in Sirman's words: "Although educated women had begun to speak out against the Ottoman family system, the main discourse was one of progress and education that did not challenge the identity of women as wives and mothers" (Sirman, 1989, p. 9). Following the Young Turk Revolution (1908–1919), women, like men, wanted to be the active builders of the nation, rather than be mere onlookers. They were willing to join forces to bolster the national economy, the national bourgeoisie, science and technology, or the war efforts by fundraising, organizing supplies, tending the wounded and so on (Sirman, 1989).

However important these insights are, they do not problematize the fact that the rise of Turkish first-wave feminism came at the cost of the erasure of other feminisms, such as varieties that were more pluralist, decolonial or respectful of coexistence.²⁴ As Altınay notes, every nation-building process initially involves a diversity of alternative projects and ideas, but nationalism singles out one strand and buries the others. Feminist history-writing "also carries the risk of reproducing that silencing and oblivion while focusing on the feminist fervor and mobility of [Turkish] women" (Altınay, 2000, p. 28). The intercultural polemics of the time that Kurdish and Armenian historians highlight provide insight into these profound erasures. One such polemic was between Muhiddin and Emine Seher Ali, who wrote for Women's World (*Kadınlar Dünyası*) magazine.²⁵ Ali found Muhiddin's essays calling for a consumption boycott targeting non-Muslim businesses *asabi* (short-tempered) and extreme. Inviting Muhiddin to

lenience, Ali said the former “is distancing herself from womanhood and antagonizing (*sataşmak*) non-Muslim women”²⁶ (Yaprak Zihnioğlu, quoted in Özgökçe, 2011).

The “founding fathers” who directed the colonial domination of the ethnic/religious Other did not treat women in any less supremacist way. The *Kadınlar Halk Fırkası* (People’s Party of Women) that Muhiddin and her friends sought to establish in 1923 to advocate for the right to elect and be elected was rejected by Mustafa Kemal, who only permitted them to form a union called *Türk Kadınlar Birliği* (Turkish Women’s Union) on the condition that it stays out of politics and just engage in charity work. When the union continued to press for political equality, the single-party regime forced Muhiddin’s expulsion from the executive board (Zihnioğlu, 2003, pp. 234–247). In 1935, the union was “successfully pressured to terminate its existence” on the grounds that its mission had been fulfilled with women’s enfranchisement (S. Çakır, 2007, p. 65). As Turkish women’s demands for a share in the government came into conflict with the vision of the nation’s patriarchs, the former were repressed in line with the gender dictum that prescribed them roles as educated mothers and wives raising responsible citizens and/or working women aiding the country’s secularist modernization drive.²⁷

Between the 1930s and 1970s, Kemalist women’s organizations,²⁸ which are referred to as “state feminism”²⁹ in feminist writing, dominated the women’s scene in Turkey. In general, “republican women” responded to the Kemalist regime’s call for harmonious partisanship with obedience and gratitude, aspiring to take their share in it. One way of doing so was to exercise authority as middle-class Turkish nationals over the Other, “uncivilized” men and women, rather than over the men of their own class or race (Orun, 2016, p. 91). For them, women’s progress was about fulfilling the modernization ideals and reaching out to rural, feudal, illiterate sisters to educate them as enlightened mothers, wives and workers in line with republican values of one nation, one language, and one flag (Yesim Arat, 2000; Türkyılmaz, 2016).³⁰ For Kurdish scholar Zeydanlıoğlu, this “White Turkish [wo]Man’s Burden” is a Turkish form of orientalism: “a civilizing mission on a supposedly backward and traditional Anatolian society enslaved by the retrograde influence of Islam” (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008, p. 4).

Kurdish researcher Orun (2016, pp. 84–85) stresses that the Republic’s inclusion of Turkish women but exclusion from governing the nation was not, in a narrow sense, a gender issue or something that can be relegated to gender as a sub-domain. As articulated by many postcolonial and Indigenous scholars, colonial domination is simultaneously a sexual enterprise, and understanding the cultural and the sexual Other are not distinct acts but interwoven aspects of the same gesture (D. Million, A. Simpson, J. Barker, P. Monture, S. Thobani, M. Yegenoglu, G. Spivak, R. Mohanram). Gender domination is not accidental but a central corollary and primary constituent of colonial capitalism and the racial state. Statist, supremacist male subjects institute a patriarchal rule that feminizes all ethnic, religious, and sexual Others in a certain hierarchical order, endowing some with certain privileges over the others. Turkish feminist

historiography has almost entirely dismissed this racial and colonial constitution of Turkish feminisms, which have been programmed to ignore the voices of the Armenian, Kurdish, Greek, Arab, Assyrian, Jewish women and so on who resisted to and suffered from colonial violence. The grand historical transformation from a multi-ethnic empire to monoethnic unitary nation-state is treated as a complicating piece of background information. In this way, I argue, not only have non-Turkish women's voices been silenced, but also a constitutive part of Turkish feminists' subjectivity and the material impact of their voice have been reduced to background information. Casting the analytical focus on gender alone helps conceal the active agency of Turkish Ottoman and republican feminists in construing themselves as the liberated hegemonic women who could enjoy authority over ethnic Others.

It is my view that the difference between the "Ottoman feminists" at the turn of the century and the "Kemalist women" later did not lie much in whether they shared the regime's commitment to social reconstruction based on denial and forced assimilation, or whether they tried to expand gender rights and policies. Based on their conscious choice and interest in realizing themselves as ideal Turkish middle-class citizens, after all, both assumed positions in the hierarchy to exclude other sections of society. They mainly belonged to the same colonial tradition. I think the difference lies elsewhere. "Ottoman feminists" spoke from a position of active agency in making history, building the new nation, a position of consciousness and entitlement that they labored and earned being free equal citizens. That is why they thought they could afford being a loyal opposition in gender issues. "Kemalist women," on the other hand, were acculturated via the official gender discourse and the privileges they acquired over Other women as the repressive authoritarian regime entrenched itself with the passage of time, erasing the memory of past women's struggles. More and more, they came to normalize the red lines drawn by the nation's patriarchs with regard to class and gender-based criticism; when they asked for an improvement in their lives, they did so in a way that would not upset the male-state ego. And in lieu of being treated as sovereign subjects of the nation, they internalized and effectively operationalized the rhetoric that rights were given, not taken.

Berkay (2015, p. 97) suggests that the fact that the Ottoman Muslim women cared more about women's societal interests than their individual rights was actually a characteristic feature of all patriarchal societies, as well as any patriarchal thought that identified women either with the social liberation/progress or corruption/demise of society. For her, becoming a rights-bearing individual is a safeguard against this instrumentalization, as the ultimate goal of feminism is liberation from the gender-oppressive community or nation. This liberal-individualist reasoning permits attention to one's communal interests only in the form of "subjugation." Yet in reality, we saw that neither Turkish nor non-Turkish activists of the late Ottoman, early or late Republican times have been passive objects but the engaged subjects of their respective nations. Therefore, I disagree that a "feminist" solution lies in

liberation from the nation but might lie in making the national situatedness more visible to work through. Moreover, Berktaş's view obscures the fact that the national projects that excite different ethnoreligious groups might radically differ in terms of their colonial or patriarchal characters (as we observe in the case of Kurdish women's movement). The Turkish gender regime, on the other hand, has long been based on excluding racialized women from enjoying hegemonic nationals' rights and freedoms, such as the right to imagine a gender regime where, say, Kurdish women are the constitutive subjects. I argue that both Turkish (neo)Kemalism and today's feminist anti-Kemalism are premised on the denial of these rights.

To summarize, despite some women's discursive efforts to construct "early feminists" shorn of national affiliations, the Turkish-supremacist worldview was essential to their understanding of gender liberation. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, avoiding an inquiry into the already-ethnonational constitution of any feminism and decentering the nation from gender is still how today's TFM aims to rescue "true feminist identity" as anti-nationalist and, hence, universal. This is how "true" women's liberation is demarcated not only from the Kemalist but also the Kurdish women's movement.

2.2 The *Yurtsever* Kurdish women's struggle

How did Kurdish women experience the 1980s in terms of the Kurdish freedom movement? One can identify some major intersecting counter-topographies, including the mountains of guerilla women, the jails of captive women, the communities, family, and acquaintances of women militants, *serhildans* (popular uprisings³¹) led by women, and the European diaspora of women. These converging lines created the conditions of possibility for thousands to come out of their homes and join in, as both civilians and guerillas, to provide a counter-narrative regarding the Turkish and Kurdish nations. In part due to the state criminalization of any intellectual engagement with the Kurdish rebellion and in part due to the internalized tendency to "see like the state" (see G. Pratt, 2010), almost no research by Turkish scholars provides an inter-spatial, multi-sited framework (including the civilian and the guerilla) to make holistic sense of the formation of *yurtsever*³² women's subjectivity. In this chapter and the next, I aspire to capture this holism.

2.2.1 The guerilla side: From "traditional family" to "revolutionary family"

By 1973–1978, the PKK's "group stage," and especially by the 1978–1984 "party stage" that preceded the beginning of guerilla warfare, Kurdish women had managed to break their silence of the pre-1970s. Kurdish women participated in initial groups dispatched from Ankara to Northern Kurdistan to train and mobilize local communities. Two PKK founders, in fact, were women: Sakine Cansız and Kesire Yıldırım. Their personal trajectories in militant life, alongside many other women figures, played a pedagogical role in shaping the movement's perspective on (women's) freedom. Among the militants arrested by the Turkish state in the early 1980s, many were women, and in the first groups transferred to

guerilla camps in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, 17 were women (Ada, 2014). In the early 1980s, the first women militants who fell as “*şehîd* (martyr)” in armed clashes started to “shake Kurdish society” and “break taboos” (Jêhat, 2013). Accordingly, increasing numbers of women were attracted to the struggle.

The numbers of initial PKK recruits were small, with most coming from urban, petit-bourgeois segments, as well as university students and the youth. They nonetheless revealed an important base of resistance among Kurdish people. Inspired by the Turkish socialist student movement of the 1970s, the PKK founders' take on the “women's question” shared common characteristics with them, as they were sensitive and open but not yet clear on the goal and perspective of gender liberation, a former woman guerilla writes (Zagros, 2013). Women's initial low rate of participation, despite the PKK's encouragement from day one, is remarkable given the strict patriarchal traditions of the region. The KWM (Kurdish Women's Movement) accounts agree that until the late 1980s, most women recruits understood some of the existing socialist or nationalist political thought, but not women's liberation (which is not to say that their issues with male domination did not play some role in their mobilization), since the cadre and leadership's anti-patriarchal paradigm had not yet fully emerged.

Women's coming out of their homes, participating in the revolution shook vast portions of the society. Women's families, school friends, neighbors, and kin, and tribal relations that were very tightly knit at the time were shaken. There was also a shake on the state side due to women's participation. Then, the men in the PKK, determined to accomplish one of the most difficult revolutions in the world, were shaken by associating with women for the first time via organizational, political, and ideological ties – ties other than the [traditional] ones between mother and daughter, sister and wife and so on. And then, there was the wave of change among women, who were relating to one another through a political party for the first time. After all, this was exactly what a social revolution was (Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015, p. 191).

In parallel with the PKK's popularization (*kitleselleşme*) after 1984 and the emergence of women role models among the fighters who trickled down from the mountains, women's question became a more pressing issue. The initial concepts borrowed from Marxist-Leninist experiences elsewhere did not match the complexity of the gendered colonial reality on the ground. Öcalan acknowledged this dilemma in his self-critical evaluation of the PKK's once state-centered national liberationist approach and the theoretical generalizations that it relied on, noting that it paid no attention to colonized individuals' specific psycho-social conundrums. Due to the party's insufficient grassroots experience, it mimicked pre-existing models without much critical reflection:

We may not institute the free family without overcoming the colossal deadlock of family relations. Due to this reality of ours, our revolution cannot do with the general principles of most other contemporary revolutions, but requires solutions standing on their specific conditions. In our case, the individual is a quagmire, and cannot be incorporated in the revolution without being untangled. Untangling the individual means untangling the tremendous network of relations s/he is entangled in. Many revolutions rely on a general analysis and do not attempt an analysis of the individual as much. But our practice shows that moving forward with a general analysis alone is impossible. For example, for a long time, we worked with the generalization that “Kurdistan is a colony, national liberation is essential”; or that “the guerilla army must respond to the imperative of a people's war.” For that, we

have quoted extensively from books, developed schemas, charters and regulations. By the end of 1985, however, we realized that things were not moving (Öcalan, 1998b, p. 4).

Women's presence in the mountains was not accepted by men *hevals* (friends, companions) and the grassroots communities. In a squad of 20, sometimes only one or two were women. Being yourself and affirming your difference as a proud woman was a matter of lethal struggle. Sometimes, women had to hide their female identity in interactions with locals. These pioneering cadres faced the most extreme level of feudal resistance, and most often paid for dissidence with their lives. If not confronted in a strategic and systematic manner, men's "revengeful attacks" in the PKK would likely have annihilated the possibilities for women's freedom. Öcalan responded creatively, making the cadres conscious (*bilince çıkarmak*) of this reality as a strategic regulative question. When things were not moving because of the internal gender fight as well, Öcalan initiated women's small *yoğunlaşma* (intensive reading, writing, and discussion) groups that specifically analyzed the institutions of the family and marriage from a women's point of view and the replication of those male-dominated patterns among the guerillas (Ada, 2014). The preliminary ideas around *özgün* (women's specific) organizing originated from these groups. Some of the earliest women commanders emerged at this time as well.

These communal discussions culminated in the first systematized analysis of sexism in the PKK, as well as a plan, which was outlined during the 3rd PKK congress in 1986, to counter this discrimination. This perspective aroused heightened interest, according to woman guerilla Jêhat (2013). The nature of gender relations in the party in its sociological relation to the father-husband figure, as well as woman-child relations in society, was examined in its interlocking complexity. In an unprecedented move for a male leader in the region, Öcalan submitted his recently ended marriage of 10 years³³ to collective scrutiny as a pedagogical case study to explore the deep-rooted gender conflict and the familial realities that enslave women in Kurdish and Middle Eastern societies. Öcalan also shared his distressing childhood and teenage observations regarding the situation of women and men in his rural feudal village and family, noting, for example, how girls would disappear from their street games to become "child brides." Through these stories, he invited his *hevals* to collective self-analysis (Westrheim, 2008a, see also 2010). This marked the beginning of a period called *çözümlemeler*³⁴ (deconstructive analyses).

What, then, were the empirical power issues at the time that led the PKK to cultivate this intersectional consciousness, which lies at the root of the freedom/domination conundrum?

We all come from the grassroots and are imprinted with our gender and class characteristics. Some come from the petit-bourgeois class, some are lower-middle, some are bourgeois, some are elite, some are rural; we all carry our social class characteristics to the struggle. So in the movement, a class struggle takes place. To purify oneself of the mentality imposed by the capitalist system, one needs to reformat her brain in a way that is similar to achieving nirvana; that is, one needs to commit *sınıf intiharı* [class suicide]. You need to nurture your brain with the consciousness of humanity, the oppressed, with women's consciousness. Similarly, men bring in their masculine thoughts and behavior. And they need to commit *cins intiharı* [gender suicide] (Suna, interview).³⁵

As KWM activist Suna puts it, “committing class and gender suicide” was an innate pedagogical practice of party life towards an egalitarian national identity. For the PKK, the primary object of deconstruction until the mid-1990s was Kemalism, the colonialist patriarchal ideology. The party questioned the Kemalist petit-bourgeois family and class structure, relations, and features that facilitated the state’s control over the colony, instilling Turkish-supremacy over the Kurdish psycho-sociality. The party studied how these internalized subjugations interlocked in a way to ensure that colonial domination took permanent root in Kurdish society. During the *toplumsallaşma* (popularization) stage of KÖH (Kurdistan Freedom Movement) in the 1990s, however, anticolonial struggle was not just about changing the objective conditions for the cadre, but also about deconstructing and transcending colonial mentality in one’s personality and life. In such a field, *cins savaşı* (gender war) became more and more important (as detailed in Chapter 3). In periodic focus group sessions for *kişilik çözümlemesi* (deconstructive personality analysis), women and men cadres would work to spot colonial, statist, and male-dominant patterns of thinking and behavior in their personalities and crack them open. “The new woman and man” would not be a product, but a producer of the socialist model for the Kurdish nation that would be based on women’s freedom. Given that the Turkish state had used every personal weakness to infiltrate the PKK and turn militants into informants, the idea was to understand the interrelation of the dilemmas of sexual and political domination/freedom, the desires and fantasies of the colonized psyche, so as to detect and transform the “agent-provocateur” or “collaborator personalities” into revolutionaries.

This dual-structured counterstrategy attacked the dual-structured colonialism on both levels: the fractured psycho-affective world of the colonized body/mind, as well as the interrelations of material historical conditions. This counterstrategy aimed at not only political and military reconstruction, but societal and personal change as well. This is similar to the Fanonian anticolonial project:³⁶ “Fanon argued that it was the interplay between the structural/objective and recognitive/subjective realms of colonialism that ensured its hegemony over time” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 32). As the next chapter will further elaborate, Öcalan’s *Önderlik* (Leadership) institution acted like a synchronizing device between thinking and action. *Çözümlemeler* was the mechanism for addressing the immediate life-and-death needs and demands of the militants while also retaining the dynamism of collective exploration and experimentation to chart a way forward after each case of state-male revenge.³⁷

Öcalan highlighted the kinship relations in Kurdistan as an immobilizing coalition of feudal tribal and Kemalist bourgeois characteristics that hindered the emergence of a national consciousness (Öcalan, 1993). Many cadres were lost or divided due to their fight in the “claws” of family-related interests and problems (Ada, 2014). The Kurdish guerilla cadre that came from families who were close to the state, either as petit-bourgeois civil servants or feudal collaborationist landlords, persisted in their class habits and identities, as they felt entitled to exercise hierarchical power and authority in the party based on their

class privileges. Turkish cadre, on the other hand, pursued petit-bourgeois or nationalist chauvinism; they were self-assured that they knew best and deserved the PKK's high esteem as natural-born leaders superior to the backward Kurdish people (Öcalan, 1993, p. 150). Ultimately, young Kurdish men sought to emulate the state-like masculinity of their fathers, while young women continued their dependent roles: "Women as the most dependent, slave of a slave, and slave men, the master of that woman, try to continue using and enslaving each other when they arrive in the party [PKK]. Romantic relationships in particular work to the detriment of women in guerilla life, perpetuating the dependency mentality and spreading it across the party" (Öcalan, 1998b, p. 6). In short, all domination problems emanating from the state-family relationship inherent in Kurdish society were infecting the entire party, as young boys and girls arrived with manners that sustained the most recalcitrant social unit against decolonization: *geleneksel aile* (traditional³⁸ family):

[A traditional family is] both a vulnerable unit that can easily swallow all kinds of repression and exploitation arising from colonization, and one of the strongest footholds for colonialism with its roots in centuries-old tribal and clan relations that prevent themselves from becoming a nation or society. Because of this, it has become an institution that is permitted and kept alive. In that case, we can say that the family in Kurdistan represents a level fine-tuned with the current status of colonialism and the interests of a personality that has favored collaborationist life for itself and its clan for centuries now (Öcalan, 1993, p. 46). ... More than an inviolable institution that should always be respected, we should see the family as something with intimate ties to colonialism and a stronghold for its ideology and politics in the country that bears extreme irresponsibility for depriving our people of their future, thereby leaving them helpless (ibid., p. 50).³⁹

Öcalan observed that Kurdish fathers representing the older generation were the most resistant to revolution – even more so than Kurdish sheikhs or *ağas* (landlords) or Turkish colonizers. Fathers as "the king, the despot, authoritarian power of the family" embodied all subjugating aspects of the colonial authority to protect and preserve the "traditional family" no matter what, with the rationale "some herd me, yet I can also herd five to 10 children and a few women" (ibid., p. 49). Men strove to counterbalance the denigration and humiliation they experienced by dominating women. Precluded from all kinds of social organizing, barred from speaking their own language, constricted economically, and dispossessed of their country, rights, and freedoms, men's wrath turned to women and children in the form of physical and psychological violence (Jêhat, 2013). The greater the state's pressure, the more men made conditions hellish for their own family. In this only space left to them, men only had women to appropriate, and women were accustomed to seeing themselves as the property of men – the very embodiment of deep enslavement (Öcalan, 1993). Therefore, all the evils of colonization and collaborationism magnified in woman's experience of the deepest subjugation (ibid.). In this vicious circle, there were often two outcomes: Fathers would either escape by abandoning the family, thereby leaving the women and children in misery, or they would deepen their colonial collaboration under the pretext of protecting the sacred family, that is, their *namûs* (honor). Both outcomes, naturally, would aggravate the crisis: this family "swallows the whole energy like a cold wellhole" (ibid., p. 141), captivates the psyches and

imprisons lives within a situation of dependency and enslavement that revolves around women's *namûs* (ibid., pp. 49–50) (explored further in Section 5.1).

The colonial Turkish state continually strategized to make the extended “traditional family” a stronghold for maintaining the colony, managing a peculiar mix of feudal-tribal and modern petit-bourgeois features to entrench the mentality of gendered enslavement. It furthered its biopolitical assimilation strategies by trying to turn family members of guerillas into agents, or pro-state village guards (see Chapter 3). Meanwhile, the state orchestrated media campaigns to call on families to keep watch over their children, marry them off sooner, or encourage them to take jobs in the public service. Turkish security forces systematically used sexual violence against the women relatives of jailed male militants to subdue them, reinforcing the patriarchal understanding of *namûs* in the process. Training Kurdish women as agents to infiltrate the PKK using sexual means to control men was yet another prevalent war strategy that intended to turn women into weapons of counterinsurgency (ibid., p. 60). The image of a woman who was “belligerent, domineering, wily, calculative, seducing, and provocative” and who trusted in her wile to exploit the free environment in the party, or the image of a woman who was “weak, emotional, jealous, manipulable, and enslavable” were two sides of the same coin. Colonized collaborationist men saw women as “devoid of will, weak and dispensable” and saw themselves as “superior and entitled to deceive, choose, and manipulate, even as they are actually cheap, aggressive, slavish, and vulgar” (ibid., p. 202). Öcalan observed that women who had escaped enormous levels of captivity were baffled by the expansive freedoms they found upon arrival in the party (ibid., p. 59). “Women arrive as slaves, weak, deeply unequipped, and dangerous. They have developed defense mechanisms in their own way. They skillfully use their own degradedness to degrade society” (ibid., p. 110). These negative characteristics developed by women, which were posited as an example of *erkekleşen kadın* (masculinization of woman), were identified as obstacles to the progress of the struggle, and the emergence of women's willpower and transformative influence on the fight.

According to participants at the 1986 PKK Congress, this *erkekleşen kadın* personality delayed the formation of a women's freedom perspective and autonomous organizing (Avesta, 2015). In the face of such a delay, the congress declared the first woman-specific self-organizing body as a foundational pillar of the Kurdistan national front. The conditions to conduct the struggle legally in Turkey, however, were still not ripe, so a group of women formed the Patriotic (*Yurtsever*) Women Union of Kurdistan (YJWK⁴⁰) in Europe in 1987 with an eye to attracting the tens of thousands of political exiles and sympathizers in the diaspora. The YJWK's goal was to disperse women's organizing to the four parts of Kurdistan, organize families around the prison resistance and facilitate recruitment. In hindsight, Kurdish women found this initial experience very unsatisfying. The narrowness of the YJWK's vision translated into more formality and less ability to organize even in Europe, let alone in the four parts of Kurdistan. This,

they believe, was due to a lack of thorough training; the party's incompetent approach to the women's question, as well as the practice of relying on poor generalizations. It proved extremely hard for women to develop a style different than the male executive conduct when there was no tradition to draw inspiration from in the face of recalcitrant opposition and the belittling attitudes of men (Jêhat, 2013). As KWM activist Hêja notes,

The PKK's insistence on women's-specific organizing in the Middle East, where it is unprecedented, posed a risk both for the movement as well as its leadership. It is always a huge risk to tackle the women's issue on a strategic level and [allow women to] try to maintain their autonomy. They always wanted to attack [Öcalan] via women, in his trial for example, they said he used women sexually. His insistence in the face of all these risks deserves due respect. He knew that bringing women to the forefront in a tribal setting was a drastic thing to do, for Kurdistan has been a closed society for a long time. He was saying, 'I will take away your wives, daughters from you via the women's movement.' And rivals always used this against him, saying, 'Don't you realize? Öcalan says your wives will be my wives, your daughters will be my daughters.' His women's strategy was constantly under attack (Hêja).

State anti-propaganda that women guerillas were sex slaves to Öcalan and male commanders pervaded the Turkish media. Women's ever-deepening interest in the PKK despite their feudal and traditional setting caught the state, Kurds, and even PKK cadres unprepared. The response had to be prompt, as the consequences of any neglect towards the mobilization of thousands of women could be fatal both for the women and the nation on the rise as part of a brutal patriarchal war. The party, in the end, took the risk, "to protect it from corruption of power, and build democratic and egalitarian *hevalhood*" (Hêja). This entailed desacralization/dethroning of the "traditional patriarchal family," as well as the transformation of "classic" (slave-like or domination-oriented) male and female consciousness. The party was envisaged as both the means and embodiment of this transformation, as well as the quintessential social base to imagine and construct the new free, revolutionary family in the society (Öcalan, 1993, p. 55). This party concept does not appear to be a reproduction of the patriarchal family, as feminist scholar Çağlayan (2007, p. 105) argues, but an attempt to re(de)arrange it.

Now the question was: While women had an immediate stake and willingness to assume the revolutionary subject position, how could it be embraced by men who were more than content with national liberation but not women's liberation? A heightened anthropological awareness of how interlocked domination occurs in the Kurdish society could set that desired change into motion. For that, Öcalan put Kurdish men in an unhappy quandary: They could either maintain male domination or they could fight for national liberation – but not both.

2.2.2 The civilian side: Resistance stories start circulating

From an avantgarde cadre, the PKK turned into a grassroots movement in the early 1990s. As the war between the Turkish state and the PKK spread across Kurdistan, locals, whether they wished to or not, had to pick a side; they could join the party, provide guerillas support, enroll in the pro-state village guards, or refuse to support the state – that would inevitably result in forced migration (Çelik, 2011). In

this popularization process, mostly *talebe* (university student) militant women played a crucial role in fostering trust with the local communities who were initially hesitant about supporting the party. People were caught, on one side, between the rival Kurdish political groups, state propaganda that the PKK consisted of a bunch of bandits and looters, as well as the memories of the brutally repressed Kurdish rebellions of the 1920–1930s and, on the other, what they heard through local networks, meetings that militants organized at the mukhtar’s or imam’s house, widely shared stories of guerillas’ heroism, and the party’s success in resolving local conflicts (ibid.). At the time, family pressures to keep women away from the PKK were high. A local women’s assembly member recalled:

When 10 young men joined the guerilla in a village, everybody would know them and address them by their names. But when two young women joined, it would not be declared; it would even be seen as shameful. This is how closed a society it was. Most women did not even step out of their doors. They were women who were not allowed to talk with their own brothers, brothers-in-law, and husbands. But think about it, one morning, you wake up and these women are staying side by side with a full army of men. That is why it was considered shameful and nothing to be proud of. They would talk about it only secretly, until the time when the women’s struggle gained momentum and attained a certain strength or, indeed, until some heroic women emerged there (Hacer).

Even when seen worthy of respect and value, it was initially because she participated in the revolution. The sexist, *ailenci* (familial), “traditional” or “classic” societal approach dictated that women needed protection and control as she “had a weaker will, was needy and dependent.” Especially in the case of war, men were extremely distrustful: “You will become a threat, they will harass you, they will deceive you. Like what they said about going out for shopping: You don’t even know how to use money; they will fool you” (Hêja). Despite, or perhaps because of, these greater risks and barriers, women who were oppressed by the feudal and colonial patriarchies were quicker to appreciate the promise of freedom of the movement’s ideology. Women had to challenge the boundaries drawn by the family, the community, colonial state, and those internalized by themselves all at once. As a result, however, their search for truth and freedom occurred at a deeper level than it did for men. KWM activist Rûken below grapples with this interlocked multiplicity. She links Kurdish women’s individual liberation with social liberation in non-dichotomous, mutually empowering terms. Women’s individuality is defined as a layered, deeper social formation from where the most penetrative forms of psycho-social control can be defied with most passion and desire:

Why do women emerge as pioneering forces in most revolutions in history? Because they represent a gender reality that searches for and aspires to attain true freedom in their own personality: the freedom of selfhood in the heart of a political revolution. [Women] represent the core spirit of all freedoms. For instance, an oppressed class would rise to eradicate class oppression. Or an oppressed nation would rise to liberate its national identity. Women operate on a much deeper register. *Their search is for the wholesome liberation of life.* Men’s search for freedom looks more partial, political, and economic. Women’s search transcends these. When we look at which gender nurtures the revolutionary quest for freedom, justice, and equality more, it is women. This is because men are hegemonic. They believe that they have the power to hold life in their hands, do not feel the need to look for a different way of life. But women join the revolution with the spirit of a bottom-up liberation

starting from the individual. That is why the woman gender is the one that pushes for the advancement of all revolutions (Rûken, italics mime).

Guerillas were traversing the countryside and cities of Kurdistan on foot, day and night, and leaving the moral and political imprint of their virtues and values on the homes they visited: gender egalitarianism, respect to nature and communities, stance against abuse of power, humbleness, passion for freedom and self-re-education (*xwebûn*: giving birth to the new self). Such women were not just fighters; they were also social agents who educated and organized people, intervened in feuds in the community and among family members in favor of women (particularly against forced or early marriage, battery, usury, and gambling in which women were the bet) and established local *halk mahkemeleri* (public tribunals) when necessary. According to one activist, “they discussed women’s liberation there in the guerilla; this had serious impact on our men. Women could hear from the village propaganda that women and men should be equal, that going there [joining the PKK] was not just about the armed fight.” In an era before the emergence of legal Kurdish mass media, the transcriptions of guerilla discussions and lectures traveled hand to hand via illegal publications⁴¹ or whispered as anecdotes from ear to ear in homes, bazaars, streets, and coffeehouses. In a society where communal and tribal contact networks and extended face-to-face familial communication are vibrant and effective, it was impossible that new ideas would not reach women. Stories regarding encounters with women fighters and their bravery soon formed a powerful female ethos of freedom that would help many women crack the patriarchal chain:

A guerilla was visiting our house. One day, my baby boy was crying inside. I was rushing to finish my work and get to him. But suddenly his crying stopped. I panicked because I thought maybe he had fallen from the bed. When I entered the room, I saw that the guerilla man was cleaning the baby’s bottom. I thought, this tremendous guerilla is cleaning the baby’s bottom. Then my husband came and asked him why he did that. He said children belong to all of society – not just to their mothers but also their fathers (Gurbet).

In the mid-1990s, I was a high school student. I had a chance to get to know some PKK militants. I always envied them. The way men and women worked together was noticeable to me even at that age. I envied them because the position of women in society was very different than how it was with them. Women could become commanders there or valuable persons or individuals. There, they were not a being to be silenced. So it attracted my attention. When PKK militants arrived, for example, my dad would never talk to mom in a loud voice. He would become very democratic [laughing], saying things like, ‘I will let my girls get an education, they will define their own destiny,’ and so on (Rojda).

If a respectable male guerilla can change a diaper, why not a father? If a male guerilla can wash the dishes, why not the men in the family? “These connections are easily drawn because the guerilla is one of us – the child of similar families” (Hêja). And if women can go and fight, why can’t they do other things as well? Women guerillas were similar women who had lived similar lives in similar homes. Joining the PKK required no prerequisites such as an educational background or any particular familial, class, ethnic, rural, or urban affiliation. Such women, who once were their sisters, relatives, schoolmates, neighbors, as constrained as themselves, now set an example for everyone. They navigated society in

freedom, influencing people, succeeding both in the armed struggle and political leadership, and doing all these things without the need for a husband, lover, brother, uncle, or father (Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015).

In the aftermath of the 1980 coup, prisoners suffered inhuman repression and torture across Turkey. Kurdish inmates, however, were the target of a special Turkification and torture program. Kurdish activist Mediha points out that the sexualized torture and rape of Kurdish women differed from that directed toward Turkish socialist women⁴² in that the state aimed to subdue not only the woman herself but, in her person, her entire ethnonational community. With the torture, officers sought to coerce her into denying and cursing Kurdish identity, culture, symbols, and language instead of forcing her to reveal confidential information. The forced teaching of the Turkish language, the national anthem, and patriotic marches accompanied such torture: “It was not about your political conviction or what you did, it was about who you were, your whole being”:

The guard yelled at those young women who knew Turkish, for they were from the [Turkish] socialist movement, ‘I will beat you if you don’t teach the national anthem to [the Kurdish inmates].’ And because an old Kurdish mother did not know any Turkish to sing it, they were beaten daily in front of her eyes. One day the mother could not take it anymore and said, ‘I swear they have taught me, but I will not sing it.’ She tried to save those young women like that (Mediha).

The spirit of the prison movement contributed a lot to breaking the walls of fear. There, women again emerged as a resilient, driving force, asserting themselves fully in resistance regardless of the circumstances.

For example, the stories of a PKK founder, Sakine Cansız,⁴³ were narrated everywhere outside the prison after the coup. For example, Esad Oktay, the principle military guard of Diyarbakır Prison No. 5 got sexual pleasure from women screaming in torture. Sakine knew this about him, so during her torture, she would bite her lips so hard to avoid screaming that they would split open bleeding, and then she would write ‘PKK’ on the walls with that blood (Hêja).

Such women’s stories widely circulated outside. Some men inmates testified that they “felt ashamed of their manhood” when they saw women standing stronger in the face of extreme psychological and physical torture. Kurdish activists agree that the civilian KWM began at the gates of the notorious Diyarbakır Military Prison No. 5. It was the mothers of the imprisoned who banged the prison gates, organized the first mass protests, and staged long-running sit-ins against the atrocities of the coup. These older women’s maternal instincts might have brought them to the door of the prison, but that impulse gradually acquired political meanings as their familiarity with their children’s ideology and their understanding of the PKK’s criticism of the “traditional family” increased (See Aslan, 2009; Can, 2014; Karaman, 2016; Şimşek, 2018; Üstündağ, 2019). The mothers’ understanding of the Turkish regime also shifted as they witnessed their children’s encounters with colonial state violence. In Kurdish culture, religious *cejns* (religious festivals) are central to the strengthening of trusts and bonds within the community. One mother says, “My daughter was in prison. I see people going to picnics and weddings wearing their most beautiful gowns. We wear our most beautiful gowns and go to prisons to celebrate

our *cejn*” (Ortadoğu Tarih Akademisi Kolektifi, 2006, p. 88). Celebrated with the families of other inmates, these *cejns* turned into political events, and particularly helped women share their deep suffering and pain. Like mass funerals for militants⁴⁴ or cemetery visits, trips to the prison became occasions in which the gendered public-private, political-personal boundaries enforced by the colonial Kemalist and native Kurdish patriarchies were subverted.

Colonizers establish control by using sexual, cultural, and military modes of violence to govern peoples whose societies do not share the same social hierarchy. In pursuing their objectives, colonizers must first naturalize hierarchy by instituting patriarchy (Million, 2013; Smith, 2005, 2006, p. 73; Thobani, 2007a; Yeğenoğlu, 1998). Öcalan defines the Kurdish people as feminized or “wife-ized” (*karılaştırma*) and Kemalism as “one of the most barbaric perpetuators” of this tradition of *eve çekme* (seclusion at home), appropriation and enslavement (Öcalan, 1993, p. 278). The Turkish colonial establishment was aware of the threat posed by a “social revolution” based on women’s liberation that had a potential to completely uproot the patriarchal colonial order. To prevent women’s mobilizing, special war mechanisms focused on anti-propaganda from the outset with the intent of reinventing and entrenching *namûs*-centred values in Kurdish society that see women’s bodies and sexuality as the territory of male domination. “No woman can escape rape in prison” was both exercised and disseminated in society to break women’s willpower and provoke patriarchal fears. In addition to the existing attempts to cultivate women informants, the state reached a new level of brutality in the 1990s with special war techniques that subjected women’s bodies to systematic rape and torture.⁴⁵ To diminish people’s trust in the PKK, the dead bodies of women guerillas were stripped naked and exposed:

The genitals or breasts – the symbols of womanhood – of a dead woman guerilla captured in combat would be cut off. Her lifeless body would be raped or subjected to a virginity test. If, by chance, she was wearing torn underpants, there would be pages of sexist media coverage that would use disgusting language and say ‘she has been fucking around.’ Their dead bodies would normally be exposed to threaten and suppress people in the cities; more recently, the mutilated corpses of women guerillas were especially left behind in the combat field. This is both to intimidate women guerillas and provoke possessive male feelings in men guerillas. Men would find justification to keep women in the background [after seeing] these special war tactics (Zagros, 2013).

Fabricated news such as “Daughter of X person from Y village was seen heavily pregnant, they say she was offering sexual services to a unit of men” (ibid.) or “Shocking news: In PKK hideouts discovered in a state security operation, pregnancy tests, contraceptive pills, and condoms were seized” were systematically spread via state agents on the ground, as well as the mainstream media.⁴⁶ Although there was widespread use of rape or the threat of rape against the women relatives of male interrogees, men could neither talk about it nor deny its powerful effect on “forced confession” (*çözülme*) that often entailed confessions to things that they had not even committed (Hêja). “Men were dragged through town squares with ropes tied to their penis,” “villages were set on fire [by state security forces] as peasant men were forced to watch their women relatives stripped naked in the public square.” “Wife-ization” was and

continues to be a colonial war strategy to “humiliate, degrade, and arrest the personality and crush the determination of a people” (Bircan).

This state strategy, however, largely backfired due to the PKK’s insistence on rebutting the attacks by decolonizing and depatriarchalizing the *namûs* regime in Northern Kurdistan. With the rise of the movement, the tacit knowledge that men could not protect women and that they were also weak, often bereft of the determination to challenge the state, spread silently in the communities. Hundreds of thousands experienced similar waves of torture and threats to the point that some fathers would tell their daughters, “I cannot protect you; go. May the mountains protect you” (Hêja).

1989 marked the start of a new era for KÖH. *Serhildans*⁴⁷ (popular uprisings) that sprouted in Cizîra, Botan, and Silopî signaled a culmination in the enmeshing of the political and social and the guerillas and the people in anticolonial mass mobilizations. *Serhildans* caused an upsurge in women taking to the mountains. These *serhildans*, which were characterized by women’s popular participation and which were largely led by legendary figures like young Êzidî woman Bêrîvan,⁴⁸ defeated the colonial annihilation concept and instilled hope (Firat, n.d.). People saw the power and success of the PKK and its image of the esteemed “free woman” in Bêrîvan. When the house hosting her was raided by soldiers due to an informant, she refused to surrender, instead shouting slogans and returning fire until she fell. Inspired by her resistance, the people of Cizîra clashed with Turkish military forces to recover her dead body, igniting a *serhildan* that was followed by many others in Kurdistan.

2.3 The Turkish feminist struggle

The tension between (Turkish) feminists and socialist women, who did not call themselves feminist but advocated an independent women’s movement, came to a breaking point in the 1st Women’s Congress of 1989 (Sayılan, 1995). The 3-day congress, which was organized with great expectation, turned out to be the first and last of its kind for a long time in Turkey. The event gathered together women from labor unions, socialist parties, feminist groups, human rights groups, women’s organizations, and independent individuals from all over the country. Heeding a call from the Human Rights Association’s (İHD) Istanbul Women’s Commission, they came together in Istanbul under the banner “Not Tomorrow, Right Now!” In the six months leading up to the congress, women – many of whom did not know each other but all of whom sought a common platform – engaged in discussions.⁴⁹ Come the congress, however, the participants could make little headway: Due to irreconcilable differences and high tension, feminists decided to walk out of the congress on its second day.

For many feminists, it seemed as if socialists still had the idea of “not now, but tomorrow” (Tekeli, 1989b), prompting them to declare, “Let’s just do our own thing; there’s no promise for us here” (Bora, 2009). Feminists resented that socialist women were not willing to talk about gender-specific oppression

common to all women, irrespective of their political differences. Sexist hierarchies were reproduced in presentations, a transvestite's address was hampered, and a man was given the floor even though they were supposed to be silent observers. In this "extremely hostile" environment in which socialist women accused feminists of being carefree people oblivious to the heavy tortures in prisons, one feminist said keywords like "hand in hand with our men," "mode of production," and "torture" were used as weapons against us. Moreover, the final resolutions did not reflect these conflicts transparently. "The unhealthy cleavage that has long existed within the women's movement is heading towards even more sectarian and chronic grounds," one socialist woman said (Kuzu, 1989, p. 70). She concluded that the theoretical incompetence and immaturity on both sides led to the sectarian denial of one another: "One says, 'We have nothing to learn from feminists.' The other says, 'We thought this was a women's congress.'"

Kurdish women affiliated to KÖH were absent from the congress as they had yet to organize in the civilian arena. However, the recently formed Independent Kurdish Women's Group of feminists from the PKK's weakening rivals on the Kurdish Left was present. For the first time in the presence of Turkish women, they tried to voice issues such as the war in Kurdistan, harassment at checkpoints, arbitrary detentions, virginity tests, mother tongue ban, and the situation of Kurdish refugees in Turkish metropolises. They, however, felt that they were discriminated by the Turkish organizers of the conference, and their presentation was the only one to be censored (Roza, 1996, pp. 4–5). "It was so hard to communicate our situation," recounted one Kurdish attendee (my interview). One Turkish feminist, on the other hand, complained that Kurdish women talked about torture, denial, annihilation politics imposed on Kurds but not their oppression as Kurdish women: "Coming from the pre-coup period in which women's liberation was sacrificed for socialism, we as feminists were highly sensitive about prioritizing women's issues in encounters with other women's groups." The Kurdish group had already sparred with Turkish women during that year's 8 March rally, at which the organizing committee interfered with the text of the group's speech and its banners. Kurdish feminist Fatma Kayhan (from Roza magazine) staged a flash protest on the rostrum against the state ban on the Kurdish language by taping her mouth shut with a black band after declaring to the crowd that she wanted to speak her own language but was prohibited from doing so (Kerestecioğlu, 2012). "This was the very first encounter with Kurdish women for most [Turkish] women," according to a feminist. That March 8 was unpleasant for Turkish feminists, too. When the police tried to prevent men from entering the demonstration area, socialist women insistently shouted the socialist slogan, "women, men hand in hand, towards a free future." That this slogan dominated the rally was unacceptable for feminists. Such conflicts, including disagreements about whether to call the day "Laborer Women's Day" or "World Women's Day,"⁵⁰ exacerbated the tensions at the subsequent congress and ultimately forced the suspension of jointly planned 8 March rallies until

1997. For the Independent Kurdish Women's Group, meanwhile, the experience at the 8 March rally and congress that year ultimately convinced the group to organize separately from Turkish women.

Who were these feminists who walked out of the congress or were upset even if they stayed?⁵¹

All those dreams about the revolution that we thought was coming were totally demolished. Many of our friends were enchained in prisons, and some had had to leave the country. The unbelievable stories coming from the jails sounded gory. We were very insecure. Everybody retreated to a corner to review the situation. It was almost impossible to get accurate news from the media. We were like deer caught in the headlights (Öneş, 2013, p. 79).

Many pioneering radical, socialist, independent, or liberal Turkish feminists of the TFM came from the paralyzed habitus of these democratic/leftist circles that had been crushed by the 1980 coup. Following the crackdown, most militant women were sent home, passivized, or alienated from their political structures.⁵² Women academics whose entry into politics came primarily through feminism also felt estranged by the patriarchy in academia.⁵³ Similar to their counterparts elsewhere in the world, women were angry and “weary of having done the errands in leftist organizations, as they were excluded from decision-making, excluded from heroic sagas, [watched as] their sentences were completed by male comrades, relegated to child-rearing, distributing leaflets and typing up others' documents or being left alone with the dirty kitchen table when men moved to another room for revolutionary work” (Göral, 2007, p. 51; see also Altunç, 2014). Having accomplished most of the founding grassroots work, women had never openly questioned why they did not hold more responsible executive positions. Then came one eye-opening experience: the state filed criminal charges against mainly male socialists, rather than women. Ironically enough, precisely because of their former inferior roles, most women were either not jailed or released earlier than their male comrades or husbands.⁵⁴

These predominantly urban, (upper-)middle-class, educated, married women were left alone; gradually, and in a spirit of discovery, many started questioning their gendered exploitation/oppression at home and work, which had hitherto remained largely invisible to them. This generally happened in conversations about their experience of male domination during their former engagements in the radical Left. Despite their strong stance against the coup, some agreed that the post-coup period brought some relief from the constraining dynamics of party traditions that hindered women's autonomous organizing (Çakır, 2005, p. 94). Sirman notes that the ad hoc, issue-based organizing that most Turkish feminists would later advocate was “instrumental at a time when state repression discouraged all forms of extra-parliamentary political activity” as a way of protecting themselves from state surveillance (1989, p. 19). Also it served as a way to distance themselves from the more hierarchical orthodox leftist and/or Kemalist state feminisms.⁵⁵ Taking issue with the sexism of the Marxist Left became one defining constituent element of the feminist struggle in Turkey (Göral, 2007). The acute discovery of themselves being oppressed led to a strong distaste for the socialist or Kemalist ways of relating to the Other as a “savior.” The desire not to replicate the hierarchical, “masculinist” organizational structures of the pre-coup era,

which were unable to speak to individual aspirations or oppression in the private sphere, persists as a motivation and, perhaps, a limitation for these activists; it is also an entrapping paradox that I hope to unpack with my research.

On the other hand, the pioneering activists of the KWM who initially came from the student movement quickly expanded to include women from the countryside, the predominantly poor, the labor movement, as well as the urban middle and upper classes. These were women of all ages, ranging from illiterate to educated, who started questioning gendered oppression in conversations regarding their experiences of male domination in violent encounters with the colonial state, in prison cells, in the colonized feudal family, and in a culture of revolutionary resistance. For most early Turkish feminists, inspired by race-and-coloniality-denying strands of the Eurocentric second-wave, their experience of becoming feminist was retrospectively related, if at all, to being involved actively in leftist politics. For the newer generation, such past or present experience was less likely, as they usually entered the feminism of their elder sisters through academia. But for Kurdish activists, their personal path to becoming feminists overlapped with that of their anticolonial socialist movement becoming feminist.⁵⁶ Turkish feminists' socialist revolutionary imagination was in decline, eventually bottoming out in the 1990s both in relation to external conditions and due to the internal feminist critique of *bütünlüklü* (holistic, overarching) political liberation projects in general. For Kurdish women, the possibility of another world in freedom was just emerging, reaching lofty heights in the 1990s (as explored in Chapter 3). This ontological difference in the character of originary narratives, motives, and “enemies,” I argue, deserves special attention, as it keeps haunting the present and shaping the incommensurability and possibilities of coalition-making between the two movements. With the passage of time, different origins have indeed set them down different paths.

This difference, however, is predated by the one exposed in the 1989 congress presented in the opening of this section, between Turkish socialist women, who were questioning their past and who harboured some sympathies for feminism, and a strand of feminists who emerged in the mid-1980s who either opposed ties with the Left or found any relation totally irrelevant. In Ankara, for instance, there were women who identified as leftists who favored more structured organizations, welcomed broader women's groups and focused more on violence, oppression, and legislative reforms; there were also women who identified as feminists who favored smaller groups, sought to establish loose independent collectives and prioritized “private-sphere” matters such as sexuality, family, and children (Timisi & Ağduk Gevrek, 2002).⁵⁷ By 1989, feminist academic Sirman was already depicting an unbridgeable “gulf” between the feminist and leftist approaches:

One area where the gulf between feminists and more leftist proponents of a separate women's movement seems unbridgeable is the role each attaches to men in the subordination of women. Feminists, including socialist feminists, are more ready to castigate men for their individual

involvement in the perpetuation of women's subordination, while the others prefer to blame the 'system' only. The main difference between these positions ... is that the former see feminism as an addition to, while the latter see it as a correction of, socialist theory. The more orthodox left denies the need for a distinct women's movement altogether. These developments incorporating the women's struggle within the political vocabulary of leftist ideologies may still serve to *vitiate* a separate feminist activism (Sirman, 1989, p. 22, italics mine).

Mocked, feared, despised, and unwanted, feminists were pictured by the Left as *düzen içi* (pro-establishment), co-opted, bourgeois democrat, *Eylülist*,⁵⁸ opportunist, and by the public at large as ugly, “lesbian,” promiscuous, freaky, spoilt, and unmarriageable men haters. Reaction, rage, and humiliation came also from Kemalist women: “How come you talk against Atatürk!” (Tekeli, 1989a). They did not mind: Feminist groups continued to proliferate in big cities like Istanbul, Ankara, and İzmir. The mostly male leftist reaction to women's autonomy provoked the feminist determination for separatist politics (Sayılan, 1995). “[Men] were very humiliating [towards us] at first, but I remember our ‘respectability’ grew in time. Soon they were lined up to invite us to talks, ask for essays or interviews.” “The mouse gave birth to a mountain, for sure. We would not even dare to dream when we first came together all these things that would happen in the coming 20 years” (Stella Ovadia, in Özman, 2008).

Ironically, the feminist criticism that socialists acted with entitlement when they claimed that all opposition to the government was their business now became a critique directed towards the TFM by other women when feminists said “gender is our business” (Ahıska et al., 2011, p. 308). Most Turkish feminist participants in my research expressed confidence that theirs is the most radical position on gender today. The KWM disagrees, why? And how does the TFM address this critique? I wonder if and how the formative antagonisms with, and the ethnocentric legacies inherited from Turkish Kemalism and socialisms, might have constricted the TFM's ability to search for more creative alliances with the ethno-national Other. How might this fear that independent feminist activism might be “vitiating” or absorbed by the Left, manifest itself in encounters with Kurdish women? Each chapter of this work will grapple with a different form that this manifestation might be taking.

2.3.1 The emergence of independent feminist political spaces in the 1980s

Following the military coup, when all political organizing and street demonstrations were strictly banned, a handful of women in Istanbul came together to consider an offer by YAZKO, a left-wing cooperative of writers and translators, to produce a publication on women.⁵⁹ Most of the five or six women had a graduate degree or firsthand life experience in Britain or France and were largely inspired by the theories of feminist figures like S. de Beauvoir, J. Mitchell, K. Millet, S. Firestone, S. Brownmiller, M. French, A. Oakley, L. Segal, C. Delphy, S. Walby and others in Europe and United States. Şirin Tekeli, a founding figure of feminism in Turkey who brought the group together, has identified this era as “latent preparation” (Tekeli, 1989a). By the time the members of the group realized they were intellectually

unprepared to launch a publication, they had already created tremendous interest in their social circles, and the number of women willing to join rapidly rose to 30–40.

The members spontaneously formed small homegroups that pursued intense discussions with the idea that the “personal is political”; before long, they realized their meetings were nothing less than the “consciousness-raising groups” discussed by their Western sisters. In Ankara, meanwhile, different friend groups consisting mostly of academics and graduate students were going through a similar process, talking about married life and mother-child relations, although not yet sexual violence. Daring not to call themselves feminist, the women immersed themselves in discussions about personal experiences, learning from each other and discovering the nature of their shared oppression as women. Educated women were coming to the realization of their own oppression in shock (Özman, 2008). This dramatically contradicted their self-image that they were already liberated. It was not until one of the members, an architect, spoke on radio about her physician husband’s physical violence that the group publicly broached the reality of a “battering husband.” To Tekeli, this stage was the “awakening.” Its distinctive feature was to take the experiences of personal womanhood as a starting point in any discussion (Ülker, 2016), “to create a woman’s identity based on these commonalities, which is too substantial to be detailed under the mega-goals of overarching political projects” (Timisi & Ağduk Gevrek, 2002, p. 18):

For the first time, almost everyone critiqued their former political experience from a woman’s perspective and discovered how, in such very recent past, suppressed it was to talk about gender-specific oppression. At the time, by undergoing a very painful process of settling accounts with our past and with the Marxism that many of us espoused and, more importantly, agonizing over our daily life experiences, we came to understand the validity of concepts like patriarchy, sexism, and male-dominated society in Turkey, and gradually became feminists (Tekeli, 1989a).

In the following period – termed by Tekeli as a “search for legitimacy” – the group organized some public events, including the 1982 Women’s Issues Symposium in Istanbul, to which they invited French-Tunisian feminist Giselle Halimi. For the first time in decades since first-wave feminism, “women [looked] at their own issues with their own eyes and from their own perspective” in public (Tekeli, 1989a). Rather than the Frenchwoman Simon de Beauvoir, the Tunisian Halimi was invited to deflect the criticism the group was “imitating the West” in the eyes of the Kemalist or socialist intelligentsia. In response to a well-known woman writer Tomris Uyar’s comment that “their voice smells Western,” prominent radical-feminist Stella Ovardia responded, “some voices smell Western, some others masculine” (Düzkan, 2013, p. 85). I ask, what does it mean to “smell Western”? I was told by some TFM activists, for instance, that the concepts I used, like whiteness, race, and intersectionality, also smelled Western (as discussed in Chapter 7). Perhaps these concepts, which are tools to examine the racial politics of Turkish feminism(s), reminded some in the TFM of Kemalist or socialist disdain. They, in turn, felt like countering with the same accusation, suggesting that I was not authentic. I am curious to determine how this reflex operates and what it does to their encounters with the KWM.

In 1983, these women were offered a page in *Somut*, a weekly literature journal published by YAZKO, which would focus on criticism of daily life from the woman's perspective and be open to all women. The page, however, lasted just six months due to the irritation it created in the orthodox Left, which accused feminism of dividing socialist forces. Feminism at that time was not strong enough to fight strident ideological attacks coming from "statist Kemalism, traditionalist Islam, and the orthodox Left" (Tekeli, 1989a). Nonetheless, this short-lived experiment soon led to a more effective and longer-lasting one. In 1984, 13 partners formed *Kadın Çevresi* (Women's Circle) as a feminist publishing and consultancy company whose aim was to support women's paid or unpaid work within or outside home. *Kadın Çevresi*⁶⁰ translated and published some classic Western feminist work⁶¹ and organized book club activities, seminars, festivals, and group discussions. From 1985 onwards, the circle became more radicalized as it drew a younger generation of women, university students and workers. It was this younger group that would publish the radical-feminist monthly magazine *Feminist* in 1987.

The primary theorist of Turkish socialist-feminism, Acar Savran, has described the period between 1982 and 1987 as an "ideological build-up, fermentation," from 1987 to the early 1990s as "campaigns and dynamism," and the 1990s as "institutionalization and project feminism" (Acar Savran, 1998). TFM historiography, meanwhile, describes the 1987–1990 period as the golden age of feminism in Turkey in that it was the most radical and most cohesive. Women made their first public appearance with feminist demands, ensuring they became a much-discussed political movement (Göral, 2007, p. 48). 1987 was critical for both Turkish and Kurdish women in terms of this conspicuous leap in women's dynamism. While the military regime started weakening in western Turkey in that year, it fortified the colonial Regional State of Emergency Regime (OHAL) in the Kurdish east. While outlawed Kurdish women formed the YJWK in Europe, around 2,000–3,000 Turkish women in Istanbul marched against the battering of women under the slogan *Bağır Herkes Duysun* (Shout, Let Everyone Hear) in the first legal mass rally since the coup. "The first to stand up for human rights and woman's liberation after the coup were women," according to one activist. Feminists thought its significance was that "women did not march for their nation or class, nor for their husbands, brothers, or sons, but for themselves" by "voicing demands specific to their conditions of existence as women in the Turkish society" (Sirman, 1989, p. 1).⁶² This march set a spectacular milestone in Istanbul feminists' collective memory. Tekeli recounts that "the 1980-coup era was incomparably more ruthless, barbaric, and oppressive than the previous coups. Ours was a defiant, dissident voice. Feminism at the same time meant dissidence, opposition. We were saying new things not only about women. It was also us objecting to all that new regime, to its state, that state's constitutional law, and the whole *Evren* (universe⁶³). I think our energy came from there" (Özman, 2008).

With that wind of defiance, other street actions followed: a women's street festival at Kariye Museum to raise funds to set up shelters for battered women, and an art gallery installation called Temporary

Modern Women's Museum on March 8, 1988, that questioned domestic gender roles through the display of the artifacts that surround women during their housework routines. In Ankara, feminists first took to the streets on Mothers' Day in 1987 to protest the commoditization of motherhood – a protest that later became a staple for the feminist *Perşembe Grubu* (Thursday Group).⁶⁴ In 1989, this Ankara-based group invited all feminists to Feminist Weekend, the first nationwide feminist gathering. Participants at the event especially discussed the common demands of women, the differences between Istanbul and Ankara feminists, potential forms of feminist organization, and methods of dealing with hierarchy within feminist collectivities. Timisi and Gevrek (2002) argue that perhaps the most important output of the event was a critique of the notion of *feminist ablalık* (feminist older sister), the propensity for superiority, mainly of Istanbul over Ankara, old-timers over newcomers, academics over non-academics, and those with a leftist past over the rest.⁶⁵ Calling on women to engage in gender-oppression-based solidarity and organize, the meeting issued a Women's Liberation Manifesto⁶⁶ that identified women's "bodies, labour, and identity as the site of their struggle." It also outlined the feminist frame of mind that is still prevalent in Turkey. The Purple Needle campaign, "Our Body is Ours, No to Sexual Harassment," launched in line with the manifesto provided another founding landmark in Turkish herstory.⁶⁷

By the end of 1980s, the monthly radical-feminist magazine *Feminist* (1987–1990) and socialist-feminist magazine *Kaktüs* (1988–1990) came to espouse different strains of feminism, while many others still chose to identify as *bağımsız* (independent) only. Düzkan notes that almost nobody in the *Feminist* magazine, except herself, identified as radical-feminist early on; and even with the passage of time, few did so. Most wanted to call themselves just feminist as opposed to socialist-feminist: "It was important for me to remind that another feminism outside of socialist-feminism was possible: a different feminism that would allow us to freely analyze and theorize without socialism getting in our way" (Düzkan & Ahıska, 1994, p. 157). Socialist-feminist Acar Savran states that their ideological differences never affected feminist solidarity negatively and that there was actually no big difference in practice, since all campaigns were run together (2005, p. 121). Radical-feminists disagree, stressing that only with the weakening of working-class politics and the rise of third-wave feminism did socialist-feminists offer solidarity.

On an organizational level, the cleavage centred on which strategy to adopt: Some opted to establish the Women's Association Against Discrimination, while most others pursued ad hoc committees and campaigns. On a theoretical level, the debates centred on the nature of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, where the origin of women's exploitation laid (see Chapter 5). The homegrown socialist-feminism in Turkey, Sirman (1989) argues, described the struggle within society at large in terms of class struggle and saw the struggle within the family as the locus of feminist activity. "Socialism and feminism are seen as two complementary but distinct forms of political struggle, both necessary and both

legitimate” (1989, p. 21). Acar Savran admits that as her theoretical conception developed, it became further distanced from socialism. She emphasizes that they are not talking about socialism and feminism on equal terms or that the two ideologies’ priorities were divided equally. Rather, Acar Savran states that socialist-feminism is a component of women’s liberation struggle, a category within feminism, and that feminism is the clear priority (Acar Savran, 2009, p. 121; Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2008c). Radical-feminists such as Düzkan and Koç, on the other hand, argue that feminists should attain total independence from all existing hegemonic discourses so that they can think only about the woman gender (2012, pp. 26–30).⁶⁸ Koç applies this logic to the Kurdish question as well: “Are we supposed take care of Kurds, the occupation of Iraq, and *Uludere*⁶⁹ as well? We used to say we do not stick our nose in your business, so you should not stick your nose in ours” (ibid., p. 27). These two positions practically converged in the end around a feminism that was mostly oriented towards body politics and gender-primary materialism that looked more radical-feminist than socialist-feminist.

Siyah Eylem (Protest in Black) against an Aug. 1, 1989, state circular letter detailing the institution of F-Type prisons⁷⁰ in Turkey signaled this convergence. To protest state terror against political prisoners and support their ongoing hunger strike, feminists from various groups donned black attire and pretended to lie down dead on a busy square in Istanbul, blocking traffic. This first feminist protest on an issue not related to the specific agenda of women caused controversy among feminists: should the feminist movement speak regarding agendas not directly related to women’s liberation? Should it speak by connecting it to women’s issues, or as a supporter in solidarity (“Cezaevlerindeki Şiddete Karşı ‘Siyah Eylem’/1989,” 2016)? The protest statement wrote, “As the women gender has faced violence for centuries, we cannot remain indifferent to state violence” (Koçali, 2003). This connection that the statement suggested looked superficial to some. They thought women’s energy was being used for an agenda other than its own. While this idea eventually came to predominate in feminist circles, it received a challenge in the 2000s from the KWM, as detailed in the coming chapters.

Chapter 3 · From the 1990s to the Early 2000s: Popularization and Institutionalization

For the TFM (Turkish Feminist Movement), the 1980s were mostly about discovering feminism and creating an avenue for feminist struggle. Owing to a specific focus on self-affirmation, Kurdish – or any other – women’s questions were absent from the political agenda. This disconnect largely continued through the 1990s when, due to the ongoing war in the southeast, the well-instituted colonial divide, and the relative weakness of a disorganized TFM, Turkish feminists neither had the inclination nor the conceptual/material access to Kurdish women’s herstory. The 1990s was more about systematization and institutionalization for both movements. Towards the end of the decade, as the result of unprecedented mass participation by women in Kurdish struggle, internal forced migration, and the main pro-Kurdish political party’s effective grassroots organizing, Kurdish women’s presence in Turkish metropolises could no longer be ignored. The mundane and structural state violence they embodied was made visible by their strong presence in labor confederations, human rights bodies, women’s platforms, rising Kurdish media and party politics. As a result, the KWM’s (Kurdish Women’s Movement) persistent critical gaze – analogous to the impact of Black, Indigenous, and women of color feminisms in the global West – forced the question of ethnocentrism onto the TFM agenda.

The 1990s marked the height of the unnamed Turkish-Kurdish civil war. The PKK’s ability to forge a popular movement compelled Turkish colonial discourse to undergo a change by the end of the decade, from absolute denialism⁷¹ towards a recognition of Kurds on an individual-level as terrorists, separatists or feudal or backward citizens in which the state denied them any national/collective rights or identity (Çelik, 2011). Likewise, majority of the Turks (including feminists) perceived the ongoing war as an issue of either terrorism or uneven development.⁷² The occupation of Kurdish land was, at best, ignored in silence or, at worst, actively supported (Göral, 2014). Turkey’s mass media, which marched lockstep with the state, systematically reproduced anti-Kurdish counter-terrorism propaganda, attempting to demonize KÖH (Kurdistan Freedom Movement) by “misrepresenting the dynamics behind the war and preventing the formation of a Kurdish political agency that might be legitimate in the eyes of the Turkish majority. Thus, the state created two different regimes of truth among the Kurds and the Turks ...” (Ercan, 2013, p. 117).⁷³ A relatively functioning parliamentary democracy, and an expanding neoliberal economy and integration with global markets, generated a sense of normalization in Turkey’s west. Large segments of civil society corroborated with the new technologies of colonialist capitalist restructuring like securitization, militarization, privatization, and export-oriented industrialization.

In Northern Kurdistan, however, the OHAL regime abolished all freedom of expression, press, and association. Newspapers, media outlets, public events, and demonstrations that were permitted outside

the OHAL region were banned inside it. The Turkish military responded to the PKK's growing armed resistance⁷⁴ with a shift in its counter-insurgency doctrine from "static territorial defense" to "field domination" (Jongerden, 2010, 84). In this model, the army didn't need to adapt itself to the rural boundaries but reorganize space according to its own needs to be anywhere, anytime. This involved the reinforcement of military personnel/equipment⁷⁵ and the deployment of integrated socio-spatial strategies to create lasting damage to the fabric of Kurdish communities. Strategies to foster social polarization included the expansive recruitment of state-armed village guards⁷⁶ from among Kurdish peasants, support of the Hizbul-contra,⁷⁷ and the use of the then-clandestine deep-state intelligence organization called JITEM.⁷⁸ JITEM and Turkish Hizbullah carried out thousands of extrajudicial killings in the OHAL region.⁷⁹ From 1994 onwards, murders were largely replaced by forced disappearances in detention (Cumartesi İnsanları, 2005; see Işık, 2014). Other major strategies to regulate the mobility of people and goods included food embargos, curfews, permanent/mobile checkpoints, arbitrary civilian mass detentions, and efforts to displace people on a massive scale through forced evacuations and the destruction of rural settlements (Çelik, 2014, p. 102). By forcibly depopulating villages and hamlets⁸⁰ and setting town centres on fire, the state hoped to hinder the PKK's ability to maintain linkages with its grassroots.

In Kurdistan, apart from some sections of the bourgeoisie, feudal landowners, and conservative/tribal communities, the vast majority, including peasants and the urban working and middle classes, became increasingly estranged from the Turkish nation-state.⁸¹ In effect, this estrangement kick-started the making of the modern Kurdish nation. While anticolonial consciousness was growing among the Kurds, the Turkish revolutionary Left looked insignificant or besieged as it struggled to recover from the crackdown of the 1980 coup. The growing gap since the 1970s between the Kurdish and Turkish Left in their abilities to resist drastically widened throughout this decade. The former became a people's movement, while the latter shrank into narrowly based factions that lost many of their grassroots connections.

In these circumstances, women's activists on both sides sought better forms of organizing, largely through mixed-gender political parties in which they aimed to transform sexist structures. The two experiments, born out of the respective specificities of a rising revolution (for Kurds) and a declining one (for Turks), produced opposing outcomes that have shaped their activism to the present day. This chapter, accordingly, will take a contrapuntal look at how these ventures unfolded.

3.1 The Kurdish Women's Movement (KWM)

In what follows, I will continue to explore the mutually transformative interstices of the guerilla and civilian sites that I began to explore in the previous chapter. Complex sociological interconnections

became all the more important in the 1990s, as PKK values came to inform the mental and material terrain of Kurdistan more effectively. State-enforced displacement, dispossession, and denial created myriad new ruptures in the world of the colonized that could be infused with the liberating motives of the resistance culture, in and through the psychic and social, private and public, men and women, armed and civilian. As such, Kurds themselves constantly subverted the divide-and-rule lines that the colonial state sought to draw between these pairs by pitting “good Kurds” against “bad Kurds.”

3.1.1 The guerilla side

How did the PKK become a “women’s party?” This, I argue, cannot be understood without asking how the PKK came to decouple the goal of democratic nation-building from state-building or, rather, the “statization of the nation.” Was this an instrumental, tactical move to gain traction from women and the Turks, as many Turkish feminists and leftists would suggest, or a dialectical consequence of systematic dialogical reasoning that closely focused on the mundane of colonial domination?

Kurdish woman scholar Dirik (2015) argues that “as the relationship between different forms of oppression was identified, as the oppressive assumptions and mechanisms of the state-centred system were exposed, alternative solutions were sought, resulting in the articulation of women’s liberation as an uncompromising principle.” While I agree with Dirik, I want to introduce a dynamic, synchronous, and two-way causality between the first and second clauses: the relationship between different forms of oppression was identified in and through the guerilla women’s daily struggle, which revealed how the colonial *karılaştırma* (wife-ization) of racialized people had a similar logic and methods as the patriarchal feminization of women. As Öcalan (1993, p. 12) said in his 1987 Woman’s Day speech: “If we are to truly analyze why brutal colonialism here is so strong in a specificity rarely seen, the ‘women’s question’ needs to be frequently evoked because our colonization is intimately linked to the feminization of women over the centuries.” The women’s lens in the PKK helped foster a lucid understanding of the inherently interlocked and oppressive nature of the nation-state system, which is patriarchal, racist, and colonial. Hence, the PKK’s non-state vision fundamentally relies on women’s liberation. From 1995 onwards, the discourse shifted from women’s to the “men’s question” to talk about the constitutive inequality shaping domination-based systems. The idea of a “women’s system” took deeper root as the PKK gained a more indigenous, more democratic, less dogmatic, and less Turkish-inspired character.

Jongerden (2017, p. 235) argues that “the military setbacks the PKK experienced from the beginning of the 1990s, eventually resulted in the institutionalization of a women’s movement” and that learning from this defeat resulted in the first paradigm change of “killing the dominant male.” The other defeat he identifies was Öcalan’s arrest in 1999, which resulted in the second paradigm change of “non-state governance.” Differently from Jongerden, I view the two as one interlocked paradigm that did not evolve separately, but in a simultaneous, interwoven, and co-constitutive fashion. The centering of “womanhood”

and decentering of “statehood” in PKK history mutually entailed one another. Instituting the women’s movement as a decentralizing power was internally related to abandoning the uniformist, centralist, and statist nation. Women in time came to represent the art of governing the balance between coordination and decentralization,⁸² flattening hierarchies and ensuring multiplicity, as they were the ones who needed autonomy the most. This means that PKK’s defeat not only concerned military and political setbacks but setbacks in the social revolution as well. And if defeat was intertwined, so was the learning.

The impact of three major developments – discussed in the 5th PKK Congress (Öcalan, 1995) – on the gender fight within the PKK further exposed the intersections between racial and sexual feminization, resulting in a paradigm shift from patriarchal colonial statism to women’s freedom-based confederalism. The first development was the collapse of the Soviet Union, the worldwide crisis of real socialism, and the unfulfilled promise of an alternative free world.⁸³ For KWM activists, socialist states competed with capitalist ones in terms of their economic exploitation, arms races, and gender oppression, becoming exact copies of what they fought against (Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015). The reason they failed to advance beyond capitalist modernity was that statist ideologies wasted their potential for freedom under the guise of socialism. On a deeper level, these states failed because they ignored the root causes of the freedom problem, that is, women’s enslavement (ibid., p. 188).⁸⁴ Second, the NATO-backed Turkish colonial state became more aggressive against the Kurds in the absence of bipolarity (Öcalan, 1995, pp. 365, 391, 409). The genocidal unitary state logic strengthened its bio/necropolitical techniques to reinstate the decades-old system of “domination through compradors/forced assimilation” that was destabilized by the PKK. Third, Turkey, the United States, and other NATO countries championed Masoud Barzani’s KDP-type conservative, neoliberal nation-statism in Southern Kurdistan against the revolutionary popular war alternative of the anti-imperialist PKK (ibid., p. 326).⁸⁵ To cultivate its own socialism, KÖH closely re-examined these three cases amid emerging alternatives such as the landless peasant, women, youth, and ecology movements in the world.

In light of this, Öcalan started deconstructing how the centralization of power in the form of the state and the statization of a single party, nation, or ideology, as in Kemalism and Stalinism, divided peoples and subjugated women. The proclivity of some male commanders in the PKK to strive after monopolist power looked similarly dividing: “Whoever gets some authority in the party wants to rule everything, even take lives. I point out the dangers of an ideology becoming a dominating power to highlight this concrete reality in our ranks. This was a common reality in the Soviets as well. ... Other factors alongside Stalin’s personal characteristics resulted in an exaggeration of the state, and socialism became almost solely confined to the interior and exterior affairs and the economy of the state” (Öcalan, 1995, p. 58). The joint impact of these three developments triggered a complex existential struggle between the

democratic and authoritarian wings of the PKK, that is, the “women’s liberationist Leadership⁸⁶ line” and the “male-dominant reformist line.”

Patriarchal opposition in the PKK underwent a qualitative upgrade compared to the 1980s, curiously paralleling the upgrade in organized state violence. Earlier traditional methods of denial and annihilation adopted by state elites against the Kurds, and by patriarchal Kurdish commanders against women, proved insufficient, giving way to more organized, advanced, and systematic moves in the 1990s. Amid the double bind of Turkey’s intensified military assaults and the related rise of women’s autonomous forces, some power-oriented, patriarchal men commanders, in direct or indirect collaboration with the colonizer, tried to establish Kurdish “micro proto-states,” that is, territories of dominion within the movement (ibid., p. 410). The monopolist statist desire to exterminate or take over the PKK always overlapped with the desire to centralize decision-making and exterminate the women’s autonomy Öcalan supported. The history of the movement has repeatedly revealed that any statist mindset, be it Turkish or Kurdish, that aspires to dominate Kurds has attacked women’s liberation mechanisms first. Whoever benefited from women’s enslavement – whether it was bourgeois or feudal families, tribal chiefs, or the PKK command – have always tried to co-opt women in a centralist struggle that demanded full subjugation. Women fighters, together with the Leadership, countered each attack by making a leap forward in women’s autonomy:

Attacks were greater this time, as not only the physical but mental structure, the brain of the movement was opening up to women in a feudal setting. Women paid heavy costs, but also there was Öcalan’s protective umbrella; otherwise, men would stifle it and they did try. Whenever there is an ideological fight, the first blow strikes women. Whenever the discourse on women’s movement changes, I know for sure some ideological battle is going on within the PKK (Elif).⁸⁷

The simultaneous liquidation attempts against both the PKK and the women’s forces shaped the character of women’s resistance in the PKK by sharpening its alertness to the proximity between patriarchal and statist control. KWM activists define this intersectional predicament as the “double war of existence”: “Just as our people fight to prove their existence in the face of state denial, we mount another life-and-death war within the wider one to prove our existence to men” (Hediye).⁸⁸ Women’s autonomous organizing eventually came to represent the Leadership line that aimed at dismantling state hegemony along with its adamant core: women’s subjugation. When a handful of exploiters build a state, it is not independence, as “people now turn to be exploited by a group of their own. The women’s freedom struggle is the biggest dynamic of this movement to prevent this from happening” (Ayna, 2010, p. 142).

The KWM differs from radical Turkish struggles in the way it acts on the interconnection between the liberation of women and the party/society. First, the KWM grounds the latter in the former, not vice versa, as in most Turkish socialisms. Two, it does not see them as two separate political projects, as in Turkish feminisms. The intra-party *cins savaşı* (war of the sexes) forms the core revolutionary dynamic to reshape and democratize both the party and traditional Kurdish society. The enslaved gender on the receiving end of the interlocked system of domination thus becomes the primary agent in intersectional

decolonization of the body/mind and land. Against the male mentality that uses war to foreclose the paths to political and social resolution, women's power becomes the guarantee of a resolution along democratic lines, it limits abuse of power and secures transparency; "otherwise, our struggle would be unable to transcend the classic national liberation models" (Avesta, 2015).⁸⁹ The task of the women's army, guerilla Avesta argues, is to defy women's devaluation and foster their creativity and inclusivist qualities. She says, "the army within the army" tweaks the power imbalance in favor of women by decentralizing the male monopoly on power that poses a fatal danger in an institutional setting where male power intensifies the most. As such, it is the "most fundamental means to equity" (Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015, p. 195).

The following section will explore the advanced methods of state and male violence exerted on militant women to trace how the latter experienced and resisted these.

3.1.1.1 Becoming an army (*ordulaşma*): "An army within an army," "a revolution within a revolution"

PKK herstory records three critical periods of male retaliation: 1992–1993, 1996, and 2002–2004. As early as Bêrîvan's "martyrdom" in 1989, Öcalan envisioned women-only military units (Avesta, 2015) (Jiyan in Section 3.1.2.2 describes how Öcalan arrived at these decisions). In the early 1990s, this process was underway mostly on a training level. Öcalan would bring women militants from all provincial units to the central *Mahsum Korkmaz* academy for training on gender liberation and army formation. In 1992, amid preparations for the first women's congress in Kurdistan to discuss autonomous organizing, he deployed women cadres to command guerilla units at the training sites. Not longer after, however, Turkey and the conservative KDP launched Operation Hammer with the support of Washington and NATO in an effort to eliminate the PKK during the Iraqi Kurdish civil war. Turkey and its allies conducted comprehensive land and airstrikes on women's bases, creating a test for women's autonomous power (Avesta, 2015). Troops at the women's command displayed highly disciplined, organized resistance. Woman commander Bêrîtan's heroic stance⁹⁰ represented a milestone in the movement's historiography by refusing to surrender to either male domination or colonization. By contrast, a central figure of the male-dominant feudal wing of the PKK, the commander Ferhat,⁹¹ clandestinely surrendered to the KDP.

Examining the situation on the ground, Öcalan decided to expedite the women's congress that was delayed due to the battle. Patriarchal commanders, however, were perpetuating traditional gender roles in the mountains and disregarding these Leadership efforts. They would argue that men should be at the front line and that women should stay on the home front to organize food and supplies. What's more, they would ask, "What is it that you do on the home front?" (Zagros, 2013). In their eyes, women were weak, slow and in need of constant protection. Their involvement had to be restricted, perhaps by quota. (Many women in the party might have been content with any status, given their lowly status in their local communities.) Meanwhile, those who insisted on their right to participate under equal conditions would have to compete with men by carrying the same amount of weight or reach the frontlines before their

male *hevvals* to be regarded as “man-like women,” exceptional enough to be allowed onto the battleground. Such men also viewed martyred heroines like Bêrîtan as exceptions to the rule of weaker women, as a former guerilla DÖKH⁹² activist Leyla put it:

What men imposed was, ‘be like a man, prove yourself!’ If men did ‘one,’ we tried to do ‘two,’ just so they would not describe us as feminine. A mistake of one would be regarded as the mistake of all. In our defense, we would remind them of the martyred heroines. They would say, ‘they are different.’ Anything negative would be generalized to women, anything positive privatized to your person (Leyla).

After a continuous exchange of ideas between Öcalan and women fighters, the women’s congress finally took place in the strategic Zele region, where women guerillas were concentrated. KJB⁹³ reports, however, indicate that the congress was hijacked by the PKK faction that championed a passive, controllable womanhood as an adjunct entity under men’s shadow. While Ferhat’s idea was to use the women’s congress to impose some reformist organizational changes on the party, such as by promoting traditional ties, another commander, Şemdin, depicted women as spoiling, or amicable, elegant, and fragile: “War is a brute form of intervention, bloodshed and firearms. Women, due to their nature, should be kept out of it” (Avesta, 2015). Despite Öcalan’s long-running efforts to consolidate women’s gains in the form of autonomy, the congress ultimately promoted an army model that privileged men (Zagros, 2013).

With each failure, you either get fully defeated, or that failure becomes an opportunity for a great transformation. Traditional male personalities who could not accept equal representation with women are always there – men like Şemdin or Ferhat who think women do not belong in the guerilla. Women have paid for this, fell as martyrs, and spent decades in prison, but at the same time, they turned it into a great advantage. After every male-dominant attack, Kurdish women, together with their leader, made a further move to entrench their self-defence. That was the difference of Leadership (Leyla).

Leadership’s response was prompt: Öcalan annulled the results of the congress, investigated the process, expelled the plotters to other fields, and dispatched women to the frontlines as the leading forces (Demir, 2014, p. 28). A repeat congress held in Europe condemned the Zele process and inaugurated the TAJK⁹⁴ (Alp, 2015; Jêhat, 2013). After an intense test period, all provinces were instructed to form together women’s troops by the end of 1993. This historic move to block the threats against existence of women’s autonomy marked the official onset of *kadın ordulaşması* (women forming/becoming an army) (Alp, 2015; Avesta, 2015; Demir, 2014; Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015). The more Öcalan learned about Bêrîtan and others’ inspiring personalities, the more he sought to honor their martyrdom.⁹⁵ As per the PKK’s ethico-political dictum, escalating the struggle to the army formation level was the best way of imparting meaning to these pioneering acts of freedom.

The two major attempts in this period to pacify women accompanied the attempts to hijack the PKK from within. The first was Ferhat’s attempt. His method of corrupting the women’s liberation project was to modify the internal regulation that barred fighters from marrying and pursue divide-and-rule policies by pitting women against each other, spreading gossip and jealousy, promoting careerism, and fomenting fights for power among women. The second was Şemdin’s practice, which the KJB identifies as a

femicidal attack. Şemdin believed that a half-women, half-men army was tantamount to a “half-soldier army” and that women’s presence in the mountains prevented men from doing their real work. On his own initiative, he dispatched dozens of women to urban centres without arms where many were arrested or surrendered. Before the issue came to the attention of the PKK centre, hundreds were already discharged from the army.⁹⁶

These attacks built on and furthered other existing concerns. Some men saw the women’s army as an opportunity to get women off their back: “Let them go and be occupied with their own problems and we’ll keep on with our business” (Avesta, 2015). Others were assured that it was doomed to fail: “Women cannot do it alone in the wild; eventually, they will be needy and dependent on us” (Zagros, 2013). Some women, on the other hand, feared this might be another trap to corral all women and either remove them from the front or expel them from the war entirely (Avesta, 2015). Others, lacking self-confidence, believed that men made better fighters. But despite all these uncertainties, as well as their ideological deficiencies, most women cadres felt a strong sense of desire, joy, curiosity, and empowerment, at least on an emotional level, and were thrilled that they would be able to learn from their own exemplary practice. They began to elect their own field commanders and formulate autonomous regulations to resolve issues without involving the male *hevals* (Jêhat, 2013).

When he says there is no way forward without autonomous organizing, neither the women accept that nor men. ‘Oh no, women are breaking away from us!’ or ‘Oh no, we are breaking off from men!’ One is scared to lose his dominion, the other her crutch. At this stage, Öcalan secludes women in a house for gender-specific training. His goal is to provide an environment where women physically and mentally get closer. He wants to bind the fragmented women’s structure by inculcating emotional unity, connection, love, and respect so that they see each other not as competitors but as supporters. This is how autonomous organizing starts (Gülbin).

Throughout 1994, women worked to entrench women’s *öz irade* (self willpower) as units learned to develop feelings of sympathy, love, and trust for their own gender and consolidate women’s self-rule (Avesta, 2015; Jêhat, 2013). “Women will either learn to recognize and navigate the land or will get lost in the mountains; they will either learn how to build a shelter or freeze in the cold; they will either create their own training and governance mechanisms or remain subjugated to men” (Zagros, 2013). By paying a high price,⁹⁷ often losing their lives to preserve every single gain, women claimed their position at the core of the freedom struggle.

The 5th PKK Congress⁹⁸ in 1995 was a critical turning point, as it helped chart a path for the future following the collapse of real socialism and marked the first time women attended such a gathering with an organized presence. This simultaneity was not a coincidence: The rise of the anti-patriarchal, pluralist struggle for decentralization accompanied the fall of the statist, monopolist, male mentality in the PKK as discussed in section 3.1.1. The congress redefined the national liberation struggle as the democratic front of all differences, sexes, classes, cultures, and belief systems that resisted the special war regime

and decided on mass organisation of women not only in the battleground but in all areas of the struggle (PKK, 1995, pp. 79–130, 221–227).

The 5th Congress laid the foundation for most ideas we practice today. The historical contradiction used to be the class contradiction until [the congress], but then on, it became the contradiction between humanity and colonial capitalism – a network of contradictions much broader than that between the proletariat and the capitalist. On one hand are the ‘others,’ including women, the environment, cultural structures, and so on, and on the other is the male-dominant, capitalist, hegemonic mentality. What immediately followed was the project of ‘killing the manhood,’ manhood as the reality to be deconstructed and overcome (Leyla).

One historic decision of the congress was to organize the 1st Kurdistan Women’s Freedom Congress to expand women’s organizing beyond the military into the social, political, and ideological realms. At the end of ten days of 300 delegates in this latter congress discussing the role of women in the Kurdistan revolution, YAJK (Kurdistan Free Women’s Union)⁹⁹ was founded (Avesta, 2015). It was at this platform that women elected and commissioned their own executives and cadres for the first time. The goal was to develop a headquarters system for women on all war fronts (Jêhat, 2013). While based separately, women could coordinate with men through Equality and Freedom Committees. The equal representation system these committees instituted, in which an equal number of men and women were to hold equal responsibility/authority in all executive levels, represented a precursor to the present co-chair system in civilian politics (Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015, p. 195). Women’s increasing competence in the armed struggle, as well as in the media, logistics, diplomacy, the arts, and the economy, created a distinctive collective spirit to define their own terms of equality and freedom, as well as “measurements of acceptance and rejection” (*kabul/red ölçüleri*). Women were better able to analyze their alienation from power, nature, and sociality, and cultivate collective structures of self-affirmation in the absence of male surveillance (ibid., p. 198). As the first full-fledged ideological and organizational disposition of women, YAJK was “a sociological earthquake” within the PKK and “a revolution within a revolution.” Its goal, furthermore, was not merely “to overcome the deadlock and weakness on political or military grounds,” but “to overcome the shortness of willpower, passion, and political horizon” (Öcalan, quoted in Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015, p. 197). Freedom was intimately tied to YAJK’s success.¹⁰⁰

Operation Steel of 1995, the second big offensive from Turkey and the KDP, once again delayed the implementation of many YAJK decisions, as dozens of women fighters were killed in the offensive. For those left, there was a long road to walk ahead and fierce obstacles to overcome. Nevertheless, the fight for gender liberation had gained its momentum and there could be no return to the status quo ante.

3.1.1.2 Becoming a party (*partileşme*): “Killing the dominant-male”

Around 1996–1997, Şemdin organized a “revenge” attack in cooperation with some women (Avesta, 2015). The YAJK 1st Women’s Conference that year investigated and tried Şemdin and woman commander Newal, who was defined as an *işbirlikçi* and *teslimiyetçi* (collaborator and one who

surrenders) who allied with men for her own power ambitions and refused to support or empower her fellow women (Jêhat, 2013). Woman fighter Zîlan's¹⁰¹ self-planned suicide action of 1996, which is widely respected among *yurtsever* (a person who loves her homeland) Kurds today, constituted another landmark criticism of the slavish, classic, and traditional (*köleci, klasik, geleneksel*) wo/manhood that facilitated that year's plots to assassinate both Öcalan and put an end to women's increasingly important role in the party (Jehat). "While he always discouraged suicide actions, Öcalan instructed the militants to see Zîlan's guerilla action as a harsh criticism of their failing tactics" (KOMUN, 2019). In entire education sessions dedicated to her, Öcalan deconstructed what he termed the *erkek karikatürü* (male caricature), *erkek taklitçisi* (male mimic) and *erkeğin yedeğinde duran* (male stand-in) character-types¹⁰² in contrast to the *özgür kadın* (free woman) character embodied by Zîlan who trusted in women's self-power. This tendency to replicate what is learned from men to overpower their fellow women is called *erken iktidar hastalığı* (premature power disease) in the movement culture (Zagros, 2013). The male character, on the other hand, either strategizes to subordinate women (*kadını yedeğine almak*) by pretending to get along with her or otherwise tells them to "go die, you are a pain in the neck and a monkey on our back," to cover his own backwardness, weakness, and defeat (Öcalan, 1998a).

Öcalan perceived the dreams and demands in the letters Zîlan left behind, like those of Berîtan before, as a *vasiyet* (will) for the PKK: "It is our obligation to pay the utmost attention to them. Each of them are manifestos" (ibid., p. 16). In this spirit of indebtedness and accountability, he introduced the *Kopuş Teorisi* (Separation Theory, 1997)¹⁰³ as a leap forward in theorizing gender liberation. The theory argued that women's freedom was possible only through intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical disengagement from the masculine system:

Separation Theory, first and foremost, entails recognizing and defining the sources, means, and acts of enslavement imposed on women and fighting their internal impacts on one's personality. Each woman questions herself with introspection in light of the theory's freedom perspective: 'How much am I being myself? How much do I belong to myself? To what extent did my family, the schools I went to, and the relationships I had shape me in compliance with the ideology of freedom or sexism?' Based on questions like these, she maps out her intellectual, emotional, and mental formation and identifies ... the phenomena she has to separate from for success (Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015, p. 200).

In the forthcoming years, however, what prevailed was an understanding that reduced disengagement largely to physical/spatial separation, instead of separation from internalized personality norms. This line of gender struggle premised on invigorating antagonism and polarization with men came to be termed as *kaba redcilik* (crude denialism), and yet another barrier to full liberation (ibid., p. 206). This is because crude denialism collapsed a societal ideology of a wider (I would say irreducibly intersectional and decolonial) scope into a narrower one that focused on gender.¹⁰⁴ This contributed to the *sapma* (diversion) and marginalization of the freedom struggle while also reproducing sexism from the other end (Jêhat, 2013; PKK, 2004, pp. 27–29). On par with Third World feminisms, which are "distinguished from liberal

feminism by [their] refusal to elevate gender as the primary axis of power” (Thobani, 2005, p. 222), the Women’s Liberation Ideology (KKI) born out of Separation Theory was

not a narrow, marginalizing ideology that only concerns women or one gender but a societal ideology. It concerns the whole society as much as it concerns women, and it holds a resolution lens for all of society and humanity. It bears a robust system critique and a radical perspective for struggle. This ideology aims to provide solutions to the diseases and social problems created by the *devletçi, iktidarçı* (statist, domination-centred) system (Jêhat, 2013).

Around 1997–1998, deconstruction of manhood became central to the PKK’s education programs as well (see Demir, 2014, p. 51). As women acquired autonomous self-governance, male attacks became more virulent. Öcalan interpreted the accusations that women became “fascists or dictators” as covert attacks on his leadership. He severely condemned them as a manifestation of traditional manhood that was unable to reflect on its own enslavement (Öcalan, 1993, p. 200) and thus feared women’s *iradeleşme* (becoming a willpower).¹⁰⁵ The frame of analysis, *erkeği öldürmek* (killing the dominant-male/manhood),¹⁰⁶ that Öcalan developed with women militants elaborated how patriarchy operated in the specificity of Kurdish society. The duty to reorient and free oneself of traditional wo/manhood belonged not only to women but also to men.

Men’s liberation is perhaps harder than women’s. Now we see the importance of his liberation more deeply. While women’s slave consciousness is being overcome, men’s slave and enslaving consciousness persists unrelentingly; it proves very conservative. While the resolution of women happens with relative ease, as her desire for freedom is strong, men show no desistance from domination, conservatism, and self-referential imposition (Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015, p. 103).

The PKK considers the political project of women’s freedom and men’s accompanying re-education as its radical contribution to world socialist literature. The tradition of men guerillas going through training circles where, under women’s supervision and assessment, they had to face and critically reflect on their own masculinity as well as that of their *hevals*, produced a rich corpus of education material starting in the early 2000s (see PKK, 2004). Öcalan was clear at this stage that without a more systematic and robust ideological foundation, autonomous organizing would wither. In his famous address to mark Women’s Day on March 8, 1998, Öcalan proposed the KKI:

For those who respect science and are keenly interested in the intimately interlinked liberations of women and the people, it is impossible to unsee the male-hegemony in society even though it has been masked for centuries. And those who see deem it important to cultivate a woman-oriented ideology. Other communist or socialist leaders had a restricted understanding on this matter, as they could not transcend male-dominant sensibilities.¹⁰⁷ They effectively could not go beyond the existing relations of domination of the family, including in their personal lives. This can be considered a shortcoming of socialism. What we want to propose here is something else. Never think this ideology is a bit of a stretch. During the initial stages of societal organizing in history, ideology was mainly women-oriented. For example, there was the goddess *Îştar*, which entered into our [Kurdish] language as *Stêrk*, which means star. She was the very first goddess. The first god was in fact a goddess. Male gods came later, or gods manifested themselves as male much later. This is widely related to women’s fertility. In short, women’s ideology is not merely a gender ideology; it is essentially a societal ideology. We have to revisit all economic, cultural, political, or military organizing in light of this framework (Öcalan, 1998a, p. 16).

The declaration of this framework¹⁰⁸ paved the way for a new discussion. Women's autonomy needed to enter a new phase for long-term survival – something more far-reaching than a union (YAJK) or an army. Only a party structure could popularize women's free identity and put KKI into action.

A major contradiction can only be overcome by a major party. Your problems are serious. Become/form a party (*Partileşin*)! You should organise. Even though my thinking is pro-woman, a suppressive male side of mine can outweigh that. That is why you should take charge to carry your liberation forward. It would be interesting to respond to male advances in the name of a women's organization. You could realize all womanly plans and dreams via this organization, couldn't you? Imagine the most creative [things you can], but also take steps of practical value. I say this as a sympathizer. I have no great intent to become a leader of women's liberation. You can use me as an ally. I am an ally of the free women's liberation party (Abdullah Öcalan, in *Jineoloji Akademisi* 2015, pp. 202-203).¹⁰⁹

3.1.1.3 Becoming a system (*sistemleşme*): Reconstruction after the liquidation plots

Öcalan's arrest in 1999 at a critical stage for the formation of a women's party presented a huge loss for the YAJK, as the *Rêber* (mentor/guide) would not be able to “come to their rescue in every situation of injustice” (Zagros, 2013). From prison, Öcalan declared the PKK's fourth unilateral ceasefire¹¹⁰ and called for PKK forces to withdraw outside Turkey's borders.¹¹¹ Until the ceasefire ended in 2004, the PKK faced a life-and-death struggle amid internal fractures over how to proceed with resistance as it fought against the all-out onslaught of the global imperial and local colonial forces. In this turbulent atmosphere, it became almost impossible for militants to distinguish well-intentioned developments from ill ones. The significance of this period for women's subsequent trajectory was the specific ways in which the internal male offensive to disrupt women's party formation became entangled with the external offensive to eliminate the PKK. KJB guerilla Zagros argues that men from two rival factions within PKK, later described as the *sağ teslimiyetçi liberal* (surrendering liberal right) and *sol dogmatik sektor* (dogmatic sectarian Left), would fight among themselves but close ranks when it came to subjugating women.¹¹²

When women wanted to proceed with the formation of a party after Öcalan's arrest, men *hevals* contested, “now is not the time to talk about freedoms,” “feminism is a *sapma* [deviation].” They condemned women's insistence on the matter as “collaboration with the plotters” (ibid.). As a result of the distrust and fear that women's autonomy would split the PKK, men panicked in an effort to regain control. After all, as one DÖKH activist notes, Öcalan's wishes were not the rest of the party's command:

Outsiders think that once the leader gives an order, everyone obeys. It's not like that. Most men resist. Women and their leader share the costs. Öcalan always says ‘all men are hostile towards me.’ Why? Because one wants to appropriate women and the other thwarts it. One says, ‘let them stay under my responsibility,’ the other says, ‘no, they will be autonomous, even I will not intervene’ (Rûken).

Men's response, guerilla Jêhat contends, triggered a *kaba redci* (crude denialist), self-defensive reflex among some women who already felt isolated and insecure based on previous experiences. At the 6th PKK Congress in 1999, women staged a sit-in protest against the lifting of the delegate status of fellow women and proceeded with the inauguration of the Kurdistan Women's Workers' Party (PJKK)¹¹³ as

planned. They announced that, as an autonomous party and decision-making authority, they would remain accountable to Öcalan as before and would ensure coordination and share information with the PKK presidential council through the body's women members but would not seek approval from the council for their actions. When the presidential council refused to recognize these decisions, the PJKK publicly declared its existence on MED-TV. That caused the conflict to escalate, and the 7th PKK Congress the following year openly obstructed women's attempts to become a party. Without a single woman's approval, they took a male-majority decision to abolish autonomous bodies and subordinate their executive mechanisms to the presidential council. This "reckless political violence" (ibid.) put women in a position to guard their own willpower. In response, women cut their hair short and buried their hair, mirroring what women traditionally do in Kurdistan to express great loss or grief. Thus, the women guerilla turned this patriarchal tradition into a symbol of resistance (see Şimşek, 2018, pp. 237–238).

From 2000–2001 on, pressures from a number of angles caused the women's movement to fragment and curbed its gender-based reflex. Incapable of producing consensus itself, the PJKK became *idareci* (going through the motions); some women became estranged from the movement because of male-dominated rule, while others sought a compromised position for the sake of party harmony – all of which facilitated male manipulation (Zagros, 2013). But despite the heavy attacks, smear campaigns, and prosecutions, the Free Women's Party (PJA),¹¹⁴ as the PJKK was renamed, proceeded with its congress in 2000 to analyze the issues that divided them and re-establish women's unity. The Women's Societal Contract (*Kadının Toplumsal Sözleşmesi*) that the PJA drafted to that end was opened to discussion within the PKK, as well as international revolutionary women's platforms.

Between 2002 and 2003, the "surrendering liberal right" or the "*ilkel* [crude] nationalist" faction led by Ferhat, Botan, and others that opposed Öcalan's non-state paradigm,¹¹⁵ openly endorsed what they called a "social reform project." Today, there is a consensus in the party that this project purportedly demanded, under the pretext of a peace process, the liberalization of the "conservative" approach to sexual relations but, in reality, sought to roll back gender equality in the PKK by reinstating traditional gender roles and the institution of marriage.¹¹⁶ Jêhat (2013) argues that if the culture, ethics, and values loosened in the PKK's cadre, resulting in encouragement of a petit-bourgeois or traditional lifestyle, then it would be possible to slowly infiltrate and take full control of the organization from within:

What was the main quality that rendered the PKK strong and distinguished it from other socialist movements? It was its approach to gender relations, family, and marriage. It was this ethics of struggle that cultivated the consciousness of freedom in women. If you dynamite this, you dynamite the foundations of the movement. ... Social Reform was an American project that aimed at ideological degeneration. Ferhat openly put it: 'We are now entering a resolution process which will be completed in a few years. We are in a peace process; the war is over. Gender relations cannot continue as they are. Those types of relations were premised on the war reality.' As if it was only tactical for the PKK, not ideological-philosophical (ibid.).

The move that Öcalan initiated to foster horizontal and decentralized organizing, Jehat asserts, was hijacked by the party's right wing to justify its hasty "social reform" to eliminate the existing party structure without any substantive impact analysis. "It just was like hierarchy is bad, power-centrism is bad, let's dismantle them altogether. ... It almost sounded like ideologies and party formations were a thing of the past; now was the time for a transition to a civilian movement" (ibid.). The PJA once again tried to unite against this attempt. At its 4th congress in 2002, the PJA vociferously opposed the "social reform project" and took principled decisions, such as organizing independently as the PJA in the four parts of Kurdistan and preparing re-education programs for men *hevals*. Following this successful congress, some influential women militants were assassinated by the right-wing faction. The faction intensified its efforts to control the PJA. The next PJA conference, meanwhile, made some strategic errors; first, it proposed a polarizing alternative social project and second, it sanctioned the disaffiliation of the women's armed forces from the women's movement. After these steps, the PJA was more easily pushed to the corner of endorsing the "reform project" (ibid.). Women were confused, exhausted, and weakened in the face of organized male plots and manipulations.

The right-wing faction's efforts to assume control over the women's structure and the PJA continued until 2004¹¹⁷ when the PKK restructured itself in line with Öcalan's "democratic confederalism"¹¹⁸ paradigm and the rightists split from the PKK (Jongerden, 2017, p. 251).¹¹⁹ Foreshadowing the reconstruction, the PJA refashioned itself as the Kurdistan Free Women's Party (PAJK),¹²⁰ an ideological and philosophical vanguard party devoted to women's liberation and the non-state freedom perspective.

Learning the gravity of the situation at a later stage, Öcalan shared his in-depth analysis of the whole process in *Defending a People* (2004), a book he wrote while in prison. In the work, Öcalan terms both the right- and left-wing factions as a divergence from the Leadership line and calls on women's units to side with neither but reunite to represent the Leadership principles. He also suggested that they organize a meeting open to all breakaway factions and outlined the frame in which the PKK and the women's units might reorganize themselves. When most of the right wing chose not to heed the invitation, the meeting (2003) clarified the position of the newer alliances. All men commanders were instructed to submit self-criticism reports to the women's movement. The launch of the Women's Higher Union (KJB)¹²¹ as the "democratic confederate organization of women" in 2005 marked the beginning of a new era in women-only, autonomous organizing. The KJB assumed the general coordination role of its four main constituents.¹²² As Jehat (2013) emphasizes, "if Leadership did not organize his own disposition in this way, total liquidation was inevitable."

Surviving the "liquidation plots," the KJB started an introspective process to paint a fuller picture of how it had become possible to damage women's organizing to the extent that women had even lost their executive agency. Splitting mixed-gender fields from the women-only and constricting women's capacity

to the latter, was part of a broader male strategy to undermine women's overseeing authority. "Declaring the PAJK right after Öcalan's arrest was actually a smart move," underlined a Kurdish activist I interviewed. Also, she added, women tacitly sensed that the imposition of marriage – "the enslavement relationship of a man and a woman" – was a manifestation of the statist centralist mentality: "During police interrogations, they say, 'You are young and beautiful, you can easily find a handsome guy, get married, and raise a family. Wouldn't that be nice?'" Despite these insights, however, women's leadership failed to play a game-changing role in these plots. Why?

Essentially, women became divided between the sectarian-left and liberal-right factions. Those on the right aligned with a "crude nationalist" patriarchal program that more openly betrayed the PKK's gender justice and non-state direction. These women, some of my respondents think, were mostly part of the "power-centred, collaborator, slave-woman" category who facilitated male manipulation in exchange for power. Women on the "seemingly true socialist Left," on the other hand, mainly took two positions: one, they tried to expose and actively confront men's fight for domination; two, they attempted to evade the fight and proceed with their own organizing. The first position was post-factum dubbed *kaba redci* (crude denialist), for it was unproductively antagonizing and lacked the vision to take the lead and responsibility to transform men and address abusive power dynamics. The 4th PJA Conference, instead of maintaining the existing social project of re-educating men and mobilizing them in and through struggle, proposed a polarizing alternative to that of the right wing that effectively trapped women in a game whose rules were set by the right wing (Jêhat, 2013). The second position of staying outside of the power fight to gain ground, on the other hand, in time allowed the men commanders to sideline them and speak on their behalf more easily. All positions were criticized for failing to enhance the battle for democratic liberation, while the mainstream socialist proposal to postpone gender liberation until after the revolution was now totally dismissed (Zagros, 2013). The lessons learned from this historic experience would be reevoked whenever necessary to guide the way forward. Civilian activists, too, drew instructive lessons.

3.1.2 The civilian side

As the PKK's cadres discussed the place of women, Turkish counter-insurgency operations stirred up *serhildans* across Kurdistan. PKK ideology attracted thousands of women from the Kurdish countryside, cities that rose up in *serhildan*, and the western metropolises, which were full of internally displaced Kurds and Kurdish university students. "A revolution was in the making and young women had no intention to stay out and settle for an ordinary life" (Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015, p. 193). "The moment women's needs match a social opportunity, they decide fast and flood into the ranks because they see *it* as the solution, as the liberating life option" (Dilan). Each woman had a different experience of state and male violence

at school, at home, or in the community that motivated them to join the movement. Nevertheless, DÖKH activists commonly agreed that the *serhildan* spirit was the embodiment of women's awakening:

I was only 17 in 1992. I experienced it, but you should watch the footages. It was the women masses who were most relentless, passionate, fierce, and [ready to come to the front to face] death in the *serhildans*. That's because women were awakening to life there. Those women, secluded in the house and repressed, not only by the state but also by men and feudality ... suddenly grasped the world and its contradictions and realized their liberation. This realization was astoundingly beautiful. It was a desire to change the world, and not to change it from where you sit; it was a true desire to change the world [at the cost of one's life] by taking to the streets, going to the mountains, or going to prison. This was indeed discovering the world anew, reinventing life, and awakening! Awakening from thousands of years of sleep. You rejected your reality and set off for the *hakikat* (truth) that needed to be something else – that needed to be about freedom (Rûken).

This quote powerfully captures some Kurdish women's journey moving from intersectional consciousness “in-itself” to “for-itself” in their contact with the freedom struggle. Each city or town created its own heroic figures of defiance.¹²³ The deadly clashes at Vedat Aydın's¹²⁴ funeral, which was attended by thousands, would affect women mostly in Amed (Diyarbakır). The self-immolation protests of women like Zekiye Alkan and Raşan Demirel,¹²⁵ or others in diaspora and prisons or the “martyrdom” of militants from one's hometown, first fostered critical consciousness and moral loyalty in the women's immediate vicinity. The affective and ethical indebtedness to the corporeal manifestation of the demand for freedom would help weave together topographies of collective accountability, as observed in a DÖKH cadre's account, who was caught while joining the guerilla and arrested:

I was 15 when Zekiye set herself on fire on top of the ancient city walls of Amed. It was a fabular, transhistorical moment for me, emotionally and mentally mesmerizing ... It played a central role in shaping my personal world and joining in. Then there was Hewîdar, my friend from Lice, who was martyred in 1991. These women affected us in Amed, but each region had its own martyrs (Bahar).

Mass arrests brought thousands of Kurdish women – young and old, rich and poor, armed and civilian – together in prison, ushering in a new phase in women's prison resistance. Öcalan had encouraged women fighters to share the same space for some time to develop trust, and the emerging shared prison experience fueled female reflection and bonding that ultimately turned jail cells into incubators of social revolution against the man-state ideology (see Westheim, 2008b). Most Kurdish women who “graduated from the prison academy”¹²⁶ joined the women's struggle soon after their release. Prisons provided spaces of dialogue not only for Kurds themselves but brought together Kurds and Turkish socialists. I was told that even though Turkish women socialists spent far less time in jail than the 5–15 years that their Kurdish prison mates served, the two sides' discussions and routines within the bounds of a small cell educated many Turks about the Kurdish question.

According to Rûken, those who preferred a total *kopuş* (separation) from the system joined the guerillas, while those who preferred to “stay [in the society]” joined civil society structures. A people's movement, former co-chair of DTP Emine Ayna stresses, should be fought on both armed and civilian

fronts at the same time, meaning everyone should create organizational mechanisms wherever they are. The social base and the goals are the same, the instruments differ only (2010, pp. 141, 146). The first pro-Kurdish legal party, the People's Labor Party (HEP), was one such mechanism.¹²⁷ Formed in 1990, it demanded the lifting of OHAL, an end to counterterrorism operations, the abrogation of anti-terror laws, mother-tongue education, and open debate on the Kurdish question and human and labor rights. Turkey's Constitutional Court banned the HEP in 1993; a year later, it also banned the party's successor, the Democracy Party (DEP). DEP, in turn, was replaced by the People's Democracy Party (HADEP).¹²⁸ Each party iteration has played host to an ongoing experiment of intersectional decolonial politics that aims to bring socialists, social democrats, and liberals of all peoples living in Turkey under one umbrella – although non-Kurdish participation in the parties remained limited until the latest party, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) emerged in 2013. After all, while many on Turkey's socialist Left “would even support the independence of Kurdistan ... the PKK is no longer a left-wing movement [for them], ideologically speaking. The personality cult of Öcalan, internal killings, and the PKK's regional positioning are not necessarily accepted by the Turkish Left” (Bozarslan, 2012, para. 62). For liberals, on the other hand, the lack of clear boundaries between the armed PKK and the pacifist HEP was deeply troubling. Both views had their counterparts within the TFM: While Turks find this interrelation “problematic,” from a decolonial intersectional viewpoint, both pro-Kurdish civilian parties and the PKK are products of the same sociological and historical culture that can neither be separated nor reduced to one another (see Ercan, 2019). The coexistence of these two actors continues to configure the political landscape in Northern Kurdistan.

3.1.2.1 Becoming a commission (*komisyonlaşma*)

The first legal women's organization, the *Yurtsever* Women's Association (YKD, founded in 1992)¹²⁹ according to DÖKH activists, was spearheaded by more educated women but also mothers from the *değer aileleri* (families of the valued) who had paid a price (*bedel*) in the struggle, such as the loss of a spouse, child, or sibling in the battle. Kinship and tribal bonds had been primary channels for the transfer of traditional wisdom but also revolutionary thought in Kurdish society,¹³⁰ meaning mother-child bonds provided an important energizing impetus for the emerging KWM.

During the upheaval of 1994–2004, HADEP became a new home for the displaced communities to cope with uprootedness, exile, poverty, extreme rights violations, and longing for home, land, and community. The party was populated with women from a wide sociological spectrum: mothers¹³¹ hurt and politicized by the war; professional women, some of whom came from notable families; former guerillas, cadres, or activists released from prison; educated, urban, and young women cognizant of both the movement's gender liberationist values and the inspiring struggle of an earlier generation mobilized mostly through national or kinship values; and, though less in number, women from the Turkish Left

(Çağlayan, 2006). How a woman negotiated her moral contract with the movement depended on her age, marital/educational status, familial/tribal or class interests. For a married woman, for example, being forced to marry a brother-in-law after the political murder of her husband; having to support her children after her village was burned down, family members were arrested, or relatives joined the guerilla; experiencing exile in an unknown city; leaving a husband who had agreed to join the village guards or defending her child's politics against her husband or her community were some concrete positions from which she internalized KÖH's anti-patriarchal politics.

Women's commissions date back to the time when women from the state-banned YKD transferred to HEP. Following hundreds of meetings across Turkey and Kurdistan in 1997 and 1998, HADEP established commissions in most major cities¹³² that were organized from party headquarters in Ankara as a centralized hierarchical structure. Participants at the first public women's conference in 1997 elected to hold annual conferences and institute systematic education programs on gender freedom.¹³³ The second conference, held clandestinely in Istanbul in 1998, brought together all cadres and activists – who avoided leaving the meeting hall for two whole days, kept the lights off all night and slept on blankets to avoid police attention since the state was determined to prevent any organizing activity among Kurdish women in the 1980s and 1990s. Regular ID controls were common even at daytime meetings. Especially in Kurdistan, no outdoor gathering was possible without severe police intervention, and “even opening the party building in the morning was a big deal – only executives could do that, and that meant risking their lives” (Kıymet). Nobody could escape this active war. As one activist states, “Exodus was the prime mode of being in the pre-2000s; you would either end up in jail, in Europe, or in the mountains.” On top of this state violence, men in the party constantly tried to hijack women's efforts, suppress their voice, dominate their rallies, and grab the megaphones.¹³⁴

Not all women, however, were initially prepared to engage in activism for their gender. A teacher in the left-wing *Eğitim Sen* union who grew up in western Turkey but began to probe her experience of ethnic assimilation in her late 20s, recalls how she was introduced to the women's question:

Yurtsevers had their own group at the teachers' union. Around 1999–2000, women were told to organize separately. First, we did not understand why; some even resisted it. More than a rejection, it was an inability to make sense of it; we were confused. Men, however, rejected, but they were shy about expressing it openly, since it was Öcalan's demand. We were introduced to notions like gender consciousness and women's solidarity; it was astounding. Those initial stages were painful, though, as we were allergic to feminists – they were too marginal, they were elitist, they did not like us Kurds, and they were distant to us. Also, men were saying, ‘you are becoming as rigid and confrontational as feminists.’¹³⁵ But the more we talked, the more we recognized the patriarchy in the party and in the state. We started to question, why did this male *heval* not do this to that man but to me? Initially, women's units looked more like a formality; we would not go there with gender consciousness – we would get it by going there. If you were *yurtsever*, then you had to take part in these autonomous structures. And only then would you realize why women should organize autonomously (Kıymet).

The training practices each commission established explored the internal relationship between class, gender, and national consciousness, as well as how patriarchy operates. The group severely criticized the classic socialist formulation that subordinated the women's question until after revolutionary liberation. "In reading mythology, the history of former colonies, religions, ancient communal societies, women's movements, or real socialism, we could see why socialism or feminism as such would not bring us liberation," noted another unionist, Sonay. In essence, their distinction from the TFM rested in a radically intersectional understanding of freedom:

Feminists were more focused on individual liberation; it looked gender reductive. We rose on our national as well as gender values. And we were laborers, so also had class values. National, class, and gender went intertwined. After 1998, the decision was to go more systematic in the women's struggle. Another decision was to collaborate with the women's movement in Turkey for mutual empowerment. Friends would joke, 'you pursue women's struggle but are unable to get married.' We conducted intensive discussions on why marriage was imposed on us, how we experience the institution of the family, sexuality, and what capitalism and colonialism do to us... These discussions lasted days and nights where we would sob or burst into laughter together (Sonay).

Elif speaks of her transformative experience in the Amed commission in the late 1990s:

Amed women's structure was classic: there was no trust or love felt for one another, there was gossip, [women] valued men only, and men divided women. Then we initiated the first herstory discussion series, namely, that *Hera* was the goddess whom patriarchy liked, and that *Inanna* was the independent one. When these sessions started, I was like, 'Where am I?' It was the first time I had heard any of these. We discussed what it meant to love one's own gender. Then in this small town of Çarıklı, we had an amazing togetherness with the women of the community. We were staying in their homes. When you stay, you achieve a better connection. The moment a woman sees there is not much difference between you and her, she opens up. In large community meetings, you cannot discuss the women's question, national issues and emotions are at the peak there. In one-to-one smaller home meetings, we would get to the women's issues. What the [Turkish] feminist movement overlooks is that, as a woman, I first need confidence to take a step. Finding another woman standing with me provides that safety. Otherwise, most will think it is their fate. You must be with her while gaining the courage to step outside her boundaries. Those who could do it on their own are already a different kind (Elif).

Both Elif and Sonay stressed that the issues of sexuality and sexual violence were explored in private safe spaces first – similarly to reputable "consciousness-raising groups," I would say. Zerrin remembers the deep level of organization in Istanbul in which her group cultivated vibrant grassroots connections with women and enjoyed tea gatherings, new relationships, and night-long conversations. Districts would compete to draw more women out for March 8,¹³⁶ not only for the central rally but also for neighborhood celebrations. They contemplated the needs raised in neighborhood meetings, health, child-rearing, education, familial relations, and domestic violence, while also reflecting on guerilla women's publications and TV shows,¹³⁷ drawing lessons from their challenges and accomplishments. "We were composing study materials out of pieces published in *Yaşamda Özgür Kadın*."¹³⁸

DÖKH activist Delal defines this process as a revolution in her personality. On one hand, she had the opportunity to realize her self-alienation as a woman and her pitiless, unloving, and merciless attitude toward her gender-fellows. On the other hand, neighborhood commissions introduced her to the realities

of Kurdistan more intensely: “The mothers did not know Turkish, and I did not know Kurdish, but they educated me about everything.” These mothers had seen their children die in the war, watch the destruction of their houses, and suffer displacement and poverty, yet they were hardworking people who were full of devotion, high spirits, and motivation. For Delal, this was empowering. “There you see a common woman’s willpower and begin to question your own personality and weakness in its light.” The synergy resulting from the woman-to-woman and intergenerational transfer of resilience made many women aware of the centuries-old alienation from their gender and culture.¹³⁹

It was only after around a decade that this amorphous, subterranean women’s struggle acquired a shape that was recognizable from the outside. “Initially, our mode looked more like the crude socialist way: ‘men, women struggle hand in hand’ – it was classic and very much like the Turkish Left.” A significant difference from the Turkish Left, though, was the ongoing inspiration derived from the accomplished army formation of women fighters who were on the road to becoming a party. What I noticed in Kurdish recounts was that the civilian side of the late 1990s and early 2000s seemed to resemble the guerilla side of the late 1980s and early 1990s: Women had been uprooted from all walks of life and joined the movement *en masse* as they sought new forms of rootedness in a still-unformalized way while their communities negotiated with the freedom thought. How women become proactive was the driving question of both periods and organizing autonomously became ineluctable at a certain point on both sides.

3.1.2.2 Abdullah Öcalan: What “Leadership” means for Kurdish and Turkish women

When Öcalan was abducted in 1999, it came as an absolute shock for Kurds: Some described it as “an end-of-the-road kind of feeling” or “a psychic breakdown [*ruhsal çöküntü*]” and that they had “become lost in utter darkness” or “lost the meaning of life.” It was a time of tremendous ontological insecurity and a “profound feeling of betrayal and abandonment by the whole world, more importantly the Turkish Left” (Suna). “I was in prison. I wanted to go to the top of a mountain and shout out at the top of my lungs so that the whole world would hear” (Bircan). Angry youth took to the streets, and self-immolation protests occurred everywhere. Many activists stress that this catastrophe (*felaket*) inflicted a much deeper pain and destruction (*derin tahribat*) on women, who felt precarious not only in the face of the Turkish colonial forces but also in the face of male *hevals*, most of whom hoped women would no longer aspire for independent power:

Just recently did women begin to stand on their own feet, but they had not taken any independent steps yet. Think of giving birth to a child, when the mother suddenly disappears, the child gets confused about what to do and how to walk alone. She would want to lean on someone, right? That is what happened to the women’s movement (Safiye).

A mother was screaming, ‘If you gave him to us, we would hide him in our chest [*çiğirimizde saklardık*]. Couldn’t you protect him?’ I can never forget her accusation, ‘Couldn’t you find a place?’

A young girl fainted in my arms saying, 'I want to go to him.' So many women were fainting and collapsing ... [Turkish] teachers at school were asking our kids, 'Who cried yesterday while watching the news?' Those who did would be reported to the school principal (Gülbin).

This deep loyalty and affective, moral, political, and intellectual bonding with the Leadership was – and still is – very difficult to make sense for Turkish allies. They either see it as something troubling that needs to be overcome, tolerable for its tactical/instrumental benefits, or illegible, albeit something that deserves respect as the other's choice. Among the first group who found it "irritating and scary," some thought that Öcalan was an obstacle to unmediated woman-to-woman connection, as in the links between the TFM and KWM, because "even if Kurdish women engage in discussion with us, their words bear Öcalan's approval" (Behiye). These activists argued that feminist organizing needed avenues where women arrive at a common understanding without any leaders, in individual-based, women-only spaces. Others suggested that the emphasis on Öcalan undermined women's agency: "I don't understand why no one is bothered by his prison letters addressed to women. A strong women's movement is there; let them do the talking, man" (Sinem); "I find it very annoying, him speaking with authority and saucing up each one of his speeches with 'women'" (Azra); "Why keep thanking Öcalan as if women do not exist?" (Kerime); "Öcalan learned all these from Turkey and the world, which is not at all to be ashamed of. When women say we learned from him, the position they put themselves in looks bad, as if they haven't seen anything, as if they were closed to the world and Turkey's women's movement" (Tülay). Another discomfort was that a male-leader cult, akin to that of Mustafa Kemal, would only reproduce dependency, subservience, and the image of a patriarchal father. "Women are doing injustice to their own labor and own power" (Nur).

The second group of reactions acknowledged Öcalan's role in women's empowerment or his critical influence on men. But, they added, "because women are strong now, there is no more need for his intervention." Others admired his mastery of Kurdish people's reality, his "strategic mind to mobilize women for national interests" or his vision to "put women's empowerment in the service of both the movement as well as the expansion of his own power." Socialist feminist Cavidan, an ally of the Kurdish cause, told me that she was not intellectually impressed by the views of Öcalan or guerillas in relation to women. It did not "mean much to her, address her needs, touch her life, or bring her any insight"; guerilla women and they lived different lives, disparate realities. "Though I have to say, if they left to their own devices, it would be much harder for Kurdish people to figure out the women's question in such big numbers." Nevertheless, she found it very problematic that Kurdish women could truly believe that Öcalan had "killed his manhood" and not question his "leadership cult" because "many of them do not read Öcalan's work; they just accept his *kelam* [theology] like an *ayet* [verse] from the Quran." Is that so? Or is it possible that "reading" works on multiple and predominantly oral, place-bound, communal registers in a people's movement in contrast to white, middle-class movements that presume the

superiority of the written over the oral? But DÖKH activist Perihan noted that “reading” in the way Cavidan implied was also abundant in her movement: “An average KWM activist serves five to 10 years of jail time attending ‘communal reading groups’ where they systematically study world literature, theories, and movements, [all of which is] on top of the continuous education they get in the life of the active movement.” In support of Perihan’s remark, a young Turkish activist observed that “men look more selective in reading Öcalan; they take what suits them and leave the rest, ecology, gender, etc. aside. Women seem to have a more holistic grasp. I mean, women’s relation to Öcalan is not just emotional, or something like ‘he backed us’: It looks more like an intellectual gratitude” (Gökçe).

The third group of responses seemed more open to welcoming the otherness on a discursive level, though not (yet) in action. “I have to accede to wherever they locate Öcalan; that’s it. Do I approve of it? No. But I never ask myself that question” (Defne). “I am hard-pressed to understand, but they are smart, *vardır bir hikmeti* [I assume wisdom there]. Out of great respect, I don’t want to be unfair. Perhaps I don’t get it because I don’t have a movement experience” (Aysel). “He is not my leader. My reservations aside, I want to understand the love, vigor, and passion felt for him. I guess I have to read his texts first” (Defne). My observation was that more empathetic approaches generally came from those younger and who had allegiance to community-centred lifeworlds besides feminism. “The question ‘how come you follow Öcalan as a feminist?’ sounds like someone asking me in a patronizing tone, ‘how come you are Muslim as a feminist?’ What matters is how you integrate yourself to the 1,400 years of historicity that came before you. You pray according to *fiqh*, but how do you adapt it to your life? What does it mean to you? How do you live your life as a Muslim while incorporating feminism? I assume they have such a relationship with Öcalan” (Meral). Few would engage with the intricacies of this connection like Gökçe (also quoted above): “He saved their lives! This is profound. It does not matter anymore if he is a man, for he did not just talk the talk but walked the walk.”

Aside from these voices, the nuanced creative ways in which racialized women integrated to the anticolonial historicity were generally substituted by self-referential, race-and-coloniality-negligent interpretations by Turkish feminists, that idealized a specific form of relationship with an “unmarked, universal man” or an “unmarked, universal state.” Some others, meanwhile, struggled to understand his deportment when captured:

I found his manners a bit pitiable. He said, ‘I am in the state’s service,’ do you remember? Leftist feminists like me who saw the 1980 coup are accustomed to showing an attitude to the state along the lines of ‘I will not speak a word. Screw off!’ Remember him letting his photo be taken in front of the Turkish flag? For us, refusing to testify and turning your head the other way, so on, have revolutionary meanings. And of course, I couldn’t see back then that the PKK does high politics. And Öcalan’s manners of the day had a calculated place in those high politics. He already had an idea in his mind of what to do when he faced the state. He spoke with that idea in mind. But that idea does not match my revolutionary format. Mine is more like the ‘Screw off!’ kind (Beyza).¹⁴⁰

I was told that Turkish allies' intolerance towards this gratitude to Öcalan peaked particularly between 2000 and 2005. "Turkish women do not realize the day-to-day anti-patriarchal alliance of Kurdish women with their leader. They tend to liken him to Kemal Atatürk, as if he granted rights to women top-down. They do not see our agency there. And when they do, they want us to keep distant from our Leadership" (Jiyan). "Why do you think he is not top-down?" I asked.

There is a massive women's practice and guerilla structure. We can't read Öcalan as separate from this historical practice, as if he's sitting and talking there on his own. It is more accurate to look at Öcalan as an institutional location where women's practice is formulized through reciprocal sharing and thinking with women. Women's contemplation groups would come together. The thoughts and notes produced there would get compiled and disseminated, to Öcalan as well. Kurds were without a formula for decades. Without practice, no formulization is possible. And without a formula, practice does not improve. For years, we tried to tailor European Marxism to our needs, it didn't fit. If one looks at what went wrong in terms of women's organizing in Turkish movements,¹⁴¹ perhaps we might better appreciate Öcalan's vision. To avoid repeating bad examples, he explored with us and put them into words. Feminists never understand the reciprocal nature of this relation. They think of it as a 'leadership cult.' Obviously, it is not that. We have lived through it. Whatever we had no courage to put into words, he did it for us (Jiyan).

In Jiyan's opinion, the continuous tension with feminists on this matter hinges on their inability to analyze the KWM's praxis-oriented historical formation entangled with coloniality: "Since they cannot read our history well from the start, their evaluation of ensuing developments remains superficial and is bound to the limitations of their perception, [meaning it's] quite orientalist." Another activist adds, "For them, he is this dirty rural man scratching his belly and shouting at everyone, okay? How can such a man envision gender liberation, and how can these women follow him, and then also come here and advise us?" A young Turkish feminist agrees: "Turkishness is very psychological. Steeped in it, you may see Öcalan as dirty, rude, and rough. It's very relative! Didn't we shudder at seeing his pictures on TV as schoolkids? We thought he was super ugly." That is so true, I thought. I could have sworn as a schoolkid that he was demonic. But look at how this "demon" for the Turks appeared in a Kurdish woman's dream:

Then a voice tells me, 'Wake up! Leadership is coming, you will be the one to welcome and put him up!' I shivered in excitement. I left the house, a two-story house in the midst of vast land. The land was endless, and there were old-style earthen homes surrounding me. I climbed down the stairs, entered a walkway, and started waiting for him. The sun burned but I was so excited, so excited that I would meet the Leadership! A woman, a bit shorter than me I suppose, approached from my side and stood right next to me. I did not even take a moment to look at her. Thrilled with the expectation, I just focused on the walkway where he would be coming from. Quite some time passed, then this woman standing next to me taped on my shoulder, and said, 'It is okay, I am here.' I turned around and she had his splendid smile (Yekta).

Yekta saw this dream a few years ago on a night when she felt extremely scared and needed support because she was to make a public address the next day following her friends' unexpected arrest. Six of us were having a cozy breakfast in a communal women's house in Dersim when she shared this dream, intrigued by the questions I was asking an elder activist about Öcalan. When the group figured out that this shorter woman standing next was "the Leadership" him/herself, an exclamation of love and joy

roared through the room. I wondered how this portrayal was possible in a deeply patriarchal setting where assigning feminine attributes to men is considered a heavy insult. Appearing in a woman's body clearly honored Öcalan, as he was welcomed into the circle of sisterhood.

In *yurtsever* Kurdish women's lifeworld, Öcalan is more like a mother figure, an encourager, a *kadın yoldaşı* (women's comrade), a *heval* (friend/companion), a *rêber* (guide/mentor), a *hakikat avcısı* (truth seeker), as well as an institutional location and "leadership mechanism for communion and reflection."¹⁴² He is also an iconoclast and dear ally who taught women how to become "human, women, and people," "even when we gave up on ourselves" – "as if he created us out of thin air." He "held onto the principle of freedom in our history and *gücü açığa çıkardı* [uncovered the power]" and "dared to 'kill the manhood' in a feudal society." In Jongerden's (2017, p. 89) words, "Though it was Öcalan who mobilized militants in the struggle against what was called 'the dominant male,' it was the women in the PKK who mobilized Öcalan in order to defend their organizational independence." In effect, Öcalan mobilizes women but is also mobilized by women. This relationship is internally related, not externally as assumed by most feminists (see Chapter 4 for my critique of this feminist assumption).

Those who once needed permission to visit a neighbor and who would have "no say in the family until menopause" were now out in the streets, respected as problem-solving actors in societal matters. That is why such women perceived Öcalan's arrest not only as the physical captivity of a leader, but a comprehensive femicidal and genocidal assault on resistance values, women's liberation ideology and their communal spirit. The defense of "the *heval*" simultaneously meant women's self-defence and defense of the community (Hediye). The "sign" of Öcalan was associated with other signs through metonymic proximity and metaphoric displacement in the historicity of the movement's signification. It became a supplement in the Derridean sense, an accretion and a substitution – "not a signified more than a signifier, a representer than a presence, a writing than a speech" (Derrida, 1998, p. 315).

Women felt responsible for recovering fast from the momentous news of his arrest. As HADEP offices came under attack, and Turkish-supremacist lynching attempts spread, "we thought today is the time to protect the party more."

3.1.2.3 Becoming a branch (*kollaşma*)

The women opened up for discussion the question of how to respond to this new situation. Under pervasive state-promoted media propaganda that Ankara was close to eradicating the PKK, Öcalan's call for the withdrawal of PKK forces outside the borders only exacerbated the feelings of insecurity and the loss of hope for a peaceful resolution among Kurds.¹⁴³ In pursuit of an answer of what would happen next, thousands, mostly women and university students, joined HADEP when other avenues for organizing were barred. Turkish witnesses tended to interpret this enormous flow as a sign of relief due

to the ceasefire, while Kurdish testimonies underline a deepened mistrust of the state, and alarm and dread as the driving motive.

Amid all of this, an amendment to the political party law lifted the coup ban on “branch-type” political organizing. HADEP became the first political party to take advantage of the change, as the move enabled a more organic and flexible platform for women and the youth. The first-ever women’s branch congress in Turkey after the coup was assembled in Ankara in 2000 with the participation of around 10,000 women in a stirring stadium atmosphere. The initial phase of women becoming autonomous in the party structure in the civilian struggle dates to the formation of this branch. Women assumed their own responsibility, elected their own executives, managed an independent budget (10 percent of the party revenue plus women’s membership fees), hired their own space, organized own congresses, rallies, and events, and gained voting rights on the boards of HADEP.¹⁴⁴ In local elections in 1999, a pro-Kurdish party won cities in Kurdistan for the first time, electing three women mayors.¹⁴⁵ Due to the pressing need to coordinate activities across the branches and improve collective decision-making and cooperation, the party created an umbrella body called “women’s coordination” that provided an archetype for more complex and democratic roof models to come.¹⁴⁶

The 2000 congress passed radical decisions for its time regarding women’s autonomy, instituting, for instance, a 25 percent gender quota at all executive levels.¹⁴⁷ A number of men objected to the quota on the grounds that it was humiliating for women, that the Kurdish grassroots were not yet ready for such, or that the Turkish Supreme Court would disapprove. But regardless of the legal framework, women insisted on the regulation’s de facto application. Moreover, a woman executive at the time stated that “in the countryside, guerilla women were visiting homes; people have embraced them. Who are you to object when communities had absolutely no issue with women in politics?” (Gülbin). Male party members would respond, “Guerilla women have proven themselves, there is no such trust built in civilian life yet. How dare you compare yourselves with the guerillas?” The Turkish participants usually linked the gender quota idea in HADEP to feminists’ advocacy for a gender quota in the Turkish Freedom and Solidarity Party (ÖDP) at the time (as discussed in Section 3.2.1). KWM accounts, however, alongside lessons from movements around the world pointed mainly at guerilla women’s practice of electing their own representatives in the PKK. As Gülbin puts it, “why is this autonomy model not in other parties but in HADEP? The difference is in our ideological tradition and heritage.”

The subsequent party congress elected women at rates way above the quota, debunking the suggestion that they were “not ready.” Interestingly, such high rates stemmed partly from men who strategically supported women against their male rivals. Men who previously dismissed the quota now expressed alarm at the results; but cautious to avoiding the appearance of opposing the movement’s ideology, they shifted their tactics to question the qualification of women candidates, arguing that women were not up

to speed on legal or financial procedures, didn't know how to organize big events, or weren't familiar with addressing big crowds. "Just as the state does to Kurds, men would try to divide our power by playing us off against each other" (Elif). They would ally only with "certain women" – such as their own wives or sisters – so as to exercise control over them. Another major challenge for women was winning voting rights on executive boards instead of settling for the mere "right to speak." Voting rights bestowed a decision-making capacity on matters related to men as well, meaning that women could play a greater role in the election of male delegates for mixed-gender assemblies and boards by electing fellow women delegates and candidates. An executive man, accordingly, would be loath to butt heads with women. HADEP had three chairpersons, for women, youth, and the party as a whole. Branches would brief the central executive board regarding their decisions and actions but not submit its activities for approval. On the contrary, they would resist every pressure or influence that came from the central executive board.

Like their Turkish socialist counterparts who invoked class unity to silence women, Kurdish men would use national unity as a pretext to avoid discussing women's autonomy. Every activist agrees that despite Öcalan's push, men would not have readily accepted the changes if women had not expended great efforts in hosting rallies for thousands, building strong grassroots ties, effectively dealing with bureaucracy, offering continual training for cadres and communities, promoting the quota system among the people, and encouraging women to become candidates and vote for women. They fought over being able to talk – "even if it was just three words or broken; we forced ourselves to speak and not allow men to grab our mike." They practiced hard and evaluated each other's performances to improve their speaking, writing, and grandstanding skills. They insisted men call them as *heval* or *arkadaş* (companion), rather than sisters or mothers. They set up women's election bureaus everywhere and worked hard to subvert the patriarchal definitions of qualification in favor of women's norms. "What should the *kadın tarzı* [women's way] be?" was a driving question: "How can she avoid reproducing the male-dominated logic obsessed with power and control, and how can she run a city different than men?" Unconcerned with whether male *hevals* labeled them "sectarian," "man-hating feminists," or "living a *mürüt*¹⁴⁸ culture," women did not permit men's interference in their decisions or in any decisions about them. General male criticism was allowed only under these conditions. Women would discuss and arrive at conclusions among themselves first before engaging with men in mixed gatherings. Men would not commence any meeting before women members arrived. In order to be recognized as a separate force, women, along with youth members, would assert themselves in public meetings by standing side by side with "the more elite-looking party executives" (Elif).

When the gender quota was first applied in the 2002 general elections, 25 women candidates – all of whom were nominated by women first time in a party – out of 102 total candidates, were placed high up on the candidate lists in places where the party was likely to win. But despite high hopes and an increase

in the vote count, HADEP failed to cross the 10 percent national threshold that a party must reach to enter the Turkish parliament. This created profound disappointment and conflict within the party, with some who espoused a male-dominant mentality attributing this failure to women's participation.¹⁴⁹ Some men argued that if the party continued women's nomination system, it would jeopardize success in coming elections as well. When Democratic People's Party (DEHAP)¹⁵⁰ replaced HADEP in 2003 following the latter's ban, all party organs, including the women and youth branches, conducted a deep process of self-criticism that created strains among women as it overlapped with the ongoing ideological and organizational restructuring of the party.

3.1.2.4 Becoming a movement (*hareketleşme*)

For Kurdish activists, the years between 2003 and 2005 were turbulent, as multi-directional and interlocking factors played out against each other simultaneously. There was the Turkish state's attempts to liquidate the PKK, the latter's restructuring in response, the influx of grassroots support into the PKK or DEHAP, the reconstruction of the civilian struggle to become a non-state movement, the women's branch's transformation into an umbrella organization, DÖKH, and the internal class and group rivalries among the activist and cadres, namely, between those more invested in the PKK or DEHAP, or between those released from prison as part of an amnesty in 2004 and the rest. The exigency of survival and the pressure of a rapid and drastic restructuring made healthy reflection extremely difficult. Witnesses generally agree that these conditions resulted in misunderstandings that especially hurt women cadres.

To decentralize the relations between politics and society, DEHAP women initiated an ideological inquiry of the branch model: First, they noted that its hierarchical, power-oriented, Ankara-centred, top-down structure mimicked other patriarchal state and party models with its executive board, chair, and vice chair and secretariat. For DEHAP's women, the vertical imposition of the secretariat's decisions clashed with the horizontal mode of decision-making tried to be instituted as the women's way. Second, the imperative to express oneself within the party, despite some autonomy, actually fostered dependency and created restrictions for women. Party rules did not permit people to stay in the branch for more than a certain number of months, for example. The traditional party form was too restrictive for the growing participation by youth and women. To breathe, women required a more independent space outside the party, because "intended or not, party activities such as election campaigns would forestall our [activities]" (Neslihan). When party identity overshadowed the KWM identity, treating it as an extension of DEHAP, this diminished women's ability to assert their strategic importance. It was the KWM that had to become stronger to assume leadership roles in party politics, not the other way around. Third, they determined a need for organizational bodies that could address the social and economic problems of women beyond the political. The existing ones (Selis, Gökkuşuğu...) were not independent enough. For that, the immediate goal was to increase the number of grassroots-level women's assemblies to create

sustainable social and economic livelihoods. Fourth, they found that a more independent mode would help strengthen the dialogue with the TFM and other women's movements around the world.

These discussions prompted the establishment of a women-only autonomous umbrella that was unprecedented in Turkey. The umbrella was organized like a movement in horizontal, network-like relation to the party structure "so that the party was not the apex from which everything trickled down but part of a broader network of organizationally independent structures" (Jongerden, 2017, p. 251). A founding assembly representing all women in the party declared the DÖKH in September 2003 in Istanbul with the participation of around 20 women's organizations invited from across Turkey. In the presence of Turkish delegates, "we said we won't call this umbrella the 'Kurdish women's movement' and associate it with a specific ethnocultural identity. Even though the idea was to form city assemblies together with our feminist allies, this responsibility was never assumed and eventually left to us" (Hêja). Another activist comments, "*Türkiyeli* (from Turkey) women stayed distant not because they rejected DÖKH but wanted to guard their own system." I will come back to what "guarding one's own system" means in later chapters, but DÖKH turned out to encompass mostly *yurtsever* women in the end, even though it was an internationalist movement centred on alliance with everyone that espoused its principles (DÖKH, 2003).¹⁵¹ The umbrella organization only excluded the *erkekleşmiş, iktidarlaşmış* (masculinized, dominating) women who sided with the colonialist capitalist system:

DÖKH's character is socialist at heart but reinterprets socialism from a democratic perspective. The socialist essence does not centralize and impose itself. We seek the terms of a democratic unity with all women's structures while avoiding reconciling with the oppressing class, gender, or nation. DÖKH has no room for women masculinized within the male-dominated system. We do not organize under the same roof with women who choose to reproduce the colonialist capitalist system. There is a colossal diversity outside the reality of hegemonic dominating womanhood. The socialist essence expressed as radical democracy envisions the representation of all these differences (Rûken).

DÖKH places women's freedom at the heart of dismantling the interlocked relations of domination. Women represent a democratic, ecological, woman-liberationist paradigm built on peoples' democratic will, communal values, and confederal organization against the patriarchal statism that masculinizes or feminizes the nations, classes, and races of its choosing. The DÖKH spokeswoman explains the "movement" concept as something that aims to respond to this inherently multifocal, interdependent nature of domination:

Real socialism showed us that one party, one ideology, or one conflict-centred politics does not bring freedom. What upholds society is diversity, multiplicity, and difference, which means multiple contradictions that cannot be reduced to class or gender. It is not only capitalism or patriarchy that oppresses us. By extension, then, we chose to relinquish our *tekçi* [unitary, uniformist], centralist lens. Multi-layered social, cultural, and faith structures require multi-layered solutions. That is why DÖKH organizes in the form of a movement. Movement-form denies the notion of one centre. You cannot organize women's liberation with uniform, universalist perspectives. The movement concept is about democratizing the interdependence of differences (Rezan).

While the newborn DÖKH focused on instituting its autonomy vis-à-vis the party, participants at DEHAP women's branch congress in 2003, a year before the dissolution of the branch, wrestled with the self-criticism of the branch's legacy. Its resolution noted that almost no changes had occurred, the old mindset continued despite the agreement to restructure (DEHAP Kadın Kolları, 2004). This *darlaşma*¹⁵² (organizational/ideological constriction) posed an obstacle to enacting the more central ideological role and actions ascribed to women. Elif, who was a branch member at the time, states,

We had this tendency to start the history with us, while actually every process before you brings you to a certain point. We were too 'us-centric;' that was narrowing. Naturally, other women developed a reaction against us, declaring that we were marginal feminists, denying men, not accepting anything. Our efforts to work together were proving futile as we were not holding our meetings together – even training was separate. Women in general party units were not allowed into branch meetings. This has changed now. One has to take part in the decision-making to oversee its enactment. Otherwise, it is like we know the right thing, and they don't – this is self-centrism. We were too busy exclusively empowering the women among us (Elif).

Amid this transition, implementing a new 35 percent gender quota in the 2004 local elections became much more difficult. One hardship was the complexity of local dynamics; another was the fierce male pushback as men stood to lose local power and resources – something that was not the case in general elections as the party was unlikely to pass the 10 percent national threshold. Men actively propagated against the quota system and mobilized women candidates against each other.

“Women's coordination” was in full charge of the women's nomination process, selecting the priority towns (quota cities) for women candidates¹⁵³ and garnering support for them in their localities:

We wanted a woman candidate in Dersim. There were seven or eight man candidates. We talked beforehand with men who could withdraw their candidature in favor of women. Some did; some didn't. The clashes were severe. There were local alliances, and we had to push through different leftist groups, as well as some tribal structures. We conducted intense meetings open to all women in Dersim. Setting up primary election ballots to find out the trending women candidates was the significance of the 2004 elections. More than one candidate would weaken our position, so we did not have that luxury, yet sometimes women did not want to withdraw in the other's favor. It was difficult to rule anyone out. Playing up one candidate against the other created tensions. I also admit there were times when our methods were not that democratic (Neslihan).

DEHAP's women candidates won 10 of the 56 municipalities the party captured that year.¹⁵⁴ Shortcomings related to the statist, centralist, and hierarchical model was something DEHAP experienced in general as well. The party looked marginal and “too radical,” leading to its demonization in the Turkish media as an alleged extension of the PKK. Therefore, a group of veteran Kurdish politicians¹⁵⁵ initiated a discussion regarding reconstruction that would realize KÖH's “Democratic Confederalism” framework (as detailed in Section 8.4), including the *Türkiyelileşme* project (literally “Turkeyfication,” being a party of all peoples in Turkey), by forging decolonial links between the peoples of Turkey and Kurdistan. This project necessitated strong grassroots ties that a strong youth and women's organizing could mobilize. Internal power conflicts, however, prevented the effective mobilization that was necessary to kick-start a conversation from ground up. Soon, DEHAP's women's branch was dissolved at a time when DÖKH

was still weak and uncoordinated. The confusion about how to resituate oneself in this newer configuration, as well as the struggles among many professional cadres to eke out a living, alienated many long-time cadres such as Neslihan:

A functioning system suddenly stopped. Now we were asked to choose where we wanted to work, while until then, it was the party that assigned us work. We made our choices, but then the allocation process took a long time, and we were confused. It was not resistance to change but confusion on not being able to see what was coming. Grassroots organizing does not tolerate long-lasting vacuums. Many women left their families behind to join the party work; you cannot just say, 'Now wait;' she cannot make a living, and you're not providing food and shelter anymore. This caused dissolution. This was not a case of losing faith in the cause, but a real concern for daily subsistence. Our resistance against the men and the criticism of the wrongdoings in the new system were interpreted as resistance to change. 'You are trying to keep your power position,' they said. But actually, we were very much for the change; we had also made a lot of critiques about the system among us. It was heartbreaking to be seen like that. You toil so hard at an executive level, and then suddenly there is a vacuum. This caused a rupture in one's mood. Pre-emptive measures should have been taken to prevent that vacuum (Neslihan).

The transition from DEHAP to the Democratic Society Movement/Party (DTH/P) and from the branch model to DÖKH is remembered as a painful process (see Bozgan, 2011, pp. 788–792 for more detail). While hundreds of new cadres and activists joined (most of whom were recently released from jail), many felt disheartened or unjustly treated, leading many to abandon the movement. Amid such severe criticism of the DEHAP women's branch, Elif thinks it became impossible for them to defend the ideological line of the movement because they had to fight on multiple fronts at the same time. Any weakness on their part was used against them, leaving no space for transformation. Elif found herself in a dilemma: "They take you seriously only when you have power, so you behave in a way that brings you power, but this then turns you into a dominating figure. I understand that in moments of change, the rejection of the old should be stark, but this could be done without sidelining us." A member currently active in DÖKH agrees that it was wrong to hold branch women responsible for the organization's failures.¹⁵⁶

Activists recall the excitement they felt at the DTP's founding congress in 2005. Women had been relatively successful at bridging the internal divides, allowing many to start to bond and trust each other once more. DTP women also made an effort to incorporate those estranged – sometimes with success and sometimes not. The congress announced plans to switch to "assembly-type" organizing, increased the gender quota to 40 percent, raised the women's budget to 20 percent of the overall party budget and introduced, for the first time in Turkey, the mixed-gender co-chair system for all executive organs (which was followed by the introduction of co-mayor system in 2014).¹⁵⁷

DÖKH reasoned that a colonial assault could only be countered by a movement-wide fightback from all spheres of life through network-like interdependent grassroots structures. If one idea behind the DÖKH was the intersectionality of oppression, the other was the predicament of "making-power," that is, carving decolonial confederal counter-topographies outside-the-state, not only against Turkish-

supremacy but also against the patriarchal statism in Kurdish culture. Decentralizing autonomy from the party towards society was the women's dual-power strategy (discussed further in Sections 5.4 and 8.3–4).

The second DÖKH conference in 2005 defined the “women's method” as the flexible, direct participative, power-sharing, “assembly-type” model of organizing. The following year's third conference, meanwhile, discussed the construction of women's confederalism. The fourth conference in 2007 decided to form city assemblies of women, alongside four other major assembly clusters – for ideological, political, social, and youth work – under DÖKH.¹⁵⁸ Each cluster would bring together whether organized or grassroots, all women-specific, regional, urban, and neighborhood level assemblies in that field so that they could interact under the same umbrella.¹⁵⁹ These changes were in alliance with the “democratic autonomy” project that the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) accepted that year for the Kurdish people in Turkey. DÖKH conducted its relationship with mixed-gender structures through institutional protocols that ensured its conditions were endorsed. The formation of women's assemblies was one such condition asked of the partnering institution.¹⁶⁰ Unlike the earlier branch-type organization that secluded the women in the branch from the rest, “women's assemblies” encompassed all women in an institution as its natural members. Another requirement was that decisions that women's assemblies shared in DÖKH organs would be accepted by the affiliated partner entities without discussion. Likewise, the movement agreed that no conclusive decision regarding any woman member could be made outside the commissions assigned by these assemblies.¹⁶¹

Around 2007–2008, DÖKH initiated another round of critiques, as the movement had failed to attain the anticipated level of grassroots organizing or establish enough communes and cooperatives. At the time, it was clear that institutions tied to the state-appointed governors were using the provision of public services as a tool of colonial population control by rewarding “good Kurds” through clientelist social-aid programs. KÖH, on the other hand, was trying to build counter-spaces of cooperation via limited municipal and communal resources. Back then, I was working as a social-policy coordinator at the Sümerpark multi-purpose community centre operated by Amed Metropolitan Municipality, interacting on a daily basis with displaced, dispossessed, and disenfranchised communities. While there, I had the chance to observe the fight between bureaucratic-statist gatekeeper officials running clientelist networks in the elected Kurdish municipalities and those who wanted to introduce the movement's “democratic social municipalism” model.¹⁶² The dominant supporters of the neoliberal urban management mindset in the municipality advocated for a competition-based, consumption-oriented economy and were more interested in the housing market for the rising middle and upper classes than in alleviating urban poverty.¹⁶³ Continued reliance on externally funded (EU, U.N., central state, etc.) projects reinforced dependency.

Developing direct-democratic popular accountability structures in the municipality, let alone in the communities, necessitated sustained re-education and political reorganizing. The mass arrest of Kurdish activists in the KCK Operation of 2009, however, sought to nip this process in the bud (this next phase, the congress model of organising – becoming a system – starting in 2015 is discussed in Section 6.1).

3.2 The Turkish Feminist Movement (TFM) and its first encounters with Kurdish activists

In 1996, feminist academic Aksu Bora was already talking about the limits of small-group feminist politics since small groups are prone to generating a suffocating, marginal subculture due to the language and codes they produce that are exclusive to their members. Sayılan (1995) adds that the politics based on the idea that the “personal is political” had also reached its limits and gained certain legitimacy but that the debates around strategies for a long-termed struggle had not yet been concluded. Bora (1996) asks, “Were we able to analyze the sexist patterns of this society, or were we carried away with Western middle-class templates so that we became unable to connect with real life?” and “How can women connect their own language and public space with that of the larger public?” Official TFM herstory views the 1990s as a period of relative stagnation for feminist activism in the face of rising NGOization and women’s organizing in leftist mass organizations. The more “adventurous, bold, and militant” campaigns and publications of the 1980s were replaced by numerous disjointed groups occupied with projects, or socialist groups that focused on the oppression of women in the public space at the expense of the private. This, feminists argued, muted feminists’ voice, erasing the most fundamental connection that feminism suggested (Göral, 2007; Osmanağaoğlu, 2011; Sayılan, 1995).

Once small groups withdrew from street actions, campaigns subsided, and the TFM lost its power to mobilize larger segments of society with topical discourse and action, state feminism, which differed from the TFM with its focus on equality as opposed to difference and close relations with donor and state institutions, filled the gap (Bora, 1996, 2014; Göral, 2007; Sayılan, 1995). In parallel to the decline of left-wing opposition in Turkey, the downsizing of the state, and the influx of EU and other supranational funds, a new form of charity-like state-feminism emerged to address the issue-based tasks outsourced by the state. Bora (1996) argues that the priorities, frames, and policies set by international donors were largely implemented through women’s groups. Oriented toward development programs, this interest-based “project feminism” sought to “save” the Other and granted higher status to professional salaried women than the people they wanted to “help.” In state feminism, urban-rural, modern-traditional, educated-uneducated binaries were reproduced as in Kemalist feminism. NGOization, which further flourished in the 2000s, received continued criticism for “taming” feminism with a specific focus on lobbying activities, detaching the movement from street actions, and narrowing the horizon down to violence against women, legal rights, and participation in political and economic life (İnce, 2014b; Bora,

1996; Göral, 2007). Yet, many feminists also agreed that, despite these problems, efforts at institutionalization were still important for passing the experience on and cultivating awareness on women's rights across society.

In parallel to NGOization¹⁶⁴ and the spread of women's counseling/support centres (including the General Assembly of Women's Shelters and Counseling Centres), Turkish feminists mid-to-late 90s onward started launching collectives, gender studies programs, citywide woman's platforms and councils,¹⁶⁵ feminist magazines,¹⁶⁶ campaigns, and demonstrations – most often joining hands with liberal or Kemalist NGOs and/or women in socialist parties or labor unions (see Çakır, 2005; Diner and Toktaş, 2010). They secured gender-egalitarian reforms to the Turkish Criminal and Civil Codes through a series of effective campaigns.¹⁶⁷

A popularization of feminism, liberal channels aside, was also occurring on the Turkish Left, as parties all began to form “dependent” – as the TFM would call it – women's branches or commissions. The dilemma for many independent feminists in this situation was to find an answer as to how socialism and feminism may ally while still protecting an independent space for women. In this quest, as well as in the hopes of changing the patriarchal structures of socialist parties, some independent feminists opted to join. Bora (2009) argues that in 1989, despite the de facto defeat of socialism, it remained the hegemonic ideology of Turkey's opposition. That is why feminists could dream of transforming sexism in leftist political entities by cooperating with socialist women to gain a say in party politics. The real defeat of socialism occurred in the 1990s when it lost its vibrant, brave language that could speak to people. At the same time, these dreams of transformation came to naught, especially for some Istanbul feminists, as I will explore below. Others, however, insisted on bringing feminist insights into the socialist movement, forcing some groups to undergo considerable transformation (Berktaş, 2010; see Sayılan, 1995).

Even at a time when Kurdish cities were completely off the radar of Turkey's civil society organizations, the Human Rights Association (İHD) closely followed human rights violations in the region (Günaysu, 2014). As such, its Kurdistan offices, which opened at the turn of the 1990s, spearheaded the documentation of state violence.¹⁶⁸ And in 1991, the İHD also became one of the first such organizations to establish women's commissions. An unorganized group of mainly socialist women who knew each other from women's and human rights struggles initiated a campaign in 1994 called *arkadaşıma dokunma* (don't touch my friend). For the first time, women directly highlighted the history of racism in Turkey by protesting rising nationalism, war, and enmity towards Kurds. The campaign, inspired by an anti-racist movement of the same name in France, sought to raise a voice for Kurds from the Turkish side (ibid.). The assassination of Kurdish MP Mehmet Sincar, who was killed by the Turkish

Hizbullah while investigating extrajudicial murders, was a major trigger for this campaign. Then, in 1994, the state arrested MPs from the Kurdish DEP in a humiliating fashion and outlawed the party:¹⁶⁹

Most of us applied to HADEP for membership to show our solidarity. ... We then collected around 100 signatures and placed an ad in a prominent [Turkish] newspaper saying, 'We non-Kurdish women feel ashamed of the privilege that our IDs provide us' (Günaysu, 2014).

“At HADEP, to our surprise, we met an amazing crowd; the building was packed with determined Kurdish commoners” (Nil). The campaign supported by the popular feminist magazine *Eksik Etek* and others gained wide traction over the next two years, as “messages were pouring from places we had no contact with before” (Günaysu, 2014). At one campaign meeting in 1995, the group decided to start a protest similar to Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo movement in Argentina, demanding an end to disappearances under custody, the public acknowledgement of crimes, and the prosecution of those accused of human rights abuses (see Karaman, 2016). The Saturday Mothers, as the collection of relatives of missing and murdered people came to be called, began staging silent sit-ins, communal vigils, and press statements every Saturday in Istanbul’s well-known Galatasaray Square. Around nine or ten weeks later, families from Kurdistan also joined in. Between the 170th and 200th weeks in 1998 and 1999, the Saturday Mothers suffered systematic police attacks, physical harassment, tear gas, detention and trial each week (Kural, 2014). Some lost their jobs due to prolonged periods of detention.¹⁷⁰ In 1996, the 10-month-long Women for Peace Initiative composed of İHD peace commission members and academics and journalists in touch with the Saturday Mothers organized a meeting in which Turkish women could witness Kurdish women’s testimonies of war for the first time in perspective (Alp, 2015; see Tanrıku, 2014).¹⁷¹ In the words of two Turkish activists,

Women raised an anti-war voice for the first time in two cases in Turkey: first, for Turkey not to enter the Gulf War and second, in 1993, to avoid keeping silent against the rife cases of rape in the Bosnian War. But back then, there was also a war in Kurdistan, but we did not do anything about that. This indicates how late the women’s movement was in mobilizing against the war ongoing in its own region (Beyza).

Saturday sit-ins started off from within a human rights framework. We were protesting the disappearances because they were human rights violations. But with the participation of people from the region [Kurdistan] and the concrete information they presented us, we got to understand that disappearances were just one part of a broader politics of systematic annihilation (Kerime).

These İHD’s activities facilitated initial contacts between Turkish and Kurdish women. Did learning about “systematic annihilation” open a space for action other than one framed by human rights discourse in the later stages of the peace struggle? This is a question I will explore in Chapter 6. For the moment, I want to note that unlike the Turkish feminists who excluded these women-led actions from feminist and women’s history on the grounds that they lack a specific emphasis on gender, many DÖKH activists describe the Saturday sit-ins as part of the Kurdish women’s peace struggle that dates back to the first cease-fire that Öcalan unilaterally declared in 1993.

3.2.1 Revisiting the possibility of organizing within a political party

Upon its formation in 1996, the 'Freedom and Solidarity Party' (ÖDP), the latest iteration of a "unity project"¹⁷² to bring the Turkish socialist Left under one umbrella, inherited the heated debates around both the Kurdish and the women's questions. Until the 1999 general elections, the internationalist, libertarian-socialist ÖDP exuded confidence and energy, raising hopes among liberal-leftists, socialists, anti-militarists, ecologists, and feminists. For the first time in leftist history, feminists were invited as a group to help write the party charter and given the freedom to define their relationship to the party. Many women from the feminist *Pazartesi Magazine*¹⁷³ chose to organize under the ÖDP's banner in the hopes that this umbrella model could help organize the women's struggle too.

The consensus was not to perpetuate the conventional "women's branch" model that was generally instrumentalized to win new members to the party. After long discussions, feminists developed a "women's coordination" model that would take on the dual task of gender-mainstreaming the party political program and function as a pressure group against the gender discrimination in the party ranks (Elibol, 2003, pp. 42, 62; Acar Savran, 2009, p. 118). The ÖDP implemented positive discrimination measures that its predecessors had practiced, giving women the right to longer podium time or imposing disciplinary punishments on men who engaged in violence against women. Still, women in the party called for vigilance in upholding the ÖDP's 30 percent gender quota,¹⁷⁴ since the relevant article stated that the condition could be breached in the event that there were no women candidates. At the same time, the idea that women could nominate and oversee their own candidates remained too progressive a measure to include in the party's founding charter.¹⁷⁵ Instead, women decided their best bet was to form a pressure group to encourage the nomination of women who espoused their views (Elibol, 2003, p. 68).

The independent feminists leading these discussions, mostly from *Pazartesi* magazine, faced overt opponents among women from various political groups in the ÖDP who "classically saw the women's issue as auxiliary to the socialist agenda" or more distant others who "saw feminism or positive discrimination as a 'high-society fad'" (ibid., p. 73). Those who identified as feminists were also roughly divided into three: the first group of mainly radical feminists argued that feminist politics could not be carried out in mixed-gender organizations but only in independent feminist groups (ibid., p. 58). For the second group of mostly socialist feminists, the ÖDP was an avenue for spreading the feminist agenda by bringing feminist demands into socialism. Acar Savran (ibid., p. 86) thought that it would be easier via mixed-gender organizations to reach women that small feminist groups might not reach on their own. According to this logic, the ÖDP could be used as a future reference point in integrating feminist demands into holistic leftist politics. However, they also agreed that the authentic ground for feminist politics was independent, women-only spaces, since restrictive party programs made the politicization of women's issues in the private sphere much harder than ones related to the public sphere. As a result, they argued

that some feminists should remain outside the ÖDP to strengthen that independent space. The third group, which was neither radical nor socialist-feminist (I would call them feminist socialists), saw the ÖDP as a platform for feminism and advocated the creation of autonomous women's entities under the party umbrella. Proponents of the idea that an autonomous feminist component could subject other components of the ÖDP to feminist critique, Acar Savran thought, envisioned an external relation between feminism and socialism, as opposed to the organic connection the second group proposed (2009, p. 115).

We could not find a balance in the ÖDP and could not act as an integrated whole. Some of us thought we'd better keep our feminist identity outside the party, some thought we could only eliminate the sexism within the ÖDP and ÖDP politics ... and some thought women's politics could be exercised in its entirety in the party. We had three different tendencies, so to say. That is why we could not pull it together (Filiz Karakuş, quoted in Elibol, 2003, p. 67).

When and how did this disconnect among women exacerbate? The variances in approach to the EU accession, the Dec. 19, 2000, prison hunger strike,¹⁷⁶ and above all, political disagreements regarding the Kurdish question in the ÖDP increasingly came to the fore towards the 1999 general elections. The minority *Kurtuluş* tradition supported an open alliance with KÖH against the majority *Dev Yol* tradition that argued for a third way between the Turkish state and the PKK.¹⁷⁷ The majority group's subsequent proposal to organize as the ÖDP in Kurdistan was deemed unacceptable by the minority group, which recognized Kurdistan's colonial status and insisted on an internationalist alliance with the pro-Kurdish HADEP for the coming elections. When effective communication among the party groups collapsed and conflict-ridden male language took over, most women chose to revert to their party group identities. As a result, independent feminists were left without a group and deprived of the solidarity of fellow women. They were perceived as "stray, puny, grumpy, or pursuing own interest or power" (ibid., p. 48). And how did the feminists perceive other women? They viewed the latter as sharing political interests and loyalties with men that often trumped "women's concerns" or a "feminist identity." For feminists, these divided concerns, "external" disputes, and waning party democracy increasingly seemed to sideline feminist identity and politics. The absence of feminist networks outside further amplified the feeling of marginalization:

For three years, I worked in the central executive committee, then I had to get psychotherapeutic support for two years. Because at the end, that confident Behiye had disappeared and a paralyzed Behiye who could neither write nor talk came in. It was a nightmarish, dog-eat-dog world. Constantly there was some bargaining going on the background of which I had no idea about. When I took the floor, the minute-taker would stop taking notes. That is because I was independent, had no affiliation with any group, and had no power behind me. There, it was a coalition of groups and each of them had spokespeople. I was just this woman, with no experience in politics. I did not know any party, illegal group, etc. And I truly assumed I would be accepted by my word alone. That didn't happen (Behiye).

These early years of the ÖDP helped many women become feminists, albeit at the cost of alienating those women who were already feminists. The first group of feminists mentioned above who understood that focusing on women's politics would exclude them from general party politics preferred to participate

as socialists, not feminists. For the second group, their growing marginalization, which was related to the missing control mechanisms between the central and peripheral party structures, simply proved that the party was not a place for feminist politics, at least not to their liking (Elibol, 2003, p. 51, 93). By the time these dilemmas reached an intolerable level, feminists had already left the party and the ÖDP had begun to decline following its disappointing showing in the 1999 elections. The third group, meanwhile, insisted that they could have defended the women's politics that the party culture looked down upon via feminist struggle (ibid., p. 48):

Those groups that are outside [the mixed-gender structures], women-only, and call themselves independent are being unfair to women who do women's work in mixed-gender organizations like political parties, unions, and CSOs. These women are part of the women's movement, too. Being in mixed structures does not push them out of the women's movement. On the contrary, if we think of the women's movement as an umbrella, they represent a range within it (Ferah Kökmen, quoted in Elibol, 2003, p. 61).

Sometimes we publicly shared the ideas developed within ourselves that looked like elite reflections, presuming that everybody agreed with them at the party. Sometimes I did that, too, not to blame anyone; there were times we showed fierce, sharp reactions. Some of that perhaps had stimulative effect on people, but I think it also had an effect like, 'These women are a different category. This is how they are.' I mean, it also created a situation which neither touched the general party life nor the people there (Nesrin Arslan, quoted in Elibol, 2003, p. 72).

The conclusion I draw from my interviews and the few writings on the period is that the non-intersectional division of labor where the "women's coordination" was expected to transform others' gender politics – on the assumption that the issue of gender could be addressed irrespective of other questions – was not seen as the source of the problems. A "women's coordination" that focused on gender issues versus other women in the party who engaged in general politics was a dichotomy left unquestioned. Feminists wanted to enjoy authority without having to deal with these group identities, lobbies, and debates on general party politics. Avoiding these also precluded them from being able to nominate the women of their choosing for general politics. In this non-intersectional form of coalition with socialists, seclusion and mutual alienation were inevitable. Feminists were seen as elite, intellectual, educated, middle- or upper-income women: "You look elite, so your demands are also perceived as elite. I mean you look like a person who speaks Turkish with an English accent" (Özlem Türkmen, quoted in Elibol, 2003, p. 74).

3.2.2 Can we march together?

According to some respondents, the split following Women's Day in 1998 foreshadowed the departure of feminists from the ÖDP. To lay the background, let me first return to the Women's Day rally of 1997. That rally, called *Artık Örgütlü* (Finally Organized), is seen as milestone in the nascent efforts to build bridges with Kurdish women: First, the rally sought to create a women's agenda outside the laicist/anti-laicist divide reinforced by the National Security Council in the aftermath of that year's "postmodern coup" of Feb. 28. Second, for the first time, Turkish and Kurdish women¹⁷⁸ organized together a mass

meeting of around 10,000 women – an unprecedented event in Istanbul. From the mid-1990s onwards, March 8 rallies became an important avenue of contact between the two ethnonational groups. Third, the event marked the first time participants read out a joint statement in both Kurdish and Turkish. Feminists from the *Kurtuluş* tradition I interviewed expressed pride since it was a women’s accomplishment.¹⁷⁹ At the time, addressing the crowd in Kurdish attracted fierce opposition; in fact, such a practice only became common in some women’s circles during the 2000s while it remains highly controversial on platforms that include (neo)Kemalist, nationalist, or (neo)conservative women.

Ahead of the 1997 Women’s Day, *Pazartesi* magazine made a nationwide call, “Let this March 8 be different!” emphasizing that the disconnect between women who work for various political parties, unions, and associations helped these entities instrumentalize women for their own interests (Pazartesi, 1997c). They wanted this rally to lay the groundwork for joint organizing, establish inter-group communication and raise the voice of an independent women’s movement. Feminism should not be about critical analysis and objection alone; it should build a political movement, the magazine argued. However, *Pazartesi* also stressed that the women’s movement should essentially develop as independent small groups, take ad hoc joint actions, and form loose communication networks and that those “who believe in the independence of the women’s movement will be the ones to ensure that the rally remains loyal to its theme” (Pazartesi, 1997a, p. 3) – a warning for feminists to prevent mixed-gender organizations from drifting away from a focus on women’s issues as occurred at the 1989 Women’s Congress (see Section 2.3).

Furious debates dominated preliminary meetings to decide on the rally theme and format. Many feminists perceived the Kurdish insistence on the theme of peace and “their political strategy to legitimize the peace demand using this rally” as an imposition: “Our agenda was a wider one; peace was just one topic, as women had a whole lot of other problems” (Nur). The larger conflict between HADEP women and feminists, however, was over the issue of male participation.¹⁸⁰ In the face of Kurdish men being beaten by police, Kurdish women thought they could not tell men not to come, arguing that “this would sound like the prohibitive Turkish police.” The question now was how to proceed with these two ethically incommensurable demands: feminists’ desire for a women-only space and Kurdish women’s desire for solidarity with male community members against racist state violence. A practical resolution was reached thanks to the intermediation of a few women who had insight into both worlds: let the men walk in support at the back of the cortege. Turkish Nil, a member of the intermediating group, points at the unfairness of equalizing a racialized people’s mass movement that was rural and working-class in character with the middle-class, urban, and relatively uniform Turkish groups.¹⁸¹

It is not like me telling my son or husband not to come to my rally. These women were going to attend such a big woman-to-woman demonstration for the first time. And they are the grassroots folks, not organized women. The Kurdish friend says she will pick them up from the neighborhoods by bus. Of course, their spouses were also going to want to come. You have to understand that reality a bit, too. Moreover, she says, ‘I cannot tell them ‘no’ in front of the police. I cannot throw them into the arms

of the police.’ And she is right, because if you say ‘no,’ what will happen? You will argue with him. And when he is not convinced, the police will intervene (Nil).

The debates were harsh, but everybody wanted a joint rally. In the long run, Turkish feminists remember 1997 as a positive milestone. The March 8 platform of that year, for example, led to the creation of a small, antimilitarist, feminist platform of a few Turkish (GEK, FKÇ, etc.) and Kurdish (*Roza*,¹⁸² *Jujin*, *Jin û Jiyan*) feminist groups called the Independent Women’s Initiative (BKI).¹⁸³ Its short-term legacy into 1998, however, was unsavory. The male presence around HADEP and the Confederation of Public Employees’ Union (KESK) corteges was extremely upsetting for feminists that compounded the weak discursive connections made between the topics of “women” and “peace.” To them, it seemed like the rally was simply raising general political demands (Pazartesi, 1997b). The talk by the Kurdish mother of a disappeared person was not considered “women’s talk.” They argued that under such circumstances, the independent feminist voice was prone to being suppressed and distorted.

When 1998 arrived, a new intersectional dilemma emerged during the preparations: a debate about whether men would be permitted to attend the rally became entangled with questions about whether to stand with Kurds against the war. Already irritated by the interference with their speeches and slogans the previous year, women from HADEP perceived this debate as another imposition and formed a separate rally platform. For feminists, however, it was HADEP that was guilty of making impositions. Women were divided into three: first, there were women from HADEP, *Roza*, and some pro-Kurdish socialist parties; second, there were the independent women’s organizations, feminists, DİSK (Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions), DBP, and mostly ÖDP members from the *Dev Yol* tradition who were unwilling to rally with men; and third, a group that was mostly from the *Kurtuluş* tradition in the ÖDP that identified as both feminist and pro-Kurdish. The second group proceeded to apply for official permission for a rally in Istanbul which was scheduled for the same date and time as HADEP’s. The third group, which agreed to neither exclude the Kurds nor include men, opted out to attend a rally in Amed (in Kurdistan).¹⁸⁴ The governor’s office issued a permit only for the second group’s rally. To protest this, Kurdish women decided to march on Taksim Square,¹⁸⁵ prompting a police attack of characteristic brutality. Mainstream newspapers showed women joyously dancing and chanting at the Turkish rally while publishing war-like scenes from the Kurdish one with headlines like “Provocateurs in Taksim.” *Pazartesi* magazine gave coverage to post-rally reflections from multiple perspectives. Some criticized the feminist perspective that predominated in the second group, arguing that Kurdish women should be granted positive discrimination given their position at the intersection of the anti-racist and anti-patriarchal struggles:

First of all, when we and women from HADEP apply for two rallies for the same day, either they would not get the permission, or even if they did, their rally would be prone to provocation. Second, when the main subjects and victims of the war are speaking at one rally, we would be talking at another rally about women’s experience of war in their absence. If we are for positive discrimination

for women laborers versus men laborers, the same should apply to the case of Kurdish and Turkish women, I think. Notwithstanding that male domination oppresses all women, we have to also understand the importance Kurdish women impart to their national identity. Therefore, I don't find it right to think like, 'We have an agenda, too, we cannot give up on that; that would harm our independence' (Koçali, 1998, p. 8).

The radical-feminist Koç's response below made it clear that her feminism was the kind that imagined an unmarked womanhood disentangled from race and class and conflated the priorities of that specific condition (whiteness) with "women's priorities." For her, the ethno-racial priorities of women were an imposition from without rather than intrinsic to womanhood. Koç thought that their March 8 rally

was comprised of women who both take sides in the war and concede that women are oppressed everywhere just because they are women. Everybody should be able to celebrate the same day with whatever political priority and form they wish. However, it is good to note on this point that impositions coming from mixed-gender organizations will often encourage the relinquishing of women's priorities (Koç, 1998, p. 7).

Saddened by the police brutality that transpired at the HADEP rally, the second group admitted in a post-evaluation meeting that scheduling both events at the same time was a serious mistake. However, many continued to assert that, on March 8, feminism outweighed any other consideration: "Why didn't they follow our call but organize a separate demo? Just as the Kurdish movement invites us to Newroz celebrations, or the labor movement to Labor Day and we follow, on March 8, feminists invite, and others should follow. Why don't we have such consensus?" (Defne).

We have nothing to self-criticize because it is perfectly legitimate for us to make a woman-only rally on March 8. HADEP will never be my reference point for March 8. Political parties that did not see the *women's call* as legitimate for Women's Day are the ones responsible for what happened. We have always insisted on doing it together. But we also said that we won't compromise on two things: one, you have to see our call as legitimate, and two, we will not march with men (Defne, italics mine).

March 8 is a day about gender struggle. It is not a day for other issues. We do not always have to tie the gender struggle to the political agenda of the country. It is tied to peace because peace concerns women. It is tied to militarism, etc. But then everything concerns women. It has to stop somewhere (Dilek).

It was impossible to combine these rallies. Their women's politics was not one that feminists could reconcile with. Allowing male participation would be too backward for us. We are not going to sideline feminism just to be able to ally with the KWM. But we could have avoided scheduling it at the same time. That would be one way of acknowledging their oppression as Kurds. One might not find them feminist, but it was for us to take this step back then (Beyza).

While it was a *specific* privileged class and race that could march without men that Kurdish women disagreed with, it was portrayed as if "women per se" were denied the legitimacy to lead. It is one thing to say, "We will not march with those that don't comply with *our* [middle class, secular, Turkish] norms," but another to say, "Why not settle for a consensus based on our definition of feminism." This unidimensional (single-axis) strand of second-wave feminism implies superiority over the intersectional reading of the KWM¹⁸⁶ by asserting Turkish feminists as representing the "women." As Kurdish women's autonomy developed in parallel with their "Separation Theory," men stopped joining the rallies. But as Kurdish Zerrin says, "feminists would still get upset with everything, such as the use of our

national colors of yellow, red, green, or the slogans our people chant for Apo [Öcalan].” She recalls many rallies were jeopardized over the issue of a Kurdish address to the crowd: “They would argue either that it is legally forbidden, or if they let us, others would also want to do it. We would challenge that this male mentality conforms with the mind of the assimilationist state.”¹⁸⁷ The KWM had its own internal language; the TFM had another. Neither side was fully aware of the premises and imperatives of each other’s lifeworlds when these clashes were occurring.

3.3 The way forward

When Öcalan was arrested in 1999, “the mistrust between the KWM and the TWM deepened,” says the Turkish Selma. The government banned all public demonstrations that year. In 2000, however, labor confederation KESK called all women to Ankara for the World March of Women, once again creating an opportunity to join hands on the themes of poverty, war, and male violence.¹⁸⁸ The joint peace actions that intensified during the 1999–2004 ceasefire (as summarised in Section 8.2), as well as the movement that opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq, were largely suspended as both sides looked increasingly inward until the next ceasefire in 2009. Turkish-Kurdish encounters during 1999–2004 mainly took place at ÖDP/HADEP/KESK/İHD demonstrations, March 8 or women’s peace rallies;¹⁸⁹ *Pazartesi* journalism, *Amargi* campaigns (see Section 8.2) and the General Assembly of Women’s Shelters.¹⁹⁰

One Turkish ally in the HADEP Ankara women’s commission in the mid-1990s recalls:

Feminists had some maxims, like body politics, that it is rape, too, when your husband forces you to have sex. This caused a serious pushback in HADEP. Executives of the time said, ‘Are you going to enter our bedrooms as well?’ It was very difficult. I wasn’t a feminist back then; I found out things myself and they sounded so right. Then I tried to convey them as best as I could, but my interlocutors were just so not ready for that. It was difficult even for myself to understand. When I first heard that maxim on rape, for example, I was appalled; feminism was so mold-breaking for me. But that is also why I was so impressed (Cavidan).

With reference to this body-politics feminism that impressed Cavidan, she would not count the 1990s as part of Kurdish women’s history, in contrast to most KWM activists. The life-stories of women in HADEP were invisible to the “outsiders,” so growing gender consciousness in HADEP would sometimes be linked to Turkish feminist influence rather than the Kurdish resistance culture. Dilan’s take on this self-centring tendency of the hegemonic nation was to recentre her own anticolonial experience:

We did not have much relation with feminists in the west [of Turkey] back then. They did not understand the Kurdish question or express it publicly. A wall existed between us: We were here; they were there. Of course, in the process of discovery, you get to be affected by an American feminist, as well as an Egyptian or Turkish one. But it was primarily our own dynamics through which we gained awareness, through our lived problems and through the clashes with our *hevals*. By experimenting, by trial and error, we learned. We cannot say there was an influential *ecole* and we come from that tradition. But you certainly are impressed with valued personalities. You research the women in other movements, and it inspires you: Palestinian, Algerian, Eritrean, Mozambican, Vietnamese... (Dilan).

The clashes in these initial solidarity attempts, on top of the disappointing experiment in the ÖDP, seem to have had a lasting impact on shaping the TFM's alliance politics for the following decade (detailed in Chapter 8). These early efforts that helped Turkish feminists open up to women outside their circles, I suggest, simultaneously engendered a more defensive reaction, that is, "to draw a concrete demarcation between the feminist and women's movements" (Osmanağaoğlu, 2011). Istanbul feminists' existing worry about the feminist political decline became more exacerbated during their time in the ÖDP. They felt isolated and weakened and that they had wasted the energy needed for independent efforts like *Pazartesi*.¹⁹¹ When they lost the transformative connection with the rest of the party, they concluded that mixed-gender organization was not the right place for the feminism they imagined – if not harmful. Their first round of alienation in the 1980s, which was discussed in the previous chapter, morphed into a seemingly conclusive loss of faith.¹⁹² They eventually split from the ÖDP to revive a women-only independent political ground that is separate from both mixed-gender agendas and the women's rights movements.

It seems demarcating feminism from the women's movement as part of larger groups (socialist, Kurdish, Muslim, liberal, Kemalist, etc.) with sharper lines was a legacy of the 1980s and 1990s; feminist boundaries and priorities were more conclusively defined and less open to debate after the mid-2000s. Alongside the death of meta-narratives and the "fetishization of the idea that the political subject solely can speak for itself" (Göral, 2007, p. 57), feminists asked, "Who are we speaking for?" The critique of the leftist politics of representation swayed towards the liberal position of "we can only represent ourselves." Centring one's own experience, the TFM was unable to relate to Kurdish women's decolonial intersectional plight. Nevertheless, some ethnocultural issues that used to be excluded from feminist activism, like peace, were selectively included as a result of dialogue. In a socialist-feminist's words: "In the 2000s, feminism began to establish connections with identity politics" (Selma). This idea that presented feminism as a broad-base systemic struggle in contrast to Kurdish women's "parochial" identity politics emerged around this time (explained further in Chapter 4).

In the lively dynamic of a revolutionary movement, Kurdish women managed to tweak their strategies after each crisis in a way that averted their marginalization. Party engagement proved quite the opposite for them; it was painful but largely empowering. The party was used as an effective instrument to engender a women's movement from within a people's movement that preserved and transcended the party rather than abandoning it. Would the "women's coordination" model of the ÖDP have also evolved in time to accommodate multiple women's liberation perspectives if the Left's "unity project" hadn't collapsed? Was it just a matter of time? Or was pluri-cultural decolonial organizing innately beyond the Turkish frame of mind?

Part 2 · Theoretical Encounters

Chapter 4 · Race, Sex, Nation, and Feminism

Their earlier *egemen, üstün sınıf* [hegemon, superior class] approach is largely broken. ‘Kurdish women are backward, uneducated,’ basically their attitude was like that; it was very similar to how the system saw us. Unconsciously perhaps, they ostracized us. That is how we felt. In the face of this, the Kurdish women’s movement strengthened and became a leading struggle dynamic of this region. Because of the transformative power we attained, we could trigger *kavrama* [comprehension] among Turkish women. We could explain the causes and effects of our actions better and prove them in practice (Bircan).

DÖKH’s (Democratic Free Women’s Movement¹⁹³) development as an effective umbrella organization in the late 2000s across Kurdistan greatly changed the power dynamics between Kurdish and Turkish activists. Until then, Kurdish women’s organizational and ideological ties with KÖH (Kurdistan Freedom Movement) were still hegemonically interpreted as a sign of the absence of a feminist consciousness that posed a barrier to instituting relations with the KWM (Kurdish Women’s Movement). “There is the Kurdish struggle, and there are women in it. Yes, women exist, but they are *ulusalcı* (nationalist). They would never think of us as a profound women’s liberation struggle,” Kurdish activist Neslihan told me. Almost all academic and activist TFM (Turkish Feminist Movement) writings of the time portrayed the Kurdish women’s struggle as an example of an oppressed people’s “identity”¹⁹⁴ or “nationalist” politics – two descriptions that had negative connotations in their mind. But DÖKH’s greater focus on self-affirmation, self-rule, and agency, as well as its more vocal declaration of the gains, demands, and values of resistance, began to disturb the Turkish, and some Kurdish, discourses centred selectively on Kurdish victimhood, suffering, and loss. In parallel to DÖKH realizing some “feminist principles” too apparent to ignore (see Section 3.1.2), the Turkish strategies to set the proximity and distance between the two movements underwent a change. Now, the formulation was that Kurdish women were waging a *feminizan* (feminist-like) struggle – that is they were “feminist but not quite,” along the lines of Bhabha’s “white but not quite.”

This chapter will examine what these distancing tropes did to the interlocking anticolonial “truth” (*hakikat*) and politics of Kurdish activists as the former changed over time. To do this, first I will look at representations of the KWM in Turkish/Turkified feminist scholarship and activism, before tracing the descent of cultural community and the nation into the quotidian of two Kurdish women. Next, I will see how this descent has been reflected in Kurdish political voice, and ultimately, how the discrepancy between Turkish representations and the Kurdish truth racializes the contestations around claims to feminism in Turkey.

4.1 Turkish representation of the colonized Kurdish Other

Thanks to the hard-won struggle of socialist, revolutionary, radical, egalitarian, in short, all women who identify as feminist in Turkey, we have evolved into a phase today where everybody can talk about patriarchy, the patriarchal system, and male domination with peace of mind. Nonetheless, let me share my feeling that the disavowal [of patriarchy] is something that may resurrect any moment and feminism can only survive with a detective-like spirit and obsession. Because there will always be someone to confront you with ‘You talk about women, but what about the villagers? Or Kurds? Or Blacks? Or the economic crisis in the world?’ It is possible that a topic critical to the political regime in Turkey or the future of the world may not be critical for feminism in Turkey (Handan Koç, quoted in Düzkan & Koç, 2012, p. 26) (a radical feminist).

The Kurdish women’s movement today is founded equally on women’s liberation and national liberation struggles. This is where we differ substantially. Our foundation is one: the struggle against patriarchy, which manifests itself as capitalist patriarchy today. They incorporate feminism into their politics but never detach themselves from a holistic freedom perspective, i.e., the ‘democratic autonomy’ project of the Kurdish movement. Öcalan’s views are holistic, similar to Lenin’s. This is not the case for us. We have only one ideology, not even socialism. Socialism matters to us only as a background (Nur, a socialist-feminist).

In the early 2000s, it was widely discussed that the feminist and women’s struggles should be waged independent of national identity because it was necessary to avoid dividing power in order to unite our demands around one axis. But in this period, the Kurdish women’s movement was growing in a very different form than what we knew. They were not really growing in terms of women’s demands, to be realistic. They were growing in terms of demands related to the Kurdish question. But because they operated under war conditions, you did not have a chance to say, ‘You have to protest the violence of men at home as much as that of the police/soldier.’ The widespread criticism among the feminist and women’s communities in [Turkey’s] west was that Kurdish women only talked about the male violence of the state, and that ... this was not women’s politics. Most women from the ÖDP [see Section 3.2.1] interpreted Kurdish women’s emphasis on the Kurdish oppression as ‘flocking after men.’ The feminist movement did a bit better in recognizing the unique conditions of Kurdish women. But in the final analysis, I agree that their fundamental motive was national. And it was a patronizing attitude to ask them to bring feminism to their agenda (Kerime, a socialist-feminist).

These voices that define feminism as detached from the “national” are quite common within the TFM. The question for members of the TFM is how to defend their gender-primacy feminism against the epistemological Other Kurdish feminists who refuse to see gender as separate from race. To do this, they generally resort to feminist analyses that originate from within the dominant nations of Western or non-Western countries to criticize the nationalisms that have founded those nation-states. This, intended or not, helps misconstrue KÖH as a nationalist system, as can be observed in Açıık’s (2013, p. 120) work, that also portrays Kurdish women as victims of war, as patriotic mothers who are passive conveyors or producers of national culture, or heroic freedom fighters who can emancipate themselves only inasmuch as the liberation of the nation benefits from their emancipation. “These discourses are based on identity politics and lead inevitably to the reproduction and construction of ideal types of Kurdish women and the creation of a homogenous culture common to national building processes” (ibid., p. 124). Yalçın-Heckmann and Gelder (2000) similarly argue that Kurdish women realize themselves as actors only by succumbing to being ethnic symbols, biological reproducers, culture preservers, or modernizing participants of the Kurdish nation. This specific brand of analysis predominant in Turkey presents

feminist and national claims in antithetical terms, dismissing the latter as mere “identity” or “nationalist” politics. It postulates that even if nationalism may temporarily open up space for limited emancipation, it ultimately institutes patriarchal control over women for the needs and welfare of the national family and represents them as symbols of the nation.¹⁹⁵

Influenced by the earlier work of scholars like (Chatterjee, 1989, 1990; Enloe, 2001; Jayawardena, 1986; McClintock, 1993; Mojab, 2001; Najmabadi, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 1997; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989), feminist scholars of the TFM tradition initially adopted this framework to interpret the workings of the national gender regime in the lives of women of the dominating nation in Turkey; namely, to criticize the Kemalist discourse that imagined Turkish/Turkified women as educated, responsible, altruistic mothers and/or wives whose job was to raise good citizens. When the same framework was applied to understand the case of colonized Kurdish women, however, the scholarship’s complete silence around the racial and internally colonial construction of the Kemalist gender regime, I argue, paved the way for epistemic racism, that is, assimilation of KWM into dominant feminist schemes. The analytical tools and concepts to engage with the ethnonational difference of the Other and the unmarked specifics of one’s own cultural construction were, ultimately, missing in this tradition. And similar to what Kemalism did, this has ironically helped mask the Turkish and Kurdish women’s asymmetrical positions in the colonial order along with their substantially different imaginations of the nation – exclusionist versus radical pluralist and colonial versus decolonial.

On this, I want to focus on a book of this genre: *Mothers, Comrades, Goddesses: Women and Women’s Identity Formation in the Kurdish Movement*. This work, which Çağlayan published in 2007 based on her doctoral thesis, is significant because it is the first book-length project widely cited in Turkish academy that has shed light on Kurdish women’s herstory of becoming political subjects. Çağlayan herself is a feminist researcher, who also held important executive-level party positions during the HADEP/DEHAP period, including in the women’s branch. As a first of its kind, *Mothers, Comrades, Goddesses* has been celebrated in allied feminist circles. It employs a “familiar” feminist critique of nationalism that resonates with many. Some of the Kurdish participants, however, described its language as alienating; they did not think it truly reflects their mindset and experience, with some declaring it offensive or one-sided. I believe that this insightful and courageous work, which seeks to directly engage with some primary sources produced by Öcalan (a rare endeavour in Turkish publications), reveals valuable empirical facts and knowledge through detailed surveys, observations, interviews, and archival work. Nevertheless, it also suffers from the limitations of the Western feminist analytical framework described in the preceding paragraphs in making sense of the Kurdish material. After all, it is a difficult task to do justice to the interlocking Kurdish decolonial context with such analytical tools that are prone

to reproducing colonial binaries that fragment reality for the purpose of making it comprehensible to Turkish readers while unrecognizable to its own subjects.

Çağlayan (2007) argues that while the indirect influence of the political atmosphere played a more central role in Kurdish women's politicization before the 1980s, the motivation following the 1980 coup for most women stemmed from the "emotional impact" of the arrest, death, or militancy of loved ones or family members (ibid., pp. 172–176). For younger women, she continues, the motivation to distance themselves from their family or the community and free themselves from the gendered social restrictions of everyday life became more influential than the incentive to join an armed rebellion against the system (ibid., pp. 177–178). In such depictions of Kurdish women's herstory, which I also observed in my interviews, we see a dichotomous conception of the "emotional" versus the "cognitive/intellectual" in which the specifics of the cognitive and political transformation achieved through emotional experience is rendered invisible. The family member-mediated politicization of Kurdish women associated with the emotional becomes a lesser form of politicization in contradistinction to the Turkish feminist (or socialist) one which is, perhaps unconsciously, considered more a cognitive choice or an intellectual endeavour. The common feminist sensitivity that values the knowledge produced by women's own experience disappears in the case of the cultural Other, since familial and tribal bonds come to be coded as mere instruments of patriarchy, implying cultural backwardness and feudalism and, accordingly, ruling out the possibility of gender empowerment.¹⁹⁶ This orientalist binary further helps separate gender-based motivations from ethnonational and political catalysts. As such, the interlocking stories of Rojda and Perihan examined in the next section cannot be duly analyzed within this framework. Their testimonies will teach us that the articulation of sexual subjugation is inseparable from that of colonial subjugation; in other words, sexualization comes into existence through racialization.

Let me continue tracing what this dualism does to the representation of the KWM. Çağlayan suggests that Öcalan theorized women as "*düşüren* [degrading] objects" in the 1980s, "subjects and comrades" in the 1990s, and "goddesses" in the 2000s. She explains this discursive change from "slaves to be liberated" to "women liberators," or from negative to positive images, with the more prominent role of women guerillas and popular uprisings that, in turn, made "the discourse which reduced women to objects to be liberated" factually unfeasible (ibid., p. 101).

For her, the PKK championed the image of the *düşüren*, seducing, deceiving woman that detracted men from the national struggle in the 1980s as part of a discourse to encourage men to join the movement rather than enter the immobilizing institution of marriage and traditional family relations. Those were the years when the movement was speaking specifically to men in the PKK and society (ibid., p. 108), and *eski erkeklik* (former manhood) was the biggest barrier to replacing the collaborationist "traditional family" with the new "national family" (ibid., p. 105). After 1992, however, the movement also began to

speak to women “as the impact of their participation was above and beyond expected.” As an entry to the section, “*Rediscovery of ‘women’s question’ with regards to mobilization strategies: ‘liberating’ women as an instrumental approach,*” (ibid., pp. 98–101), Çağlayan argues that, “besides the ‘democratic revolution’ principle of the movement ideology,” what played an effective role in the development of the critique of patriarchy was “essentially the mobilization strategy that entailed women being put into action” (ibid., p. 97). Because of the multi-layered oppression experienced, women expressed more interest and proved easier to mobilize for a “people’s war strategy” than men, meaning they became the theoretical and practical focus of the movement (ibid., p. 99). At the same time, the party also saw that women were more effective in developing public relations and molding public opinion. As a result, the image of women as “deceiving bait” who distracted men from the struggle had to move towards the image of “reliable, brave” women who freed society while freeing themselves from feudal bonds. That is how, Çağlayan asserts, modern Kurdish identity came to be redefined from within a perspective that delegated an active constitutive mission to women as well. Ultimately, she concludes that Chatterjee is right: In nationalist discourse, women do not speak but are spoken about; they are treated as an instrument or a ground for mobilization. “The question whether this contributed to women’s real liberation or not aside,” she emphasizes, “Kurdish women surely accomplished what was expected of them in terms of mobilization” (ibid., p. 100). Here, women’s intersectional agency is rendered subordinate to an imagined relation of instrumentalization, which is suggested as the primary relation governing the movement’s universe.

Furthermore, the Kurdish movement’s discourse that connects society’s liberation to women’s liberation, Çağlayan argues, puts the burden of achieving this primarily on women (ibid., p. 161–62), assigning her burdensome obligations, such as the duty “to liberate society in order to get out of her hole” (ibid., p. 140). For many Turkish feminists, the problem with “negative images” that highlight women’s weaknesses is that they sound essentializing and reproduce the patriarchal discourse by blaming the victim. And with “positive images,” they question whether the role of liberator is just another patriarchal burden foisted on women by sapping their energy for self-transformation. My analysis of the movement’s texts and the interviews I conducted (as discussed in previous chapters), on the other hand, suggests a different story.

We focused mostly on women as they are the oppressed gender. But men need to be liberated, too, at least as much as women. You know that our deconstructive analyses also include deconstruction of manhood to a considerable degree; we deconstruct the male typology as the other pole of the problem as much as we do the female typology. Furthermore, as a result of these analyses, we assert that due to the greater share of men compared to women in the nation’s enslavement and societal degradation, they should be seen as more guilty and held accountable. Women are disempowered and rendered dysfunctional to the extent that they may not sense responsibility. They are almost in a position of full defeat and surrender. Thus, we will leave them aside when enslavement is in question. It is the men who dominate, engage in relations with colonial institutions, and are thereby linked more to our enslavement. They establish the relations, become informants, and sell themselves for nothing – for

a salary. [Men] are the ones who keep an eye out for possible developments first and run to the colonialist parties or the colonialist army. Is that a lie? (Öcalan, 1993, pp. 200–01).

Öcalan explains the PKK's earlier focus on negative images here, as early as 1993, with reference to women being the oppressed gender. The Party tried to bring their oppression and exploitation to the revolutionary agenda through a preliminary process in which women first questioned themselves and the system. Negative images were part of a pedagogical strategy whose goal was to arrive at self-affirmative positive agency through an analysis of complicity and negative agency, as opposed to the passive victimhood of women. Cultivating the free self meant not leaving it to the mercy of men: "The greatest good that a man can do to you is to transform himself. You will organize your own work and execute yourself. Man will also support you if he has the power" (Öcalan, quoted in Jêhat, 2013). Although the balance in the use of positive or negative images changed in time, the underlying dialectical thinking of the 1980s premised on the interplay of contrasting images as a tool to deconstruct and work through the contradictions of colonial subject formation has continued to the present.

Furthermore, this focus on women did not mean that the deconstruction of manhood or the patriarchal system was missing at that earlier stage, as implied by Çağlayan. The images of negative women analyzed were contextualized and understood as outcomes of the male-dominated feudal and colonial processes that forced women into adopting survival strategies against their own will and interests as defined by and for women. They were not innate ahistorical qualities: "The speechlessness and weakness of women is not autogenous. It is a stage arrived at via development within an existing system of relations," Öcalan asserts (1993, p. 52). In this endeavour, the negative images of womanhood resulting from patriarchal feminization are generally analyzed in counter relation to the negative images of manhood. Öcalan categorizes men as either rushing to become dominating *ağas* (feudal chieftains) or slaves to other men (Öcalan, 1998b, p. 7). As men dominated each other primarily by using women, establishing *hevallik* (companionship) with women was essential to cultivating *hevallik* among men. Similar to men who needed to elude aggressive, offensive, authoritarian qualities, women needed to elude the qualities which looked "even worse, more bottomless, and structural but actually are [historically] acquired and marked by the class-based society" (Öcalan, 1993, p. 41).

"Insomuch as she is the gender most negatively affected by the current state of affairs, when labored over and organized, she may, thanks to her advanced potential, become the foundation (*zemin*)¹⁹⁷ to rely on the most in the national liberation struggle" (ibid., p. 52). This quote from Öcalan's Women's Day speech in 1987 suggests that the images of "degrading" or "liberator" women were ideal types that always already existed to tackle the problem of women's becoming revolutionary subjects, which, as in the case of the "working class" for Marxism, could only occur if women engaged in the political labor of rearranging their desires and actions in pursuit of their own needs and interests. Therefore, the change in PKK discourse in the late 1990s indicates not an "instrumental and pragmatist" shift in strategy to

mobilize more women, but a tactical shift in responding to women's changing degree of realized potential in the dynamic process of an evolving ideology. When women became sufficiently organized and institutionalized in the 1990s, it came time to oblige male *hevals* to question their manhood. As Kurdish woman scholar Alp (2015, p. 94) argues, "this process continued uninterrupted throughout PKK history" from the initial stages when mainly the women questioned themselves and the system to the later stages when men also questioned themselves and their manhood (as discussed in Section 3.1.1.2).

Informed by Çağlayan's work, Al-Ali and Taş (2018)¹⁹⁸ try to move away from a one-sided emphasis on the negative impacts of nationalism that fail to analyze women's agency. But while aiming to shift "the focus from Öcalan's writings to the experiences and contributions of Kurdish women activists," the pair's research fails to go beyond complicating the Western white genre above, as their reading also retains the dualist conception of nation and gender, and lack of colonial-racial analysis. The authors repeatedly use nationalism (that is, essentialist claims to ethnic and cultural belonging and supremacy) as a substitute for nationhood and national liberation (a pluralistic and anti-essentialist phenomenon through which Kurds demand status). With this conflation, they suggest Kurdish women have managed to fight against patriarchy in spite of their movement: "Despite their commitment to the Kurdish nationalist cause, Kurdish women developed a sophisticated and nuanced critique of the patriarchal nature of the nationalist movement as well as the nationalist character of the Turkish feminist movement" (ibid., p. 469). Al-Ali and Taş define the positive impact of what they call "Kurdish nationalism" as that it facilitated a reactive "Kurdish feminist nationalism" that, by developing a critique of nationalism, has managed to transform itself into "Kurdish transnational feminism" (ibid., p. 471).¹⁹⁹

My counter-argument is that the critique of patriarchy that impresses Al-Ali and Taş comes from the mixed-gender, decolonial, intersectional practice of KÖH that is predicated on an anti-nationalist, non-state paradigm that emerged through a longstanding, everyday engagement with the issue of women's subjugation (as examined in Chapters 2 and 3). Omitting this simultaneity and interconnectedness, the authors read some Kurdish women activists' criticism of nationalism as if it contradicts the comments of other activists that "seem to hold on to the close relationship between national liberation and women's liberation." While the former is posed as evidence of a progressive gender struggle that transcends nationalism, connecting the nation to gender shows that nationalism is "still a strong mobilizing force among Kurds" (ibid., p. 465) that feminists will need to transform. What I argue conversely is that "connecting the nation to gender" is an intrinsic, indigenous quality of Kurdish feminism embraced by Kurdish women activists in general.

The academic corpus presented above depicts the relationship between Kurdish women and their culture and community primarily as external and instrumental – even if dialectical – as if Kurdish women are constituted prior to their entry into ethnocultural relations. According to this Western-centric feminist

teleology, in the 1980s, women were rather passive recipients of the movement's call; later, they became more active and conscious participants as they started to question the patriarchal nature of the movement. In response, the movement's discourse underwent a gender-positive, anti-national change. So, Kurdish women must now desire being independent of men (this "independence" thesis further explored in Section 4.4). Implying it as a more progressive stage, Al-Ali and Tas (2018, pp. 463, 464) assert that all Kurdish activists they talked to "agreed on the need for independent women's organizations and institutions," however some were "more ambiguous in their views" and continued to argue for a close relationship between national liberation and women's liberation.²⁰⁰ This narration, I argue, cannot account for the simultaneously shaped, intermeshed agencies of individual women and the collective movement. It glosses over the community-centred logic of the freedom movement – the Kurdish anti-colonial sociality – as the enabler of critical consciousness and capacity, by use of a binarist, race, and coloniality-negligent template.²⁰¹ In my interviews, Kurdish activists used the term "autonomy" (*özerklik*) to describe and embrace their relationship with KÖH. And while supporting independent organizations of women, they did not see independence as an ideal situation or a dreamed future for themselves. The model they proposed was confederal coalitions of autonomous or independent women's groups.

4.2 Embodying an interlocking truth

A closer look at two young Kurdish women's testimonies might cast light on how gender is "raced," how race is gendered in the quotidian formation of subjectivity and how the PKK's liberating intersectional praxis works on this intimate level.

Looking back at her detention experience at the age of 17 in the mid-1990s, Rojda reflects on her ambivalences through the structuring prism of her family members' contradictory orientations. On the day she was captured, Rojda was frightened because she assumed the state would use her against her brother who was working for the movement. The first thing she thought of was rape. While she was being escorted to a police vehicle, her brother sensed her fear and found a chance to approach her and whisper: "Look, *namûs* [honor] is not about womanhood. Whatever they do to you [implying rape], don't betray your people. Only then will you have the face to walk among them." Rojda continued: "That came as a huge relief to me." I was intrigued: "Did he mean you should not be ashamed of rape?" She responded, "Yes, he was like that. The moment he realized my anxiety, he quickly wanted to comfort me. But later, I challenged him, saying, 'What kind of a man are you?' To be honest, I did not find his behavior very *normal*." "Why?" "Because I thought a man should be more bothered about his sister's honor. That is why my brothers tell me that [before I joined the movement], I used to be more male-minded than them, more in alignment with patriarchal norms and the pressures of society. That was unavoidably true, because I was with my mom most of the time, and all these pressures mostly impacted women. Even

when I knew something was not right, I was inclined to think that is how it is. Despite a deep cry inside, I would eventually come to terms with it.”

One might find the way Rojda’s brother comforted her as perfectly patriarchal, representing the same control in a different guise as part of a strategy to motivate Kurdish women to maintain their support for the national struggle.²⁰² But what would such analysis mean for Rojda when it completely overlooks that the Kurdish freedom ideology offers a solid critique of the Kurdish patriarchal family and the statist, racist, and bourgeois nationalism that accompanied Turkish modernization? Or what would it mean when it effaces the significance of a brother delinking his honor from his sister’s sexuality in a society where they are inextricably linked and recoding it as freedom from colonization? Can it explain why this would come as a “relief” to Rojda, who strongly desires to be part of a decolonial value system where men and women are held to similar criteria of *namûs* so that she is not ostracised for being raped?

Once released, the first thing Rojda’s mom asked was, “Did they do anything to you?” “I said they beat me up.” “She said, ‘Not that, did they do anything else to you?’ I realized what she was trying to hint at, and it really irritated me.” I intervened: “Why were you irritated?” “Well,” Rojda said, “I could have been killed there; 60 of us were under custody, and this is the first question my mom asks. That was what was more important to her. That was extremely disturbing for me. I was fighting for my life and look at what this woman thinks. It was very annoying. Of course, later when you think about the social circumstances she comes from, it may be understandable. [My mom’s behavior] perhaps looks strange at first, but rape can truly be the most shameful thing for a woman. You lose your dignity. Maybe she looked from a woman’s perspective, but I thought she looked from a very feudal perspective. But maybe both were intertwined.” I asked, “Maybe she wanted to show solidarity as a woman?” “No, it did not look like that. I knew she thought the life of a woman was socially finished if she experienced something like that. There was something feudal I sensed in her questioning. She was ready to shame me.” Rojda’s mother, however, is not simply a victim reproducing male feudal control:

How many times was there a police raid, my mom was braver than I. She would take a tough stance both in defending her kids and talking back. So many times she opened her chest, and said: “Okay, kill me if you will, God created me Kurdish. Here you are! That means your God is also a criminal. Shoot us if this is what you are shooting for.” I saw her defiance, keeping her head high. I would envy her in admiration and would want to be as brave as her. But I realized this only in time. Actually, we had been approaching her as the classic victim woman. Only in time did I realize that mom had a *toplum-içi* [organic/embedded] kind of revolutionary nature; a covered rebelliousness that was not turned into an open struggle like ours, but she had it. Maybe this was the kernel that shaped my path as well. She was my greatest mentor somehow. I never realized it back then. She was like a shadow that I did not turn my face towards. She was a taboo. I always saw her as the oppressed, but in time, whenever I needed to assess something, I found myself recalling examples from her. She had a covered revolutionary mission. Still, when I was being detained, she certainly did not beg because she is a proud woman, but her eyes almost begged, ‘Take anyone but her’ because I was a woman (Rojda).

Rojda’s mother is clearly an ambivalent figure who could inspire admiration for her revolutionary courage in standing up to the oppressive state yet simultaneously be an oppressed shadow and a woman

enabler of the patriarchal control over Rojda's body. Another dilemma for Rojda was the contrast between her guerilla brother, who empowered her in cultivating gender consciousness, and her *yurtsever* father, who championed traditional gender roles in his house.

My brother was martyred. When I saw his approach to women, I realized it was different, but he did not reflect it much in the family. It was like he lived in a separate world. But hanging out with him, I saw he could show it to all the other women he interacted with. One day I asked him why he never gave me the books he read on the women's issue. He said he was leaving them on the table for me to ask about (Rojda).

After her release, Rojda's father asked, "What do you want to do?" "I want to work for the movement." After a serious fight to change her mind, he finally gave up, "Then you should join the guerillas. I will not let you [struggle for the movement in the city]." "Why not? Can't women struggle in the city, too?" He replied, "They [state forces] won't let you; you will have companions up there. They will support you." But Rojda remembered once meeting a woman *heval* who visited his brother. The woman, who hailed from the Kurdish city of Sêrt, was now living in Istanbul, but had come to the Kurdish city of Wan simply for party work. "This sounded so unbelievable, free and out of the ordinary," Rojda said. "I envied her!" When Rojda insisted on working in the city, her father yelled in anger, "Are you going to be a feminist or something!" She laughed, "I had no idea what that meant, but if it was against my father, then it may be a good thing, I thought. So, I said, 'Yes, I am!' Because when police asked me if I was a socialist or not, again I would have no idea, but think that must be a good thing." Her dad then threatened to marry her off.²⁰³

I told him I wouldn't get married. He asked, "Why? Are you *Hz. Meryem* [the Virgin Mary]?" In Kurdistan back then, a woman could have only two reasons not to get married; either she was a guerilla or had some defect. There was no other option. There was some progress in society, but that progress was not that advanced. It was much later that society came to question gender roles a bit. Me, as well. Yes, perhaps I have a pioneering mission now, but being one of the people, I go this far by questioning along with them. I cannot say my progress is far ahead of society (Rojda).

This heightened sense of embeddedness within societal relations and structures, as well as an emphasis on an undetached negotiation with these relations, differs from the Turkish feminist tone, as explored more in Chapter 8, that argues for a "*köktenci, yıkıcı* (fundamentalist, disruptive)" voice (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2008a) and a "Jacobin, *tepeden inmece* (top-down)" movement (Düzkan, 2005, p. 160), "if you are a feminist, you say 'women are fooled, and we will wake them up' (ibid.). Rojda's experience of womanhood was a negotiation with a social world ordered by the colonial and feudal patriarchies and subversive spaces created by a resistance culture that grappled not only with men's, but also women's ways of perpetuating patriarchy. Her testimony gives us an idea about how the movement's values seeped into the semantic texture of a middle-class family, opening up a space to redefine concepts such as *namûs*, dignity, and a free life. The arriving discourse is internalized differentially by the family members, creating new contradictions between contesting loyalties, and

turning them into opportunity structures to be acted upon. Rojda navigated this terrain creatively. The police and her father became interlinked images in her critical inquiry, as she interpreted one through the other. By choosing the guidance of her brother, she made sense of her mother's suppressed revolutionary nature under patriarchy and identified what was best for herself to move forward.²⁰⁴

Let me now turn to Perihan who, unlike Rojda, decided to join the guerillas. Born in the Kurdish city of Dersim, she migrated to the industrial city of Bursa in western Turkey at the age of 13 following her father's death. Later, she dropped out of high school and worked at a factory for a few years before joining the guerillas. After being captured, however, she served 10 years in jail. Until the age of 7, Perihan was raised by her single father, a respected *ağa* (feudal chieftain) of their sub-tribe who was well-known for his fairness in resolving local conflicts. Under his protection and special care, she accompanied him in all community activities, meaning she was unaware of the disadvantages of being a woman until her father called her mother, who lived separately, back home to take care of her. As her privileged position continued, hostility between herself, her mom and her parents transpired:

My dad would not admire anyone so easily. For him there only existed strong characters and weak ones. He would make such sharp distinctions. He did not think my mom was strong or wise. That is why they used to live separately. Because he saw her like that, he thought he had the right to do anything to her, such as making her live in difficult circumstances and unable to benefit from any of the freedoms that I enjoyed. She was battered sometimes, or scolded and humiliated. I witnessed all of this (Perihan).

Perihan was constantly trying to grapple with the conflict of trying to defend her “distanced and cold” mother against her dad, while also concealing from him that she often beat Perihan when he was away. That is because Perihan would see her own possible future in her mother – that is, what happens when one lacks the protection of a “strong man.” At the same time, she received her father's further admiration for standing up for justice even when it was against her own interest. As such, Perihan faced the ethical dilemma of enjoying a privilege at the expense of another woman. Both the good and the bad, the pleasure and the pain came from the same father, and she wanted to resolve this contradiction. As Perihan continued with her childhood story, she mentioned that each of her four elder brothers supported different leftist groups, one of which was the PKK. I asked, “Was he the one who inspired you?”

P: No, I don't think so. It was my father's will for my brothers not to intervene in their sisters' lives, and they never did. I think it was my experience in Bursa, I was outraged there and realized that I could not escape my Kurdishness. Perhaps I wanted to mingle and live like them [Turks]. Although I was aware of my Kurdishness – my grandparents were survivors of the 1938 Dersim massacre, and I grew up with their stories – I had no intention of fighting for it. That thought only emerged in Bursa. I became furious there.²⁰⁵ We could not even enter places that our Turkish friends could. The discrimination and loneliness I felt there compelled me to think of my childhood memories of meeting PKK guerillas. Their approach always felt the best and also because they valued the human; I liked that a lot. I remember they did not treat me like a child when I first met them. They would listen to me very seriously when I talked; I liked that a lot. And [the *hevals*] always did women's specific work even back then, I remember. When I got in touch with women *hevals*, their discussions on the need of raising women's awareness affected me.

C: So, you already knew when you were a child about their take on women's issues in the late 80s?

P: Yes, I knew, because the very first guerillas I met asked me if my mom was oppressed by my dad and what kind of problems she had. This aroused my interest, in part because of the contradictions that already occupied my mind. Women were in other revolutionary groups, too, but they only talked about a general revolution, that it would be a socialist revolution and that men and women would then be equal. The PKK did not engage in such talk. The PKK said women had to organize separately and that they had to empower themselves. This talk prevailed even when women's specific organizing was nowhere yet. Due to my troubled relationship with my mom, in order to understand her, I was attracted to spending more time with women militants. This continued during my time in the guerillas as well. I wanted to understand both those women and myself (Perihan).

I was told by Kurdish activists that young women especially took a passionate interest in the mind-opening discussions like those Perihan mentioned that directly spoke to their experience. I thought this resembled the kind of excitement, joy, and curiosity Turkish feminists had when they first started the consciousness-raising groups of the 1980s. Then, I was further intrigued why this empathetic transference was missing in TFM narrations of the Kurdish experience. The guerillas provided Perihan an analytical language with which she could make sense of the interlocking contradictions of her life: the hierarchical power relations among her mother, father, and herself, as well as her father's simultaneous love and respect for her and the community but disrespect for her mother, and of the painful memories of the 1938 Dersim massacre, forced Turkification, and the everyday racism she experienced in a Turkish city.

Colonial and sexual subjugation came into existence through the concepts, predicaments, dilemmas, and sensations of one another. A raced and gendered matrix of subjugating and liberating forces of the family and the community fractured Rojda and Perihan's inner worlds, allowing them to reconfigure them from within contesting discourses and behaviors. Both women did this in dialogue with a decolonial paradigm that permitted analysis of these seemingly disparate conflicts in one interwoven framework, without having to suppress one at the expense of the other.

4.3 Defending an indivisible freedom

A veteran Turkish feminist, who once worked in the women's unit of the socialist *Kurtuluş*, began observing the feminist group *Kadın Çevresi* (Women's Circle) from a distance before beginning to read up on feminism herself. In time, she quit *Kurtuluş* because she concluded that she "was also being oppressed as a woman":

In 1985, a male friend from the central committee proposed positive discrimination for women in delegation elections. It was not a quota or anything, only that if women and men received the same number of votes, women should win. It was funny but I found this very offensive: 'What's all this about! Let's be elected deservedly; why should women need priority?' And I started reading to support my argument. That was a time when the feminist movement was emerging in Turkey with *Kadın Çevresi* and so on. The more I read, the more I realized that I was also being oppressed as a woman. I was a lone woman [her husband was in jail]. Having a husband offers both protections and throws up obstacles. When you're married, you don't encounter a whole lot of male harassment in the movement. But as a single woman, you face more of its brute male-dominated character. Reading those books, I grasped that, one, there was something called male domination, and two, I was also

experiencing its consequences. That I left home and school as a ‘good revolutionary’ and had not given birth did not change it much. Then I started to call myself a feminist. I came out in the late 1980s, and without waiting for their decision, I said, ‘I’m leaving’ (Beyza).

For a younger feminist, on the other hand, feminism was her first entry into the political field in general:

I was never part of a political group before. I was kind of apolitical and never organized. During my undergrad years, I couldn’t get along with any leftist person around me. My friends were rather the mischievous kind. I was quite like that, too, bohemian. Now I really feel sad that I spent so many years like that. What I mean to say is it was feminism that drew me into politics. Because it is directly about your own experience, feminism is amazing in that sense. I was reading a lot, then I did my masters in gender studies. It put me in touch with other political issues. Otherwise, chanting slogans or going to street demonstrations and the like were very cliché things for me. It was never something I could belong to or be part of. Shouting slogans with my left fist in the air ... I still can’t do such a thing; I never was that person. But shouting slogans and becoming political were made possible for me thanks to feminism, for it was about myself. It is a different thing to take to the streets for the working class – I cannot directly relate with that. But taking to the streets as a woman is about my own experience, I know all about that oppression, as I was raised in a patriarchal family (Esra).

The women who became feminists as they abandoned Turkish leftist groups developed a feminist consciousness outside these groups. The sensibilities, needs, and demands pertaining to the two – class and gender – realms of self-making, at best, could not accommodate each; at worst, they contradicted each other. Therefore, they moved towards a political field that prioritized gender-specific concerns “freed from the burden of class politics” (Azra). For the younger generation, which often had no political past, feminism could sometimes serve as an arena to explore other forms of oppression, albeit within certain boundaries as well (as argued in Chapter 8). In this arena, books and magazines provided an entry point into feminism, although more so among the younger generation, often graduate students studying gender. In contrast, the process by which Kurdish women became feminists was primarily a context-bound, communal, grassroots activity that was initiated by action rather than reading or theory.²⁰⁶ They found a match within their movement to their intersectional experience as women – even if it was one that was in constant need of improvement:

I never dissociate: The Kurdish identity struggle has always been simultaneously a gender struggle against male domination. Right from the beginning! When women were struggling against colonialism that enslaves women by means of male-dominated power, they were also waging a gender struggle against their male *hevals*. There is permeability between [ethnic] identity and gender, and sometimes in this permeability, [ethnic] identity can take a bit more prevalence. One reason for that is that the state targets women and society through their [ethnic] identity. This is just the visible face, though, because at the same time, it views women as a big threat. Therefore, it constantly tries to divert the more horizontal, reciprocal, and egalitarian energies of organized women to other areas by attacking their self-government and self-defence mechanisms (Newal).

The connections drawn in this quote between agency and structure, male and colonial domination, and women’s intersectional struggle against the intersectional attacks of the state are remarkable. The state assault on Kurdish identity is simultaneously perceived as an assault on women’s organized power and capacity. Rûken also identifies an overdetermined attack at the moment women join the guerillas:

You already experience the rich-poor conflict and the suffering in society. And you defy being deprived of your identity and your humanness due to being Kurdish. And life is totally restricted for you as a woman. It imposes a template: study up to a certain point and then get married to whomever your family deems suitable. But as a woman, you want to live life and want to realize yourself; you don't find approval in the present situation and want to get out of it. In this sense, Kurdish women who join the struggle are essentially doing so by realizing a woman's revolution against multi-dimensional enslavement. Consciously or not, at heart, her participation is a manifestation of a profound revolt against her existing status (Rûken).

In the Kurdish narrations, joining the movement entails building self-esteem and self-validation almost from scratch both as a Kurd and as a woman. Such feelings of absolute voicelessness, subjugation, and absence of self-worth are not central to the Turkish politicization stories. Before becoming feminists, Turkish respondents seem to have already found a sense of self-worth, privilege or entitlement based on their class or ethnonational backgrounds but were deeply – and rightfully – disappointed that they never found fulfillment on that level in activism, work, or family life as women. In the Kurdish case, the resistance to multidimensional dehumanization could not be imagined as anything other than intersectional liberation. Bircan below articulates it as *hakikat/anlam arayışı* (search for truth/meaning) – the ability to live a cultural, national, and gender-based *hakikat* and exercise determination over one's own life and future (as Rûken, too, put it in Section 3.1.2):

Rather than being a living dead person in the system, where you do not have your language, culture, political expression or anything, Kurds chose to go to the mountains because there is no point in staying stagnant in the system. When 'meaning' fails, life also fails. There was no compulsion against us; it was voluntary. People started to search for the meaning of life and found it in the mountains. I don't want to oversimplify, but, if I may say so, we went *güle oynaya* [joyfully], in a spirit of festivity, *knalar yakılarak* [applying henna to our hands] as if we were going to a wedding. The mountains are where Kurds have found, preserved, and defended their freedom throughout their history. This is how we, the youth, wanted to come to terms with our past, our culture, and truth: returning to selfhood through our own resources (Bircan).

Women like former guerilla and DÖKH activist Bircan speak as insiders of the value and moral system of their movement and as subjects who constitute and are constituted by the very movement that they are shaping. Any corruption of power in the movement gives them deep pain that has real consequences on their lives. Accordingly, they assume ethical, political, and affective responsibility for alleviating such problems, and remain compassionate and caring in their criticism and action. They can at once be sharply critical of the gender inequalities in the community, yet at the same time, appreciative of the countering indigenous mechanisms inherent within the same community. Since negotiated trust and interests, reciprocity, and accountability govern the *heval* culture (see Hakyemez, 2020), many Kurdish women perceive the Turkish evaluation that the women-KÖH relationship is one of mere antagonism – meaning it disregards the mutuality of agonistic admiration and identification – to be an unjust affront to the indivisibility of their experience and truth (*hakikat*). This Turkish feminist analysis risks silencing women who are willing to take on the liberator role for their community and declaring them to be merely the instrument of a cause that is not theirs. When Turkish feminists identify this role

as *yük*, *yükümlülük*, *zorunluluk*, *görev* (burden, obligation, incumbency, duty) (see Çağlayan, 2007, pp. 111, 140) that are imposed by patriarchy, Kurdish women become objects. This, in turn, opens the door for the Turkish outsiders – whether in the garb of a feminist, socialist, liberal, or nationalist – to advise Kurdish women an “ideal” future independent of KÖH (discussed in Sections 4.1 and 4.4).

In the peaceful courtyard of a traditional Amed house in the historic city centre, I was interviewing Kıymet just before the first meeting of a local women’s assembly. The house was one of three that was used as a women’s academy. While the women from the nearby neighborhoods were chatting, drinking tea, and eating figs from the tree that shaded the yard, Kıymet described their understanding of holism in the struggle:

A non-fragmented struggle against the colonial establishment demands an ability to effectively balance the fight on political, civilian, and armed grounds depending on the need. This movement teaches us well that the oppressor is not the man or the family alone; it is a system. You must be able to expose this system. Some women *hevals* say, ‘I don’t want to be in the system to fight against its nastiness.’ And they engage in a *kopuş* (rupture, separation). It involves a physical *kopuş*. Those women go up to the mountains and start a new system for themselves there. That system does not involve the notions of private property or obedience to exploitation and domination based on gender and sexuality. That is their choice. Then there are those of us who stay. Those who stay say that we reject the given system but at the same time live in it, so what can we do? The answer is we may expose it as much as possible and try to nullify it by creating assemblies like this one here so that women can cultivate self-rule. You see, we’ve learned that there is no life for us if there is not an integrated and holistic struggle (Kıymet).

The indivisibility of class, race, and gender truth also has a spatial dimension that focusses on simultaneity. In Kıymet’s imagination, the guerilla and civilian terrains are part of a continuous realm of resistance that offers different opportunity structures to resist the same patriarchal colonial power: one is within the system; the other is outside it. The success of the freedom movement is predicated on exposing and nullifying the system. Both civilian and armed struggles contribute to this purpose with limitations and potentials specific to their location. Understandably, then, most of the self-critical comments that DÖKH activists share express concern about the loss of effective collaboration between the two forms of resistance. They note, for instance, the risk of the civilian movement becoming “elitist” like the Turkish socialist or feminist movements, which would mean that it loses touch with the teachings of guerilla ethics that rely on building door-to-door trust and connections with people on a grassroots level. TFM narrations generally separate everyday life from the armed struggle:

But what about the family? The division of labor at home? Raising children? The real war for women begins when she gets home. The guerilla life keeps you outside of normal and everyday life. The everyday life of armed people is the war itself, and that is nothing like the everyday. The avenue women should win is the everyday life. If we cannot change it there, it doesn’t matter if we have ministries, fame, songs, or requiems written in our name: There won’t be a feminist change (Dilek).

Such analysis, posits clear boundaries between everyday life and guerilla life in Kurdistan that do not reflect the reality of the complex sociological interconnections between the two realms, including their impact on the gender conflict at home (see Gurbet in Section 2.2.2). In so doing, this dichotomous view

assigns a space of “innocence and victimhood” to the civilian sphere associated with gender, and a space of “guilt and perpetration” to the armed sphere associated with the national. Ultimately, this narration falls within the boundaries of the “hegemonic memory regime” that Kurdish scholar Çelik mentions:

It is impossible to give voice to ‘truth’ without calling things by their name, without questioning the perspectives that derive legitimacy from innocence, and innocence from victimhood, which is a form of history narration set within the boundaries of the hegemonic memory regime. We need a language which sees not the defenceless and civilian alone as the victim, but a language that may represent those who resist as well and tell us how brutally they were massacred (Çelik, 2018).

But the simplistic view of clearly demarcated civilian and armed arenas is not shared by all Turkish scholars. Göksel (2019), for instance, sees both realms as “the core constituents of revolutionary resistance.”²⁰⁷ To bridge the resistance of guerilla women fighters and civilian activism, she suggests that “women’s activism opens up a middle ground of action between ‘heroic’ and ‘ordinary’ resistance by reconciling revolutionary politics with everyday activism around gender-based violence, democracy, and human rights” (ibid., p. 1). While I agree, I want to add that if both the “future-oriented heroic” and the “present-oriented mundane” guerilla politics are not traced back to the actions of the grassroots, this framing could run the risk of reproducing the binaries of heroic versus profane and armed versus political. As much as the images of the “martyred heroic women fighters” that Göksel mentions, the systems of meaning, knowledge, and justice enacted in the communities by living guerilla women also inspire contemporary Kurdish society. Their autonomous organizing, egalitarian relations with men *hevals*, and discussions about “the free and equal co-life of genders” (*özgür eş-yaşam*) all inspire Kurdish women’s everyday strategizing. The withdrawal of guerillas from Turkish soil in 1999 and 2013 as part of unilateral PKK ceasefires saddened grassroots *yurtsever* women mainly because it deprived them of mundane interactions regarding everyday security and gender justice issues.²⁰⁸

In the interviews, my Turkish participants tended to attribute Kurdish women’s earlier participation (*katılım*) in KÖH to ethnonational and, later, gender interests.²⁰⁹ I see this non-intersectional either/or approach as congruous with the discontinuity imagined above between the civilian and the guerilla. I would say that reducing women’s attraction towards KÖH to national/ist motives masks their anticolonial, anti-patriarchal, or socialist motives, which, in turn, supports the women’s instrumentalization thesis.²¹⁰ On the other hand, explaining the phenomenon away as the “oppression of Kurdish women in the family” or the “sexual war crimes of the state” implies that women do not have anticolonial or national motivations. This formulation also resembles the developmentalist Kemalist conjecture that women join the PKK because of poverty or their desire “to escape their sad lives as ‘victims of a backward culture’” (Dirik, 2015).

In contrast, most Kurdish activists I interviewed stressed that the consciousness of Kurdishness or the desire to liberate Kurdistan, resist colonization, become a socialist revolutionary, or seek individual liberation (sometimes even for adventurist reasons) almost always meant rising against the conditions they

experienced as women. In almost all cases, male domination in the family was experienced and understood through the effects of state domination that shaped their communities.²¹¹ In guerilla Zagros's words, even when gender oppression was not in one's subjective consciousness, it was always an underlying, objective cause. The same can be said for national oppression too. The growth of KÖH presented the first-ever opportunity in Kurdistan for women to express their selfhood outside normative ethnocultural and gender roles. Indeed, the close examination of testimonies like those of Rojda and Perihan above reveals how the movement mattered to them both in gender and racial terms.

In short, the impetus for relating to KÖH was always already determined by multiple systems of domination. The objective entanglements between these systems, however, could only come to consciousness through pedagogical praxis. Thanks to KÖH's queries on how Kurdish coloniality construes gender and race (as detailed in Chapters 2 and 3), women's intersectional consciousness "in-itself" became "for-itself." This was unlike the Turkish case, in which gender was subordinated to either the national (Kemalist imagery) or class (socialist imagery) liberation in an ancillary role or privileged as separate from other liberations (feminist imagery).

4.4 Racialization of the term "feminist" in Turkey: "Feminist but not quite"

Discursive strategies to set the proximity and distance between Kurdish and Turkish movements underwent some change as DÖKH earned a positive reputation through broad organization. As a result of this change after 2010, Turkish observers gradually shifted from describing the KWM as "nationalist/identity-based" to "feminist-like" or "feminist but not quite."

Let me say it is a *feminizan* [feminist-like] struggle. It is actually a bit like the way I did feminism in my former [socialist] organization. I described myself as feminist, but there were all those roles, responsibilities, and other identities I also assumed ... I mean, in mixed-gender politics, certain things are imposed on you, even if you do not want them. Perhaps not imposed – perhaps it is a chosen relationship. Perhaps it is not okay to say both that there are feminists among them and then that they are imposed upon by Öcalan. Maybe they truly find him valuable and are happy about this intertwined way, I don't know. But at the 'Socialist Feminist Collective [SFK],' we organize independently of the state, capital, and men. I believe these are the fundamental tenets of any feminism. Even though they look independent, I think the Kurdish women's movement keeps its bonds with men. This is perhaps also related to that Leadership phenomenon that captivates all Kurds (Azra).

Obviously, I don't find DÖKH as feminist as I am. I am more feminist, but I also can see that they are more advanced than the traditional national struggles. First of all, they have internalized the women's question on a mass level and are persistent and assertive on that. They never compromise on acting in solidarity with the feminist movement. It is almost the only leading organizational entity in Turkey that cares about the feminist movement. They are close to becoming feminist, but it is difficult. I mean what they are experiencing is very difficult; it is a tough struggle. And in this tough struggle, they are as feminist as they can be (Cavidan).

DÖKH aims at autonomy and self-defence. They see themselves as part of the 'democratic autonomy' and 'democratic modernity' projects of the Kurdish movement. Actually, they define a women's liberation ideology that is new and different from ours. They see it as nurtured by feminism but goes beyond it. After all, they don't call themselves feminist, as they openly lay out its shortcomings in addition to its benefits. That is why it is not like a feminist movement. [She pauses] But I no longer

think it is okay for us to decide whether a movement is feminist or not. Five or 10 years ago, I would have easily done that. Not anymore. Life gives you lessons, and I have learned them; I think it is a discriminatory, self-centring attitude. So I am not saying anything like they are not feminist. Instead, I see and make an assessment of their situation. I understand their situation based on the struggle they are in and see it propelling the freedoms of women over there. But I think women's movements independent of national or mixed-gender political movements have a better, more open future (İpek).

İpek's self-criticism that it is patronizing to declare whether the other is feminist or not was something I repeatedly heard in my interviews. Many allies stated that they learned that this was not "okay." What I find intriguing, however, is that the narrative surrounding this self-criticism nearly always works to undo its effect, like those in the above quotes.²¹² An indirect hierarchy between own and other's feminism continues to govern the discourse. The term feminist is used to measure the KWM's distance from an ideal image of feminism. Even though DÖKH is recognized as feminist, the normative image that makes it "not quite" feminist, or not *makbul* (favorable, acceptable), is never challenged. "I cannot say they are not feminist when they say they are. What I can only say is that I will criticize your feminism. I will certainly discuss the difference with our feminism" (Nur). I observed this attitude which prioritizes one's own critical analysis over hearing the Other or benevolently excuses the "shortcomings" of the Other due to her "difficult" conditions in many Turkish-Kurdish encounters. This approach, which is sometimes called out by younger Turkish feminists as well (as the examples below and in Section 7.2.4), is driven by the urge to emphasize one's own concepts and definitions. Kurdish activists, however, perceive this attitude as an act of superiority, as it places suspicion on DÖKH, presenting it as a not-too-trustworthy sister rather than an ally from which it could learn. This policing lens also helps re-centre the TFM's norms in solidarity-building that I will return to in Chapter 8. Here, however, I wish to unpack how a Turkish feminist's discomfort and indirect claims to feminist authority materializes in intercultural contact and how this racializes the claims to feminism in Turkey.

I met Esra, a former Amargi (women's cooperative) activist who was an Istanbul Feminist Collective (İFK) volunteer at the time, in the same humble, leftist-intellectual coffeeshop in Beyoğlu, the cosmopolitan heart of Istanbul, where I interviewed most of my Turkish respondents. It is close to Taksim Square, where many feminist spaces, such as SFK, İFK, KADAV, and Mor Çatı are also located. At one point in our conversation, she said in a displeased tone, "When one of them [women from DÖKH] enters the room, it is as if a thousand women are entering." Explaining her meaning, she emphasized her fear of being overpowered and marginalized as an individual feminist and the general vulnerability of feminists vis-à-vis hierarchical organizations:

I must say it is difficult to have a discussion with Kurdish women. One thing too challenging for *us* is their '*us language*' even while talking to different Kurdish women, for this is what that political movement is like. Maybe they also have differences from one another, but in the end, they all say the same thing about how women's liberation will be. This 'seeing in the same way' is something we constantly quarrel about. And I always feel like we will never be able to come to a mutual

understanding, no matter how much we love each other and despite all these bittersweet quarrels (Esra, italics mine).

“How is their ‘us language’ different than your ‘us language’ that you just used now?” I asked.

Sure, I do believe that feminism also has an ‘us’ language and I find it essential to inhabit that ‘us;’ being a political movement is all about the ability to institute an ‘us.’ But feminism takes issue with the monotony and the uniformity involved in that ‘us.’ The emergence of the feminist movement, its historical heritage and its political values were a move away from those leftist macro movements, which define a uniform ‘us,’ towards an ‘us’ instituted along with and through the individual ‘I’ of women. For example, we don’t have *örgüt temsiliyeti* [organizational representation]. One can question all these frames, but this is how it is now. They, on the other hand, have representation and attend every meeting like that. We also have some sort of *temsiliyet* [representation], but we can say one thing today and another thing tomorrow. X can say one thing; Y can say another. You cannot see this in DÖKH. On a profound issue, such as the KESK sexual harassment case [see appendix], you meet with four people from DÖKH, yet all would talk like the same person. They have already discussed it among themselves; each knows what to tell us. But in our case, every one of us would march to a different tune (Esra).

How does Esra distance DÖKH from *makbul* (favorable) feminism? There are several appropriative superiority moves that Esra unconsciously employs to posit the ontological nature of the Other as inferior.

First, she suggests that “I and us” tension is healthier in feminist groups since each woman’s voice can be heard thanks to the absence of a hierarchical representational system. What she disregards here is that the ability to conduct politics while avoiding representational organization is only possible with certain material preconditions, including the size and uniformity of the group. In the feminist case, the group is predominantly Turkish, secular, and middle-class. The individual “I” of women do not bring in “unsettling” ethnocultural, religious, or class differences that require negotiation; in other words, individual differences are uniform enough to be heard. Second, Esra rushes to assume that the tension between the “I and us” in the Kurdish movement might be an unhealthy one, while the internal negotiation process of Kurdish women to arrive at a collective voice, which also has a contested character, is essentially invisible to her. Her assumption is that KÖH is like those Turkish “leftist macro movements that define a uniform ‘us’” that feminism always seeks to avoid. This quick slippage between the Turkish and Kurdish Left suggests that Kurdish women, consciously or not, are associated with the Turkish socialist women who, in their view, gain “unjust/hierarchical” power by allying with men, thereby jeopardizing the feminist cause.²¹³ This premise eliminates the structural differences between the Turkish and Kurdish Left (as well as the diversity on each side). Third, her desire to have access to the Other’s individual voice contradicts the appreciation of her own collective voice in encounters with male others. She admires the assertive and dissident voice of the collective self, regardless of how it sounds to outsiders, but fears it when it comes from the Other. Immersed in her own fear, Esra disregards that she might be complicit in racialized forms of domination, against which DÖKH deploys a collective voice to tackle the unequal power dynamic. Fourth, she ignores the fact that many feminist groups have failed to address their internal personal and political conflicts and have eventually disbanded themselves (as

discussed in Sections 8.1 and 8.2). If feminists can afford not to continue as an organization without risking the future of their cultural communities, this might further testify to their privileged positionality. Defending an individuality disentangled from a cultural movement or community might be the function of one's class and racial privileges. As examined in earlier chapters, tapping into institutional strength is indispensable for racialized Kurds. They cannot afford to be individualistic the way Turks can. Prioritizing an individual voice as the *sui generis* sign of anti-patriarchal resistance is possible only when patriarchal domination is conceived with reference to the experience of unmarked women.

Realizing individuality in terms of how the "social" arrives at the "self" is ontologically different in the colony. The revelation of this difference at the moment of the social encounter is often recognized as something other than itself. Some in the TFM stereotype the cause of their fear and discomfort as the Kurdish "us language."²¹⁴ This prevents them from perceiving the cultural Other's feminism as an equally enriching women's experience that multiplies women's power in society. Rather, it lists what the Other lacks: independence, individual-based representation, and a focus on body politics.²¹⁵ Kurdish women are expected to strive to become independent from their revolutionary movement like Turkish feminists did. This teleological analysis, I argue, even if unintended, plays into the orientalist Kemalist binary of "the dependent women of the (Kurdish) east" and "the independent women of the (Turkish) west." It assumes that the real and ideal feminist consciousness will eventually be realized either through independence from KÖH or increasing encounters with "the feminists" outside of KÖH. Turkish feminists do not perceive the autonomous (as distinct from independent) organizing of DÖKH as an "ideal feminist" model. A Kurdish woman is a *makbul* feminist only when she demonstrates her fight against the men of her political community – not when she allies with them against Turkish patriarchy.

Furthermore, this "independence" thesis presupposes that the process of nation-building is ongoing for Kurds, but a thing of the past for Turkish/Turkified people: "On one side are the feminists who have completed their national identity struggle, who can speak their mother tongue, as they have long exhausted those discussions, and are focused more on the women's struggle. On the other are Kurdish women who are still fighting for their right to mother tongue," according to a Turkish feminist. Here a later and supposedly more advanced stage in history is associated with a later and supposedly more advanced stage of feminism that can organize independently from any political movement and hence prioritize women's issues. Even though feminists criticize the linear progressivist understanding of history ingrained in the Kemalist modernization school, it is puzzling how this indirect form of progressivism goes unquestioned.²¹⁶ The KWM, speaking from the belly of a revolution and a non-linear historical and political paradigm sensitive to the co-existence of different spatio-temporalities, is a disruptive reminder for Turkish progressives that nation-making is never complete for anyone:

Under circumstances where expressing one's existence is a crime punished by torture, it was impossible to talk about our existence as women only. We had very difficult, long-lasting arguments with Turkish friends on this point. As Kurdish women, we can never say women's existence, or the national existence comes first. To be honest, we would also want to enjoy such easier situation *had the colonial question not been there* (Bircan, italics mine).

Bircan's phrase "had the colonial question not been there" implies that disregarding coloniality is a privilege of unmarked feminists based on which they can sustain an illusion of gender exclusivity or a decontextualized autonomous woman subject. The ability to imagine oneself as disentangled from the ongoing nation-making processes can only be enjoyed by those whose colonial constitution and complicity in other women's oppression are invisible to them due to racial privilege.

The relatively more nuanced contemporary analyses thus still play into the earlier "external relations" thesis that supposes that detachment from the racial and national is possible.

4.4.1 "I am a feminist, and I am not"

These distancing strategies have a profound effect on whether and how DÖKH members identify as feminists. While Turkish feminists are at ease with interpreting Kurdish feminism from within their own values, priorities, and interests, the matter is less straightforward for Kurdish women. They are compelled to adopt ambivalent and shifting counter-strategies to claim or reject feminism at the site of asymmetrical racial relations. Describing themselves as "Democratic Free Women's Movement (DÖKH)" as opposed to "Kurdish Women's Movement" or "Feminist Liberation Movement," demonstrates one such strategy. This name counters two things at once: the TFM tendency to bypass Kurdish claims to the universal through the former's conception of a "particular" Kurdish feminism, as well as the risk that Kurds could be assimilated into a feminism that they know to be Turkish. Turkish feminists describe themselves as feminists because such an identity foregrounds a non-compromising, radical, and disruptive voice against male-domination. Activists in Kurdistan, on the other hand, are hesitant to directly identify as feminists because they think this may occlude their substantive critique of existing feminisms in Turkey. Losing that distinction might diminish the power of their radical, decolonial voice. Furthermore, it might result in the loss of a more flexible intersectional discourse that appeals to a diverse spectrum of women in the movement's social base. Activists, accordingly, are open to identifying as feminist on a personal or occasionally movement level, provided that they enjoy a space to explain their difference from those traditions that have conventionally laid claim to the title in Turkey:

We never identified with any feminist politics; we were grounded in the 'women's liberation ideology' of the Freedom Movement. This perspective does not disown feminism, but gives it its due and acknowledges its importance, while deeming it insufficient for the freedom of women in the Middle East. It also thinks it is a strand of thought that needs further development. So, our [ideology] does not deny feminism but thinks that it is not well-equipped to address our situation today. That is why we did not call ourselves feminist, as there is this general perception that feminists are more into gender-exclusive politics and do not take an interest in the general context or general women's politics. What specifically comes to mind in this respect is Turkish feminists (Zerrin).

Most often people ask about our relationship to feminism. We essentially are a feminist movement. The only reason why we do not directly call ourselves feminist is that the existing feminist stances in Turkey do not aim to transcend the lifestyle and relations of capitalist modernity. They are stuck in urban capitalist individualism. We criticize this aspect. However, we do not mean to say that all feminist movements are like that because, at the same time, we believe the feminist movement holds the greatest potential to question and dismantle capitalist modernity (Rûken).

The Kurdish Women's Movement does not perceive itself as feminist alone; it finds it insufficient compared to what 'women's liberation ideology' offers. For example, this ideology talks about breaking with capitalist modernity towards instituting democratic modernity. This is very important. This goes beyond the feminist struggle. It is a truly revolutionary approach that identifies manhood with the system and proposes a simultaneous struggle against both. Man means the state. And what we defend is a non-state system because 'stateful [*devletli*] systems' only bring hierarchy and domination. So we reject each of the state, hierarchy, and domination (Mediha).

To justify their difference, DÖKH activists point at an excess, as opposed to the lack conveyed in Turkish accounts, of ideas concerning relations with men, the nation-state and the nation and the community. Turkish feminisms, however, lack the tools to appraise this excess. Western white traditions – of the socialist, radical, multicultural, or liberal variety – are studied and respected but not deemed sufficient to liberate women in Kurdistan, the Middle East, or the world at large due to the capitalist-colonialist matrix of oppression. For that, DÖKH activists propose a liberationist reading stemming from KÖH's praxis. When *jineoloji*²¹⁷ seeks a way to “transcend” (*aşmak*) other feminist discourses in Turkey, Turkish allies consider it almost as a threat to dominate, homogenize, and replace the multiplicity of feminisms in Turkey.²¹⁸ Again, because of their privileged position, they appear to perceive any theorizing by the colonized as a will to dominate, while leaving the colonizer's gaze unquestioned (see Section 5.4 for the KWM's response and 7.1 for other feminist reactions to *jineoloji*). As a result, Kurdish women are invariably overburdened with explaining that their use of the notions “transcend” and “encapsulate” (*aşmak, kapsamak*) do not suggest the competitive connotations attributed to the male-dominant mentality but imply “nurturing and elevating one another” – “not in the meaning of exclusion, schism, dichotomy, or elimination but of intertwinement and complementarity. What is important is the relationship and exchange in between” (Jineoloji Akademisi, 2015, p. 43). Using the analogy of parallel universes, they invite women's movements to the mutually empowering interaction of epistemic universes, instead of perceiving “transcendence” or “moving ahead or beyond each other” as a “problem or a matter of [an inferiority/superiority] complex” (ibid.).

Since Turkish women dominate the feminist identity that Kurds face in the activist realm, claims on feminist territory always already embody the latent or manifest forms of colonial confrontation that govern every territorial claim in Turkey. Due to Turkish women's ability to mobilize their discourse (internal variances notwithstanding) as the feminist norm, Kurdish women's relationship to the term becomes innately ambivalent and shifting. DÖKH activists illustrate how their engagement with feminism becomes racialized in and through this contestation:

Many women are hesitant to call themselves feminists. I actually understand them. It is because there is the model of the Turkish feminist movement in front of you that you have continually been in conflict with for years. It has not approved you; it has even denied you, etc. In a way, what Turkish men have done Turkish women have also done. There is such a preconception. At this stage, relations are better. At least we can come together to discuss certain issues. You heard my talk at the conference, I said ‘feminists from Turkey and Kurdistan.’ This was a fine line for me. Now I perceive myself as a feminist. Or at least I try to be one. I am not afraid to say it anymore. We always define ourselves in relation to the nearest examples around us, but ideologies shouldn’t be defined like that. Feminism is an ideology that can attract masses of women, and I find it awkward to say ‘I am not a feminist’ based on the examples that do not satisfy us, even though I could only summon up the courage to say it recently. What I mean is I, too, was one of who lived her feminism secretly. Then Besê Hozat made a public statement and said that we are feminists, a radical kind. I said, ‘Oh thank God, you have relieved me!’ (Şükran).²¹⁹

We must not evaluate feminism on the basis of the feminist groups that exist in Turkey. Their feminism relies on a tradition of 150 years. But for me, the ‘witches’ immolated during the Middle Ages or farmer women who domesticated crops during the Neolithic were also feminists. For us, feminism has a tradition of more than 5,000 years. From this perspective, certainly we are a feminist organization too. But in relation to existing [Turkish] feminist circles, I believe we go beyond feminism. The feminist movement in Turkey is among our strongest allies. That said, here I speak from the viewpoint of traditions, because eventually, it is the traditions that shape us. The Kurdish women’s movement did not come out of the blue. There is a tradition which includes the Inannas [Ishtar], Hypatias, Rozas and Zetkins – a tradition that dates back 5,000 years [and includes] thousands of unnamed women heroes who took pains and paid a price (Adalet).

Şükran, a young lawyer volunteering in court cases against male violence, expresses her hesitation and fear, as well as the courage she had to summon to call herself a feminist due to her frequent confrontations with Turkish feminists. Although allied Turks never mean to become the source of this fear, the more “innocent” they are in posing themselves as “true” defenders of the ground against gender oppression, the more it becomes difficult for young Kurdish women to identify as feminist. The latter must constantly strategize to avoid becoming assimilated by the colonizer’s definitions of feminism that do not work for them. That is perhaps why Şükran feels empowered and relieved when KCK woman Co-Chair Besê Hozat uses the term openly on Kurdish news channels. Self-validation through the anticolonial authority of the guerilla gives her the courage to go public with her desire to define her radically intersectional women’s struggle as feminist. Adalet, on the other hand, evokes the KWM strategy to relate to an alternative genealogy to define her relationship to feminism. This genealogy connects the global women’s struggle to the Mesopotamian heritage in a specific way (detailed in Section 5.3). This long-durée heritage emancipates Kurdish feminists from the Turkish feminist genealogy that is an interpretation of the Eurocentric second wave. In this decolonial ontology, the milestone events and women role models differ from those of the colonizers. Inspiring Kurdish figures like Sakine Cansız and Leyla Qasim can be cited in the same breath as Rosa Luxemburg, the Mirabal sisters, Clara Zetkin or the goddesses of Mesopotamia.

Hêja and Gülseren, meanwhile, adopt a different strategy by rejecting the term feminist altogether:

It was really demoralizing – they always wanted to discuss if we were feminists or not. We always found it awkward. Why is it so important if we are feminist or not? This was mostly happening on

panels or TV programs. ‘Do you recognize the purple flag and the femina sign? No?’ Then it becomes all about the femina sign. Use it; then it is done. ‘Are you feminist or not?’ I mean Kurdish history does not know the word feminist. It is not even Turkish; it came from Europe. For Turkish women, it seemed like, if you did not call yourself a feminist, [what you were doing] would not be considered a women’s struggle. I believe that there is male domination and women’s oppression, and I struggle for women. And I call this the women’s liberation struggle. I don’t know how to pronounce this word ‘feminist’! (Hêja).

When we talk about women’s freedom, we refer to a certain system of governance. But [Turkish feminists] say you cannot establish that system, as feminism does not need such a thing. If the strategies we propose do not match with those of the feminists, how can we call ourselves feminist? We do not approve of defining other feminist movements on our own terms. ‘All feminist definitions should be like mine’ is a patronizing attitude. Since we have not exhausted these discussions together, I would not want to define myself the way she defines herself (Gülseren).

The two strategies – reclaiming feminism through subversive indigenizing work or purposefully guarding one’s distance from the colonizer’s terminology – appeal to different groups of women in the Kurdish grassroots. This is a productive multiplicity as DÖKH activists negotiate feminism simultaneously with Turkish women, Kurdish men, and other Kurdish women. Kurdish women are extremely heterogeneous in how they perceive feminism and how they mobilize it for their own interests. In an interview at the MEYA-DER²²⁰ office, a 67-year-old guerilla mother told me she had been a feminist ever since she first heard the term on Kurdish TV. For her, a feminist was a free woman who resists all kinds of male domination. But for Mizgin, an 18-year-old who had been forcibly displaced that I met in a sewing cooperative run by Payas District Municipality in Amed, women’s freedom and feminism signify two separate realities:

M: It’s nonsense. [Feminist] is a name some elites and some Westerners give to themselves among themselves. That is how they define their own lifestyle.

C: But DÖKH is also waging a feminist struggle, isn’t it?

M: No, of course not. Who says that? Who is a feminist?

C: I mean, they fight for the freedom of women...

M: Women’s freedom is a different issue. That is very different from feminism.

C: What is the difference?

M: We ask, ‘Why should men be superior to women?’ We defend equality. If we said, ‘We are superior to men,’ how would we be any different [than men]? Feminists think of a life without men. But we inhabit a physical world where neither positive nor negative can do without each other. Think about it: That is why we have the co-chair system; men should not be without women, and women should not be without men. As long as we respect, love, and trust each other, rather than torturing each other, that is enough (Mizgin).

Likewise, Kurdish male *hevals*’ responses also vary depending on time and situation. Some, like Rojda’s brother, inspired his family members into the women’s struggle, while others might be concerned about women’s autonomy or DÖKH’s growing relations with Turkish feminists:

Sometimes male *hevals* joke, ‘You are like a women’s *tarikât* [religious sect],’ or they call us the ‘red army.’ They say, ‘We cannot interfere or say anything to any one of you.’ They often criticized us for adopting *kaba redci* [crudely denialist] feminism. Men in Kurdistan and in Turkey, and sometimes

women too, have the sense that feminism is a blatant defence of women and that it believes women never make a mistake, that one should defend women in all circumstances and deny male reason and interference no matter what in an ungraceful way. As women's power and potential grew, a natural spirit of self-defence developed and women managed to solve their own problems among themselves, but men perceived this as 'crude feminism.' But we explain to them that it is nothing like that: Our self-defence is a healthy result of our experience as women. The heavy attacks from the community or the state resulted in women getting closer and protecting one another. This protection is extremely strong among us. You know why? Some women's movements emerge under peculiar conditions that lead to building much deeper solidarity among women. In prison, you live for five, 10, 15 years in a tiny room with someone. You witness her whole story and all her hardships, weaknesses, happiness, sorrow, willpower – everything about her. You don't get that close with your family (Hediye).

As our relationship with the [Turkish] feminists grew, men *hevals* were concerned if feminists assimilated us into their ways, 'you organize separately, and you act like feminists in being sectarian and reactionary.' Through our struggle, we ensure that feminism is understood correctly in Kurdish society. In a way, we dislodged that '*kaba redci*' stereotype in their minds; there are fewer such criticisms today. Now they say, 'Oh, okay you really are not like feminists.' And we say, 'No, actually we *are* like feminists. But *they* might not be the way you think they are' (Perihan).

Previously, my questioning about what I could do as a woman was more based on a liberal individualist understanding of freedom. I was a socialist in general but my inquiry into the women's issue was in the liberal mode. Thanks to the party, I grasped that it could also be a radical struggle. I found feminism *kaba redci* and divisive before I joined the party. Only upon getting to know the Leadership paradigm more did I come to realize that a feminist core that views life from within a woman's stance is necessary. This did not happen automatically. It took extended education and practice, for we initially could not interpret 'being women-specific' other than as separation (Nesil).

The term *kaba redci* (crude denialist, see Sections 3.1.1.2/3) the movement has developed is a conceptual tool that Hediye and Nesil use to measure their distance from a hegemonic understanding of feminism in Turkey. Perihan challenges the *kaba redci* perception of feminism in male *hevals'* mind by inhabiting the conflicted territory of moral loyalty and empathy towards multiple causes. In this, she allies with Turkish sisters to defend autonomous organizing against male *hevals*, but at the same time, she allies with KÖH against Turkish sisters to defend a community-centred model of feminism. Hediye, who was a DEHAP executive in the early 2000s, told me that there was a prevailing tendency in the KWM at the time to separate the political fields or ratchet up antagonism and polarization with men. According to this view, members of the KWM saw men as the cause of all oppression and denied their input in all circumstances rather than trying to transform men and engage in proactive self-empowerment. Their present goal, in contrast, is to steer towards the middle ground between a *kaba redci* attitude or its opposite, being *uzlaşmacı* (accommodationist). They try to strengthen their power mechanisms to negotiate what they want, rather than respond to each individual male attack in an ad hoc fashion. The co-chair mechanism, for example, not only ensures women's participation in governance but also fosters a culture of collaboration in decision-making that can transform both genders, as opposed to compartmentalizing the political field by gender. In this mechanism, women can critically open up to male input with minimum compromise on women's collective interests.

While Turkish feminists may interpret accusations of *kaba redcilik* as a caricatured or reductionist reading of feminism, or as an attack on women's radical voice, Kurdish women perceive it as a women's

liberation model that ignores the necessity of transforming men and society. Turkish feminists consider the “re-education of men” as yet another social burden put on women, but for DÖKH, it represents an existential capacity to negotiate from a place of strength to further safeguard their influence. They see it as the key to becoming popular (*halklaşmak*) instead of marginalized radicals: “Feminist discourses are intellectually crucial but minimal in terms of social impact. They can afford to be marginal voices. We cannot. That would lead to our extermination” (Delal).

The dynamic complexity of the situated responses presented here does not lend itself to simplistic antithetical representations. It is not easy to posit an inherently multiple and flexible discourse that shifts according to the interlocutor’s power position. During my fieldwork, I observed that younger TFM activists, particularly those who participated in the Women for Peace Initiative (BİKG) or spent some time in Kurdistan, were more open to recognizing the otherness of this ontological cosmology in less binary terms. They adopted an empathetic language which prioritized observing how Kurdish women represented themselves and why, without establishing a hierarchy between:

Feminists from Turkey are all middle-class, and we don’t pursue our class struggle as feminists; we do it as socialists. The Kurdish approach is altogether different. They do not call themselves feminists because the feminism they see here does not match their practice. But if you ask me, theirs is totally a form of indigenous feminism. Perhaps eventually they will not call themselves feminists, but I think they are up to establishing a feminist movement (Nihal).

I do not find it problematic that it is a national struggle. It unites a mighty mass base. I never judge Kurdish women for sometimes prioritizing the national cause; or rather, I do not see myself entitled to do so – that would be self-righteous. Each struggle has a different historical background. Even when we fight for the same thing, very different processes bring us there. This is why I think the Kurdish women’s movement is feminist. They don’t call themselves feminist, but titles don’t mean much after a certain point. Some feminists in Europe, for example, are actually state feminists. If feminism signified something like that in my country, I wouldn’t call myself feminist either (Betül).

DÖKH does not call itself feminist, but most of what they say feeds and/or feeds off feminism. Of course, there is the national identity issue too. What I observe is that DÖKH does not put anything into words that it cannot communicate to its social base (Ebru).

It was one of the discussions we had in my [socialist] organization in early 2000s: Why do we shy away from saying we are feminists? Perhaps they also have the same issue. You know, feminism comes from within a more individualist framework, whereas these socialist organizations are more based on the collective and the social. That is why they accuse feminists of being liberal and bourgeois. The funny thing is there are other feminisms too that conceive the collective/individual relationship differently. Third-World feminism or Black feminism are such examples. I think Kurdish women’s feminism is more akin to theirs. That is why they both call themselves feminist but, at the same time, talk about their difference from the feminism they view as Western-centric (Eylem).

I guess they don’t call themselves feminists. I don’t know exactly. But if you ask me, it looks like the ‘feminism without borders’ that liberates itself from whiteness and the distance to the working class. It’s the kind that is theorized by immigrant women in the U.S. I find DÖKH very close to that movement. It is a feminism that is observant of the hierarchies among women and the interaction among nationalism, capitalism, and patriarchy (Didem).

Since the 2000s, Kurdish, socialist or Muslim women’s engagements with feminist ideology have become progressively more complicated. In Turkey, the multiplicity of approaches to women’s liberation

cannot comfortably sit under the umbrella term “feminism.” As analyzed above, this has partly stemmed from the TFM tradition’s exclusive ownership of the term. Like Thobani (2020, p. 13) says in relation to the core feminist stance in the West towards Muslim women, Kurdish women in the Turkish context face a similar ordeal: the stance that “feminism is the only legitimate politics up to the task of ‘saving/liberating’ women inevitably leads to the construction of Muslim women, among others, as always-already failed gendered objects – they may be female, they may aspire to the status of Woman-as-Subject, but they are not feminist – unless integrated through the idiom of feminism into Westernity.” Thus, many Kurdish, Muslim, or socialist women in Turkey prefer not to identify as feminist even if they have integrated women’s liberation into their politics. It was, however, again Kurdish women who, for the first time, began to claim feminism on a mass level from a radical decolonial standpoint and introduce epistemic and ontological multiplicity into the gender-reductive feminist epistemic realm of western Turkey.

My contention is that *jineoloji* centres the transformative capacity of the discourse and methods, and the diversity in their societal reception, rather than centre self-referential discourse and methods over how society receives them. Kurdish women’s fight against sexism entails an intersectional and emplaced negotiation between the self, the family, the community, the state, and the Turkish feminists in a way that does not jeopardize the freedom of a colonized nation. Compared to the comparatively unidimensional (single-axis) and compartmentalizing epistemologies of the TFM, the KWM aspires to a radically intersectional, decolonial epistemology. In the Kurdish episteme, agency and victimhood, gender and nation are not understood in additive or oppositional terms. The radical attention paid to the multiplicity and simultaneity of oppression drives theory and action in concert, such as Collins articulates in relation to Black feminism: “The more holistic approach implied in Black feminist thought treats the interaction among multiple systems as the object of study. Rather than adding to existing theories by inserting previously excluded variables, Black feminists aim to develop new theoretical interpretations of the interaction itself” (Collins, 1986, p. 20). Regarding aspects like centring the interaction among multiple systems of oppression, the self-definition/self-valuation of the colonized, and the community and land-based thinking of self-governance, Kurdish women’s contributions align with the genre of Indigenous, Black, Third World traditions that are anti-colonial/anti-racist. That said, I must note that the Jineoloji Academy’s 2015 book *Introduction to Jineoloji* is wary of any analysis that rushes to categorize the Kurdish experience as post-colonial, women-of-color, Islamic, or Kurdish feminism, as that might do injustice to the multiple dimensions of the Kurdish struggle (see endnote 257). Instead, they use their own terms.

Chapter 5 · Patriarchy and the System(s): Anti-State or Beyond the State?

Have you read my work, and the work of other Black women, for what it could give you? Or did you hunt through only to find words that would legitimize your chapter on African genital mutilation in the eyes of other Black women? And if so, then why not use our words to legitimize or illustrate the other places where we connect in our being and becoming? If, on the other hand, it was not Black women you were attempting to reach, in what way did our words illustrate your point for white women? (Lorde, 1979).

DÖKH (Democratic Free Women’s Movement) has been launching year-long campaigns²²¹ on every “International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women” since 2008. I will focus on the 2010 campaign, “Let’s elevate our freedom struggle and transcend the rape culture.” DÖKH suggested that it and the groups from the TFM (Turkish Feminist Movement) jointly organize the event, but the latter turned down the proposal on the grounds that the conceptual framework contradicted feminist goals. Initially, DÖKH framed the issue as follows:

Rape culture originates from sexist ideology, which itself stems from a hierarchical, domination-centred, statist mentality. ... [It] includes the narrow meaning ascribed to it today – sexual activity carried out forcibly on women – but cannot be reduced to that. Rape culture refers to the forced possession; seizure; looting; appropriation of tribes, peoples, and nations; and [the theft of the] material and moral values of a society. This culture begins with colonization and the possession of women as the first oppressed class and nation. ... Rape culture neither begins nor ends with women alone. Starting with women, the whole society experiences rape. Any social system deprived of self-will and its own societal politics experiences rape on an everyday basis: sometimes by the force of law and politics, and sometimes by the police or military. An upper society appropriates society in general, while the state appropriates society (DÖKH campaign pamphlet).

Turkish feminists had issues with this definition:

I believe the connection drawn between the ‘Turkish state rapes our land,’ and ‘men rape women’ is an essentialist one and serves to mask patriarchy. It is very problematic to assume such a connection, as it ties rape not to patriarchy but to racism, nationalism, and state violence. It implies that this identification is made by nationalism, not patriarchy, and pins concrete responsibility on the system or the state. However, the subjects that oppress women in patriarchal capitalist systems are men. There exists a rape that does not operate through racism and nationalism, like when Kurdish men rape Kurdish women, and Turkish men rape Turkish women (Selma).

We never define an incursion against peoples as rape. If we did that, this would overshadow the male violence and rape that occurs between men and women. The state definitely utilizes rape, but just because it does utilize it, does not mean that... I mean the rapist is the man himself; what the state does is to protect him by means of the law, etc., and institutionalize his protection (Nur).

The most important tool the state uses to protect its power is violence. It’s the same with men: They also use violence to protect their power. That is why we see rape not as a culture, but an instrument needed to continue the system. The system of oppression here is patriarchy. And as with capitalism, only systems can create a culture, while rape is just a tool (Fulya).

Women’s oppression as a separate system was unknown before; it was always seen as an extension of something else. The distinction of patriarchy, despite its relation to other systems, is a fundamental thing that feminism asserts. Feminists struggled a lot to grasp this concept. The moment you culturalize things, as in ‘violence culture,’ you come to ignore this distinction (Eda).

For Turkish socialist-feminist Osmanağaoğlu, DÖKH's institutional rules generally conform with feminist goals as they see men as the perpetrator of marital violence, rape, and other sexual assault, but their mass campaigns excuse Kurdish men of responsibility and set the Kurdish people's struggle as a precondition for the Kurdish women's struggle (2012, p. 14). The above quotes share a similar concern that DÖKH's call risks obscuring the "concrete perpetrator" by means of an "abstract notion." Centring the criticism on state and culture masks the agency of the male subject. Furthermore, they note, "rape" is only an instrument, not a system. The state might instrumentalize rape in the service of its goals, but its essential agent is patriarchy – that is, men, not racism, nationalism, or statehood. The occupation of the land arises from a different relation of exploitation and has to be named as such: "We can only talk about rape in relation to living-beings whose consent is at stake. Land does not have that capacity" (Nevin). For them, rape is a specific form of sexual violence and should not be used as a metaphor for other forms of exploitation or "culture": "Is rape culture identical to the rape of the homeland? Are they that connected? Where is patriarchy then?" (Filiz Karakuş, in Ahıska et al., 2011, p. 311). In the magazine of socialist-feminists, Devocioğlu (2010, p. 47) argues, "As the assault on women's bodies comes to be identified with the assault on peoples, nation, or land, the 'woman subject' gets to be excluded from the category of the peoples, household or nation. In this frame, the woman subject, who can neither be traced as the oppressor nor the oppressed, is sent back to history where she is made invisible as an object."²²² Others have suggested "rape culture" is a term applicable to the Kurdish context because their deterritorialization directly stems from the state violence inflicted on their bodies. "But if you say it for [Turkish] Istanbul, alas! This erases the feminist conception that sexual violence is a distinct form of violence" (Eda).

In sum, Turkish feminists find the notion of "rape culture" problematic on two main levels. First, it erases the male subject perpetrator and, accordingly, the specificity of patriarchal oppression, the specificity of the women's struggle, and the latter's distinction from the Kurdish struggle. Second, it erases the female subject by identifying her body with the nation and land. In Turkish feminists' view, imagining the oppressed nation as feminine or feminized excludes the "woman subject" from the category of the oppressed.

"Had Kurdish feminists waged their own struggle and made their own definitions, we would not tussle with these concepts so much, and they would not be such a problem" (Filiz Karakuş, in Ahıska et al., 2011, p. 311). "Sometimes I say to myself, perhaps these issues are because [Kurdish activists] do not have a good command of Turkish. It takes time to work through feminist literature" (Defne). Is it that, or did the TFM lack a command of Kurdish definitions? Why were Turkish feminists so sure that the visibility of male violence was at stake in this campaign? Did that possibility emanate from the campaign's "inherently failing" epistemological frame, as the allies suggested, or some methodological

shortcomings that could be addressed in practice? Did DÖKH really reduce “rape culture” to the rape of the homeland and equate women’s bodies with the land, or did it try to open up a discursive space in which all could examine how patriarchy gives a space for the rape of women and the land? Is “rape” merely a tool, or is it an innate feature of colonialist, supremacist patriarchy that facilitates men’s domination through systematic transgressions? In other words, is rape external or constitutive to domination? Can patriarchal violence neatly be divided between state violence in Kurdistan and male violence in western Turkey? Is any form of rape possible that operates outside the racial and national dynamics of a given territory?

The Turkish feminist objections partially seem to stem from how they conceive of “culture.” According to them, patriarchy as a system of domination cannot be reduced to a cultural phenomenon that is neither about power nor domination. In their mind, DÖKH confused “culture” with “systems of domination”:

The ‘culture’ discourse seals itself off from the problem of men who treat women as their possession. It evokes some collective doing that obscures its material foundations or actors. It suggests culture may be transformed without changing certain power relations at home. Rape is a much more concrete act. Who gets to be raped is the question. What DÖKH says on this topic does not lead to the dismantling of male domination. It becomes a cultural problem whereas we know that it is not a problem of culture, but power and domination (Azra).

I think it is dangerous to call this culture, for then it becomes easy to ascribe rape to a specific culture, just as some say honor killings happen in the East while killings of love or jealousy happen in the West and thereby imply the backwardness of Eastern culture (Betül).

Do Kurdish feminists conceive of “culture” separate from the material relations of patriarchy that also govern male domination at home? Do they comply with this binary understanding of culture that seems to imagine a Marxist base-superstructure relationship between “material systems” and “customs, beliefs, values, and lifestyles?” If there is a perceived risk to reinscribe the “backward eastern Kurdish culture” stereotype among Turks – a pertinent concern – would the adoption of the term in relation to Turkish culture not avert that risk as an anti-racist gesture?

To answer these questions, one must first make a detour into the distinct ways in which the two movements conceptualize the notions of oppressor, patriarchy, “system,” history, and the nation-state.

5.1 Who is/are the main oppressor(s)? Men, family, and the state

Black feminists who see the simultaneity of oppression affecting Black women appear to be more sensitive to how these same oppressive systems affect Afro-American men, people of color, women, and the dominant group itself. Thus, while Black feminist activists may work on behalf of Black women, they rarely project separatist solutions to Black female oppression (Collins, 1986, p. 21).

Chapters 2 and 3 discussed how male figures in Kurdistan all sought to overpower one another mainly by strategizing over women’s lives – whether in the form of male guerilla commanders consciously or

unconsciously replicating the male-dominated colonial state mind in the PKK or in the actions of husbands, uncles, and brothers who had been “feminized” by the Turkish state. Thus, Kurdish women’s conundrum has always been conditioned at the intersection of the “Kemalist-bourgeois colonial” and the “feudal-tribal traditional” patriarchies. Colonial white patriarchy not only subjugates white women as docile nationals²²³ and brown women as the undocile but also feminizes brown men. And feminized Kurdish men have the potential to repress Kurdish women further so as to recover a sense of control. These twin layers of patriarchy, however, may also sharpen women’s ability to apprehend the connections between seemingly disparate patriarchal institutions, allowing them to interpret one through the other: “My husband is a democrat on the street and the fascist state at home,” a peace mother I met at MEYADER²²⁴ told me:

I was only 23, but I already had three children. Whenever my husband went to the mosque for prayers, I would say, ‘I swear you are becoming a slave of the state. State imams enslave you. Then you come home and enslave women. I will never submit to this enslavement.’ Whenever I said this, my mother-in-law would say, ‘See, this woman is impudent [Ooo, *kadının dili uzundur*].’ It is not that this woman is impudent. She just knows. She knows everything but cannot express it out loud (Zübeyde).

When the two patriarchies join hands, it modifies the native social fabric so that the traditional power or freedoms of women are diminished.²²⁵ As brown men lose power under colonial domination, they either resort to a worse version of the colonial or the traditional patriarchy. In the first scenario, men become guardians of the nation-state’s values at home. State-appointed imams warn the male congregation at the local mosque not to allow “their women” to go out freely and join anti-state protests. “We were the daughters of our mothers, not the fathers, because our fathers were the first ones to have contact with the state, civil servants, governors, and judges. Our fathers were the guardians of the state. They would prevent their schoolkids from speaking Kurdish at home. [...] If you went to school, your mom would talk to you [in Kurdish] only when your father was not around. When he came, she would stop. Thus, it became a conflict between men and women” (Aysel Doğan, in Sauloy, 2016).²²⁶ The more brown men collaborate²²⁷ with the state as feudal or modern patriarchs, *ağas*/sheikhs, or household heads, the more the women are degraded and imprisoned in a peculiar hybridization of colonial and feudal patriarchy. “The family became the most important tool for legitimizing monopolies. It became a fountainhead of slaves, serfs, laborers, soldiers, and providers of all other services required by ruling capitalist rings” (Öcalan, 2017, p. 79).

But when completely excluded from state power, a more violent version of traditional patriarchy might emerge as in the second scenario. As Seda from the Amida women’s centre in Amed suggests,

A man emasculated by the police turns into a more horrible father at home, because there is no public space left out there for him to perform his masculinity. It’s the same with men who do their obligatory military service. Initially, yes, they feel emasculated, cringing, and fearful, but soon after, it gives birth to a more furious and provoked masculinity: like ‘I am more manly now, I have come out sharpened.’ Violence is like a contagious disease, from state to men, men to women, women to

children... The first thing a man does when subjected to police violence is exert violence on his own family. But I am talking about the everyday violence here, not the political struggle. Political resistance is where this vicious circle is broken and transformed. The organized struggle is all about men gaining the awareness that state violence is political (Seda).

If we are to face up to the past wrongdoings, the suffering of men has to be faced up to first. When we come together with a few friends, as women, we can express ourselves – just by crying if nothing else. But have you ever seen any fathers crying among their friends? Or men who can talk about their pain, or lowly feelings because they cannot bring home the bread, or how they were sexually harassed and raped in custody? They cannot even utter the word ‘rape,’ but say, ‘things that would never come to anyone’s mind.’ War makes this experience invisible. This is a real problem (Melda).

Another reason why Kurdish women cannot escape the entanglement of state and male violence is that women live this provoked masculinity against their own everyday experience of dehumanization by an immensely more oppressive masculine power that extinguishes them and their communal lifeworld. The state exerts its systematic political violence simultaneously on both genders:

My Turkish friends would say, ‘You always walk like you are marching in a rally, your body posture is not feminine, and your facial features are stern.’ I would be baffled: ‘how else [could I walk]?’ A deep level of violence shapes all our relations, private life, and even the way we walk. When I was at primary school, I witnessed the *faili meçhul* [state murder by unidentified assailant] of my uncle on our street. Does it really matter that my father did not beat me? I have already met the worst kind of violence. In Kurdistan, unlike in the west, the primary violence conducted against a woman’s person is the state-related one. It is a sharper one. If I have to say something against violence, I will mention the state before men because I experience the darker, the crueller form there. Violence at home comes secondary. A sister who tries to rescue her brother from the kicks of the police may not perceive her brother’s violence as fatal. This is against the nature of existence. By instinct, we first tend to protect whom we see as our own (Seda).

I heard many Kurdish women who consider reporting abusive male relatives to the Turkish police or seeking refuge in a government shelter as complicity with the state. They are acutely aware how this would be used against them and return as more violence from both the state and men. Bouteldja (2018) makes a similar comment: “Because, as [Algerian-French men] are oppressed, treated like dogs, if we as women do the same, we are complicit with the state, saying, ‘You [Algerian-French men] are our main oppressor.’ We will not gain anything [by saying that], from a decolonial feminist point of view. I am talking about my interests. If we want them to join the fight [...], we have to realize that we have to make an end to the behavior of the state towards them.” As such, decolonial feminists do not absolve individual men when they first accuse the state; rather, they have an embodied, intersectional understanding of how violence against women works in coloniality. When feminism that prioritizes gender difference as the basis of women’s oppression – a discourse that historically emerged out of white women’s desire to share in the spoils of colonial nation-states (further discussed in Section 5.4) – is shoehorned into racialized communities without regard for the latter’s specificities, it both erases colonial-state violence and marks certain lives (of both women and men who resist the state) as undeserving of pity and, therefore, expendable. This imposition plays a rarely questioned, key role in how Turkish allies exercise their postcolonial whiteness. For Kurdish activists, however, the manifestation of masculinity on an individual

level cannot be reworked in either the colony or the metropole without regard for the colonial nation-state question:

Life has taught us that the male personality of our revolutionary *hevals*, family members, men in Kurdish society, or men in the state are similar in some respects. Their realities create one another. Women in a revolutionary dynamic gain the *ability to see the personality of a state governor or prime minister in their own hevals*. Calling out this state-man cooperation distinguishes us. Men at home or at work become a power against you, so far as they are organized as a state. Pull the state out from under their feet; no man can stand against you! With its army and bureaucracy, the nation-state organizes millions of men against women. Can a country be occupied without the power of the state? Can a socioeconomic life be invaded? This is what we mean by ‘rape culture.’ *The state arena is where the male gender organizes its domination the best*. Through the state mechanism, he invades, appropriates, and loots. This is rape. *If everything you own is grabbed without your consent, this is rape*. Rape culture is this culture of domination. Our broader philosophical perspective on this issue distinguishes us from the feminist movement in Turkey. We want to transcend the man by questioning his system; they only want to transcend him by questioning his individual (Rûken, italics mine).

Rûken underlines the similarity that the supremacist domination techniques of the state, the men at home, and the men in the movement all share. As both victims and perpetrators of state masculinity, men become more violent. Women feel the simultaneous and interlocking/interwoven operation of different systems of domination so deeply that, when the movement named women’s intertwined captivity as the “capitalist, statist, and colonial patriarchy” and the family institution as “man’s small state” and “the stem cell of state and society” (Öcalan, 2017, p. 78), it made immediate sense to grassroots women. “A small model of the problems integral to power and state is established within the family” (ibid., p. 79). Öcalan argues that state hierarchy and appropriation trickles into the family through the seizure of women’s willpower and body. It delegates power and authority to the family in the person of the father-man who then usurps her unlimited, unpaid labor. Moreover, her slavery sets a degrading role-model for the whole society (ibid., p. 78).²²⁸ In sum, the dominating man represents the colonial state monopoly in a household; male domination, meanwhile, embodies statehood and vice versa. In between is an immediate relation of “production,” rather than a mediated relation of “reproduction,” as the TFM suggests.

I argue that this multidirectional and multilayered material entanglement²²⁹ that KÖH (Kurdistan Freedom Movement) highlighted has helped cultivate a radical intersectional consciousness. This shift from women’s intersectional consciousness in-itself (structural) to for-itself (political) shapes the itinerary of the KWM (Kurdish Women’s Movement). Its loyalty is to the sociology and psychology of a colonized people. The widely repeated motto, “Kurdistan can’t be free unless women are free,” which dates from as early as 1987, encapsulates this consciousness. It imagines both the state and the family as being equal/primary in upholding the patriarchal system. This view differs significantly from that of Turkish feminists,²³⁰ who theorize the family as the primary locus in all women’s domination by all men and male violence as the structural component of the family (Feminist Politika, 2013, p. 23). To understand individual violence, the TFM departs from the sexualized family-women relationship, while the KWM departs from the racialized/sexualized/ classed state-family relationship. For the former, the

family is the “privileged castle of patriarchy” (ibid., p. 21) and the key site for appropriating women’s bodies, identities, and labor; for the latter, the key site is the racialized/sexualized institutive relationship that the nation-state establishes with the father-led-family. The KWM centres the dialectical entanglement itself to avoid a priority-setting binarism.²³¹

What is the political implication of locating the “inherently patriarchal” in the family? Rather than a society-based transformation or reworking of the family or men, the state’s solutions come to the fore to protect women. In such a situation, the patriarchal family comes to be disregarded as a constituent colonial and racial agent. For Turkish feminists, this is too indirect and too mediated to achieve feminist goals, while it also carries the risk of diverting attention away from gender-specific oppression. Kurdish activists, meanwhile, almost always refer to the state as the *erkek devlet* (male state), yet most Turkish feminists find this problematic: “The state is not male. Sure, it protects male interests, but it protects bourgeois interests as well. Or, in Iraq, for example, women soldiers tortured people too” (Nevin). Nevin argues that associating the state with a specific gender identity or masculinity would distract from the concrete men in the family, workplace, army or bureaucracy who are the true agents of patriarchal oppression. Some Turkish academic writing²³² might deal with the co-emergence of both the Kemalist nation-state and the modern nuclear family with regards to earlier stages of nation-state formation, but once the state is instituted, family becomes the stronghold of patriarchy, while the nation-state becomes adjunct, derivative, and secondary to how patriarchy operates. The state shapes the family mainly for its capitalist interests, not patriarchal or colonial.²³³ State support for male domination occurs from outside the patriarchal system, as the common feminist slogan captures: *Erkek Vuruyor, Devlet Koruyor* (Man Hits [the Woman], State Protects [the Man]).

This external approach to state-patriarchy relationship contrasts with the Kurdish one. There, the reverse, “State Hits the Woman, Man Protects the State,” also works – as does “State Hits the Man, Man Hits the Woman.” What counts as “inherently patriarchal” is the colonial nation-state regime. The family, on the other hand, is an ambivalent social unit that is not to be abrogated, but transformed, as it “can become the mainstay of democratic society” (Öcalan, 2017, p. 79). There are many examples where the family becomes protective and nurturing, as well as a site to resist the interlocking systems of oppression in Kurdish society, depending on how the family acts in the face of the im/potency that the state gives to the father.²³⁴ For the KWM, the re-education – de-education – of men and the family is viable and something to strive for. “Women will not live on a different planet. As you liberate yourself, you must also struggle for male liberation. Domination is not freedom. A dominating man has slaves. One who has slaves cannot be free, for he is nothing without his slaves. In this sense, our program by far transcends that of the [Turkish] feminist movements” (KJB, quoted in Candan et al., 2013, p. 52). The re-education

or de-education of men is intimately linked to creating spaces outside the reach of the colonial state, as the work of decolonizing the statist family carves out one such safe space.

One can thus conclude that the TFM views conflict based on gender difference as primary in shaping women's lives and brings patriarchy to the centre, signalling individual men as the primary oppressor. The KWM, on the other hand, views the nation-state, representing the interlocking/intermeshed domination that either empowers or weakens men, as the primary oppressor. While this view does not absolve men of individual responsibility for their actions (as shown in Section 5.5), it does mean that racial and class male positionality vis-à-vis the nation-state system must be considered in any political action around male violence. The KWM thus operates on the levels of structure and agency simultaneously. Nevertheless, Turkish allies seem to regard this multi-level approach as a threat to the feminist cause, for it allegedly hides men as the perpetrator and women as the "feminist subject." Their objections to the "rape culture" notion also stem from this fear.

5.2 One-system vs. two-system theories of patriarchy

It is not the descriptive potential of gender difference but the privileged positioning and explanatory potential of gender difference as the origin of oppression that I question (Mohanty, 2003, p. 25).

If we are truly making feminist politics, I am of the view that we take the men-women conflict as the essential, primary conflict and see all other conflicts as internal differences feeding this conflict (Acar Savran, 2019).

Socialist-feminist theoretician Acar Savran's statement, which expresses a view that is shared by many Turkish feminists, considers gender conflict as the primary basis for describing how patriarchy (read: men) becomes a system and shapes other social structures and relations. The gender conflict envisioned, however, takes an essentialist, monolithic, trans-historical notion of sexual difference as its basis that is complicated but not structured by other conflicts. "It assumes men and women are already constituted as sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the arena of social relations" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 25). And since women are constituted as a coherent group by their gender "over and above" everything else, "sexual difference becomes coterminous with female subordination, and power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men), and people who do not (read: women)" (ibid., p. 31). This sets a hierarchy between the forms of domination acting on women's lives. Existing sexual power relations, however, can also be seen as the result, rather than the cause of patriarchal system(s). Mistaking "effect" as the "cause" creates a theoretical impasse that "impos[es] a structural label on what it is supposed to explain" (Pollert, 1996, p. 646). In effect, it conceals the scene that has produced it. The failure to explain the systemic nature of patriarchy in TFM writings by offering, for instance, only vague descriptions like "institutionalized power relations, with a particular systematic and permanency, independent of the subjective will of individuals" (Acar Savran, 2011, p. 220) might point to this impasse.

Instead of explaining how these power relations come to be institutionalized in society, such literature offers empirical results, such as “patriarchy construes women and men as the oppressor and oppressed social groups” and notions that “it shapes all spheres of life (reproduction, family, labor force, politics, law and citizenship and culture ideology and discourse),” in lieu of an explanation. This self-referential circular logic can pave the way for essentializing universalisms that effectively suggest men are inherently violent and are subjects of, or subjected to, identical patriarchal privileges.

Acar Savran explains why she thinks women are subjects of feminism, but men are not:

If we consider gender as an order constituted by patriarchy, based on a system built on the relationship of two social groups with conflicting objective interests, then it becomes inevitable that the feminist subject should be comprised by the oppressed group, i.e., the women. Especially if we understand patriarchy as rooted in *material processes*, i.e., the objective appropriation of women’s body and labor by men, we will obviously view the oppressed party in this material relationship as the feminist subject. But if we instead think of gender as a *regulative principle* and a *norm*, then anyone who objects to this norm can be included in the feminist subject, and then the ‘subject’ disintegrates; talking about a ‘subject’ with definite boundaries becomes impossible. Anyone who wants or objects to this situation on ethical or political grounds, even men, can be included in this subject. But ... whatever their nations or intentions might be, men have an objective positionality (ibid., p. 303, italics mine).

This analysis distinguishes between “gender” as an order formed by patriarchy around the conflict of interest between men and women, and “gender” as a regulative principle or norm. It argues that the latter leads to dismantling the feminist subject since it extends all the way to include even men, which seems unacceptable because their material positionality and interests prevent them from becoming a feminist subject. In my view, that “norm” can neatly be separated from the “order” is typical of structuralist antithetical thinking. How can we call “patriarchy” a system when we disregard what makes it a system, namely, its structural capacity to institute gender hierarchy as a regulative norm across all power structures and relations of society? This separation, intended or not, reduces “patriarchy” as a complex, mediated structure or social formation to the level of immediate, individual, male agency.²³⁵ “It is not capitalists, but men who directly have an interest in women’s unpaid labor at home. The moment capitalism finds it more profitable, it can promote others to do the work at home” (Nur). Here, the feminist desire to highlight direct male agency comes at the cost of ignoring the equally primary role that class and racial interests play in the patriarchal oppression of women (those areas are relegated to other domains of struggle as discussed further below). Police violence becomes a feminist issue so long as police are men, not because the police are a patriarchal institution. Doing so also collapses the political category of feminist subjectivity to the sociological category of womanhood.

The KWM occupies a different epistemological position. The norm-making capacity of “gender” is integral to the institution of the patriarchal order across broader structures of power. In this, men can also become feminist (ally) subjects who may strive for women’s liberation. This is not to argue that men may define what is good for women given their material position; instead, their feminist subjectivity has to take its lead and direction from Kurdish women’s political authority and work towards breaking apart the

structures that perpetuate male privilege. But more than dismantling, this process aims to expand the feminist subject: “It is when feminism is no longer directed towards a critique of patriarchy or secured by the categories of 'women' or 'gender,' that it is doing the most 'moving' work. The loss of such an object is not the failure of feminist activism, but is indicative of its capacity to move, or to become a movement” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 176).

The KWM takes the “historical entanglement” itself as the origin of women’s oppression and all the structures and relations of domination that have historically created current sexual and gender relations; that not only renders men dominant but also establishes a hierarchy among them. “Gender discrimination is not a notion restricted to power relations between men and women” (Öcalan, 2017, p. 70). They subvert the liberal understanding of the public-private divide when they comprehend the supremacist state through man’s private person and the supremacist man through the state’s public person. This is their radical decolonial interpretation of the feminist motto “the personal is political”: “Feminist circles in Turkey do not understand us because they interpret this motto very narrowly. They reduce ‘personal’ to sexual violence problems, and even there, men alone appear as the source of the problem” (Newal). The KWM's approach expands beyond the descriptive assertion that “patriarchy controls women’s bodies and sexuality,” and explains how, through the statist organization of society, individual men are able to institute, mobilize, and transform patriarchal mechanisms in and through other relations of oppression, placing Turkish bourgeois men at the top of the hierarchy. The TFM, however, almost entirely neglects to explore the patriarchy’s ability to set hierarchies among men (and women).

As a result, one might say that TFM politics is doubly constricted. First, it loses sight of the complex intersectional causal plane mainly because it focuses on the plane of effects; second, it loses sight of the diversity among the effects in terms of how they might appear in non-Turkish, non-middle-class, religious, and other settings. This loss of sight, however, is welcomed as an indication that adherents are nearing the “independent, intrinsic, specific” dynamics of patriarchy:

‘Patriarchal capitalism’ is a more meaningful conception in connection to woman’s labor. But when we look at issues like women’s bodies, sexuality, and identity; violence against women; heterosexism and the like, I find it more appropriate to talk about old and modern, pre-capitalist and capitalist forms of patriarchy; that is, its continuity (taking new forms, multilayered) throughout history. By means of this distinction, I think, it is possible to do justice to both the strong relationship between the structurally specific woman’s labor and capitalism that patriarchy offers and the *independent, intrinsic dynamics* of patriarchy itself (Acar Savran, 2013, p. 31).

Most self-ascribed “anti-system” Turkish feminists subscribe to a version of the two-system (capitalism and patriarchy) theory in conceiving patriarchy. The patriarchal system is imagined either as articulated to, shaped by, or separate from the capitalist system depending on the strand followed. Acar Savran diverges from the two-system theory as she finds the more holistic concept of “patriarchal capitalism” – that is “the whole formed by two separate systems” (2011, p. 220)²³⁶ – more meaningful

when it comes to analyzing women's invisible or unpaid labor issues, inspired by British sociologist Sylvia Walby. While engaging with issues like women's bodies, sexuality, identity and so on, Acar Savran thinks the continuity of patriarchy between the capitalist and pre-capitalist is more relevant. For her, capitalism and patriarchy relate to one another only externally – mainly through tension and conflict – although sometimes they may also be in harmony:

It cannot be denied that control and domination over women's sexuality, body, and health have taken diverse new forms under capitalism, but the possessory relationship observed there still carries the same meaning as it would if *cleaned from* [italics mine] these forms, or before it took these new forms. ... Capitalism draws women to the labor market in the same way as it tends to commodify all labor power. Patriarchy, by contrast, needs women to stay at home (Acar Savran, 2013, p. 31). ... Patriarchy (men) participate[s] in this effort because they want to be served; capitalists, on the other hand, do so because they want the reproduction of available labor power (ibid., p. 30).²³⁷

There was no need for socialist-feminist organization to fight against patriarchy-specific dynamics – such as the control over women's bodies and sexuality by men and male violence – that have also existed independent of this whole [capitalist patriarchy] (Toksöz & Barn, 2013, p. 32).

These quotes presuppose a relationship of domination intrinsic to patriarchy that might not be contaminated by racism or capitalism. Pre-capitalist patriarchy is assumed to be a universal, trans-historical, trans-cultural phenomenon with “independent dynamics.” “What seems to happen is that the word ‘woman’ takes on a conceptual/categorical status encoding patriarchal social relations which are viewed as substantive structures. So issues pertaining to ‘women’ would be discussed largely without locating them in a historical, social organization context, such as that of race and class” (Bannerji, 1995, p. 24). Even “modern patriarchy” seems outside of history in this analysis since it assumes that a context-dependent patriarchal method that “women should stay at home” is universal. Did we not learn from Black and/or anti-racist feminists that white patriarchy once best exploited Black women outside of their homes as slaves in plantations, depriving them of their right to give birth and build families? (see Davis, 1983). Perhaps Acar Savran would say, “but that is capitalism, not patriarchy,” but that separation, I argue, is precisely where the problem lies. It ignores the capacity of capitalism to make use of patriarchy and the capacity of patriarchy to make use of racism and capitalism to restructure and diversify itself as white, brown, or Black so as to adapt to new conditions of oppression.

If materialist feminism sees gender as a social construct, and male desire is always already shaped by the social formation of its time, how can we think of an ownership relationship that can be “cleaned from” the form it takes under capitalism, and reach a patriarchy that exists prior to its interplay with the other systems? If pre-capitalist/colonial history is not bereft of proto-class or proto-racial hierarchies, then how can pre-modern patriarchy be presumed immutable so as to shape the capitalism that followed but was not structured by pre-capitalist forms of socioeconomic relations? “There exists a rape that does not operate through racism and nationalism,” Turkish Selma told me in asserting the “specificity” of patriarchy in the introduction to this chapter. But is that true? Or is it just that this mediation becomes

invisible to some, for racist culture accords them relatively better resources to cope with middle-class Turkish men at home rather than disempowers them? This is an essentialism invisible to its privileged subscribers. The universalist white mythology confuses analytical distinctions (between patriarchy, capitalism, racial formation, etc.) as real and, intended or not, assigns an untainted origin, ahistorical essence, and self-referential autonomous power to a chosen subject position (white, middle-class), a chosen experience with men (intimate, immediate), a chosen form of violence (male, domestic), a chosen social conflict (gender/sexual) and a chosen system of power (patriarchy with intrinsic dynamics). Focusing on these at the expense of other logics of power that structure patriarchy is an act of privilege that only some can afford. Others can do nothing but bring interlocked/intermeshed patriarchy to the centre of their politics: “A decolonization movement must thirst for the eradication of both heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism or else it will do little to achieve decolonization for either Indigenous women or men” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, pp. 16–17).

I argue that this is what DÖKH does with the concept of “rape culture.” For them, the nation-state ideology is omnipresent, even at home, as it profoundly affects their communal, physical, and psycho-affective well-being, usually in the form of more violence under double patriarchy.²³⁸ Along the lines of anti-colonial/racist Black, Third World, or Indigenous epistemologies, the KWM attributes no intrinsic or specific dynamic – including the structural or individual levels, at home or on the street, or in pre- or postcolonial times – to sexism that is not always already an effect of the class and race matrix. Instead, the KWM observes any sexual/social relationship between genders through the matrix of colonial and class relations; there is no “essence” of patriarchy that precedes its material and discursive constitution. “‘Interlocking’ effect means that the systems of oppression come into existence in and through one another” (Fellows & Razack, 1997, p. 335). The irreducible specific dynamics of sexism, too, are structured through the prism of other power structures. The campaign against rape culture recognizes the homology between the territorial domination fantasy and sexist and racist significations as they learn and borrow from each other. Both the sexual and the colonial Other are “unpredictable, inaccessible, seductive, defiant, subservient, threatening, ignorant, unstable, deceptive, wily, disguised, hysterical, terrorist.” The response to both is rape, the seizure of identity, body, and labor, the denial of willpower and subjectivity, dehumanization, appropriation, theft, plunder, conquest, and geno(femi)cide. Regarding this homology, Öcalan calls the subjugated women the “earliest colony in history.”

Essentializing approaches can neither account for this co-constitutive homology nor the racialized differentiation of patriarchal regimes in Turkey that I discussed in the previous section. In other words, such approaches fail to show how racism subordinates indigenous feudal patriarchies to official colonialist ones, restructuring the community-based through the state-imposed.²³⁹ If all women were subjugated by identical patriarchy – articulated as “men” in TFM discourse – the colonial nation-state

would cease to function. The nation-state must not only victimize women but also differentiate between friends and foes, between the respectable and the degenerate, and between those who are more and less compliant in the state. Therefore, they are subjected to different social conditions of subjugation and support, access and restriction, retribution and reward, as well as differently structured male violence. Excluded or eliminated womanhoods (e.g., Armenian, Kurdish, Arab, Greek) are constituted outside Turkish womanhood. As I discussed in the case of late-Ottoman and early-Republican feminists in Chapter 2, racial state domination techniques developed during the colonial dispossession and degradation of Kurdish women simultaneously shaped the domestication and exaltation of middle-class Turkish women.²⁴⁰ The polarization between Turkish women as modern, clean, bourgeois, proper/progressive, educated people who are “good mothers of loyal citizens” and Kurdish women as traditional, uncivilized, dirty, poor, animalistic/backward, ignorant people who are “bad mothers of the unruly” became a regulative principle of Turkish-supremacist patriarchy. Thanks to this polarization, middle-class Turkish women obtained full citizenship, allowing them to grab a share in the colonial enterprise.

One day in the literature class, we were reading Ottoman poetry. I recognized a Kurdish word and stood up and said, ‘Teacher, this word is Kurdish.’ He said, ‘What are you talking about? Who is teaching you such nonsense?’ I said, ‘Kurdish is my mother tongue; I speak Kurdish at home.’ And as an innocent kid, I even said, I also know how to read and write in Kurdish. Dad used to teach us at home. He stood right next to me and said, ‘You will never talk such crap in this class again!’ and slapped me in the face. I fainted. I was already in some sort of search. With that slap, I attained clarity. ‘Yes, I am in Kurdistan,’ I thought, ‘but Kurdistan does not exist, I have no right to exist here.’ I quickly made up my mind and joined [the PKK] (Suna).

The slap and subsequent fainting of DÖKH activist Suna meant that she, like many more Kurdish youth, was not going to be my competitor in Turkey’s university entrance exams that are designed for native Turkish speakers. With her elimination, I got a “better share”²⁴¹ from the national education fund.

Chapter 7 will discuss how Kurdish coloniality is an obscure concept for most Turkish feminists since they imagine the Kurdish ethnonational space in a continuum with the Turkish one. One consequence of that homogenizing overlook is that the patriarchal system is likewise imagined as more or less a uniform phenomenon across cultural spaces. This, I argue, is a form of seeing like the state. “The *Racial State* ... is about the tension between racial conditions and their denial, racist states and their resistance, and about the ways homogeneity has been taken axiologically to trump the perceived threat of heterogeneous states of being” (Goldberg, 2001, p. 6). By treating it as a singular regime or reducing it to the common experience of womanhood, this race- and class-denying universalization of patriarchy serves this state fantasy of “a coherent populace in the face of potentially divisive heterogeneity” (ibid., p. 10).

5.3 Herstory: *Jineoloji*

[Any struggle] bears the imprint of the archetypal struggle for power in a relationship, the one between woman and man. From this relationship stems all forms of relationships that foster inequality, slavery, despotism, fascism, and militarism (Öcalan, 2017, p. 59). The history of enslavement of women is the history of the enchainment of society (ibid., p. 57). Without an analysis of women's status in the hierarchical system and the conditions under which she was enslaved, neither the state nor the class-based system that it rests upon can be understood (ibid., p. 69).

At first glance, it might be possible to confuse this statement with an approach that prioritizes gender difference and conflict as the origin of women's oppression. There are two major differences, however. First, KWM epistemology does not posit gender difference and conflict itself, but the whole power struggle resulting in women's subjugation as something foundational (*temel*) that emerges early in history as the first systematized form of domination ("women are the oldest colonized people"). Second, this is not to imply that patriarchy is more important than racism, capitalism, or colonialism or that it can be challenged separately, but that it affords an advantageous standpoint to understand the intertwined nature of oppression and the systematization of the linkages among multiple systems of domination in a colonized society.

Let me unpack the second point first. The KWM's decolonial perspective is rooted in the knowledge that the Turkish ethno-economic order is dependent on the colonial denial, appropriation, and dispossession of Kurds. And colonial denial, in turn, is dependent on forging a subordinate family order in Kurdistan – a specific blend of colonial and indigenous patriarchies. In this interlocking frame, the KWM prioritizes gender oppression strategically, as a productive entry point to analyzing social phenomena as an integrated whole. The oldest system informs and shapes all other systems of oppression that may have shaped women's lives throughout history. This means fighting patriarchy entails a simultaneous fight against racism, classism and vice versa. The primacy of gender is not possible without that of race and class. This society-centred approach can delve deeper into investigating the full spectrum of structures that limit women's freedom. Even if they self-identify as *anti-system*, gender-primary white approaches are incapable of fulfilling their own goal of reworking patriarchy as a system because they cannot address its intersectional structuration and "develop [feminist] philosophy to the full" (p. 92). Furthermore, taking gender conflict as the point of entry into revolutionary politics offers some political advantages (its social risks in a closed society notwithstanding) for raising decolonial critical consciousness. First, it opens up a pivotal political space for Kurdish women whose material position better prepares them to observe the widest intersectional spectrum of power relations. Women's servitude is an intimate practice in every household on which the colonial state works to extend its domination over Kurds, and women are best-positioned to expose this linkage as they suffer the most. Women's self-interest is intimately connected to decolonization. Questioning this linkage becomes a generative revolutionary machine for the movement. Second, it has the potential to bind Kurdish men to women's

liberation even if they would otherwise not care about it. Third, framing women as the main revolutionary subject, as the high-stakes benefactor of intersectional liberation, helps prevent a slide towards class-reductionist socialist or racial supremacist nationalist ideologies (“primitive nationalism” as PKK calls it), thereby securing radical internal democracy.

To understand the first point, one needs to look at how KÖH connects women’s long-durée history of enslavement to the rise of male-dominant, hierarchical, and statist civilization. Chapters 2–3 followed the concrete sequence of events that led the PKK to center gender in holistic liberation; here, instead, I will outline the understanding of history that corroborated those events.

According to PKK historiography, the Neolithic era shaped the collective unconscious of humankind before the rise of the statist civilization (i.e., before around 3000 BC), fostering a matricentric, matrilineal, communal social order that revolved around women. This “primordial socialism” was characterized by equality, freedom, sharing, solidarity, and ecological principles and had no institutionalized hierarchy. The division of labor between the sexes was also not based on ownership, force, or hierarchical power relations. “Mother” did not just have the ability to give birth, but formed the basis of the whole social being (Öcalan, 2017, p. 61). How, then, did such a system fall? Men’s role in hunting and defending the clan from external dangers, in alliance with the shaman and the elderly, strengthened their position in the community, ultimately, leading them to take over the family/clan by force in the first serious organized violence in history. “What was usurped in the process was woman herself, her children and kin, and all their material and moral cultural reservoir” (ibid., p. 64).

During the subsequent 2,000 years of patriarchal counter-revolution, men’s accumulation-oriented culture and hierarchical authority, rooted in surplus production, war, plunder, pillage, and the captivity of women, gradually overcame women’s egalitarian culture, which was based on a fertility and productivity that was tightly bound to communal existence. The result was the seizure of the mother goddess’s know-how and governing authority and the demeaning of her sacredness. The women-led system and its values lost to a male-led one that enslaved women through emerging hierarchical statist power. The training ground for state domination was the dynastic ideology whose cornerstones were the patriarchal family, fatherhood, and an abundance of children. The dynastic system developed from within the tribal system and “established itself as the upper-class administrative family nucleus, thereby denying the tribal system” (ibid., p. 77). It became the proto-ruling class and the prototype of the state. The patriarchal society, with deepening class divisions, slavery, and a strict hierarchy that subjugated women and other ethnicities, came into being through the development of the state. It took the state phase based on permanent force to institutionalize authority in its full capacity. As a result, the idea of man as the family’s absolute ruling power was transformed into state authority. Once the system was turned upside down, the state redesigned the nuclear family in its own interest, authorizing it as “man’s small state.”

Öcalan names this long socioeconomic enslavement process of women and defeat of her culture as *karılaştırma* (wife-ization or feminization),²⁴² which became fully institutionalized through the hegemony of statist society. As such, it became the oldest form of enslavement, providing a model for subsequent slavery:

Gender discrimination has had a twofold destructive effect on society. First, it has opened society to slavery; second, all other forms of enslavement have been implemented on the basis of housewifization. Housewifization does not only aim to recreate an individual as a sex object; it is not a result of a biological characteristic. Housewifization is an intrinsically social process and targets the whole society. ... Civilizational society reflects this foundation in all social categories (ibid., p. 70–71).

Wife-ization structures all power relations until eventually the colonialist and capitalist nation-state emerges as “male domination in its most institutionalized form to represent the monopoly of the tyrannical and exploitative male” (ibid., p. 83). State domination signifies intersectional domination, in other words, the “rape” of society by racial hierarchy, exploitation, and patriarchy. The women’s liberation ideology of the KWM develops the revolutionary concept *Sonsuz Boşanma* (Total Divorce), as women’s “divorce from this 5,000-year-old culture of male domination” (ibid., p. 89). It advocates autonomy from the identities imposed on women both by the state and men to become more in tune with her “nature.” And *jineolojî* (see endnote 217 for its meaning) seeks to develop “the woman’s science” that can theorize and practice this autonomy in a radical, non-state, non-patriarchal, non-developmental alternative called the “women’s system.”

Thousands of years ago, under much harder conditions, our grandmothers left an imprint in history by accomplishing the ‘village revolution’ that guaranteed the existence and continuity of humankind. As their grandchildren, we launch *jineolojî* today with vast means in our hands. ... The fact that *jineolojî* thought bursts out of the Middle East, which hosted the women-orientated lifeworlds of the past, must have something to do with these roots. ... These are the ancient lands in which women both ascended the throne of the goddess but were also dethroned for the first time. These are the lands in which women cultivated mother-orientated societies and laws but were also hit and defeated by the patriarchal system for the first time. Mythology, religion, and philosophy provide numerous pieces of evidence to this reality. Mesopotamia witnessed women who established lives in between the two rivers, but also those who were murdered by their sons and pulled to pieces – [yet it was] out of [these women’s] bodies that earth and sky were created and from whose teardrops that the Tigris and Euphrates were created. After sitting on the throne of the goddess for tens of thousands of years, they were the first ones to die under the feet of all those who came to throne in the last 5,000 years. Nevertheless, they have never lost their resilient, animate, loving, and free-flowing lifeblood. It is this resilient vein that *jineolojî* thrives on (Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015, p. 7).

Turkish feminists object to this “romantic,” “golden-age” narration and pursuit of alternative, arguing there is no proof that matricentric societies ever existed. And even if they did, how does such a deep dive into history address contemporary problems that have no living connections with that past? Turkish feminists further suggest these matricentrism and woman’s communal order views are based on essentialist ideas that it is in “woman’s nature”²⁴³ to strive for justice, peace, and equality.

For the moment, I want to set aside discussions about the veracity of Kurdish women’s reading of history.²⁴⁴ What I want to stress here is the virtue of shifting from a form of “academic reading” focused

solely on critical analysis, proof, and refutation to a “political reading” oriented towards doing something, changing the world in a certain direction, and organizing knowledge accordingly. Thanks to deconstructive thinking, we have long known that academic writing puts its own strategic (or not) essentialisms and myths to work to legitimize its arguments. As such, the TFM aspires to inscribe context-dependent, privilege-based methods as ontological fixes into feminism. In this, it comes to describe campaign-centred and small-group organizing, independence from national (or socialist) movements, the disavowal of leadership, the gender-primary conception of patriarchy and the like as distinguishing features of feminist activism. Accordingly, the KWM recognizes the anticolonial agency of women as part of the peace struggle, irrespective of their use or non-use of violence, but Turkish allies tend to subscribe to a discourse of vulnerability that emphasizes women’s role mainly in reparation, redress, and recovery defined from within a rights-based discourse. What becomes problematic here is the complacency shown towards one’s own essentializing presuppositions, which can readily be presented as non-negotiable – and, hence, quasi-religious and quasi-mythical – while being readily suspicious of others’ ontological assumptions in the confidence that this does not emanate from one’s own omissions or privileges.

KÖH’s priority is to change the destiny of Kurdish people (alongside other oppressed groups) and construct a decolonized indigenous future by learning from the past histories of freedom and colonization in Mesopotamia. Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard calls this a “resurgent approach to Indigenous decolonization”: “Colonized populations, despite the totalizing power of colonialism, are often able to turn these internalized forms of colonial recognition into expressions of Indigenous self-empowerment through the reclamation and revitalization of precolonial social relations and cultural traditions” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 153). As opposed to the “instrumental rationality central to liberal politics of recognition,” the resurgent approach “draws critically on the past with an eye to radically transform the colonial power relations that have come to dominate [the Indigenous] present” (ibid., p. 157). This critical revitalization that builds on the value and insights of one’s own past helps break “the colonized free from the interpellative stranglehold of colonial misrecognition” (ibid., p. 148).

Building diverse, nation-culture-based resurgences means significantly reinvesting in our own ways of being: regenerating our political and intellectual traditions; articulating and living our legal traditions; language learning; creating and using our artistic and performance based traditions. [Decolonization] requires us to reclaim the very best practices of our traditional cultures, knowledge systems and lifeways in the dynamic, fluid, compassionate, respectful context in which they were originally generated (Anishinaabe feminist Leanne Simpson, in Coulthard, 2014, p. 155).

Haste to focus on factual mistakes, essentialisms, or analytical inconsistencies can belie a refusal to come closer or “face that which cannot be assimilated into one's model” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 166). What is path-breaking in *jineoloji* is the lifeway it paves for shifting the object of “what to know and how to know” from the Western white forms – including the postcolonial variety – which are premised on liberal-individualist humanism and the nation-state cult, to the pre-nation-state and even pre-state forms of

thinking, being, and governing. This is a form of rehistoricization that ensures the erased history of power relations becomes visible. By not feeling the urgency to rewrite history from the perspective of the colonized, it is possible to become trapped in Western-colonial systems. The significance of *jineolojî* is that it is the first in Turkey's feminist history to ask questions about what life was like for autochthone peoples before colonization by the Western-oriented late-Ottoman or Turkish Republican states or even much earlier. *Jineolojî*, furthermore, asks how we can uncover and learn from layers of indigenous ways and knowledge, good or bad, that various Western and non-Western colonizing missions dating back to Sumerian times attempted to erase.²⁴⁵ It is no coincidence that while remembrance of the pre-nation-state has been revived in the KWM episteme, it has vanished in that of the TFM. The ethnonational and religious issues that the secularist, racial Kemalist modernization project (see the "Turkishness contract" in Chapter 8) banned were also ignored in Turkish feminisms. And Eurocentric white feminisms proved congenial sisters to that end as their frame of erasures mostly matched.

De/anti-colonial scholarship asserts that "any postcolonial or decolonial theory that does not take white supremacy, racism, and the systemic violence over bodies located in a zone of non-being as a point of departure of their theorization, is just another [recycling] of colonial theory" (Grosfoguel, 2014). They emphasize that modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin.²⁴⁶ In this framework, the rise of feminism is historically described as a modern Western movement/ideology for the liberation of white women:

The aim of feminism was to resolve the contradiction inside the nation-states between men and women, white men and white women. Its first reason to exist is to solve this contradiction, this hierarchy inside the imperial nation-state. And feminism did not exist before 1492. It began to exist slowly during the construction of the state, nation-state, colonialism, etc. The first aim was to make equality because two categories of the nation-state were exploiting the south [together] (Bouteldja, 2018).

The ongoing feminist refusal to rethink the feminist tradition through sustained and substantive engagement with the divides of race, coloniality, nation and so on, keeps the orientation of feminist futures within the orbit of Westernity. Moreover, the feminist insistence on reading what are basically Western constructs of patriarchy and heteronormativity as transhistorical and transcultural allow Western feminist appropriation of the historical experiences, struggles and consciousness of Indigenous, Black and Third-World women to bolster hegemonic narratives of white gendered/sexed victimhood (Thobani, 2020, p. 13).

The Kurdish decolonial project carries an affinity to this perspective. DÖKH spokeswoman of the time shares this:

The feminist movement has a herstory of 300–400 years that has emerged in parallel to the European Enlightenment and diversified in ideology and theory depending on its class base – whether liberal, socialist, radical, etc. They were disadvantaged, from the start, for being exposed to the negative hegemonic impact of capitalist modernity. Like many other revolutionary movements of 'democratic modernity,' they got co-opted by the system so far as they thoroughly failed to deconstruct the terms of 'capitalist modernity' (Rezan).

DÖKH activist Zeliha defines the "real feminism"²⁴⁷ she observes in Turkey as falling far short of the "essence" of feminism that she describes as the opposition to colonization and colonial

epistemologies. To distinguish the feminisms currently practiced in Turkey from non-colonial forms of women's struggles like the mother-orientated Neolithic ones, they sometimes refer to the latter as the "essence of feminism," which I read as "true to its intersectional community-centred freedom values." We propose *jineoloji* so that "feminism can be purged from capitalist modernity's influence and re-encounter its true values" (Jineoloji Akademisi, 2015, p. 85).²⁴⁸ In this sense, *jineoloji* problematizes the constitutive outside of colonial feminisms, Turkish included. The KWM argues that Turkish feminists, despite their theoretical savvy, continue to enact covert forms of the orientalist "traditional-modern" dichotomy. Their political practice does not reflect a serious engagement with the ethical and political societal dynamics of the people of Mesopotamia, as internalized orientalism affects their ability to face their own societal history (ibid., p. 90). It loses sight of a holistic, intersectional perspective for freedom, dismisses indigenous cultures, precolonial history, and the long-durée history of women's colonization. The more feminism empowers itself by engaging with local cultures and specificities, the more it will be able to fight this orientalist influence (ibid., p. 90).

To my mind, *jineoloji*'s first teaching is that it does not situate the foundational conflict on the intersubjective level between man and woman, but the structural level between the two forms of civilization, sociality, and governance. In this, there is a battle between the hierarchical, authoritarian, and patriarchal, on one hand, and the egalitarian, horizontal, and matricentric, on the other. It was not only the individual woman's will but her social system and communal being that was taken over in the Neolithic period. In this line of thought, the individual freedom of woman is connected to her ability to shape a life form, that is, an anti-sexist and anti-racist mother-woman culture. Second, it teaches that patriarchal civilization is a product of history, not of immutable natural or social laws. Remembering a past that was (or could have been) fosters a "radical remembering of the future, a beyond where we currently live" (Native Hawaiian scholar Manu Meyer, in Smith, 2014, p. 225). Third, it suggests that if not for the (proto)formations of race and class domination, sexual domination would not have developed in history. The historical ability to execute hierarchical, monopolist forms of government, appropriate nature and surplus products, as well as take members of other clans and peoples captive, enabled the seizure of women's sexuality, labor, and identity, and vice versa. These forms of domination emerged simultaneously. What patriarchy achieved first in herstory was *the systematization* of women's subjugation, long before modern-day racism, capitalism, and colonialism could systematize their dominations.

5.4 Stateful vs. stateless

[T]he master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is

only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support (Lorde, 2007, p. 112).

What are the immediate political consequences of the theoretical differences examined so far in this chapter? What tangible difference does it make on the ground to view the nation-state in a derivative and instrumental, rather than constitutive, relation vis-à-vis male violence or see the systems of domination as externally related, rather than interlocked?

Acar Savran imagines socialist society as one in which resources are distributed on the basis of needs, rather than profit, where family and marriage are not strictly codified or legally determined in all detail, and where political organizing allows everybody to participate in decision-making (Acar Savran, 2011, p. 222). This, she argues, requires widely dispersed self-governance mechanisms, as opposed to political organizing dissociated from society in the form of a separate state. Women need these kinds of self-rule mechanisms to express their needs as part of society's general decisions. She describes the world that radical feminism (including Turkish socialist-feminism)²⁴⁹ imagines in four critical points: 1) Men and women equally share care work at home and outside, men and women equally realize social production and the paid/unpaid labor dichotomy ceases to hurt women; 2) society ends the gendered division of labor, achieving absolute equality at work; 3) women gain sexual freedom, sex that is not oriented to reproduction or submissive to male sexuality becomes possible and society eliminates heterosexism; 4) society ceases to sanctify biological motherhood and society raises children together with other men and women (ibid.).

What kind of politics does radical feminism propose to move towards this world? In the area of politics related to care work, for example, theorists suggest positive discrimination (benefits, social security and retirement right for housewives, etc.) to enable women's participation in the labor force, along with measures that reorient men towards care work. But in this theory, proponents only bring a few popular feminist objectives that do not directly call the nation-state to action down from the realm of theoretical ideal to concrete practice. The making of self-governance mechanisms that Acar Savran finds essential for women's equal participation, for example, is seen to be outside the feminist agenda. Moreover, nationalism, which relates to patriarchy in theory, does not find much space in practice next to the "priority issues" of sexual violence and body politics. Even in the imagined socialist society of the future, she argues, feminists shouldn't build society or execute the majority decisions that will still favor men, but should focus on criticizing, checking, and monitoring (ibid., p. 227). Patriarchal socialists, in essence, will make the revolution and create the mechanisms; the job of monitoring and criticizing will fall to feminists.²⁵⁰

"But would this not lead to elitism?" a Kurdish activist asked at the Q&A of the seminar where Acar Savran spoke. This question hinted at an important clash. I asked the socialist-feminist Süreyya, "Some

Kurdish women say that you are state-orientated in political action, do you agree? How do you describe your relationship with the state and the ‘system’?”

‘How come you demand things from the state and then say you are independent’ is a non-contradiction. Being independent of the state is in no way a barrier to making use of the resources available within the system in our anti-state struggle. We don’t believe the women’s question can be resolved within capitalism, but ‘general revolution’ is beyond our political scope. It is not us who will make that revolution. It is not like we think the state will internally change and stop supporting patriarchy when we push the laws because we know that both capitalism and patriarchy are immensely powerful and directly connected. ‘Anti-system’ means being against both patriarchy and capitalism. The women’s struggle will continue also after the socialist revolution. Women cannot be free unless both systems are dismantled. More rights or improvements within the system, even though we support them, will not bring liberation to women. Women’s liberation requires the structural rearrangement and the redistribution of all resources in consideration of women. We open spaces by creating pressure, and meanwhile, we gain some rights. Applying pressure on the state and capital in an insurgency mode is what feminists call ‘revolution.’ We try to squeeze, scratch, and weaken the state as much as we can, turn the laws to our advantage, force it to open women’s shelters, etc. Or we follow male-violence court cases that create awareness in society. We expose male domination and its political background there (Süreyya).

Süreyya explains why using the system’s tools against the nation-state does not contradict with being “anti-system.” Her justification, however, mainly evokes theoretical ideals and wishes rather than feminist practice. Socialist-feminists are aware that the state will not change through their efforts and argue that both the capitalist and patriarchal systems have to be toppled for women’s freedom. They believe that pressing for legal and governmental mechanisms to enhance women’s rights and to secure more effective punitive measures against male oppressors will open spaces against the state. The provision of women’s shelters, social security, health and care services and the like will increase awareness and prepare society for an eventual takeover of the state. Their goal is to shake the capitalist state policies in a way that supports the formation of a future socialist state and society. Until then, the idea is to weaken the state, reveal its anti-gender policies and pressure it for gender equality. The general revolution is not their job; the responsibility to create an alternative society is a matter of socialist, not feminist, struggle. In fact, taking it even a step further, Cavidan below defines making demands from the state as an imperative:

Why is there the comparison that ‘feminists demand from the state, while Kurds don’t embrace the state;’ we don’t find this meaningful at all. As a socialist, I never saw the state as my own. *I have always been as distant as Kurds are, at least.* No leftist person will see the state as her own. It is unfair to ascribe this to feminism, as the Kurdish movement also makes demands: After all, they are negotiating with the state in the peace process. They demand education in their mother tongue or the release of their friends from prison. So long as Kurds do not separate from Turkey, there will always be mutual expectations. Even if you are ‘anti-system,’ if you are not in office and have such power, obviously you will ask for women’s shelters from the state in a place where four women are murdered every day. We do not have equal power with the state; we are the oppressed. We do not have the power to set up our own mechanisms, so we ask for them from the state. This is not to see the state as our own but to oblige it, expose its breach of duty and remind it of its responsibility. There is no other way to make politics. Demanding from the state is, in fact, how you become political. Obliging is not begging (Cavidan, italics mine).

In these accounts, what seems to make socialist-feminists “anti-system or anti-state” in their eyes is their theoretical desire for general revolution, the dismantling of the state, and their theoretical belief that their politics do weaken the state. Their actual politics and the real impact on the state, however, are governed by practical limitations of the ground: the oppressed are too weak, and the state is too strong, so there is no way feminists can initiate their own mechanisms; for this, they have to call the state to responsibility. Furthermore, do Kurdish people also not ask for things from the state? I would respond to this question with another question: What does this defensive argument erase regarding Turkish and Kurdish women’s differential relationship to the Turkish nation-state? The answer might also shed light on the paradigmatic distinction between conceiving of state agency as inherently patriarchal and colonial (as is the case for Kurdish activists) versus viewing the state as indispensable for realizing popular feminist goals.

Delegating the actual work of creation, execution, and sustenance of egalitarian social spaces to the state (or socialists) assumes an external relation to social change and community-building. This contrasts with an internal-relations approach where the critical capacity to criticize or dismantle the state in favor of a feminist society comes primarily from the concrete responsibility taken in the building of alternative social structures for women and the people. In KWM thought, the ability to theorize or dream of a future feminist society and the actual work of creating communal structures that model the world they want to create are intimately interlinked. Continual discord between the requisites of theoretical envisioning and actual practice, as observed in the TFM, perpetuates dependency on the state and entrapment in the state system. This is because, on unidimensional, aspatial politics in a vacuum, the homogenizing machinery of the nation-state fills this space as the only emplaced institution to realize feminist dreams. In other words, the absence of rootedness in alternative cultural, faith, and ethnic communities, as well as the engagement with the ethnocultural (and class) constitution of gender, reproduces the homogenous nation imagined by the state.

Feminists say that ‘as you [Kurdish activists] are part of a tightly-knit community, always together and discussing similar issues, you cannot see from within different places and thoughts.’ And we say, ‘No, on the contrary, since you stand too disjointed and scattered in closed small-groups, you are alienated from the intertwined truths of society. You are alienated from the reality of women embedded in community life’ (Selvi).

From liberal to revolutionary, Turkish feminists tend to see the state as the main actor that must right the wrongs, respond to feminist actions and meet women’s needs. The nation-state becomes the ultimate horizon, interlocutor, and resort for executing gender justice. This does not necessarily mean that all feminists are open to working with the state. Socialist-feminists, for example, object to producing women’s politics for state institutions or receiving their support. Nonetheless, aspatial gender politics tends to limit itself to what the nation-state might offer, helping perpetuate that limiting horizon. The state becomes a feminist target insofar as it disempowers the “unmarked women,” not when it empowers

them against the racialized others. This fails to pose any challenge to the capitalist racial state that thrives on deepening the rifts between cultural, ethnic and class groups. In such anti-sexist politics, which largely comply with the state-sanctioned framework of universal law, rights and citizenship, any success or failure in changing legislation to include certain women and recognize their delegated rights furthers the racial state legitimacy: “Delegated exchanges of political recognition from the colonizer to the colonized usually ends up being structurally determined by and in the interests of the colonizer” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 152).

Even if most TFM activists assert that they do not see the state as their own, their subjectification process, political horizon and methods appear to be profoundly shaped by the opportunities and limitations that a state-society offers (as explored in the coming chapters). Being hailed as subjects of a state shapes the (un)conscious ways of being and doing. Here is how it frames the vision of one Turkish feminist academic activist:

What did the Republic of Turkey do? It reinvented a womanhood; you [KWM] will do the same in your own way. You have a utopia. I have no chance to know at this point whether and to what extent it will be feminist. Just as the Turkish Republic’s womanhood did not liberate me, it is possible that your *jineoloji* will not liberate me, either. Whenever a new definition is made regarding womanhood, it disturbs me – whatever that definition might be. I see it as a homogenizing power gesture (Aylin).

Obviously, there will be a distinction between the theories created from within an utterly different societal project [in Kurdistan] that everyone thinks is just around the corner, and those of feminists standing here [in western Turkey]. We can say feminists are not even speaking the same language with Kurdish activists anymore because they [the latter] have the vision to build another society and are able to do what it requires. As a feminist, I am not able to do such a thing. I have to live in *this* society. Do I make myself clear? The positions are vastly different. So, just as feminists in Turkey cannot criticize them, they also should not criticize us from where they stand. I learn a lot from Kurdish women. But Kurdish women have stopped learning from me; for the last few years, it has been totally over. And ever since it is over, they have started criticizing the feminists. Fair enough (Aylin).

Aylin thinks that Kurdish feminists are not in a position to criticize Turkish (or Turkified) feminists due to the vast distinction in national contexts. She cannot trust the *jineoloji* of the Kurds because similar to the Kemalist project, it might also come to oppress herself as a woman. While Aylin lets her qualms regarding her own gender liberation determine her approach to the Kurdish criticism, the colonial interdependency and ethical responsibility of belonging to the colonizing nation cannot. The two worlds, one with a utopia to build another society and the other without that vision, are depicted as two unrelated realms. These discursive (dis)connections suggest a subjectivity that is open to (un)learning only on her own terms, as a racially unmarked woman, not a colonial one. Kurdish activists interpret being framed as “homogenizing or dominating” as a reflection of the other’s weak, compartmentalized feminism:

[W]hen offered some basic principles to agree on, feminism’s erroneous, weak, *parçalı*²⁵¹ [compartmentalized] ways perceive it as a homogenizing call. There are also feminist trends that readily treat all forms of epistemology as germane to domination, remain their feminist epistemologies closed to criticism or investigation, find building a world based on women’s knowledge systems a deficiency and do not believe that the society can be changed. These trends argue that everyone has their own truth, that all [cultural] identities are meta constructs, that imagining a future on behalf of others is a gesture of domination or that societal structures pose a barrier to

individual freedom. This is how they deprive the social energy and dynamics of life and an aim. In this sense, they cannot transcend the effects of modernism and post-modernism, even though it is vital to do so (Jineoloji Akademisi, 2015, p. 51).

Aylin describes her situation as the feminist who “has to live in the current Turkish state-society.” Why does she think she has no other possible future? Or why does Cavidan believe there is no option but to hold the state accountable? Or as the quote above says, why is there no belief that society can be changed? The covert presumption here is that the racial Turkish nation-state is a given, and forms of community or land-based governance that could win autonomy from the state model are unimaginable. This marks the political horizon of a *devletli akıl* (state-orientated/state-owning/stateful mind): It presumes the nation-state as permanent. Even if the state might be confronted on gender (and/or class) terms, an implicit affirmation of the existing racial citizenship contract ultimately directs its political action. Exclusive reliance on this contract revitalizes the representational relation between the culturally unmarked and the nation-state.²⁵² The Turkish-stateful-mind is characterized by its inaccessibility to the Kurdish-stateless-mind which cannot assume such representational, affective, cultural, or political bonds with or leverage against the Turkish state. It draws on the ancestral knowledge that the condition of possibility of the Turkish nation-state was their colonization and that this colonization must one day end. Statelessness is not a mere matter of political status, but a corporeal, symbolic, semiotic, and semantic experience, making it a distinctive form of subjectivity and relation to life, as well as a form of existence that trains the desire differently. And instead of viewing this state of being as a shortcoming, the KWM embraces and revalues it as a legacy that has shaped its lifeways for centuries, turning it into a field of transgression that cannot be contained by the nation-state system.

How does this transgressive attitude manifest itself in political action? In contrast to the TFM’s focus on “taking-power,” the KWM embraces a dual strategy in which “taking-power” is conditioned on a society-centred strategy of “making-power”:

On one hand, it is necessary to engage in oppositional politics to corporate and state power by taking-power. Yet if we only engage in the politics of taking-power, we will have a tendency to replicate the hierarchical structures in our movements. So it is also important to ‘make power’ by creating those structures within our organizations, movements, and communities that model the world we are trying to create. ... If we ‘make power’ without also trying to ‘take power,’ we ultimately support the political status quo by failing to dismantle structures of oppression that will undermine us (Smith, 2005, p. 187).

The KWM aims to build a confederate system of women’s communes, assemblies, and congresses across the grassroots that are rooted in the spaces of knowledge and power outside the state (as explained further in Chapter 6). “The assemblies are not just for the sake of democracy but are about arriving at a self-governance level that does not need nation-state mediation in solving the problems of our communities. This is a form of self-defence” (Muazzez). The KWM wants to transgress the boundaries set by the state and introduce its own self-defence, conflict-resolution, educational, economic, and

cultural communes with the participation of all of Kurdistan's diverse communities.²⁵³ "Decolonization inherently requires more than the type of justice that can be pursued at a settler nation-state level" (Arvin et al., 2013, p. 17). What's more, women will lead and represent this pluralist, ground-up organizing that respects the coexistence of difference. "State-orientated politics reproduces women's victim status; we also used to have such a perspective, but not anymore: Now we focus on women's agency, assets, and transformative willpower" (Muazzez). KÖH political representatives mainly derive their power and legitimacy from these spaces of freedom. Hence, it is communities organized outside the state that buttress their negotiating power with the state, rather than their entitlement to citizenship. The idea is to revive the grassroots willpower to constrict state influence: "We are trying to move the body of the state away from our bodies." In the absence of a decolonial outside, the oppositional politics of "taking-power" alone cannot be considered "anti-system," as it ultimately empowers the system. DÖKH activist Muazzez emphasizes the vitality of these avenues for women, noting that they provide the movement with oxygen:

The women's movement in Turkey has no oxygen and no place to be nourished from; they are just themselves. They are unorganized and besieged by a suffocating system there. The Kurdish women's movement is not like that; it has many places to be nourished from. This is the difference. It is nourished from its autonomous organizing, its people, and its guerillas. Tons of bottom-up mechanisms feed the women's movement in Kurdistan; one would be deficient without the other. It has a political party entering the elections; it has municipalities. And in our case, winning the city means the women's movement will get stronger. In Istanbul, for example, even if women get elected, will the women's movement get stronger? No. It will feed the male-dominated system because they are not elected on the basis of women's autonomous, organized power (Muazzez).

Thanks to women's confederal umbrella of DÖKH/TJA²⁵⁴ that runs autonomous election campaigns, mobilizes communities, nominates its own candidates, and backs them up once they are in office, municipalities have been able to distance themselves from the centralizing state, and collaborate more closely with local residents.²⁵⁵

In a 2014 summer *jineoloji* workshop in western Turkey attended by Turkish and Kurdish feminists, DÖKH/TJA activist Kıymet highlighted male-dominant state-society and the stateful-mind as the main obstacles to women's freedom. Some feminists like Cavidan confronted her: "But you also make demands on the state." "Yes, you are right; for example, we demand public education in our mother tongue, but in the meantime, we also struggle to open our own schools and encourage the teaching of the languages of that locality there." She continued, "What the state declares illegal is what we call our system. The state can ban our co-chair system, but then we go to the people, go to the streets and pay any price to push back." For Kıymet, it was "one thing to relegate the arrangement and control of public space to the state and another to construct self-rule mechanisms independent of the state. And when the state tries to ban, criminalize, or coopt it, you resist." This made me recall the heated discussions during the 2013 General Assembly of Women's Shelters in Istanbul. To resist the Violence Prevention and Monitoring Centres (ŞÖNİM), a government proposal to place all independent and municipal women's

shelters under central state control, DÖKH invited everyone to push cities to issue municipal council decrees to reject this top-down imposition. Turkish organizations, however, said many of them had no choice but to work with the ŞÖNİMs and push for their improvement: “They should consult us to set the methods and principles, but violence is so pervasive that only the state can deal with it.”²⁵⁶

KWM efforts do not reject the pursuit of civil rights, but they decentre the nation-state and promote a model of governance and community other than the colonial nation-state. Writing about Indigenous communities, Bruyneel describes this as the third space of sovereignty: It “resides neither simply inside nor outside the American political system but rather exists on these very boundaries, exposing both the practices and contingencies of American colonial rule” (Kevin Bruyneel, in Simpson & Smith, 2014, p. 14). The third space tends to uphold “an alternative to two ‘false choices’: independence and assimilation.” Indigenous scholars Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill see the “imagination toward governance beyond the nation-state as a generous and generative contribution of Native feminist theory” (2013, p. 16). I likewise see indigenous *jineoloji* as a generous and generative contribution to humanity.

For *jineoloji*, there is no greater calamity than society losing its power for self-defence (Jineoloji Akademisi, 2015). Assimilation into the racial state-system works through the total seizure of societal self-defence mechanisms, turning “peoples” into a mass, population, and citizenry. Because the KWM wants to revitalize the longstanding, creative, and emplaced relationship between women and their communities as an effective strategy against the crush of communal resistance, it criticizes (Turkish) feminists for “lagging in working out the linkage between the women’s question and sociality” (ibid., p. 94). According to *jineoloji*, feminism in Turkey²⁵⁷ “articulates the statist mentality and cannot transcend positivist, Eurocentric, and orientalist perspectives” (ibid., p. 94). Equally, it states that (Turkish) feminism fails to transcend the limits of liberalism, Western-centric democracies, and capitalist modernity that conceive individuals as detached from society. *Jineoloji* invites to a decolonial path the allied Turkish feminism(s) whose gender-reductive approach was “understandable for the time and context of its emergence” but “will undermine its own interests if it continues on its present path” (Perihan). Only time will tell as to whether the TFM’s historical structuration will permit such a transformation (see Section 7.1 for the responses of some feminists to *jineoloji*).

5.5 Narrower vs. broader

After this long detour, let me now return to the debate around DÖKH’s “rape culture” campaign. What I find remarkable is that the KWM’s tendency to tackle any notion using its broader meaning and mediated structuration kept clashing with TFM’s tendency to narrow matters down to the “immediate.” *Jineoloji* concepts like wife-ization, total divorce (from men and their system), enslavement (race, gender), rape (sexual, colonial), self-defence (sexual, political, cultural), the colonization of women (mental,

corporeal), the male state, femicide, and so on make the interconnections between seemingly disparate phenomena more visible in pursuit of a fresh vocabulary for a radically intersectional discourse. The word *tecavüz* (from the Arabic *tacāwuz*), which is used for rape in Turkish, means “going too far, crossing the line, exceeding the bounds.”²⁵⁸ This broader meaning is in everyday use as in *haneye, hakka, sınıra, mala tecavüz* (encroachment on residence, rights, border, or possessions). Its modern meaning as a type of sexual assault – that is, encroachment on the body – comes from *ırza tecavüz* (encroachment on chastity).²⁵⁹ By making use of this polysemic quality that moves along the axis of consent and coercion, DÖKH aspires to turn “rape culture” into a productive intersectional notion that sheds light on the interlinkage of sexism and different forms of domination. It illustrates how patriarchy sexualizes race by feminizing peoples, dehumanizing brown women and their communities through rape, and reducing the social to the physical by denying the body and the land as the “perceived, conceived, and lived space” (Lefebvre) of the colonial other. It tells that it is the same racist and patriarchal logic that gives men licence to engage in the *tecavüz* of both women and the lifeworld or land of racialized peoples. The rape of one becomes a training ground for the rape of other. More than reducing it to a metaphor, it aims to overcome the Western humanist regionalisms and restore its broader meaning that denotes all transgressions without consent, be it physical, sexual, or colonial:

If I cannot get out of my house, say a word, think, speak my language, and own my identity and my land, these are all examples of rape. The male-dominated culture breaks my willpower in all sorts of ways. It cannot tolerate my existence, my liberation; it wants me to be his colony, slave, wife or daughter. It rapes my body. I think of rape as *irade kırma* [breaking willpower], *yoksun demek* [denial of my existence]. This is its shortest definition for me (Adalet).

According to Turkish feminists, this reasoning conceals the male agency in sexual violence. But did it conceal male agency on the ground? I asked this to DÖKH activists. During the campaign, they said male community members at public meetings were extremely disturbed. They did not want to be associated with rape in either its narrower or broader sense; in fact, what bothered them most was the articulation of male violence in conjunction with state violence. Women always underlined the linkage between the nation-state system’s rape of societal life and men’s rape of women, referring to the family as the “small state” and the male-dominated system as the “state culture.” For them, non-consensual relations at all levels of life were enslaving. After listening, male residents did not want to believe that what they inflict on women could be as dehumanizing and degrading as what the Turkish state inflicts on Kurds. This created a tension of empathy and alienation conducive to Kurdish male self-reflection. DÖKH strategy was to use the concept of “rape culture” to shame the statist male authority, both in terms of immediate agency and mediated structure: “Sometimes after those gatherings men would say ‘we are ashamed to say we are men anymore’” (Delal). Turkish allies’ assumption that men would not believe that the epithet of “rape culture” applied to themselves and that they would abscond from their responsibility for violence proved unfounded; it seemed that it was the very drawing of these linkages that made such dereliction of duty less likely.

Organizing actions or meetings together with men to reflect on “rape culture” as a community has always been unsettling for Turkish feminists who prefer confrontational, separationist methods in dealing with the gender conflict. I read TFM fear as the product of an experience rooted in “taking-power.” Place-bound strategies of “making-power,” like re-educating men and the community entail an engagement with the “entanglements.” That said, did DÖKH think the campaign achieved its goals? Not really. The problem, however, was not about the harms of broadening the discourse on male violence, but that its *modus operandi* prevented it from reaching more people at a grassroots level:

We could have gathered more people around that concept, but then we relied on press statements and demonstrations and less on public meetings. My objection is not to the content but to the form and the kind of activities we did. I am afraid that we are increasingly beginning to embrace the feminists’ methods that we criticize, namely, those that do not allow us to reach other women. Isn’t that our primary concern? It’s not only feminists – we also have a *tepeden* [top-down] approach. We had to be able to find a better way to convince [wo]men in poor communities and connect the ‘rape culture’ discourse to their concrete needs (Rojda).

Part 3 · Political Encounters

Chapter 6 · Women for Peace Initiative (BİKG, 2009–2016)

It was only after the start of the peace talks [2013] that the Turkish women’s peace efforts took some heart from the system. Until then, so much blood had been spilt here because they had kept silent. Why? They were under the spell of the mass media and the system. That is why the Turkish Left and the women’s movement in Turkey criticized the Kurds in self-righteous ways, making it sound like a political disagreement, implying ‘but you did this,’ or ‘our approach is different.’ Mainstream society, on the other hand, was more direct; they just called us terrorists (Zerrin).

It is essential to take ownership of the peace struggle dating back to the late 1990s. Turkish friends generally dismiss this past and pretend as if everything started in 2013. This is a delimiting approach. The peace struggle was initiated with the first unilateral Kurdish ceasefire in 1993 in Turkey. And after the institution of the women’s branch at HADEP, it was Kurdish women who pioneered the struggle through numerous actions. Since then, we have experienced a strain with Turkish women friends, mutually. At the present time, however, we have forgotten this unease to some extent and are trying to compensate for the lost time by taking steps towards each other (Bircan).

Since the war with the Turkish state began in 1984, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) has declared eight unilateral ceasefires to advance its commitment to a peaceful resolution. The Turkish state recognized none. The PKK leader Öcalan, soon after his imprisonment in 1999, appealed for one of these ceasefires.²⁶⁰ This “negative peace” period²⁶¹ ended in 2004 due to an escalating Turkish military offensive, but even in war, the Kurdistan Freedom Movement (KÖH) representatives continued to call for the institution of truth commissions, public education in the mother tongue, and recognition of Kurdish status. These calls culminated in a “democratic autonomy” declaration by the *de facto* Democratic Society Congress (DTK) of Northern Kurdistan in 2011 (“DTK Demokratik Özerkliği ilan etti,” 2011).²⁶² For its part, the Kurdish Women’s Movement (KWM) took many pioneering steps during the 2000s to create allies for the Kurdish demand for “a lasting peace in dignity.” They wanted to spread peace activism among Turks by fostering alliances with Turkish democratic, leftist and/or feminist circles. But it was not that easy to convince most of these groups of the necessity for peace, as Bircan, of the Democratic Free Women’s Movement (DÖKH) summarizes above.

One pioneering step of the KWM was to co-found Amargi Women’s Academy/Cooperative (discussed in Section 8.2). It was during this period that the Turkish activists’ initially, and *en masse*, witnessed the reality of Kurdish women. Around the same time, Turkish progressives were introduced to Western anti-war feminist discourses, largely through the 2004 World Tribunal of Iraq, held in Istanbul as part of the international anti-war campaign against the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Another major step was initiated in 2009, in the aftermath of Operation KCK,²⁶³ an extensive counter-terrorism detention campaign aimed at criminalizing the civilian self-organizing efforts of the Kurds. The Women for Peace Initiative (*Barış İçin Kadın Girişimi*, BİKG) came into existence at that point as a response to the Kurdish women’s call for solidarity. BİKG was set up in an Amed (Diyarbakır) meeting. During the summer of

2009, a series of forums, conferences, and actions²⁶⁴ took place under the banner, “We have words to say and power to initiate a resolution” (BİKG). The Amargi peace activism of 2001–2003 was a historical precursor to BİKG, which came after a period of interruption that occurred because of the war (2004–2009), during which time no significant women’s peace action was observed.²⁶⁵

Soon after the so-called Kurdish Opening, when Kurds emerged as a powerful opposition force through the 2009 local and 2011 general elections (see endnote 159), socialist-feminist peace activist Gülüm stated that the government applied a dual strategy to break Kurdish dominance by creating an expectation for peace in society, while at the same time paralyzing the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) (Gülüm & Irmak Çetin, 2012). Thereafter, the AKP government launched Operation KCK, and in the second half of 2011, the internationally mediated, undisclosed first-round peace talks with the PKK (Oslo process) ended with a stark turn towards crackdown militaristic solutions.²⁶⁶ A youth activist I talked to said that they were overcome by a state of paralysis for almost two years. In order to cut off ties of the workers of the movement from the people, almost all executive cadre were arrested. The activist continued proudly, “Young and old, hundreds of new faces defying the fear of arrest, filled in the gaps fast.” BİKG was mostly inactive during 2012, during the height of the armed conflict and the arrest campaign. The dialogue process was resumed in January 2013, following the hunger strike of Kurdish political prisoners, who demanded the lifting of the absolute isolation imposed on the chief negotiator Abdullah Öcalan.²⁶⁷ With this, BİKG also resumed its activities, though not for long. Striving hard to continue functioning even after the 2015 collapse of the second-round talks, it went defunct after the July 2016 coup attempt and the *ipso facto* state-of-emergency declared across Turkey.

In the words of a BİKG member,

It was a more pluralistic time in the beginning, when we would converse on what feminist or non-feminist women, laborer women or Kurdish women, separately, were thinking on certain peace-related issues. These were serious discussions. Others would raise objections, for example, when the overall peace discourse got dictated too much by one particular group (Çiğdem).

But the voices that Çiğdem shared above were eventually lost and BİKG became a somewhat uniform, small group of individuals. Without any mechanism for recognition and representation of political and cultural differences, at the time of my fieldwork (2013–14), it already appeared as a closed group that met at the convenience of its active participants. Members of the initially platform-like initiative included DÖKH, leftist political parties, labor unions, women's organizations, and independent feminists and women. In time, however, feminist activists and intellectuals came to the fore, while others mostly withdrew.

In this chapter, I want to look at why the collapse into an executive core group format happened. To that end, I examine two ambiguities that I think BİKG maintained throughout: (1) Was BİKG a small,

uniform group of individuals or an open platform where differences could be represented? What were the terms of conduct among its participants? (2) What was the status of DÖKH/KJA at BİKG?

We read from initiative's early posts and resolutions expressions of hope that BİKG would pave the way to a women's peace movement (Barış İçin Kadın Girişimi, 2009b, 2009a). Applying intersectional decolonial analysis, I probe both the realized and unrealized potentials of this hope, by putting Kurdish women's changing critique, demands, and offers in a contrapuntal reading with the Turkish perspectives. Without undermining the invaluable efforts of BİKG activists, I explore the limitations of universalizing white feminist epistemologies for the purpose of peacebuilding through the following questions: How much do BİKG activists remain accountable to the Otherness of the Other, its unique demands and needs? How much do they contribute towards transforming the colonial mindset of Turkish nationals? How much do they encourage the flourishing of other women's peace strategies?

6.1 Merger or alliance? Universalist vs. pluriversalist logics of peacebuilding

With the resumption of the dialogue process,²⁶⁸ BİKG was revived. The May 2013 BİKG conference titled "Women Taking Active Role in the Peace Process" was the broadest base gathering after a long time of around 200 women. Fatma Kaşan, DÖKH spokeswoman at the time, elaborated in a TV interview before the conference, on the indivisible truth of Kurdish women and the dual agenda of women's peacebuilding. She began by contextualizing the colonial domination, going back to the turn of the 20th-century when the nation-state model was forced on the multiethnic/faith fabric of the Middle East:

The Kurdish people were sacrificed during the making of the nation-states in the Middle East. The *kati* (hard-line exclusivist) nation-state model was instituted through the denial, annihilation, and assimilation of Kurdish people. Our democratic autonomy and democratic nation perspective suggest a confederal system where all the colors and diversity in the Middle East may organize themselves autonomously. No matter how great a state you are, how great an army, wealth, or capital you have, you are doomed to be defeated against the power of the truth. This is not a minority-majority relationship. What matters is the truth itself. If a culture, a language, an identity exists, and it has a life, a personality, a character of its own, you cannot wipe it out from the land. This is against nature. There may only be temporary suppression or disabling. ... We have an ethical-political identity; that is, fundamental values and principles such as the sisterhood of peoples, the freedom of faiths, cultures, and the women. If it is possible to co-exist within the 'democratic modernity perspective' and institute that political system, then we will take that path. This is a dialogue process started by Mr. Öcalan, with the Kurdish people on one side and the Turkish state on the other. We carry the hope that it will evolve into negotiations; this is what we prefer at this stage (Kaşan, 2013).

Kaşan went on to add that the Kurdish people were powerful actors in the political canvas of the 21st century and their key demands included:

[...] the sisterhood of peoples based on peace, democratic principles, and the equal relationship of all ethnicities and faiths in freedom. But most importantly, we try to build a social liberation model grounded on women's freedom. We want to come together with all women's movements from Turkey, political, social groups and individuals and build a democratic Republic together. And in this negotiation process all women should take intervening roles either as *taraf* (negotiating side), observers, or witnesses. We want to ensure 50 percent representation of women in the Committee of

Wise People, strong representation of women in the talks between the state and Mr. Öcalan, while at the same time turn the *negotiation method into a form of living in the society*, into a form of social relationship based on dialogue and communication (Kaşan, 2013).

She further reiterated that:

We will organize ourselves in the forthcoming conference around two main agendas: one, the political agenda of women, what kind of peace, democratic society, constitution, Republic, and legal changes they want; two, demands of women around gender inequality (Kaşan, 2013).

Kaşan connects the interlocking truth and demands of her people, summarized in the democratic autonomy and nation model, to their desire to institute the “negotiation method as a form of life.” Women’s gender freedom is dependent on women’s participation in this societal negotiation. KJB²⁶⁹ coordination member Dersim asserts, “Women should be present in the negotiation process, both to guarantee their constitutional rights and also in the name of the peoples. Sensitivity to active participation of the peoples and securing their rights is rather a determining characteristic of our women’s politics” (Dersim, 2013). DÖKH/KJA conceives peace as:

[...] democratic nation-building that allows for co-existence where peoples, faiths, and cultures are considered as sources of wealth, as opposed to the nation-state that represents the *tekçi* (unitary/uniformist/monopolist) and centralist mode of capitalist modernity. KJA struggles for advancement of self-will and self-governance of communities (KJA, 2015, p. 12).

In the conference, DÖKH underlined that the Turkish state could only convince Kurds of its goodwill by recognizing the Kurdish political will and Abdullah Öcalan as a free and equal interlocutor and that the necessary constitutional changes and guarantees to legalize the process should take effect as soon as possible.²⁷⁰ For the sustainability of peace, Öcalan proposed mass public assemblies to be held across the country to discuss the truths of both sides, before arriving at further legal changes. Activists insisted that the position of allies should not be that of passive support, but towards mediating the discussions for reconstruction of the Republic, based on mutually negotiated principles. Facing up to the wrongdoings of the past and present was necessary to this end. In HDP MP Sebahat Tuncel’s speech, facing up to the past was not only about documenting crimes, but also about Turks and Kurds gathering to discuss the impact of the war on both sides; this was the only way to overcome the so-called “national sensitivities” of Turks.²⁷¹ The letter from captive DÖKH members that was read to the audience suggested the formation of a coordinating assembly composed of women representing all sections of society. Women’s peace coordination assemblies could be set up at regional, city, or district levels. They emphasized that “hall meetings”²⁷² are important, but the real success lies in the proliferation of grassroots activities, mass participated public meetings, concerts, rallies involving as many women as possible, where Turkish and Kurdish women’s groups, cultural or labor organizations can interact with women in the communities. This assembly (or confederation of assemblies), having close relations with CHP, AKP, and BDP/HDP women’s structures, would seek to create shared democratic terms and values via the broadest possible coalition of women, and serve as a mechanism between diverse communities on the ground and state

institutions. Peace delegations could meet mothers of both the guerillas and the soldiers, or the sexually assaulted, forcibly displaced, or imprisoned Kurdish women, the KCK/KJB representatives as well as Öcalan, and communicate their concerns and demands to the state commissions. They expected their allies to garner support within the grassroots and the women's groups, and relying on that support, put pressure on the state.

BİKG ended up initiating five commissions: Contact and Observation, Women's Truths, Gender Equality and Constitutional Reform, Security Reform, and Press and Media. The outcome of setting up these commissions, I argue, had two significant effects on shaping BİKG activities over the next two years: First, the organization style of closed working-groups based on individual-base participation was tacitly instituted, which in the long run led to the silent withdrawal of almost all organized groups. Second, although no legal-constitutional formal framework was yet in place, BİKG mainly prioritized women's representation in formal processes of state-level reforms (taking-power),²⁷³ rather than informal popularization of peace on the ground (making-power). By mid-2014, due to the same group of women who could financially – and in terms of time – afford out-of-town solidarity trips, and the detailed academic discussions fully preoccupying active members during prolonged report-writing processes, BİKG could not attract new volunteers. Most commissions either became defunct or turned into a closed group of feminist academic-expert activists closely acquainted with one another.

The 2014 annual conference was held at this stage, at which time neither DÖKH nor leftist or women's organizations were active participants, and it was more visible now to Turkish BİKG activists that the government was not taking any steps toward instituting legally binding mechanisms. Before the conference, DÖKH representatives were noting that it was time BİKG clarified its strategy for expanding in society. At every opportunity DÖKH stressed that it is their self-power and rightful truth that they rely on, not trust on the state. Now Turkish feminists were also in a place to quote them, "As you always say, we will not wait and start building the kind of peace that we want as women" (Nur). Thus, some feminists proposed the formation of a women's coalition comprising liberals, Kemalists, Muslim or Alevi women, to create encounters with lower-tier social organizations. Another change suggested was that workshops not lecture, feature in the format of conversation, and that they spend more time on how to cope with chauvinist questions to be encountered in public meetings, such as, "Why peace, when there is terror?" Navigating messy clashes and crises on the ground would necessitate laborious, strong intermediation by the allies. An academic self-critically stressed, "If we've learned women do not like lectures, then let's remake BİKG together and turn women into peace workers through a coalition." Nevertheless, the working principle envisioned was more or less the same as before, signing the people up on a non-representational basis for ad-hoc work-teams. As these teams were not based on a place-based alliance

of collective identities accountable to their social bases and the peace platform, eventually they shrank into one small group again.²⁷⁴

To prepare for the 2014 conference, DÖKH and Turkish women gathered around a table to share their plans regarding the process. DÖKH activists were excited to hear the idea of a “women’s coalition,” which they thought signified a willingness on the Turkish side to spread the message in society. In this spirit, they briefly shared their own experience and difficulties of trying to build neighborhood communes and assemblies of women since the mid-2000s in Kurdistan, how difficult it was to fight the habit of centralized thinking/organizing that stemmed from the needs of urgent decision-making in a war zone. However, they also realized that this propensity towards centralization would not allow the flourishing of the horizontal assemblies that should be about, “mutual liberation, not imposing one’s liberation on others.”

At the same time, the Turkish blockade and isolation politics on the Kurdish city of Kobanî in the *de facto* autonomous region of Rojava (North and East Syria), to break the Kurdish resistance against the siege of ISIS, peaked towards the end of that summer. Inspired by Rojava’s commune and assembly system, the exercise of woman-only and mixed-gender – 50 percent women, co-chaired – local assemblies representing all ethnocultural groups in the region, as well as the building of “democratic autonomy” were being discussed vigorously in all parts of Kurdistan.²⁷⁵ DÖKH representative Adalet in her talk connected her insights derived from these discussions to the relationship they envisioned between the HDP and HDK; how HDP as a political party would become a marginalized political elite if HDK (People’s Democratic Congress, founded 2012) assemblies did not function properly and organize the ethnic, cultural, and faith grassroots communities for alliance.²⁷⁶ Adalet was enacting “border thinking” from the borders of the colonial matrix of power, using an alternative, multinational, non-exclusivist knowledge tradition; “the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside” (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006, p. 206), therefore, not fully comprehensible to Turkish feminists embodying a “stateful,” Eurocentric, postcolonial nation reality (discussed in Chapter 5). DÖKH was willing to share its decolonial response to capitalist modernity and years of trial and error in Kurdistan, in public forums in Turkey. *Gezi* uprising’s spirit was the kind of movement synergy they were looking for, where different cosmologies could blend into each other. They had an alternative imagination of the universal from within the “decolonial border.” Yet, for Turkish feminists that vision remained a non-replicable singularity of the Kurds that did not apply to the circumstances of Turkey’s west.

The August 2014 rise of a “women’s confederal system” in the women-led revolution of Rojava was a materialization of the women liberationist paradigm of KÖH. For the women of Northern Kurdistan, it was a moment of intense learning, inspiration, and active solidarity, the absence of which would have had deadly consequences for Kurdish survival. In its 2015 conference, after months-long brainstorming around strategizing on how to broaden *özgün, özerk* (women-specific, autonomous) organizing in the

communities and encourage national, ethnic, cultural, and political heterogeneity, DÖKH decided to evolve into a Kurdistan-wide congress, *Kongreya Jinên Azad* (Free Women's Congress, KJA). In 2013 a DÖKH activist shared, "It was the street and neighborhood communes/assemblies that would make DÖKH a real transformative success. We could not bring things up to that system-formation level. We only managed to institutionalize DÖKH's autonomous agenda and institutional protocols, open new women's centers, academies and so on. Basically, what we accomplished was to institute our *kadın hukuku* (women's conduct) with existing entities, rather than spreading in the communities." DÖKH's self-criticism was that it could not overcome a uniform character in practice, albeit efforts to the contrary. Now was the time to shift from a "coordinating umbrella" model towards a structure more suitable for building a pluriversal confederate system. "Rojava became an inspiration in Mesopotamia. It is the struggle for and by all women; Arab, Armenian, Assyrian, Ezidi, Syriac, Turkmen, all faiths and ethnicities. At this stage, here also we need to involve broader segments of society" (Evin). The lesson drawn from Rojava was that the congress model of organizing, i.e., a bottom-up confederation of women's communes and assemblies, was indeed possible, and more suitable for solidarity-based self-rule.²⁷⁷ It was more inclusive, egalitarian, and uniting for the horizontal co-existence of the broadest possible women's-base from diverse *Kurdistani* communities. From the year 2013 onwards, DÖKH/KJA strived to deepen the practice of this approach, trying to enact multiplicity via the alliance of Muslim, Christian, Alevi, Kurdish, Armenian, Ezidi, Arab, Assyrian, and LBT, women across Kurdistan.

I don't think we [Turkish feminists] are sensitive enough to the accomplishments of the Kurdish women in Rojava. Our curiosity towards them is limited; roughly, 'good stuff is happening.' Which steps did they take? How can we evaluate it from our perspective? We do not try to learn their experiences. Only remotely [...] We have things to criticize, too, I don't argue that they do everything in a feminist way. But it is serious stuff under war conditions. How do they do it? How do they establish self-defence powers? How do the women's assemblies operate? How do women exist in the autonomy administrations? We don't discuss these with the sense that we might benefit in the future. We might have different ideas regarding the Middle East, but it is problematic that we say nothing in relation to women there. We don't have a word on behalf of feminists (Bilge).

The issue of what is happening in the Middle East cannot be tackled by general statements like, 'women are oppressed, women are raped' anymore. It is positive what women do in Rojava, very important. But what is beyond that? Women have a justice system there, but does it operate like ours? Yes, they are good fighters, they struggled a lot, took to the streets, but how does it work when people apply to those women's justice mechanisms? We must learn these. Do we understand, here, in the west, the same thing from the social reconstruction in Kurdistan? We must sit down and talk about what these concepts correspond to in the west (Birsén).

It was around 2015 that for the first time some feminist allies would open up to taking a genuine interest in this land-based, anticolonial feminist practice grounded in *inşa* (building) of autonomy. In their solidarity visits to the Rojava border of Northern Kurdistan, Turkish allies got a chance to observe the holistic revolutionary truth of KWM across Turkish and Syrian sides of Kurdistan and, even if on a personal level, started thinking what women's self-rule and self-defence meant in that cosmology (Osmanağaoğlu, 2015b).²⁷⁸ Visiting the razed city of Cizîre in September 2015 with 150 women from

western Turkey, air-bombed and mortar fired by the Turkish army (unimaginable by BİKG only a year before), they could now get a sense of how these communes of women and youth *did* and *do* mean a lot:

They describe self-defence and self-governance – in other words, ownership of the means that would prevent the central-state destroy them by deciding on how they should exist, or even if they should live or not – as the only way to freedom for themselves. Especially for women, these decision-making mechanisms are important, as they also become the means to take ownership of their own lives and own words. That is why, when Cizre is resisting hunger, thirst, and state attacks through street communes and street and neighborhood assemblies, it is women who put themselves to work the most, it is women who participate in actions the most. Everywhere, in every commune and assembly, they comprise 50 percent at the least. There we have witnessed that women in fact say ‘no’ to a governance system that excludes them, the women (“Kadınlardan Cizre izlenimleri,” 2015).

This transient curiosity for the non-state, community-centered truth of Kurdish decolonial feminism could be sustained only until about a year after the collapse of the peace process (mid-2016), during which time the Turkish security forces conducted a massive military destruction campaign in Northern Kurdistan.²⁷⁹ Partly because of the belatedness of the awakening, partly continuing exclusivist tendencies within the TFM (Turkish Feminist Movement), and partly higher security risks involved due to deepening state repression, these learnings did not translate into transformative action. Also, BİKG was quite worn out by the internal disputes that I detail in the next section. With the resumption of war, the track of history dramatically changed. BİKG switched to narrow-reach, anti-war public demonstrations, and humanitarian-aid petitions/campaigns.²⁸⁰ By the end of 2016, the initiative went defunct.

In DÖKH’s vision, peacebuilding was a form of popular negotiation across society, a pluriversal movement/community-building activity, horizontal, direct-participative, mainly at the grassroots level. The assembly-type, place-based organising model they suggested would allow different peace strategies to emerge, appropriate to the circumstances of every locale. DÖKH looked for coalition-building mechanisms that would benefit from this multiplicity, rather than a merger into one. Kurdish, feminist, socialist, religious, humanist-liberal, or Kemalist approaches needed to have spaces to learn from each other and open newer paths for action. The priority goal was to create face-to-face avenues reaching into the neighborhoods, workplaces, and homes: “Peace is only possible by sharing, discussing, and understanding each other’s feelings. We, the women, will go door-to-door and listen to as many women as we can reach” (İpek, 2009). BİKG’s independence was valuable so far as it differentiated its volunteer and audience base from those of the Kurdish organizations and reached other sections of society: “If it is again the Kurdish women here who will fight for peace, or again the Kurdish majority neighborhoods or groups that BİKG will reach, then it does not make much sense, as we already are able to do these without BİKG” (Müjgan).

Serra, an independent left-leaning activist who withdrew from BİKG, once invited her friends to one of the “Peace Spots,” and was surprised²⁸¹ to see HDP Co-Chair, Sebahat Tuncel²⁸¹ making a speech there

alone, “I love Sebahat and vote for her, but those accompanying me were apolitical women who quickly got concerned if this was a BDP/HDP meeting. Especially when they heard the *zılgits* (traditional Kurdish ululation), they felt worried and left. They just wanted peace and expected something softer in tone from an initiative like BİKG.” She continued, “When BİKG makes a call, Kurdish MPs accept immediately. But then there is not much effort spent to convince other political parties to participate. This is why eventually the meetings look like a Kurdish activity, or BİKG looks like a Kurdish organization” (Serra). Following this incident, Serra started to question the function of BİKG in weekly meetings, stressing that Kurdish women had already paid the cost of the struggle, even died for peace; it was western Turkey that lacked this demand. But to convince them, BİKG needed to be independent. “BİKG claims to be independent, but then it is predominantly Kurdish women present at certain events. This undermines its claim.” She argued that Turkish peace advocates had to be more visible, and at the front; many liberal, (neo)Kemalist or Muslim women walked out of BİKG thinking that it felt too much like BDP’s women’s branch. For her, they had to target the millions, so that the government would feel the pressure to stay on the negotiating table. “Unfortunately, we are happy enough when we gather 40–50 people” (Serra). And to target the millions, you could not speak only from a too leftist, too feminist, or a too Kurdish place:

DÖKH cares a lot about BİKG, why? Because they assume there is diversity, different kinds of women there. So, it is important to open that space for those differences. In these kinds of initiatives, nobody should aspire to assimilate the Other into herself. It is not enough to accept the difference; it should actively be desired. A woman friend wearing a headscarf told me that BİKG looked too leftist and too Kurdish, she said if you are not one of them, it becomes impossible to be part of the group. The moment she said something, they would start questioning what she meant and pull it to different places. ‘And maybe I mean what I say, but am I still not here for peace?’ (Serra).

Serra paused for a moment and asked:

We want the PKK and the State to sit down for peace, right? Now, why do we have to assimilate them into each other? Let them negotiate! It is crucial to desire the difference. We focus too much on the technical details of what is negotiated on the table, but that is up to the bargaining power of the negotiating sides. We should focus on expanding the public dialogue across differences. This Muslim woman was telling me, ‘There is already no demand for peace on the religious side, and here we are silenced, too, so we cannot channel our energy anywhere’ (Serra).

Indeed, many Kurdish women I talked to agreed that “BİKG should be able to appeal to *batılı* (western [Turkey]) women from different political and ethnic groups, Laz, Circassian, Azeri, Georgian, Arab, Armenian, Greek, Turkmen, Turkish, Alevi, Muslim, Christian” (Dilan). Unfortunately, this demand triggered prolonged bitter discussions. DÖKH labor activist Müjgan, siding with Serra, recounted that some insisted BİKG should be a place for secular leftist or feminist discourse, and not for the Kemalist, the liberal, or the religious. Fights over whom to include or exclude “created breakaways and a nerve-racking atmosphere for a while” (Müjgan). Independent Kurdish feminist Çiğdem thought that socialists were unwilling due to their historic opposition to the neo-conservative AKP government.²⁸² Socialist Yeşim confirmed, “The Kurdish demand to convince those who stay distant to peace with the Kurds

[AKP, CHP etc.], this time, I think, has estranged the leftist women, while it did not attract AKP or CHP, either.” The same applied to the predominantly secular TFM. Both movements had a legacy of having difficulty with connecting to and organizing with religious or conservative workers, women, youth, or the poor. “Nobody cares about reaching outside of their social bases. Nobody asks a Muslim woman to open a space in her neighborhood for them,” Çiğdem said resentfully, adding, “Their enmities and prejudices impede their ability to reach out.”

As a result, despite the valuable efforts of a few, BİKG remained as yet another small group attended by a closed circle of secular, left-leaning allies of marginal influence. Its shift from a platform-like *zemin* (ground) with *bileşens* (constituent representations), to a less structured, closed group, illustrated an inability to work with cultural and political heterogeneity. In a feminist’s words, BİKG was unable to spread because “it [did] not have arms like an octopus, persisting through personal relationships of a few women who share an intimate language. That is very difficult to break.” Another activist noted, “Elitism, growing distant from the people on the ground, that is when most organizations lose it and go extinct.” But rather than viewing the failure to reach other Turkish people as a structural problem inherent to the modes of organizing and a mindset, Turkish feminists blamed it on women’s lack of interest. They were expecting women to respond to their calls, self-emerge, and do peace work wherever the women were positioned. This contradicted the community-based logics of decolonization.

6.2 Internal contestations over modes of action

At BİKG, DÖKH representatives found themselves playing a mediating role among Turks to keep as many women actively involved as possible. They were filled with apprehension to secure everyone’s stay, wanted no one disappear so that that space survived. İlknur, working in a feminist foundation, could feel how important the peace talks were for DÖKH, as opposed to Turkey’s west: “Do you understand? They were in an *edi bese* (enough already) state of mind, the peace process was at stake, and they wanted no more obstacles. Their approach was not to do away with what was at hand, but to expand and multiply it” (İlknur). This comment corroborated with DÖKH activist Hêja’s assertion that their strategy was to focus on what Turkish women could offer, rather than what they lacked:

Unfortunately, we must admit that they [Turkish women] have no deep concern for walking together, essentially it is our concern. We do not want to be too much in the front-line, but women ask us to side with their arguments when there is an internal dispute at BİKG. It is hard to explain to them that our concern is to win all women who might think differently. We cannot confine ourselves to women who are already more aligned with us. For example, they complain about why we must walk with what they perceive as ‘politically problematic’ women. What they don’t realize is that you cannot abandon people each time you see political issues with them. Our attention is towards resolving the frictions, on a basic level at least, and keep it going (Hêja).

Against the dichotomous demands coming from all sides (feminists, socialists, liberals), imposing mutually exclusive social-justice discourses/methods, Kurdish emphasis was generally on trying to

convince why each democratic alternative should find a place at BİKG. Heterogeneity was an advantage, not a loss. “Let it be small, but mine” was an approach that DÖKH activist Neslihan identified as one that could perhaps explain the current stagnation of Turkish movements. Feminists, for example, feared that involving some women celebrities might dilute the “feminist discourse.” “There is constant anxiety,” she said disappointedly, “what if they cannot do what *they* want?” She was unable to make sense of this level of unease at a time when feminists should be more confident, for it was the 2000s now. For her, as far as peace was concerned, one had to be able to pursue parallel channels that might qualitatively differ from one another depending on the interest and ability of their adherents:

There are all kinds of people here. For example, those who want to do street action, let them do it. Okay? And those who want to do academic work, let them do it. Let’s say I don’t like talking to the press. If some want to gain visibility through this, fine, let them own this identity and be visible. No need to worry whether she talks outside of that which is commonly agreed, she cannot, and even if she does, you can always say that it is her personal thought. But it does not work like this at BİKG, you know? Despite a claim to the contrary, actually, there is no serious *mütevazilik* (humbleness) among women or *alan açma* (opening space for others). On top of that, those attending from amongst us, feminists, or the mixed-gender organizations, are always the same few women. For example, X suggests doing a street action that week. We agree. But then she does not participate in its organizing. Again, the same small *mutfak* (kitchen) group do all the work, seven to eight people. When it is always the same seven–eight, this causes *daralma* (contraction). And the moment they stop working, it all falls apart (Neslihan).

Throughout BİKG, we see a small core group called *kitchen* taking responsibility in decision-making, and a larger fluctuating group of 300–500 in the email group, not necessarily taking a role in the division of labor. In the absence of organizational mechanisms taking an active role in expansion at the grassroots level, one strategy adopted to attract more women, earlier on (before 2012), was to hold the weekly *kitchen* meetings at the venues of feminist groups like Amargi, SFK, or KADAV. It was expected that younger feminists, overhearing their talk, would take interest. Or another strategy was to organize workshops and press releases at *Cezayir*, a stylish restaurant and meeting-room complex at the heart of touristic Istanbul Beyoğlu, so that women especially in art, media, politics, “who did not want to be branded as ‘Kurdish’ or look like directly engaging with the Kurds” would have easier access. One-to-one contact with social-democrat political figures closer to Kemalist CHP and some feminist academics and their graduate students, were also sought. *Peace Spots*,²⁸³ on the other hand, formed the street connection.

I was there at BİKG when it started in 2009. Then I left it for some time. This year [2013], with the peace process, I came back. It had no resemblance with how I left it. When I left, it had a far more pluralist structure and diversity of women. The discourse was not that ossified. Now it is too ossified. This cadre, that you also saw, have loads of things against each other, accumulated during many years of doing politics together, some of them personal. Because I was acquainted with them all, I could start doing politics at BİKG again. But, for example, after that big call, many new women came. And we made much bigger meetings. No newcomer stays. Because there is an unwelcoming structure here. Just a group of women who constantly have ossified words to say only against one another. Self-referential comments... So, no new person comes for a second time (Gökçe).

“In time, teacher-like voices became more predominant,” Amargi feminist Gökçe thought, contributing to “ossification” of the gender and peace discourse. After the resumption of BİKG in 2013, along with the volunteer profile, participation rules, and activism strategies also changed. Neslihan recounts that this shift in participation strategy, from more representational towards an individual-base, at its onset, did not mean to prioritize one mode over the other:

Not enough if just X comes. Let other women from SFK, whoever is sensitive to the peace issue, also join in. Therefore, in addition to representatives, we also cared about individual-base participation. Because otherwise, just one or two representatives would attend, and then they would fail to relay our decisions at BİKG to their organizations. We spent a whole year like that, experiencing this. For instance, women from all structures would come. But then, they would not give feedback. This made it less participative. Soon as we encouraged individual participation more, more began to join, whether in a representative capacity or not. Participation of organizations obviously was vital for us. They always have a special place at BİKG. But, at this point, individual participation was more on the boil (Neslihan).

For DÖKH, it seems this was a shift in emphasis, to encourage interest and participation of individuals. Yet, at the same time, they wanted leftist and feminist organizations reach their member and social bases more actively across Istanbul and Anatolia, and open doors to the communities that DÖKH could not enter. “I wish we could set up our peace spots also in the Black Sea, Aegean region, and so on, and could genuinely talk about why we need peace. Since it is not the state that will do this, we should do it. This is exactly what we failed to accomplish,” said Kurdish activist Müjgan. Despite the demand to accommodate multiple modes, however, responding to a newcomer in a 2014 workshop, an independent feminist would describe BİKG as “the sum of whoever happens to be present. It is not a place like a professional structure with an executive head or anything. It walks with whoever is present, sometimes five people, sometimes 20, once it was even 40. Otherwise, around 200 women come to the conferences. BİKG basically is you and me, nothing else.”

How did the tacit shift from a platform-like *zemin* (ground) to a less structured, loose group, affect the interrelation of BİKG constituents? As the feminist majority “kitchen” group’s discomfort with the visibility of group identities came to dominate the discourse, socialist, Muslim, Alevi, or (neo)Kemalist women whose women’s identity and connection to BİKG was construed through a sense of belonging to their own political or cultural communities, felt alienated. Only few continued to attend, while keeping their institutional identity covert, and others opted to organize separate peace activities, and yet many others were just discouraged away from peace politics.

Socialist Hayriye commented, “I belong somewhere, I have a background, I represent it, how can I abstract myself from that?” She knew that DÖKH also thought in a similar way, but “probably feminists and DÖKH eventually agreed on non-representation, except for the covert representation of DÖKH, because Kurdish women have a specific position in the peace talks,” she added. No DÖKH member I have spoken to testified to such an agreement. But many socialists perceived this to be a feminist

imposition of the preference for *örgütsüzlük* (staying unorganized): “Fewer feminists would join due to the presence of women from mixed-gender organizations back in 2011–12, and now [2013] it is the Left that withholds itself” (Yeşim). This seemed to be a continuation of the long-time dispute between the socialists and feminists over whose struggle counts as “the women’s” (explored in Chapter 8). For Hayriye, it manifested the feminist desire to represent the women’s movement as a whole: “And we said, you cannot represent all of it, we also exist, Kurdish women also exist. What really matters is to open channels for different constituents of women’s liberation to be able to walk together.” Besides socialists, Dilara from a women’s rights institution also opposed to what she named as the “tyranny of structurelessness”:

They say I cannot use my group’s name, no representation. But women’s organizations are already too invisible. Nobody takes us seriously. Why do we also have to do the same towards one another? How will I be able to convince my organization then? Mine is a white organization, if I do not talk about peace, nobody will give a heck about it. But we should find a way to involve such women’s organizations, go to them, have meetings, seminars, and hold them accountable (Dilara).

When the accountability and representation system are unstructured or non-transparent, specific individuals with privilege – time, experience, income, education – eventually come to enjoy some degree of unchecked power over collective decisions. Indeed, many feminist organizations in Turkey abolished themselves mainly due to an inability to account for invisible hierarchies turning into accumulated tensions, both among the privileged members, and between them and the marginalized.

According to socialist Diren, DÖKH displayed “a stronger propensity for collaborating with feminist friends” and kept a distance from socialists. “Most of the time, it felt that we were left alone with the ideas we brought,” Diren remarked. She recalled that they took some steps, including efforts to organize BİKG in other cities but, “could not get sufficient support to be able to continue.” Their actions and suggestions appeared futile. She resented KÖH taking them for granted: “Perhaps because we are supporters already, they try to win the feminists,” she said. She sensed a growing Kurdish tendency to undervalue the socialist and overvalue the liberal mind. It seemed unfair as it was thanks to their unyielding stance with the Kurds at every critical turn that the democratic movement in Turkey could reach its current level. Their interventions furthered the radical tone of the peace discourse. The feeling of abandonment that Diren experienced reminded me of Kurdish activists’ criticism that Turkish allies did not internalize the peace struggle as their own. The approach still was mainly, “Kurds are oppressed, so we should support them.” This external relation to war and peace was perceived as an *egemen tavır* (hegemon attitude)²⁸⁴ by DÖKH. At a later point in the conversation, Diren indeed added, “But socialist allies, like me, do, and have to, make the self-criticism that neither were we that proactive or successful in attracting women towards our position, or organizing at the grassroots level.” This external relation was observable in Hayriye’s account, too. She stressed that instead of high-tier representative bodies of AKP or CHP, BİKG had to turn to low-tier-mechanisms, such as, democratic mass organizations,

townsmanship associations, and religious or environmental groups. But her party could not grow in that direction either, due to their troubled relationship with BİKG:

Millions of women voting for AKP, CHP, or MHP send their children to war and lose them. Moreover, this sexist militarism translates into more violence at home. Since a peaceful atmosphere where people do not die concerns them directly, we need to go to these women. Kurdish women are asking for peace. Socialist women, therefore, must also make their presence felt at BİKG, but they don't. It is because they cannot express themselves there. As a result, they are unable to relate to their working-class social bases over the issues of peace and war crimes on women. Because if you are not on a specialized platform such as BİKG, it is difficult to grow in that direction. As we emphasized back then, to reach masses of laborer women, we need to develop campaign methods and tools capable of addressing them (Hayriye).

Nil, a veteran Turkish socialist in HDP, complained that the Turkish socialist way of doing politics was “too much saloon-discussion-oriented,” debating forever on *petit* conceptual details. Similarly, TFM's ontology of organizing was incommensurable with movement-building of any sort, as they did not have a dynamic through which they could touch other women. On the Kurdish side, she said, activists *çantası sırtında geziyor* (living out of a backpack), were mobile, and on the ground, engaging with people, while Turkish activists “cannot even skip their mother's dentist appointment.” KWM was distinct in that it truly was bottom-up, had organic connections with the complexity of the social environment it operated in: “We don't have such connections. Not just because we are few, because even when small in number, you can be connected with the place you live in, your life world” added Nurcan, a socialist-feminist. Their activities were of the sort that expressed their stance, but not the kind that would trickle down into the folds of society. Even a peace campaign such as convincing your Turkish neighbor towards peace, like Öcalan suggested, and creating public mediums to exchange stories of the war, were far from being imagined:

Not that I look down on what BİKG does, but this is how far people like us can go. Fair enough, if you are content with it. But what is needed right now is much more. We think we have touched the Muslim women when we bring one woman wearing a headscarf, while there are thousands of *cemaats* [religious communities], groups out there, meeting on *Cuma* prayers. They are so organized, and we absolutely have no touch with them (Nil).

She reassured me that nobody I talked to at BİKG had the potential to expand the peace movement, in contradistinction to some powerful Muslim woman figures outside of BİKG who had larger social circles and networks. Another veteran socialist, Yüksel, also hinted that, despite the intent of BİKG to do popular work, it could not be the force to spread peace across society: “The recent BİKG conference was around the time that HDK emerged. I expressed in the HDK general women's assembly that it was only mass-organised HDK constituents that could realize this as part of BİKG,” Yüksel explained. Yet, she also criticized DÖKH for relying too much on the Turkish socialists, or a group like BİKG, to mobilize a peace movement:

Kurdish women have shortcomings, too, in strategizing with regard to the Turkish front [*cephe*]. Perhaps they think it is the task of socialists exclusively, but this is wrong. BİKG cannot do that,

either. You know, they are too academic, journalistic, whatever, too intellectual. They can play the shopfront role in molding some public opinion, give panel speeches, etc., but they may not carry the movement. Real people on the ground who have testimonies from both sides may carry it (Yüksel).

Socialist Diren thought that the clash of different modes of action kept BİKG busy and eventually stuck in the “feminist mode” (discussed in more detail in Chapter 8):

That is a discussion we always make at BİKG; how to cope with the differences in modes of action. Feminist women generally are more comfortable with actions in certain city-squares, or methods focused on developing an idea. But we, the women who come from mass party experience, and social democrat, labor unionist, or Muslim women also show similar tendencies; we always propose a variety of activities that could become widespread and reach all kinds of women in the neighborhoods, workplaces, districts, and so on, and move outside of Taksim Square or Istanbul. Actually, I cannot say feminist friends are very happy with confining themselves to Taksim, either. This is not intended, but the modes of action they go for lead them that way. As a result, even if we objected a lot, somehow always all of us were stuck in there (Diren).

Independent Muslim feminist Meral also criticized the exclusivist, “this or that” logic of TFM:

The issue here is whether you can explore other horizons or not, rather than saying, ‘we are different, and do not go to the grassroots due to this difference.’ It is a question of the ability to think about what can be done with those who do go to the neighborhoods, in a way that is different than what you already do, than saying ‘this cannot be my method.’ And I am not talking about using those who go. I am talking about learning whom to submit to at the grassroots level, and how. This is the only way to expand the boundaries between classes, ethnicities, and cultures for solidarity (Meral).

For Kurdish Gülay, who works for a Turkish women’s association in Istanbul, if BİKG aimed at public propaganda and action, it had to organize accordingly, such as, take joint action with other women’s organizations in a platform-for-action format, recognizing representation. She was aware of the disadvantages this might bring, but popularization of peace was impossible without joining hands with organized power or relying singly on individual-base voluntarism. Otherwise, BİKG could just as well define itself as a research group. Currently, it was neither one, nor the other. When I asked whether it was possible to reach the right-wing base, she pointed out that trying to reach everyone with limited energy and human resources makes nothing achievable.

This emphasis, on “limited human resources,” was raised by many feminists in a way to excuse BİKG for its ineffectiveness. SFK activist Beyza was disappointed that BİKG did not turn out to be what people imagined in 2009, that is, “more amateur, relying mainly on street activism,” instead it “refurnished after 2013 into what looked more academic.” I was curious whether she thought there ever was a possibility for BİKG to become something else. She replied, “Perhaps there was not. There are no proper peace activists in Turkey, exclusively devoted to this work. It exists as an ancillary activity of women already working in the Kurdish movement, SFK, X political party, or in the academy, holding multiple roles at various places. So, they come and go. You cannot create something building-up with such a fluid community of women” (Beyza). SFK, for her, was an example of how women invested in a particular cause should organize: permanent and focussed on well-defined routines. Another SFK activist agreed, “These specific few women are both everywhere and nowhere. We are too fragmented. And given that it

is the same women all the time, without expanding, all we can do is this much” (Nur). Yeşim emphasized that even putting BİKG together was such a big deal and a huge step forward, “It took twenty years for us to be able to grasp only recently that a peace movement is needed. But now it is time some women own it, make it their primary agenda, and have a say in Turkey’s political scene.” Given the busy schedules of the existing women, what is accomplished, even insufficient, is still the best and the only thing possible, she thought.

Limited energy and activist-time also affected the ability to follow-up the peace process, in both the Kurdish and the state agendas. Nur self-critically asked, “How can I foresee what is coming next if I do not have time to read? We should be able to foresee what is ahead of us, come up with a plan of our own, and invite DÖKH to comment on that. We should be building up peace politics independently, based on how we see things from where we stand, but we cannot succeed in doing that.” Nur complained that the information required for developing political action is limited to what is delivered by the Kurdish women, and not on their own simultaneous, independent tracking.²⁸⁵ Turkish feminists at this phase of BİKG rarely made a systematic effort to go to the Kurdish activists to find out their thoughts on the unfolding process. The impulse to inquire from Kurdish contacts/resources or the Kurdish media was largely missing.²⁸⁶ Perhaps during BİKG’s earlier phase, when some DÖKH activists were regularly present, lack of this effort was not that visible, since communication was happening effortlessly, face-to-face. However, when the peace talks started, owing to DÖKH’s preoccupation with rebuilding their own institutions and the change in the functioning style of BİKG, Kurdish attendance became more irregular, and the flow of updates was interrupted.

Another problematic consequence, Nur identified, of being dependent on DÖKH’s active push was that, when PKK was back to war, their activism suddenly stopped until the time when the Kurds came back to a ceasefire. Ideally, “we should maintain our demand for peace independent of conjuncture,” Nur remarked. When I asked what the impediment was towards becoming a continuous platform as such, she believed one reason was that the demand/need for peace did not come from the Turkish side; “When Kurdish women arrive, they cannot find an already existing structure on our side to negotiate with,” she explained. Socialist-feminist Cavidan summarized it well:

It is always Kurdish women who take the first step to initiate the joint organizing. This is a shortcoming on our part as feminists and socialists. Is it because of their organizational strength, knowing their own needs too well, or our lack of a wider political foresight? Perhaps even if we think it is wide, it is not wide enough. Kurdish women initiate, and they are powerful, and after some time, either because they speak the same political language, or because others think they are affiliated to PKK, hence dangerous, it becomes impossible for new women to join in. You know, it is already so difficult to talk with women from different social backgrounds on the peace issue. Because in Turkey, peace is perceived akin to committing a crime. They ask, ‘Are you supporting the terrorists?’ A universalist understanding of peace is not there. This makes it uneasy. But I also think we, the non-Kurdish women, the feminists, have insufficiencies. I mean, we join in what already exists, but this

is not how one should be doing politics. We display no creative political venture or determined and determining willpower (Cavidan).

Cavidan lists several points when trying to understand the Kurdish ability to be proactive when Turks cannot: is it their organizational strength, knowing their own needs too well, or is it the feminists' lack of a wider political perspective, or the high risks involved in supporting peace? Few other than Kurdish women ponder on the relationship between this inability and middle-class Turkishness of the consciousness. Here are how Turkish activists' shortcomings appear to DÖKH member Dilan:

Their shortcomings do not originate from their practice alone. As I said earlier, it is an issue of internalizing the struggle or not. I mean, they do not feel its urgency, its severity. Which is why I feel their efforts look like a hobby, all in their own sweet time, in the time remaining from their private lives. I realize that activism does not sit at the heart of their lives. We [DÖKH and Turkish feminists] form mechanisms, but those mechanisms in no way become durable. It is like let the women from DÖKH take care of it. It is always left to us to piece it together. This is good in a sense; it means they pay attention to DÖKH. They pay attention because it is also their dreams that materialize. But do they know what DÖKH goes through until the dreams materialize; what kind of challenges, crises are overcome, what kind of labor is invested day and night? (Dilan).

Kurdish activist Gülay was more explicit when she stated:

People did not take an interest because they don't care about the peace process. This is again white Turkishness. They don't value it that much; they covertly are being racist once again. Look, these meetings are being organized for almost two years now, yet it is always the same women. Especially that last meeting was so weak. No prominent groups in the women's movement come and go. The general atmosphere is as if no such process exists; they don't even bother to talk about it (Gülay).

In Dilan and Gülay's accounts, organizational/technical (in)abilities stem from a certain state of mind; they indicate a consciousness/internalization problem. For Gülay, white Turkishness places an impediment to genuinely caring about peace and organizing accordingly. In my conversations on BİKG, almost no Turkish activist problematized racist consciousness, Turkish-supremacy, complicity, or colonial state policies, or drew connections between denialist, assimilationist state culture, and the character of their peace discourses. There was a sustained tendency to avoid speaking in terms of racial identifiers and problematize racial hierarchies (as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7). Turkish activists detailed the practical barriers, such as the weakness (financial, organizational, political) of their movement, a lack of drive or interest, a sense of self-centrism in individuals, attention-seeking egos, fragmented busy schedules, a lack of grassroots connections, age/experience hierarchies, academism, and not opening the way for others, for the youth in particular. All were based on ground realities. For Kurdish activists, however, the emphasis for the most part was on the correlation between the sense of existential, embodied urgency one feels about the colonial issue and the dedicated, direct-participative nature of their organizing (as explored in Chapter 8).

6.3 Unnamed Turkishness in peace activism

The “independent” organizational identity that feminist allies wanted to attain for BİKG, rather than moving in the direction of stimulating a grassroots dialogue between the Turkish and Kurdish people, took a path of exploring a Western-centered, gender-primary, anti-war feminist discourse. They suggested, for example, that UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security could serve as a useful reference guide for legal recognition on a state-level. I learned from my interviews that when a BİKG delegation shared this thought with the women’s umbrella organization KJB during their one-time visit to the guerilla camps in Iraq, it was not received with much enthusiasm. UN Resolutions were not a priority discussion topic for them as they believed what mattered were the legal guarantees that Turkish and Kurdish people developed among themselves.²⁸⁷ However, KJB agreed to what BİKG thought would be useful for building awareness among Turkish people and the international community, as long as it was not imposed on the Kurdish representatives.

The 2013 BİKG Report on the Process of Resolution presenting activists’ observations and suggestions²⁸⁸ engaged with KWM singly within the “victims of the war” framework. It referred to DÖKH as a reassuring source of empowerment, under the section Gender-Sensitive Security Sector Reform, thus: “Thanks to DÖKH’s campaigns, actions and networks of support women are able to be protected – to a certain extent – from patriarchal structures, as well as from both male violence and state violence” (ibid., p. 53). DÖKH was recognized here as a partner in relation to its role in fighting male violence: “It is necessary to act in collaboration with the Kurdish Women’s Movement in all plans and programs attempting to ensure women’s security” (ibid., p. 59). The absence of recognizing DÖKH as the women’s representation in KÖH, and associating DÖKH exclusively with gender violence and suffering, rendered DÖKH’s intersectional agency invisible as an interlocutor in the talks.

To privilege gender oppression over the national, the report used a racially merging language that disallowed differentiation of the Turkish voice/truth/demands from the Kurdish. The ethnonational positions of the authors remained blurred.²⁸⁹ The report invited “the State of Turkey to immediately create a national plan that places women at its center and put into effect regulations that will ensure the equal participation of women in the peace-building process” (ibid., p. 8). As part of the UNSCR No. 1325 guideline, “a supra-party body where women from all backgrounds come together to work for peace” (ibid., p. 61) had to produce this plan to implement the required constitutional changes, truth commissions, and “gender-sensitive security sector reforms.” Again, however, the report remained silent on the question of which nation(s) was/were being referenced. Would this “national plan” be able to accommodate a plurinational reality? Would it be able to challenge the Turkish state's "efforts to deny the existence of a Kurdish nation outside of the Turkish nation with an original Kurdish language, Kurdish history, Kurdish identity and culture, and their concentration in particular parts of the country" (Bayır,

2013, p. 19)?²⁹⁰ As is typical of rights-based logical frames, the report omitted the colonial question and portrayed the cause of the war as the denial of “Kurdish identity,” and not the denial of Kurdish national rights and demand for self-administration/autonomy. ‘The state’s truth’ defined in the report as “a variety of strategies at various moments in order to obstruct the Kurdish political movement” did not open a space to engage with DÖKH spokeswoman Kaşan’s 2013 TV interview statement quoted earlier that, “The *kati* (hard-line exclusivist) nation-state model was instituted through the denial, annihilation, and assimilation of Kurdish people.”

Grappling in my mind if a race-denying discourse led to misrepresentation or silencing of the Kurdish voice, a friend at DÖKH that I often consulted reminded me that I should not worry. DÖKH would not stay on any ground that would violate its political interests. They were aware of BİKG’s ideological limitations yet were open to accommodating the perspectives that would help Turkish women get motivated, involved, and find their voice around peacebuilding. “We strategize over what they are able to do, not what they ought to be doing. BİKG is an opportunity to do joint politics, win and transform Turkish nationals,” the friend asserted. They did not see this sort of alliance as a compromise, as they simultaneously kept expanding in other avenues premised on more radical, decolonial terms. I asked, “Why are you not a bit more assertive at BİKG?” She said, “If you are rigid, you break easily. Politics is about negotiation, winning the hearts, not asserting from a too ideal place. Societal transformation has its own dialectics. What is more, they are quite fragile, not even ready to handle minor criticisms.” This conversation helped me reflect on my supremacist attitude that underestimated the Kurdish political wisdom and ability to ally with many discourses so long as these were not openly racist and sexist. Nonetheless, given my specific positionality as a Turkish woman whose feminist politics was shaped in Kurdistan, partially insider and outsider to both sides, I wanted to develop the reflective consciousness that I began pursuing during my five-years of work experience in Amed.²⁹¹ Kurdish women may have no other option than to be content with what Turkish women are able to offer, but what about Turkish women? Do they not have an ethical responsibility to think about what “ought to be done” and take issue with their Turkishness, if they truly care about decolonizing the relationship?

I witnessed an argument between a group of Kurdish and Turkish feminists in a BİKG meeting. Turkish socialist-feminist, Nur, mentioned a previous decision of BİKG, which was not to refer to DÖKH as an organization within BİKG. She reasoned that DÖKH was already part of BİKG and everyone was open to hearing them out on the “region-related issues” anyway. In an initiative where everyone joined in on an individual-basis, saying, “I am from here, I am from there” would create tensions, she suggested. “That is why we never speak in the name of our collective [SFK], either” she commented. The three DÖKH activists, caught by surprise, responded that they had hoped this was a long-exhausted debate and disagreed that such a decision existed, this platform has always been open to everyone, organized or

otherwise. They emphasized that, for them, the goal was getting as many women organised as possible, and that collaboration with progressive organisations could make women's groups more influential in Turkey. They argued that it was an undesired de facto outcome that leftist/socialist groups had disappeared from BİKG. Their affiliation to DÖKH by no means meant an imposition of their collective decisions on BİKG, an aspect which they hoped they had already proven. Their representational presence was rather meant to express the Kurdish collective will on equal terms with the others. At that point, an independent Kurdish feminist entered the conversation, noting that "DÖKH means BİKG, BİKG means DÖKH, we are together anyways," an approach that Nur articulated at the beginning, was a "neutralizing, mergerist" attitude. For her, this would not solve anything. BİKG was supposed to be a venue where different national subjectivities would come together to find common ground. By the same token, women from other groups had to have their collective voices, too. Then another feminist from SFK,²⁹² who looked like she wanted to deescalate the dispute, formulated the solution that DÖKH could constitute an exception, as it was a party in the peace negotiations. That is why Kurdish friends could sometimes speak in the name of their organization, while others could not, she interjected. With this comment the conversation changed, only to leave bystanders like me in confusion.

The views of Turkish participants kept sliding between DÖKH being recognized as, 1. Allied Kurdish individuals in the peace struggle; 2. One organized entity among many present at BİKG; and 3. A special political entity representing the Kurdish side in the peace talks. Especially newcomers were unclear on the terms of this Turkish-Kurdish togetherness, while the hegemonic feminist tendency viewed the Kurdish activists as individuals from DÖKH. Disassociated from their national affiliation, DÖKH activists were in a way "redeemed as feminist interlocutors" to be included in BİKG. Therefore, I continued asking: Did the white liberal feminist discourse of the UN function as a way out of BİKG's quandary; that is, sympathetic to DÖKH, but unable to take effective action for recognition of DÖKH's demands in Turkish society? It seemed that the existing mergerist tendency of TFM, representing multiple voices of women as one via a body-politics oriented feminist discourse, refraining from racial identifiers, found a certain comfort in the disembodied "security and sexual violence-based" language of the UN.²⁹³ This "neutral" ground was perhaps expected to ensure equal distance to both KÖH and the Turkish state, and protect feminist concerns from the impositions of both sides. A peace discourse centered on the interests of a universal woman subject achieved a less intimidating effect, a safer solidarity space for Turks.²⁹⁴

The racially unmarked use of the term "woman," especially with regard to Turkish womanhood, was striking for me as it contrasted with the openly named ethnonational identities that I was used to hearing from Kurdish activists, for example, "Turks have to hear and understand what it means not to be able to speak one's mother tongue. Or Kurds should hear Turks' fears and concerns. Obviously not only Turks

and Kurds, but all ethnic groups and communities in this society. Only then may the peace process find support on the grassroots level and the government may not have a chance to back away” (İpek, 2009).²⁹⁵ I wondered how the unmarked language used at BİKG could affect peace politics on the ground, as the peace that Kurds demanded required the decolonial performance of recognizing a plurinational reality. To what extent was speaking from a universalizing position conducive to opening spaces for truthful negotiation and decolonial dialogue in a conflict-ridden society?

I reproduce below comments made by a young Kurdish woman, a first-time participant at the Istanbul launch of the abovementioned 2013 BİKG report. Her inquiry shows that she is trying to figure out exactly what role BİKG assumed. It showed parallels with my own inquiry above:

Reading the report, I asked myself, ‘There are already many women’s organizations in Turkey. What gap is BİKG willing to fill? What exactly are they doing? What is it that BİKG does and other women’s movements, including DÖKH, don’t?’ I understand that they have visited several cities, met political party representatives. These are all very important. But on the other hand, we already know what DÖKH wants, they make public statements every day, likewise, we know the opinions of political parties. What I found missing was that those groups which the Kurds cannot reach were not contacted. What I mean is, who are the Kurds making peace with? Who are the sides of the peace talks? If one side is the Kurds, the other side is the Turks. The Kurds are already vocal about peace. But who are the interlocutors on the other side? This is not clear, I think. It is very vague in the report. Invariable visits to Kurdistan, Kandil, DÖKH, or to HDP cannot bring much change. For example, if we are making peace with Turkish women from the Black Sea Region, Central Anatolia, Aegean Region, then BİKG should carry the peace issue to their agenda. Or go to the universities. DÖKH is not able to do these, but BİKG can go and say here is such a process, do you know anything about it? What do you want to say about it? The current structure of BİKG looks too homogenous, maybe not everyone is academic, but still, most are intellectuals. The families of the soldiers are absent, for instance. DÖKH cannot reach them, BİKG can. Otherwise, BİKG may as well choose to say, ‘We do theoretical work.’ But here they say they aim both for theory and practice, though it does not seem to sink in anywhere. I fear that BİKG will become just another small women’s group added to the existing ones (Aliye).

Her question, “What does BİKG do other than what DÖKH already does?” and her insistence to call the sides of the conflict by their name, offers a different path to solidarity, premised on recognition of differing demands and roles, rather than assimilating selected demands of Kurdish women into an unmarked category of “women’s demands.” If the denial of Kurdish collective identity was/is the cause of the ongoing war, peacebuilding should involve moves to reverse this denial and learn how to respect Kurdish self-organizations. This is nothing less than what Kurds demand from the Turks. Kurdish guerilla women’s salutation of the women’s border-watch action clearly distinguishes these differing roles and positions of women. The “women category” for Kurds is always already ethnically heterogeneous:

The most effective weapon for peace would be that *Kurdish women* strengthen their self-confident struggle and determination, and *Turkish women* become more courageous and determined in going beyond the state politics in a way to overcome the corruptive, defiling, othering, and enmity-producing aspects of the system. As YJA, we salute the Berçelan women’s meeting and all other actions and want to express our expectations of leadership from women (“YJA Berçelan Kadın Buluşmasını Selamladı,” 2009) (italics mine).

Turkish women are invited to put their ethnonational privileges into use more courageously and determinedly. They are asked to go beyond the state politics that criminalize Kurdish self-organizing and deny legitimacy and credibility to the Kurdish interlocutor in the peace talks. Given that the Kurdish people are consumed by resisting the military and political attacks inflicted on them, the responsibility falls upon the Turkish allies to open up their spaces and create newer milieu for Kurdish women, so that they are heard and the dehumanizing stereotypes spread by the state-media are unsettled. DÖKH activists agree:

Sure, let them come to Kurdistan. I am not saying they should not, but Kurds have already explained themselves enough, expressed what they want in all forms possible. I think those who come here must now go and voice them in the west, to the Turks. Otherwise, ‘let me observe and write a report’ is an orientalist attitude, like a tourist, or a *velinimet* [benefactor] honoring our place. No, you must share whatever you see here with the Turkish women. *Halklaşmak* [popularization], that is all we need! They have visited Qandil [Mountains, PKK headquarters], right? Guerilla women there told them why they are up in the mountains. Now you go to west [of Turkey] and share it with those who don’t know about it. Don’t come here and share it with me! Your duty is in the west (Kıymet).

It is substantial to narrate the truth but not necessarily from within a meta-narrative. For example, a former guerilla woman who had served her sentence might participate in BİKG meetings. Sometimes people are scared to talk to them. But the current dialogue process brought some legitimacy. If she could share her story in an everyday conversational atmosphere, why she joined up, what life she lived and what kind of life she wants, anyone who holds the slightest conscience and desire for peace in herself, I believe, would infallibly get affected (Adalet).

BİKG should be able to make use of the contacts established with Muslim women’s groups. Turkish friends should ask them, ‘Open a space for us.’ It should not be the Kurdish women’s job to incorporate Turkish women into peace work in Turkish-majority cities, but we [DÖKH] can participate in the activities organized. What do I mean by ‘opening a space?’ I mean, for instance, ‘We want to have access to your neighborhood. Let us come in along with the Kurdish mothers, allow us to tell you why we need peace.’ In the Black Sea Region, for example, there are many Turkish political groups, like ÖDP, Halkevleri. They should aim to carve out such spaces (Müjgan).

An elderly Kurdish “Peace Mother”²⁹⁶ took the floor after Müjgan in the Report launch event and powerfully put herself in charge of the task that she mentioned. Her words, “I would not change myself for an academic,” that were clearly critical of elitist forms of activism, were received by laughter among the middle-class audience:

Don’t make it theoretical, do it among the people. We are not the only ones who need peace, the women in the neighborhoods, the working women, who do not share the same sentiments with us are also aware. Because as women they are more directly affected. Turkish, Circassian, Armenian, Laz people also want peace, although they cannot voice it. We need women leaders. Let’s hold public meetings, conferences. I was repressed by my husband, society, and the state, yet I resisted. I can share this in the meetings, I am not an academic, but I would not change myself for an academic. In an event we organized, 70 women signed up, most retired, all are working for peace now. Only in these kinds of environments women can thrive and start questioning the system (Ayşe).

I interviewed veteran Turkish socialist Yüksel, a former BİKG activist, in the Amed DÖKH office when, as a response to BİKG’s call under the motto *Böyle Barış Olmaz* (This is not how you make peace), on Oct. 2014, 130 women from Turkey’s west, organized in unions, chambers, political parties, or independent, visited the Kurdish town of Suruç at the Syrian border to Kobanî.²⁹⁷ They joined in the overnight border watch action; forming a human chain as a symbolic gesture of solidarity to protest the

passage of ISIS armed forces backed up by Turkey to break the Kurdish resistance in Kobanî. After the two-day trip on the bus from Istanbul to the Syrian border, they joined in the daily work of local communes, helping the displaced people, and they worked in Kurdish municipality warehouses to sort out the social-aid collected through local campaigns to be distributed to the Kurdish refugee camps.²⁹⁸ Meanwhile, they heard people's stories both from Rojava and Bakur (Northern Kurdistan), how they talked about the PKK fighters in Kobanî and Sinjar who saved them from ISIS and supported them in building their self-defence and self-rule communes. Referring to their trip, Yüksel sighed:

See, we come here jam-packed in busses. But when is this crowd *batıya çıkarma yapacak* (going to do a landing operation to the west [of Turkey])? Because that is exactly what a peace movement should be doing. [Kurdish] Peace Mothers are too invisible in the [Turkish] west, while their testimonies alone would be enough to get the message across. Next to her, you can invite a professor to talk about colonialism in other instances in the world, they don't even have to be on Kurdistan. Feminists can come and talk about the perspectives of women living in the west. BİKG should play the role of intermediate in this kind of conversation. But you know what happens? They invite me as a socialist woman to a panel in a western city [of Turkey] and I alone talk about colonialism in Kurdistan. It was always like that. All those white Turks there ask me thousands of questions. Not that I cannot grapple with it, but when a Peace Mother shares her story in her own voice, nobody dares to ask a single question, it is so effective. Obviously, mothers of soldiers who have been killed should also be present. Women in Kurdistan are already experienced in articulating their pain and political demands in public. We have to fish out those mothers of the soldiers. BİKG does not include even a single [Turkish] soldier's mother who says *vatan sağ olmasın* (neither for God, nor country). Instead, BİKG says, 'We do not carry such mission.' Then what kind of a women's initiative for peace are you? This war also has a Turkish side and most are working-class families. They are under the influence of the state. Peace is not possible without disabling that influence (Yüksel).

I refer to this self-referential, mergerist approach to the plurality of peace discourses, modes of activism and identities as "Turkish feministization." I consider it seeing like the internally colonial Turkish state, denying engaging with the Other's irreducible political subjectivity in the way defined by the Other. A participant of the very last BİKG forum said, "At BİKG, we stuck to a specific discourse that we wished people would support. This time, for a change, we should ask people what they understand from peace. I do not think it is sufficient to invite people to our own position anymore" (Barış İçin Kadın Girişimi, 2017). DÖKH activist Delal comes from a long-standing collaboration with TFM. What I learn from her is that before going to the mainstream members of the colonizing nation, Turkish allies should convince themselves of DÖKH's demands, what it represents, where it speaks from, and its decolonial project. I hear this as not a call to merger, but alignment on the terms of the oppressed:

One cannot convince others to something she, herself is not convinced about. In a way, she also thinks that the Kurdish movement is the source of the problem; like, if it did not oppose, rebel, or wage war, then there would be no problem. They see it from the perspective of the state, their state, their cultural upbringing. Yes, they are aware that there is an injustice here. And they want to do something about it. That is a precious effort. But overall, they are not in a place to take any risks. Everyone, in a way, fights for her own self. They demand a more livable environment for themselves; this is natural. But there is no shouldering of the risks. Perhaps it will sound rude but like, at the end of the day, it is for her own comfort. I mean, she wants the silencing of arms, but I am not sure how much Kurdish freedom matters to her. It is more like *yasak savma* (make do with) so that they feel good about themselves. Struggling for co-existence, on the other hand, means that you should be ready to pay its

costs. Solidarity in the form of external, temporary support is different from solidarity in the form of building a life together. I know they will be angry with my comment, but this is how it looks to me (Delal).

From the BİKG analysis so far, it can be summed up that dependence on DÖKH manifested on multiple-levels: to initiate the peace struggle, to galvanize support for their own political arguments against others, to learn what is going on in Kurdistan and in the peace talks, and to be able to reach the grassroots. The compelling question was about reciprocity: Did Turkish activists in exchange open their own resources, spaces, and channels, or develop new ones for the use of the Other? The quandary that stuck BİKG in a double-bind was not being able to find a way or language to expand in society due to the fear of getting appropriated by mainstream, anti-Kurd Turkish nationals on the one hand, and by KÖH on the other. On a personal level, DÖKH was respected by most women allies. Nonetheless, this would not translate into taking effective collective action in pursuit of its decriminalization, humanization, and recognition in Turkish society as a legitimate entity. The ostensible fear was that it would discredit or undermine BİKG's status as "independent." This was reciprocated by the fear of outsiders that BİKG looked either too Kurdish, too feminist, or too socialist. There was a problem in finding the appropriate methods and discourse to inhabit the distance between the Turkish and Kurdish ethnonational subjectivities, keep them in a productive tension of negotiation, in a way to avoid merger or Othering.

Instead of a politics that centered indebtedness, or being accountable to this asymmetrical interdependence, one tacit strategy embraced was to downplay DÖKH's national character so as not to intimidate "apolitical Turkish women." In fact, being Turkish nationals, most feminists were also intimidated (as explored in Chapters 4 and 8). DÖKH was expected to walk a tightrope of playing a unifying/mediating role, while at the same time remaining as invisible as possible, so as not to disturb both those who saw BİKG as too Kurdish, meaning "dangerous," and also those feminists and/or socialists who wanted to have "independence" and "freedom" to create their own peace agendas.

6.4 "Inter-embodiment as a site of differentiation" (Ahmed, 2010)

DÖKH's request from its allies was not for any group to take a single lead or dominate BİKG, but to lend discursive and physical spaces, resources, and power to one another, in light of demands of the women that DÖKH represented. Creating an active dialogue with the not-yet-allied Turks, social democrat, liberal, humanist, nationalist, Muslim, secular, or otherwise, was part and parcel of peacebuilding. Multiethnic platforms and public meetings intermediated by Turkish allies could engender a pedagogy to transform public opinion in favor of Kurdish freedoms. So far, I have explored the structural impediments to this. Here I want to look at the moments that were promising; that could carve out agonistic spaces from a starkly antagonistic political landscape wherein ideas of peace grounded in different ontological realms could contest one another.

During the peace talks, there were hardly any public occasions that hosted organic diversity, bringing together the Kurds and the Turks either opposed to, indifferent to, or supportive of the peace talks.²⁹⁹ Pre-2013 BİKG workshops can be considered one such ground for a narrow group of women. Many younger feminists found these semi-public conversations vital to better understand the Kurdish question. Learning from KWM, the relations established there, and discovery of the heterogeneity of women's approaches to peace and war, were attractive for them. A Muslim feminist reflects on how, in these early meetings, she experienced getting closer to the Kurdish truth, while at the same time accepting the distance:

I was thinking I knew the issue quite well, voting for BDP etc., but after I started visiting BİKG, I said, 'I know nothing', seriously; neither that such a women's movement existed, nor what this struggle meant for Kurds, what it meant to go up to the mountains. I came to terms with the fact that I will never be able to understand fully. For example, even if I knew DÖKH from before, I was thinking of women as being more passive there. Most probably Turkish feminists and Western feminists also see it like that. That they are more passive and yielding to top-down decisions most of the time. That perception in my mind has shattered a lot. Listening to them in the meetings, I have witnessed how strong they are, how well they know politics. When I say something, I cannot be too sure about it, 'Do I say it right, how am I saying it?' and so on. But when a woman from the Kurdish movement speaks, I can see they dig into the issues very deep indeed, calculate their various aspects well, and use a very powerful rhetoric. And I can realize that this ability comes from an experience that is not mine. Above all, BİKG is an enlightening process for me. Never is there a meeting I leave without learning something new. We truly know nothing! Neither about the war, nor the movement [...] And those first moments of getting closer sometimes is so painful. How come we remained so remote from their reality? How come, this much and until now? I mean I did not even have a close friend from the Kurdish movement until recently. These friendships began to develop at BİKG. The distance we must cover is so great. I don't know if BİKG will have such a contribution to my life, but at the least, I came to realize the lack. How is my life so removed from this movement even when I suppose I am close? Another important teaching was that I cannot always understand and know things like the Kurdish freedom struggle. I may not, but the effort is still important to be able to stand with them and to relocate myself. I rediscover every now and then that the Kurdish movement is not a story I know of. It has its own rooted narrative, history, its own dynamics. Therefore, it is very difficult to articulate myself to it from a random point. Nonetheless, it is where I should stand by. Because on the other side, there is the state. So, my place is with them. As a Turkish woman, I could get this close to the Kurdish movement for the first time. And it is still nothing (Meral).

I read this account as giving the clues of a generous, affectionate communication, which acknowledges the Otherness of the Other in one's effort to get closer and put the impossibility of grasping her/story to work (Ahmed, 2000). Meral repeatedly goes back to the moment of surprise where she realizes that she knows nothing, invites herself, and me, to inhabit that moment and drive the inspiration from there. These kinds of pluriversal, unsettling, and generous encounters exceed the limits of solidarity discourses that prioritize commonality/uniformity. They do not assume common values, concepts, or analysis, but connect through the difference, are open to creating negotiated values in interaction. Ahmed (ibid., p. 157) defines generous encounter as recognizing how the encounter itself is implicated in broader relations of production and exchange, but in such a way that the one who is already assimilated can still surprise: "An ethical communication is about a certain way of holding proximity and distance together: one gets close enough to others to be touched by that which cannot be simply got across. In such an

encounter, ‘one’ does not stay in place, or one does not stay safely at a distance (there is no space which is not implicated in the encounter). It is through getting closer, rather than remaining at a distance, that the impossibility of pure proximity can be put to work, or made to work.” I subscribe to this definition of ethical communication as reflective co-creation and simultaneous differentiation that helps rework a self-centered, self-referential, self-absorbed hegemonic subjectivity.

The BİKG delegation’s one-time visit to the Women’s Assembly of a City Council in Turkey’s west was memorable for some activists, in this sense. Most assembly members did not know about the existence of Kurdish or other identities until the 90s and thought that everybody was Turkish, living in peace. According to one of them, it was when Turgut Özal publicly declared that he was Kurdish that she awakened to their existence. For her, however, the underlying cause of “terror” was that the U.S. was using PKK to prevent Turkey from extracting the rich underground sources of the region. Due to the interventions of external powers, the Kurdish people were held hostage at the hands of PKK terror. One woman disclosed that she could sense the hope put in the peace process in the Kurdish region, something that is totally invisible in the west [of Turkey], because her husband worked in a Kurdish city. Among mainstream Turkish nationals, the widespread perception is that PKK is an instrument of imperialist powers, engaged in weapon/drugs smuggling, killing women and children. It is demonized to the extent that it is impossible to imagine PKK as having any sort of social or political representation. The leftist version of this perception is the fear that PKK might ally with the conservative AKP government in Turkey or the U.S. in Syria and betray the socialist cause. Humanist liberal Turks, on the other hand, would think youth on both sides do not know what they are dying for, and the mothers caught in between the PKK and the state are suffering from both. In such a contested encounter, BİKG activists tried to open up the conversation by sharing their observations in Kurdistan, and they could create some curiosity about the Kurdish question. Participants were now asking how women “in the east of Fırat (Euphrates)” saw the peace process, if they could express their views independent of men, decide on their own. Finally, they requested that BİKG organize an event to bring them together with Kurdish women. It seemed that they wanted peace, but did not know how to talk about it, how to take responsibility. Unfortunately, there was no mechanism in place at BİKG to respond to such demands.

Another memorable encounter was with a pro-AKP Muslim women’s organization. Serra, coming from the Turkish secular Left, described to me how their first meeting was frank and open. “They asked if we really were pro-PKK or terrorists, as it was said.” She told them: “No, we have no relation with PKK. But we want peace. What about you? If you also want it, let’s talk why we cannot come together.” Then they started sharing their thoughts quite openheartedly. A conservative Muslim from Konya shared with her how, after her son attempted suicide during his military service, she took him out of the military and told her two other sons that they had to step on her corpse if they wanted to join the army. This was

interesting for Serra. Another woman said, “There were no Kurds around us, so we have embraced whatever was told to us. Not that we really know what is going on there.” They wanted the war to end on the condition that “They do not become an instrument for PKK.” Her response was, “You are right, but let’s remember that PKK is a product of the 1980-coup, those tortures inflicted on Kurds in the Diyarbakır Prison. If you advance on people that much, then this happens.” She continued, “And still, small kids are sentenced to 25 years for terrorism. But as a state, did you ask them what they want, recognize their rights?” Serra shared that she came from a secular, white, Turkish family, all army personnel, in Istanbul for a few generations, hating religious people. And then, how she started to question her secularist upbringing as a result of a first encounter with a religious woman. Then she became supportive of religious freedoms. A mutually self-critical, reflective conversation brought them closer. In the end, Serra and Kurdish activist Müjgan suggested, “Let’s do something that will not discomfort you. But let’s do it together, it is important.” That way, they could put a statement together and launch a petition calling the national assembly to action. Unfortunately, the relationship was not sustainable due to an absence of mutual trust, shared political language, and history of common organizing. The historical ruptures within the women’s movement were not that easy to bridge without organised commitment.

The self-critical language that Serra performed, I believe was crucial in opening up a critical space for transformative, non-appropriative empathy. She told me that although she supported democratic autonomy and education in the mother tongue, she thought it was up to the Kurdish people to decide how that autonomy would be. Her priority role and mission were to change her own self, her own state and society, prepare them for the Kurdish reality. She would formulate a discourse so that Turks would listen to her. For this kind of search of a language able to convey the Kurdish truth to Turks in a less threatening way, she was labeled as liberal, and did not find enough support within BİKG. The range of pedagogical tactics to generate non-appropriative empathy, from liberal, humanist, feminist, religious, to decolonial, could be decided depending on the conversation’s embodied nature and openness level of the audience. How open or subtle one can be when reaching out to other women is a matter of one’s choice and strategizing and the protocol each group makes with DÖKH.³⁰⁰ Somebody who wants to work for peace but believes PKK to be a terrorist organization, in a diverse discussion where each can hear the voice of the other, may find her own negotiation voice. The government-assigned Wise People’s Committee³⁰¹ meetings held to prepare reports on people’s approach to peace, although eventually disregarded by the government, provided such sites of negotiation. A Kurdish member of the committee said:

For the first time, people from AKP, BDP, CHP or wherever, sat down together and spoke their mind to each other. It was nothing easy, to be honest, to hear somebody expressing something that you strongly repudiate. Arguments were severe. Nonetheless, the experience was profound. First of all, we learned that we can be patient with one another. Second, we once again awoke to how deeply actually the war victimizes all of us. Being from AKP does not make a difference. Let me tell you how they see it: some feel repression either in economic terms or think they get anti-democratic

treatment in BDP predominated regions. Others, on the other hand, say they cannot even breathe where AKP is predominant. Do you see? And they listen to these views and both sides get a chance to hear each other. This is important. Hearing each other out is a start, an important start, I think. You hear stuff that sounds nonsensical in your conviction. You start taking a deeper breath, in and out, yet continue to listen, then you respond, and s/he listens to you, too (interview).

In the Istanbul Besiktaş Abbasağa park forum I attended in the summer of 2014, three BİKG activists and a CHP MP, upon invitation of a local initiative, shared their observations of a solidarity trip to Lice in Kurdistan. Activists made engaging speeches regarding military violence and its effects on the everyday life of Kurdish women. They kept underlining that, contrary to our fears, Kurds do not want separation, but a life of equality. A 49-year-old Turkish woman asked, “I remember my teenage years, in our apartment were people from Diyarbakır, Malatya and also policemen, we all lived together as brothers and sisters, interwoven, without any problem. I still have so many friends from the East. Why is this a problem now?” BİKG activists emphasized the need to learn how to negotiate, listen to, and learn from each other, leaving our prejudices aside: “We should not speak for them, here I have passed my impressions to you, but I am only a conveyor/mediator, the negotiation should be with the people of Lice, we should listen to them for what they want and what they lived.”

Despite this awareness, however, it was only when the floor was opened to the forum that Kurdish people undertook the burden of grabbing the mike so that could bring in their voices. A young Kurdish man raised in Istanbul recalled, “When I started primary school, my mom cautioned me not to reveal my Kurdish identity. You would not be able to survive in Besiktaş in the 90s if you said you were Kurdish. My parents were careful not to talk Kurdish when I was around so that I would forget it. Let them forget the place they came from, their tradition, morals, values, language, and culture, and say, ‘we used to live happily together.’ Yes, we lived together, but how is the question.” A Kurdish woman added, “We call this a murderer state because whichever government comes to power always hits the Kurdish people. To stand with Kurds, it is time to start listening to them. There is questioning, but never listening. We want peaceful coexistence but also have genuine fears of our own, like you guys do.” When the 49-year-old woman, as I have noted above, shared her recollections of supposedly happier times when everyone lived together without conflict, it seemed that she did so unaware of her Turkish positionality. Her positionality and assumptions, it seems to me, could only be challenged by Kurdish subjects who could articulate what was invisible to Turkish sensibilities, namely, that it was only through the denial of Kurdish self-determination and Kurds being hidden away, that Turks could co-exist comfortably with them.

The ways in which engagement with the sovereignty issue may be undertaken for decolonial action needs to be learned from the Kurds. I remember a Kurdish activist saying that when the Kurdish truth is solely delivered in the liberal form of rights and inclusion, as opposed to liberation and self-determination, when Turks come face to face with the Kurdish demand for democratic autonomy, they feel betrayed and wronged. Peace activists should therefore study and learn how Kurdish activists

negotiate clashes with Turkish women and collaborate with them in addressing crowds. DÖKH activist Dicle shared with me her experience in a big gathering of women's organizations in Ankara. When the word Kurdistan was uttered in the DÖKH presentation, a group of Kemalist women protested, booed, started clapping, and left the meeting hall. She remembers a Turkish Muslim woman from HDP, who saluted Kurdish friends in solidarity, telling them that they are not alone, that no one has a right to monopolize the gathering. The fact that nationalist women were not given the ground was very encouraging for Dicle:

Sometimes you really say *inceldiği yerden kopsun* (let it break if it is already too weak). Because you have no more patience. I can say that I have witnessed every possible kind of torture in life, particularly the psychological kind. If we are at unease with adapting to social life and establish relationships, that is because of what has happened to us. She [a Kemalist woman] says if we [Kurdish people] demand a sacrifice from them, we should watch out for their sensitivities! I just told her this, 'You are talking about sensitivities, right? Let me tell you one thing. See Turkish flags are everywhere in this hall, there is a big one right over there. And the picture of Kemal Atatürk. If you talk about sensitivities, if I am showing the patience to sit under this flag, rest assured that I am depriving myself and making a huge compromise. I mean, this is a sacrifice, you should know that.' She was shocked, boggled! But it is time we start a true conversation. If it is under this flag that my door was banged, if my dad has been kicked by combat boots, if I have been exposed to all kinds of violence, I said, isn't it normal that I develop an antipathy towards this flag? That I do not feel any belonging to it? Or what does it even mean to expect otherwise? I said 'Rest assured; I am already trying to 'be' in this conference-hall by overcoming tons of barriers inside me. So, you think you have a sensitivity against the word Kurdistan? Then think about this... My mom is still crying after ten years, because she could never receive my brother's dead body. What sensitivity are you talking about? All you do is to talk about a one-way sensitivity.' Now actually these two are not even comparable, but I was trying to do my best to touch her and get her to understand. During that workshop, I tried to sit at every table. And what I witnessed hurt me too much. People have not the slightest idea what is happening in Kurdistan. It is only what they watch on TV. You feel like, 'I must get more organised, mingle with them more, touch more people.' You want to scream that, 'We are not monsters. This is what happened to us.' You want to say, 'People suffered just because they spoke their mother tongue.' I wanted to scream all that, but the time felt short. Those coffee breaks were too short for me (Dicle).

I suggest that no Turkish voice can substitute this corporeal affective voice/knowledge that embodies Turkish colonial violence. Turkish privilege, I argue, whenever possible should be used to lend the space, pass the mike to Kurdish subjects, amplify their voices, and Turkish voices should share their own testimonies in negotiation with that of the Kurds'. In the absence of Kurdish supervision or challenge, Turkish accounts have the risk of reproducing appropriative misrepresentations. The role of Turkish peace activists in such encounters can be to develop strategies to establish "a 'more difficult contract' between those who give testimony and those who receive it, one that creates a complex ethical and political space in which the audience is required to register their own complicity in the other's loss" (G. Pratt, 2009, p. 3), that is, to make visible Turkish implicatedness in assimilation. "The possibility of something giving ... begins only with a recognition of the debts already accrued and which assimilate bodies, already recognised as strange or familiar, into economies of difference" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 154). If diverse ethnonational voices could address a Turkish majority audience, the quandary of BİKG – fear of getting appropriated by Turkish nationals on one end and DÖKH on the

other – could be overcome. Nonetheless, this desire for agonistic radical democracy by Kurdish activists seems to clash with the often-singular ontologies of the Turkish, that tend towards uniform discursive and physical spaces.

Chapter 7 · Representation of the Colonial Turkish Self in Postcolonial Coloniality

Why am I writing this book? Because I am not innocent. I live in France. I live in the West. I am white. Nothing can absolve me of this. I hate the white good conscience. I curse it. ... I am a criminal. But an extremely sophisticated one. I don't have any blood on my hands. That would be too vulgar. No justice system in the world would drag me to court. I outsource my crime (Bouteldja, 2016, pp. 27–28) (Daughter of an Algerian Arab family).

We must investigate and imaginatively constitute our 'own' unclaimed history with the same teleiopoietic delicacy that we strive for in the case of the apparently distant. The most proximate is the most distant, as you will see if you try to grab it exactly, in words, or, better yet, to make someone else grab it (Spivak, 2012, p. 406).

Barış Ünlü (2018b), a rare Turkish scholar inspired by critical whiteness studies, conjoins the term “Turkishness contract” to describe the situation what I call the “postcolonial whiteness” of Turkish nationals submitting to the constitutive contract of the postimperial Turkish Republic. According to this tacit contract, only those whose mother tongue is Turkish or those Turkified in time (Circassian, Laz, Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian, Greek, Arab, Azeri, Turkmen, Georgian, Bosnian, Pomak, Albanian, etc.) can potentially benefit from the promises of the contract to acquire decent positions in politics, business, bureaucracy, academy, or arts in Turkey. While the first implicit proviso which the contract demands is to be Turkish or to be Turkified, the second proviso is not to talk or write about the history of erasure of non-Muslim peoples from Anatolia and the appropriation of their wealth. The third proviso, on the other hand, is “not to write, talk or make politics around the Muslim groups who may resist Turkification” (Ünlü, 2012, p. 25). Today the largest organized people to resist Turkification in Turkey are the Kurds. Often unconsciously internalized ways of thinking, seeing, feeling, attending, or *not* thinking, seeing, feeling, attending, inform how Turks submit to the contract; a Turk actively or passively refuses to learn about, take interest in, or be affected by the groups or issues excluded by the contract. Ünlü argues that Turkishness is invisible to the majority of Turks who fail to account for how it shapes their emotional and intellectual worlds (Ünlü, 2018a). For the same people, however, a Kurd's Kurdishness or an Armenian's Armenianness would be too visible; their behaviors would readily be associated with their ethnonational identities. Ünlü furthermore asserts that the more a Turk is universalist, be it liberal or socialist, the more her Turkishness becomes invisible to her.

The feminist allies referred to in my study take an interest in the Kurds, unlike those Ünlü mentions above. What I argue, however, is that they seek to engage with them in ways that would avoid breaching the “contract.” In the previous chapter, I looked at the mergerist methods that I describe as “Turkish feministization,” conducive to concealing the interlocking truth of the Kurdish Other and the Turkish self in the context of peace activism. In this chapter, I explore in deeper ways the specific discursive strategies

and conceptions of whiteness, race, and coloniality deployed by feminist allies that help screen Turkishness and implicatedness in the colonial modernization project of a postcolonial state.

7.1 Denial of the racial matrix of self-constitution

We practice a feminism in Turkey that does not identify as Turkish. What happens is, since it is evident that this is not Kurdish feminism, it comes to be coded as Turkish feminism. But we don't call ourselves Turkish feminists. There are Cherkas or Kurdish women, too, in our feminist cadre. What brings them together mainly is living on the lands of the Republic of Turkey and being women. I think if a feminism identifies as Turkish in Turkey, this would amount to regressive nationalism (Beyza).

The anti-nationalist Turkish Feminist Movement (TFM) tradition deems identification with an ethnic culture either parochial, essentializing, supremacist, or acceptable only in the case of oppressed ethnicities, as a subcategory of class or gender. Beyza, as mentioned above, thinks if they were to self-ascribe as Turkish, this would be nationalist. Her way out is to allege “living on the lands of the Republic of Turkey and being women” as what brings them together in TFM. What is paradoxical here is that an anti-nationalist concern not to identify as Turkish, results in different cultures of womanhood to be assimilated under the phrase “women living on Turkey's land.”

I argue that Turkish peace activists' hesitance to negotiate new spaces for Kurdish voices in Turkish society was partly because the former did not identify as Turkish. Their self-image was nationally unsituated, hence innocent. Why would they decolonize something that they never claimed? This self-image of being unmarked or invisible, however, is a privilege that can only be enjoyed by Turks or those who pass as Turks dwelling in national normativity in Turkey. Critical race and whiteness scholars identify normative invisibility as a defining characteristic of white culture: “Most have argued that the reproduction of whiteness relies on its constitution as an invisible ‘raceless’ identity, thereby equating white subjects and their specific cultural mores and values with the universality of the human” (Thobani, 2007b, p. 172). In this sense, there is a strong correlation between postcolonial (or internally colonial) whiteness and being Turkish in Turkey's context. The counter-geographies of Kurdistan and western Turkey are simultaneously connected and separated by the double movement of colonial racialization and deracialization. Yet, if there is not much said on racialization of the Kurds, even less is said on deracialization of the Turkish allies. How Turkish progressives reinvent whiteness is rather an untold story.

I know many people like me; raised on that privileged side and sufficiently ignorant to google the word ‘Kurd’ on the internet at the age of 21. Because during our formative years, there was not even the possibility that anything other than Turk existed. There were the internal and external *mihra*s (hostile powers). Internal ones were somewhat ghost-like; they would never be named (Arıkan, 2017).³⁰²

Even if Turkish feminists like Arıkan or myself learned about the Kurds in our 20s, I argue that learning about one's Turkishness was/is a more difficult task, not yet incipient on a collective level. When I think of my ongoing journey, it is slow, gradual, and unsettling; it takes many stages of unlearning and

encounters with Kurdish or Armenian friends whose generous offerings might initially be too packed, cryptic, sometimes incomprehensible to me. Perhaps this introspective process would have never started had I not had the chance to live in Kurdistan; it was an inaccessible truth, silenced in all social and academic realms for the urban, secular, middle-class Turks of western Turkey. I remember many subversive moments that I used to suppress. When I argued in 2006 to a Kurdish workmate in the Amed (Diyarbakır) Metropolitan Municipality that the Kurdish question was mainly about uneven economic development, he categorized me as belonging to the Turkish Left. I was offended; how could I fall into the Turkish category as an internationalist Marxist? A year later, disturbed by the slogan *Kadını Yaratan Öcalan'a Bin Selam* (Thousand salutes to Öcalan who created the women) chanted during a protest against femicide in Amed's Şemse Allak park, named after a murdered woman, I was trying to explain to Kurdish friends around me why a man "creating" women made no sense. A young woman standing close by smiled amicably and asked if I was Turkish. The question disturbed me. I thought it was irrelevant, perhaps even discriminatory, yet it stuck in my mind for years, until I could revisit it from within its own semantic world. Just as it has taken me some years to realize that being invited to Kurdistan as part of the city-planning team of a Turkish professor from Ankara, Middle East Technical University, was also about my colonial privilege. When we arrived the first time from Ankara (the Turkish capital), I had no idea that we were "Turkish," in the way my Kurdish friends saw it. All this made me curious about how my Turkish participants engaged with their Turkishness.

Those who were not ethnic Turks, perhaps meaning to show their sympathy to Kurds, sometimes said, "I am not Turkish, either" and hinted at their ethnic (Arab, Albanian, Circassian, Tatar, Laz, etc.) or religious/cultural (Alevi, Jewish, etc.) origins, and shared family stories of assimilation or immigration:

The 'what is your nationality' question has always been a problem for me because I don't know my nationality. I know that I am not Kurdish or Armenian or Greek. But am I Turkish? Probably not. My mother is Georgian, who has migrated from Batum to Artvin and from Artvin to İzmit. But, let me say that they are very assimilated Georgians. My father has migrated from Bulgaria, he was born in Rusçuk, came here at the age of seven. Given these, I really don't exactly know what my nationality is (Aysel).

I am originally from Diyarbakır. But I can say that mine is an assimilated family circle that denied their Kurdishness and embraced the Kemalist ideas. I come from a family that, due to the repression of those earlier times, believed that they were Turkish, and refused to question their past since then. My father used to tell us that Kurds were the 'mountain Turks.' He did not deny being from Diyarbakır, instead defended that the real locals of Diyarbakır were the Turks (Birsen).

The feelings of loss or being lost, resentment for lack of cultural belonging that I observed in these narratives, although attesting to a degree of unhappy consciousness, usually were taken for granted, as if not much could be done about them. The weakening memory of ethnocultural origins seemed to be left to a slow and silent death. The absence of active politics to claim one's right to national identity and culture, however, lends to passing as Turkish in Turkey, particularly if coming from a fair-skin, no accent,

Sunni Muslim ethnic group, trusted by the Turkish state for its historical loyalty (as discussed in Chapter 1). And passing as Turkish, “allows one to pass into an invisible and privileged community” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 128). In this position, one can continue to benefit from promises of the “Turkishness contract” as a more-or-less respectable “exalted subject” (Thobani, 2007a); not challenging assimilation, yet at the same time fantasizing colonial innocence by imagining herself as non-Turkish. Kurdish feminist Gülay found this disingenuous, stating “The relationship between Turkish and Kurdish people is like that between men and women, employer and worker. It is a domination relation, [Turkish] feminists must see that. This ingenuousness never exists, they would quickly say, ‘Oh, but I am not Turkish, either.’ Then why do you act Turkish?” (Gülay).

Ethnic Turks or those who were Turkified with no living memory of their past, on the other hand, thought Turkishness held no noteworthy effect in the formation of their daily or political consciousness. They put forth their gender, sexual, class, or political identities, wounds and vulnerabilities as having shaped them. Some reacted that they would find it very problematic, reductive, or patronizing if I categorized them/their politics as Turkish. I kept hitting at this unwillingness to analyze or to be analyzed in ethnocultural terms, via concepts like whiteness and race. A prominent feminist academic said, “I think this *devasa* (mega) conceptualization of white/black is very problematic. What benefit can we expect from such leveling when we know that the oppressor-oppressed relationship is pretty complex?” (Aksu, in hkubra, 2013). Another told me that most women become feminists due to body-politics-related wounds, sexual abuse, exploitation at home or workplace, etc. “When you say white feminism, she thinks, ‘How can you call me white, a person so wounded?’” Gender, sexual, faith, or class vulnerabilities were not only posed as having mattered, but also as a testament to why those who have them may not exercise whiteness: “How is it possible for an Alevi woman to be a white feminist in Turkey?” (Canan). Cavidan added that gender-wise no woman can be white. She also rejected the characterisation of TFM as middle-class, as feminism affected women across classes. Many agreed that it generally was non-feminist women or leftist Turkish men who would use the term “white” to insult their work, alongside other words such as, bourgeois, elitist, or middle-class. They found it offensive, patronizing, agitative, and reductive, and also ignorant of some feminists’ closeness to the Kurdish or socialist movements, arguing that “what underlies is their distrust in organized feminist struggle.” TFM’s visceral reaction mostly was a response to these pejorative Turkish uses. This rendered it all the more difficult to introduce “whiteness” as a meaningful tool to promote anti-racist feminism in Turkey.

For both groups, the irrelevance of Turkishness in one’s politics was often a self-referential statement, not mediated through the gaze of the Other. For example, when asked why Turkish peace activism could not flourish as desired, besides the practical barriers (as discussed in Chapter 6), Turkish participants mentioned the geographical distance, separate lifeworlds, lack of time, or the “irreconcilable” differences

between DÖKH and TFM. A connection to Turkishness appeared almost nowhere in the narratives. This contrasted with the Kurdish accounts that certain acts could only be explained by Turkishness: “It is not a coincidence that [Turkish] feminists are unable to theorize an anticolonial, anti-racist feminism albeit the 30-year Turkish-Kurdish war,” said a DÖKH activist and continued, “I don’t understand; it is as if DÖKH is not Kurdish, and these feminists are not Turkish. They have to recognize, feel and accept Kurds just as they accept French or Germans” (Çiğdem). The Kurdish MP Semiha stated, “If feminists do not take issue with the article 66 of the Constitution,³⁰³ this says something about their participation in Turkish nationalism.” DÖKH activist Helin who worked in an Amed neighborhood women’s center as a domestic violence counselor has witnessed many times the racial whiteness talk being avoided within TFM,

They would say ‘I am not white because I am vulnerable as a woman or a socialist’ and so on. But having the privilege not to see or live an ethnic form of oppression is already a form of whiteness. They are not even able to feel their own suffering and loss as a Turk; that they are Turkified and assimilated into the state culture. They do not remember what they have lost, when they have lost it, and what it cost. But we can explicitly see, feel ours. This is an ongoing thing for us. We just cannot escape it (Helin).

“Turkishness contract” is precisely about this inability to see, hear, think, feel, and talk about what the nation-state does not want “us” to, for that is how Turkish-supremacist patriarchy racializes and sexualizes women differently (as explored in Chapter 5). After all, the inability to see oneself from the eyes of the excluded, or a lack of double consciousness, is an attribute of the colonizer. Kurdish activists keep asserting that Turkish allies, as racially accepted nationals, benefit from a considerable degree of protection from criminalization, direct state-violence, linguistic or genocide, and enjoy privileges such as a life in their mother tongue, as well as cultural and class resources and entitlements which protect many from certain forms of male violence, or being ashamed of their own culture or language.

For Helin, the incapacity to feel the pain of assimilation into the nation-state culture signifies both privilege and a disadvantage/numbness. The extent of this numbness marks the level of harmonization that happened between the “white but not quite” skin of the assimilated immigrant and the “white mask” imposed by the postcolonial Turkish State, in the Fanonian sense. The official mask of postcolonial Turkishness founded on the colonial erasure of indigenous Other(s), mutates the collaborating skins to such an extent that the self loses touch with her historical-cultural roots. The more one happens to come from ethnocultural groups historically rewarded for their complicity in the constitution of the unitary nation-state,³⁰⁴ the more is her alienation. Therefore, a mainstream secular Turkish feminist is usually a stranger to her ethnocultural self and history, a self-alienated subjectivity forgetful of the constitutive violence that links her history of self-identification to that of the Republic. The very violence that racially excludes the indigenous peoples of the land simultaneously rewrites her cultural identity as the unmarked white Turkish citizen. For her, the internalization of national homogeneity is an unmourned loss, for it takes root deep inside at the level of the psycho-affective unconscious. For Turkified Kurds, however,

the comfort experienced under the mask is precarious, it lasts only until they are seen: “The crisis of ‘not belonging’ for the black subject who passes becomes then a crisis of knowledge, of knowing there is always a danger of *being seen*” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 128). What is required to avert the danger is a constant, deliberate performance of Turkishness to prove loyalty. And when they do/can pass, the independence that comes with assimilation is a strategy of internal colonialism that enables the expropriation of Kurdish lands.

In a 2014 summer workshop organized by Kurdish and Turkish feminists as part of an alternative leftist academic platform in western Turkey, I got to observe the difficulty of introducing critical race terminology to a feminist audience. The workshop sought to discuss the Kurdish feminist concept *jineoloji* based on presentations by Turkish and Kurdish students of the *jineoloji* classes held in Amed. These classes were primarily attended by Kurdish women, and from time to time also Turkish graduate students studying or researching in Kurdistan. The two Turkish presenters³⁰⁵ tried to read *jineoloji*’s take on Western epistemologies, drawing some connections to postcolonial, subaltern, and Black feminist theories. The presenters seemed to be surprised to see the Turkish audience extremely unsettled: “You cannot criticize feminism in Turkey as if it is the one in the [global] West. In Turkey, it is not that *pirupak* (clear-cut, immaculate); not everyone benefits from the opportunities offered by Turkey. I find these [racial] concepts too sharp” (Müge). Her suggestion was that it would perhaps be more realistic to “build a discourse based on real stories of the women’s movement in Kurdistan rather than the critique of the Turkish one.” It was alright that different feminisms concentrated on different issues; this did not necessarily imply an asymmetrical relationship. The presenters replied that they did not mean feminists benefited from all privileges, neither in Turkey nor in the Western world, or that whiteness was fixed instead of relational. Their idea was to make the racial inequality visible so that we could work through it. Nonetheless, the audience interpreted the categories of “white, whiteness, Turkish” to be polarizing rather than constructive for the present alliances in any way: “This does not go beyond leftist men’s criticisms of feminism; divisive and dangerous for the common struggle we try to put forth” (Müge).

It was evident that no Turkish participant wanted to speak from a position of complicity or investigate unequal racial relations. They expressed the view that recognizing Kurdish women’s oppression was progressive enough and questioned the need to link it to the critique of “their feminism.” What would its use be, other than to alienate feminist allies? They already recognized the geographical differences, but in the end, all women were targeted by and fighting against the same state and patriarchy. This liberal conception of “geography” – as well as state and patriarchy – as abstract, inert, homogenous realms, instead of differentiated products of unequal racial relations, helped to evade exploring what alternative forms a solidarity between the colonized and the colonizer might take.

What was more surprising, however, was the discomfort of the DÖKH discussant, Kıymet, with the presentations. She could not see herself in the language of this postcolonial feminism that named things

from within another's experience: "Before you have put us in the category of nationalist, then third-wave, then identity-based or whatever, and we had to fight so hard to convince you that we are not that, and now here is this postcolonial one," she said. Perhaps in an urge to relieve the tension in the room, like on many occasions I witnessed before, as a Kurdish woman first she took on the responsibility to remind everyone that DÖKH acknowledged historical teachings of feminism and celebrated its solidarity. It was just that feminisms of each alternative temporality and space had to generate newer paradigms, tools, and concepts. Then she turned to what she saw as the real issue: our *devletli akıl* (stateful, state-oriented, state-owning mind). I didn't notice it then but going over my notes a few years later I realized that *devletli akıl*, which comes into being in and through a nation-state-centered/shaped lifeworld, was one of the indigenous reference concepts she was proposing for our contemplation (as discussed in Chapter 5). She explained that their struggle relied on fashioning their own material and mental resources, land-based knowledge, and governance mechanisms, independent of the colonial mindset.³⁰⁶ "Where do we think solutions to our problems lie, the individual, the society, or the state?" she asked. Turkish responses were defensive, ranging from explaining why seeking solutions through the state did not mean allying with it, to the observation that it was "unfair to charge feminism for putting demands on the state, for the Kurdish movement also does that." Another feminist stressed that the vast difference between the material conditions of the two struggles made any comparison nonsense. Kurdish women had municipalities and a "giant" movement to support them. What did they have in the west of Turkey?

My analysis of these quick evasions or reversals will follow in the next section. Here I want to emphasize that the mind-opening food for thought Kıymet offered, and her proposal to seek newer concepts and language – like *jineoloji* – to analyze women and their relation to other peoples of the land, were perceived as artificial. Turkish feminists were not convinced that it spoke to a genuine demand, "*altı dolu gibi gelmedi bana*" (looks unsubstantiated to me), or to the real needs of Kurdish women.³⁰⁷ Instead of engaging with the Kurdish insights, exploring the potentials of a perspective beyond the state, what was repeatedly asserted, in a tone which sounded somewhat infantilizing towards the Kurds, was that feminists in Turkey and in the world had already covered the issues that Kurdish women were bringing up, and that the former did what they did for a reason.³⁰⁸ This implied being content with the specific world tradition that Turkish feminists felt at home with, rather than learning from within a decolonial counter-tradition.

I have experienced with many feminists that even when they say, 'I don't get this, I don't get that,' they mean to make you feel, 'You don't get it, you may talk but you are not in a position to advise me really.' In other words, she cannot get that Kurds may talk better than her, or Kurds may get it better than she does. This is the issue a bit, okay? One can easily see through their psychology (Jiyan).

Ironically, what I witnessed looked like a staging of the very whiteness that was furiously disowned in the gathering. It unfolded in its quite typical form: Turkish defensiveness, lack of generous curiosity,

a liberal understanding of intersectionality, centering the self as the one to be convinced, self-referential critique to inferiorize the Other, adoption of a teaching tone, non-acknowledgment of what is offered, and a rush to innocence and vulnerability. The difference between how Kurdish and Turkish women, respectively challenged the presentations was also telling. Kıymet did it to introduce the indigenous Kurdish terms in use, and in progress, to dismantle the ethnonational hierarchies in Turkey, while Turkish feminists had nothing concrete to offer in that respect beyond expressing discontent with being seen as white.

This whole experience reminded me of an exchange in a weekly gathering of feminists at Amargi (women's cooperative) in 2011. In response to socialist-feminist scholar Acar Savran who argued for establishing bridges between different women's experiences through commonness of the analysis, another scholar Sirman asked a self-critical question, "Are we spending enough time to be able to agree on the concepts?":

We do not work together duly to create common concepts; do I make myself clear? We all feel others are imposing on us. We think Kurdish women impose on us, leftist women impose on us, but I think we impose on them as well. They also name our reaction as an 'imposition,' therefore first and foremost we must look into how we can get out of this blind alley. We must try talking in a whole lot more serious way so that the process of conceptualization and the concepts coming out of this process are not solely coming out of what we know. We do not talk enough with others and on others' experiences; this is the issue I want to underline the most (Nükhet Sirman, in Ahıska et al., 2011, p. 310).

The practical consequence of not sparing enough time to study the genealogy of each other's concepts was such that when DÖKH called some feminist ways as "Turkish," allied feminists would feel offended as though a severe injustice had been done to their progressive tradition. They would prefer to dismiss it as unfounded, hostile, ignorant, or endangering solidarity. DÖKH activists, on the other hand, abstained from using "white" to describe the standpoint of TFM, either to avert the tension it would cause or, as I explore in this study, they had other concepts with which they could talk about racial whiteness, and these concepts differed from the critical discourse developed in North America. This can partly be attributed to the earlier Marxist-Leninist, later neo/post-Marxist (A. Gramsci, E. Laclau, E. Wallerstein, F. Braudel, A. G. Frank, T. W. Adorno) and finally anarchist (M. Bookchin) influences on KÖH (Kurdistan Freedom Movement) that provided a limited analytical lexicon to talk about the racist character of colonialism. As a result, the movement developed its own terminology to name and fight Turkish-supremacy, namely, by indigenizing these theories.³⁰⁹ For DÖKH activist Delal, for example, whiteness signified a specific way of relating to the state, namely, avoiding taking risks, and showing an eagerness to develop relations with the state, "being content with the opportunities the state offers":

This is a *tuzu kuru* (well-off), state-centered position enabled by the availability of some social capital. In that sense, there are white Kurds as well as white Turks. Similarly, within the oppressing nation, there is a nationalist majority, producing racist discourse. And there are a few others who are in solidarity with the Kurds; those who see their own future in the future of the Kurdish people. Therefore, I do not find healthy the wholesale definition of peoples as white, racist, or even

revolutionary for that matter. Uneasy expressions these are. It is difficult to work with too sharp terms. So, it is not an issue of either black or white; there are grey zones in between (Delal).

At first glance, how Delal challenged a wholesome definition of whiteness may sound close to the Turkish one. The essential difference, however, is that while her account assumes that some Kurds may also become white through assimilation into the Turkish state culture, Turkish feminist accounts center on a desire to justify why whiteness is always already impossible for their political community. Secondly, Delal connects the possibility of challenging whiteness to the performance of solidarity, as an active struggle breaching the “Turkishness contract,” and bringing the system-structuring power of Turkishness to crisis. What makes the “grey zone” grey are the risks taken in relinquishing one’s racial privileges in negotiation with the Other. In Turkish accounts, denial of one’s whiteness/Turkishness because they are gender victims, seems to me to be essentialized/categorical and independent of the quality of the solidarity that their Turkishness professes. When and how they may or may not exercise anti-racist agency or may or may not take certain risks to account for colonial privilege, are left out of the discussion. More than the “grey zone” that Delal references, feminists seem to claim the zone of race-denying gender or class victims: “The white subjects claim the place of hosts ('our shores'), at the same time as they claim the position of the victim, as the ones who are damaged by an 'unmerciful government'” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 43).

Most DÖKH activists make a clear distinction between the nationalist Turks and (potential) allies. However, this does not mean that these “grey zone” relations show no resemblance to the Turkishness envisioned by the nation-state. This resemblance was encapsulated in frequently used Kurdish expressions like, *Türk gibi bakmak* (seeing like a Turk), *Türk gibi ilişkilirmek* (relating like a Turk), *Türk bakış açısı* (Turkish viewpoint), *devlet gibi ilişkilirmek* (relating like the state), *erkek gibi ilişkilirmek* (relating like men), and capitalist modernity, and individualism. Some concepts used to denote features of capitalism in the Turkish Left, like “individualism” or “elitism,” became racialized terms in the Kurdish political lexicon. Their manifestation on the ground was described as *üsttenci* (patronizing), policing, *tepeden bakan* (looking down on), hegemon, *devletçi* (statist), *dayatan* (imposing oneself), *katı* (rigid), teaching, *inkarcı* (denialist), orientalist, elitist, judgmental, *beğenmeyen* (dyslogistic), savior-like, and *halklaşamayan* (unable to spread in society). These phrases highlighted the discrepancy that the Kurds saw between how Turkish people treat the political, ideological, and territorial claims of the Kurds, and those of the groups that they view as their own. They see feminists, not as unidimensional subjects defined by gender oppression alone, but always already intersectional, racial subjects mediated through their distance or proximity to the “Turkishness contract.”

Sirman asked, “What if we may not find common analysis or concepts?” (Ahıska et al., 2011, p. 306). It is this question that I trace in this study. What if not being able to build the common is related to something we cannot grasp here in the present? What is it that will allow us to be moved by what fails to

be in the present (Ahmed, 2000)? Kurdish women are the specters haunting Turkish feminists' homes. Will they renunciate their sovereignty and open themselves to heterogeneity? So far, in the face of challenges, the primary strategy TFM follows seems to be suspending relations, turning down, or withdrawing. The KESK sexual harassment crisis was one such case of suspending relations (see Appendix A).

7.2 Denial operating through discursive moves

I turn to unpack how the disavowal of Turkishness impacted the activist exchanges I observed. This task requires a decolonial intersectional analysis of a set of indirect quotidian discursive gestures that, intended or not, worked to deracialize Turkishness in Turkey. These gestures helped think of Turkishness as other than a set of racial privileges structurally granted to Turkish/Turkified citizens. Going unmarked was a fundamental privilege: “There is no more powerful position than that of being ‘just’ human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can’t do that – they can only speak for their race” (Richard Dyer, in Thobani, 2007b, p. 177). If Turkishness was not about race, it could not be about whiteness either. One could remain ethnically or culturally Turk/Turkified but be redeemed of whiteness.

7.2.1 A thing of the past

The radical wing of the movement, namely, socialist-feminists, revolutionary feminists, and various other feminists who did not fall under these names, shared a perspective that went beyond the fight for equality; they sought the transformation of the societal system and were sensitive to the hierarchies and inequalities among women. Back then, however, these were called hierarchy or inequality instead of ‘differences,’ and we cared about them in theory though arguably in practice... How much could we be open to Kurdish women, for example, and voice their demands? I say Kurdish women intentionally, because back then no other women claimed a different sexual, national, or ethnic identity, and said, ‘We have these separate demands and problems.’ Were there such pleas, then I would say we were insensitive to lesbians, to Armenians as well; but it was only Kurdish women who came forward with such power. ... In that period, we could not act responsibly towards Kurdish women’s feminist approach, whose emphases differed from ours. Why was that? Perhaps there was an unconscious chauvinism that had taken root somewhere very deep inside, I do not know. I do not think this was the real reason though; the fundamental reason was our zeal to enviously protect feminism. Those days, Kurdish women were adopting the motherhood discourse against the state, and this was straining us. We were worried that feminism would again be sacrificed to other things; women’s identities, demands would again have to fall behind other things. Our desire to create an autonomous and independent space for feminism partly desensitized us against these differences and hierarchies (Acar Savran, 2005, pp. 123–24).

Gülnur Acar Savran, the theorist of socialist-feminism in Turkey, in this self-critical retrospection admits that “anti-system” (*sistem-dışı*) feminists during the 1990s were insensitive towards ethnic and other inequalities and hierarchies. More than chauvinism, however, she links this to their desire to create an independent political ground for feminism. It is this very moment where she quickly evades the chauvinism option and moves on to what she thinks was more determining in their experience. I want to

expand on that. What do we make of the fact that Kurdish or other women were invisible to Turkish feminists unless they organized and expressed their own concerns? “It would take us much longer to ask certain questions if it were not them growing stronger. And probably it would again be Kurdish women forcing us. We were more like men who never say, ‘Oh dear, I am sorry that I began this life with good fortune’ (Nurcan). Or what do we make of the fact that instead of “difference,” they just called it hierarchy? Do these not attest to one’s subjectification through a white national space that instructs negligence to racialized cultural differences? I argue that this omitted structural level investigation is what makes TFM white, both back then, and still today, and it is that which allows relegating whiteness to the past, without connecting to the present.

“Kurdish women from Roza [see endnotes 183, 195] have shaken us up, rubbed it in our face that women are not abstract universal subjects,” Selma said in relation to the early 2000s. But she also noted that back then Kurdish women were hostages to their difference, advocating for a fixed identity. According to her, the relationship turned into a real one when TFM could “build bridges between different forms of gender-based oppression.” What were these bridges for feminists? The often cited were: recognizing the right to education in the mother tongue and fighting against sexual state-violence as women’s demands; recognizing the difference between the politics of Kurdish mothers and the reproduction of patriarchal gender roles; abandoning the culturally essentialist naming, *töre cinayeti* (murder ordered by custom³¹⁰) for *kadın cinayeti* (women’s murders). These improvements were quite limited for KWM (Kurdish Women’s Movement). Yet, in particular, the feminists referred to as *Kürtçü* (Kurdist) believed that white, middle-class, Istanbul-centered consciousness of feminist movement had largely been transcended. “Our interaction used to be white. We always had this ‘I am the one who knows’ attitude because we learned it from the West” (Esra). Challenged by Kurdish women on numerous occasions, they believed they had questioned their ethnocentric prejudices, and improved their politics. Nurcan suggested that perhaps due to the parallel historical emergence of the KWM and TFM, feminists were the first to build solidarity with Kurds, even earlier than many socialist groups. Their advantage was that a background in pro-Kurdish socialist movements helped them understand the Kurdish question, and on top of that, their fierce critique of the *abilik taslama* (posturing as older brother) problem of the socialist groups granted them a briskness to spot the *ablalık taslama* (posturing as older sister) tendency of their own.

Saviorist hegemon attitudes, ethnocentric ways of thinking, ignoring the ethnicity-gender connection, all were mainly depicted as problems of the past, like the way they saw their national condition: a completed process (as discussed in Section 4.4). “There may still be remnants of whiteness here and there, but certainly not an overall feature” (Nurcan). Today’s understanding is that current relations transpire between two equal political subjects. A Kurdish feminist contests, “I cannot say, for example,

that feminist friends at BİKG [Women for Peace Initiative] are ‘white white.’ But overall, the feminist movement is white; it cannot come to terms with the Kurdish question” (Çiğdem). Self-criticism modulated as a retrospective act, I argue, helps evade the continuity of the racialized hierarchies that were rooted in the developmentalist/universalist era of the pre-2000s taking newer multicultural forms in the Turkish colonial present. My intent is to disturb this comforting notion of a “once and for all” fix in the past.

7.2.2 Equating the positions

Three renowned feminist academic/activists in Turkey: Sirman, Ahıska and Acar Savran, were reflecting on an issue that a Turkish participant living in Egypt for the last few years raised in the Q&A of the Amargi weekly gatherings. The participant was confused concerning the conflict that transpired at the 2011, March 8 demonstrations at Tahrir Square between some Egyptian feminists and white women. The white women believed that they had the right and freedom to be there alongside Egyptian women, while the Egyptian women argued that the presence of the white women contributed to the verbal and physical attacks the Egyptian women received. Was the “rights and freedoms discourse” of her foreign friends in Cairo relevant on this occasion? Sirman (2011, p. 315) responded, “What should white women do? In Egypt, they should do what the Egyptian women want them to do,” because their ability to nag about entering a square that is not theirs stems from the domination of the white feminist discourse, or North over the South. Ahıska said, “I do not agree with this ‘true Egyptians’ versus the ‘white women’ thing [...] White women are criticized from the perspective of power relations, but then who are the Egyptian women, or who are the Kurdish women? I mean these things are not that simple, *kendinden menkul* (self-evident), either” (ibid., p. 315). Acar agreed, “There is also the question in my mind why Egypt is their space and where our space is” (ibid., p. 315).

Who are the “real Egyptians” and who are the Kurdish women? Why is it their space and not ours? The inability to see the hierarchical interconnection of spaces, imagining a mobility unbounded by place-based power relations is what Mohanram (1999) calls “disembodiment of whiteness”; its ability to move is a result of the unmarking of the body. What Ahıska and Acar seem to be asking is that “since ethnonationalities are imagined constructs that can be questioned, why and how can we draw lines between the Kurdish, Turkish, or Egyptian women, or their spaces?” Such relativist discourse flattens the structural differences on two levels: one, it erases the differential treatment of colonial forces on these groups; two, it disregards the positive differences between the equally sovereign lifeworlds that colonial forces act on. Fanon’s (2008) criticism of Sartre was, “I wanted to be typically black – that was out of the question. I wanted to be white – that was a joke. And when I tried to claim my negritude intellectually as a concept, they snatched it away from me.” When asking, “Who are the Kurdish women?” the Turkish allies, like Sartre, seem to forget that it is not the Kurdish being, consciousness, and cosmology, but the

colonial subjugation of them, that we must strive to abolish. Here an anti-essentialist critique is put in the service of erasing the material historico-political difference of the Other, its right to extend in space, and self-govern, without the invasion of subjects who are attached to other territories of domination. This hegemonic approach disregards the conflicting interests and ontologies of liberation among women, and assumes the Turkish feminist agenda as unimplicated in, or equally threatened by (neo)colonial regional/global forces. Turkish feminists assign the power and authority to decide on where to be to an autonomous self that is imagined as ahistorical. Thus, they may transverse marked lands as unmarked bodies, similar to their Western white sisters, without negotiating the terms of their presence.

My Turkish participants were often suspicious that Kurdish women's claims to their own space, theorizing, or decision-making, could be a power move to marginalize that of the Turkish women's. This, I argue, is a symmetry that can only be drawn when race/racism/racialization is ignored as an autonomous field of social conflict on par with sex/sexism/sexualization. Whiteness was generally treated as individual-level beliefs and behaviors (elitist, arrogant, paternalist personality, tone or style) that could be changed through cultivating awareness. One common belief was that openness to learning could redeem one from whiteness: "However sensitive we might be to all forms of oppression, every standpoint has its blind spots. Just as Kurdish men are white with respect to the gender issue, feminism from time to time might be white with respect to the Kurdish issue. Not knowing of an inequality does not make you white, one can learn" (Defne). Are anti-system feminists relieved when men want to believe that they have done away with their masculinity through gender education? If manhood cannot be reduced to awareness or performance, how can whiteness be reduced to learning? When institutional and individual dimensions of racism are delinked, and the colonial context is blocked out, the result is a loss of the sense of directionality in racial relations of power. This missing connection opens the door to a full range of disorienting liberal moves, equating or reversing the two side's positional powers.

One example is to imagine both groups of women as similarly affected by nation-building:

National identity formation always works through women. The Kemalist paradigm is built on modernism, breaking with tradition. It says we are Turks now, and tells us how Turkish women should be: sacrificing, blah blah. For instance, my mom was one of these 'daughters of the Republic,' she saw it as a fancy situation, and rightfully so. If I was also wearing hijab in the Ottoman era, and suddenly a man came and promised liberating things, such as education, occupation, I would also like it. You have a role to play in nation-building now. Think of all those teacher girls sent out to Anatolia to become part of [Kemalist] nation-building. It is much more fun than being a housewife obviously. A Kurdish friend of mine, for example, said her life was so boring in the village. Then the guerillas came. She realized that it would be better if she were among them. I read many guerilla testimonies. All had this in common: instead of becoming a housewife and bearing six children, you go up to the mountains, participate in discussions and perhaps become a commander in the end. You attain a personality and dignity (Nevin).

Kurdish women have set an incredible example. Their municipalities, domestic violence measures, and so on. I do not underestimate any of these. But I say, can you imagine what a women's movement that gained independence from the [Kurdish] movement would achieve on top of these? It would blow us away. I don't think it is a coincidence that they cannot separate. They cannot because this is a

national struggle. Just as our women, I mean the women in Turkey, the likes of Kemalist women, could not dissociate from Atatürk's westernized woman model that suffocated them until the 70s. If women of the Kurdish movement don't want to be like them, they need to disassociate sooner. Not because they are in an awful state, but because they must do it (Canan).

One foundational argument of the book [Women's Societal Contract, published by KÖH] is that the leadership enabled 'awakening of the women.' It is a known fact that Kurdish women got politicized through the Kurdish struggle and cracked the door open for freedom. Nevertheless, linking this merely to 'power of the leadership' instead of the dynamism of women is like a continuation of a sexist attitude. This kind of [leader] ownership evokes the tension that transpired between the Kemalists and the feminists in early Republican times (Zihnioglu, 2002, p. 11).

These quotes illustrate non-intersectional analyses; women are equated on the basis of their gender, regardless of their culture and history. Perhaps the strong desire of Turkish feminists to differentiate themselves from the patriarchal traditions of Kemalism and socialism creates an extra barrier to seeing the specificity of KÖH. TFM identifies as anti-nationalist and anti-system, as opposed to the (neo)Kemalist, conservative, or liberal women allied with the state, dominating the women's movement scene in Turkey. Their anti-Kemalism relies on a critique of the top-down emancipation of women by the Republican male elite and the savior mentality of the "liberated" women elite, as discussed in Section 2.1, who took on the task of saving "backward, rural women of the east" (see Tekeli, 1991, p. 113). Such a critique, that is said to have helped question their own savior relation with the KWM, at the same time, seems to have reproduced what it critiqued, through the unquestioned analogy assumed between the two separate national contexts. What if KWM does not speak from the familiar place of the colonial patriarchy of Kemalism, or the revolutionary imagination of Turkish socialism, both of which have persistently disappointed Turkish feminists? What if Kurdish modernization and national revolution that have given rise to KWM, are considerably different from those influences that have given rise to TFM, as discussed in Chapter 2? Kurdish scholar Orun puts it thus:

The rearrangement of gender identities, and attributing to them new meanings and missions are not issues peculiar only to the agenda of government models such as the Republic of Turkey, that are shaped through creating a modern national identity and respectable citizens, but also on the agenda of people's movements that question the very notion of a 'nation-state' and the classical ideas of nation and nationalism, and aim for the liberation of society, instead of its control and domination (Orun, 2016, p. 85).

The presumption that Kurdishness might be a similar, coercive, top-down construct as Turkishness, disregards the historical and political differences that Orun notes. What follows from the logic of Canan and Zihnioglu's analyses is that the capitalist, bourgeois nation-state of Turkey, as enacted by the Republican male state elite, was imposed against the interests of the exploited classes and women, and so the Kurdish national project must/might also be an imposition by the Kurdish national elite, or the PKK. Once this symmetry is drawn, it becomes possible to project on to the Kurdish context the Turkish feminist skepticism of all nation-building processes, of their legitimacy to represent people and claim to territory. DÖKH's desire to represent their people and land would be sidelined, for it does not fit the

critical narrative built on exposing how national patriarchy instrumentalizes women. Instead, most feminists would warn that Kurdish women also might face being sent back home after the revolution. Kurdish activists interpret this as a hegemonic national attitude: “It is not that that risk is not there; the problem is to keep receiving this warning when we are already in more acute awareness of the risk” (Neslihan). “They forget that we are a generation who studied the failed Turkish revolution and the collapse of the Soviets right here next to us. We know how national liberation does not bring liberation to women” (Bircan). “In their case, they only had their family homes to return to. But we are trying to build a social and political life that hopefully will become our home to return” (Rûken).

A deeper analysis of the differences in ethnocultural praxis calls for another research project. Dependent on my participant observations, I can only paint a picture in broad strokes here. On the one hand there is the vibrant daily experience of Kurdishness in Kurdistan that we learn about from the thick descriptions in life-stories. These include a tightly-knit concrete cultural life-place, a meaning and value system grounded in familial and communal routines and mechanisms, sometimes oppressive, sometimes liberating, but with strong psycho-affective, socio-economic kinship bonds, interwoven through an indigenous resistance culture that challenge(d) the Ottoman and Turkish colonizing ventures. The Kurdishness that KÖH imagines, as a result, remains closer to its social and historical truth, better equipped to face its past, both as a perpetrator and a victim. Despite the brutal forces of colonization, it is less alienated and more open to accounting for its historical co-existence with others. “The powerless person is not exposed to the contamination of racism that comes with power. It is very difficult to become racist when you are not educated or acculturated to constantly humiliate, denigrate others and see yourself as superior. Just as power contaminates, lack of power keeps you ‘clean’” (Ünlü, 2018a, p. 11). Therefore, the Kurdish nation-building project is not a supremacist, centralist autocracy, but a pluralist, multi-ethnic, radical democracy. On the other hand, there is the Turkish, secular, urban, middle to upper class experience, one that is malleable, uprooted, and emptied from the emplaced content of its communal and cultural bonds, acculturated into the modern, abstract, individual citizenry of the nation-state. Exalted through benefits, it does not mourn for the loss of her organic cultural community that used to co-exist and exchange with others. Turkishness is unitary; a top-down forced racial invention of the Republican nationalism imposed on a multi-ethnic (including Turks and Turkmens), multi-religious social fabric. It is a proxy term the colonial state-machine must keep reinventing to perpetuate its racist control over heterogeneity; a territorial existence that conceals what is stolen, when and from whom.

7.2.3 Reversing the positions

Another move, unregistered as whiteness, is to swap the positions occupied in the racial matrix, which helps claim innocence and vulnerability. DÖKH’s willingness to influence TFM, for example, is interpreted as whiteness or desire for domination, “a masculine display of *quantitative* strength” (italics

mine). When Kurdish women use the *-meli*, *-mah* (must/should) modal verb form instead of an “experience-sharing language,” they find it white, patronizing, or masculine. Instead of hearing this language from within the predicaments/exigencies of anticolonial resistance, they let this style perceived as “irritating, masculine” take precedence over engaging with its content.³¹¹ When they abstain from entering discussions with DÖKH due to the Kurdish admonition that “feminists should not teach us feminism,” an Istanbul feminist says, “I fear this might engender a postmodern relativism that silences us [Istanbul feminists]” (Tülay). To counter the Kurdish criticism that TFM campaigns do not speak to the rural/urban poor in Kurdistan, one feminist blames Kurdish activists for performing whiteness because they are underestimating the agency of those poor Kurdish women in making use of the feminist politics of Istanbul. Another feminist says it is unfair to pin the blame on SFK alone, “We cannot keep up with everything; our power is limited. We must also see how much they [DÖKH] want to relate with *world feminists* [read Turkish feminists]. If they think we focus too much on body politics, then they focus too much on the Kurdish issue, but this argument would lead us nowhere” (Sinem). While self-critical of the white feminist attitude, which negates the accomplishments of Kurds, Esra suddenly jumps to a symmetrical reversal about being unfair to one another’s feminism:

We appreciate their struggle, okay? Actually, they hold a power that we could never achieve. But then, we give them advice. Feminism in Turkey is like that; it draws on the West, and our talking style includes too much, ‘No, not like that. Feminism is not this but that.’ Of course, one might have her own definition of feminism and debate it with others, but this cannot be a theoretical discussion that negates another’s practice. As if this movement does not already organise thousands, we try to prescribe to them how women’s organising should be. I find this laughable. Today, of course, I define such a position as very white. But just as I have a Western attitude against the Kurdish movement’s feminism, and am blind to certain aspects of it, their definitions also do not see my feminism, their *jineolojî* text in particular. The feminism they criticize there is liberal feminism, not mine. They ask why feminism is not turning into a mass political movement, but I think they do it very superficially. Does it mean that every political movement has to become mass-based? Just as we tell them how a movement should be, they do the same. They say, ‘You are a handful and don’t care to organise others, while my struggle includes millions: therefore, I go beyond feminism’ (Esra).

Esra’s feminism omits some aspects of DÖKH’s feminism, but so is *jineolojî*, as that which it challenges does not feel like her feminism.³¹² Just as feminists try to assert upon Kurds how a women’s movement should be, Kurds do the same when they take issue with feminism not being able to organize on a grassroots level. This defensive mirroring move fails to ask what if Kurdish activists are well-aware of the internal variations of Turkish feminisms, able to distinguish “anti-system” ones from the liberal or statist ones, but still prefer to highlight what they see as common on the Turkish side; an aspatial, decontextualized form of struggle, which they associate with the colonial privilege of Turkish feminists who can ethnoculturally survive, albeit doing closed-group politics.

We might recall that, as noted in Chapter 4, the same Esra said, “When one of them [women from DÖKH] enters the room, it is as if a thousand women enter.” This triggered in her the fear of being overpowered. Some younger feminists who cultivated more empathy for Kurds after their stay in

Kurdistan³¹³ observed a general fear in TFM. “The prejudice is that DÖKH is so strong, it is a big movement, *kesin bize istediklerini yaptırırlar* (definitely they will boss us into what they want). They are seriously fearful, can you imagine?” (Bilge). Ebru from SFK found this attitude, accompanied by the sentiment, “the Kurdish issue is their problem, why should we mind?” very unfair. She thought that Kurdish women “racked their brains” on how to establish common ground with TFM, and they were pretty unlike those leftist women who have “an off-putting confidence and teaching attitude.” Perhaps because Kurdish women were also oppressed, she sensed, SFK and DÖKH were better able to understand one another, “I know that they will not *elini masaya vurmak* (hit the table – to assert authority) like socialist (wo)men.” It was notable that she explained their closeness in terms of affinity in the degree of oppression. Then, she moved on to elaborate the political weakness of feminists and her sympathy for their anxieties, “Feminists are so isolated, so few. Nobody really stands with them. When they organize something, they are left alone. There is neither a political party nor any other power behind them, they remain just a handful.” Due to this imbalance in power, another young feminist Gökçe was pessimistic about the future of a sustainable working relationship, “Recently DÖKH started a process again; new meetings to discuss what to do together. But it is too difficult. DÖKH is so mass-based, so widespread and feminists are so few, how many women are we talking about when we say TFM? How is it going to work?” Bilge thought some feminist allies felt “flashy” when the Kurdish movement valued and paid attention to their solidarity, “It is not a joke; such a huge movement takes you seriously as an interlocutor. This expands one’s cultural and intellectual capital within intellectual circles. It was not like this when the Kurdish issue was viewed *avam* (plebeian) earlier on.” However, she added, they were at the same time worried that TFM was getting relatively stagnant, withdrawn from the street, unable to form mechanisms for creative, coordinated action. And these changes were all happening when Kurdish women were getting stronger. DÖKH activist Mediha summarized:

Their general mood was like, ‘DÖKH is too dominant, more crowded, expressing its ideology too strongly, and this weakens us,’ or to say the least, ‘does not empower us.’ But some also admitted the reality that Kurdish women dare to take to the streets and fight. ‘They pay the price. So we can do nothing but respect. We are scared, we have concerns.’ These, too, were openly shared with us in more intimate, friendly circles (Mediha).

What I noticed in Turkish accounts was that compared to the agency, strength, and power proudly spelled out concerning the historical achievements of TFM, it was mostly self-vulnerability and limitations that were underlined when it came to making sense of their relations with DÖKH. Practical alliances were rarely seen as an essential feminist responsibility, or an indispensable way out for mutual liberation.

I interviewed the Turkish feminist lawyer, Halime, during her visit to Amed for the 17th annual General Assembly of Women’s Shelters in 2014.³¹⁴ That year for the first time in Turkey a woman mayor got elected to a metropolitan municipality (of Amed) as the result of a successful DÖKH campaign, for

the first-time a co-mayor system of genders was introduced to the electoral process by the pro-Kurdish party BDP, and a department dedicated to women's politics was instituted at the municipal level. The assembly bringing together many associations across Turkey took place in the Sümerpark municipal community complex, located in a central urban park, hosting services for women, children, and youth. The Kobanî resistance against the siege of ISIS was ongoing 250 kms away, and some member organizations with Kemalist standing did not attend for "security reasons" (see Arı, 2018, p. 258 for more). Impressed by DÖKH presentations demonstrating the organizational capacity and testimonies of rich communal strategies to fight violence against women in Kurdistan, Halime said:

In terms of power, I think historically we really are in an equal situation. I don't know when this has happened, but here today, I realized it better. This was eye-opening for me. As their organizing gets stronger, this equality gets instituted, I guess. Until I heard the [Kurdish] women here, I only knew the commonly known stuff. For example, that they call it *kadın/cins kırımı* (femicide) not women murders, I knew that bit. Or that they cut the salary of men who commit violence against women. But while doing politics, you would not only be interested in the results, you would also want to know how they got there. Knowing the results is one thing, to study and internalize them another. For example, reading the Rojava Constitution is good, but you would also be curious of the process that led to its writing. When women from Kurdistan, who probably know this experience, come to Istanbul, I don't know what happens, is it their tiredness or busy schedules, that experience does not pour out. While discussing male violence in a meeting, for example, why don't they say, 'We have such and such experience in this or that municipality, let's try it together here as well.' I find this very interesting, also because I have seen the extent of achievements here; organising the whole city while at the same time organising your movement. I cannot even dare imagine as I have never been part of such a big organisation. But I am sure there must be parts of this experience that can be applied in Istanbul, too. It reaches us very little. Perhaps they are also like us; they do it but never have the time to talk or write about it (Halime).

This impression of equality in political power and the admiration of Kurdish accomplishments, however, did not lead to self-reflective engagement, unlearning, and alliance in a way to transform one's own politics. When Halime's fascination turns into curiosity, she thinks it is DÖKH's responsibility to deliver the details of how they got there, and to invite TFM to try some of it out together in Istanbul. Once equality is assumed on a political level, colonial domination and racial privileges become erased, and via a sudden twist in the narrative, responsibility to educate the Turkish feminists can be assigned to those who are under constant attack of the Turkish state. Ironically, the feeling of equality and admiration of the Other serve only to mask the structural inequalities; namely, what it costs Kurdish women to achieve such hard-earned power, and the unaccounted past and present complicity of TFM. So contrary to what one might expect, the perceived "equality" works to create distance rather than proximity to KWM. Ahmed (2000, p. 5) calls this "stranger fetishism"; ontologizing the stranger as "only having effects rather than as an effect in itself."

Moreover, this impression of equality can swiftly transform into "we are equally vulnerable," or even, "I am more vulnerable," as in the cases of Esra and Ebru above. When I tried to remind Halime that Kurdish women actually kept rejecting state-dependent strategies, and inviting Turkish women to

community-based mechanisms, she said, “The solutions they come up with here do not have an equivalent in Istanbul. We do not have such municipalities, facilities, and resources or the grassroots mechanisms they have here.” Her answer made me think of another debate I ran into the same day during the tea break, between a young Turkish woman and a veteran Kurdish feminist. The young woman was frustrated and said, “Please do not keep talking about your approach to the state. Those of us present here already know and have empathy for your situation. The more you insist on your communal solutions of self-defence, the more it looks as if there is a difference between us that does not exist, and this creates a rupture. Because what can we do? *Siz* [plural you] have the conditions to do them here, and you should. But conditions in the west are different. Your insistence won’t lead us anywhere.” The older woman responded, “Then perhaps *siz* [plural you] can also consider creating these conditions in the west.” The young woman seemed disturbed to hear the plural pronoun “you” mirrored in the Kurdish voice, although she, herself, had used it a minute ago. “But it is not okay for you to talk in terms of ‘you’ and ‘us,’ we [Turkish feminists] see this as a common struggle,” she protested.

In these conversations and those during the Assembly, the situation in western Turkey was regarded as a given, fixed reality, albeit with its weaknesses, which came to mean that whatever commonalities that could be imagined had to fit within the state-dependent, short-term, and ad-hoc ways of the Turkish. Ahmed (2000, p. 180) argues for “getting closer which accepts the distance and puts it to work.” Getting closer for TFM, however, rather than opening a path to working through inequalities, generally resulted in quick twists, re-centering the racially dominant self as vulnerable and the reference for common action.

Their fury at not being central to every project – a furious feeling of exclusion when they never noticed the absence of others in their world unless forced by others to notice it – is their own political business. Quick charges of ‘reverse racism’ and sneering about ‘political correctness’ regarding minimum, forced concessions such as multiculturalism or Human Rights – are not wounds on which we have to apply a salve. These angers and complaints come from being dislodged from centrality – from white feminists, for example, at being shaken in their claims of victimization, or from a collective guilt and anger of those resting on white privilege, who resent having to feel guilty (Bannerji, 1995, p. 38).

TFM in 2014 imagined itself as a de-facto more vulnerable movement than KWM. They feared being pushed into what might not be a “feminist” method/priority the way they defined it, such as seen at BİKG. A Kurdish feminist scholar put her disappointment in a nutshell, “Equal dialogue is never possible. Previously, we were allowed only to speak from the position of *mağdur* (victim/vulnerable). At present, the Kurdish movement is very popular, has tremendous power, so it turned the other way around; now it is themselves whom they speak of as the vulnerable” (Azize). It seems that anticolonial agency and colonial victimhood of Kurdish women cannot be addressed in its dialectical unity. KWM’s power is inherently linked to the costs they paid, and these costs are partly linked to the limitations of liberal individualist Turkish activism. The force that brought the minimum necessary economic and political welfare that enabled individual-based organizing in western Turkey, that in turn, gave rise to Turkish

feminism, was the same force that denied individual and collective sovereignty to Kurds that gave rise to Kurdish feminism.³¹⁵ This is crystal clear for DÖKH activists like Azize:

They cannot see the linkage between our power and our dedicated resistance. This shows their level of disconnect from society. Our movement did not become so strong out of the blue. It was a fight. What I am saying is that women's strength stems from the strength they gave to the movement. Arin Mirkan³¹⁶ is the epitome of this. Thanks to women like her this women's movement says, 'If I don't have the weapons to destroy the tanks of this rapist barbarous gang called ISIS, then I have my body to explode.' Or a mother can join the war in Kobani leaving her children behind. Or she can end a marriage that she was forced into at the age of 13. Rest assured that that divorce will be hellish; parents will insult, the brother will say 'never come back home', and that in a small town and so on. But she will do it. Thousands of us spilt this blood, thousands were tortured – that is how we got here (Azize).

In sum, once the “benevolent,” universalist fantasy of proximity, the ability to assume authority to teach fails, the discourse seems to slip into a culturally relativist fantasy of distance. This fantasy took two main forms in my conversations; one, claiming innocence, fear, and vulnerability vis-a-vis Kurdish women's collective power, for which the suggested remedy usually was going back to prioritizing “sexual oppression proper” (meaning body-politics). In this sense, disregarding “differences” in the 1990s seems to persist into the present: the excuse to “create an independent space for feminism” back then, turned into recreating, reinstating, or safeguarding that space today. And two, pointing at the incommensurability between the two historico-geographical contexts, and the non-transferability of the Kurdish experience. In the absence of genuine openness to decolonial change, these two self-centred ways of relating to the other – reducing into the self-same/knowable or the absolute different – kept alternating, caught in a fetishistic vicious circle.³¹⁷ Since both fantasies shared the same effect of evading responsibility in colonial domination and Turkish-supremacy, one came to the rescue of the other in the course of the narratives.

7.2.4 “It’s a political choice and nothing to do with race”

Another gesture of postcolonial whiteness concerns refusing to develop an intentional attention towards why certain theoretical or political choices/ways may appeal to some, but not to others. Let us look at how Acar Savran detaches political choices of women from their racial positions:

When qualifying the feminist subject, I mentioned about not becoming a sub-heading under other political programs; subordinated and reduced to a back-up under the title ‘women's issues or women's studies. In this sense, during our feminist practice we come to conflict with Kurdish women, as much as we do women in leftist organizations who self-identify as feminists. What is in question here is not a politics of whiteness, but a political preference, I think, because most women whom we conflict with in the leftist organizations are also white women. ... Therefore, cultivating a subjectification process through building bridges between different modes of womanhood is one thing, and political preferences are another. I think we are often mistaken in using womanhood conditions and political choices interchangeably. For instance, concerning the campaign we ran against women murders, a transition from the concept of ‘honor killings’ to ‘women murders’ was a meaningful one for me. This new concept signified expansion in relation to different modes of womanhood. However, each time we confront Kurdish women, or the women in leftist organizations, does not mean that it is about setting a priority among different womanhood conditions, exercising white womanhood or white

supremacy; sometimes it is about defending the priorities of the feminist movement against other political impositions (Acar Savran, in Ahiska et al., 2011, p. 309).

In a first move, Acar underlines that the nature of their conflict with Kurdish women is akin to that with socialist women, who are mostly Turkish, therefore, this confrontation may not be about cultural difference. Once the specificity of Kurdish subjectivity is erased through this gesture of displacement with the Turkish socialist, the otherness of the Other is reduced to a version of the same. This initial move to prove the irrelevance of race in disagreements sanctions a further move to assume a position to represent “feminism,” now that the own self is portrayed as a raceless identity “uncontaminated” by anything other than “feminist” (read gender) interests. The bodies associated with feminism are elevated to a disembodied place cut off from their specific needs, desires, and interests, that have attracted them to a specific feminist tradition in the first place. What goes unaccounted here is that the power gesture to imagine oneself as safeguarding an ideology against construed “impositions” of the Kurds always already enacts the racial power structures of the land (as explored in Section 4.4). Unimplicated zones in the conflicts, relatively autonomous from race, sovereignty, or coloniality, are the impossible fantasy of white, non-intersectional thinking. The damage done to the colonized through the denial of solidarity cannot be equated with the damage done on non-racialized, Turkish socialist sisters.

One argument socialist-feminists raised in a group discussion over *jineoloji* was that it was not that they established a hierarchy over Kurdish theorizing, only that they believed the explanatory power of their own theory was better to analyze capitalist patriarchy and the world. This was agreed to by many. Some thought that *jineoloji*'s epistemological approach was postmodern, circular, non-dialectical, essentialist, and prone to relativism, while theirs was historical and materialist. These decontextualized analyses, quickly placing *jineoloji* in categorical boxes, was happening in the absence of Kurdish activists, relying on limited reading – from a few to none – yet shaping opinions of one another in a way to foreclose further discussions. This specific use of racial privilege served to the self-affirmation of their own political project within a self-referential circuit. A seasoned feminist would ask, “They call it a women’s revolution in Rojava. Is it really a women’s revolution? Can we define it as such from the viewpoint of feminism? What does revolution mean for us? What do we compare it with?” Those disturbed by such questions, or what they called, “presumptuous inquiries,” were fewer and mostly those who researched in Kurdistan: “I think we are very non-negotiable. I am amazed to witness this here. Most of us talk like ‘I do not have much of an idea, but it does not suit us,’ or ‘I wish they got closer to our feminism.’ This is just taking the easy way out. There is a huge women’s movement out there that discusses and theorizes things based on historical experience” (Hale). Ebru added:

It sounds so wrong to ask if we call it a women’s revolution or not. If they call it a women’s revolution, then it is. Looking at why they call it the way they do would only enrich us. We have to learn more about how they organise the resistance there. Commenting over something we don’t know well only smacks at the solidarity. And knowing more should not be motivated by coming up with a decision.

'Let's decide now whether it is a revolution or not' is a question beyond us. Perhaps we have to refrain from such perspectives that might be stigmatizing/labeling. Besides victimization, what kind of empowerment happens there? As feminists, we should be supportive of making that empowerment visible (Ebru).

These feminists believed that "our feminism talk" by ethnically and class privileged feminists like them sounded too exclusionist and hierarchical. There was a further need to talk, hear and convince one another. As a participant, I added that elevating one's own episteme to being non-essentialist, while downgrading the anticolonial episteme to essentialist, could be a covert move of whiteness. It was rejected. Counterarguments were that one did not have to feel guilty for defending her theory; just because one was white-Turk or colonist, she did not have to be hesitant that there might be a problem with her own theorizing. Theories were first and foremost about internal consistency, they could not be reduced solely to a means of struggle, or class/ethnic positionalities of their followers, and thereby disvalued. It was not because Marx was a man that he could not analyze the exploitation of women's labor, it was because his theory did not allow that theorizing. They would be open to discussion only if Kurdish criticism proved how socialist-feminist analysis invisibilized Kurdish women's gender exploitation. Although no such straw-woman existed to dismiss feminism due to its authorship/ownership by white-Turks, the presumption that it did, mainly served to enable an escape from engaging with concrete criticisms of the KWM, which were generally seen as irrelevant or non-feminist (as detailed in Chapters 4 and 5). The question my study asks is: is TFM ready to hear those criticisms that would involve the labor of reworking some entrenched ways of practicing feminism in Turkey? In other words, is TFM ready to relinquish the ownership and control of the house, dismantle the distinction between the host and the guest, and restructure relations for unconditional welcoming?

The Kurds' approach to feminism is not like that of white Turks to the Kurds, which is denial and negation. Kurds don't deny it, they see feminist gains as their own and want to contribute to them. They want to be part of it. Why should Kurdish women's efforts to transform feminism and spread it to world from their own standpoint be so disturbing? See, this is the problem, because Turks don't see ours as their own gain. They don't like the term *jineoloji*. We call it *jineoloji* today but can call it something else tomorrow. Who says it is closed to suggestions? Only if they could focus on what is being said here, leaving their prejudices aside, then perhaps we could build it together. When you keep your guard up from the start, it won't work (Neslihan).

If theories/discourses cannot be reduced to the positional interests of their followers/authors, does it mean that they can be detached from them altogether? The post-structural turn has taught us that it is Western metaphysics that aspires to obscure the foundational relation between internal structuration of a text and its genesis/authorship. The political agency any theory/discourse/text enables is related to its premises that already have their own history of exclusions. It was partly because Marx was a man shaped by the patriarchy and European colonialism of his time that he was unable to account for the formative effect of other systems of domination on capitalism. When the relation between the conditions of possibility of a theoretical approach and the social world it serves is trivialized, one is less likely to be

suspicious of her own history of determinations, and more prone to aligning with the universality of the human, such as may be observed in the following response:

I use ‘white feminism’ in quotation marks. I mean, I think that feminism has a marginal and middle-class character a bit. I say this hesitantly and with many reservations. But, for instance, a feminist scholar wrote something about our SFK campaign titled, ‘There is life outside the family.’ She said, ‘Ask Kurdish women if there is life outside the family or not.’ I disapprove of such criticisms towards feminism. I think feminism should not have a concern to become *kitlesel* (mass-based, popular). Obviously, it is important to work together with women outside our circles, but I think feminism should still have a sharp, startling edge, a disturbing side to it. In my experience abroad, Black people would level such criticism, saying that they find refuge in the family against racism, etc. But looking at Kurds, and I think this was important in my theoretical perspective, insistently I said, *whatever the specific experiences might be*, in today’s world system, family plays a higher priority role in domination. I still say that, but I have loosened it up a bit (Kerime, italics mine).

Progressives do not say, “my nation, my culture, or I am superior”; instead, they say, “my theory, my political choice, or my feminism is more explanatory.” This statement gets racialized to the point of epistemic racism, so long as it systematically sticks to certain bodies but not that of others, whose discourses are inferiorized. Some feminists would challenge my argument with another move of swapping. “But what about DÖKH who says *jineolojî* transcends the feminism we practice? Is not that a superiority claim, too?”, as discussed in Section 4.4.1. This reversal equates Kurdish efforts to create a more democratic feminist landscape that centers non-normative voices, with white feminisms that seem to take pride in centering their own voices over whom they might be marginalizing. Privileging their own specific way of relating to the family as “the feminist way,” while lowering the raced experiences of women to the realm of “specific,” is such an example. Here the subject escapes from the analysis of her own racial specificity that enables perceiving the family as the primary oppressor over women (as explained in Section 5.1).

What might be the ethical and political cost of self-referential/self-affirming reasoning in hearing the Other’s demands? Perhaps the loss of a decolonial alliance that can center marginalized voices, amplify their messages, and take their lead. The loss of a chance to open herself to something beyond herself, exceed her own definitions. Sirman fears: “Our feminism is becoming fixed and *içten içe kendi kendimizi bir şekilde kemirmeye başladık* (sneakingly we somehow began to erode/eat ourselves from within.) By closing ourselves off to differences, we began to decay theoretically” (Ahıska et al., 2011, p. 304).

7.3 Denial operating through (non)conception of race, whiteness, and colonialism

The feminism that dominates mainstream media, including social media and social formations, in Turkey is some sort of white feminism. This feminism is not inclusive: it either excludes the groups that it views as Other (in Turkey, these can be covered religious women, LGBTQ persons, women from different ethnic groups, etc.), or it fakes being inclusive by hosting token persons from each group. It is also a fact that it has a hierarchical approach that goes beyond non-inclusivity and represents a very specific sociocultural and socioeconomic group whose privileges it never questions. I personally prefer to call this group white Turks and use this term irrespective of its Kemalist connotation. These are people, middle-to-upper class, considered cultured in the sociocultural

hierarchy, viewed or self-identified as Turk in social life, even if they are not ethnic Turks necessarily, secular or laic, and mostly falling into the leftist or liberal political categories. The feminist movement that I call white, in Turkey is pioneered by this group: naturally it cannot go beyond its own socio-cultural, class, and political privileges and parameters, in terms of its priorities and interaction with other groups. [...] This is why the lesson I personally draw from the Gezi [uprising] process is that, separate from this mainstream white feminism, we need authentic women's movements that can better voice our group concerns. Just as Black feminism has emerged vis-a-vis white feminism in the US (there, obviously whiteness emerged with an emphasis on race although it had class and other dimensions as well) and demonstrated the need for a multi-directional perspective towards women and women's rights, in Turkey also there is a need for women's movements vis-a-vis white feminism (hkubra, 2013).

This excerpt is from a piece by a Muslim feminist posted on the feminist blog *Sharfliler*. The comments section provides some insight into the unhappiness of most readers with the author's arguments. I leave out the overtly supremacist secularist responses as my focus will be on more subtle, polite, engaging ones. One Alevi woman argued that if one never belonged to the hegemonic Muslim culture in Turkey, her attitude could never be white. Another woman confronted her that being black in a certain context does not mean that you cannot be white in another. "It is not about being literally white, but about the manners you adopt. In other words, it is not something that automatically sticks to you just by actually being white, atheist, Alevi, heterosexual, or even white, middle-class that is considered to be its typical characteristic." Some others said that a majority of organizations in Turkey were not at the point of white feminism, because they were more or less in contact with different political struggles and were open to learning-encounters-sharing experience. Another feminist argued that those in contact with other struggles comprised rather an alternative stream, not the main, yet it would be fairer to recognize their efforts, too. One agreed with the need for authentic women's movements separate from mainstream white feminism, but thankfully they already existed; the Kurdish women's movement was one example. A prominent academic activist also responded to the unfolding debate. To suggest organizing separately as "black and white women" and see this as liberation was difficult to understand for her. She thought opting to organizing separately was a sign of a distrust in politics. Besides, the Kurdish women's movement could not be shown as an example of this, as they had "their own history and context" which was not "a question of *siyahlık* (blackness)." What was more important was to "problematize feminism's relationship with men" (ibid.).

As the most visibly racialized indigenous nation in Turkey, how can separate Kurdish organizing not be associated with race? Yes, Kurds are not *siyah* (Black) in the African American sense of the term, and it is important not to conflate different forms of racism/colonialism with one another. But are they not *siyahi* (colored, blackish) in the context of Turkey? If "their own history and context" mentioned above is not their history of racialization, annihilation, and colonization by the late Ottoman and the postcolonial Turkish states, then what is it about? How is a progressive feminist able to see KWM's character as delinked from race and their resistance against the Turkish-supremacist nation-state?

To answer these and better understand the mindset that enabled the power moves outlined so far, I need to look into feminist allies' conceptions of whiteness, race, and coloniality.

For an older independent Turkish feminist, the main problem was not that feminists were nationalist or white. "They are not, but they are urban, (upper) middle class, educated, heterosexual. It is a form of elitism. It is learned feminism from translated Western books. Socialists are also the same; you have a grasp of the theory, so you think you are free from scrutiny. Arrogance and pride, savior mentality that thinks of itself as the base element; it knows better, it does better, and has started earlier. Never openly said but lived like that. Hence are the problems with Kurds or Muslims" (Tülay). For Azra, feminism that did not criticize capitalism would be white. SFK would think of Amargi as white because they did not have class politics. Amargi would see SFK as white because they were not inclusive of ethnic, sexual, or religious identities. In my interviews, I generally had to draw attention to the linkage between whiteness and race to receive opinions on the same, otherwise white would de facto be understood in religious or class terms. The term "white-Turk" was introduced to Turkey for the first time by Turkish sociologist Nilüfer Göle in the 1980s to understand the secular-religious divide, the laicist suppression of Islam in Turkey. In this framework, also picked up by the AKP regime to target secularist Kemalism, white-Turk signified the well-educated, elite urban groups, middle to upper class, who shared secular, Western, Republican values and populated the bureaucracy and the army. Black Turks were mostly those who were religious, uneducated, lower classes, coming from rural Anatolia. While the debate on whether it is an economic or religio-cultural term continues, its ethnoracial aspect is often kept out of discussion.³¹⁸

This complete dissociation of "white" in postcolonial Turkey from its racial use, I believe, tells us about the success of the "Turkishness contract." Once the founding conditions of genocide, dispossession, and assimilation are forgotten, whiteness comes to be delinked from the institution of racial supremacy and denialism, only to signify class and social hierarchies among Turks. There are white-Turks and black-Turks; Turkish intellectuals tend to view Kurds, or whoever fails to inhabit the racial normative, within the black-Turk category, and talk about them in deracialized terms such as, uneducated, rural, eastern, backward, poor, terrorist, traitor, etc. When the "constitutive racial outside" is concealed, through which Turks came into exalted national existence, Turkishness becomes a deracialized category within Turkey. This framework cannot explain why only *Turkish* "black-Turks" would unite with "white-Turks" in anti-Kurd military campaigns. Or why it is often the colored peoples of the land who come to spearhead a substantial critique of the unitary, centralist, white-Turk Republican values that advocate one state, one nation, one language, one flag. When Kemalist authoritarianism gives way to Islamist authoritarianism, as happened during the 2010s in Turkey, what remains unchanged is the colonial oppression of Kurds. This mergerist ideology of Turkishness closed to cultural heterogeneity, I argue, has a formative impact

on TFM, that draws on race-and-coloniality-negligent, critical Western traditions. Thus, ethnocultural whiteness can at best be recognized on a personal level, rarely as structural.

N: What's racism got to do with us? I don't like the idea that a western concept is mounted on our reality here. Nationalism is one thing; racism is another. They are so different. One creates an imagined community out of cultural parameters, the other is based on physical parameters. What we have is nationalism. And Turkey has a powerful one in the sense that it is denialist. It simply asserts, 'You do not exist as yourself. You are a Turk.' Only recently a discriminative kind of nationalism is emerging, which says, 'You are Kurdish and inferior.'

C: But on the other hand, there are bodily references, like the accent, the language...

N: Accent, language, all these are not bodily but cultural. Foreign language is a cultural thing.

C: Yes, they are cultural but there is also something called 'cultural racism,' these inferiorized cultural attributes ultimately stick to certain bodies who are excluded as a group.

N: That can also be argued, but as far as I know, racism moves from physical, biological parameters. Secondly, racism is a remnant of slavery, has an economic underpinning. Nationalism is not like that. I argue that most of us cannot distinguish a Turk from a Kurd visually, while you can distinguish an African among the Arabs. It is biological. This is an imported concept and I find it entirely wrong to explain Turkey from within the American experience (Nevin).

Concepts like race, racialization, whiteness, and colonialism (or postcolonial/decolonial analysis) are often deemed Western imports when TFM is under scrutiny, "imitating the West," and thus unsuitable to understand the specific dynamics of Turkey. This feminist discourse shows similarities to the Turkish socialist one using the label "white-Western product" to discredit women's struggles. Nevin's conception of nationalism as separate from racism has two main issues. First, while treating racism as an import, it embraces nationalism as a local mode of exclusion. Then what do we do with the historical fact that nationalism is as much a Western construct as racism? My work subscribes to theories of state that conceive capitalism, racism and the nation-state as technologies of colonialism.³¹⁹ In this framing, race is "integral to the emergence, development, and transformations ... of the modern nation-state. Race marks and orders the modern nation-state, and so state projects, more or less from its point of conceptual and institutional emergence. The apparatuses and technologies employed by modern states have served variously to fashion, modify, and reify the terms of racial expression, as well as racist exclusions and subjugation" (Goldberg, 2001, p. 4). Racism is "a supplement of nationalism or more precisely a supplement internal to nationalism, always in excess of it but always indispensable to its constitution" (Etienne Balibar, in Smith, 2011, p. 59). Section 1.4 discussed how Turkish racist nationalism carried out the Armenian Genocide and instituted Kurdistan as an internal colony as part of its effort to create a homogenous nation out of a multiethnic reality. Second, when the colonial foundations of the postcolonial nation-state is concealed and the constitutive connections between Western imperialism, internal colonialism, nationalism, and racism are not theorized, what happens in Turkey is that opposing the gender or class aspects of nationalism qualifies one as "anti-nationalist." In this way, the structural racism

that justifies who will die and who will live inside and outside the homeland vanishes from the feminist agenda.

If one tendency to disregard race as a structure of domination is to efface it under the body of nationalism, the other is to subordinate it to capitalism:

The older form of racism, i.e., slavery, is a primary component of the primitive accumulation stage of capitalism. In that context, racism meant to suggest categorically distinct human species. Whereas today, racism is an ideology that operates without suggesting a completely distinct humankind. In order to incorporate and exploit, capitalism utilizes human groups whom it fictionalizes as of the same kind but somehow inferior, backward or delinquent. I doubt that racism or the exploitation of nature have dynamics that can be distinguished from capitalism as it is. But I think patriarchy does. Capitalism and patriarchy are the two fundamental constitutive forms of oppression and exploitation (Acar Savran, 2009, p. 116).

While Turkish feminist ideas around whether and how capitalism and patriarchy interrelate differs (as discussed in Chapter 2), both are recognised as systems of domination. Nonetheless, racial formation is never considered as another analytically distinct system, institutionalized, and with enduring internal logic. “There are two systems of domination, capitalism and patriarchy, racism is not a system as it does not determine the relations of production or social formation. Capitalism incorporates race to exploit it” (Nevin). In line with many Eurocentric internationalist, socialist traditions, feminists like Acar and Nevin conceive racism (hence colonialism) as epiphenomenal, derivative, super-structural, a sub-category or offspring of capitalism, an ideological remnant of a former “primitive accumulation stage.” Race reduced to a symptom of capitalism, ultimately becomes a sign of difference, a mere effect, an identity marker, an additional factor in the discrimination of women. However, decolonial scholar Coulthard (2014, pp. 151–52) argues that “Rather than positing primitive accumulation as some historically situated, inaugural set of events that set the stage for the development of the capitalist mode of production through colonial expansion, we should see it as an ongoing practice of dispossession that never ceases to structure capitalist and colonial social relations in the present.” Following Grosfoguel,³²⁰ who follows Black feminists to bring the whole entanglement into analysis, I suggest that it is the “Turkish- supremacist/Sunni-centric, capitalist/patriarchal, modern/colonialist system” that orders the patriarchal regimes in Turkey today. And I agree with him that any movement that does not engage with this heterarchical entanglement, and develop accountability for all, is doomed to corruption. Race cements and organizes all these power structures and places things in the “zone of being” or “non-being.”

As you know, the debate here always revolved around nationalism. We [Turkish feminists] perceive racism as something external to us, I think. I mean like it is something between blacks and whites and we don't have blacks here. The Black feminist movement actually says things that go beyond that. I don't know in depth, but I know a little, mostly over the work of Cynthia Cockburn. In England obviously it is more widespread. It was very intriguing for me to learn that black women were organised separately there. I kept asking why. Then I realized that self-organising should actually be seen as pretty normal. Yet somehow, that knowledge and experience never reached us. It did not have an equivalent here. Or we were not curious about it. We said, ‘No racism here, so that experience is alien’ (Azra).

In the absence of native/race/ethnic studies programs in Turkey, the Turkish feminist academy either dismisses scholarship on race and coloniality altogether, or selectively utilizes it to analyze, either the secularist, self-orientalist gender regime of the Kemalist civilizing project, or Western orientalism and Islamophobia against Turks.³²¹ Turkish Muslim feminist Meral points at why; “We cannot see things from within a postcolonial lens, for feminism in Turkey is produced by women on the colonizing side. And it is quite difficult for a new theory to seep into a rhetoric entrenched over 40 years” (Meral). Here is a glimpse of how this difficulty plays out:

Western feminists embrace the Western mind. They determine our liberation from where they stand. I am not sure how this criticism applies to feminism in Turkey. Since the 80s, some feminists in Turkey have been talking about Turkish women as victims of an imposed modernism, modernized by a repressive Western mind. I mean Turkish feminists were the ones making a similar criticism of colonialism. The kind of feminism that postcolonial theory criticizes is very different from the feminism in Turkey; it was a feminism that set out to organize gender relations in some overseas geographies. Feminists in Turkey did not do that and partially I would count in Kemalist feminists, too. As a feminist, I do not know how I should respond to this critique; it does not plop down anywhere in my mind. The parts I can take personally are minimal, like, the critique that we do not question these issues enough. Obviously still there is a long way to go. But I do not think we harbor colonialism in the sense that late 19th-century English feminists did (Safiye).

Turkish feminists’ self-image as critical of Western imperialism and being on the receiving end of Western orientalism obfuscates their ability to reflect on their own colonial legacy. The ideal-type, blatantly orientalist colonizing woman image of the British meddling with gender relations overseas, shields internal colonial relations that the “progressive” whites of postcolonial societies perpetuate, that might be subtle, indirect, and masked by Western-centric gender or class liberationist discourse. A Kurdish journalist asks a prominent pro-Kurdish feminist Ayşe Düzkan (2014) if she sees herself as an interlocutor to the KWM criticism that Kurdish women’s experiences are either disregarded in the academy or analyzed in orientalist ways: “To be honest, I do not see myself as an interlocutor to this criticism. First of all, I am not Western, and Turkey is not the West. Secondly, I am not an academic. And I am one of those women who got in touch with the Kurdish Women’s Movement the earliest.” Turkey is not the West, but its secularist, colonialist westernization process shaped its culture in profound ways.

Few feminists would unequivocally recognize Kurdish coloniality, especially those mostly from the older *Kurtuluş* tradition. As for the younger generation, when it is not dismissed outright, “colony” is an abstract, fuzzy concept hardly ever contemplated. In moments of confusion as captured in Sinem’s response below, the quick references drawn from India, Algeria, or Palestine would determine whether Kurdistan is a colony or not. And most often, Kurdistan would fail the test:

S: I never thought about whether it’s a colony or not. Can we call it a colony outright? No, probably not. There are remarkable similarities, but it does not entirely overlap.

C: Why, what is it that does not overlap?

S: To be honest, I never thought about this before; now I am trying to think it out loud. I mean, when it is a colony, there is the seizure of resources. That is one thing. Notwithstanding that such a situation exists in the Kurdish case, the state does not make such active use of these resources, like, until they are exhausted. And the extent of Kurdish labor power seized to be actively used in capital accumulation process – that also does not overlap. It is true that in certain sectors especially Kurds are put to work, but I cannot say it is too systematic. Otherwise, forced identity change, forced cultural change, a foreign language imposed on them; these are all similar. But still, the ‘labor power’ aspect is not that systematic or organized. It is more fragmented, random, arbitrarily finding a way. It is not like, ‘Let them do the work that Turks don’t,’ I think. Or maybe I don’t know much. Also, there is another thing; when it is a colony, you know that the person is, for example, Indian. That identity is not disguised. But Kurds have to hide it. Since what they say can be perceived negatively by Turks, they either hide it or prefer not to identify as Kurd, particularly in a western city like Izmir or Bursa. For example, among those who have immigrated to England from the former British colonies, I met some who were even fond of the colonial situation. They do not see it negatively. That is why they do not hide that they are Indian (Sinem).

The physical/geographical continuum in the case of internal colony Kurdistan in contrast to the “overseas distance” ideally required to qualify as a colony, in addition to the legal and administrative continuum, disallow perceiving Kurdistan as other than a “troubled” extension of the Turkish economic and ethnonational space. The comment below lays out the imagination of this seamless continuum well; for veteran socialist-feminist Nur, Kurdistan might not be a colony because it does not entail the “transfer of surplus value from one country to another”:

If you are using the term colony as is used in the postcolonial literature, like in ‘colonization of women’s bodies,’ I mean, if you are interpreting all liberation through a postcolonial language, yes, you can call it a colony. But in the sense of *foreign capital taking advantage of the place*, I do not think it is colonization. I think the same founding processes of capitalism were instituted in tandem here [in the west of Turkey] and there. I mean in the Kurdish case we are not talking about the transfer of a surplus-value from one country to another; it is rather that they are exploited more. Therefore, it is something else. It is forced underdevelopment, discrimination by the capital, and so on. But I would not call it a colony (Nur).

Two points are remarkable in these two quotes. One is that it is not the definitions of KWM, but their own comparison of world examples that are referred to in working out the status of Kurds. Two, colonialism is understood solely in economic terms. “Since the potential and actual resources of Kurdistan are unknown or hitherto unnoticed by us, it is difficult to call it ‘colony straight’” (İpek). Colonialism is mainly seen as the systematic exploitation of labor power and complete seizure of natural resources, which is tangentially complicated by ethnic oppression. The self-governance issue, a permanent agenda of KWM, the (semi-)autonomous self-rule structures of Ottoman Kurdistan, and the Kurdish history, culture, and political economy dating back to a few thousand years, are erased in this discourse. This complies with the Kemalist nation-state narrative that marks the founding of the Turkish Republic as the origin of the history and political economy of the peoples of the land. Hence Nur can say, “Capitalism was instituted in tandem here and there.” What comes to look “in tandem,” however, is an historical effect of the bio/geo-political subjugation of Kurdish territories and stealing of the Kurdish potential to create a future. When the structuring role of racial and political seizure and pillage of pre-

colonial lifeworlds is underestimated in instituting Turkish capitalism, colonization comes to be equated with a generic capitalist exploitation or uneven development issue.³²² As Pratt (2010) warns, geographical imaginations shaped by hegemonic national contexts may (despite best intentions) lead to “seeing like the state,” either by overgeneralizing the reach of own knowledge or conceiving places outside that through tropes of poverty and underdevelopment.

KWM practice, on the other hand, lays out how relations of political, cultural, and economic domination are enmeshed to subjugate Kurdish men and women on psychic and social levels in and through family and community life. For Kurdish women, Turkish nation’s control of the Kurdish imagination, land, flora fauna, and resources, and the denial of its right to self-determination, are part and parcel of understanding how capitalist patriarchy operates in both the colonizing and colonized nations. Colonialism is not an add-on to complicate things, but inherent to instituting Turkish-supremacist patriarchal capitalism.

Turkish feminists say, ‘I also stayed in jail, suffered a whole lot from this State.’ But I keep telling them, ‘You know these frequent checkpoints in Kurdistan, right? When I travel from Wan [a city in Kurdistan] to Amed, and soldiers stop me, the feeling inside me is, ‘You are the occupier, you came here and occupied our lands and now you check my ID.’ But a Turk does not feel like that. A Kurdish child like I was, grows up in the Kurdish language until a certain age and then is thrown into *kapkara bir dünya* (a world black as coal), the Turkish language. She is muted. A Turk would not know that. How many village-guards are there in the Aegean region? Zero! A Turk would not know what arms a village-guard carries, the salary he receives, the violence he unleashes hand in hand with the state. She would not know his rape (Berfin).

The detached, economic reductive, disembodied relation of Turkish allies to both the concept and reality of colonialism ontologically differs from the vivid, intimate, and interlocking relation of Kurds like Berfin (and others as discussed in Section 4.2). Turkish and Kurdish bodies are marked as different by violence; they expand or shrink in the Turkish-supremacist ethnonational space radically differently. The non-normative body/consciousness of Kurds is forced to structure itself in and through Turkish norms, which do not extend from her historico-corporeal being. Daily, Kurds navigate through contradictory cosmologies, norms and values, interests and desires, racialized fields of contesting beliefs, ideas, emotions, and ways of doing. This is a realm of alarming contrasts, excessive, uncontrollable translations, and split personalities. For Kurdish women, colonialism simultaneously is an objective reality of dispossession, displacement, appropriation of resources, land and home, and a subjective reality of degradation of the mind, dignity, and culture, as well as resistance to dehumanization. Therefore, decolonization demands both psychic and social liberation; it is about affirming the ability to live and expand freely in one’s own culture, history, and space.

Chapter 8 • Additive vs. Decolonial Intersectionality: Negotiating Women’s Solidarity with Turkish Allies

Intersectionality is not a label or an identity, it is an institutional practice. An individual or institution cannot simply be intersectional; individuals and institutions must enact intersectional feminist direct action, policy, and activism by purposefully centring and amplifying marginalized voices in the development of such acts in the first place (Poisson, 2018).

Following the imposition of a state of emergency in the wake of the 2016 coup attempt, some women from Turkey’s left-wing opposition felt the urgency to join forces³²³ against an ultranationalist, neo-conservative government that was systematically targeting women’s rights and freedoms. This call to common struggle, however, had long been on the agenda of Kurdish women who live under a constant state of emergency:

As DÖKH [Democratic Free Women’s Movement], we have long discussed bringing the women’s movements in Turkey and Kurdistan under a common roof. We have often shared this thought with you. Today, it is an inescapable fact that women should unite in the face of women’s suffering which has reached the level of femicide, capitalist colonialism that has crystalized itself in the woman’s person, and neoliberal hegemonic powers that have started their invasion from the women’s bodies. Therefore, we believe that every women’s group or entity should, while preserving its organizational independence, carry out a joint struggle on common problems. Confronting men and their instrument of domination, the state, as a united women’s force promises greater success for women’s liberation. We can transcend the male monopoly in every geographical region as long as women’s labour struggle from Trabzon to Colemerg,³²⁴ struggle against sexual violence from İzmir to Êlih, and freedom struggle from Istanbul to Amed are united. Accordingly, we propose working on gathering a Turkey-wide women’s conference (DÖKH, 2013b).

Since the mid-2000s, the “stateless” KWM (Kurdish Women’s Movement) has been willing to initiate strategic, institutionalized coalitions with the TFM (Turkish Feminist Movement), which is rooted in the cosmology of a “stateful nation.” In the hope of finding a radical, anti-system ally in the TFM, Kurdish activists have invited Turkish activists to common organizing on various occasions, such as the call above during the 2013 Gezi Park protests. This call to unite under a mutually negotiated roof came from a place of strength derived from many recent accomplishments. At the time, peace talks between the state and the PKK were continuing, and members of the KWM were no longer using a language of victimhood. But the TFM harboured many reservations against coalition calls that looked too structured, representational, preplanned, and long-term; they would rather stick to ad hoc, issue-based, and time-limited joint actions “when necessary.” It was around the same time that some major Istanbul-based feminist organizations were becoming exhausted. In addition to the TFM’s recurring internal disagreements, emotional burnout, declining creativity, and failures to form persisting alliances, the political regime was increasingly becoming more authoritarian. Groups within the TFM, thus, worried that a structured alliance with the KWM, or any other socialist organization, would suppress their voice.

TFM activist Gülay told me that following the successful campaigns of the 1995–2005 period to reform the Turkish Civil and Penal Codes on women’s rights, the practice of working together on a common agenda was mostly forgotten: “That memory briefly came back during the 2012 anti-abortion campaign but did not fully return.” The mid-2000s also coincided with Kurdish, Muslim, socialist, and LGBTQ women expressing their separate women’s agendas more confidently within or without their mixed-gender movements, according to Gülay.³²⁵ In parallel, Turkish secular feminists in Istanbul were trying to build a more organized independent movement.³²⁶ Feminists were unhappy that the movement of the 1980s, which was proudly espoused by many as *köktenci ve yıkıcı* (fundamentalist and disruptive) (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2008a), had dissolved in the following decade. Although the TFM was theoretically more nuanced, multiculturalist, and cognizant of the post-structuralist critique³²⁷ by the 2010s, it nevertheless maintained allegiance to a second-wave mainstream that mostly focused on body politics and the primacy of gender. To Gülay, “Any organizing attempt today needs to discuss first how to come to terms with this newer situation of heterogeneity without erasing the discourse and methods of one another, rather than jumping in haste on the ideas on what to do for feminism” (Gülay). Otherwise, “the women’s movement will lose its chance to become a long-term, effective opposition, coalition, platform or not, in the face of ongoing attacks by the AKP government.”

How did allied feminists engage with this heterogeneity? Could they move towards working on interconnections as much as they aspired for autonomy? According to Göral (2007), some in the TFM failed to redirect even a small percentage of their enthusiasm for criticizing those on the Left into actually building alliances with them: “While the periodical problems the feminist movement in Turkey faced regarding the Kurdish women’s movement partly had to do with its ‘Turkishness,’ it partly stemmed from its inability to forge outright political relationships even within its own movement” (ibid., p. 58). I agree. But unlike this additive formulation, I suggest exploring the co-constitutive connection between the reluctance to enter coalitions with cultural/epistemic others (a trait shared by most of the Turkish Left) and the cultural/epistemic location of the self.

In this chapter, I want to explore the TFM and KWM’s contesting ideas around organising and solidarity. This will also help us survey the political deadlock the Turkish participants widely felt, resulting partly from what I believe were structural problems innate to Western or non-Western white feminisms. First, I will lay out the TFM’s general approach to organizing, then detail the organizing/alliance strategies of the Socialist Feminist Collective (SFK, 2008–2016) within the TFM. The SFK deserves closer attention not only because of the influence it enjoyed over feminist politics in Istanbul, but also for its closer relations with the KWM. The SFK actively contributed to BİKG (Women for Peace Initiative) as well as other solidarity actions with the KWM. I will then return to the first solidarity actions with Kurdish women around another collective of the early 2000s, Amargi (2001–2012).³²⁸ Against this

backdrop, I then will compare the coalition logics of the TFM and KWM with regards to the concepts of intersectionality and decoloniality.

8.1 The Turkish feminist approach to organizing

In Chapter 5, I argued that the TFM valued the critique and exposition of patriarchy (taking-power) more than the curation of structures within the movements or communities that would model the gender liberationist world imagined (making-power). There, I focused on its manifestation in connection to the state. Here, I turn to the other side of the coin: the connection to society.

The Turkish activists I spoke with generally believed that the feminist movement either *cannot* or *should not* engage in popular grassroots organizing. Those who think the former cite practical reasons like being few in numbers and their lack of power, resources, energy, and time; urgent topics like the murder of women already preoccupy them fully, or they do not feel they belong to any place because they frequently move to a new house. For those who think the latter, however, the grassroots poses an ontological contradiction as feminism is not a mass movement; feminist *sui generis* organizing requires direct, one-on-one safe spaces, engagement with each other's personal stories, and the construction of intimate solidarities to generate self-transformation. Popular organizing, by contrast, requires wider hierarchical organizations with strangers whom one cannot know in person.

How do women find each other, then? Mainly through feminist magazines, email lists, web portals, social media, or friendship circles. The popularization of the political discourse resulting from these encounters can be achieved via campaigns (social media, petitions, public statements, demonstrations), Women's Day rallies, writing and lecturing, lobbying for judicial reforms and so on. Place-bound forms of organizing in middle- or working-class communities or fostering alliances with non-feminist women on the ground are coded as top-down in a masculinist socialist, liberal middle-class, or Kemalist nationalist way.³²⁹ "Thanks to becoming feminist through a diehard critique of socialist organizing, feminists could overcome the whiteness of posturing like an *abla* (older sister) in the communities," according to one SFK feminist. What is interesting here is that the critique of the modernist Kemalist or socialist variety of elitisms in relation to society – savior mentality of the "liberated" women – instead of leading to the questioning of the class and ethnocultural supremacies inherent in these ideologies, prompts adherents to abandon community-based work altogether, for it comes to be projected as the cause of supremacy. To avoid such hierarchy, the discourse "I can only transform myself; who am I to transform/represent others?" comes to justify aspatial, closed-group organizing as the "feminist way." Here is how a young independent feminist puts it:

Actually, we say things that nobody would accept. But then it *ripples* through society in such a way that its effects are observed indirectly, in different intensities, in different places. Which is why I always defend the discourse to be articulated in the small-groups from the most radical place possible.

If I am not going to be able to say these things in feminism, I have no other avenue. When everything in my life is so pro-family or pro-marriage, that is, when everywhere is occupied with that discourse, I have no place to say any alternative to it, but if I can't say it here, that would be a big problem. Yes, this makes us marginal. And I admit that it also rules out expanding and perhaps prevents many women from being able to relate to feminism. But if this desire to expand and to relate to others comes at the expense of meeting my own needs as a subject, then how can I claim that my feminism is from within my own life experience, my own knowledge? Did I become a feminist for the life of others? (İpek)

Another feminist admits a curious mismatch between the ideology and organising of “feminism”:

S: SFK does not have such concern to go and organise people directly. Of course, [SFK] is rather middle-class, no one can deny that. But perhaps, feminist struggle is always possible from within the middle-class. Because feminism is also a matter of resourcefulness, moral, or material potentials. There is that link. It is a bourgeois movement.

C: Do you mean that SFK's feminism is middle-class, and it is okay to accept it as such?

S: This is how it is for now; it is not to say that it should continue like this. Feminism is a cross-class ideology. I don't think that other women should learn from middle-class women. But its modes of organising may not always overlap with its cross-class character. Today, the possibilities that its organising creates do not match that character. Because of our distance to leftist styles, like grassroots organising, we do not think much about how to relate to women of other classes (Sinem).

In the absence of mechanisms to expand with others, can the indirect channels that İpek mentions, “rippling” in a vacuum, avoid projecting what is produced from a specific position as “the feminism?” “Radical” for whom, for example? İpek's account reminds me of the Kurdish critique that Turkish feminism is not radical enough. One can argue that the Turkish feminism of the 1980s could sustain the idea of being bottom-up and radical so long as it was rooted in the lived and felt reality of middle-class, educated, secular, Turkish women who were troubled mainly by the anti-feminist hostility of the Left and who spoke in and to that narrow circle (as discussed in Chapter 2). Likewise, İpek's discourse, which defends a feminism that meets her own needs, sounds bottom-up and legitimate. The problem surfaces when this class and race specific understanding and practice of gender liberation comes to be defined as a feminist measure to decentre those who do not share a similar background. This part, I argue, is quite invisible to TFM activists. It was only after having to negotiate with Others (Kurdish, Muslim, LGBTQ, socialist) that the universalizing, supremacist qualities of their anti-system feminism became more visible. Nonetheless, the difficulty in provincializing one's own feminism continues, regardless of whether one emphatically defines the reference point (as İpek does) as one's *own* gender oppression. As I will discuss further in this chapter, I argue that disengaging from grassroots community action makes it easier to mask one's top-down effect, which becomes more visible in direct encounters with Others. Ironically, then, the whiteness that feminism criticizes in Kemalism and mainstream socialism turns into a whiteness that is simply better masked in Turkish feminism. More than undermining the socialist or Kemalist whiteness, avoiding place-based engagements provides a shield to reproduce a Turkish feminist version by masking its race- or culture-denying choices. It helps sustain the fantasy of a “uniform enough gender category,” like the “uniform enough nation or class categories” of Kemalism and most Turkish

socialism. This fantasy is interrupted by the Kurdish gaze: “The inability of Turkish feminism to address the racialized reality of society resembles that of the Turkish state” (Müjgan).

When claiming feminist authority over other political groups, my Turkish participants often asserted certain modes of organizing as the marker of feminist politics.³³⁰ According to them, mixed-gender leftist entities (including KÖH, Kurdistan Freedom Movement) are hierarchical, top-down, centralized mechanisms that reproduce masculinist organizing and are based on representational, as opposed to unregulated, direct, face-to-face participation. In contrast, feminist organizations privilege horizontal, non-hierarchical, issue-based, loose relations (small-groups and campaigns), for they encourage individuals to take the initiative and express themselves more easily. In such a setting, convincing every individual matters: “We already have too many decision-makers in our lives that we fight all the time. We cannot tolerate its perpetuation when we organize,” a young feminist told me (Belgin). “What I value most in feminism is its self-critical approach. If I cannot create some transformation in my own life, why would I run after bigger things?” (Betül) another told me. Feminism is about a woman’s self-transformation based on her own experience: “Nobody may represent the group or any other woman; everyone may say something different on a certain issue.” Another feminist joked to me,

Can you imagine if the government wanted to sit down to negotiate peace with feminists? How could anyone dare to say, ‘I am the person to talk to.’ Who are you to decide on behalf of others? Nobody would agree on one person; everybody would want to sit around the table. But in the Kurdish movement, everybody agrees on Öcalan as the chief negotiator. Because they think they must mimic their opponent to be able to negotiate with it. They reproduce the same representational mechanism as the Turkish Republic. That is turning into what you oppose (Burcu).

Focusing on feminist concerns requires independence from men and mixed social struggles, which entails that feminists should not represent women’s perspectives other than their own. And that “own perspective” is assumed to be in sufficient alignment with that of an “abstract, favorable (*makbul*) feminism.” It appears that independence means independence from entities and thoughts that represent collective, intersectional interests. Women’s non-gender interests are associated with manhood and, therefore, hierarchy and representation. Face-to-face, direct, participative, individual, loose politics has come to be associated with the equal importance given to the political weight of the individual against the group, which is deemed as synonymous with women’s self-realization and liberation. The SFK, for example, would not welcome holding representational power in any feminist platform, as it would create power inequality and hierarchies that would intimidate individual women and, by extension, fail to be feminist. As a safeguard against women with multiple loyalties who enjoy some collective power that might “overpower a weak independent feminist movement,” a feminist organizing, or alliance must be individual-based.³³¹

The difficulty in provincializing oneself, I believe, is related to what closed-group organizing in a vacuum, intended or not, does to Turkish feminisms. My observation is that it secures some abstract

uniform social space by maintaining political and physical distance from the intersectional, context-bound differences that can be witnessed and experienced on the grassroots level. That is to say that it helps draw a boundary between the familiar and the stranger or the self-referential and the inter-referential in which one has to negotiate her politics. This distance averts the possibility of dialogic interaction and emplaced learning from the experiences and feminisms of ontological others in their own social context. As Kurdish scholar Dirik (2015) notes, it “fails to touch the real lives of millions of affected women, generating yet another vacuumed discussion on radicalism that is inaccessible to most. How radical or intersectional is a struggle that fails to spread?” The distance maintained between the site of feminist discourse and the messier reality of women on the ground helps occlude the inherent hierarchies, as it leaves the privileges of the knower unchallenged. The gaze cannot be returned, as the privileged subject cannot rework her position of authority. Feminist activists tend to produce politics with those who already self-identify as feminists and measure the “radical” quality of their voice mainly by its appeal to the self-same subjects. The making of the feminist subject often precedes the site of political action (see Section 4.3). The process of “becoming feminist” is usually a private venture based on personal chances of access to feminist resources or people. This very class-race specific way of becoming-feminist, however, is readily assumed as intrinsic to feminism as such.³³²

In Kurdish women’s accounts, on the other hand, it is the detachment from grassroots that poses a danger towards elitism.³³³ Being and becoming are depicted as spatially, politically, or analytically inextricable in that being is a moment in becoming, always with the Others. Feminism, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, is an essentially emplaced and interlocked process of transformation grounded in community experience. Compared to İpek’s account that derives inspiration from the “self-affirmation of being,” Kurdish feminist Selvi is stimulated by the “temporality of becoming” through dialogic action in the community:

When you go to grassroots communities, elders would tell you to dress modestly. You wage the struggle *Bedenim benimdir* [My body belongs to me], but then you wrap yourself up in a different look when you go there. Now, this is one concrete example of the discrepancy between the women’s movements. On one hand, some say, ‘My body belongs to me and no matter what anyone says, I will go there the way I want.’ These are mostly called by society as ‘the feminist movement.’ Even if they don’t necessarily do it that way, this is how they are perceived; how can I say, it’s as if they are a bit more detached from the realities of society. On the other hand, there are others who say, ‘Yes, my body certainly belongs to me, but for me to forge contacts with the women there, negotiate what is wrong and what is right, and also come to know myself better, I have to win her trust by my appearance and my talk. We must open up to each other and feel each other.’ And this is what is called the Kurdish women’s movement. This body belongs to me, but for you to be able to defend it, and make me experience and feel your body’s reality, you have to convince me first. First, you must learn and weave it from within my own customs and practice. You must reveal well at what points in my history I was distanced from this idea and how male domination created gender inequality. When you hold onto this effort as a foundational practice, you also change and get a sense of your own customs and gender norms (Selvi).

8.1.1 Non-intersectional holism? Socialist Feminist Collective

Women's organizing of the socialists revealed a concrete distinction in connection to the women's liberation struggle: The Women's Movement and the Feminist Movement. These dependent – definitely ideological, political and/or organizational – organizations that make politics against the discrimination, oppression, and exploitation that women experience in the public sphere often come side by side with the feminist movement based on that agenda. How this reflects on the existing women's liberation struggle is that the politics that disconnects the public space from the private silences the feminist movement whose voice is already thin and bars the ideological struggle that would obliterate women's oppression. Despite all good intentions, the women's movement blurs feminist ideology and carries the risk of rendering the most fundamental supposition of feminism obsolete (Osmanağaoğlu, 2011).

Istanbul feminists, in particular, turned inwards between 2004 and 2008 to concentrate their energy on building a lasting, independent political ground for concerted feminist action. While Kurdish activists understood this distancing reorientation within the rise of nationalism, Turkish feminists saw it as a protective measure against being carried away and derailed by other agendas that weakened the feminist movement.³³⁴ They felt a pressing need to differentiate “feminist politics” from the “women's movement,” that is, rights-based, project-oriented NGOs or groups affiliated with organizations that are mixed-gender or have a mixed-gender agenda. The common experiences of marginalization in mixed organizations since the 1970s has reinforced a conviction that “independence” is a sine qua non to maintain a radical, uncompromising stance and to defend the feminist agenda against other political impositions. “Think of the women's movement as a wide spectrum. Absence of a radical wing will inhibit the capability of the whole spectrum” (Beyza). As such, they wanted to “create a feminist political terrain recognizing patriarchy as a system” (Nur).

In 2005–2006, some radical, anarchist, anti-militarist, socialist, or independent feminists organized discussions, street actions and March 8 rallies in a loose, unbranded form of feminist togetherness. However, due to impromptu political subgroup formations and their perceived impositions, which socialist-feminists deemed unacceptable, women gradually began to grow distant from each other. This process pushed socialist-feminists to form the group *Küçük SFK* (Small SFK). They avoided using their name in joint campaigns as they thought promotion of group identity or representational politics would conflict with the higher goal of promoting general feminist interests. Following a series of *Küçük SFK*-organized campaigns in 2007³³⁵ that drew other groups in “targeting male domination as a holistic political problem” (Birsen), socialist-feminists became troubled by the absence of any form of organizing that could uphold and perpetuate the dynamic energy revealed by these campaigns. They argued for “holistic feminist politics” and a membership-based organizing model that combines the small-group model with task commissions.³³⁶ This would foster the discovery of one's own oppression while building solidarity with other women. Other feminists, however, preferred loose, ad hoc, campaign-based gatherings. Ultimately, the SFK came into being in 2008 via an open call over women's mailing lists (*feminist, kadın kurultayı, etc.*).

In 2014, SFK grew more than it expected.³³⁷ According to one young volunteer, the SFK's appeal resulted partly from lack of alternatives in Istanbul, particularly after the dissolution of the feminist Amargi in 2012: "Let's say you have issues with the government policy on abortion. You have no socialist or leftist stance or sympathy for the Kurdish movement. You look for the most active group in Istanbul. And here you are; you've entered the SFK somehow, only to encounter various aspects of the SFK's perspective for the first time. Yes, you learn and change, too. But still, women without much in common happen to come together" (Eda). As confirmed by most respondents, this swell in membership numbers and the dissimilarity among members diminished the capability for mobility and responsiveness, creating an awkward atmosphere in which face-to-face, non-representational decision-making and rotational internal coordination became more and more difficult. As most women did not even know each other, they lost motivation and began to participate less. Exhaustion and disorder prevailed. "An increase in quantity raises the prospect of dominating the political scene, but not necessarily an increase in quality. As we grew, the inequalities increased and the ability to touch, hear and see each other decreased, which led to disconnection and doing politics with women you don't know" (Azra). Most active women in the SFK were either younger university students or retired women over 50, while the age group in between simply focused on making ends meet, working heavy schedules, raising kids and so on. These disparities also affected participation, feelings of belonging and politics. Women who had more time on their hands to take initiative facilitated unintentional centralization and created hidden hierarchies. Some suggested tightening the membership rules to encourage everyone's active participation, but others feared that, too, would create hierarchies so long as the measures excluded those who could not fulfill the rules. On top of these, many SFK activists also expressed concern at criticism from other feminists that they were acting like the centre of the feminist movement.

What brought the SFK to such paralysis? Or, in other words, what happens when "holistic socialist-feminism" largely derives its legitimacy from aspatial closed-groups, instead of community-based, emplaced organising?

I was told that most younger members in their 20s had no political experience prior to the feminist struggle, while just a few others tried to engage in feminism in leftist groups but became disillusioned and quit, just like their elder sisters. Accustomed to hearing the stories of women being sidelined in mixed-gender groups, those introduced to feminism through women's platforms generally felt luckier. On one end of the spectrum, one could hear those who would say, "I never felt like I belonged to any group, be it Marxist, socialist-feminist, or feminist. I prefer issue-based loose groups to identity-based [groups] or everyday life politics to meta-politics" (Aylin). On the opposite end, there were mostly middle-aged women whose needs and expectations could no longer be fulfilled by feminist politics alone, as they wanted to have a say on other social issues too:

I always thought one's organization should meet all her needs and that [a woman] should have no need for another. But when I look at where the feminist movement has arrived, the SFK is no longer sufficient for me. I started attending a leftist organization as well because just that I can't make most of the political arguments I need to make in my feminist organization. Either there's no time, no need or no demand for that. I came to realize that I lagged most of the discussions in the political field (Cavidan).

Within this spectrum, some women complained that socialist-feminist ideology was not holistic or pluralist enough, meaning it was too narrow to incorporate intersectional articulations, while others criticized it for being too broad to qualify as feminist. For the former, the pluralist ground the SFK strived to create was still too homogenous and unidimensional, as it obstructed the pluralist representation of newer ways and concerns as it grew bigger: "Our tendency to talk too much in body, labour, capital and exploitation terms resulted in a politics that dismissed other arenas as germane to feminism" (Eda). Efforts to demarcate socialist, Muslim, or Kurdish politics from "feminist" body politics perhaps attested to the limitations of pluralism and political flexibility within the SFK. Subgroups could not emerge with differing interpretations of "holistic socialist-feminism" that adopted different approaches to family, men, motherhood, and the nation-state, to say nothing of racism, coloniality, religion, or ecology. This is because there was a permanent crisis between the insistence on holism and the simultaneous denial of the collective representation of differences that a holistic understanding entailed. If these differences were represented collectively, it was interpreted as a crack in the holistic perspective, as opposed to its fulfillment. These initially desirable grey zones were now regarded as uncontrollable, divisive and distracting. How and why to relate to the Kurdish issue, militarism, nationalism, racism, or the peace movement remained under-theorized and under-discussed, meaning their exigency for feminist politics was dubious:

Certainly, we can be in solidarity with various oppressed groups, or some of our friends may work on other platforms. That is meaningful, too, only if the power to expand our own *odak* [focus] does not get spread [too thin]. As we are already few, we tend to lose our identity and perspective in such environments. Because a particular mode of doing politics dominates there, it is a mechanism that makes those in higher echelons become even stronger, preventing those lower in the hierarchy from prospering. It is difficult to pursue anti-hierarchy politics against that (Birsen).³³⁸

This additive, external relation prevented in-depth discussions that might have led to more radical, anti-essentialist understandings of intersectionality within the SFK. In the absence of such discussions, younger activists, in particular, felt uncomfortable about not knowing how the SFK positioned itself in the peace movement and feared misrepresenting the collective at BİKG by saying something "wrong"; the result was that they shirked responsibility or withdrew more easily in the face of the smallest criticism.³³⁹ As Bilge says,

B: Being friends with Kurds brings cultural capital and makes you an opinion leader. You are the one who gets to meet with Kurdish notables; they take you as an interlocutor. But then you don't transfer it to your own social base. Those few who take an interest in this see their cultural capital swell. And after some time, what these big shots [*kodamanlar*] say about the Kurdish question comes to be seen

as the only truth. Because the perception is, ‘they are in close relation with Kurds.’ Activism has been narrowed down and became like an academic engagement. They don’t share much about their meetings with DÖKH. Sometimes they do; sometimes they don’t. Sometimes they have unofficial meetings, just like that, and sometimes they share what happened three months after the meeting. If peace politics is a priority, you have to share it with women. Some even think we are not on speaking terms with the Kurds. If it really was your activist concern, you would spread the word and engage in its politics. But we don’t, as you notice. It is only on the level of sympathy or friendship.

C: Someone from the SFK complained to me that it was DÖKH who wanted to meet only with certain women. That it was their choosing and they were also after the big shots.

B: If we say we are 300 women, and they still insist on just meeting with three of us, only then that would be a problem of theirs. We cannot expect DÖKH to make visible the non-white among us. That would annoy us, too. When asked who wants to attend BİKG, the big shots say they are already there. They opt for it so fast. So long as we don’t break this hidden hierarchy, someone like me cannot be active at BİKG. And I don’t want to, as they take charge anyways. There is something that insidiously makes me passive; it’s really interesting. The same goes with not being able to write to the email groups comfortably. You end up self-censoring by thinking that they will not like you attending BİKG anyways. The SFK can’t just say ‘go and work at BİKG.’ We have no peace politics; everybody thinks differently. There has to be a peace commission that is rotational and which represents us at BİKG. It has to be systematic. This commission should be the one attending the meetings with Sebahat [Tuncel], and not those who just want to be buddies with her (Bilge).

This brings us back to the question of how the Turkish socialist-feminist conception of a “holistic approach” materialized in political action. The materialist, *sistem-dışı* (anti-system) SFK advocated an organized and *bütünlüklü/bütünsel* (holistic) activism grounded in the idea of pluralism “within feminism”: “We define our internal pluralism with reference to the variation of the agenda within feminism, not within socialist perspectives” (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2008b). The feminist pluralism imagined was “uniting on a common denominator with feminist individuals or groups whose political perspectives [were] close to one another” (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2008c). They called them the *anti-system* feminists, independent from men, the state, and the capital. So when they said, “feminism is a rebellion against the common oppression of women despite their racial, national, class, sexuality or faith-based divisions” (ibid.), the form of the “common” or “rebellion” to be practiced was not really negotiated with women from those divisions.³⁴⁰ “Holistic” meant following a program/struggle aimed at weakening the “patriarchal capitalist system” as a whole. This entailed standing in solidarity with all the oppressed and raising one’s voice not only on women’s issues, but also social, political, and economic matters (body politics, peace, labour, violence, and the like) to arrive at the woman-liberationist world that requires revolutionary upheavals in the labour/production and sexuality/body realms (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2008b). Yet, at the same time, the *sui generis* realm of feminist politics was defined as the private sphere. Becoming feminist required the self-discovery of one’s own oppression by recognising the commonness of all women’s experience. For that, small-groups, street actions, and campaigns alone would not be enough (ibid.); organizations were needed. But then how do you reconcile the idea of holistic intervention for all women, with a liberation idea centred on private space and closed-groups? The path the SFK took seemed to define a “feminist interior” where feminist solidarity would extend mainly to those who come

from the same tradition of feminism dating back to the 1980s in Turkey. Solidarity with the women outside (Kurdish, Muslim, socialist, Kemalist, and so on) to meet the holistic principle was theorized as a relation with the sufferers of different types of oppression.

To assure the continuity of this sort of boundary-making or selective inclusion within its ranks, the SFK membership rule stated³⁴¹ that members could engage in general politics, but not women's politics in other political parties, for the SFK was already a full-fledged independent political group as such: "Independence from socialist organizations here is an absolute condition even if their future dream may overlap with ours. We come together as socialist-feminists who are not affiliated with any socialist party, organization, circle, internal rule or hierarchy structure" (ibid.). This precautionary measure aimed to prevent the SFK from becoming a place where women would clash over varying approaches to women's liberation because they would talk like representatives of the leftist groups they adhere to by "bringing in their values and longstanding disputes with other groups, and trying to annex the SFK to their own political agenda" (Ebru). I asked a veteran SFK feminist who defended this rule if she could give me some concrete examples of the problems that can occur:

For example, what would a mixed [*karma*] organization usually pick as the theme of a Women's Day rally? They could say urban gentrification isolates women. Or what would DÖKH pick? The peace talks, militarism against women and so on. So when we sit down to bring our demand for daycare centres to the agenda, if those of us affiliated with mixed-gender organizations have already been persuaded to an anti-militarism agenda, for instance, they will say, let the theme be anti-militarism. Then, we won't be able to take an organizational decision. It would turn into a platform-like structure. We will have to negotiate with these women as we do in other platforms. Let's say I find daycare or femicide more important than the gentrification problem; how will we be able to arrive at a decision when other political loyalties are more determining? By the same logic, to me it does not make sense to say feminists should be determining either. Let the feminist organization do the femicide and others support it or participate. And we support them on other issues. The most *can alıcı* [vital] topic can be either gentrification or femicide, one or the other (Selma).³⁴²

This theory produces a paradoxical situation that I call "self-referential, non-intersectional holism." This exclusionist brand of holistic approach, which theoretically aspired to plurality, was always likely to collapse on its universalist premises due to its failure to embrace the emplaced, racialized, and classed inequalities on the ground. I argue that the binary framing of the feminist interior/exterior or closed-group versus place-based politics that is symptomatic of the TFM in general, has always contradicted the SFK desire to produce politics on peace, labour, militarism, racism, ecology and so on. That's because the latter requires openness to community-based epistemologies of the ethnic, class, or faith-based feminist others. The individual-social relationship that the SFK "holism" envisioned was prone to constant crisis and eventual paralysis as long as intersectional/intermeshed identities/interests of women remained on the side of the social (that is, the feminist exterior, the so-called hierarchical realm of representation) and women's self-realization remained on the side of the individual (that is, the feminist interior, the so-called egalitarian realm of non-representation).

It is possible to say that the SFK's holistic approach that proposed a reconciliation between *toplumcu* (community-based/collectivist) and liberal-individualist perspectives was, in empirical reality, caught in the crossfire of the pressures coming from the adherents of both sides within its ranks. The SFK's promises appealed to both yet could please neither. Nonetheless, both groups described the crowded, wider-base organizing as the main cause of the dissent in the SFK, rather than any shortcomings in theory. As a result, rather than moving towards a more intersectional/interwoven, community-based direction, what became plausible was the impossibility of holistic feminist politics and its inherent incompatibility with feminist organizing. After all, women who wanted to take their private sphere needs, demands, and emotions as a political vantage point felt excluded while others talked about the "big issues," such as women's liberation, class liberation, or Kurdish liberation (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2016). In their minds, holism and representational organizing compromised personal agency and subjectivity. In its 2017 call to discuss the future of feminism in Turkey, popular feminist blog *Çatlak Zemin* (Cracked Ground) asked: Is creating a political subjectivity against patriarchy even on the agenda of generation-2000 for whom feminism is a lifestyle, lived mainly on subjective and intimate registers around body politics? Perhaps the weakness of feminist organizing in 2017, despite the self-emergent widespread popularization and individualization of feminism, attests to the fact that "both in Turkey and the world, organizing as we know it is coming to an end"³⁴³ (Çatlak Zemin, 2017). Eventually, even the initial authors of the idea of the SFK's holistic approach were confused about whether holistic organization required party-like structures that took centralized decisions – although that would contradict feminism by compromising the personal expression and solidarity each woman needed. One dedicated advocate of the approach describes the dilemma in her mind at around the time the SFK (and just two years before the group itself dissolved) was striving to find a constructive way out:

We say anti-system, and on top of that, postulate socialism as a precondition. These kinds of grand analyses entail serious organizing. If you cannot organize seriously, you wait so that somebody makes the revolution, and you do whatever alongside. And of course, then they can always delay your demands or shove them aside, particularly when you are not organized. So, being organized is necessary. But on the other hand, the creativity of the feminist voice that can weave delicate details, tunnel through narrow passages, and reveal the intimate realities of the condition of womanhood has a very popularizing side to it. And this is not my feminism I am talking about. I assess feminism in general here; I mean the feminist ideology, just like the socialist ideology. The practical offerings of the feminist ideology actually trickle down to every segment of society and are embraced by them partially, in bits and pieces. It can offer political statements through campaigns. And these campaigns, initially suggested by feminists, might turn into general women's campaigns later. Under circumstances where the word of feminism is so widespread, how is feminism going to be organized as a political subjectivity? And how is it going to build bridges between differences through organizing? Feminism tries to produce politics for not only selfsame women from a certain background but aims for women's liberation for all. And we say our feminist politics will build bridges and overcome the obstacles between the urban and rural, Turkish and Kurdish, lesbian and heterosexual, and that this is what will transform the society. But for this, you need solid organizing. But then solid organizing is *against the nature of feminism*, for feminism is against hierarchy, dull divisions of labour and so on. So, I do not think feminism yet knows the kind of model it needs for

kalabalık [mass, popular] organizing, aside from small-groups and campaigns. The SFK experimented with a model in this respect that aimed at holistic organizing instead of small-group. [It sought to] preserve the small-group as a principle, but at the same time tried to overcome its limitations through commissions focused on different actions. But the collective is experiencing so much pain: It bounces a lot and has something to say for everything. It shows solidarity with the Kurdish movement and the ecology movement, participates in the occupation of Gezi Park, fights against anti-abortion ... This situation strains the SFK a lot. Thus, within the SFK, there is a feminist objection to this multi-directional, holistic way of being – a feminist curiosity and questioning. And we need to hear that (Beyza).

The unexpected high interest shown in the SFK disturbed its political homogeneity, bringing its organizational principles into a state of dysfunction. Complex, intersectional, and flexible representation mechanisms that would allow simultaneously for personal and group empowerment, or the idea of empowerment not only through self-affirmation but also affirmation of others' political community, was still far from imaginable. Similar conundrums also hit the pluralist, loosely organized Istanbul Feminist Collective (İFK),³⁴⁴ which went defunct at around the same time. An open letter announcing the SFK's dissolution in 2016 noted the following questions for future consideration:

Was it indispensable for the SFK to talk about and produce politics regarding every area (including the agenda of the opposition) while making holistic politics? – Was politics with a holistic political perspective (body, peace, women's labour, violence, etc.) suitable for our model of organizing? – Did the strengthening of tendencies that became mainstream in the internal functioning of the SFK weaken our pluralism? – Is feminist organizing possible with strong centralized aspects? Or is a network model of organizing more suitable, as it is more inclusive of the differences regarding the tendencies, skills, and private space matters of women? – To what extent do individuals' character features become determinative in a feminist organization? Is it possible to avoid that? And if so, what kind of mechanisms can overcome this problem? (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2016).

8.2 An early instance of women's peace activism: A curious split in Amargi

The first of its kind in Turkey, the Istanbul-based Amargi Women's Academy/Cooperative (2001-2012) was a Kurdish-Turkish joint initiative³⁴⁵ that strived for a multicultural, holistic politics that forged relations between the feminist and women's movements with the goal of broadening the scope of feminist activism. Amargi, whose scope was broader than that of the TFM at the time, sought to politicize the connections between feminism, nationalism, militarism, and peace issues, while also touching on heterosexism, trans/homophobia, and Islamophobia. For five or six years, Kurdish and Turkish women collaborated in Amargi with much enthusiasm under the slogan "together along with our differences" until an internal dispute in 2006 resulted in Kurdish women's departure from the group.³⁴⁶ The foundational role of Kurdish women in this influential organization³⁴⁷ was not known to younger Turkish feminists, including myself. The lack of awareness of the Kurdish departure as a turning point stems from a curious rupture in the transmission of organizational memory. This piqued my curiosity, as I wanted to understand better how Kurdish and Turkish activists remembered – or forgot – the early Amargi.

A third space

Between 2001 and 2003, a group of renowned Turkish woman writers, journalists, feminists, actresses, artists, and academics mobilized for a series of events to voice women's demand for peace. Facilitated by Amargi, the Women's Solidarity for Peace Group organized several solidarity trips to Kurdistan to meet hundreds of Kurdish women mobilized by the KWM. Coming together for the first time to hear the Kurdish testimonies on war and state violence was a shocking experience.³⁴⁸ Kurdish author Alataş's (Alataş & Arslan, 2001) observation captures the spirit of these encounters well: "While not understanding a word in Turkish, local women in the crowd zestily cheered the Turkish guests on the podium, while guests not understanding a word in Kurdish were distressed by the one Kurdish announcement, *biji aşiti* [long live peace], from the podium." When Mothers of Peace in their traditional white *dolbent*³⁴⁹ saluted them in a confident voice, "modern" Turks were bewildered: "Look at her, she can even hold a microphone!" Hearing local women's demand for education in their mother tongue and opposition to forced sterilization,³⁵⁰ "modern Turks" were again unsettled; for them, learning Turkish or having a smaller number of children were "civilizing" traits. "Most of the feminists we hang out with today were quite distanced back then. They did not know anything, as if the war were happening in another part of the world" (Neslihan).³⁵¹ Amargi could not really go beyond a benevolence logic in these visits, said one Turkish socialist witness,

You are meeting women making history – people who are more successful than anyone among us; they are powerful political subjects. Their transformation is revolutionary, striking, astonishing, and something to be respected and studied. Amargi could not convey this to the visiting group who took for granted that *they* were the liberated ones or the liberators. Nobody could get the idea about who they actually were meeting (Nil).

In a third meeting in Istanbul, feminists, socialists, environmentalists, and Kurdish activists came together from different parts of Turkey under the motto *Farklılıklarımızla Buluşalım* (Let's meet in diversity). Amargi spokeswoman and prominent Turkish sociologist Pınar Selek criticized the fact that women's organizing was not in the form of a movement in Turkey; most groups did not even aim at creating one. Detached from the streets and the grassroots, charity-like NGOs pervaded. There was no platform where all constituents of the women's liberation struggle could connect, coordinate and understand one another through their differing agendas (Selek, 2002).³⁵² According to Selek, the chosen modes of organizing and the weak desire to work with other women did not accord with the higher feminist goal of dismantling patriarchy and its institutions ("Kurtuluşumuzu Örgütleyelim Kadın Konferansına Doğru," 2002, p. 13). The subsequent 2002 *Kurtuluşumuzu Örgütleyelim* (Let's Organize Our Liberation) conference held at HADEP's Istanbul office was attended by Kurdish, Armenian, Muslim, feminist, LBT women's groups, as well as women from unions and political parties.³⁵³ For the first time since the collapse of the 1989 1st Women's Congress and the 1997 rally Finally Organised (see Sections 2.3 and 3.2.2), women sought a common ground of action. The conference agreed to form a

non-rigid coordination mechanism, but that never materialized. Some thought it was too early for such mechanisms or that there was no actual need. Feminists believed the women's liberation struggle should not prioritize issues that did not directly relate to women, while socialists thought the women's struggle should be waged hand in hand with men. Kurdish women's forceful demand for peace and joint action, however, was a cementing factor that no one could ignore:

This time it was the Kurdish women's movement bringing us, feminists, together with the socialist women's movement in Turkey. As the Kurdish women started to do more direct women's politics, our desire to stand with them became an excuse to stand with socialist women as well; otherwise, we wouldn't have. The [Kurdish] movement acted very inclusively. It both held our hand firmly and continued its relations with the socialists. After a while, the March 8 rallies became avenues where we would tolerate each other in order to be together with Kurdish women (Selma).

Feminists were concerned, though, that Kurds mostly talked from a motherhood position and mainly focused on the village evacuations, house raids, tortures and losses: "It was impossible to hear anything other than 'the state' from their mouth. They exclusively focused on state violence and would not let you enter private-space issues. They would not answer questions such as, 'What about male violence in your family or your organization?' This would put up a wall between us. Obviously, it was wrong to start the conversation with these questions," according to Beyza. This self-criticism notwithstanding, she remained convinced that those meetings could not be considered feminist since "communication did not flow through women's oppression." "Is it still a feminist togetherness if it does not politicize the linkages to sexism?" she said to me. I ask, however, whether those linkages were really missing or just incomprehensible to outsider Turks. Rather than shy away from the issue of sexism or patriarchy, it seems possible that Kurdish women were latently trying to open a third, more intersectional space between the feminist and socialist ways. They were connecting racial and gender oppression through a broader definition of patriarchy (see Chapter 5). DÖKH activist Besime, who quit Amargi, describes this third way:

Our movement tries to answer, 'When and where did women lose [power]?' and 'Why and where did these leftist or feminist groups lose?' We want to take lessons from the mistakes of others, mainly of Turks, and try not to repeat them. Perhaps we will also make mistakes, but those mistakes will be made after having taken those lessons. So, ours will be a newer experience (Besime).

Dispute

I learned from the Kurdish participants that the inspiration for establishing Amargi came from Kurdish women's liberation ideology. This was an intriguing discovery for me as progressive circles in Istanbul most often associated Amargi's success with Selek's vision. The KWM ideology (discussed in Chapter 3) attributes a central role to local women's academies and cooperatives in knowledge production, and the critique of patriarchal power and knowledge through reflection in communal circles. These circles, inclusive of class, age, and cultural differences, make sure that one's own experience and subjectivity are (re)interpreted via the mediation of the other. KWM pedagogy presumes the rootedness of theory in everyday life practice; anti-system alternatives developed in the academies would ideally emanate from

the grassroots. Early Amargi, likewise, believed in the power of criticism or self-criticism, organizing with the subjects of oppression,³⁵⁴ mutual liberation through alliance-building, and non-hierarchical, horizontal forms of togetherness in the spirit of agonistic pluralism. One did not have to self-identify as feminist to join in.

Amargi brought some visibility to the Kurdish question and legitimized solidarity visits to Kurdistan, offering Kurds a boost in morale when they felt “abandoned by the whole world.”³⁵⁵ However, as the 1999–2004 ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish army ended, Kurdish volunteers began to observe Amargi’s slide towards a once-criticized “detached academism” characterized by a gradual withdrawal from street activism and a change in political priorities and volunteer profile (more academics and graduate students, less ethnic, cultural and class diversity). Meanwhile, Selek’s legal vulnerability³⁵⁶ due to her ongoing court case and the threats she received from state security forces urged a righteous sense of grievance separate from other issues, prompting her friends to organize well-attended solidarity campaigns. This situation, however, was not conducive to any open discussions about internal power hierarchies in Amargi. As the horizontal decision-making practices premised on criticism and self-criticism weakened, tacit tension between Kurdish and Turkish Amargi women started to grow. This racialized tension became ever more difficult to contain once the armed conflict resumed, and the colonially situated disputes over how to arrive at a “dignified peace” became more pronounced. The more Amargi’s call for peace was “seen as subversive by the state and police for the similarity to that of the Kurdish movement” (Özakın, 2012, p. 64), the more the conceptual multiplicity on violence that existed in the cooperative became unsustainable.³⁵⁷ The liberal, antimilitarist, anti-violence discourse pioneered by Selek came to singularly dominate Amargi, which largely equated state violence and anticolonial violence, subjected the Turkish army and Kurdish guerillas to the same anti-militarist critique, and detached feminist struggle from anticolonial struggle.³⁵⁸

For Kurdish volunteers, armed struggle was unavoidable due to the Turkish state’s policies of extermination. They perceived these new circumstances at Amargi as tantamount to exploiting their labour and silencing their voice: “It substantially contradicted the reasons and enthusiasm of why we came to collaborate in the first place” (Ferhan). At some point, the internal avenues of negotiation became exhausted to the extent that Kurdish women felt that it was impossible to act without betraying themselves. Eventually in 2006, eight Kurdish founding members silently departed Amargi,³⁵⁹ ending the brief opening in which the group sought to foster dialogue between different ethnonational communities.³⁶⁰

Erasure

With the gradual marginalization and loss of the Kurdish voice, the cooperative's ability to analyze differing political responsibilities arising from colonial inequality also diminished. Turkish Amargi activist and researcher Özakın's interviews with some Amargi volunteers document this inability well:

Feride states that the dominance of Kurdish women in the beginning made her feel bad about being Turkish. Her suggestions or critiques were taken as racist statements. Another teacher, Merve had similar problems. She started to feel like a Kurdish woman after the discussions on this subject, but it was reminded to her that she was not Kurdish, in an exclusionary way (Özakın, 2012, p. 126).

Feride and Merve said that they experienced a lack of confidence for being non-Kurdish (ibid., 96) [They] felt intimidated due to belonging to a hegemonic identity. The transsexual, lesbian and bisexual women did not experience this feeling as much as heterosexual non-Kurdish women did due to their specific subordination. Non-Kurdish women could not speak about Kurdish issues easily. When they did, it was interpreted as nationalism, racism and Kemalism (ibid., p. 127).

Merve felt isolated for not being Kurdish and not trusted as a person who did not suffer from racism. She felt isolation and guilt, as well as a need to apologize for them. Additionally, her critique of the design of the Peace Table campaign was regarded as irrelevant, and some Kurdish women hinted that her reaction was due to disguised Kemalism (ibid., p. 127).

These race- and coloniality-negligent fears erased the structural inequalities and instantiated white fragility among women like Feride and Merve by centring their own feelings of intimidation, isolation, and lack of confidence when Kurdish women called out their racial hegemony. The function of this self-victimizing talk is to avoid engaging with the differences in the degree and quality of suffering. What is more alarming is that Özakın proposes personality clashes and Kurdish women's reverse racism as the root cause of these feelings: "Kurdish women in Amargi had to overcome their prejudices against Turkish women, about their own racism and homophobia and transphobia to facilitate a healthy dialogue with the other volunteers from various sexual identities" (ibid., p. 96). She argues that Kurdish women's departure may be explained by non-Kurdish others' insensitivity towards their struggle, but the more likely reason was their suppression by KÖH:

Because the press declarations of the Kurdish movement became distant to feminists at the same time, the [Kurdish women's departure] was interpreted as the Kurdish women who were active in Amargi were not totally independent from their national struggle. Hence, another explanation for what happened can be that they had to follow the decisions of the larger group, the Kurdish political movement, as a supposedly liberatory new identity that suppressed their autonomy as women, as Appiah puts it, replacing 'one kind of tyranny with another' (ibid., 99). The departure of Kurdish members can also be interpreted as *a retreat from transversal politics and a return to identity politics* on their behalf (ibid., p. 99–100, italics mine).

This analysis appropriates Amargi's history by granting the "transversal host" position to Turkish feminists while reducing Kurdish activists to the status of "guests trapped in identity politics" who eventually fell victim to a "tyrannical" political movement that denies them agency. This epistemic violence obfuscates the equally constitutive intellectual, emotional, and physical labour of Kurdish women in Amargi, as well as their conditions of collaboration. To qualify for "transversal politics," Amargi then expected participants to abandon their ethnonational loyalties. For my Kurdish respondents,

however, the “retreat from transversal politics” that Özakın propounds pertains to Amargi’s changing direction, rather than their unchanging relationship with KÖH that remained the same all along. Amargi once refused to see the Kurdish question as extricable from patriarchal domination, contrary to most feminists, as it deemed militarism and war as ultimate manifestations of masculinity. Later, however, it began to disentangle this radical intersectionality. By suppressing the Kurdish episteme that locates patriarchy in an interlocking frame, Amargi later portrayed the PKK as an agent of nationalism, militarism, and war, making it a source of masculinity that women needed to move away from. This additive approach revealed the limitations of liberal-individualist diversity feminism and alliance-building in Turkey.

8.3 The Turkish response to the Kurdish call for coalition politics

Here is how some feminists whom DÖKH contacted responded to the coalition call quoted at the opening of this chapter:

We cannot play an active role there. It’s already a tough enough job keeping our own movement alive. Feminists cannot be in a position to lead the ‘roof organizing,’ because if we were to lead, we would have to file down our sharp edges and have to make compromises to get along with others. Why would we do that? We are fighting to entrench an important ideological position regarding the distinction of the feminist voice in an already constricted arena. We say that feminists should wage the women’s liberation struggle, Kurds wage the Kurdish freedom struggle, and socialists wage the working-class liberation struggle. In a place where the legitimacy of this statement is questioned, it is not okay to enter a coalition just like that. In Turkey, feminism is still not recognized as an independent, holistic political movement; leftists see it as ‘area politics’ (Selma).

DÖKH is trying to compose a women’s coalition bringing together the feminists and women from mixed-gender organizations. This won’t work. They just cannot see that you cannot form a women’s front like this. You can only bring them together around one or two topics – that’s it! The independent feminist struggle empowers women in mixed-gender organizations. Yet today, very few admit that feminism occupies a special place in the women’s movement. For roof organizing to come true, the feminist movement in Turkey should become as strong as the Kurdish women’s movement, but socialists, for example, still refuse the idea that the femina-sign represents all women. Or friends at DÖKH or the SKM [Socialist Women’s Assemblies] say that they are as good as feminists in terms of waging a women’s struggle. If we come together with these groups, we will lose the centre, dissolve, and fall into a position where we may neither empower ourselves nor others (Beyza).

I don’t believe that we can eliminate our differences just by forming an umbrella. We should accept these differences. For example, we organize in loose, ad hoc campaigns or closed-groups, but they are a well-structured mass movement; I don’t know how these two can relate. Or many feminist women want to stay away from the Kurdish question. Not all of us are sympathetic, I mean. Therefore roof-like regulated platforms will only exacerbate the existing divisions. It is more critical to prioritize convincing each other from within our own grounds than to focus on structured alliances (Azra).

The logic in these accounts follows: Since we represent the gender struggle, we should be able to lead the roof or coalition. But we are not even recognized as an independent movement in its own right, so we cannot convince all women to use the femina-sign in protests, or organizations affiliated with mixed-agenda movements perceive their gender struggle at the same level as feminists’ whereas their politics cannot be called those of the women’s liberation struggle. “Just as in feminist circles, we never say we will liberate the Kurds; similarly, feminist women in mixed-gender bodies should believe that feminist

organizing relies essentially on the power of independent feminist politics” (Filiz Karakuş, in Acar Savran, 2011, p. 232). When methods and concerns are so different, convincing each other under one roof becomes impossible. If we are not strong enough to be able to lead without compromising our disruptive voice and convince others, this means we will file down our edges, dissolve and lose our ability to empower others. Thus, we would better not be part of an umbrella, or any structured, regulated mechanism.

Here “gaining strength” is associated with a non-negotiable, oppositional position of taking-power (as discussed in Section 5.4). Making-power, or creating alternative spaces that a roof might suggest, is not imagined as another form of empowerment that allows feminists to reach diverse women. In our conversations, Beyza told me that mixed-gender roof organizations (such as the People’s Democratic Congress, HDK) did not treat feminists, Kurds, and socialists as equal subjects. “Feminists are ineffective and weak there, for others are backed up by group power. I believe we need to be addressed as an influential political subject no matter how much power we hold.” Further on in our conversation, she also underlined that no organized feminist ground independent from “the state, the capital, and men” existed before the SFK: “Feminists are too dispersed, and today, the SFK is also in crisis.” Demanding equal political power and recognition in mixed platforms despite a predetermination to remain “non-representational, small-group, and non-grassroots” is a recurring conundrum for the TFM. In this discourse, claims to power come from the supposed universality of own gender politics, rather than the functioning networks/alliances or emplaced power structures that can be shared with other women. Such an essentializing claim, which might be instrumental in countering Turkish men, comes at the cost of overlooking the development or analyses of equally authentic and legitimate gender consciousness emerging from within other women’s worlds.³⁶¹ This frame-making effort is perceived by Kurdish, Muslim, or working-class women as a move of superiority or imposition due to the ethnic, class, and cultural privileges that most feminist activists represent.

Outside of this call, Turkish feminists have been probing how to relate to Kurdish women. At BİKG (see Chapter 6), for example, the discussion centred on,

Should ‘Women’s Initiative for Peace’ be on the side of the oppressed, the Kurds, or assume a non-partisan position? Should it move in tandem with the Kurdish freedom movement or be positioned within the women’s liberation struggle? I would prefer the latter. Unfortunately, things get mixed most of the time and the Kurdish line of action gets to shape our program at BİKG. This debilitates the image of BİKG as an independent platform that employs feminist methods (Nur).

The riddle to be solved for ally Turks seemed to be whether to support the Kurds externally as in the form of “solidarity with the oppressed” or as a common struggle between groups both oppressed as women in which they would walk together despite their differences. “Do we advocate education in mother tongue because it is a democratic Kurdish demand, or because it is a feminist demand of Kurdish women, or do we not advocate it at all as it is not a feminist demand?” asks SFK activist Nur. While the

third group was the largest among the feminist mainstream, DÖKH's allies, she believes, often belonged to the first category: a group that offered solidarity against ethnic oppression like an average social democrat or socialist while maintaining a critical distance from Kurdish gender politics. Women on one side, Kurds on the other: it was not a relationship that made common cause but supported an oppressed group from the outside. For Nur, this was neither feminist nor equal, because it meant that women's solidarity between victims of different forms of oppression became an external relation that reproduced ethnic hierarchies. If they could centre gender oppression, on the other hand, it would become a common feminist struggle of reciprocal liberation. But is that so? I argue that centring gender oppression alone may not dismantle the external relation as long as it reproduces the same additive model in a (white) feminist form. This additive model in Turkey, Turkish feminist scholar Aksu Bora remarks, pretends "as if 'being oppressed as a woman' is the same thing, but in certain situations, for certain women, this oppression becomes imbricated [*katmerlenme*]" (Bora, 2017). Activist Esra also highlights this problem as a result of her conversations with DÖKH but cannot think of a political alternative:

E: We were there to support the Kurdish women, not to understand them. These are two different ways of showing solidarity. I do not want to trivialize the former, but it is really awkward to behave as if you always have something to say, but not much to hear from them.

C: How would "understanding them" affect your politics do you think?

E: I don't know if it would change anything in one's actions, to be honest. It is a difficult question. I am not sure if it is something that can do that. But certainly, it changes what you hear and the way you hear (Esra).

In the SFK magazine *Feminist Politika*, socialist-feminist Filiz Karakuş (2011, p. 34) echoes Nur: "Including specific forms of oppression of Kurdish women in feminist politics and trying to build bridges with them is not the same as building a relationship with the Kurdish movement. The former pertains to the substance of feminist politics. What determines the extent of the relationship with the Kurdish movement, on the other hand, is the Kurdish movement's women's politics, anti-sexist organizing and the way it connects with feminists." This statement implies two things: First, including Kurdish women's specific oppression in feminist politics might not be achieved through the gender politics of the Kurdish movement. Second, relations with the Kurdish movement might not be achieved through an anti-racist, decolonial, intersectional strand of feminist politics. This non-intersectional approach to feminist solidarity replicates the same hierarchical additive logic of "solidarity with the oppressed," as it can only imagine common struggle with those whom it can assimilate into the "same": "The commonality defined by feminists was a 'negative commonality' arising from oppression," writes Bora (2004) in her seminal article *Feminism: Boundaries and the Possibility of Transgression*. Here, she questions feminism of post-1980s in Turkey for leaving all identities and loyalties outside of the gender bracket and assuming gender is the common denominator: "The Kurdish question is one thing; the women's question is another. It is not problems related to her Kurdishness but womanhood that feminism cares about" (ibid.). Feminist

scholar Nükhet Sirman borrows an ingenious phrase from another scholar, Ayşe Saktanber, to capture this add-on method: *pilav üstü kuru kaldık* (we're just haricot beans over rice).³⁶²

It did not even occur to us that sexuality can be lived differently from class to class. We were told that feminism would tell us what love is all about, what sexuality, what a woman's body is all about. Then from socialist theories, we would learn what labour and so on are all about. What I mean to say is, *we're just haricot beans over rice!* We could never engage in true intersectionality; we still can't. We should be able to see that how patriarchy is lived might differ based on class, race and gender. If we copy sexuality or 'love' from feminism and paste it onto working-class women or Kurdish women, the present situation we face will arise (Sirman, 2011, p. 93).

These self-critical voices are rare, however. More often, the TFM tends to see itself as that which builds bridges across differences, hence is intersectional, regardless that it substantiates epistemic superiority through compartmentalizing moves: first, by claiming disentanglement from the nation and ethnicity/race (Chapters 4 and 7); second, by defending gender-primary politics (Chapter 5); and third, by privileging certain modes of action as feminist rather than others (Chapters 6 and 8). Thus, the TFM becomes the one to empower all and the one all must empower. In other words, it is the one that decides what is "feminist" in a coalition setting, while the reverse scenario becomes unthinkable.³⁶³ For instance, when the TJA called for solidarity in 2019 for the hunger strike of a well-known KWM activist, political prisoner Leyla Güven, for the state to end the isolation of Öcalan and return to peace talks, some feminist members of a women's platform that includes the TJA questioned support for this "non-woman's issue" for it violated the platform's common accord. Since Güven's hunger strike was a mixed-gender protest, they suggested it could not be supported based on women's liberation politics. What's more, hunger strikes are a "questionable form of action that cannot be applauded anyway." Others tried to find a middle ground suggesting that, regardless of whether the topic falls directly within the women's domain, it would still be acceptable to show solidarity with Güven from a critical distance without specifically espousing the form of the action or its content. Nevertheless, voices who recognize the indivisibility of freedom and see the direct linkages tying together Öcalan's isolation, the return to war, attacks on women's rights, the seizure of TJA-affiliated women's organizations by state-appointed trustees, as well as the arrest of most TJA activists, have been discouraged from mobilizing the wider platform. In this, Turkish anti-nationalist feminists framed their agenda as the "commonly" agreeable by marking radically intersectional/interwoven agendas as non-feminist. Or, in regard to peace activism, they use an add-and-stir language that deracializes gender and flattens Turkish and Kurdish women's different experiences of war:

My demand for the resolution of the Kurdish question has nothing to do with my womanhood. I used to demand it before I became a feminist as well. But, of course, this war has some dimensions concerning feminism, too. Women are displaced, harassed, killed, or raped. It would be naïve to say that the recent dramatic rise in woman killings is unrelated to the rising militarism or the military service done in the conflict region (Halime).

Women portrayed as undifferentiated victims simultaneously help externalize the responsibility of cultural domination onto the state, thus providing white feminisms an escape route from accountability,

and help reproduce the homogenizing denialist visionary of the nation-state. Racial state, multicultural or assimilationist, “differentiate[s] between those strangers whose appearance of difference can be claimed by the nation, and those stranger strangers who may be expelled” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 97). Silence on the colonization of Kurds makes the TFM complicit with the nation-state which, in turn, becomes their emboldened class/gender oppressor.³⁶⁴ This occurred after the collapse of the peace talks in Turkey in 2015 when the demonization of the Kurdish opposition was soon followed by the suppression of all opposition. At the 2015 BİKG conference, a few months after the eruption of urban warfare in Kurdistan, DÖKH activist Şeyma Kantarcı (2015) was already warning that the state was waging the war against all of society: “Military tanks could show up in the streets of Istanbul anytime as well. If people are silent on [Kurdish cities] Cizre and Sur today, this war will come to [Turkish cities] Ankara and Istanbul tomorrow. Don’t act with a sense of support; act like war is at the door of every one of us.”

The compartmentalized, additive, feminist alliance discourse analyzed in this chapter can easily be coopted by the state apparatus so long as it fails to account for Turkish women’s complicity in the asymmetrical interdependence of women’s suffering. That the demand for peace turned into a feminist issue defined on one’s own terms simply offered the TFM another occasion to further its own interests, rather than hear Kurdish feminists. At the same time, the demand failed to win the popular support of Turkish women. Faced with Halime’s arguments that war and militarism will incite more male violence, Turkish women are likely to make an intersectional calculation just as Kurdish women do. If they think of Kurds as troublemakers, terrorists, and criminals who threaten the “unity of their country,” they will ally with the militarist offensive, as the Kurds would seem to be the bigger threat. So long as the internal colonization continues, the mainstream masses will continue to ally with their class and gender oppressors. White discourses of liberation only serve to hide this reality. Mutual liberation, on the contrary, entails engaging with women’s complex entanglements that are irreducible to gender difference. A transformative effect may only be possible through the simultaneous decriminalization of Kurdish women and their demands and the demonstration of how national men benefit from this criminalization to repress Turkish women. That is, even as one speaks for one’s own plight, one connects it to the Other.

Nonetheless, the TFM refrains from complicity-based articulations. This is partly because the guilt and responsibility to be acknowledged in perpetuating oppression is generally confused with the guilt and responsibility men try to evoke in women resisting male domination. I, however, argue the contrary: Working on racial and class complicity can be liberating for women for it confronts the male system that enables men to evoke baseless guilt in women. Just as the KWM asks Kurdish men to re-educate themselves to relinquish their masculinity, Turkish women are similarly invited to relinquish their ethnonational advantages through a reflective alliance.

They do not join the HDK [People's Democratic Congress] because they have qualms around building a common future together with the Kurds, because they think, 'Let the Kurds go and struggle in Kurdistan and we'll show solidarity.' Both the Turkish Left and the feminist movement should revisit and reconfigure themselves based on the progressive teachings of the 21st century (Delal).

We don't need a savior kind of external support; that is exactly what we don't need. We don't want everyone to think like us either. Our demand is to be better understood in terms of our goals. If our vision is understood, we believe their patronizing attitude – well, let's put it differently, their male-dominant mentality – will get a chance to be questioned more. We want to come to some common understanding around our approach to the nation-state or our women-liberationist reading of history. Our motive is to engender a decolonial vein of struggle of the ecological, radical democratic kind that is grounded in women's freedom (Bircan).

All additive forms of solidarity that keep ethnocentric definitions of feminism intact are questionable from a decolonial radically intersectional/interwoven point of view. Delal and Bircan argue for an alliance based on mutual intersectional liberation of colonially interdependent entities. In this model, Turkish women's liberation is not possible without Kurdish women's and vice versa. Recognizing this interdependence demands strategizing not only on victimhood but also accountability and recognizing one's implication in the oppression of the other which, in turn, comes to reinforce one's own oppression.

While I was volunteering at DÖKH, my colleague and mentor Hêja told me that she once challenged an ally activist, saying: "If you believe you are a Circassian woman, then reclaim it, do its politics, don't continue to say I am Turkish. Or if you believe you are Turkish, then reflect and act on how you also are a *mağdur* [victim] of this colonial war as a *Turkish* woman." The Kurdish call for Turks to focus on their own oppression for solidarity initially confused and troubled me. I thought this would play into the hands of Turkish allies' strong existing tendency to equalize women's oppression through a "politics of innocence" that supposed that both they and the Kurds were equidistant from the Turkish state.³⁶⁵ However, through the numerous generous conversations over the years I had with DÖKH activists, I believe I began to sense the difference between Hêja's understanding of the *mağduriyet* (victimhood) of Turks and its TFM version. The former was interwoven, interdependent, and asymmetrical; the latter, additive, unimplicated, and symmetrical. There was a reason why Hêja insisted on racially marking her ally. This is because for the TFM, Turkish women were just women, just as Turkish feminists were just feminists (as detailed in Chapter 7). Hêja challenged her because only then could Turkish women's vulnerability be read against the backdrop of colonial domination of Kurds. Unless feminists problematized their Turkishness, they would not be able to address the interplay between their own sexual subjugation and the denial of the cultural others. "We need to recognize not only differences but also the relational nature of those differences... white women and women of color not only live different lives but white women live the lives they do in large part because women of color live the ones they do" (Barkley Brown, 1992, p. 298). For the KWM, recognizing being oppressed differently as a *Turkish* woman entails politicizing one's own relationship to the Turkish-supremacist colonial patriarchy. Since heteropatriarchy and its multiplication through race are structural to colonialism (see Chapter 5), failing

to make this interconnection visible will both sustain Turkish women as beneficiaries of the racial system and Turkish and Kurdish women as sufferers of sexual oppression at one and the same time.

“Here is one reason why I truly dislike the concept of intersectionality: Why would the concept of gender not be enough to spot different forms of domination?” (Bora, 2017). In other words, isn’t the gender concept already an intersectionality itself? Bora asks this as a Turkish feminist in internally colonial Turkey where feminist solidarity activism models the liberal white version of intersectionality in that Kurdish women’s ethnonational problems are treated as add-ons to their womanhood, as she argues in (Bora, 2017) again, cited earlier in this section. Thobani (2020, p. 13) contends that, “Western feminists’ recent adoption of intersectionality focuses only on class, gender and sexuality, while race and colonialism continue to be sidelined.” In a similar vein in Turkey, race is sidelined as a structuring, relational process and is reduced to a complicating, experiential identity category. This liberal misuse does the exact opposite of what the original term born out of Black feminism (See Combahee River Collective, 2019; Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991) intends it to do, by “[becoming] a shield behind which progressive organizations covertly elide radicality and ultimately uphold the status quo” (Poisson, 2018).

Bora’s “dislike” targets this expropriated, multiculturalist version of intersectionality without acknowledging that the gender concept which she imagines as already intersectional is a historical product of Black women’s struggle. If gender were already intersectional, why would Black feminists conjoin the term in the first place to make the racial constitution of gender visible? The radicality of intersectionality comes from its ability to reveal that “no matter what other axes of discrimination are in play, whiteness confers support to individuals such that they cannot experience the full impact of oppression and erasure” (Poisson, 2018). This is what Kurdish women are able to reveal. Theirs, accordingly, is a path-breaking epistemic shift from the Eurocentric theories of power. Once this genealogy is erased, Bora comes to view the liberal, relativist, “all differences matter” form of intersectionality as a threat to her own white materialist feminist analysis, but not to women of color feminisms’ legacy. This ongoing erasure of race, even by progressives like Bora, instantiates that it is all the more important to reclaim intersectionality against the colonization of Kurdish thought, and practice it as an “anti-racist radical theory of anti-subordination” (ibid.).

8.4 Decolonizing the politics of recognition by radical intersectionality

Feminism remains compelled by that which it is against, but no longer is that ‘against-ness’ delimited as an object. It is the loss of the object, rather than its creation, that allows feminism to become a movement, as it opens up possibilities of action that are not constrained by what we are against in the present (Ahmed, 2004, p. 176).

The discussion so far suggests that the TFM's mode of activism and solidarity with the Other, despite claims to the contrary, primarily falls within the "politics of recognition/inclusion" by the Turkish nation-state, which differs ontologically from the KWM's "politics of decolonization/anti-subordination." This categorization might sound disturbing to Turkish feminist allies for most associate "exclusionary, provincial identity politics" with the Kurdish movement as they align themselves with the more-esteemed "uniting, (materialist) system analysis."

The politics of recognition entails a claim to uniqueness that justifies recognition by the state. For example, those Indigenous peoples seeking recognition from the state invariably find themselves in competition with others who are also seeking recognition. This forces an adversarial argument that one's own claims to cultural distinctiveness and political integrity, for example, are more worthy than the claims of others. By contrast, the politics of decolonization requires the building of mass movements capable of dismantling settler colonialism, white supremacy, and capitalism (Simpson & Smith, 2014, p. 10).

Simpson and Smith argue that politics based on recognition or inclusion does not require "coalition politics" or "a serious engagement with broad-based ideas that can fundamentally change social and political relations as well as relationships with the natural world." Turkish solidarity activism that takes vulnerability as leverage enacts "taking-power" at the expense of "making-power" in women's coalitions, assemblies, or communes (see Section 5.4). It delegates final accountability to the state institutions that decolonial feminism sees as the cause of the problem, rather than to a grounded movement rising from the intermeshing of different women. This feeds an oppositional politics of recognition that fosters competition rather than cooperation. In contrast, the twofold strategy of the KWM, which holds vulnerability/complicity, taking/making-power, and similarity/difference together, emphasizes the transformative agency of women and delegates the accountability to their horizontal coalition structures. It describes the roof organizations, confederal interlinked networks/congresses (like the HDK, DTK, TJA) and grassroots communes and assemblies as avenues for negotiation between different women's agendas and definitions, as well as contested bonding among KWM, TFM, Islamic, socialist, LGBTQ, Alevi, Armenian, liberal, or other women's struggles.

There are serious conceptual quests across the world within second-wave feminism, too. That I find missing in Turkey. In conversations with Turkish friends, I don't really see that they grasp the real complexity of the gender conflict. They don't present a new perspective to me, or perhaps they don't even care about that; it is as if womanhood may only be expressed in relation to being oppressed. If the struggle is indeed for woman's freedom, then it has to have its mechanisms, alliances, and fronts. I long for the days on this land to hear 'when Kurdish, Armenian, Alevi women are not free, I am not free.' We are in dialogue, but we cannot organize together, cannot identify common goals, and cannot form a tradition. Our meetings are ad hoc and issue-based, rather than strategic or historic. But what we face is a historical problem. How can we form women's coalitions against patriarchy? What will our collective response be? (Dilan).³⁶⁶

Their behavior was arbitrary towards us, still we needed them; we knew that we should not break apart, as otherwise, the Kurdish women's movement would have been marginalized and isolated. At the end of the day, we saw the women's movement in Turkey as revolutionary; I mean, feminism is a revolutionary attitude in a sense. And if you are genuinely revolutionary, you have to relate to the Kurdish women's movement one way or another (Mediha).

The acute Kurdish awareness of the indispensability of the alliance with Turkish feminists is not reciprocated. “We see the gains of feminists as our gains, but they see our gains as something external to them” (Neslihan). Turkish apathy for strategic coalition-building looks more like a function of privilege. Tapping into institutional strength is indispensable for Kurds, as they cannot afford to avoid continuing organizations, engaging in individual-based, ad hoc politics, or writing off alliances. These alliances are an existential matter of survival: “We predicate the idea of ‘democratic confederalism’ on coalition-building with different cultures, faiths, and thoughts. That is why Kurdish women open the spaces they create to other women” (Bircan). Coalition-building is not an add-on in the KWM episteme; it is a constitutive core and how decolonial epistemology materializes itself. Coalition-building is a means of drawing closer to one another that puts the impossibility of pure proximity to work. It also acknowledges the multiplicity of agendas. “A monolithic movement based on a single, exclusionary identity or single-issue politics” (Runyan, 2018) can be renegotiated as part of such politics. A commitment to anti-subordination brings women together, even as ontological points of departure might be different. Each party learns to negotiate the terms of using its own privilege to support another’s agenda. The idea is to be able to mobilize not only from one’s own priorities but also from those of others.

When Kurdish women say, “war is at the door of every one of us,” this is not to say, make it all about yourself or all about the Other – all about gender or all about race. It means to look at women’s asymmetrical relationship with one another and the state, as well as the asymmetrical responsibilities accruing from that. Similarity-based, gender-reductive politics might help facilitate the initial moves to approach one another but cannot be a political end for decolonial feminism. Decolonization, rather, requires addressing the interlocking structure of domination. It problematizes the comforts, interests, and benefits that make women complicit in the statist patriarchy, as much as the male and state perpetration. The goal is to arrive at an understanding of how and why the degree and quality of suffering is different among women, and how that difference simultaneously connects and separates them. That women express their anti-war voice differently and arrive at disparate gender politics provides an opportunity for a women’s coalition, rather than an obstacle to circumvent to arrive at agreeable minimums. It can be a pedagogical resource to “address this imperial/racial binary or the demands made by specific human others” (Thobani, 2007b, p. 182) because it is the voicing of these very differences that reveal how the nation-state system constructs differential complicity.³⁶⁷ Inhabiting this distance in between may help nurture non-appropriative empathy, revisit one’s essentialisms, stereotypes, fixes, and fetishes, and push the limits of solidarity towards mutual transformation. These spaces of “ethical communication” facilitate explorations of how the state wins my allegiance against you, thereby, managing to shrink my oppositional space. Ahmed calls this “reflective-affectionate solidarity” – “that openness to

difference which lets our disagreements provide the basis for connection” (Jodi Dean, quoted in Ahmed, 2004, p. 141).

A woman may get elected as a mayor, but if not controlled/supported by the bottom-up women’s assemblies, she will eventually become a dominating figure. Grassroots women’s assemblies are there to realize women’s collective will. We suggest this movement-type organizing to Turkish women as well, which is also why we want to turn into a women’s congress [KJA]. When that is realized, women from all faiths, ethnic, and cultural communities can learn to stand together and may wage an interconnected struggle of gender, class, and cultural identity (Sonay).

The coalition politics the KWM imagines aims at moving society beyond that imagined by the Turkish postcolonial state and its enmity towards heterogeneity. It promotes a collectivist, interdependent and pluralist liberation model as an alternative to the individualist, divide-and-rule, unitary domination model. This entails going beyond ad hoc, issue-based gatherings towards emplaced popular mass movements that are materialized as a confederation of local and regional assemblies: “Not merely an alliance, we should become a movement, that’s the goal. Nation-statism must be transcended ... We have lost amazing women, this struggle will never cease, we owe this to our companions” (KJB, quoted in Candan et al., 2013, p. 52). One can move away from Turkish-supremacist patriarchal structures only by allying with other structures that excluded communities, peoples, and nations shape on their own terms. Listening and lending power to one another is the only way to free cultural communities from state monopoly. The KWM invites women from all communities to remember their displacement, dispossession, and assimilation herstories; reclaim their cultural institutions, networks, and spaces of governance; and decouple from the imposed “Turkishness contract” (discussed in Chapter 7) towards the “confederal radical democracy” of the oppressed. KÖH calls this alternative system for mutual liberation as “democratic confederalism” and a women’s system for self-defence of society. Just as nation-statism is a political project that realizes the masculine potentia, democratic confederalism aims to realize the feminine potentia.

I still think feminism has more advantages than the holistic approach of *jineoloji* for the advancement of women’s liberation. I don’t think *jineoloji* can pave the way for us. I know this sounds a bit *üstten* [patronizing], but to be honest, I wish their horizon would come closer to feminism, because they will also run into a dead end (Nur).

The refusal to engage in an alliance, do feminism on another’s terms, centre another’s voice or take her lead means a refusal to expose the colonial nature of the Turkish modernization and secularization project. This is complicity, for it is with the help of these passive and negative forms of racial domination that more blatant forms prosper.

Chapter 9 · Conclusion

In the present work, I have studied the contrapuntal story of the encounters between the Turkish Feminist Movement (TFM) and the Kurdish Women's Movement (KWM). My research showed that the parties arrived at the encounter from different points of departure that produced different trajectories and worldings; one featuring as “politics of recognition” and the other “politics of decolonization.” Their respective historical origins have led the two women's liberation movements to take opposing-directions with respect to intersectionality. For both Turkish and Kurdish women activists, the 1980s was about the discovery of the women's question. This discovery was shaped in and through the asymmetrical interdependence of the colony and the metropole. The TFM was moving away from the Turkish socialist movements that made gender subservient to class, and the KWM was moving away from the Turkish nation-state that denied the interlinkage between race, gender, and class. Class struggle served as the background for the former, and the anticolonial struggle for the latter.

Coming from leftist organizations, Turkish anti-nationalist feminists wanted to disentangle class, gender, and nation in the way they were hierarchically ordered by the Kemalist and Turkish socialist traditions. Their ambition was to differentiate patriarchy from capitalism and nationalism in order to uncover gender-specific forms of agency and subjugation. For that, they were targeted by leftists for turning gender-oppression into the basic power conflict in society. What about ethnicity/race? If not ignored altogether, it was subsumed under gender, like socialists of the time would subsume it under class. Singling gender-oppression out of an entanglement of power relations appeared emancipatory in the earlier stages of the TFM, but it quickly turned into a universalizing disposition whereby the “gender-specific” came to be seen as women's “commonality” that, intended or not, privileged the private realm, the body-politics, and the personal.

Turkish Kemalists prioritized the national, socialists the class, and feminists the gender in hierarchical opposition to one another. My research concludes that Turkish feminists' critical distance from Kemalist and socialist traditions (even as they inherited much from them), provided a handy toolbox to further their racial innocence in moments of conflict with the KWM. I have observed that the formative anger and frustration of feminists with Turkish leftist men, Kemalist women, mixed-gender patriarchal organizations, and holistic theories, as well as their desire to not replicate “masculinist” hierarchical organizations made them hesitant with the KWM, for they confused the KWM with white Turkish traditions.

The KWM, on the other hand, constantly challenged these single-axis conceptions of the systems of domination espoused by Turkish nationalisms, socialisms, or feminisms. Under colonial domination, the discovery of womanhood moved in the direction of experiencing and theorizing intersectionality. Turkish nationalisms, socialisms, or feminisms, though presenting themselves as distinct ideologies, were

connected racially from the vantage point of the anticolonial movement. As documented in Chapters 2 and 3, this connection was too visible to guerilla and civilian Kurdish women who lived the interplay between multiple systems of oppression in their everyday experience with men and the state. For example, the monopolist statist desire to exterminate or take over the PKK always overlapped with the desire to centralize decision-making and exterminate women's autonomy. KWM's analysis of these experiences revealed the inseparable logic and methods of colonial and patriarchal feminization, or wife-ization (*karılaştırma*) as Kurdish women call it. This analysis did not allow them to isolate the "gender-specific"; instead, they saw it as radically interlocked. Accordingly, *jineoloji* argued that the history of women's enslavement went in parallel with the history of colonization in Mesopotamia. The rise of the male-led, hierarchical, monopolist, statist power that appropriated nature, peoples, and surplus products enabled the seizure of the women-led system and its values. KÖH's (Kurdistan Freedom Movement) turn to the non-state, confederalist, communalist model of self-governance from a statist, centralist, uniformist model came as the logical outcome of these lived experiences of women both in the PKK, in grassroots communities, and in history. That is why, Öcalan's "democratic, ecological, woman-liberationist paradigm" defined Kurdish women as the main revolutionary subject. Since their material position equipped them to expose the widest intersectional spectrum of power relations, KWM would be the central decentralizing power/agent to constitute KÖH as a democratic force, a non-state, pluralist movement in which differences may find equal representation and transformative presence.

Becoming feminist is primarily a context-bound, community-based, practical process for Kurdish activists in contrast with the mostly universalist, individual-based, intellectual process for Turkish feminists. Unlike Turkish women departing from socialist movements, Kurdish women could create a space within their freedom movement to articulate and politicize their intersectional concerns as women. The agonistic respect cultivated within the movement was the enabler of critical consciousness and action that women could shape and get shaped by. In this episteme, agency-victimhood, gender-nation, individual-community were not understood in additive or antithetical terms. The radical attention paid to the multiplicity and simultaneity of oppression guided the theory and action. In Chapter 4, I have argued that the TFM's tendency to uncouple the racial/national from the sexual is rooted in Turkish women's experience and national privilege that is constitutive to TFM's trajectory. Thus, Turkish feminists read the relationship between Kurdish women and their culture/community as external, like their own. And when the Turkish representation of KWM as "nationalist" or "identity-based" became unsustainable, it gave way to representations as "feminist-like" or "feminist but not quite." As such, the "external relations thesis" and decentering through provincializing continued. These distancing strategies have profoundly racialized the Kurdish acts of claiming/rejecting feminism that contest the women of the colonizing nation who claim to be the hosts of the "feminist lands." Kurdish activists, neither inside nor outside that

territory, create an inside from the outside and embody the ambivalence of embracing and resisting feminism, strategizing against assimilation into the colonizer's definitions while also remaining open to engaging with it.

The irreconcilable conflict around KWM's notion of "rape culture" captured how the Kurdish women's predilection for broader meanings and complex, mediated structuration clashed with the TFM's tendency to focus on the "gender-specific" and the immediate. I have shown how this ontological difference reflected in their respective conceptions of the oppressor, the patriarchal system, history, and the nation-state. The KWM campaign against the rape culture that relied on place-bound strategies of *making-power* (like re-educating men and the community) and entailed engaging with mediated entanglements, was criticized by the TFM for reducing the woman subject to the body, land/nature, and nation, hence concealing the specificity of patriarchal oppression and male agency in sexual violence. Turkish feminists preferred retributive, confrontational, separationist methods that could target individual men more directly, rather than working for anti-patriarchal transformation of communities. The TFM's relationship with the state resembled that with the men and society – a rather unidirectional, external relation where feminists would criticize and expose, and the state would act. Against this *devletli* (state-owning, stateful) political approach that presumed dependency on the nation-state as permanent, KWM decentered the nation-state for a governance model that provided an alternative beyond independence or assimilation. This "third space," a different regime of modernity envisioned by anticolonial double-consciousness, invites us to thinking and living beyond the nation-state, for neither the nation nor the state is complete or permanent. Thus, I interpret the Kurdish *jineoloji* school as an effort to break with colonial capitalist modernity and the Western-imposed supremacist, patriarchal forms of state. As the science of women and democratic confederalism, *jineoloji* advocates ecology, radical democracy, epistemic diversity, and decentralization of knowledge, power, and responsibility as the best fit for the multiethnic/multifaith geo-culture of Mesopotamia. *Jineoloji* connects the individual freedom of woman to her ability to shape a life form that is anti-sexist and anti-racist. It is my belief that the unique way in which this non-state, non-patriarchal approach indigenizes Western epistemologies including feminism offers much to Turkish allies who ought to investigate the invisible ethnocentric premises of their own postcolonial culture.

In Chapter 6, I have looked at Women for Peace Initiative (BİKG) as an attempt for alliance between these contesting women's traditions. I sought to understand why most disputes proved unproductive in terms of fostering social change. Who to contact, how, and where on the Turkish side was a constant debate. While some agreed on visiting Muslim and/or Kemalist women's groups, others had strong reservations. Few showed a desire to decentralize and organize in local communities; most went for centralized, socially and politically homogenous group actions, which could only reach individuals who

had access to these specific networks. While some preferred street demonstrations, others desired more academic activities, conferences, and petition campaigns. Yet another dispute was over the political discourse to be adopted around peace: Would it rely on women's liberation or Kurdish? Would they spread the women's word or the peace word? Under the circumstances, the KWM's role was to mitigate these either/or disputes and open the space up to multiplicity. The KWM representatives found themselves playing a mediating role between Turkish activists and trying to keep as many volunteers actively involved as possible. They wanted Turkish allies to facilitate multi-ethnic public platforms to engender place-bound pedagogies and influence public opinion in favor of Kurdish freedoms and a renegotiation of the Republic based on mutually agreed principles. Turkish activists were sympathetic to the KWM, but unable to take effective action for recognition of KWM's demands in Turkish society. My inquiry into the Turkish women's difficulty in finding a way/language to act revealed a quandary: their fear of getting appropriated by the mainstream anti-Kurdish Turkish nationals on one hand, and by the KWM on the other. In the chapter, I have illustrated the structural limitations of a joint platform like BİKG in terms of achieving its goals. In sum, BİKG was constrained by the universalist, mergerist vision and the limited representational and mobilizing capacity of feminist peace activists in Turkey. These constraints got in the way of building a movement, going to other Turkish people on popular/grassroots level, or building bridges between Kurdish and Turkish women to seek decolonization.

The inability to develop a pluriversal perspective to engage with difference and colonial domination on structural and political levels was rooted in two constitutive elements of denial. In Chapters 4 and 5, I have examined how denial (*inkar*) of the anticolonial truth of the colonized Other was constructed in the Turkish feminist discourse and exchanges with the KWM. In Chapter 7, I have discussed how denial of the colonial Turkish self, the other side of the coin, operated. The denial of Kurdish identity by the Turkish state and mainstream nationals is blatant; they proudly promote Turkish-supremacy and annihilation of Kurdish political existence by endorsing "counter-terrorism" campaigns (I call it overt mainstream racism). Compared to that, the Turkish progressives' denial is more nuanced and indirect. They disavow the racial specificity of their own constitution, effacing the Other in the process and establishing their autonomous, universalized status in Turkey (I call it covert progressive racism). I contend that the inability to inhabit Turkishness subversively, to expose and disturb its supremacy, marks a politics in Turkey as *white*, even when there is a simultaneous orientalist astonishment and admiration for Kurdish women's political power.

In my interviews, the Turkish discursive moves to (a) reverse or equate the positions and responsibilities and (b) dissociate the political/theoretical differences from relations of race worked in tandem with conceptual moves denying the racial formation and coloniality as a "system of domination" structuring the capitalist, patriarchal, Turkish-supremacist regimes. Most Turkish feminists believed that

they were open to building bridges between different womanhood conditions. However, in-depth interviews have led me to conclude that Turkish feminists reserved normative superiority/supremacy for their own methods and analyses, avoided engaging with own implicatedness in colonial oppression, and refrained from building decolonial intersectional coalitions. Thus, their bridges that excluded the distinctions did little to unsettle homogenizing Turkish whiteness and looked more like adding an unintended “one feminism” to the Turkish nationalist list of one country, one nation, one flag, one language.

Kurdish women want to bring together all democratic forces in Turkey, including the feminist, socialist, religious, and ethnic groups, in the contrapuntal political space that they are creating. Women in KÖH, as the main revolutionary subject and the high-stake benefactor of intersectional liberation, defend this space against race-, class- and gender-reductive forms of liberation. They advocate place- and community-based women’s politics, not just *taking-power* but *making-power*, not just critiquing but building. They attack individual and systemic male-domination at once; at home, in community, and in the Turkish-supremacist nation-state. In my view, this cosmology is too relational and entangled to be contained by any existing Turkish frames. The TFM often conceived the intersectional identities/interests of women on the side of the social, the feminist exterior, the so-called “hierarchical realm of representation,” and women’s self-realization on the side of the individual, the feminist interior, the so-called “egalitarian realm of non-representation.”

Compared to this compartmental, additive, and binary ontology, the KWM asserts instituting horizontal democratic confederal systems outside the state, pursuing women’s and peoples’ liberation at the same time. To that end, they aim to build a congress model, a ground-up network of intersecting communes and assemblies, for the self-governing co-existence of broadest possible women base in Kurdistan. With 40 years of hands-on revolutionary experience and awareness of the potentials/limitations of progressive Turkish groups/parties, the KWM has played an important part in building decolonial confederal coalitions (HDP, HDK, KÖM, BİKG, and so on) to unite anti-oppressive powers that were otherwise fragmented, unreflective, and closed to negotiation. Depatriarchalization and decolonization have been central to KWM’s revolutionary ethics. The KWM invites women from all communities to remember their displacement, dispossession, and assimilation herstories; reclaim their cultural institutions, networks, and spaces of governance; and break with the top-down, imposed “Turkishness contract” towards the ground-up confederalism of the oppressed, that is, the women’s system for self-defence and the defense of society.

The race-and-coloniality-denying, liberal-individualist legacy of the TFM radicalism, mostly immersed in its own agenda, did not make this task easy. The KWM’s calls for lasting, strategic, structured coalitions respecting multiple modalities of women’s liberation were often received as a threat to the nonnegotiating, disruptive Turkish feminist voice. Nonetheless, the Kurdish voice has grown more

confident, especially since mid-2000s, in expressing interlocking Kurdish truth and resisting the moves of Turkish intellectual superiority. While some allies opted out in the face of this challenge, others were compelled to learn and relate to this new situation. It is this learning process that I have studied in my research. The TFM appears open to learning from or building alliances with ethnonational Others on the condition that Turkish-feminist definitions and moves to innocence were not unsettled. The Turkish side invisibilizes the TFM's colonial substratum. My dissertation explores how ethnocentric assumptions, acts, and gestures of Turkish allies work to reconfigure Kurdish demands and reaffirm self-referential practices. I am led to conclude that today's Turkish feminisms continue the essentializing, universalist, gender-primary feminist paradigm of the late 1980s in Turkey; the paradigm is upgraded, more inclusive, multiculturalist, and nuanced, but still *white* as far as it fails to take anticolonial, anti-racist directions, i.e. *doing* anti-nationalism as opposed to *saying* it.

The late-Ottoman and the postcolonial Turkish states have emulated Western colonialism and the racist nation-state model in their efforts at secularist modernization. The organic consequence of this process is that the feminist and socialist traditions of the hegemonic Turkish/Turkified nation, too, are shaped by and within this constitutive whiteness. Despite their liberatory potential for some, they are essentially exclusionary and restrictive. While the world academy, even if in small niches, has started thinking in anti- and decolonial terms again, thanks to the impact of abolitionist, anti-colonial/racist, and Indigenous movements, the Turkish academy seems to lag behind – due to unyielding postcolonial whiteness and Eurocentrism of Turkish scholarship that locks out indigenous (including Muslim) epistemologies of Mesopotamia and Anatolia. KÖH is a subversive power in Mesopotamia committed to disrupting Western imperial as well as Turkish, Persian, and Arab colonial forces, seeking a path to pluriversal democratic autonomy in alliance with peoples of the land. The Kurdish determination for reflective democratic co-existence provides a generous roadmap for anti-oppressive Turkish actors. Kurdish insights could help imagine future efforts at solidarity beyond external support or merger, and towards building avenues of ethical accountability and mutual liberation.

It is my hope that my work encourages other students and scholars to undertake class, gender, and race studies in Kurdistan, Turkey, and the Middle East from an intersectional decolonial perspective. With my dissertation, I have sought to further an academic tradition in the Third World/postcolonial context that takes racism and coloniality as a point of departure in analysis and examines whiteness not only in relation to the West, but also non-Western, postcolonial modes of identification. On a political level, I hope that my work inspires Turkish and other Western-centric feminist/women's groups emerging in (post)colonial contexts to take Kurdish and other Indigenous women's intellectual and political lead to cultivate non-appropriative, pluriversal/confederal coalitions that are accountable to different cultural worlds and Indigenous self-determination.

As a former DÖKH spokeswoman says, “What Turkish revolutionaries started in Turkey in the 70s has transformed into a revolutionary movement in Kurdistan. But Kurdistan’s revolution has not turned into Turkey’s revolution yet. This is what needs to happen” (Rezan).

Endnotes

Chapter 1

¹ Turkish administered part of Kurdistan in southeastern Turkey. For *yurtsever* Kurdish people, the “North” (*Bakur*) denotes the Kurdistan in Turkey, the “South” (*Başûr*) in Iraq, the “West” (*Rojava*) in Syria, and the “East” (*Rojhilat*) in Iran. The geographical reference point in this denotation is Kurdistan itself, not the colonizing nation-states of the region. Mainstream Turkish people either do not know about this naming, or find it racist, hostile, or separatist.

² “Located in the northernmost corner of the Fertile Crescent in Upper Mesopotamia, Diyarbakır is an old city which was home to prolonged struggles between regional powers since the medieval times. Centuries of wars, state-making processes, forced or voluntary population movements, mass conversions, and the Silk Road trade had made Diyarbakır a highly ethno-religiously mixed regional urban center with a well-established bureaucratic tradition and economic and cultural life. This urban formation was severely disrupted over the course of the late 19th and early 20th century Ottoman-Turkish modernization processes” (Özsoy, 2010, p. 13).

³ In 1928, “Afet İnan, Atatürk’s adopted daughter, took a French geography book to Atatürk, and asked him if, as the book says, Turks are of the yellow race. His response: ‘No, it cannot be. Let’s occupy ourselves with it. You work on it.’ ... [B]y delegating İnan the task of searching for Turkish origins, Atatürk made her a state-supported proponent of Turkish whiteness. The Turkish government sent her to the University of Geneva in Switzerland to pursue a PhD in history under the direction of Eugène Pittard (1867–1962), a well-known anthropologist friendly to the idea that Turks were white” (Ergin, n.d.). See also (Ergin, 2008).

⁴ On Ottoman orientalism see (Makdisi, 2002), “how Ottomans represented their own Arab periphery as an integral part of their engagement with, explicit resistance to, but also implicit acceptance of, Western representations of the indolent Ottoman East” (p. 768). And for a discussion on Kemalist adoption of the orientalist discourse, see (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008).

⁵ Kurds are indigenous to Mesopotamia (means “between rivers” referring to the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers). Turks, on the other hand, entered Anatolia during the 11th century.

⁶ Öcalan (2012, p. 152), like many other historians, sees echoes of grisly German, Italian, and Japanese nationalisms in this “white Turk practice” which entered late into capitalist modernity: “The bureaucratic cadre of the Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihat ve Terakki Fırkası*) was shaped in the ideological garden of German nationalism and militarism and by the Germans that they allied with in World War I, in that, [their ideology] was not only similar or twins to the Nazi nationalism but a constitutive element of it. Hitler himself admitted that he was inspired by the Armenian Genocide experience conducted by the *İttihat ve Terakki* government when embarking on the Jewish Genocide.”

⁷ Layered on to these powers today are the imperial powers United States and Russia, the global significance of region’s oil reserves, and a painful articulation with peripheral capitalism under the exploitative conditions of globalization (Bozarslan, 2000; Canefe, 2008).

⁸ In a gendarme report of the time, General Staff Marshall Fevzi Çakmak even used the term “internal colony” in relation to the Kurdish city of Dersim, arguing that “Dersim could not be won over by compassion but had to be treated as a *Dahili Koloni* (Internal Colony) until the undesired elements were removed from the area and the Kurdification process could be reversed” (Türkyılmaz, 2016, p. 170).

⁹ To understand Kurdishness, one needs to engage with “the history of Western and Ottoman colonial projects; continuing (self) interest and intervention in the region by imperialist superpowers; varied critical appropriation, transformation, and contestation of these projects and their discourses by Kurds themselves; and most importantly the assimilating imperatives of Middle Eastern nation-states” (Houston, 2009, p. 25).

¹⁰ Islamic movements’ complex trajectory in Turkey and their position against Turkish colonial westernization calls for a detailed examination that goes beyond the scope of this work. In line with the French tradition, Turkish Kemalist laicism embraces an authoritarian character, forces religion out of the public sphere, and advocates strong state control of the religious affairs.

¹¹ Among the 18 rebellions between 1924–1938 only two were non-Kurdish (Tunçay, 1992). The most well-known Kurdish rebellions are the Koçgiri (1920), Sheikh Saïd (1925), Ararat 1930, and Dersim (1937) rebellions. “The revolt or even the contest was hitherto considered as a ‘betrayal’ to the ‘Nation’ requiring a heavy military response, if not a ‘war for ideal’ or an ‘internal war of independence’ as the Kemalists defined it” (Bozarslan, 2000, p. 23).

¹² Including the mosque imams, schoolteachers, and health workers. Turkish officials were dispatched to the region through a compulsory service program and got paid a higher salary than that paid for the same job in the west.

¹³ Kurds are the largest linguistically distinct group in current Turkey. The plan considered the use of Kurdish language as treason and penalized it in urban/town centers, as well as at all public institutions, schools, shops, and bazaars.

¹⁴ The state boarding schools (YİBOs) and “Girls’ Institutes” separated Kurdish children from their families. “By the 1970s, out of the 70 boarding schools in Turkey, 60 were located in Kurdish cities” (İsmail Beşikçi, quoted in Zeydanlıoğlu, 2008, p. 11). See also (Türkyılmaz, 2016) for an analysis of the Elazığ Girls’ Institute (see endnote 30).

¹⁵ The inspectorates were “special administrative units first established during the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century for the establishment of order in the provinces, especially the Balkans and Macedonia. Then, in the Republican period, these institutions were reactivated and established in the eastern Anatolia, Trace and north-east Anatolia” in 1927 (Gündoğan, 2005, p. 83). The inspectorates held more discretion power than the state-of-emergency governors, authorized even to execute death sentences without approval of the central state. For a detailed account see (Koçak, 2003).

¹⁶ TKSP, DDKD, KUK, *Rizgarî, Ala Rizgarî, Kawa, Tekoşin, Beş Parçacılar*. Their social bases have considerably shrunk in the 80s in parallel with the rise of PKK.

¹⁷ Also, a colony had to have a separate governance structure than that of the colonizing country, whereas Kurds had citizenship, as well as representation in the national parliament. As such, Kurds need not organize separately; the anti-capitalist revolution of the working-class would solve their national problem as well. See Section 3.2.2 on how these political differences affected the women’s politics at Turkish libertarian-socialist ÖDP.

Chapter 2

¹⁸ The absolute martial law was restructured as the State-of-Emergency Regime (OHAL). It encompassed the Kurdish cities of Amed (Diyarbakır), Çewlik (Bingöl), Elezîz (Elazığ), Colemêrgê (Hakkâri), Mêrdîn (Mardin), Sêrt (Siirt), Dêrsim (Tunceli) and Wan (Van). The appointed Regional Governor (known as the Super-Governor) was the ultimate and single decision-maker endowed with extensive authority on all matters.

¹⁹ These middle-class, educated women in Istanbul held conferences and formed associations, focused mostly on philanthropy work, and published magazines and newspapers dedicated to homemaking, fashion, health, and increasingly more so to the critique of issues such as arranged marriage, divorce law, polygamy, segregation of the sexes, and exclusion of the women from public life. To support participation in work-life, they opened women-only schools and workplaces (Tekeli, 1989a; Zihnioğlu, 2003; Demirdirek, 1993; Çakır, 2010; 2007; Sirman, 1989; Durakbaşa, 1988).

²⁰ She published the magazine *Kadın Yolu* (Women’s Way). “[The] Ottoman Welfare Organization of Women was founded in 1908 and became partially involved in the Young Turks Movement which was a driving force in the founding of the Turkish Republic. ... Accomplished writers and politicians such as Fatma Aliye Topuz (1862–1936), Nezihe Muhiddin (1889–1958) and Halide Edip Adıvar (1884–1964) also joined the movement” (Binder & Richman, 2011). See also (S. Çakır, 2010; Demirdirek, 1993; Zihnioğlu, 2003).

²¹ The official “unity discourse” was reflected in the state policies such as the ban on ethnic-based association and the imposition of Turkish as the official language. Kurdish thinkers, as early as 1913, have complained of these policies. Klein’s study “demonstrates that most ‘nationalists’ among the Kurds continued to envision themselves as members of the multi-national Ottoman state, the temptingly powerful rise of nationalism in their day notwithstanding” (See also Klein, 2001, 2007).

²² Some associations of the women from various ethnicities of the Ottoman society that were eradicated during the Republican period were: *Beyoğlu Rum Cemiyet-i Hayriye-i Nisvaniyesi* (Beyoğlu Greek Beneficial Association of Women), *Türk ve Ermeni Kadınlar Ittihat Cemiyet-i Hayriyesi* (Beneficial Union of Turkish and Armenian Women), *Kürt Kadınları Teali Cemiyeti* (Society for the Elevation of Kurdish Women), and the *Çerkes Kadınları Teavün Cemiyeti* (Association for Mutual Co-operation Amongst Circassian Women) (S. Çakır, 2007, p. 72, 2010, p. 45). For other Armenian and Jewish women’s organisations see also (Dorn Sezgin, 2005; Ekmekcioglu, 2016; Rowe, 2009).

The first Kurdish women's association known in history, *Kürt Kadınları Teâli Cemiyeti* (Society for the Rise of Kurdish Women), which also advocated for Kurdish national rights, lists in its 1919 charter the goals of creating/finding jobs for Kurdish orphans and widows who suffered from the Armenian deportation (*tehcir*) and other subsequent forced migrations, providing financial support to save them from extreme poverty, besides the goals of improving the conditions of Kurdish women from a modern perspective and achieving institutional and social reforms in the Kurdish family life (Karakışla, 2003). See also (Yıldız, 2018).

²³ Some well-known Armenian feminists of the time were: Elbis Gesaratsyan (1830–1911), Sırpuhi Düsap (1841–1901) Zabel Asadur (1863–1934), Zabel Yesayan (1878–1943) and Hayganuş Mark (1885–1966) (Ekmekçioğlu & Bilal, 2006).

²⁴ In recent Turkish feminist historiography, a supportive tone can be observed regarding the late Ottoman centralization politics and forced deployment of a singular (as opposed to plural) legal system. It is read as a sign of modernization and civilization (Çakır, 2010, pp. 136, 302). At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, however, some non-Turkish feminists took democratic decentralization as a sign of civilization and sought government models that could accommodate multiplicity of languages, legal and education systems.

²⁵ The magazine was published between 1913–1921 by the *Osmanlı Müdâfaa-i Hukuk-ı Nisvan Cemiyeti* (Association for the Defence of the Rights of Ottoman Women). It was open to all Ottoman women: Greek, Armenian, Kurdish, Albanian, Circassian. The magazine has defended all these women who contributed with different content (see also Akkent, 2013; Özgökçe, 2011).

²⁶ Özgökçe moreover mentions that Muhiddin looked down on Nuriye Ulviye Mevran, who published the Women's World, arguing that the magazine was actually founded by her husband. Cherkes Ulviye Mevran was married to Mevlanzade Fırat, a prominent Kurdish intellectual, democrat and journalist of the time, who besides supporting Mevran, himself ran the magazine Men's World to remind men about their responsibilities and role in women's liberation. He was in opposition to the oligarchic authoritarian structure of the Committee of Union and Progress that Muhiddin supported and fiercely critical of its politics that silenced diversity and imposed a centralized government model. He was tortured and exiled in 1921 along with 150 opposition members. Özgökçe (2011) compares this man figure with the men allies of the Turkish Women's Union that Muhiddin also belonged. The Union nominated the Turkish military commanders Şükrü Naili Paşa and Mahmut Esat Bozkurt for the parliament, the latter well-known for his statement: "Turk is the sole master, sole owner of this country. Those who do not descend from the pure Turk lineage only bear one right in this homeland; the right to be a servant, the right to be a slave." Esat Bozkurt was part of the government commission to prepare the *Şark Islahat Planı* which laid out the strategies for colonial administration of Kurds. See also (Alakom, 2001; Mithat, 2010).

²⁷ Social reforms such as adopting the Swiss Civil Code in 1926 helped M. Kemal to work out his anti-religious stance by bringing an end to the organization of social and family life according to the Hanafi Islamic jurisprudence, which the official narrative viewed as the enemy, the sign of backwardness. Not only that, it also proved a handy democratic credential in countering the international community that accused Turkey of dictatorship comparable to those of the fascist Germany and Italy because of the Armenian Genocide and the Kurdish massacres (Kandiyoti, 1991; Orun, 2016; Tekeli, 1981).

²⁸ Outside the Kemalist vein, some women's associations affiliated with the Turkish socialist Left reached to masses via extensive organizing in the grassroots in the late-70s. An influential one was the *İlerici Kadınlar Derneği* (Progressive Women's Association, 1975–80) which mobilized thousands of working-class women around the issues of equal pay for equal work, equality in educational opportunities, right to childcare and maternal leave, promotion of birth control methods, etc. Although they perceived feminism as a "deviant, bourgeois" ideology, most of their demands and goals overlapped with those of the Western feminisms, except for the issues like abortion and domestic violence (Talay Keşoğlu, 2011). Other well-known associations were *Devrimci Kadın Dernekleri Federasyonu* (Revolutionary Women's Federation) and *Demokratik Kadın Derneği* (Democratic Women's Association) (Akal, 2011; See Akkaya, 2011).

²⁹ "After the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the feminist movement gradually became integrated into state polity, which inherently inhibited its practice outside the state. The so called 'state feminism' established itself as a part of the Kemalist modernization efforts to copy the model of Western societies" (Binder & Richman, 2011).

³⁰ Kurdish scholar Türkyılmaz (2016, p. 162) studies the life of one such republican woman Sıdika Avar, "principal at the Elazığ Girls' Institute, a boarding school established to civilize 'rebellious,' non-Turkish, and non-Sunni daughters of Dersim as a part of genocidal military operations in 1937–38. Inspired by the American Protestant model, Avar presented herself as a Turkish missionary, devoting her life to being a proper mother to the "savage girls" of Dersim."

³¹ Also translated as “Kurdish intifada.” Literally means “raising the head” in Kurdish.

³² Means “one who loves her homeland.” Sympathizers of the PKK-led freedom movement identify as *yurtsever*. Borrowed from the Turkish socialist tradition of the pre-80s, it has revolutionary, anti-colonial connotations. It differs from nationalist patriotism (*ulusalcılık* or *milliyetçilik*) as it promotes love and protection of the land without inferiorizing other ethnonationalities.

³³ Kesire Yıldırım has been in *devrim nikahı* (revolution marriage) with Öcalan from 1976 to 1986, until she fled to Europe as a result of her alleged participation in a failed intra-party coup attempt against Öcalan. Öcalan analyses his relationship with her in his writings as a case study which is widely discussed among the militants. Despite the tendency observed in the critical writings on PKK (see Bruinessen, 2001) to portray her as a strong woman silenced by a strong male leader, I can say that this relationship requires a more complex, intersectional analysis that also takes their class and political positions into account which are unknown to the author of this study.

³⁴ Through a women’s specific education system, Öcalan developed a gender-sensitive, deconstructive personality analysis method. The volume titled *Woman and the Family Question in Kurdistan* brings together Öcalan’s gender-centred deconstructive analyses between 1987 and 1993 addressed to the PKK militants in woman-only and mixed-gender education cycles at the Mahsum Korkmaz Academy (PKK’s main training facility). His analyses recorded between 1993 and 1998 were compiled in a volume titled *Marching unto Equality and Freedom: Towards Women’s Army Formation*. Another compilation of similar kind is titled *Social Revolution and New Life*, recorded between 1992 and 1998.

³⁵ A single name (pseudonym) without date indicates that an interviewee is being quoted.

³⁶ “The responsibility for slavery lies also with the slave himself and it is only his resistance that will allow him to become a free man. Violence is the main key to reach this goal. So it is not only about changing the system but about creating a man who frees himself from his chains. We haven’t got this in the writings of Deniz Gezmiş. But with Mahir Çayan, and later with Abdullah Öcalan, this idea of the New Man is clearly formulated” (Bozarşlan, 2012, para. 28). The deconstruction practice in the PKK opened up the possibility of engaging with the “instability of cultural signification that the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities – modern, colonial, postcolonial, native” (Bhabba, 2004, p. 152).

³⁷ A manifestation of this revolutionary, agency/praxis-centred approach is that most PKK terminology appears in the modality of “becoming” (suffix *-leşme, -laşma*) versus “being” (*olma*), as in, *ordulaşma, iradeleşme, iktidarlaşma, erkekleşme, karılaşma, komutanlaşma, toplumsallaşma, baharlaşma*.

³⁸ The use of “traditional” here does not rely on a dichotomous conception of the traditional and the modern. Öcalan formulates the “traditional family” – or sometimes “classic family” – as the male dominated, patriarchal form of family, whether feudal or modern (i.e., Kemalist).

³⁹ “It became evident that to advance the war the individual must be liberated. And to liberate the individual, one must analyze and transform the traditional men-women and family relations, and deepen the freedom consciousness. Women are increasingly rushing to join the ranks, seeking freedom. There is a family institution that they are escaping from. But what is that going to be replaced with? Relationships keep shattering everyday. What will be developed instead? The war must be considered in this respect as well. We can knock out the enemy and crash the remnants of feudality. But what will we establish instead? Our response to this question is ‘an independent country, free peoples and society, liberated individuals, and liberated men and women’” (Öcalan, 1998, p. 5).

⁴⁰ *Yekitiya Jinên Welatparezên Kurdistan*

⁴¹ Books, cassette tapes, or the monthly newspaper *Serxwebun*, etc. (*Serxwebun* means independence in Kurdish, published since 1978 in Germany, serves also as a publishing house for the PKK).

⁴² Another distinction she mentioned was that while Turkish socialist women were generally released much sooner than their male comrades, Kurdish women were accused of similar level of crimes with men and served sentences of similar length.

⁴³ Founding member of the PKK. She is a legendary revolutionary figure and a great inspiration for Kurdish women freedom fighters. She was assassinated along with two other Kurdish woman political activists in Paris, January 9th, 2013. The murderer had links to the Turkish intelligence services. See her memoir (Cansız, 2018).

⁴⁴ See (Özsoy, 2010) for a detailed study of “situating death as a central symbolic and semantic field constitutive to [Kurdish] national identity.”

⁴⁵ A pioneering organisation in Turkey to defend the sexually assaulted women by state forces is the *Legal Aid Bureau Against Sexual Harassment and Rape in Custody* founded in 1997. The co-founder, Eren Keskin, a prominent human rights defender and lawyer, notes that until 2002 they received voluminous rape files by Kurdish women; at the time, sexual harassment and rape against women were used as a war weapon in Kurdistan (Keskin, 2015). Only from the late 90s onwards, testimonies, reports, and research could reveal the details of sexualized torture in Turkey. For a comprehensive account of sexual harassment and rape in custody, see (Altunç, 2014; Erdoğan Çelik, 2016; Halavut, 2013; Keskin & Yurtsever, 2006).

I heard countless stories of sexual state violence during my fieldwork: “I was in Silopi the other day. I listened to how a 75–80-year-old man was raped by a baton. He told me how they kept him hanged the whole day, laid him down in the snow naked, gave electrical shock to all his body and penis... and he was so old... We know so many of us who felt martyr during torture. In the 90s, there was no woman left not raped or harassed in Kurdistan. From women who gave birth to their torturers’ children, to those raped in front of their husbands and never again talked about it even with their husbands; to women so scared of people learning about it that they betrayed their friends during torture and then committed suicide... All these made us more determined in our struggle” (Bircan).

⁴⁶ The popular TV show *Anadolu’dan Görünüm* (Panorama from Anatolia) systematically spread anti-PKK propaganda between 1987 and 2001 on the state-run TV channel TRT. “In one episode, they say PKK kills lovers, that PKK is against love. But then in another episode they say they found contraceptives in the PKK hideouts. Well, if making love is not allowed in the PKK, then how come you find those contraceptives? The show was full of these contradictions. Of course, Kurdish people knew how manufactured lies these were. But how much did the Turkish people know?” (Hêja)

⁴⁷ The first *serhildan* in PKK history, the 1989 *Kamuran Serhildan* of Savur, broke out following the mass funeral that local people held for the PKK commander Kamuran Dündar and his friends. The funeral mass was gunfired by the Turkish Special Forces causing death of many.

⁴⁸ Bêrîvan (Binefş Agal) is one of the many symbolic figures known by heart by the Kurdish activists. A village raised Êzîdî woman without formal education, during her work in the countryside has gained sympathy, love, and trust of people due to her humbleness and organizing skills. In the eyes of the local folks, she has become an exemplary militant, embodiment of the dignified Kurdish personality who passionately sought freedom, and combined the communal, non-capitalist features of the traditional society with the revolutionary features of the PKK (Fırat, n.d.).

⁴⁹ On the issues like whether it is sexism, capitalism, or sexist capitalism that oppresses the women (Peker, 2005).

⁵⁰ “The friends who say Laborer Women’s Day mean that ‘women’s liberation is dependent on the liberation of the working-class’ and that women’s liberation is not possible through their independent struggle. Those who say World Women’s Day, including myself, say that women of all classes, nations, and races are oppressed, and what is primary is the women’s oppression” (Karakuş & Akkaya, 2011, p. 61).

⁵¹ Socialist-feminist *Kaktüs* was the only feminist group who stayed. They thought it would be politically wrong to leave the socialist women who also favored an independent women’s movement (Acar Savran, 2005, p. 122).

⁵² On this note, not everyone after the coup has split from her leftist group or joined in the feminist movement. Some got introduced to the rising wave of feminism while in human rights or socialist activism. These women were rather interested in bringing in the former leftist experience into the women’s liberation movement (Sayılan, 1995). Irrespective of whether feminism affected their politics, or they identified as feminist or not, theirs was another crucial channel for the women’s liberation movement.

⁵³ Some were leveling criticisms against the sexism in TÜMAS (Association of all University, Academy and Graduate School Assistants). Homegroups of the early 1980s in Ankara, on the other hand, were usually attended by academics and graduate students without a leftist past (Timisi & Ağduk Gevrek, 2002).

⁵⁴ It must also be noted that many women have lost their relatives, sons, or husbands in prison torture, or experienced heavy torture themselves.

⁵⁵ Sirman notes that “An anti-Islamic stance and the importance given to progress and to education constitute the main points of similarity between ideas informing [anti-state Marxist leftist ideology] and official state ideology”

(Sirman, 1989, p. 16). I add the Turkish-supremacy as another main similarity that marks the Kurds as uneducated, backward, separatist in Turkey (see Chapter 7).

⁵⁶ This can also be said for the women from some post-2005, Turkish socialist parties inspired by the KWM model.

⁵⁷ In Ankara, three paths emerged after the mid-80s: those who preferred a loose organising model formed the *Perşembe Group* (1987–1994), those who wanted to experiment a feminist association founded the *Women's Solidarity Association* (lasted one year), and those who wanted to focus on the women's experience in the Left formed the *Independent and Democratic Women's Discussion Group*. In Istanbul, women coming from different socialist movements with varying perspectives on the women's question founded the *Democratic Women's Association* (DKD, 1987–1992). Its feminist members left the association in 1989 pursuant to some disagreements on organising (Karakuş, 2017). See also (Akkaya, 2008).

⁵⁸ “Septemberist,” meaning supporter of the September 12, 1980 coup d'état. Feminists were seen as opportunist for voicing opinion when other more “seriously political” voices were silenced (Sirman, 1989).

⁵⁹ Many sources outline the earlier TFM history, see (Yesim Arat, 1994, 1994, 2000; Aytaç & Koç, 2011; D. Çakır, 2005; Düzkan & Ahıska, 1994; Osmanağaoğlu, 2015a; Özman, 2008; Sirman, 1989; Tekeli, 1989a, 1994; Timisi & Ağduk Gevrek, 2002). This section focuses mostly on the better documented Istanbul experience. For a detailed discussion on the earlier Ankara feminist circles, see (Timisi & Ağduk Gevrek, 2002).

⁶⁰ The 1986 *Kadınlar Dilekçesi* (Women's Petition) campaign launched by *Kadın Çevresi* collected around 3000 signatures to be delivered to the parliament, calling the Turkish state to draw up an action plan to enact the CEDAW undersigned by Turkey in 1985. As the first post-coup mass action, this marked a peak in the confidence level of feminists (Ülker, 2016). In 1987, Istanbul feminists set up the *Ayrımcılığa Karşı Kadın Derneği* (Women's Association against Discrimination) to follow up on the implementation of the Convention.

⁶¹ Many foundational texts of the feminist second-wave were translated to Turkish during the 80s, including J. Mitchell, L. Segal and A. Oakley, as well as the Egyptian writer Naval El Saadawi.

⁶² It was a reaction to a court decision that dismissed a woman's case against her husband's battering. The judge evoked a misogynist proverb that said, *kadının sırtını sopasız, karnını sıpasız bırakma* (never leave a woman's back without a cosh and her belly without a colt). Feminists also produced a campaign booklet which “isolate[d] the family as the major site of violence against women” (Sirman, 1989, p. 19). One radical protest in 1990 against the nuclear family and the male dominated character of the Civil Code was the divorce campaign launched by a group of feminists.

⁶³ A word play evoking the last name of the army general (Kenan Evren) who led the 1980 coup.

⁶⁴ Timisi and Gevrek note that *Perşembe* group's aim was not to say something to other women; it was “political because [they] thought it concerned all women” (Timisi & Ağduk Gevrek, 2002), see also (Sirman & Demirdirek, 2005). The group published a bulletin named *Yeter* (Enough). In Mother's Day campaigns, they asked, “Do you love your mothers and beat your wives?”, “My mom, me, and my daughter, what has changed?”

⁶⁵ While homegroups looked exclusivist, introverted, and apolitical from outside, inside, dealing with the emerging hierarchies among women was the real challenge.

⁶⁶ The manifesto was published in the March 8, 1989 special issues of the feminist magazines *Kaktüs* and *Feminist*.

⁶⁷ Actions under the Purple Needle campaign included invading the men-only coffeeshops and pubs, selling purple needles in the public transport to raise awareness on self-defence against sexual harassment, protests against the state-sponsored virginity controls applied at work, school, or in detention, and a campaign against Article 438 of the Turkish Penal Code which handed reduced sentence to the rapist if the victim was a sex worker (Dicleli, 2014; İnce, 2014). The first major legal achievement of TFM was the abolition of the Article 438 in 1990 as a result of these actions.

⁶⁸ Following materialist feminist Christine Delphy, radical feminists regard capitalism and patriarchy as two distinct systems of economic exploitation, and the family as an economic unit of production (rather than reproduction) with relations of production and exploitation that are different from capitalism. In this sense, the conflict between men and women is a materialist exploitation relation as that between the classes; women's class is determined within the patriarchal system. Koç thinks that foregrounding the relation between women's oppression and capitalism while pushing

the priority issue of understanding/transforming the gender relations aside is “just a socialist-feminist obsession” (Düzkan & Koç, 2012, p. 26)

⁶⁹ On December 28, 2011, Turkish Air Forces bombed a group of Kurdish civilian villagers who were crossing the Iraq-Turkey border from the Uludere district of Şırnak (Roboskî Massacre). 34 people, mostly minors, were killed in the strike.

⁷⁰ Special penal institutions built on a system of cells constructed for one or three people. Convicted prisoners are not permitted any contact or communication with other prisoners.

Chapter 3

⁷¹ Kurds were referred to as *doğulu vatandaşlar* (the eastern citizens).

⁷² Namely, the socio-economic backwardness problem of the “Southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey.”

⁷³ Rare Turkish socialist/leftist attempts at solidarity would directly be penalized by the state. Turkish sociologist İsmail Beşikçi serving 17 years of total jail time for being the first Turkish person to recognize and study Kurdistan as an “international colony” was well-known to progressive circles. My respondents reported that, back then, only some Human Rights delegations (IHD), perhaps some European groups, and Kurdish deputies would visit the burnt down Kurdish villages or investigate the state killings.

⁷⁴ To counter the OHAL regime’s everyday intelligence, military and paramilitary harassments, PKK staged raids and armed actions against the military institutions, targeting the soldiers, police, and special squads, and sometimes the village guards, or the local informants aiding the state operations. PKK also burned down the state schools seen as centres of forced assimilation. Accompanying these guerilla attacks were the civilian protests such as *serhildans* (popular uprisings), shop shut-downs, school boycotts, etc. as part of everyday life in Kurdistan. These actions mostly took place in Newroz times, guerilla funerals, PKK anniversaries, or when state violence targeted the civilians (Çelik, 2014, p. 127).

⁷⁵ Between 1993–95, the number of Turkish troops and paramilitaries in the region were almost doubled from 185.000 to 360.000, 70.000 of which were the village guards. The military bases were extended and equipped with new armored vehicles and helicopters for high-speed mobility. Commando brigades and special forces – the Special Action Teams mobilized under the authority of police and gendarmery – became the key elements of this new field domination doctrine.

⁷⁶ The Temporary and Voluntary Village Guards System became operational in 1987 to arm the Kurdish civilians as paramilitary to be disposed against PKK (Çelik 2014). About 5,000 men joined this paramilitary force in its first year, a number which had increased to 67,000 by 1995 (Jongerden 2010). According to the Ministry of Interior, in 2006, the total number of voluntary village guards was around 70.000 (Çelik, 2014, p. 105; Özar et al., 2013, p. 10). Village guards were part of a colonial control system to promote fratricide, separating the “loyal” tribes or families from the “enemy” ones (Balta Paker, 2010; Çelik, 2014). The goal was to multiply and deepen the intra-communal conflicts like the blood feuds, as for some locals being on the opposing side of the local adversary would determine their side in the war. These paramilitary guards who impeded returns to the forcibly evacuated villages – forcing people to migrate – committed land seizures, murders, arsons, harassment, and rapes, and tattered the existing communal structures and value systems on both inter/intra village and extended family/tribe levels. Not only social, but also environmental and economic structures were destroyed. Gangs formed in collaboration with the military officials would profit from the war by wiping out the forestland, smuggling arms, trafficking marijuana, getting agricultural subsidies, local government contracts, etc.

⁷⁷ A self-declared radical Islamist movement founded soon after the 1980 coup in opposition to the class-based Marxist-Leninist ideology of the PKK. The petit bourgeois and middle-class groups that were uncomfortable with the PKK mobilized armed militants for the *Hizbullah*, mostly out of apolitical young villagers who have migrated to town centers for socio-economic reasons. The Turkish state has ignored its violence and corroborated on lower rank state security level (Çelik, 2014).

⁷⁸ The Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism Centre (JİTEM) was a covert deep-state organisation found in 1983. It carried out murders of civilians mostly based on the information gathered by ex-PKK militant informants.

⁷⁹ “If only three people were killed that day from our neighborhood, we would say ‘Thank God! Not so many today’” (Emine). “As lawyers, waking up every morning we had one concern in mind, ‘Whose death news will we receive today? Which morgue will we go to? Which place will be burnt down?’” (Fulya).

⁸⁰ In the early 90s, PKK had spatial control over much of the countryside where the state was the weakest. Villages and hamlets that were “effectively outside the formal administration system and simply self-governing” (State Planning Organization, in Jongerden 2010) provided the guerillas shelter, logistical support, recruits, and intelligence. Village evacuations often went hand in hand with forcing the villagers to become village guards. On their refusal, the military would evacuate the village and move in the village guards of a nearby area to plunder the place.

“According to official figures 833 villages and 2,382 small rural settlements, totaling 3,215 settlements, which amounted to around a quarter of all rural settlements, were evacuated and destroyed in 14 provinces” of Kurdistan, most of them between 1991–1995 (Jongerden, 2010, 79). Government sources report the number of displaced as 383,793; Human Rights Organizations and local NGOs estimate 3 to 4 million; other research calculate between 1 to 3 million people. Between 1986–2005, the ethnocidal logic of the Turkish state yield 35 thousand people killed, 3,438 Kurdish rural settlements evacuated and 1–1.2 million Kurdish people forcibly displaced (Turkey Migration and Internally Displaced Population Survey, 2006).

⁸¹ The latter group mostly became PKK sympathizers and, on a smaller scale, showed allegiance to the nationalist right-wing KDP or the left-wing PUK of Iraqi Kurdistan.

⁸² Jongerden stresses that “Too much of one could result in fragmentation and a falling apart, a serious risk the PKK faced in the mid-2000s, while too much of the other could lead to the formation of a centralised bureaucracy, which was already one of the prime objects of Öcalan’s state critique” (Jongerden, 2019, p. 89).

⁸³ The political report of the 5th PKK Congress (Öcalan, 1995, p. 57–84) made a detailed critique of the Soviet regime where the Party became the state and the ideology dissolved away in politics. This created a situation worse than capitalism: “The reasons behind dissolution of real socialism were its narrow nationalist and narrow class approaches, as well as its strict sectarianism and narrowness in alliance-building. ‘Everything is for the Soviets and the Soviets are for Russia’ kind of narrow nationalism obstructed the development of internationalism. Narrow proletarian interests gradually turned into interests of a narrow bureaucracy. People’s democracy did not develop, and instead of the Party dissolving amongst the people, it became a bureaucratic device that was a pain in the neck of the people. If you look carefully, we embrace the broadest democracy for the people approach, and at the same time the broadest humane approach towards outside, against the nationalism disease. This is the essence of socialism after all” (ibid., p. 127). See also endnote 98 for Öcalan’s critique of real socialism.

⁸⁴ DÖKH activist Hediye told me that once the “democratic autonomy” principle is sidelined, peoples’ freedom will be lost; “Right next to us real socialism had collapsed. I was a child back then, but youth of the time observed it closely. We all saw that national liberation did not bring freedom to women.”

⁸⁵ PKK records that, during the 90s, Kurdish KDP allied with the Turkish state in many anti-PKK cross-border operations and hosted Turkish military bases in exchange for the recognition of a regional status.

⁸⁶ Öcalan is described as the “Leadership” (*Önderlik*) in the movement culture. These intra-party contestations are examined in great detail in the movement literature and well-known to many activists.

⁸⁷ A single name (pseudonym) without date indicates that an interviewee is being quoted.

⁸⁸ Hediye’s definition differs from the “double jeopardy” or “triple oppression” conjoined by Black feminists in that racial and gender oppression interlocks here with the colonial denial of Kurdish sovereign existence; it centres the territorial, physical, and cultural annihilation aspect of colonialist patriarchy.

⁸⁹ A Kurdish activist says, “For the PKK, accountability comes first with regards to the use of violence, otherwise they would become corrupted like the Turkish army” (Melek).

⁹⁰ Code name of Gülnaz Karataş. “When Berîtan’s unit was about to be surrounded by KDP [Kurdistan Democratic Party] forces, she kept them at a distance so her unit could escape. When she ran out of ammunition, she threw herself from a mountain rock, preferring death to captivity” (Jongerden, 2019, p. 76).

⁹¹ Code name of Osman Öcalan, the younger brother of Abdullah Öcalan.

⁹² Stands for Democratic Free Women’s Movement, umbrella organization of the civilian KWM, see Section 3.1.2.4 for more.

⁹³ KJB stands for Women's Higher Union (*Koma Jinên Blind*), see endnote 121 for further explanation.

⁹⁴ YJWK was reorganized under the name of TAJK (Free Women's Movement of Kurdistan).

⁹⁵ "Through a symbolic economy of 'gift' the Kurds resurrect their dead as martyrs – affective forces that powerfully shape public, political and daily life and promote Kurdish national identity as a sacred communion of the dead and the living" (Özsoy, 2010, viii).

⁹⁶ "Until the leadership decision arrived, most would already be liquidated. A decision's arrival would take months back then, there were no phones. In Dersim, for example, despite being disarmed, women resisted and did not leave. But in many places, they did not have gender consciousness yet, and they would listen to such command" (Leyla).

⁹⁷ "Men commanders sent women to sandy areas to dig trenches knowing that it was an impossible task. For three months women tried to dig those trenches, they could not, and they got humiliated for three months. Sometimes men would send the women first to certain engagement areas knowing that they would get killed, so that they would give up. So Öcalan's support was not only about empowering women, but saving their lives, too" (Melek).

⁹⁸ "According to Akkaya (2016), this critique of real existing socialism can also be traced back to Öcalan's speeches devoted to socialism (most delivered on the occasion of May 1 [Labor Day in Turkey]) in the 1980s, in which Öcalan argued that the development of a 'bureaucratic state' under 'real existing socialism' had resulted in alienation and subjugation (Öcalan, 1999a: 13–14). Furthermore, Akkaya argues, notably referring to the PKK's 1993 congress (Öcalan, 1993), that Öcalan's critique of the Soviet Union did not come with a turn to dogmatism or liberalism, but with a search for a new form of socialism (Akkaya, 2016, p. 311). The rethinking of socialism through a state critique became a recurrent theme. At the 5th congress too, Öcalan voiced his critique of the contradictory relation between state and socialism (Öcalan, 1995). By the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, Öcalan was already proposing a "new socialism" based on a societal transformation coming from below" (Jongerden, 2019, p. 79).

⁹⁹ *Yekitiya Azadiya Jinên Kurdistan*. YAJK participated in the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

¹⁰⁰ YAJK was premised on five basic principles: *Yurtseverlik* (Love of the homeland and loyalty to one's roots – "Yurtsever core is stronger in women, she sustains the culture, has a high influence on men and the shaping of society. Women are more loyal to the communal values of the peoples because they are the creators of communal values. Communal culture, consciousness, memory, and emotions are much stronger in women" (Nuceciwan)); *Mücadelecilik* (Being combatant – ensuring that the intra-party class and gender struggle is fought in an intertwined way); *Örgütlülük* (Being organized – being loyal to the organisational principles of the Party the most; "A primary reason behind women's oppression is the dispersal of women's organised power" (Nuceciwan)); *Özgür İrade ve Özgür Düşünce* (Defending free will and free thought in the Party); and *Estetik ve Güzellik* (Defending the "aesthetics and grace/beauty" party principles in all stages of life and struggle) (Jineolojî Akademisi, 2015, p. 198).

¹⁰¹ "After the Turkish Military Intelligence attempted an assassination of Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan in Syria, a young Kurdish woman, Zeynep Kınacı or 'Zîlan' took the decision to avenge this attempt and to also protest against the Turkish regime's brutal and 'dirty war' against the Kurdish people in Turkey that was being hidden from the outside world. On 30 June 1996, she walked onto a Turkish military parade in Dersim amongst the occupying forces of her country, Kurdistan, and detonated herself, killing and seriously wounding dozens of Turkish soldiers. ... As [Zîlan's] letter below illustrates, against attempts to pathologize sacrificial actions, militants such as Zîlan are well-aware of the implications of their decisions, which they resort to in moments of total besiegement by colonialism" (KOMUN, 2019).

¹⁰² In the light of Women's Liberation Ideology, the 1998, 2nd Middle East Women's Conference defined seven main women character-types with respect to how women dealt with patriarchy: 1) Distant to the women's liberation ideology 2) Apolitical-emotional 3) Caricature-like, alienated from her own gender 4) Collaborationist 5) Individual liberationist 6) Crude denialist 7) Zîlan-like free women.

¹⁰³ This later gave birth to another concept *Sonsuz Boşanma* (Total Divorce) in the 2000s (see Section 5.3).

¹⁰⁴ For a discussion on how Separation Theory differs from TFM's understanding of independence, see Chapter 4.

¹⁰⁵ *İradeleşmek* (forming/becoming willpower) is a key concept in PKK terminology. Against the colonial domination, it foregrounds self-determination and agency.

¹⁰⁶ "Organise yourselves strongly against us [men], including myself, because I see the men of our reality as dangerous. The men have not changed or transformed yet; they are not in a position to treat [you] equal, free, with love and respect. I say I am just a quarter of a man. I keep saying this. I could achieve my personal development only this much. I consider myself only a quarter of a man – although I am quite old now – for a woman who must live an equal and free life. I am still like this. You call me the Leader, but this is what my reality is like. I cannot embellish women's dreams, hopes, and worlds. Despite all the fight and effort that I stage for women, there is a limit to what I can do. That is why I say master your emotions, get organised if possible, and multiply your power to be able to change the men. Otherwise, the tyrants or the desperate cannot give you anything" (Öcalan, 1998).

¹⁰⁷ Öcalan argues that the insightful principles of Marx, Lenin, and Engels in relation to women's role in the revolution did not give rise to a program regarding women's equality and freedom that could flourish into a specific, organised struggle. The existing women's movements or emerging women leaders "were not part of a strategic approach that aimed at the root causes of the problem but were treated as backups (*yedek*) of a general strategy" (Öcalan, 1993, p. 28).

¹⁰⁸ KKI considers women as the oldest colonized people, and gender subjugation as the oldest form of enslavement that was systematized long before the modern racism, capitalism, and colonialism have systematized their dominations. I discuss in Section 5.3 that this is not to elevate gender over other axes of domination, but to recognize and politicize its constitutive role in the production of interlocking systems of domination.

¹⁰⁹ Öcalan suggests that, if desired, men like Fikri Baygeldi who fully embrace the women's conditions/rule can also join the women's party. Fikri Baygeldi is seen as the concrete expression of a free man, the manifestation of a true friendship with the free woman, a major blow on the traditional manhood. He followed the footsteps of his woman *heval* Sema Yüce and demonstrated his loyalty to her commandship. In the movement literature, Yüce along with Zilan constitute the vanguard spirit of "women's becoming a party." Yüce described her self-immolation action as "I turn my body into a bridge from March 8 to March 21." Connecting women's resistance day to the Kurdish people's resistance day Newroz, Jehat (2013) argues, she realized the KKI goal of conceiving women's struggle at the level of people's struggle.

¹¹⁰ Upon Öcalan's call, PKK sent two peace groups from Qandil and Europe to Turkey. Even though group members were arrested by Turkey, Öcalan went ahead for an indefinite ceasefire. The ceasefire ended in June 2004 due to Turkish state's inaction towards peace.

¹¹¹ According to the news reports and local witnesses, hundreds of guerilla fighters lost their lives in the ambushes laid by the Turkish security forces during the withdrawal ("1999 geri çekilme sürecini yaşayan PKK'liler anlatıyor," 2013; Vardar, 2013).

¹¹² Besides women, some younger men who were more open to Öcalan's alternative non-state, woman-liberationist, ecological paradigm, also felt marginalized in the fierce confrontation of the two factions (Jongerden, 2017).

¹¹³ PJKK stands for *Partiya Jinên Karkerên Kurdistan*.

¹¹⁴ PJA stands for *Partiya Jina Azad*.

¹¹⁵ This paradigm was first expounded in his defense letter *Bir Halkı Savunmak* (Defending a People) compiled as a book in 2004. Öcalan authored more than 40 books. Critically engaging with many Western scholars, including Bookchin, Proudhon, Wallerstein, Braudel, Foucault, Derrida, Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School, Öcalan committed himself to an indigenous decolonial rethinking of the history of his people and socialism, and the fashioning of a non-patriarchal, non-state political project.

¹¹⁶ PKK's approach to the family and marriage institutions does not suggest one strategy for all. If one prefers to be a cadre, marriage or sexual relationship is banned. For non-cadre activists or the society in general, on the other hand, the ideas of "democratic family" and "free co-life of genders" (*özgür eşyaşam*) are discussed. KWM's critique of the family differs from most Western-centric feminist criticisms that reduce the family to a seat of male oppression (see Turkish feminist Kerime in Section 7.2.4). In KWM's intersectional analysis, family has the potential for empowerment and resistance, similar to that in Black or Indigenous feminisms (for further discussion, see Section 5.1).

¹¹⁷ The man co-chair of Kurdistan People's Congress, who represented the liberal nationalist faction, refused to read Bookchin's email message at the general assembly in May 2004, mocking Bookchin as a marginal anarchist compared to the much more powerful friends they had in the US (Jongerden, 2017). The woman co-chair contested: "Look, sorry, but you know Bookchin is quite important for our leader, and if we get a message from him we should read it and I'm going to do it.' She took my letter and she made a translation. She then read it out herself at the conference, and they

could not stop her. So, that was quite a great moment, because people were standing up, there was this standing ovation, and people were really excited about this. So you could see a lot of delegates in the room who actually thought this was very, very important, historic” (Oliver Kontny, in Jongerden, 2017, p. 249).

¹¹⁸ “The democratic confederalism of Kurdistan is not a state system, it is the non-state democratic system of the people. ... The democratic confederalism is the movement of the Kurdish people to found their own democracy and organize their own social system. ... It develops the (notion of) a democratic nation instead of the nationalist-statist nation based on strict borders” (KCK Agreement, 2005).

¹¹⁹ In August 2004, Osman Öcalan (Abdullah Öcalan’s brother) launched a new political party that “rejected the new paradigm, holding to the establishment of an independent state as the ultimate aim of the struggle. It considered the American intervention in Iraq an opportunity to create an independent Kurdistan and sought a close collaboration with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Barzani” (Jongerden, 2017, p. 251). PKK lost hundreds of long-time militants (about 1,500) in this confrontation between the statist, patriarchal, and the non-state, woman-liberationist paradigms. But the eventual split also enabled the PKK gain an internal ideological consistency (ibid.).

¹²⁰ PAJK stands for *Partiya Azadiya Jin a Kurdistan*.

¹²¹ The KJB (*Koma Jinên Blind*) is the autonomous umbrella organization of women within the KCK (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan* – Kurdistan Communities Union). KCK is the democratic confederal system of Kurdistan: a complex societal organization, a network of village, city, and regional assemblies. “KJB gives priority to the struggle for social transformation and ascribes strategic value to the establishment of the democratic self-governance system of women and the peoples. Its basic programmatic principles are to support the liberation of society, expand the scope of democratic life and politics, and compel the state to respect the self-governance of peoples” (KJB, n.d.). In 2014, KJB restructured itself as the KJK (*Komalên Jinên Kurdistan* – Kurdistan Women’s Communities), from an umbrella organization to a confederal system/structure: “The umbrella organisation used to organise itself via constituent entities. The friends at the KJB used to represent their autonomous areas. The executive task was to coordinate division of the labor and roles. In the new system, however, the executive is elected by the congress. This is an important point” (Mîrza, 2014).

¹²² 1) PAJK, for ideological/philosophical/political production and direction; 2) YJA, for building the women liberationist confederal system via grassroots organizing; 3) YJA-STAR, for armed self-defence; and 4) Young Women, for passing on the PAJK ideology and mobilizing the youth. The KJB agreement regulated the relations among these autonomous constituent entities that were represented in the KJB executive assembly.

¹²³ Çelik (2014) emphasizes that it is impossible to generalize the experience of the localities during the war era of the 1990s due to the significant differences regarding their geographical features, hundred-years of history and societal organisation, and quality and quantity of the guerilla influence or state oppression that they had received.

¹²⁴ The Amed provincial chair of HEP and the IHD, murdered by JITEM in 1991.

¹²⁵ Respectively, a final year student of medicine in Amed (1990), and a forcibly displaced migrant in İzmir (1992).

¹²⁶ “We turned the prison cells into academies. When pen and paper were not permitted, we created them in mind, developed dialogue-based education and discussion strategies, and inscribed everything in our memory” (Bircan).

¹²⁷ HEP founders were the Kurdish MPs expelled from the Turkish social democratic party SHP upon their participation in the 1989 Paris Conference titled *Kurdish National Identity and Human Rights*. The dismissal from SHP meant that Kurds “cannot integrate into the Turkish political class and that they have no other choice” but to become autonomous (Bozarlan, 2012, para. 53).

¹²⁸ In the 1995 elections, HADEP won over a million votes across the country despite facing numerous threats and suppression, incarceration of its MPs included. HADEP was succeeded by DEHAP (2003), DTH/DTP (2004/2005), BDP (2008), and DBP (2014) respectively.

¹²⁹ YKD opened branches across the Turkish metropolises. The displaced Kurdish women sought ways of organising an anticolonial gender struggle until the state ban of the association the following year.

¹³⁰ Due to economic or forced migration and urbanization, kinship and tribal bonds have loosened to a degree, but their viability persists.

¹³¹ Relatively older age, mostly traditionally dressed, Kurdish speaking, and with limited to no formal education.

¹³² In İzmir, İstanbul, Mersin, Adana, Wan, Amed, Elezîz, Meletî, etc.

¹³³ Raising domestic violence issues was still hard due to the fear that it would overshadow the focus on state crimes. “Only when arms were laid down that the *feminist issues* were brought up for the first-time,” one Turkish HADEP member recalled (italics mine).

¹³⁴ “When we asked for a room, men would say ‘all rooms are yours’ to skirt our demand” (Mehtap).

¹³⁵ See Section 4.4 for further discussion on men *hevals*’ approach to feminism.

¹³⁶ March 8 was celebrated as early as 1992 by the KWM. The first rally held in Istanbul “ended by a lynching attempt of the militarist forces and civil fascists” (Newal). In Adana, socialist women were more welcoming of the Kurdish participation in contrast to the hostility of Kemalists. In Amed, IHD woman’s commission organised a meeting at the Dilan Theatre, “mostly the relatives of the martyrs and the imprisoned attended, tortured women were on the stage” (Fulya).

¹³⁷ The spread of the mass-media engendered a time-space convergence between the guerilla pedagogy and the Kurds who experienced internal displacement and diasporic exile. The circulating guerilla testimonies on TV, newspaper, and magazines contributed to emotional, moral, and political bonding, and brought the racialized women’s situated dilemmas to light. The widely watched Kurdish channel MED/ROJ TV broadcasting from Europe since 1995 hosted shows with civilian and militant women and women-run panels/forums analyzing the actual politics from the women’s perspective.

¹³⁸ This monthly magazine *Free Women in Life* (1998–2001, later renamed as *Free Women’s Voice*) was banned by the Turkish state. The monthly magazine *Hevîya Jinê* (2008–2015) was also banned many times and re-emerged with new names. The first women’s magazine of KÖH was *Jina Serbilind* (1993) published in Europe. The first women-only press agency called JINHA (2012–2016) and internet newspaper Şujin were also banned. Kurdish women continue their women-only journalism at JIN TV (since 2018), JinNews (since 2017), and the women’s pages of Kurdish newspapers. And since 2016, they publish the Amed-based, three-monthly, science and theory journal *Jineolojî*.

¹³⁹ Kemalist nationalism’s instrumental use of the motherhood concept as the transmitter of culture and the bearer of respectable nationals was the only frame of reference for Turkish feminists in their initial approach to the politics of Kurdish mothers that they saw as part of “Kurdish nationalism.” The anti-patriarchal, decolonial character of this mutually transformative inter-generational activism was/is quite unintelligible to them. See also endnote 196.

¹⁴⁰ A DÖKH activist agrees, “They said, ‘Do you see, he turned out to be an informant, he could not even posture as much as Mahir and Deniz [Turkish revolutionary student leaders of the 70s] did.’ But they do not see that he is not a student leader. He is one of the most important leaders of the Middle East, representing a people. How can he behave like them? They did not want to understand this partly to escape from their own liabilities” (Hacer).

¹⁴¹ Learning from the closely witnessed defeat of the Turkish Left, in addition to the collapse of the Soviet Union, were references recurrently used by many DÖKH activists that I interviewed. In Öcalan’s texts, the persistent analysis of these defeats can be traced back to the early 80’s. The Kurdish ability to search for an alternative seems to be very much shaped by learning from the defeats of the Turkish and world socialists,’ as well as of their own, not only with regards to statism but also patriarchal domination.

¹⁴² Turkish feminist Tokdoğan argues that the transcendentalizing of Öcalan as a leader has limited remedying effect on masculinity because Kurdish women still accept Öcalan as determining the discourse on them. For her, this is a central tension between the Kurdish women’s movement and the *Western feminist movement* (Tokdoğan, 2013, p. 48, italics mine). It is curious to see here how association with the West helps assume a voice of authority.

¹⁴³ State-violence, urban poverty, social anxiety, mental health problems, state-backed prostitution and drugs-use, violence against women, and women’s murders and suicides were on the rise.

¹⁴⁴ Around that time various movement affiliated, autonomous women’s organizations emerged: Dicle Women Cultural Center (1998), Peace Mothers (1999), DİKASUM (2001), Gökkuşağı (2003), Selis (2002), Amargi (2001), and several women’s cooperatives. Women were also active in mixed-gender organisations like TUHAD-FED (Federation

of Prisoner' Families Legal and Solidarity Associations), Mesopotamia Cultural Center, GÖÇ-DER (Association for Migrant Rights and Social Cohesion), etc.

¹⁴⁵ Bazîd (Doğubeyazıt), Qoser (Kızıltepe), and Derik districts. These mayors were referred to as *kefenini giymiş kadınlar* (women in graveclothes) to emphasize their courage in such volatile political landscape.

¹⁴⁶ Their monthly meetings included women from the women's and youth branches, the political party, the municipalities, culture and media fields, and the autonomous women's organizations.

¹⁴⁷ This included the municipal council, parliamentary, and all level party assembly candidacies.

¹⁴⁸ Means the student of a religious teacher. It implies a dogmatic, uncritical culture from a secular point of view.

¹⁴⁹ In fact, the party was always at risk of failing to capture 10 percent of the votes, in part due to the general complacency in the party following its relatively strong 1999 election results, when the pit was against multiple parties unlike in 2002.

¹⁵⁰ DEHAP's party program placed women's freedom as a primary goal next to the resolution of the Kurdish question. It raised the gender-quota to 35 percent and elevated gender struggle to the level of structural/system analysis, unlike the earlier times when it merely was regarded a social policy matter. For DEHAP, gender inequality "not only affect[ed] women, but as the oldest established inequality, it undergird[ed] all other grave societal, political, ecological questions of the 21th century" (Çağlayan, 2006). The party recognized women as the primary actors in curation of a democratic, egalitarian, and free society. Violence against women at the party or at home, including sexual violence, sexual harassment, and polygamy were ranked as disciplinary crimes. The party program embraced all CEDAW principles and pursued goals like fighting gender discrimination in education and the labor market, discrimination based on sexual orientation, religion (wearing headscarf), and the traditional gender norms and values belittling women, like the bride exchange, child marriage, and dowry. The party aimed at advocating social security for prostituted women, opening women's shelters, unionisation for all women workers, and so on.

¹⁵¹ "3) The struggle against male-dominated system is based on women's specific organization models that are distinct from the male-dominated ones. 4) Against the mentality which masculinizes the nations, classes, and race, DÖKH approaches to women as an oppressed sex, nation, class, and race from the perspective of women's freedom. 5) DÖKH conceives the democratic solution of the Kurdish question as the basis for societal peace and the democratic co-existence of peoples. 6) DÖKH is against the state-centred, hierarchal structures a) Adopts a democratic, ecological, and woman liberationist paradigm. b) Aims to reveal people's democratic will. c) Organises around democratic communal values. d) Aims at autonomous women's organizing within a democratic confederal system. 7) DÖKH adopts democratic struggle against all kinds of attacks, violence, and violation on women; exercises the right to legitimate self-defence. a) DÖKH fights for all women's rights regardless of their region, class, nation, belief, sexual orientation, and ethnic origin. b) DÖKH's struggle for equality permeates every sphere of society – social, political, legal, economic, cultural – as opposed to the sexist, nationalist, unequal, hierarchical, and violent ideologies of the male-dominated system" (DÖKH, 2013a).

¹⁵² Becoming exclusivist, elitist, and losing touch with the grassroots diversity was/is a constant issue to be checked and corrected for the KWM, while for TFM expanding in the grassroots might mean losing one-on-one intimate contact and the capacity for individual empowerment (for further discussion, see Section 8.1). A KWM activist said that women's ideological position in DEHAP used to be closer to the sectarian Left (*sol sekte*), "showing poor empathy with people due to a fixation on 'what ought to be,' as in the Turkish Left or [Turkish] feminism." She deemed this stance unhealthy for decolonization.

¹⁵³ Besides the gender-quota, DÖKH also introduced the "women's quota city" system. If DÖKH announced a city/town as a "women's city" in the local elections, this would disallow the party to nominate men candidates for that city. DÖKH identified the quota cities based mainly on the suggestion of local women's commissions. They especially targeted the cities/towns with stronger feudal/tribal patriarchal structures that needed to be challenged.

¹⁵⁴ Out of 18 women mayors across Turkey. Zeyniye Öner, a primary-school graduate, rural Kurdish woman, mother of 11, became the mayor of Sürgücü (Mardin), which was unprecedented in Turkey (Evrensel Gazetesi, 2008).

¹⁵⁵ Including the recently released former DEP deputies Leyla Zana, Hatip Dicle, Orhan Doğan, and Selim Sadak.

¹⁵⁶ "We have disbanded a well-functioning women's structure with our own hands and failed to transfer that experience to DTP. The integration process of the friends recently released from prison was not that healthy, they had

created their own power structures there. Then there were other internal conflicts in DEHAP. During reconstruction, it was treated as if the branch women were responsible for the existing exclusionary, centralist system. In fact, those who firsthand experienced the shortcomings of the old system could have imagined the new better. I feel we have disregarded their experience a bit. And those friends, instead of making more effort, felt heartbroken and sidelined themselves to prove that they were not responsible” (Delal).

¹⁵⁷ DÖKH increased its gender-quota starting from 25 (2000) percent, to 35 (2003), 40 (2005), and 50 (2013) percent, respectively. It enhanced the women’s autonomy in running nomination and election campaigns (in intra-party as well as local and general elections). 1999 local elections: 3 women mayors (out of 16 across Turkey); HADEP won 37 municipalities (including 7 cities). 2004 local elections: 8 women mayors. 2007 general elections: 40 percent quota achieved; DTP got 22 seats, 8 women (out of 50 across Turkey). 2009 local elections: 14 women mayors (out of 18 across Turkey) and 193 women municipal council members; BDP won 99 municipalities. 2011 general elections: BDP got 36 seats, 11 women. 2014 local elections: 97 women co-mayors (3 metropolitan municipalities). 32 were designated as women’s quota-cities (including Amed). The co-mayor system was instituted for the first time. 2015 general elections: HDP passed the 10 percent parliamentary threshold for the first time with 13 percent, got 80 seats, 32 women (40 percent). In the repeat elections that year, got 59 seats, 23 women.

Women demanded judicial recognition of the co-chair system with a petition including 100,000 signatures. In the 2014 local elections, BDP women’s assembly took another progressive step to initiate the equal representation and co-chair system in local governments. The election campaigns promoted women and men co-mayors as a team of two with equal authority and power. “Co-mayor system not only targets the participation of women in governance but also transformation of the men allies via power sharing and decision-making on equal terms with women” (Delal). In 2016, the Ministry of Interior of Turkey declared the use of co-mayor title as an administrative crime to be punished up to two years of imprisonment.

See (Ari, 2018; Bozgan, 2011; Taşdemir, 2013) for analyses based on rich empirical material on the implementation of gender quota, the co-chair system, and the history of Kurdish women’s organising in general. See also (Kışanak, 2018) for a compilation of inspiring stories from imprisoned KWM activists who played important political roles.

¹⁵⁸ The political cluster, for example, consisted of women in the political parties, municipalities, national/local parliament, etc. In 2007, the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) accepted the “democratic autonomy” project for the Kurds in Turkey.

¹⁵⁹ To ensure more grassroots participation and diversity, the original quota of 60 percent devoted to institutional representation was reduced to 40 percent in favor of a rise in the “peoples and faiths” (*halklar ve inançlar*) grassroots quota.

¹⁶⁰ The Democratic Society Congress, political parties, municipalities, labor unions, vocational chambers, etc. can be given as examples to partnering mixed-gender institutions. Until the Turkish state started seizing the Kurdish municipalities by appointing trustees in 2015, Kurdish *kadın belediyeçiliği* (women’s municipalism) struggled for the collective empowerment of women. All municipalities had numerous women-specific units, ran shelters, and did gender budgeting. Since 2004, the collective agreement between the municipality and the workers’ union included articles such as barring polygamy for men workers, positive discrimination for women in employment, terminating man worker’s contract or transferring his wage to the spouse in case of violence against women.

¹⁶¹ In 2013, DÖKH’s supra-assembly of 300 delegates represented hundreds of women: political party workers, MPs, mayors, municipal workers, unionized workers, activists/professionals in civil society and democratic mass organizations, independent women’s centers/associations, cooperatives, women in media/press, art/culture, academia, and in the city assemblies set up across Kurdistan. DÖKH (2013) brochure lists, “city assemblies of women in 25 cities, 27 women’s solidarity and counselling centers in BDP municipalities, 3 women shelters, 17 women’s cooperatives, 9 women’s associations, Peace Mothers’ initiatives in 12 cities, a women-only press agency (JINHA), a women’s magazine, 3 women’s academies, and women’s autonomous assemblies in all mixed-gender institutions including BDP and DTK.”

¹⁶² Inspired by the Libertarian Municipalism model of the American libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin.

¹⁶³ Ayşe Seda Yüksel (2011) shows the municipalities had to constantly negotiate with the Kurdish elite and the Turkish state along neoliberal demands.

¹⁶⁴ Some well-known Istanbul and Ankara-based NGOs of the 1990s are: *Mor Çatı* Women’s Shelter (1990; the first and as yet the only independent women’s shelter opened in 1995); Women’s Library and Information Center (1990; holds women-centred print and visual library & archive); Women for Women’s Human Rights – New Ways Foundation (1993); KADAV Women’s Solidarity Foundation, Ankara (1993; focuses on domestic violence); *Hazar* Association for Education, Culture, and Solidarity (1993; runs programs for women excluded from formal education because of their

headscarf); *Başkent* Women's Platform (1995; focuses on discrimination of Muslim women by the secular society and challenges conservative religious approaches to gender roles); *Uçan Süpürge* Women's Communication and Research Association (1996; aims at enhancing cooperation among women's groups); Turkish Women's Union (1996; focuses mostly on gender equality before the law); KA.DER Association for Support of Women Candidates (1997; supports women's participation in electoral politics), KA-MER Women's Center (1997; focuses on domestic violence and gender discrimination mainly in Kurdish cities); KADAV Women's Solidarity Foundation, Istanbul (1999), Federation of Women's Associations of Turkey (1976), *Filmmor* Cooperative (2003, aims to increase involvement of women in cinema and media). In other cities: Bursa Independent Women's Initiative, Ege Women's Solidarity Foundation, Eskişehir Women's Cultural Centre, Mersin Independent Women's Association. See (Bora & Günel, 2002).

¹⁶⁵ Such as in Istanbul, Ankara, Bursa (Local Agenda 21), Izmir, Eskişehir, Mersin, and Antalya.

¹⁶⁶ Issued by Turkish feminists: *Pazartesi*, *Minerva* and *Martı* (Istanbul); *Eksik Etek* (Istanbul&Ankara); *Cımbız* (Izmir), *Dolaşan Mavi Çorap* (Ankara). By Kurdish women/feminists: *Roza*, *Jujin*, *Jin û Jiyan*, *Ji Bo Rizgariya Jinan*, *Yaşamda Özgür Kadın*. By Turkish socialists/feminists: *Kadın Bülteni*, *Kadın Postası*, *Emekçi Kadınlar Bülteni*.

¹⁶⁷ These campaigns against male violence, feminists argue, were a legacy of the famous 1987 feminist *Rally Against Battering of Women*. Major campaigns included: The early-90s campaign against virginity controls at school (removed in 1999); the 1993 proposal for *Amendment of the Civil Code* (proposed amendment included: wife's right to work being subject to the husband's permission, men being the head of the household, husband selecting the house lived together, wife having to carry the husband's surname); the 1997–1998 *Family Protection Law* campaign (regarding the right to protection order in domestic violence); the 2000–2001 *Turkish Civil Code (TMK) Reform* campaign (lifted the law that designated men as the household head, brought the equal division of property and debts after separation); the 2002–2004 *Turkish Penal Code (TCK) Reform* campaign (lifted the reduced sentence for honor crimes, recognised the marital rape as a crime, barred lifting of the sentence by marrying the victim to the rapist); the 2002 *Women Demand their Dues from Men and Society* campaign (Karakuş, 2018a); the 2005 *Male Violence Kicked Out by the Law No. 4320* campaign (to inform women of the family protection law and their rights).

¹⁶⁸ The families waiting outside the jails to hear about their relatives/friends gradually got organized to protest the heavy torture and inhuman prison conditions of the post-coup era. Perhaps 80 percent were women, 10 percent men, and another 10 the youth (Altunç, 2014). This women majority initiative paved the way to the formation of IHD (Human Rights Association) in 1986. It was soon followed by the foundation of TAYAD (Solidarity Association of Prisoners' Families). IHD women's commissions played an important role in bridging the feminists with the women in labor unions, vocational chambers, socialist parties, and later with the Kurdish activists. IHD initially concentrated on the prison atrocities in Turkey's west alone and learned about the notorious Amed (Diyarbakır) Prison only in the 90s. HEP Amed provincial chairman Vedat Aydın for the first time in a 1990 IHD congress talked about the Kurdish guerilla struggle and the brutality of the Turkish military. "[The police] took brother Vedat and Ahmet under detention, soon were they arrested. Then we underwent a huge split at IHD. The Kurdish question divided human rights advocates the first" (Keskin, 2015, p. 60).

¹⁶⁹ The alleged charge was based on the 1991 event that the Kurdish woman MP, Leyla Zana, ended her oath in Kurdish at the opening ceremony of the Turkish parliament. She said, "*Min vê sondê ji bo gelê kurd û gelê türk xwend* (I take this oath for the brotherhood of the Turkish and Kurdish people)" (Çağlayan, 2014). She was later sentenced to 15 years on charges of treason and affiliation with the PKK.

¹⁷⁰ The attacks overlapped with the third PKK-declared unilateral ceasefire in 1998, the Turkish army's enhanced counterattack in response, and the PKK leader Öcalan's arrest in 1999. The sit-ins were suspended due to police crackdown until its resumption in 2009 when the *Ergenekon** trials revealed new facts about the acid wells, the death fields, and the heating boilers that were used to disappear bodies of the Kurdish victims.

*Series of trials (2008–2016) in which high-profile military officers, journalists and lawmakers, all alleged members of a suspected secularist clandestine organization, were accused of plotting against the Turkish government.

¹⁷¹ See (Alp, 2015; Tanrıkulu, 2014). Another important gathering in line with the 1996 IHD efforts was the 2000 *Gözaltında Cinsel Taciz ve Tecavüze Hayır Kurultayı* (No to Sexual Harassment and Rape under Custody Assembly). It was part of the campaign *No to Sexual Violence* led by the Union of Laborer Women (EKB). The organizers were prosecuted at the State Security Court. The assembly heard the testimonies of 19 women and followed their court cases.

¹⁷² The United Socialist Party (BSP, 1990–1996) was an earlier phase of the idea of bringing the Turkish Left together, and the first to directly call on independent feminists and other opposition to discuss mechanisms for a common struggle. While BSP could not overcome the hegemonic tendency that relegated women's politics to women's commissions, it still promised finding some common ground for many feminists (Sayılan, 1995). The party abolished

itself to join in the formation of ÖDP. BSP was also one of the initiators of the *Labor, Peace, Freedom Bloc*, the first shared platform of the Kurdish and Turkish socialists.

¹⁷³ “*Pazartesi*, Newspaper for Women” (1995–2007) was a nation-wide distributed, popular feminist periodical published by a group of feminists who were part of the women’s liberation movement of the post-80’s in Turkey. It played a significant role in making many women feminist and mobilizing them. *Pazartesi* women’s journalism aimed to create a women’s perspective for the general political agenda of Turkey, stimulate the discussions on the feminist agenda, and do feminist journalism. It was the first women’s magazine to look at the Kurdish question, the war, the struggle of guerilla women and women from HADEP, and the news from the “region” (such as women suicides in Batman, Women and Peace Conference, Saturday Mothers, rape by security forces...). *Pazartesi* was the first Turkish women’s magazine to publish an interview with the Kurdish guerillas (*Pazartesi*, 2002). For more on *Pazartesi* see (Yeşim Arat, 2004; Atakul, 2002; Düzkan, 2005; Koçali, 2005; Şeran, 2009).

¹⁷⁴ See (Elibol, 2003, p. 44–46) for the positive discrimination method they developed in the local and national elections.

¹⁷⁵ “Perhaps the only shortcoming of the model was that the women nominated for the quota were not determined by a primary election conducted by the women’s coordination. This was discussed but not accepted at ÖDP” (Elibol, 2003, p. 108).

¹⁷⁶ In response to the prison hunger strikes that protested institution of the F-Type isolation cells, the Turkish state staged *Operation Return to Life* on Dec. 19, 2000, resulting in the death of 32 inmates and the injuring of hundreds.

¹⁷⁷ The third-wayist party leader used to mark his distance from HADEP in every public speech. In a 1997 public rally *Neither Refahyol, Nor the Coup*, held against the rising secularist and religious authoritarianisms, ÖDP followers were alarmed to observe the Kurdish national colors (yellow, red, green) at the rally, and the slogans chanted in Kurdish. Some feminists witnessed that Kurdish women who were protesting against Öcalan’s arrest were not allowed in Taksim party building of the ÖDP while seeking refuge from the police attacks.

¹⁷⁸ Feminists made the keynote speech and independent feminist groups led the cortege.

¹⁷⁹ This was a late-coming solidarity response to the Kurdish feminist Fatma Kayhan’s 1989 protest (see Section 2.3).

¹⁸⁰ Other issues were the color of the banner (feminists insisted on purple), the use of the *femina* sign (Kurdish representatives were worried that their social base might confuse the *femina* sign with a tin god), and the Kurdish women’s consulting with the men at HADEP about the rally-related issues.

¹⁸¹ She also differentiated HADEP’s position from the Turkish leftist groups who viewed March 8 as part of class struggle and insisted on celebrating it women-men hand in hand: “I can debate with [the Turkish Left] forever and not participate in their rallies if I wish not to. But HADEP’s situation is different. This is a people’s movement. And indeed, Kurdish men learned to stay out when they came to know more about the women’s struggle” (Nil).

¹⁸² İstanbul-based, independent, Kurdish women’s magazine (1996–2000), inspired by Black feminism. Most academic writings of the 2000s such as (Yüksel, 2006; Kerestecioğlu, 2012; Açıık, 2002) look at the magazines *Roza*, *Jujin*, and *Jin û Jiyan* when they talk about the Kurdish feminism. As late as mid-2000s, it was not *yurtsever* (sympathizers of the PKK-led movement) women, but these feminist magazine circles who separated from Kurdish leftist groups rival to PKK, that some Turkish feminists contacted with, mainly through BKI (see endnote 183).

¹⁸³ BKI (1997–2000) gave birth to the earliest inquiries on ethnocentrism and racism in TFM. When *Roza* and *Jujin* quit the initiative, however, BKI disbanded itself for “it did not make sense to continue without them,” said one respondent, “We were offended for they treated us as if we represented the Turkish state. When they wanted to organize separate from Turkish feminists to re-empower themselves, we said we don’t identify as Turkish. In hindsight, I think they were right. ‘It consumes too much of our energy; it has been few years now, yet we still have to remind you of certain things,’ they said.” Despite this painful relationship, however, the fondness observed in my interviews of the once upon a time close friendship, contrasted with the distance felt towards the *yurtsever* women of the time. The favoring of the *Roza* tradition was interesting to me. Perhaps the relative comfort with *Roza* was in part due to the commonalities in political socialization or class background. Both groups shared similar views on how to relate to mixed-gender struggles, as both have departed from larger movements for similar reasons. Contrary to HADEP, a Turkish feminist points out, “Roza entered our field by saying Kurdish men are also sexist.”

¹⁸⁴ The inviting organization was the pro-Kurdish labor confederation KESK. Around 500 women departed from different cities for Amed. After the 20 hours of road trip, police stopped them outside of the city and sent them back.

¹⁸⁵ The iconic square of Beyoğlu, İstanbul, closed to the leftist demonstrations since the 1977 Taksim Square Massacre (Bloody First of May) that claimed the lives of 41 protesters.

¹⁸⁶ The “we” of the 1997 rally speech of the independent feminists represented the racially unmarked women who suffered from capitalist exploitation and patriarchal oppression. The suffering of Kurdish women from war was not identified as an issue of systemic colonial/racial oppression (Pazartesi, 1997b, p. 4). Kurdish women’s 1998 rally statement, on the other hand, said that “Women cannot achieve true liberation unless they struggle for liberation of the men, the oppressed peoples, and the exploited classes, as much as they struggle for themselves” (Özgür Kadın, 1998, p. 14).

¹⁸⁷ In the 2000s, the women-only rally or the rally-language issues were largely resolved. Instead, the slogans, colors, signs, political agendas, or priorities became the matters of dispute. Feminists’ issue with the invisibility of their voice in the March 8 rallies, the blurring of the ideological/political distinction that separated feminist and non-feminist women, and the challenges in negotiating with the politically-mixed Women’s Day platforms, led them to initiate a separate *Feminist Night March* starting from 2003. It was inspired by the *Reclaim the Night* movement of Leeds, 1977. The founding principles of the Night March are that independent organised/individual feminists organize it, and participation is individual-based, that is, no one can join with visuals, signs or banners representing a group. See (Büyükgöze, 2021).

¹⁸⁸ In this rally, HADEP’s mass participation stood out next to the visibly shrank ÖDP ranks. It was the first time in Ankara that the crowd was addressed in Kurdish. This created tension: “Ankara folks were not used to it, like we were now in İstanbul,” remarked Selma.

¹⁸⁹ The 2001 campaign *Endişeliyiz* (We are Concerned) was launched to protest the state operation *Return to Life* of Dec. 19, 2000. Every week women met at the İstanbul Galatasaray Square to make a press release and post letters to women political prisoners to support their hunger strike against F-type prison isolation policies and to stop the ongoing death news coming from the prisons. Many women were detained during these actions (Koçali, 2001).

One other notable attempt was *Ankara Barış İçin Sürekli Kadın Platformu* (Permanent Women’s Platform for Peace) founded in 2002. The platform organized a rally in 2003, *Barış Hemen Şimdi* (Peace Right Now), attended by around 10,000 women. The rally demanded a general political amnesty, laws for democratic participation and peace, the right to education in mother tongue, an end to F-type prisons, investigation of the missing and the murdered cases, return to the evacuated Kurdish villages, and implementation of reparation programs (“Barışın Sesi Ankara’da,” 2003; Karakuş, 2018b).

¹⁹⁰ Initiated by Mor Çatı, the Assembly (since 1998) is held every year in a different city with the participation of women’s counselling centres and the municipal/central government units working on violence against women across Turkey. Kurdish women are part of the organizing team since 2001, when the KWM counselling centres such as DİKASUM, Selis, and Gökkuşığı were founded. The assembly has been scene to many conflicted encounters between the Turkish and Kurdish participants, the intensity of which depending highly on the general political atmosphere of Turkey regarding the Kurdish question. In 2005, Selis hosted the 8th assembly in Amed for the first time. Due to the unresolved disputes, many workshops were cancelled, and a final statement could not be announced. KWM’s use of the word “Kurd” divided the participants in the 2006, 9th meeting in İzmir, upon which KWM decided to withdraw from the assembly temporarily. In the 12th Adana meeting in 2009, the KWM’s address on the history of their movement caused tensions, some participants called the civil police. When DÖKH activists excused themselves to leave the next day hearing the news of the state ban on DTP, the solidarity speech of a feminist was interrupted by the nationalist audience. Then in solidarity with DÖKH, a group of feminists withdrew from the ateliers (Arı, 2018, pp. 257–259; Ünalı & Şimşek, 2010). In the 2011, 14th Nevşehir meeting, the tensions escalated to the point that nationalist women called the police on Kurdish women and the latter had to escape the meeting hall to avoid a lynching attempt. In most other times, due to the successful mediation of Mor Çatı or other feminist groups between the Kemalist and Kurdish participants, the space allowed for more inclusive discussions. The main topics of conflict were whether the issue of state violence against women could be included in an assembly that focussed on domestic violence, whether expression of ethnic identity was acceptable in an assembly focussed on gender identity, or whether Kurdish activists could represent DÖKH at the assembly, as DÖKH was affiliated with a “nationalist” – or for some – a “terrorist” movement. DÖKH activist Yılmaz (2014, p. 27) argues that the assembly includes Kurdish women but also is problematic for excluding the discussions on how national oppression affects women and also the relations between the men and women.

¹⁹¹ Some other feminists who continued their activism in the socialist movement, on the other hand, thought that the political debates at the ÖDP nurtured both the ÖDP and the *Pazartesi* magazine in terms of linking feminism to general politics (Şeran, 2009, p. 17).

¹⁹² The three-issue special volume of the *Pazartesi* magazine in 2000 asked, “What does the Left promise women?” The volume put that the feminist movement will abstain from establishing relationships with the leftist parties from then on. Şeran (2009) argues that in a general shift away from the popular towards the political, the magazine’s inclusivity narrowed down from “women” to “feminist women.”

Chapter 4

¹⁹³ In 2003, the KWM established the autonomous umbrella organisation DÖKH (see Section 3.1.2.4). DÖKH organized itself in the migrant neighborhoods of some major cities in western Turkey as well, like Istanbul, Bursa, and Izmir.

¹⁹⁴ On that note, Turkish feminists themselves were troubled by the mainstream Left accusing them of doing identity politics.

¹⁹⁵ “As Necla Açıık points out, while *Roza* and *Jujin* tend to be more feminist, a more nationalist overtone comes to the fore in *Jin u Jiyan*; in *Yaşamda Özgür Kadın* [KWM tradition], on the other hand, one can see an overtly nationalist discourse on Kurdish women. Moreover, Açıık states that independent and feminist Kurdish women’s groups [like *Roza*] came into existence as a reaction to the instrumental use of women in the Kurdish nationalist parties and organizations that are male dominated” (Yüksel, 2006).

¹⁹⁶ “The mothers’ commitment to peace is derived from their emotional connection to their children and from their ‘maternal role of bestowing life and protecting it’. Hence, their commitment to peace is primarily an emotional appeal and does not equate to a political consciousness” (Açıık, 2013, p. 24). The complexity of the KWM’s motherhood politics that TFM criticized for valorizing the traditional gender roles and reducing mothers to the transmitters/signifiers of the national culture, only after 2010s came to be recognized (and that to a certain extent) as part of progressive women’s politics by the TFM. Berivan’s story in Göksel’s article, and Rojda and Perihan’s stories that I analyze in Section 4.2, give some insights into how women might be empowered through their familial and communal bonds.

¹⁹⁷ I diverge from feminist interpretations such as Çağlayan’s which read Öcalan’s use of the term *zemin* (basis, foundation) as typical of nationalist rhetoric reducing women to the object position of the land, ground, or space. When read in context, *zemin* here rather signifies the situated collective agency of women.

¹⁹⁸ SOAS scholars mainly inspired by O’Keefe’s work on the Republican feminism in Northern Ireland.

¹⁹⁹ “Our article reveals the transformative processes within the Kurdish nationalist movement, which have led to the politicization of women and the emergence of a feminist identity and a collectivity engaged in feminist action. Kurdish feminist nationalism in turn developed a critique of nationalism while the political leadership also distanced itself from the nationalist trope. In that process, Kurdish feminist nationalism transformed into what one might coin a Kurdish transnational feminism” (Al-Ali & Tas, 2018, p. 471).

²⁰⁰ In compliance with the authoritative teachings of this Western feminist framework, Al-Ali and Tas also speculate that unless the Kurdish women’s rights activists have an overtly critical engagement with the writings of Abdullah Öcalan, and tackle the issues of sexuality and morality, they will not be able to radically transform the Kurdish society (ibid., pp. 468, 471). For a criticism of their approach to *jineoloji*, see also endnote 257.

²⁰¹ According to Bannerji (2000, p. 911), against the views which consider “falsity” to be the fate of all decolonization efforts and national(ist) politics, which doom them all to neo-colonialism, we should pursue complex views such as Fanon’s that would alert us to the class and gender-specific dominating and liberating potentials of the historically and politically specific decolonial movements. As Chatterjee’s decolonization proposal does not permit any critique of the patriarchy in India, she argues, it fails to break from the discourse he analyses and theorize the gendered colonized subject. She is represented as “a regulated identity in which certain external features of modernity were instrumentalized and annexed at the behest of the community” (Kamala Visweswaran, quoted in Bannerji, 2000, p. 912).

²⁰² Turkish feminists generally recall the image of a similar woman promoted by the early Turkish republicans, “‘the comrade-woman, an asexual sister-in-arms,’ whose honor and chastity remains intact despite her active participation in the struggle to liberate and improve her nation” (Deniz Kandiyoti, quoted in Sirman, 1989), who, after the War of Independence, was expected to return home to resume her duty to the nation as a mother and wife. Açıık’s (2013, p. 22) analysis of Kurdish women’s magazines is also an example to this Western feminist lens: “Here, against traditional perceptions of rape, sexual violence against women is no longer perceived as an attack upon the honor of the affected person and her family and ought therefore not to cause shame for the family and the victim. It is rather to be seen as just another form of torture. Moreover, in comparison to the feminist journals, YÖK [the KWM magazine] does not regard

sexual violence in custody as part of a sexist system perpetuated and reproduced by society but solely as a consequence of the war, which, as they argue, ought to be combated through effective resistance. They call upon the victims of sexual violence not to allow these acts to break their will and continue to support the national struggle. This call on women is part of a wider strategy to motivate Kurdish activists to continue their resistance and not be intimidated by such targeted violence. The discourses of rape as identified in YÖK conceal the societal dimension of sexual violence against women. This is done in the interest of portraying a unified image of the Kurdish community; women are perceived as victims of the Turkish state violence and its war of annihilation against Kurdish nationalists. ... [Sexual violence] is defined as violence against all Kurds and as something that can only be put to an end through Kurdish unity and resistance against the 'enemy'."

²⁰³ A youth activist underlines why it is harder for the young women to get organized: "Easier if she is studying, but if not, harder for her to get out of the house. Young women generally decide to join the guerilla at earlier stages because choosing to work in the city instead, means that the social bonds she is entangled with would put pressure on her. She either decides to fight against them here in the city or – if she cannot find that power in herself – she decides to exit the civilian field. Otherwise, she would either study first and get married, or would not study and get married sooner. This kind of pressure exists. She must cut off all these exploitative bonds and act fast. Cutting off those ties is an immensely more radical defiance compared to that of men. A reality [womanhood] considered as the honor of the society suddenly rises to shape her own life; this is nothing the society is used to."

²⁰⁴ Each woman is situated within a specific matrix of enabling/constraining circumstances from which to strategize. Depending on their political positionality, families might play supportive, neutral, or obstructing roles, or a mixture of all. Someone from an anti-PKK family, for example, may have to escape from home to join the guerilla or may not even dare think about it.

²⁰⁵ Among the many examples she gave to her experience of racism one was, "My Turkish friend shouted at the [Turkish] baker pointing at a Kurdish kid, 'Don't sell bread to that dirty Kurd.' I can never forget it. Turkish kids did not see me as Kurdish because I spoke Turkish and my clothes were clean, I looked like them. But that kid looked unclean and spoke Kurdish. For me, it did not matter anymore that they did not discriminate against me. I stopped playing with them."

²⁰⁶ "The most important quality of the Kurdish Women's Movement is that the practice/action produced the theory. It is not a women's perspective that is put forward by academic texts, or educated, class-privileged women and theoreticians. It is produced in and through praxis, in the war process, that is, in the venues where 'manhood' is lived in its most intensified form" (Alp, 2015, p. 96).

²⁰⁷ Göksel (2019, p. 13) explores how DÖKH activism appeals to three interacting realms: "The revolutionary ideology (shaped by the images of guerilla women), family and kinship relations, and network formation and professionalism."

²⁰⁸ "While the existence of guerillas in places where people live has been an important source of security for women, the current placement of soldiers in areas from which the guerilla has retreated is contributing to an increase in their sense of being under threat" (BİKG, 2013, p. 34). "Due to these two factors, in Lice, Dersim and Doğu Beyazıt, the guerilla are seen as a military and societal force that provides protection against suffering caused both by being a woman and by being Kurdish. Therefore, there seems to be a sense that the retreat of the guerrilla has left women defenceless against men, as well as against state and military forces" (ibid., p. 39).

²⁰⁹ For example, women running away from forced marriage to take refuge in the guerilla.

²¹⁰ Alp (2015, p. 80), too, highlights a problematic tendency among the Turkish feminists to explain women's presence in KÖH as an imposition of the war conditions, suggesting exigency rather than agency. A similar victimizing, reductive, non-intersectional approach, Özkaya (2013) argues, can also be observed in the feminist representation of the Turkish socialist women's struggle.

²¹¹ For examples to the intertwined factors to join the PKK, see (Demir, 2014; Käser, 2019).

²¹² Here is another example: "I think feminists keep their expectations too high from the Kurdish Women's Movement. We expect from them feminisms that would speak to us. When we talk like that – forgetting suddenly the reality of Kurdistan and how they get organised there – resentments, expectations, and a patronizing language emerge. Kurdish Women's Movement is born out of the Kurdish movement. We do not say 'Kurdish feminist movement' but say 'Kurdish Women's Movement.' This is a significant difference, so we must not forget this reality" (İlke, in Aras, 2012, p. 79).

²¹³ Turkish feminists' experience of marginalization within/by the Turkish leftist groups (see Chapters 2 and 3) seemed to haunt their present and future alliance opportunities with the Kurds.

²¹⁴ “Unnuanced, monotonous, crude, masculine, dominating, *ezbere konuşan* (making memorised talk),” were some other stereotyping terms that Turkish feminists employed to define the Kurdish “us language.”

²¹⁵ Just as most Turkish socialists did not find KÖH socialist-enough supposing that it lacked a class-focus, most Turkish feminists did not find KWM feminist-enough supposing that it lacked a gender-focus.

²¹⁶ A Muslim Turkish feminist told me how she discovered about her progressivism: “Honestly, I am waking up to it just recently. It takes time to recognize the progressivism in oneself. Hanging out with [Turkish] feminists, perhaps I, too, had similar feelings. I was blown off my course when I watched Diba Keskin elected as the mayor of Erciş. Because you always suppose that something will happen first, then another will follow, exactly as in the progressivist modernization thought: first this will be liberated, then that. But then suddenly a woman like Diba Keskin comes and does something completely revolutionary. That extremely touched me. I cried that whole day. Truly, she belonged to a different history, she came from a different dimension, and because we did not belong to that history, we were literally baffled. For me, it also was euphoric. These women [like Keskin] have subverted so many things. The way she wore her hijab...a Kurdish woman in hardcore Islamist dress...speaking both Kurdish and Turkish... her body language, her confidence, the power of her messages... For a few days we walked around saying, ‘We are the soldiers of Diba Keskin.’ She subverted our whole narrative about women’s liberation and left us gaping at her from Istanbul, asking, ‘how did this happen?’ But as a person who knows the Turkish feminists a bit, I can understand why they could not share this excitement. It is because Kurdistan did not turn out to fit the narrative they wrote. Yet, it was sheer excitement for me because it made me realize the progressivist in me. I realized that Kurdish women were writing a different narrative that I was not aware of until then. Why was I surprised? Kurdish women weren’t” (Meral).

²¹⁷ Means “women’s science,” conjoined by Öcalan for the first time in 2003, in his book *Sociology of Freedom*. *Jin* means woman in Kurdish and comes from the root *jiyan*, meaning life. For more detailed discussions on *jineoloji*, see Section 5.3 and Chapter 7.

²¹⁸ “I am suspicious if there is a domination concern behind all these homogenizing claims. Is there a power struggle here? Why are we discussing about a societal project that is an alternative to feminism, setting it against feminism as an upper structure – even if we say we don’t? In that sense feminism is not a transcended project! It is already heterogeneous, very eclectic, and can discuss different liberation projects in different places. Therefore, instead of getting into such a theoretical power struggle, we need to discuss the practice, the action” (Güneş, in Aras 2012, p. 67). “I wonder if a different conceptualization might be creating a new domination project and a claim to remove from feminism a domain that already belongs to the critical space of feminism? It really amazes me, why are we trying to produce a new concept without discussing enough the feminism itself?” (ibid., p. 80).

²¹⁹ The BIKG delegation reported from their meeting with the KJB at the guerilla camps in Iraq: “If you take feminism as women’s liberationism and the defence of women’s rights, we define ourselves as very radical feminists. But we do not approach this issue in narrow gender terms” (Candan et al., 2013, pp. 51–52).

²²⁰ Mesopotamia Association of Assistance and Solidarity for Families with Lost Relatives (since 2007).

Chapter 5

²²¹ These campaigns comprised marches, mass demonstrations, festivals, workshops, petitions, public forums, alternative public courts against violence, etc. The DÖKH campaigns: “We are Women, We are Nobody’s Honor, our Honor is our Freedom” (2009); “Let’s Elevate our Freedom Struggle and Transcend the Rape Culture” (2010); “No to Femicide” (2011); “Freedom for Öcalan, End to the Genocide” (2012); “With Free Women, Towards a Democratic Nation” (2014); “Women Curate the Life and build the Ethical-Political Society” (2015); “I Claim my Leadership, my Freedom, and my Land” (2016). The IFK (İstanbul Feminist Collective) campaigns: “We Rebel against Murders of Women” (2010–2014); “We have a Feminist Word for *Bey-oğlu*” (2009 Beyoğlu local elections); “Abortion is a Right; Women Make the Decision” (2012–13). The SFK (Socialist Feminist collective) campaigns: “Men Owe us; We Reclaim the Hours, Days, and Years Spent in Housework” (2010–2011); “Family is a Castle that can be Pulled Down, There is life Outside the Family” (2012–2013); “No to AKP’s ‘Favorable Woman’ Imposition!” (2015).

²²² Devocioğlu builds on the feminist critique of Albert Memmi’s work which likens the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized to that between the husband and wife.

²²³ To (re)produce the labor power and the good nationals, transmit the authentic culture and mores into the modern world, and provide a sign of distinction vis-a-vis the West.

²²⁴ Stands for “Mesopotamia Association of Assistance and Solidarity for Families with Lost Relatives.”

²²⁵ Many Indigenous scholars demonstrated this in relation to the social impact of the Indian Act on the Indigenous communities in Canada and the US, see (Barker, 2011; Million, 2000; Simpson, 2014).

²²⁶ Most of my respondents agreed that if their fathers or uncles were not already part of the movement, they would pose the biggest obstacle for their politicization. Mothers, on the other hand, were generally more open to transformation through alliance with their children’s politics, particularly after their loss. Kanlıbaş (in Ortadoğu Tarih Akademisi Kolektifi, 2006, p. 36) whose brother died in a shoot-out between the Turkish army and the PKK remembers how their father fiercely objected to her brother’s join up with the guerilla forces: “He told us, ‘I raised him, brought him up to this age, and is this the response I deserve?’ He thought my brother was his capital; it was like losing his investment. Sure, the underlying thing was that ‘You cannot confront the state!’ I mean this is actually the logic that there is the God above and the state below. He was always a partisan of the state.” After her brother joined the guerilla, their home was often raided. Each time, three or four family members would be taken in custody, her father being one. He therefore began to see his children as his enemies and became ashamed of them. The villagers gradually isolated the family, stopped greeting them, and harassed to get them to vacate the village. The children however were able to convince their mother that their support of the PKK was a worthy cause. She began to respect his son’s struggle and would tell her acquaintances, “He is my son. This is his own choice, and this is his life. He [can choose] whether to live or die. Nobody can intervene.” She resisted pressures from her husband to migrate out of loyalty to her son who was fighting for their rights to that very land. Kanlıbaş says, as a result, “The feudal relations were dismantled in the family.” Kanlıbaş attributes her father’s eventual death to “shame and sorrow” at being displaced as the patriarch.

See also (Üstündağ, 2019, p. 122) “Because [the woman] is excluded from state institutions and development machineries—also a result of patriarchy—she remains the preserver of the Kurdish language and of those traditions, lullabies, laments, and fairy tales that embody the wisdom accumulated by the community as it defends itself against inequality and oppression. Therefore, while the man has to be symbolically killed, the mother can be redeemed.”

²²⁷ The village-guard system explained in the introduction of Chapter 3 is one example to how the Turkish state systematically creates male collaborators within the Kurdish communities.

²²⁸ “Domination in the family gets entangled (*düğümlemek*) in the person of the man. Domineering man in the family projects the general decay and fallenness (*düşkünlük*), in other words, all the negativities of the repressive, colonialist authority onto the family in his person” (Öcalan, 1993, p. 46).

²²⁹ This entanglement can also be observed in the testimonies of Rojda and Perihan studied in Section 4.2.

²³⁰ Including the liberal, multicultural, independent, radical, or socialist variety. For socialists or feminist socialists, on the other hand, it is rather the capitalist system (class conflict) that is key to patriarchy, neither the family nor the state, although to varying degrees they may recognise the role of the latter two in women’s oppression.

²³¹ “Claiming that we first have to address the question of the state and then the question of the family is not sound. No serious social problem can be understood if addressed in isolation. A far more effective method is to look at everything within the totality, to render meaning to each question within its relationship to the other. This method also holds when we try to resolve problems. Analyzing the social mentality without analyzing the state, analyzing the state without analyzing the family, and analyzing the woman without analyzing the man would render insufficient results. We need to analyze these social phenomena as an integrated whole” (Öcalan, 2017, p. 90).

²³² Feminist scholars like Nükhet Sirman and Deniz Kandiyoti wrote that during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic the social reforms to remould the Ottoman society “included the replacement of the traditional patriarchal Ottoman family by the nuclear, monogamous ‘National Family’ (Kandiyoti, 1991, p. 11). “The attempts of post-independence states to absorb and transform kin-based communities in order to expand their control have, not surprisingly, had an important bearing on state policies relating to women and the family” (p. 11). Authority of the modern state was partly secured by this patriarchal contract between men and the state: propertyless little men rose to the civilized status of a citizen by getting his colony – the family and a domesticated housewife (Mies, 1986).

²³³ On a TV program about the women’s movement in 2017 in Turkey, a prominent socialist-feminist Hülya Osmanağaoğlu (2017) stated that in 2007–8 they used to emphasise, “[Women] mainly have to escalate resistance against domination of the men who stand right next to [them]. This is distinctive of the feminist movement.” And she continued,

“But then there came a moment that the state personally got involved in the struggle we waged against the men next to us. In order to empower the men at home, the state personally set its hands to organising the inside of the house, the private space.” Against this perception of a change in how the Turkish state acted, KWM argues that, the nation-state always already is/was personally involved in organising the private space while its tactics and strategies changed over time.

²³⁴ As the resistance grew, some Kurdish family settings turned into a base for not only counter-revolution, but also revolution. See Rojda’s brother in Section 4.2 and Kanlıbaş’s brother in endnote 226.

²³⁵ “Patriarchy (the men) join in this effort because they expect to be served; capitalists, on the other hand, join because they want the reproduction of the labor power that they can use” (Acar Savran, 2013, p. 30).

²³⁶ “Christine Delphy speaks of two different modes of production. Personally, I do not see patriarchy as a mode of production. But I still think that we need to talk about two separate systems” (Acar Savran, 2011, p. 220).

²³⁷ “I think it is very difficult to say that capitalism equally shapes the structures/areas of patriarchy other than women’s labor. For example, regarding violence against women, the motivation of men might be related to some capitalist phenomena like unemployment or credit card debts; but undoubtedly, what lies at the bottom of this violence is a relation of patriarchal ownership, I think” (Acar Savran, 2013, p. 30). See also the 2020 talk on Feminist Strikes, Transnational Solidarity and Changing Forms of Patriarchy (Acar Savran & Karakuş, 2020). Here Acar Savran elaborates in detail how the internal dynamics of patriarchy that existed before capitalism made unpaid care work possible for capitalism when it arrived. She argues that unpaid labor at home has nothing to do with capitalism. Here Acar also expresses that the world-wide women’s strikes that started in 2016 are not feminist because they explain women’s oppression with capitalism, and invisibilize the patriarchy and male violence.

²³⁸ I refrain from using the common expression “double oppression as a Kurd and a woman” as it might suggest to some that gender and race are independent parallel systems. The “double” I use here describes the multiplicity of the patriarchal systems acting on women, ordered and interlinked through race and class.

²³⁹ For racial domination to continue, it must (re)produce a gender inequality between Turkish men and Turkish women that is distinct from that between Turkish men and Kurdish women. And for gender domination to continue, it must (re)produce an ethnic hierarchy between Turkish men and Kurdish men, that is distinct from that between Turkish men and Kurdish women.

²⁴⁰ That Turkish inter-class relations are ordered through this colonial mediation is a largely under-researched area in the Turkish academy. Many postcolonial scholars (G. Spivak, S. Thobani, R. Mohanram, M. Yeğenoğlu, S. Razack, S. Ahmed, A. McClintock, A. Stoler, M. Mies...) studied the gendered and raced dynamics of the interdependent differentiation of colonizing and colonized identities, construing one as the “respectable” the other as the “degenerate.”

“The ‘naturalization’ of African women who were brought as slaves to the Caribbean is perhaps the clearest evidence of the double-faced, hypocritical process of European colonization: While African women were treated as ‘savages’, the women of the white colonizers in their fatherlands ‘rose’ to the status of ‘ladies’. These two processes did not happen side by side, are not simply historical parallels, but are intrinsically and causally linked within this patriarchal-capitalist mode of production (Mies, 1986, p. 95).

“Freedom from economic and sexual exploitation for the lady, however, is only made possible by her complicity in maintaining class, gender, and racial hierarchies that resulted in the economic and sexual exploitation of other women” (Fellows & Razack, 1997, p. 348). “By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the analogy between race and gender degeneration came to serve a specifically modern form of social domination, as an intricate dialectic emerged-between the domestication of the colonies and the racializing of the metropolis. In the metropolis, the idea of racial deviance was evoked to police the ‘degenerate’ classes -the militant working class, the Irish, Jews, feminists, gays and lesbians, prostitutes, criminals, alcoholics and the insane- who were collectively figured as racial deviants....” (McClintock, in Fellows and Razack 1997, p. 347).

²⁴¹ Income transfer from Kurdistan through exploitation, confiscation, and war economy results in better resources for education, social services, public security, and access to respectable jobs and networks for the middle-class Turks.

²⁴² As a key concept in KWM theorizing, “wife-ization” was unfamiliar or troubling for most Turkish feminists as they thought it takes away from gender-specific oppression. For KWM activist Bircan, however, “Enslavement is constitutive to the state spirit. It enslaves, wife-izases (*karılaştırmak*) the other as the husband-owner. For us, wife-ization is not only about women but denotes a foundational mentality that targets both men and women.” Jongerden (2017, p. 234) argues that Öcalan turns the thesis of Marie Mies, Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen, and Claudia von Werlhof on its

head by suggesting that “social inequalities and cultural injustices started with the emergence of gender-hierarchies and the identification of women with the domestic sphere (‘housewifization’) in the Neolithic era.”

²⁴³ My understanding is that KWM’s general usage of the concept is not essentialist when it refers to a hypothetical state when a woman is not dominated and the possibilities that might open up for her under that condition. But time to time, the political qualities of an egalitarian project and the description of real women might get conflated in the KWM writing, that is, the communal, solidaristic, sharing qualities of a women liberationist society and the caring, mothering, less violent qualities of real women. While KWM is more open to reclaiming women’s biological abilities and politicizing them in an affirmative way (as in Black feminism), it might sound essentializing when the social processes through which those abilities prosper are not explained enough.

²⁴⁴ Whether and how matricentral/matrilinear societies functioned is an ongoing study area and a racialized debate between different women’s liberation models, also in other parts of the world. New archeological or anthropological evidence is interpreted differently by the historians of different ethno-cultures.

²⁴⁵ Öcalan (2012) argues that cultural relationship of the proto-Kurds with civilization was two-fold: first one was in the form of resistance to the centres of exploitation and repression such as the cities, states, and the classed structures. They tried to preserve their freedom and independence by withdrawing to the mountains. Second was in the form of embracing those structures as a positive influence (ibid., pp. 91–92). According to him, the second group in the cities and the states played a negative role on traditional Kurdish cultural existence. While the interests of these upper-class families led to dissolving in others’ languages and cultures, the lower segments could preserve their tribal and family cultures for thousands of years due to seclusion in the mountains (ibid., p. 92). For Öcalan, contrary to what liberalism argues, the resistance of a society against the civilizational forces proves its democratic character (ibid., p. 89). The anti-civilizational cultures preserve a strong democratic substance as the antithesis of the state form. The tribes and clans, religious communities, and stateless peoples and nations that have survived until today beyond the city walls represent the fundamental forces of democracy. “Systematic anti-civilizationism is democracy” (ibid., p. 89).

²⁴⁶ Most postcolonial or decolonial scholars argue that to disenchant modernity, to expose the history of thievery from other civilizations, and show how the accumulation of wealth and the rise of class and gender divisions were made look like *sui generis* to Europe, racism must be taken as the central framework. Modernity/coloniality school, for example, starts the history of colonization with 1492 to show that modernity and development of the modern nation-state and law were from the beginning poisoned and entangled with coloniality. Or scholars like Thobani (2020, p. 19) trace the foundational logics of race back to the Crusades: “along with everything else that Islam is, it remains the organizing principle of the West in existential terms, of its identity, values and culture. Moreover, the sets of associations – religion, culture, language, body, geography, nation, civilization and so on – that shaped the modern concept of ‘race’ also found meaning in and through this Western relation of enmity with Islam.”

²⁴⁷ Zeliha’s use of “real” here is in the same fashion as in real socialism.

²⁴⁸ In the absence of critical race language, KWM examines the colonial Turkish feminisms under the category of “capitalist modernity,” and the un-coopted, anti-racist, non-colonial feminisms to be uncovered or reclaimed from within or without these modern feminisms, under the category of “democratic modernity” or *jineoloji*.

²⁴⁹ “With radical feminism, I mean an anti-system feminism that truly aims at women’s liberation, has issues with the family, with heterosexism, and looks far beyond today’s horizon with regards to the issues of gender and sexuality” (Acar Savran, 2011, p. 221–222).

²⁵⁰ “What I understand is that *jineoloji* is related to power, as if it desires – when foregrounding the women’s knowledge – to build a world taking the women’s knowledge into account. The women here [in Istanbul] do not have such fancy. I mean none of us believe that we can change the society anymore. So, when you say we are not outside the system, you are absolutely right. But even if feminists remain within the system, they never efface a critical perspective” (Nükhet, in Amargi 2012, p. 63). “[You ask] why do some women’s movements remain marginal in Turkey? Why does the Kurdish Women’s Movement become more popularized? It is not that hard to understand. As you also mention, it is a preference of radical feminism to build a feminism on criticism alone” (Güneş, in ibid., p. 67).

²⁵¹ *Parçalı* is an adjective commonly used by DÖKH activists to pronounce the non-intersectional, add and mix quality of most Western feminisms, even when they claim to be intersectional (or multicultural) in a liberal fashion. For a discussion, see Section 8.3.

²⁵² Ünlü (2018b) calls this representational relation as the “Turkishness contract,” see Chapter 7.

²⁵³ *Jineoloji* thought inspires the Rojava model, too. See *The Communes of Rojava: A Model In Societal Self Direction* (Neighbor Democracy, 2018).

²⁵⁴ In 2014, DÖKH transformed into the Free Women’s Congress (*Kongreya Jinên Azad*, KJA), see Section 6.1. Following the state ban in 2016, KJA renamed itself as the Free Women’s Movement (*Tevgera Jinên Azad*, TJA).

²⁵⁵ This was until 2015 when the government gradually started suspending elected mayors in the Kurdish municipalities to replace them with appointed trustees. According to HDP’s 2020 report, the trustee appointments include 3 metropolitan, 10 provincial, 63 district, and 22 town municipalities. In parallel to this, around 15,000 workers and civil servants working in the public sector and the municipalities and around 300 mughtars were discarded. 93 co-mayors and hundreds of municipal council members were arrested. 15 co-mayors received a sentence (Genç, 2020).

²⁵⁶ “They talk about local autonomy and not working with the state. As Mor Çatu, I can’t say such thing, I don’t have an alternative model to the state. I don’t have a municipality, which means I have no mechanisms to realize that” (Defne).

²⁵⁷ The feminisms that *jineoloji* critically engages with encompass all strands of feminisms that the KWM encounters in Turkey. But, anti-nationalist, anti-system, multicultural, radical, or socialist-feminists seem to disown these criticisms mainly in two ways: a) Thinking that these criticisms only apply to liberal or nationalist feminisms that they are not (see endnote 312), or b) By appropriating the efforts of anti-racist, decolonial feminisms in the world, they will argue that “feminism” has already raised similar questions or criticisms, so there is no need for a new intervention under a new name, or present a new, methodology, epistemology, or scientific paradigm (see endnote 308).

We can, for example, see an application of these two strategies in the following assertion by Al-Ali & Käser, (2020, p. 1), “Our article critically assesses the claim of Kurdish women activists who present *Jineoloji* as a new science and paradigm that goes beyond feminism while developing our argument that *Jineoloji* represents an important continuation of critical interventions made by marginalized women activists and academics transnationally.” The authors appreciate *jineoloji* for it is “in opposition to the dominant social science paradigm based on positivist, Western-focused, and androcentric knowledge production,” but at the same time erase its singularity by undermining its claim to a sovereign epistemology rooted in a concrete racial colonial context that goes beyond feminism in its own way. This rush to deny the novelty of an epistemology works to assimilate it within other critical epistemologies and disregards the multiplicity in the ways in which different Indigenous epistemologies go beyond Western-oriented feminisms. For Kurdish women’s strong criticism of the Al-Ali & Käser article, see (*Jineoloji Committee Europe*, 2021).

²⁵⁸ It shares the same root with the Arabic word *cawāz* that means “pass, consent, permit.”

²⁵⁹ Narrowing of the broader meaning of *tecavüz* – to grab, to seize, carry off by force – to sexual assault is more pertinent to the English language than Turkish.

Chapter 6

²⁶⁰ During the negotiated withdrawal behind the Turkish border, the Turkish army conducted targeted eliminations of the PKK, ambushed the guerilla fighters, killing an estimated 500 militants.

²⁶¹ The longest-lasting unilateral ceasefire between 1999–2004 overlapped with the EU decision to grant membership candidacy to Turkey which encouraged the neo-conservative AKP government to promote a relatively more liberal, multiculturalist atmosphere by the support of the liberals. This time period helped AKP marginalize the Kemalists and the military tutelage on civilian politics, and also garner support among the Kurds by claiming the Kurdish movement as anti-Islamic. The highly hesitant AKP reforms accommodated limited individual rights and were uncompromising on recognising Kurdish collective rights or sharing of the state sovereignty (these reforms included lifting of the state-of-emergency in Kurdistan, lifting of the death penalty, an exclusionary reparations program for the internally displaced, an official TV channel broadcasting in Kurdish, the legalization of private Kurdish language courses). In 2009, when AKP claimed to initiate the so-called Kurdish Opening, it was accompanied by successive police operations (under the name Operation KCK). Following these operations, the statist-Islamist political discourse of AKP, that foregrounded the Muslim identity as a supra-identity for the Kurds to maintain the Turkish ethnic hegemony, became more visible to larger sections of the Kurdish society. Meanwhile, millions of Kurdish migrants in Turkey’s west were increasingly relegated to Kurdish ghettos and they were characterized as backward, un-modern or terrorist. Turkish nationalism, lynching attempts, military massacres were stepped up. Across Northern Kurdistan, people faced high levels of unemployment, lack of education, and dependence on unpredictable forms of state social-aid. Rates of domestic violence, split families, forced prostitution, drugs-

use, and petty criminality soared. Kurdish organizations, municipal units, and local networks attempting to address the impacts of these state violations were overburdened. See (Çiçek, 2013; Özsoy, 2013; Yörük & Özsoy, 2013).

²⁶² The *inşa* (building) process of the confederal self-administration prescribed in this declaration was hampered by the counter-terrorism campaign Operation KCK, launched on both military and legal grounds. Nonetheless, the declaration of the demanded status, while brutally retaliated by the state, helped clarify in the mind of Turkish progressives what Kurdish people wanted.

²⁶³ KCK stands for *Koma Civakên Kurdistan* (Union of Kurdistan Communities, 2005). KCK is an alternative institutional framework, an umbrella structure that provides political representation to the Kurds of Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria, and allows them to organize as a nation within the existing state boundaries. Turkish establishment regarded this bottom-up organizing as a “parallel state structure” endangering the existence of the Turkish state. In a purge extending over a few years, around 8,000 Kurdish politicians, activists, and intellectuals were detained/arrested for their alleged links to the PKK, with no justification/indictment against them until the first court hearings in 2013–14. DÖKH activists in irony stressed that Turkish state exercised a 40 percent gender-quota in detention. State allegations against DÖKH targeted the Kurdish gender-quota system and the concerted actions observed among the Kurdish municipalities and the women’s assemblies/organizations (Aktaş, 2012, p. 285). Attending the March 8 rallies, organising women-only activities, or not getting married were presented as evidence to the woman captives’ membership to the PKK.

²⁶⁴ In Amed (April/May); in Ankara (July); at Berçelan Upland on the Iranian/Iraqi border (August); at Istanbul Maçka Park for a women’s peace festival (late August); in Istanbul and simultaneously at the border town of Silopî to welcome the Peace Group (October). The Kurdish activists I talked to recall the solidarity actions of that summer as the most memorable. Of significance was the overnight Peace Watch at the border (Berçelan) where the military operations intensely continued, while another group simultaneously camped out at the Istanbul Taksim Square with the slogan “Let the operations stop, Give way to peace,” to make it visible in the west

²⁶⁵ One notable exception was the 2007 campaign *Vakti Geldi* (The Time Has Come [for peace]) by a group of 122 artist, journalist, academic, and writer women. The Peace Council of Turkey was also founded that year in response to KÖH’s call, composed of around 375 mix-gender public figures, to put pressure on the state, as well as mobilize a peace movement on the Turkish side.

²⁶⁶ This included securitization of the Kurdish question to the extent of openly advocating the Sri Lankan model of merciless political and physical extermination (Garrie, 2018). This was in part due to the changing power balances in the Middle East and the emerging possibility of Kurds gaining an autonomous status in Syria and Iraq that threatened Turkey. On June 26, 2015, President Erdoğan of Turkey tweeted, “I call out to the world. Whatever the cost may be, in no wise will we permit a [Kurdish] state to be established in Northern Syria, Southern Turkey.”

²⁶⁷ Öcalan is held in solitary confinement at Turkey’s İmralı Island Prison since 1999. Other than the long periods of absolute isolation imposed on him, he continued to give direction to the Kurdish movement through his lawyers, his prison notes published in the Kurdish newspapers, and more than a dozen of books that he authored while in prison. Öcalan has been a persistent voice for peace and drafted a roadmap for peaceful resolution.

²⁶⁸ The resumption happened on the 68th day of the hunger strike led by the Kurdish women political prisoners. Soon after the start of official communications with Öcalan, Kurdish woman politicians Sakine Cansız, Fidan Doğan, and Leyla Şaylemez were assassinated in Paris on Jan. 9. The resolution process was launched by Öcalan’s message read to the public at the 2013 Amed Newroz attended by hundreds of thousands of Kurds. DÖKH dedicated to Sakine Cansız the 2013 Middle East Women’s Conference that was held in Amed and attended by more than 250 women from 26 countries. The Middle East Women’s Conference and the European chapter of World March of Women declared Jan. 9 as the “International Day of Action against the Murder of Political Women” (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2013).

²⁶⁹ *Koma Jinên Blind* (Women’s Higher Union), the autonomous umbrella organization of women within KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union).

²⁷⁰ “The members of the KJB invoked the failed negotiation processes of the past that had ended with many negative consequences on their part – especially their previous withdrawal process in 1999, thus emphasizing that this current process could not be carried further without definite legal guarantees” (BIKG, 2013, p. 32).

²⁷¹ She also said that women had to discuss issues like the abolition of the village guard system, return of the forcefully displaced to their villages, release of the political prisoners, and disclosure of the missing and murdered people. Turkish women had to raise awareness on the ongoing military build-up in Kurdistan, construction of the new *kalekols*

(fortress-like, high-security military outposts) and “security dams” (hydroelectric power-plants built to obstruct guerilla mobility), and the increasing political oppression that create profound insecurity and distrust among the local Kurds.

The negotiation centered approach of the Kurdish activists not only sought for decriminalization of DÖKH but also of the KJB. They emphasized the need for more contacts with the KJB and the Rojava representatives to deliver their peace messages to the Turkish people. Upon DÖKH’s insistence, a small BİKG delegation visited the KJB guerilla camps in Iraq. One young feminist told me that KJB criticized them for not viewing the KJB as other than an armed force. “They asked, ‘Have you ever thought about the guerilla women’s truth?’ That was true, we kept talking about the war crimes but never about the guerilla women’s truth. Perhaps partly because we thought DÖKH was our interlocutor. But partly because we did not know what kind of a lifeworld it was, or how active there the women were” (Gökçe). As the first ever TFM group visiting the KJB, it was a remarkable step forward in recognizing the guerilla women as political interlocutors. Unfortunately, it did not create any publicity effect, as BİKG avoided media coverage to share its testimony. The BİKG Report on the Process of Resolution (2013, p. 32) briefly summarizes the visit: “As peace negotiations began between the State of Turkey and the PKK, the KCK instituted a system of co-chairpersonship. ... At the same time, the KCK in general was transformed into a structure within which women have completely equal representation. These were pointed out during the meeting as both important gains of the struggle being carried out by the Kurdish women’s movement for years, and vital indicators of the determination of the Kurdish women movement and of the KJB to take part in the peace process as equal parties to the process.”

²⁷² One activist criticized such meeting as “conflict-resolution talk in a constant mode of teaching and researching.”

²⁷³ To that end, role of women in the conflict resolution processes all around the world and their use of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 were heatedly studied.

²⁷⁴ Only a small group of academics and graduate students working on the “women’s truths” continued meeting separately. They focused on collecting some archival material to document the war crimes of the 1990s.

²⁷⁵ The 2014 local elections was the first time DÖKH instituted the co-mayor system and equal gender representation.

²⁷⁶ For more on the HDK’s mission, see (Kışanak, 2018, pp. 34, 263).

²⁷⁷ KJA/TJA has 12 commissions: Economy, Politics, Social Work, Cultural Work, Diplomacy, Law and Human Rights, Ecology, Press and Media, Peoples and Faith Communities, Language and Education, Local Governments, Self-Defense and Struggle Against Violence. The General Assembly of KJA consists of 501 delegates elected for a term of two years. The General Assembly elects the Permanent Assembly of 101 individuals. Among them 45 individuals are elected to form the Executive Coordination and 11 individuals are elected for the Coordination. KJA applies a 60 percent quota for the peoples and faith communities, 30 percent quota for the organized entities and 10 percent quota for the individuals, besides an overall 20 percent quota for young women.

²⁷⁸ Some notable BİKG actions of late 2014 were: A march and a park forum (Istanbul Yoğurtçu) under the slogan *From Gaza to Rojava, from Sinjar to Maxmur, Women Stand against Massacres*. Peace actions on Sept. 8 in 20 spots across Turkey under the slogan *Women in Sinjar are not Alone*. A demonstration in Istanbul Kadıköy under the slogan *War in Kobanî, Peace in Turkey does not Work*, in parallel to the Oct. 6–8 Kobanî protests in Kurdistan. A solidarity trip in Oct. to the border town of Suruç with the motto *This is not How you Make Peace*. An anti-war action in Oct. at the Istanbul Atatürk Airport in solidarity with the Kurdish resistance in Kobanî (47 activists were put on trial and acquitted). A humanitarian-aid campaign between Oct. 2014 and Jan. 2015 for the Ezidi women and children who sought refuge in Northern Kurdistan, entitled, *I am Here to Share with the Women of Kobanî and Sinjar*.

²⁷⁹ The UN Human Rights Office reported that, between July 2015 and December 2016, in total some 2,000 people were killed including local residents, amongst whom women and children, as well as close to 800 members of the security forces, while between 350,000 and 500,000 people were displaced. Satellite images showed the “enormous scale of destruction of the housing stock by heavy weaponry” (OHCHR, 2017).

²⁸⁰ These petitions called for a return to peace negotiations and an end to death, destruction, and displacement.

²⁸¹ Along with hundreds of other HDP members and executives, Sebahat Tuncel is held as a political prisoner since Nov. 2016, sentenced for membership to and making propaganda for a terrorist organization.

²⁸² Alevi women at BİKG were also unsympathetic to going to a Sunni social base.

²⁸³ Between 2009–2012, before BİKG activities were essentially suspended for more than a year, its most prominent actions were street activities such as the *Peace Spots*. *Peace Spots* set up usually during the weekends in different districts of Istanbul such as Kadıköy, Kartal, Beyoğlu, and Esenyurt, symbolized a public space to talk about peace and its relation to women. The initial idea was to spread these spots across the city. A large circular cloth on the ground with colorful femina signs would attract the passer by. Once they even set up a *Peace Tent* in Esenyurt, a lower-middle-income district largely populated by forcibly displaced Kurdish migrants. In workshops and forums, the university students/academics or feminist groups interested in the Kurdish issue discussed what peace looks like from a woman's perspective and the ways to spread the peace word.

²⁸⁴ Kurdish activists generally use terms like *egemen tavir* to address the whiteness of Turkish allies. They spare the terms like “racist, colonialist, or fascist” to those who openly deny the Kurdish existence.

²⁸⁵ Learning late, BİKG was caught unprepared, for example, for protesting the construction of high-security military-posts (*kalekols*) across Kurdistan immediately after the guerilla withdrawal. With these posts, the Turkish state aimed to gain full military control over the guerilla routes and civilian passages and harass local people and women in their intimate spaces.

²⁸⁶ Ironically, the feminists critical of men for laying the burden of teaching feminism on women, as the Turkish beneficiaries of colonialism, may lay a similar burden on the colonized and not do their homework.

²⁸⁷ The KJB expressed, a delegation member reported, distrust in organizations like UN that visited them often with their own agendas, and that the KCK was already negotiating its own resolution plan with the government. Turkish delegation in response argued that an internationally binding, legal ground of legitimacy could empower Turkish peace activists in educating the society that there are other similar conflict situations in the world, so that people would open up to calling this a conflict or a struggle for rights, and not terror. Also, the Resolution 1325 provided a ready template to follow for the legal reforms on women's rights, so that they would not have to reinvent the wheel.

²⁸⁸ The Contact and Observation workgroup visited the *Parliamentary Commission for the Resolution Process*, the *Wise People's Committee*, the AKP, CHP, and BDP women deputies, the KJB guerilla, and some women's organizations. They observed the impact of the guerilla withdrawal on the lives of local women, paid several visits to Kurdistan and some cities in the west of Turkey to conduct conversations with women's groups.

²⁸⁹ The report categorized the truth regimes in Turkey in five groups: The truth of the victims, the women, the west [of Turkey], the state, and the perpetrators. The “women's truth” was defined as “the destruction wrought in women's lives as a result of state policies targeting women during war and of the strengthening of the patriarchal system in these situations. All throughout war, women's bodies have also been made into battlefields” (2013, p. 50). My question is, who are these women? If Kurdish, do Kurdish women define their truth solely in terms of rape, harassment, and the violations of their gender rights? Quoting directly from them could have complicated the representation of their truth and allow Turkish women to engage with a more complex historical reality. What about the Turkish women's truth? It was prompted only under the heading “Truth of the west” as “all that has been told through the media and other official bodies throughout the 30-year-long war” (ibid., p. 42). BİKG visits to political parties and a few local women's organizations give a sense of the mainstream Turkish women's approach to peace, but those women were not marked as Turkish/Turkified. This ethnonational invisibility and absence of a detailed discussion around the historicity of the situated truths of Turks worked to obfuscate the national position of BİKG, too, where it spoke from, whom it allied with, and whom it wanted to reach. “Perpetrators' truth” again remained ahistorical, defined as the state security rank and file responsible for the violations. Turkish women's varying forms of direct or indirect complicity in the perpetuation of war was not problematized in any of these categories (discussed in Chapter 7).

²⁹⁰ The Constitutional Court of Turkey persistently invokes a rigid unitary state identity in which sovereignty within a fixed territorial unity is solely afforded to a single nation. The Court conceives “territorial and national integrity” and the notion of “right to self-determination” as mutually exclusive; “in a unitary state, there is a sole sovereignty, and there *should* also be one nation. A federal system is thus not acceptable since it makes possible the existence of more than one sovereignty belonging to different nations” (Bayır, 2013, p. 16). The Constitutional Court defends rulings against political formations defending diversity, protection of differences, minority or group rights, and territorial autonomy, explaining “that such claims result in creating minorities, that they are tantamount to regionalism and racism, and that they go against the principle of egalitarianism” (ibid., 16) Also, see (Bayır, 2018).

²⁹¹ I was trying to discover my own voice as a Turkish ally while at the same time trying to understand other Turkish women who arrived at BİKG from different life trajectories and political struggles. My past political experience was in *Kurdistani* (Kurdistan-based) organizations, whereas most BİKG volunteers have been politicized on the Turkish side. I

wanted to be open to the insights of these seasoned Turkish activists in Istanbul, but at the same time stay loyal to the friendships and encounters that were shaping me in Amed.

²⁹² A Kurdish woman raised in the west of Turkey after her family has migrated in the early 70s from Kurdistan. Her political life was largely shaped within TFM. Together with few other SFK members who shared similar migration histories, I could observe that they tended to be more upfront in challenging the lack of interest or the misinformed ideas with regards to the Kurdish question at SFK.

²⁹³ The UNSCR 1325 has been critiqued in detail by feminist scholars worldwide (N. Pratt, 2013; N. Pratt & Richter-Devroe, 2011; Richter-Devroe, 2012; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2010; Shepherd, 2008).

²⁹⁴ The TFM insistence on individual-base representation again, intended or not, worked to ensure that “safer space.”

²⁹⁵ There was a shift between the language of earlier BİKG texts and those during the 2013–2015 peace talks. The final resolutions of the founding 2009 meetings named the simultaneous struggle of women against racism and sexism without collapsing one into the other, whereas during the peace talks the focus shifted more to a gender-exclusive agenda mostly concerned with the economic impact of war on women and the provoked masculinity and male-violence resulting from militarization.

²⁹⁶ The DÖKH member organization Peace Mothers Initiative consists of the mothers of Kurdish people in the mountains, in prisons, or who had lost their lives in the war. It has been the most persistent women's peace group in Turkey since its foundation in 1999.

²⁹⁷ A feminist in the group writes, “Although listening to the decades-long suffering and pain of the Peace Mothers hurt us so bad in the heart, it was at the same time so empowering to see them still fighting, telling us stories in front of the bus with laughter and folk songs. It motivated us for the struggle and life greatly to see them holding up despite years-long state and soldier violence, and hear them talk about the Kobanî fighters as their own children” (Konakçı, 2014).

²⁹⁸ The government refugee camps mainly accepted the Sunni Arab refugees and denied services to the Kurdish, Ezidi, Assyrian, or Alevi populations. When the city of Kobanî had to be evacuated of its mostly Kurdish inhabitants due to heavy ISIS attacks, it was only the Kurdish municipalities in Northern Kurdistan that organized provision of shelter and basic supplies for the displaced. I volunteered as a translator for the international delegations visiting some of those refugee camps.

²⁹⁹ The few actions were organized by the local grassroots groups in migrant-majority districts, such as Esenyurt, Kartal, Bakırköy, Maltepe, Esenyalı, and Ümraniye in Istanbul.

³⁰⁰ According to DÖKH member Newal, BİKG activists thought that including Öcalan’s freedom in their agenda would make it difficult to reach common women or the women from different political parties: “Of course, I do not embrace this approach; I want everyone fighting for peace to know that democratic peace is impossible without the freedom of political prisoners. But we never made this a precondition to alliance.”

³⁰¹ An official committee made up of 63 prominent journalists, artists, academics, and civil society representatives selected by the AKP government. In 2013, the committee was commissioned to work in the seven official regions of Turkey to organise meetings with the local actors and report back on their approaches to the peace process.

Chapter 7

³⁰² “That some people lived on this land – and still do – was something that must not be spoken of. You would indeed live without knowing it if you grew up in a city that did not receive Kurdish migration. I think this shows the power of denial the best. It is absurd to interpret this as ‘racism did not exist back then.’ It did exist, but we were supposed not to know about it. We had to live without knowing about our perpetration in the perpetuation of the system. Whenever an encounter occurred, there was cruelty against what looked different, but that actually was a hatred felt towards everyone who did not fit the definition, speak the ‘Istanbul Turkish,’ and look ‘modern.’ Hatred towards those who wore headscarf was much more openly expressed, for example. But naming and recognizing the Kurd only became possible thanks to the Kurdish struggle. Personally, I learned about it at METU when I saw the protesting Kurds and asked, ‘what the heck is this?’ That whole night I read about the Diyarbakır Prison, and for years I spilt out anger against my family asking, ‘How come were you not aware of this?’ When I think about it now, they really did not know about it. We were rather programmed to exalt Turkishness and define an amorphous category of the traitors that could encompass everyone outside, and that could expand to include any new identity at any moment” (Arıkan, 2017).

³⁰³ The article writes, “Everyone bound to the Turkish State through the bond of citizenship is a Turk.”

³⁰⁴ The ethnocultural groups (Albanian, Bosnian, Macedonian, Greek, Pomak, Circassian, Azeri, etc.) that immigrated to Anatolia during the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries mainly from the lost Ottoman territories in the Balkans and Southern Russia. These immigrant Muslim groups played critical roles in the constitution of Turkishness contract because they felt great *öfke ve hınç* (rage and grudge) against the Christians, and were fearful of living the same massacres in their new homeland (Ünlü, 2018b, pp. 91–92). As a Jewish scholar from Turkey, Navaro-Yashin puts it, “[M]any people were brought up to be Turks in republican institutions, whether their ancestors be Abkhazian Muslim immigrants from Georgia, Slavic converts to Islam from Serbia, Armenian speaking Muslims of the Hemşin region, or Arabs, Kurds, Lazs, Circassians, or other Turkishness was internalized and adopted to varying extents and in various fashions. Some people had an easier time in assuming Turkishness as an identity than others Some were willing to assimilate or to assume this identity, while others were not. This was less problematic for Circassians and Albanians, for example, than it has been for Kurds; easier for the Muslim-born and difficult for the willing Jew” (2002, p. 49).

³⁰⁵ PhD students/graduates with degrees in North American universities, who have been joining the weekly *jineoloji* classes held in Amed. I also was a Turkish student attending those classes.

³⁰⁶ The new theses developed around this imagination include the Women’s Liberation Ideology, Separation Theory (*Kopuş Teorisi*), Free Co-life of Genders (*Özgür Eş Yaşam*), Project to Re-Educate Men, and *Jineoloji*.

³⁰⁷ “First, why was the need for something like [*jineoloji*]? Second, I find your criticisms in relation to modes of organising and action very valuable, but I think proposing a new concept as the Kurdish Women’s Movement and trying to come up with something new will divide your movement’s energy. You already have an organisation established over the years. I feel like proposing a new concept from a different channel divides your power” (Eda, in Aras 2012, p. 77).

³⁰⁸ “I think the issues you discuss in *jineoloji* are already discussed in feminism, in that sense I think feminism encapsulates *jineoloji*” (Eda, in Aras 2012, p. 77).

³⁰⁹ Some independent Kurdish feminists are critical of KÖH’s shyness in talking about the ethnocultural difference, “I think DÖKH discusses the ethnicity/race issue from a position of [inferiority] complex. They cannot openly say, ‘We are a Kurdish group.’ Yet, it is vital to name it confidently” (Gülay).

³¹⁰ *Töre cinayeti* in western Turkey is associated with the “backward, irrational” Kurdish tribal customs. For a critique of this orientalist imagination, see (Sirman, 2010).

³¹¹ Turkish feminists frequently get irritated by Öcalan’s terminology and the talking style. For instance, they thought *karılaştırma* (wife-ization) was a sexist term, as *karı* is perceived to be a slang word for woman when used alone, without the word *koca* (husband) that makes it heard as “wife.”

³¹² Since anti-system/anti-nationalist feminists believe not to be liberal, *jineoloji*’s criticisms seem invalid. Here is another feminist, “What *jineoloji* text talks about [critically] is the liberal feminism because it utters sentences like, ‘It will be self-deceiving for existing feminist movements to claim that they had become anti-system powers divorced from liberalism’” (Esen, in Aras 2012, p. 65).

³¹³ “I went to Amed in 2013 for the first time. Then it became clear in my mind that many discussions we make here [in Istanbul] are simply meaningless. I mean that place is another country already. Last year, I attended a workshop in Amed in a municipality building. On TV was a music channel. In the video clip, Öcalan walked on top of the mountains. I found it so odd for a moment because the venue was a municipality after all. Then I laughed at myself, how funny it was for us to debate Öcalan’s leadership in the west. It was a symbolic moment of enlightenment for me that whether we accept it or not, a different reality already exists. That year, I also attended the Amed Newroz. The kids were shouting at us, “Look, white people are here!” When you go to the region, that feeling [of being white] intensifies” (İpek).

³¹⁴ This was the second time since 2005 that the assembly meeting was held in Amed. See endnote 190 for more on the history of the relations between the KWM and the shelters assembly.

³¹⁵ Ann Stoler asserts that racialized notions of sexuality and gender were not by-products of colonial enterprise, but foundational to it (Benard, 2016, p. 1).

³¹⁶ Arin Mirkan was a commander in the Women's Defence Units (YPJ) who died fighting against ISIS during the siege of Kobanî on Oct. 5, 2014. She carried out a suicide bomb attack.

³¹⁷ “Colonial discourse produces the colonised as a social reality which is at once an other and yet entirely knowable and visible” (Bhabba, 2004, p. 71).

³¹⁸ According to Arat-Koç, the two most vocal and visible feminist perspectives in Turkey – the liberal bourgeois and the neo-Kemalist ones – are influenced by the neoliberal, urban (preferably Istanbulite), “modern” and “Western” white-Turk ideology that takes an aggressive, “orientalist and culturally racist position against non-white Turks,” and “tends to blame Turkey’s exclusion from Europe and ‘the West’ on these ‘other Turks’ who present a backward image of Turkey” (2007, p. 47) (Here “white-Turk” again is used as a religio-class-based concept). These secularist, urban, middle-class feminisms that are much less critical of the men and patriarchal practices of their own class/culture than of those of the “other Turkey” identify with a certain conception of the West, as both the center of civilization and the global capitalism, and “overlap with the official state discourses and practices on feminism.” She considers socialist-feminism as more inclusive but still implicitly sharing the same secularist, white-Turk orientalism with regards to the Middle East: open to the European and American feminist groups, while hardly engaging with any groups in the Middle East.

³¹⁹ See F. Fanon, A. Memmi, E. Said, A. Öcalan, R. Grosfoguel, W. Mignolo, A. Simpson, S. Thobani, G. Couldhard, H. Boutheldja, T. Goldberg, A. Stoler, E. Tuck, H. Bhabba, etc.

³²⁰ He suggests using the “capitalist/patriarchal, Western-centric/Christian-centric, modern/colonial world system,” instead of a mere “capitalist world system” (Grosfoguel, 2011).

³²¹ This selective engagement is also true for the general scholarship on race in Turkey. Earlier scholars of race grappled with how the concept of race was used by Turkish intellectuals to essentialize Turkishness, the Turkish nationalism, and the racial nation-state as defense tools against the “civilized Europeans.” What was not examined, however, was how these defense strategies, under the rubric of westernization and modernization, were at the same deployed to erase the indigenous cultures of Anatolia and Mesopotamia and institute colonial technologies of territorial control. Most post-2000 studies on anti-Kurd racism again evolved independently from anti/decolonial perspectives or questions of sovereignty. This scholarship recognized Kurdishness as a cultural identity to be included, not a socio-political entity structuring the socio-spatial order in Turkey.

³²² As Simpson and Smith (2014, p. 17) put it, “Marxism is not helpful for Native studies because of its investment in economic developmentalism, its Eurocentrism, and its emphasis on labor exploitation rather than land appropriation.” See also (Saldaña-Portillo, 2003).

Chapter 8

³²³ *Kadınlar Birlikte Güçlü* (Women Strong Together) was founded in 2017 as a coordination platform following a campaign run by the *Urgent Action Against Women’s Murders Group* (2014–2017). The platform comprises of women from leftist organisations, labor unions, political parties, and independent/organised feminists from different cities. See (Eralp, 2018).

³²⁴ In each pair, the former is a Turkish city, the latter Kurdish.

³²⁵ SFK feminist Selma explains the disbanding of the feminist Amargi cooperative (see Section 8.2) with the expired need for its “identity politics”: “Homophobia and heterosexism later found a more credible voice in the LGBTQ groups in Turkey, while DÖKH better-represented the oppression of cultural identities.”

³²⁶ Let me note that platform traditions for coordinated action varies from city to city. Ankara Women’s Platform, for example, seemed more inclusive in bringing together women from different political backgrounds, whereas in Istanbul, March 8 platforms were often the only spaces to touch base with non-feminist women (until 2017, see endnote 323). As far as I could observe, separating the feminist movement from the women’s movement was not a central concern in cities other than Istanbul. An Ankara feminist adds, “since there are not many feminist organisations in other cities, they organise together with other women” (Yasemin, in Karakuş & Akkaya, 2011, p. 84).

³²⁷ Studied mostly from a scholarship that represents the “Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism,” rather than a decolonial, anti-racist scholarship that represents “a critique of Eurocentrism from subalternized and silenced knowledges” (Walter Mignolo, quoted in Ramón Grosfoguel, 2011).

³²⁸ Some SFK activists I interviewed found Amargi white for not doing class politics, while Amargi activists found SFK white for ignoring the cultural difference and sexuality issues.

³²⁹ A veteran radical-feminist says, “We would be disturbing them if we tried to mingle with the grassroots folks. The real problem is our desire to go to the neighborhoods maintaining the same old leftist habits. Those who do that cannot be feminists. I want every woman to be liberated, but would not go to a neighborhood to advocate for it.”

³³⁰ See (“Dosya: Politik Bir Hareket Olarak Feminizm,” 2011) for various examples to this assertion.

³³¹ Turkish feminists argued for individual-based participation at BİKG as well, so that it could become a “feminist” space (see Section 6.3). IFK (see endnote 344) and the Feminist Night March (see endnote 187) also embrace(d) this principle. Some women interpreted this effort as a dominating gesture of the SFK to reconfigure the feminist ground along its own ideals, whereas SFK argued that this was to prevent the group identities surpass the broader interests of feminism.

³³² The debate between three prominent Turkish feminists in a 2011 Amargi workshop on who the feminist subject is, I believe illustrates the shortcomings of this hegemonic circular logic which isolates the feminist subject from its “constitutive outside,” that is, the sociopolitical circumstances that create it (Ahıska et al., 2011).

³³³ For a discussion on “middle-classization” of the Kurdish politics, see (Küçük, 2018).

³³⁴ Socialist-feminist Filiz Karakuş (in Acar Savran, 2011, p. 232) explains why they moved towards building an independent feminist political movement.

³³⁵ Support campaign for *vesikalı* (licensed women to work in a brothel) candidates in the 2007 general elections; solidarity campaign with the women workers at strike at Novamed; Purple Needle campaign (repeat); protest against the “social security and general health insurance law” (SSGSS) (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2008a).

³³⁶ The small-groups that gathered in different locations aimed to encourage personal empowerment, face-to-face contact, and more participation. The commissions, on the other hand, were to organise campaigns, publish the SFK magazine, regulate the membership and finance, etc. SFK tried to enforce the rule that everyone in a small-group attends a commission as well.

³³⁷ Around 150 members in Istanbul and 100–150 more in other cities.

³³⁸ I was told that there were three main groups at SFK. One group was either unsympathetic, silent, or unaware of the Kurdish question. Another group believed that SFK was not a place to show solidarity to other oppressed groups, had no such power, and should better concentrate on “patriarchy specifically.” And a smaller third group thought women need not organize for mixed-gender issues such as peace but could join the existing political bodies that fight for peace. The quote comes from a member of the third group.

³³⁹ As for Kurdish activists, the growing tendency at the SFK to refer to BİKG or the Gezi Uprising as distraction sounded alarming: “It is odd to see that Gezi intimidated them more than energize and help them recuperate” (Newal).

³⁴⁰ The SFK introduction letter titled “Who are we?” describes the wide diversity within the collective solely in terms of age, occupation, and political past (feminist, leftist/socialist, or none) (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2008a).

³⁴¹ “We believe that discussing and organizing around our differences within socialist-feminism [and not socialism] requires that the socialist-feminist women that we walk together are not part of any autonomous [meaning leftist affiliated] group doing women’s politics” (Sosyalist Feminist Kolektif, 2008c).

³⁴² Selma also underlined that when *Kurtuluş* in the early 2000s came to them with the offer to form a feminist group, she refused: “I said ‘No, that would be *sahtekarlık* (dishonest). That will link us to another political belonging. We can be feminists individually, but it is wrong to form a feminist group within *Kurtuluş*. *Ayıp* (disgraceful) to the feminist movement. If our political belonging to *Kurtuluş* bonds us together, then it should not bring about a feminist organization. A mixed-gender organization’s women’s politics coheres with its general politics. This does not mean that women there only do what the men say. Many at SFK think like that. I find it unfair. These women are an organic part of their organizations and that is how their mind works. Women can do women’s politics in mixed-gender organizations, too. But obviously it cannot be called the ‘women’s liberation struggle.’ I do not mean to say one is more valuable than the other. But you cannot be both here and there. That I know for sure.” Significant in this account is that even as Selma

disagrees with the feminist perception that women in mixed-gender institutions are under the influence of men, she does not think their politics can be named the “women’s liberation struggle,” either. As such, she welcomes through the back door the hierarchical relation that she supposedly denies.

³⁴³ “Why is organised feminist politics weak today even as tens of thousands of women attend the Feminist Night March every year? What are the differences and commonalities between doing organised feminist politics and the mobilization of women?” (Çatlak Zemin, 2017).

³⁴⁴ The collective was initiated in 2010 by SFK to serve as a year-round umbrella for “*sistem-dışı* (anti-system) feminists”* in Istanbul. IFK was a product of the feminist campaign, “We Rebel Against Murders of Women”. Initially, women represented their own groups at IFK. In time, as some groups opted out or conflicted, the collective introduced an individual-based participation rule, which meant that the collective would be sum of the individuals whoever attended at a given time, in no representational linkage to their own groups. IFK would be open to all feminists; it would expand or shrink depending on the level of attendance. In a few years, however, its boundary ipso facto rigidified and got constricted around the same small number of women, mostly from SFK; taking a less participative, transparent, and accessible form than initially desired. In the absence of participation methods that allowed open representation/negotiation of the group perspectives, uniformity increased. This led to a constant ambiguity and tension whether IFK was a closed group/organization accountable to each other over certain terms and conditions, or a loose-boundary, umbrella, *zemin* (ground) open to all feminists. Who did IFK actually represent and who could represent IFK in its external relations? *Zemin* implied plurality, but IFK looked too uniform, unable to attract newer groups or individuals. The legitimacy problem arising from this representation crisis turned unsustainable during SFK’s weakening. Now, some SFK members felt excluded in the process of deciding on the future of IFK. Late 2015, when for the first time a non-SFK majority group wanted to reshape IFK to adapt to the new feminist terrain in Istanbul and replace a predefined understanding of feminism with something collectively arrived at, in part due to the diminished SFK support and in part the political landscape that attacked women on multiple fronts, the attempt did not come through. IFK went defunct.

*Independent/organised women who recognized patriarchy as a system and shared a feminist tradition dating back to the early 80s.

³⁴⁵ Amargi means “freedom” and “return to mother” in the ancient Sumerian language. According to *jineolojî*, Sumerian state was the first to institutionalise patriarchy on a civilizational level. “The seventeen women who founded Amargi were mostly young academicians, most of them being sociologists working at several universities in Istanbul. Among them, Pınar Selek was a prominent figure known to many people due to a prosecution over her alleged involvement in a bomb attack in Istanbul in 1998. There were also a number of young Kurdish women with prior active political background, mostly university students or schoolteachers; and there were also three transsexual women” (Özakın, 2012, p. 51–52). Turkish sociologist Selek was the charismatic, dedicated, renowned spokeswoman of Amargi whose vision and efforts were seen as foundational to Amargi.

³⁴⁶ From then onwards, the Kurdish question as one central area of action and street/grassroots activism seeking participation of the oppressed groups were replaced primarily by the LBTQ issues, literature/film/feminism workshops, publishing and bookstore activities, alongside fund-based projects. Three-monthly periodical Amargi Magazine (Feminist Theory and Politics Review, 2006–2016) aimed at interaction of the feminist academy with activism. Due to the changing volunteer profile attracted by the magazine circle and the seminars mostly held by academics, from 2005–6 onward, Amargi appeared more like a conventional closed-group focused on critical analysis. This was the very organizational model that Amargi questioned at its onset. Paid professional work and donor-funding introduced after 2005 further added to the internal challenges.

³⁴⁷ “It was *Mor Çatı* [shelter] in the early 90s, *Pazartesi* Magazine in the late 90s, *Amargi* in early to mid-2000s, and IFK and SFK in the 2010s that would come to a lay person’s mind interested in feminism in Turkey” (Azra).

³⁴⁸ An independent feminist recalls: “Thousands have welcomed us with open arms, with flowers. Each of us had at least five Kurdish women taking care of us. Whatever we said they were cheering. A friend said, ‘Please do not cheer, we did not do anything to deserve your cheering.’ She was crying. We were welcomed like a state delegation, they respected us so much, so much! But we would not be able to do much at all, we felt so down. They told us the whole story; they told it for days... They demand peace... But we will return and will be able to do nothing.”

³⁴⁹ Local headdress made of muslin, symbolizes peace. In Kurdish culture, there is a tradition that a conflict ends when an elder woman throws her *dolbent* on the floor.

³⁵⁰ Carried out by the Turkish General Staff and also ÇATOMs (Multi-Purpose Community Centres) founded in 1995 across Kurdistan to offer literacy, reproductive health, home economy education for women. Necla Açıık (2002) argues that ÇATOM or KA-DER like organisations assume a prominent role in assimilation of Kurdish women.

³⁵¹ See also (Kerestecioğlu, Zengin, and Özakin, 2012) for a discussion among Istanbul feminists that inquires whether women in Amargi could stand together with their differences or not. They ask if these visits worked to overcome or reproduce the existing hierarchies among “Istanbul women” and Kurdish women.

³⁵² “The relations between components of the women’s liberation movement resemble our families that firmly close their doors on the outside world, minimize communion with those left outside, thus, isolate and disempower us,” DEHAP executive Handan Çağlayan put it (“Kurtuluşumuzu Örgütleyelim Kadın Konferansına Doğru,” 2002, p. 7).

³⁵³ Another notable event of that year was the *Women Marching Towards Each Other* campaign whose goal, besides touching base with Kurdish women, was to highlight that feminists should not speak for other women but create spaces/mediums for them to have their own voices. Women departed from Istanbul, Bursa, Ankara, Mersin, Adana, Batman, Antakya to meet in the city of Konya, the geographical centre. On the way, they met with women and collected their messages along with a piece of cloth to stitch in a patchwork. The closing meeting planned for after the women’s festival in Konya was cancelled due to constant police harassment, as was the case throughout the march (Şakir, 2018).

³⁵⁴ Amargi worked with textile workers, immigrants, Kurdish and Roman women, transsexual women, sexually abused children, sex workers, street children, and so on.

³⁵⁵ Turkey’s internationally backed extermination campaign against the PKK intensified during the unilateral ceasefire between 1999 and 2004 (see Chapter 3).

³⁵⁶ “[Selek] was reflecting over the conditions of a prospective peace process between PKK and the Turkish State, as part of her PhD thesis. She was then taken under custody, subjected to torture in order to reveal the names she was in contact with (members of PKK in Europe) and was afterwards prosecuted as the suspect of an explosion. Selek was kept in prison, waiting for the court’s decision for two and a half years and was finally released in 2000” (Özakin, 2012, p. 62). Despite being acquitted four times, the trial has been open for 20 years in 2018. She is exiled in France since 2008. “In Amargi, many months of work was put into organizing campaigns, getting signatures for a campaign statement for witnessing Pinar Selek’s personality and mentioning that ‘she was not capable of the deeds she was accused of, being a truly an antimilitarist, non-violent and feminist sociologist’” (ibid., p. 63).

³⁵⁷ For the March 8 rally (2005) banner, Kurdish women insisted on the message “We Will Stop the War,” but Selek opted for another slogan as she saw it more important, and because the former had already been repeated in Amargi for the last four years with no success (Özakin, 2012, p. 98). Kurdish women’s uninterrupted activism through both peace and wartimes is an important distinction between the Turkish and Kurdish peace activists.

³⁵⁸ “Selek and some other members criticized the PKK for the resumption of violent acts. Selek wrote an article, questioning if freedom could come through ‘the blood of the people killed.’ It was published in *Özgür Gündem*, a newspaper close to the Kurdish movement. Due to the antimilitarist principles held by Selek and other Amargi women, who rejected violence for any reason, they could no longer be allies with the Kurdish movement that changed the long-time strategy of demanding peace into armed struggle again” (Özakin, 2012, p. 98). “Around the same time some articles published in the Amargi magazine were criticizing the feminism of the Kurdish movement for not being independent of the mixed Kurdish movement and criticizing the movement for keeping women dependent on the leaders of the struggle and separate from other feminists” (ibid., p. 99).

³⁵⁹ In 2013, this time a younger group of Turkish feminists who have found out about the early Amargi through personal curiosity departed from Amargi for some overlapping reasons that the cooperative no more provided a healthy, inclusive space for different political subjects to genuinely collaborate with one another. Certain voices (non-liberal, pro-Kurdish, etc.) were systematically marginalized. See their open letter “On our departure from Amargi” (fakfukfon, 2012). This was when Amargi decided to dissolve itself.

³⁶⁰ The last antimilitarist Amargi campaign before the resumption of the armed conflict was the June 2003 *Dialogue Table for Peace* street demonstrations in Istanbul, Ankara, Mersin, and the Kurdish city of Bingöl, calling for the silencing of arms and the start of political dialogue. Demonstrators in Bingöl, 148 activists from 39 different women’s organizations, were deported from the city and put to trial for breaching the law of protest and allegedly operating under the order of the PKK (“Barış Masasına Şiddet Oturdu,” 2003).

³⁶¹ A socialist activist commented on this neglect: “I think the reason why second-wave feminism in Turkey has come to a deadlock at a certain point is that it did not want to associate with some fundamental dynamics like class, revolution, and socialism. What is the success of the Kurdish women’s movement? They learned a lot from the feminist experience. But what did they do? They turned it into a weapon in the hands of a warpower, of a national dynamic. This is more or less true for socialist women as well. We did not create the idea of ‘women’s revolution’; that is a concept that feminists produced. But we were the ones to experience what kind of a power women’s revolution might become in the hands of a mass movement. We could unite the two with a leap in consciousness which was so fortunate!”

³⁶² *Pilav üstü kuru* is a popular, everyday dish in Turkey. Haricot beans are served over rice in a way that they do not mix. Sirman uses this metaphor to describe the additive quality of their feminism that is not truly intersectional.

³⁶³ “Apart from exceptions, it is very difficult for feminists from Turkey to join the campaigns that are designed according to the objectives of the Kurdish movement and whose title and content incorporate definitions specific to that movement” (Karakuş, 2011, p. 35). “Kurdish women may certainly say ‘Let’s transcend the rape culture’ in relation to their own land. There is another type of feminism. But this will not stop me from criticizing the [rape culture] concept and it will preclude me from walking together with Kurdish women in this campaign. So, our criticism regarding the campaign was not one of ‘what kind of feminism is this?’ It was rather turning down the invitation of Kurdish friends who called feminists to join the campaign” (Nilgün, in Ahıska et al., 2011, p. 307).

³⁶⁴ Just as any success in repression of the Kurds enables the state as a stronger oppressor of the non-normative Turks, success of the Kurdish resistance disables the state and curbs its coercive power as an oppressor.

³⁶⁵ “We are able in this way to maintain our innocence and to consider that the systems that oppress us are unconnected from the ones in which we are privileged” (Fellows & Razack, 1997, p. 52).

³⁶⁶ DÖKH activist Zehra İpek, in the socialist-feminist magazine *Feminist Politika*, resents that KWM and TFM could not overcome a chaotic web of relations despite many attempts to form platforms, and asks TFM if it is sufficient to show solidarity – and that at best – as a supporter of the Kurdish side in the ongoing war (İpek, 2011). Few years later, another DÖKH activist repeats that solidarity with Kurdish or Armenian speaking women should go beyond publishing certain essays or making certain statements in Kurdish: “Going beyond ideological or political recognition, only a women’s front or network that targets the transformation of the world based on those recognised terms can advance our standing together in difference” (Yılmaz, 2014, p. 27).

³⁶⁷ “It is only by engaging with definitions of the West as defined by its others that the possibility of transcendence of the binary between the West and its Other becomes possible” (Thobani, 2012, p. 182).

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Appendix: A Sexual Harassment Allegation

In December 2010, nineteen Turkish feminist organizations launched a statement to expose a sexual harassment allegation at the prominent left-wing labor confederation KESK (Confederation of Public Workers' Unions), which involved a high-ranked executive Kurdish man and a Turkish woman laborer. The statement called women from all labor factions to condemn all responsible groups who protected the harasser and put pressure to penalize the abuser. Turkish political rivals within KESK instrumentalized this statement to initiate a media smearing campaign targeting the Kurdish labor faction, which, at the time, was on a rampant rise. High-ranking resignations from Turkish labor factions in alleged support of the feminist disclosure fueled the media debate, which shortly led to the stepping down of the accused executive. He interpreted this as a “political plot” (*Bianet*, 2010), that the internal investigation found the allegation unmerited, so public exposing was an intentional attack on the labor movement, the Kurdish women’s movement and those seeking for a resolution to the Kurdish question.

In the autonomous DÖKH (Democratic Free women’s Movement) tradition, the primary liability of women activists working with movement-affiliated entities lies with DÖKH, prior to their mixed-gender organizations. This means that any decision on women, including disciplinary actions, can only be conducted by relevant DÖKH commissions. In cases of Turkish-Kurdish joint platforms like KESK, placed in Turkey’s west, DÖKH would assign a representative to ensure coordination between the two organizations. Under the ongoing KCK arrest campaign, however, “overseeing capacity over executive problems was minimal” (Roza). Therefore, the initial investigation process mentioned above was not known to DÖKH in Kurdistan until exposed. DÖKH activists that I interviewed, 3–4 years after the incident, admitted that the KESK administration of the time failed to conduct a timely, effective and transparent investigation abiding by the feminist principle *kadının beyanı esastır* (woman’s declaration is a basis to investigation). They said that even if it was seen as a plot against the Kurdish faction, they had to remove the alleged harasser during the investigation, include women from all factions in the investigation team, and make the complainant feel safe during the process. Had these been done, women’s principles that have been fiercely practiced in the movement against all odds for so many years would not have been violated, and political rivals not given a chance to question their feminist integrity.

During my fieldwork, I observed a rupture felt between TFM-KWM as an aftereffect of this incident. Given DÖKH’s self-criticism and reassurance of their unforgiving attitude against male-domination, why did both sides feel heartbroken and betrayed? What was it that left Turkish feminists “dissatisfied” and Kurdish feminists feel “tested”?

Following the removal of the executive from KESK and his suspension in KÖH as well, DÖKH activists asked for a considerable amount of time for completion of their investigation, for the case had complex dimensions, decades-long comradeships were in question, and a detailed examination was required to arrive at healthy decisions. Feminists were pressing for total expulsion of the executive from KÖH, along with a public statement by DÖKH which convicted him of sexual abuse and apologized to feminists (in and outside KESK) for the earlier misconduct in handling the issue. Pushing for this demand caused an important split between TFM and DÖKH in the March 8 rally platform, Istanbul. A debate around whether and how to refer to the case in the rally public statement resulted in Istanbul feminists withdrawing from the platform and absenting themselves from the rally.

In an Amargi meeting, feminist academic Sirman was questioning this withdrawal decision, for it caused the rally to lose the meaning feminists ascribed to it, namely that it was different from a “laborer women’s day” (Ahıska et al., 2011, p. 314). For her, it was up to DÖKH to decide whether they called it an “abuse” or “an allegation of abuse.” Feminists had a right to oppose that but could still participate

in the rally or continue searching for ways for joint action with DÖKH. In this way they came to be perceived as imposing. Socialist-feminist Acar Savran objected: “It was not a case of imposing a priority on the political choices of Kurdish women. On the contrary, it was resisting the imposition of Kurdish women’s political choices on the feminist movement in general” (ibid., p. 309). For independent feminist Yurdalan, “The decision was not only up to Kurdish women but also to all feminists, for it was not only the harassment case at KESK that was at stake but all harassment and rape cases of the past and future” (ibid., p. 307). Socialist-feminist Karakuş’s support of Acar and Yurdalan further revealed a gender-reductive, universalizing imagination that blurred the boundaries between two separate spaces of sovereignty:

We are living on the same land as Kurds. That is why we don’t have the kind of relationship as in the Palestinian example where we can say ‘it is their space.’ For example, KESK is a joint union for us all, the woman who has been harassed at KESK is a Turkish woman, the women that the harassed woman at KESK conveys her trouble to are Turkish and Kurdish women, Turkish and Kurdish socialists, etc. Because of these, in this sexual harassment case at KESK, we have no right to say, ‘this is their space, we cannot interfere’ (ibid., p. 311).

Karakuş argued that since March 8 rallies were “not the avenues of solidarity with the Kurdish women or the Kurdish movement, but a common ground [as women],” they needed a common stance and statement against patriarchy, or at least sexual abuse and rape. The most critical problem with Kurdish women in common politics was that “since Kurdish women are part of a political movement, their decisions on whether it is sexual harassment or not depends on the internal hierarchy of the movement, more than their problems as women. And saying this is not disregarding ethnic discrimination but pointing at what precisely divides women” (ibid., p. 311). Note here the parallelism with “feminists divide the struggle” argument of mainstream socialists. Both treat difference as a threat rather than a potential strength that needs to be made visible in the common ground.

Disappointed with the slow pace of DÖKH’s internal investigation, not coming up with a public statement or expulsion of the executive from KÖH, in the June 2011 general elections many feminists refused to support the election campaign of a renowned Kurdish feminist Istanbul MP, arguing that walking with organizations that do not expose harassment would go against their feminist principles. What was declined, however, was an urgent call for solidarity against the anti-Kurdish Operation KCK (for the Operation’s impact on KÖH see endnote 263). Indeed, most DÖKH activists that feminists knew got arrested soon after the elections. Making this dispute a precondition to all other collaborations contradicted with DÖKH’s understanding of solidarity: “In our movement culture, you criticize something and then continue walking together, and you try to get that problem registered while moving forward. But here it was an attitude that cut off the ties, posed it as a barrier to any joint work” (Newal). Some Kurdish activists interpreted this as TFM’s way of staying away from DÖKH at a period when the arrest campaign intensified. They found it *duygu kırıcı* (heartbreaking) and “estranging.” My participants described this “cutting the ties” style as *hakim ulus tarzı* (hegemonic nation style), *haddini aşan* (crossing boundaries), *chantage-like*, *blood-feud-like*, *revenge-like*, *dictating*, *punishing*, *terbiye eden* (disciplining), *testing*, *patronizing* and “generalizing to the movement.” These terms hinted at DÖKH activists’ perceived disrespect towards their tradition, a transgression of their sovereign boundaries. Hêja identified two recurring types of feminist transgression, undertaken by a universalist sense of entitlement into the space of the other. One was to ascribe an “exaggerated mission” to KWM that it should solve any problem right away, “excessive hope invested in us.” In a Turkish feminist’s words, “We trust a lot in their power to tackle these issues. When they fail, I mean, we do not expect this. Then, we almost ask for twice as much retribution just because the harasser is from BDP” (Esra). Another tendency, by contrast, was to prove that KÖH was no different in terms of male-domination, despite their claims to the contrary:

It is the Kurdish women's movement that this man is betraying, first and foremost! The women at DÖKH hard-earned all these. They paid the price to get there. Nobody, neither Cemil Bayık [one of the PKK founders] nor anyone else would support these women. Nonsense. All are men! Women earned those rights paying a price. And then this man will come and destroy everything they have hard-earned. I, too, am not going to allow that (Nur).

I think we should never shy away from our political discourse. Too much empathy might lead to loss of our political ground. I mean Kurdish women are also aware of course and I admit their difficult position. But just as we cannot tell them not to do politics in mixed-gender organizations, they also should not say, 'what are these feminists up to, always the same pressure' (Fulya).

A young Turkish feminist made an empathetic analysis of how they might be disrespecting the autonomous space of the other:

It is not difficult to imagine that Kurdish women were pushed to a point where they felt they had to prove it right there and then, like 'here is a litmus test.' Even if unintended, this is how that language works. Besides, how can I say, one thing gets confused here. Sure, the harasser should be exposed and DÖKH should be criticized, if not. But precisely as whom are we calling them to account? We have a code of conduct with them. For example, if a complainant from Diyarbakır contacts us, we say 'DÖKH is there, we cannot intervene from here.' We ask them to get involved. While there are such terms of conduct, here we almost force them to make a choice, 'make your call, are you with us or not?' I think nobody realizes that Kurdish women do not have to be 100 percent honest with us. They have to care about many other things at the same time. My guess is that while their struggle against those men is tremendous inside, outside they are forced to operationalize another defense mechanism, probably because we keep repeating this 'testing' language (Gökçe).

DÖKH activist Delal expanded on how their way of tackling with male-domination in their own organizational space is different than that of TFM's:

The Kurdish women's movement is a mass movement that appeals to thousands on a daily basis. We receive hundreds of cases from polygamy to violence against women, child marriage to mobbing and so on. We are devoted to overcoming the problems, we do whenever we can, and whenever we cannot, we struggle through thinking why. Obviously sometimes we face behaviors of friends that are inconsistent with our women's perspective and put us in difficult situations. But in the end, we know our principal and ideological approach by heart. That is why back then we assured feminists of our central principles. That is why we removed both the man and the allying woman in question. But we also have our own methods. Sometimes when a person undergoes 'self-criticism' and arrives at a place where he says he won't repeat it, he might go back to his post. Then a process we call the 'practicum' begins. It is important that you understand our criticism/self-criticism mechanism here. People who are raised in a male-dominated system that seeps to the marrow, may from time to time act classic. But this does not mean that it will be the case forever. S/he can grapple with it in a given time frame to gain a newer perspective, and then deserves another chance. We always say, *pratiğim özeleştirimdir* (my self-criticism is my praxis.) What does that mean? You will not repeat the same shortcomings and your friends will observe you in time. This mechanism itself is what matters. We never condemn people for a lifetime. Even the nation-states judge people depending on the status of their crime. Sometimes in [Turkish] feminist or socialist movements a person is permanently expelled or stigmatized in a somehow revengeful way. It is not what we do unless it is a crime against humanity or an unforgivable crime that caused irreversible harm. Everyone deserves a second chance as long as one is signing up to the labor of changing himself (Delal).

Kurdish women seem to have a practice-based and community-centered, more pedagogic approach where criticism/self-criticism mechanisms run by women and the collective responsibility taken in re-education of *hevals* play a central role. The act of working on masculinity under supervision of the

community becomes an act of self-criticism. The method of exposing someone in public is used only in cases of male violence, such as murder, assault, rape, child abuse. This contrasts with TFM's more confrontational, retributionist and individualist way of dealing with sexual harassment, centered on exposing the men and excluding them from social life. And particularly regarding this case, Turkish socialist-feminist Cavidan thought dissatisfaction and *hırsını alamama* (inability to control own anger) was definitely something to be criticized about TFM: "Penalty for any crime should be finite. Some wanted him to die, some suggested attacking him physically. I can't understand this kind of infinite anger and fury. What is the penalty for abuse? Execution? Bodily injury" (Cavidan)? Another point Delal highlighted was the sociological heterogeneity of DÖKH. Coming from proximate feminist/social backgrounds and individualist methods, Turkish feminist groups seemed to find it difficult to envision the movement as an avenue for consciousness-raising or pedagogic contestation of different levels of women's consciousness. Cavidan acknowledged this:

Their size affected us negatively, but that size also had a positive effect: they could conduct an internal settlement that held people accountable. If it was a smaller organization, or one without such a strong women's movement, then perhaps it would be covered without coming to terms with it. They did not overlook it. Actually, they never overlook anything related to internal organizational problems. And women are very unbending in that. [Turkish] feminists for example, may overlook things; perhaps this is why we cannot make much progress in organizational terms. We cover it for the most part. And even when we don't, generally we cannot settle it (Cavidan).

These differences, I argue, are not accidental or purely political but have material underpinnings. Both the ability to afford exposing male members of the community, or relative uniformity in feminist consciousness of the movement, are partly an outcome of class and ethnonational privilege. "Let's say I steal something; they would say Kurds are thieves. This impoverishes our power to fight back. Some generalized his case to the whole organization" (Besime). Just as most Kurdish women would not report male violence issues to the Turkish police, as this would be betraying one's community, the Kurdish movement would want to rely on its own mechanisms to judge its members, as opposed to the ways "dictated" on them, like taking the route of writing a public apology for a hostile Turkish audience, or expelling someone from the movement because "outsiders" demanded it:

We don't live on feminists' terms; we live according to our own rights and wrongs. We did not create this culture relying on anyone or to please anyone. In the end, this friend was one of the most trusted men in the struggle for more than twenty years. Of course, this does not mean that he won't be a harasser, or we will unsee it. We will see it, but in perspective and deal accordingly (Melda).

Feminist allies assumed ethnic invisibility demanded that Turkish-Kurdish sisterhood come prior to the Kurdish-Kurdish. They seemed to trust DÖKH insofar as it proved to perfectly mimic what they would ideally do in seemingly similar situations. But when the difference in ways of fighting patriarchy is denied, what is it that remains different about the other? What is lived and perceived as imposition by Kurds is incomprehensible to most Turkish feminists. And what feminists perceive as imposition might be DÖKH's demand to deal with these cases at its own pace, in its safer ethnopolitical space, via its own feminist methods. In contrast, the overall conclusion feminists drew was that, despite the wear and tear they had to suffer, they managed to "show all political groups the huge cost they can make them pay" (Nur). This might be true. The question I want to raise, however, is whether this whole encounter contributed to building reflective solidarity and respecting the political subjectivity, space and cultural difference of the Other.