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Kurdish women in the Kurdish–Turkish conflict – perceptions, experiences, and strategies

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The armed conflict between the Kurdish PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) guerrillas and the Turkish state has continued with varying degrees of intensity since the early 1980s, causing tens of thousands of casualties and displacing large numbers of civilians in southeastern Turkey. However, social and political tensions relating to, for example, economic justice and recognition of Kurdish ethnic and cultural identity have troubled the Turkish state since its creation after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Although an increasing number of studies have described and analyzed these tensions, a review of the early literature reveals that few studies have examined how women experience them.¹ This study analyzes how Kurdish women experience the violence and other consequences of the civil war raging between the PKK and the Turkish state. More specifically, it seeks to answer two questions: What are the sources of conflict-related stress for Kurdish women? What strategies do they use to deal with this stress and other consequences of the violent conflict? The empirical material comprises focus group interviews conducted in the spring of 2017 in Istanbul, Ankara, and Diyarbakir.

Women are often ignored in historical accounts of civil wars, even though these conflicts can force women to step outside traditional gender roles and become combatants.² Increasing women's empowerment and gender equality has also been associated with higher levels of peace.³ While societies experiencing violent conflict have a high risk of relapse after peace agreements have been reached,⁴ increasingly prominent social and political roles for women increase the chances of creating longer lasting peace.⁵ Moreover, men and women often experience and suffer from wars differently. For example, although women are less likely to participate in armed conflicts as combatants, they die more often of war-related problems such as human rights abuses, infectious diseases, and economic devastation.⁶

In particular, knowledge of Kurdish women's experiences of the Kurdish–Turkish conflict is limited. Kurds are the largest minority group in Turkey and have suffered from violations of political and cultural rights. During the rule of the multiethnic and multicultural Ottoman Empire, minorities had the right to use their own languages.⁷ However, after the Turkish republic was established in 1923, the Kemalist modernization project 'aimed to create an ethnically, linguistically and culturally homogeneous nation and nation-state out of the remnants of the Ottoman Empire'.⁸ Turkey was argued to be populated only by Turks, leaving Turkish as the only official language. For example, Kurds were not allowed

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to give their children Kurdish names and were denied the right to education in their native language.⁹ To varying degrees throughout the history of modern Turkey, it has been illegal to write, publish, broadcast, or speak Kurdish.¹⁰ Despite recent legal improvements, following Turkey's application for European Union (EU) membership, many overt and covert government policies are perceived by international human rights groups as exercises of oppression and forced assimilation.¹¹

Kurdish women experience the Kurdish–Turkish conflict not only as members of an ethnic minority but also as women. For example, sexual violations of women prisoners and the sexual mutilation of female guerilla fighters have been reported.¹² However, how the violent conflict has particularly affected women is still understudied. Some recent studies have increasingly concentrated on the situation of women.¹³ For example, M. Yüksel argued that Kurdish women became ‘doubly marginalized’ as, on the one hand, their ethnic identity was crushed and, on the other, they became relatively disadvantaged compared with Turkish women who could benefit from the modernizing republican reforms.¹⁴

Many studies have considered only the voices of politically active Kurdish women.¹⁵ However, a growing body of research has also analyzed ordinary people's life stories,¹⁶ the use of melodized speech to express grief,¹⁷ Kurdish women's strategies for coping with violence related to the Anfal campaign in Northern Iraq,¹⁸ violence against the spouses of the Peshmerga,¹⁹ and the relationship between post-traumatic stress and forced migration among Kurdish women in Turkey.²⁰

Experiences of violence arguably help frame what it means to be a Kurd at both the individual and collective levels. R. Aras has collected life stories and testimonials of, for example, former prisoners, mothers of guerillas, and ordinary civilians to analyze how the fear and pain of state violence affect the everyday lives of Kurds in Eastern Turkey, reshaping their identities and memories.²¹ While Aras analyzed, for example, how religion and nationalism have been used to deal with experiences of violence, this study identifies new experiences and perspectives, such as Kurdish women attempting to protect their husbands by not sharing their experiences of Kurdish–Turkish conflict with them. Moreover, while Aras collected data in Mardin and Batman in Eastern Turkey, this study widens the studied area to encompass the Kurdish diasporas in central and western Turkey.

Method

The empirical material comprises focus group interviews conducted in the spring of 2017 in Istanbul, Ankara, and Diyarbakir. While most Kurds live in eastern Turkey, there are large diasporas elsewhere inside the country. The geographical distribution of the interviews was intended to capture the experiences of a wide range of Kurdish women. Istanbul is a metropolitan city on the Turkish west coast and Ankara is the capital city located more towards the center of the country, and both these cities harbor sizable Kurdish minorities as a result of internal migration. Diyarbakir is the largest city of the Kurdish region in eastern Turkey, which has experienced heavy fighting between the PKK and the Turkish government, especially in urban areas in 2016.

The respondents' ages ranged from 29 to 60 years. While most respondents lacked higher education, some had studied at university. Considering that most Kurdish women in Turkey belong to socioeconomically lower classes, the respondents represented the

population of interest fairly well. The focus groups consisted of women who knew each other and often met socially for practical purposes. All interviews were conducted in Turkish, with the help of a research assistant. The respondents' identities are anonymized such that those interviewed in Ankara are identified with the letter A, while those interviewed in Istanbul and Diyarbakir are assigned the letters I and D, respectively.

Focus group interviews allow for interaction between the respondents and help in eliciting a wide variety of views. They enable the researcher to study how individuals collectively make sense of complex social phenomena, in this case, the Kurdish–Turkish conflict. Coming to terms with such often traumatic phenomena is seldom undertaken in isolation from other people, and contexts always affect how people generate meaning. The present interview locations were familiar to the respondents, and tea and other local refreshments were available to create a natural setting for the interviews.

Ten women were interviewed in Istanbul for three hours and ten were interviewed in Ankara for two hours, while 15 were interviewed in Diyarbakir for four hours. The variation in the interview duration depended on how much time the women had and how much time was spent, for example, drinking tea, as the interviews took place in natural settings. When using natural groups in which the respondents know each other, the social setting and interaction among participants render the discussion as natural as possible, making it easier for participants to reflect on their experiences and perceptions.²² The interviewer does not need to intervene as much in such interview situations as compared with interviewing only one respondent at a time. The moderator used the two research questions as key discussion topics and avoided interfering with the interaction between the participants. The aim was to encourage the participants to share their experiences, facilitate their interaction, and gain knowledge by listening to their discussions in a natural setting.²³

Using pre-existing groups in natural settings allows the researcher to access fragments of interactions that approximate 'naturally occurring data (such as might have been collected by participant observation)', as the respondents can 'relate each other's comments to actual shared daily lives'.²⁴ However, although using such groups renders 'the interview sessions less intimidating for the participants',²⁵ especially during research into violent conflicts, the data can be affected by social dynamics that filter out certain voices. The data emerging from the interview context should be viewed as 'narratives co-constructed in a particular setting'.²⁶ The present interview data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, identifying central themes and concepts relating to the research question.²⁷

The conflict's effect on women

How does the Kurdish–Turkish conflict affect Kurdish women? Geographical variation in the level of violence can be expected to have an impact on women's experiences. At the time of the interviews, Diyarbakir was a city closely monitored by the Turkish army and security forces because of the violent conflict that had turned several city centers in south-eastern Turkey into rubble. The previous year, the city already appeared 'shell-shocked after three months of fighting between the security forces and the militant Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK)'.²⁸ Kurdish women living in Diyarbakir experienced general conflict-related stress caused by the fear of being killed or wounded. As respondent D1, a middle-aged woman from Diyarbakir, related, 'It is about conflicts, bombs, explosions, tears, worries,

stress, and a constant fear that something could happen to us any second!’ They sometimes also became the direct targets of violence and torture. Respondent A4, a young woman who had fled Diyarbakir for Ankara, told about a close relative of hers:

She saw the Turkish police kill a man. They told her to say that she had killed him, but she refused. They took her, bound her hands to a fence, and gave her electric shocks. Her husband, my mother, and other relatives were out and heard her scream because of the torture. She was never the same again. They destroyed her relationship with her husband. How can Kurdish women have honor, our dignity, when the Turkish police can come in to get us and do whatever they please with us? How could we not prostitute ourselves? How can we think of a future when they smother our dreams already when we are young?

When respondent A5 heard the story, she replied by confirming the geographical variation in the level of violence and how it affects women: ‘You are right. We live in fear also in Ankara, but it does not compare to life in Diyarbakir! It is calm as long as the PKK has not attacked anywhere. When that happens, there are conflicts all over the city.’ Another dimension of the conflict concerns how women experience violence against their husbands and children. As mothers, some respondents expressed fears about how the violence affects their children. Respondent D3 lamented that,

The conflict is all that our children talk about. Bombs and grenades from the Turkish military have become toys for our children. They play in places that the military has ruined or bombed. They see on TV how children play in wonderful playgrounds and swing on colorful swings. The only playground for our children is destroyed roads and bombed fields. Do you know how much it hurts in a mother’s heart when I see my children and their friends play outside? Have you ever had a feeling of hopelessness?

Her response expressed not only fears about children being physically hurt but also about relative deprivation causing anxiety, as the children’s life worlds become dominated by the proximity of violence while they are aware of other children leading better lives. In relative deprivation, individuals compare their situation with a certain social standard or the situation of a reference group. As a result of these comparisons, they feel unjustly deprived of prestige, power, and/or material goods, leading to a sense of outrage at the perceived injustice, predisposing them ‘to support social movements promising an end to deprivation’.²⁹ Fraternal relative deprivation, that is, deprivation related to social group belonging, is likely to lead to militancy because it can increase the probability that one will blame the social system for the group’s deprived condition.³⁰ In particular, Kurdish women experience relative deprivation through their families. Respondent A5 further explained how their presence as women creates fears of exacerbating violence, especially against their husbands:

We are afraid to go out because we are afraid that the Turkish police will attack us or say something humiliating to us, so that our men will end up in a fight with them. Then we will never see them [i.e., our husbands] again. Last month my neighbor went out with her daughter and husband. When the police in the street said a [foul] word to her, her husband and the police started to fight. The police then imprisoned and tortured him for several days. This woman’s life collapsed, as it happened because of her. She felt guilty about everything, even though it wasn’t her fault. We have feelings of guilt even though we do not do anything wrong.

Some Kurdish women therefore do not frequent public spaces as often as they would otherwise do, as they fear that their presence could be a source of conflict having dire

consequences for their husbands, who may feel obliged to defend their honor. The oldest woman in the Diyarbakir group, D2, now a grandmother, explained how such worries lead women not to tell their husbands and sons about their worries and experiences of discrimination:

We cannot tell our husbands or our sons what is going on in our lives or what kinds of winds are blowing in our hearts, because it could make my husband make a mistake. If they [i.e., the police] imprisoned him or killed him, the wind in my heart would turn into an endless storm. For example, I could never tell him how my daughter was treated at school when she was little. The teacher threw her out of the classroom in front of the others, saying that she was dirty and had thick eyebrows – they show that you are a Kurd. My husband would go to the school to defend her, but the teachers would accuse him of being a PKK terrorist. That is why I keep quiet, talk with my daughter, and we cry together. I have never told my husband and my sons how much I have suffered because of what has happened to my family. Men have enough troubles in their everyday lives. I was forced to be the strong one and support my husband.

Upon hearing this story, respondent D4 added that women's silence could be a matter of life and death: 'This is how we Kurdish women have tried to keep our men alive, by keeping quiet about everything.' In her study of the female victims of Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign in northern Iraq, K. Mlodoch argued that Kurdish women face not only economic and social but also 'gender-related constraints' limiting their social roles when dealing with the trauma of violence,³¹ 'sidelining their own experiences of violence' as a result of internalized gender and social norms.³² However, in traditional Kurdish society, women's experiences of warfare are not only suppressed by 'hegemonic masculinity' when constructing collective memories, as A. Fischer-Tahir argued in her study of the Iraqi Kurdish context,³³ but are also ignored to reinforce hegemonic masculinity, especially if women feel that they must keep silent for the sake of their husbands, as in the case of the interviewed Kurdish women in Turkey.

When the conflict leads to the death of the husband, the need to protect him disappears. In this new situation, both the children and, especially, the mother often find themselves in an unfamiliar situation with new worries: the mother must now bear a heavy burden as the primary caregiver with limited means. Respondent D4 related how she had experienced such a tragic event:

My son was outside playing with his friends in front of our apartment when the military came and shot my husband. A small group of people came in a car and shot my husband in front of my son and his friends. When the news reached me, I fainted. My little son saw his father die in front of his eyes. How could I be strong and take care of him, how would I raise him?

Life in conflict zones can be fearful and devastating. However, women's experiences of the conflict often differ from men's experiences. While men are more often the targets of physical violence, women are more likely to fear that they might inadvertently contribute to the death of their spouses and face tragic lives of trying to bring up children alone, in poverty and encumbered by feelings of self-reproach.

The feeling of not daring to speak up is not only limited to conflict zones but permeates, to varying degrees, Kurdish women's everyday lives in many parts of the country. Some women said that a culture of silence has emerged in Turkey about experiences of the conflict, women's experiences in particular. Respondent I1 is originally from Mardin but now lives in Istanbul. She described how the country has imposed a general silence on Kurds wanting to complain about injustices. This condition is especially painful for

women, who feel that their silence is needed not only to protect their own lives but also their husbands' lives and the future of their children:

It is so annoying, unfair, and disturbing that no one can hear our voices. They cannot hear us because the country has taught us to keep quiet when we should complain. They cannot hear us because we cry and cry for help only in our hearts. Our sorrow is heard only by us and it stays inside of us. They have taught us with fear to be quiet. If we talk, we die, and so do our children and husbands.

Kurdish women and their families experience discrimination in public spaces and in the labor market. Respondent 12, a young woman who also moved from Mardin to Istanbul in search of a better life, explained that even when there is no threat to one's life, it is better not to complain: 'Of course we keep quiet. Our children at school are afraid to say that they are Kurds, because otherwise there will be fights and the teachers do not care about our children. When they hear a Kurdish name, like my daughter's name... they shiver.' She further explained why Kurdish women feel that, although they should complain about injustices when their children's futures are in jeopardy, they cannot, as they fear far worse consequences if they do:

My brother's son is called Abdullah, and we call him Apo. At school, he is called a terrorist because he has the same name as the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. This leads to fights. We have tried to talk to the teachers but they do not help. Because of this, he does not want to go to school. He started skipping school, smoking. Teachers do not encourage him and children discriminate against him. No one wants to see her child being discriminated against, regarded as less valued, and sad ...Often something happens to our children, or to us women when we go shopping, but we have to keep it secret from our husbands. It can get worse if they know.

Kurdish women experience a double silence forced on them by the cruel realities of the Kurdish–Turkish conflict. Because of a general culture of silence concerning the Kurdish question, they do not dare to complain in public about the discrimination that they and their family members experience. Moreover, they do not dare to tell everything that they and their children experience to their husbands, fearing that things would only get worse if the husbands felt compelled to defend their families.

The reason for this fear, which makes women's experiences different from those of men, can potentially be found in local patriarchal perceptions of honor linked to women's modesty. While some Kurdish women avoid public spaces so as not to be a source of conflict, traditional conceptions of women's and men's social roles,³⁴ general perceptions of public spaces as unsafe for women,³⁵ and even high levels of unemployment, especially among women,³⁶ may also explain why women stay at home more of the time, experiencing the conflict through their children and husbands. Moreover, how Kurdish men relate to their wives can sometimes be affected by their own experiences of being discriminated against. Respondent 13, a middle-aged woman, explained the difference between how the conflict affects women and men, who are often seen as economically responsible for the family, and how women at home are affected by their husbands' experiences in public spaces:

They move about more outside the home and they end up in conflicts more often. We experience most of the Kurdish–Turkish conflict through them, through their behavior toward us, through their eyes. When they come home after having been unfairly treated at work or in

public spaces, and they cannot make their voices heard, then they come home and clash with us. They are oppressed by the Turks outside, and they oppress us at home. Sometimes I could not understand my husband's behavior, but later I realized that he behaves like this because he is oppressed by the Turks and it must come out somehow, and often it comes out against me or the children.

Women at home are not protected from the consequences of the Kurdish–Turkish conflict, as men take their experiences home with them, giving rise to conflicts among family members. Respondent I4, a younger woman, told how she is affected by her husband's experiences at work when he is discriminated against and cannot fulfill his potential or support his family as he wishes: 'When he comes home, he is irritated and sad and does not even want to talk to me. This makes them [that is, husbands,] angry about almost anything.'

Kurdish women's experiences of the Kurdish–Turkish conflict can partly be described using the concept of 'intersectionality', which explains how different forms of oppression, based, for example, on ethnicity and gender, work together in producing injustice.³⁷ While Turkish women may experience discrimination because of their gender, Kurdish women experience double oppression, both politically as Kurds and by a male-dominated society.³⁸ Moreover, as multiple oppressions are not suffered separately but synergistically, intersectional oppression is greater than the sum of its constituent parts.

Intersectionality explains Kurdish women's experiences not only at home but also in public spaces. Respondent A1, a middle-aged woman who had moved from Diyarbakir to Ankara in search of a better life, argued that the root of the problem is government policies relating to educational opportunities and forced migration, which have negatively affected the images that many Turks have of the Kurds. This discrimination and these images have created considerable anger as they reinforce each other. They have also forced some of those women who have no other way to make a living into prostitution, creating intersectionality as women face double oppression in the form of sexual violence and ethnic discrimination:

Our people are called terrorists, thieves, murderers, mountain people, incompetent, wild. They also say that our women are prostitutes. But why are these girls there [i.e., in the bars]? Has anyone asked them? No one wants to walk this path, but the state has forced us because they limit our educational opportunities. No education – no job. They threw us like animals into places and villages where we did not belong, where not even an animal can survive, but we had to survive for the sake of our children.

A third dimension of oppression is class, as a lack of educational opportunities and socio-economically deprived neighborhoods, in combination with their traditional roles as homemakers, make it difficult for Kurdish women to improve their and their families' social positions. How do Kurdish women deal with this harsh reality of the Kurdish–Turkish conflict?

Women's strategies

The pro-Kurdish parties have had the largest number of nominated and elected women in both local and parliamentary elections.³⁹ Those women who manage to become politically active do so by developing strategies and practices that are context specific, but not all women can become politicians.⁴⁰ In the 1980s and 1990s, women also started to

participate in the PKK guerillas to such a degree that the gender composition of the Kurdish movement in general dramatically changed, as up to one-third of the fighters were women.⁴¹ However, still other strategies have emerged by which women seek to improve their situation. Respondent D4 explained:

Previously it was a common strategy for women to join the PKK because we could not see a future or a solution to our problems. We knew that no one cared about us, except for the PKK. We felt safe with the PKK. Our children preferred to die in battle against the unjust state, but now they want to educate themselves rather than join the PKK.

As many women cannot tell their husbands how they feel, fearing that this would only make things worse, they have created their own supportive social networks of women. They may 'cry at home' with their daughters, but they can also meet with other women to discuss their experiences and feelings. These are reminiscent of the 'informal networks' among the surviving Kurdish women of the Anfal campaign in Northern Iraq, which are based on 'invisible channels of communication'.⁴² Like the melodized speech of Yazidi women examined in E.A. de la Bretèque's work,⁴³ these networks allow Kurdish women to live through and enunciate their suffering, providing a setting for the construction of Kurdishness through fear and pain, as Aras has explored.⁴⁴

Some Kurdish women avoid public spaces so as not to become objects of violations that can draw their men into defending their honor. However, they can meet in safe spaces, for example, at each other's homes for a cup of tea. Although these women do not meet in public spaces, the 'feminist perspective contests and denaturalizes this public-private juxtaposition by pointing out the ambiguities in alternative substantiation of the public and private divide'.⁴⁵ These networks also created a natural setting for the focus group interviews, bringing out the voices of those women who have not joined the guerillas and are not politicians. Respondent D4 explained the importance of such gatherings when there are no other fora for discussing their problems:

This is the way all of us Kurdish women have tried to keep our husbands alive, by keeping quiet about everything. Instead, we get together and talk about all the things that we have gone through and share our worries about how it is going to end. Look at my hair. Look at the hair of every Kurdish woman who is over 30 years old and see that everyone has grey hair. Why? Because everything that we see and experience we keep inside of us. It is psychological torture to us!

There are large differences in the level of education between the Turks and Kurds. More than 70 per cent of Kurdish women have not completed primary education versus 22 per cent of Turkish women. Only 0.5 per cent of Kurdish women have more than secondary education, versus 5 per cent of Turkish women.⁴⁶ Because of the limited opportunities in Kurdish regions, one strategy that entire families use to create a better life for themselves is to move from the Kurdish areas so that the children can get a better education. Respondent A1 asked: 'How do you think it feels for me as a mother? It cuts through my heart, it hurts when one cannot change how things are'. She lamented that migration – the final option for many families living lives of desperation – could give rise to a sense of not belonging: 'Our children are now starting to get an education, as they move to larger cities. That is why I am here [in Ankara], because of my sons. They studied and they work here, and I moved here with them. But I miss Diyarbakir'.

Migration from the Kurdish provinces started in the 1970s, mainly for economic reasons. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, the numbers of migrants increased because of the violent conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state. Thousands of villages were destroyed and up to three million Kurds were displaced.⁴⁷ The elderly respondent D2 said that the situation is especially difficult when Kurds are forced to migrate:

When it is a forced migration, we lose everything. Our homes, our fields, our lives, our identity. It is difficult to start all over. Many families have had to move to Istanbul and there they lost themselves completely. Girls are forced into prostitution and boys are forced to sell drugs. It means death to us, shame.

She further lamented that this situation has given rise to a vicious circle that not only makes it difficult to get an education but also cuts ties to one's relatives and roots in a society where honor is important: 'This girl can never go back home again. She can never be the same girl again'. As L. Şen argues, the lack of employment opportunities, the state's reluctance to address the problems of the internally displaced Kurds, and their loss of kinship and community networks have contributed to the deterioration of their condition in the new urban setting.⁴⁸

Living in predominantly Turkish areas creates new challenges, but life can be better for those who manage to get an education and a job. However, in these new social spaces, there is a need to devise new strategies for dealing with the Kurdish–Turkish conflict and improving one's living conditions. Respondent A2, a young woman living in Ankara, is university educated and has a job. She explained that hiding one's Kurdish identity can lead to a better life for those women who have jobs and can earn a living:

Life is completely ok as long as no one knows that you are a Kurd. Sometimes, especially at work, you must hide your identity from your colleagues if they are Turks. But it is not easy to have a hidden identity. People ask you where you are from, and then you must answer the question. We do not want to deny that we are Kurds. As soon as they hear Diyarbakir, Mardin, or some other city in southeast Turkey, they dissociate themselves from us and start talking behind our backs.

Respondent A3, also a young woman living and working in Ankara, said that 'here we have a better chance to complain and make our voices heard, more opportunities to educate ourselves and get jobs, even if they give us the worst of the jobs'. She further explained that women educating themselves and working will change traditional gender roles in a conservative society, which is necessary in order to improve Kurdish women's position in Turkey and, ultimately, to bring the Kurdish–Turkish conflict to an end:

Of course, our husbands do not want women to work, but we must change things now. Our girls must educate themselves so that we can prevent what happened before from happening again. If we educate our children, there is a smaller risk of the [Kurdish–Turkish] conflict continuing. We do not want them to treat us unjustly and to humiliate us. We do not want to see our girls at bars selling themselves just because they do not have another option. No, we do not want it!

Increasing levels of gender equality have been associated with a decreasing risk of violent conflict within states.⁴⁹ In particular, increasing female representation in parliament and higher educational attainment reduce the risk of civil war.⁵⁰ Increasing female representation in parliament also reduces the risks of political imprisonment, disappearances, torture,

and killings.⁵¹ Moreover, increasing women's status in society is positively associated with successful peace building.⁵²

Respondent A6 said that 'the only thing we can do is to educate them [that is, young girls] so that they can take care of themselves and do not have to be under anyone's power'. Respondent D4 also argued that education is a 'strong weapon with which to fight the unjust state', and 'as they educate themselves, we see more potential in girls than boys'. She said that two of her daughters had got educations and described how important it was that they could now 'take care of themselves, make their own money, help their families economically, and not be dependent on their husbands ... It is mostly the girls who support their families, and it is something new for them.' Such social change is an inevitable outcome of women's efforts to improve their social position while also seeking a solution to the Kurdish–Turkish conflict. While the Kurdish female survivors of the Anfal campaign who lost their husbands 'were constantly torn between the social expectation to respect traditional gender values and the necessity to earn a living',⁵³ the interviewed women in Turkey were more positive about the necessity of challenging norms.

However, the social positions of Kurdish women in both Iraq and Turkey have been affected by negative external shocks to society, which have led them to challenge prevailing gender norms. In Iraq, the shocks have included the Anfal campaign of 1988, which made it necessary for many surviving women 'to go beyond traditional female work',⁵⁴ and the fight against the Islamic State (IS) in 2014, which gave women Peshmerga a window of opportunity to improve women's positions in a traditional society where men are seen as the defenders of the nation.⁵⁵ In Turkey, the shock has consisted of the violent struggle between the PKK and the Turkish state, including the social upheavals created by waves of Kurdish migration to central and western Turkey.

The change processes set in motion by these shocks have been influenced by the social structures of the affected areas. While the women Peshmerga in Iraq sought to advance social change by actively choosing to participate in the war against IS, in the rural areas struck by the Anfal campaign in Iraq and the fighting in Eastern Turkey, adverse circumstances forced upon them increasingly pushed women to take on new social roles. Whatever the case, despite the prospects of positive social change, these processes are not always benign when women's 'bodies, their souls, their hopes, and dreams become the battle ground of internal and external forces of violence'.⁵⁶

However, not everyone has the opportunity to migrate and get an education. Respondent I3 asked, thinking of her friends and relatives in Diyarbakir, 'How can women educate themselves and think of a brighter future when these conflicts continue? The only thing we could think of was how to survive. Education and getting a job were secondary considerations for us'. Even in such a desolate situation, women feel that they have an important role. M. Suzuki Him and A. Gündüs Hosgör have argued that Kurdish migrant women's high fertility rates are closely related to the form of patriarchy that seeks to minimize women's autonomy.⁵⁷ However, respondent I3 described childbearing as a form of rebellion: 'We are used to explosions, we are used to being killed, but they should not forget that we can reproduce ourselves. If they kill one Kurd, we can give birth to ten more Kurdish children!'

Many Kurdish women want to educate themselves, not only because they believe that it can contribute to solving the Kurdish–Turkish conflict, but also because it has become a practical necessity given the many casualties of war. The interviewed women in Istanbul explained that around the year 2000, Kurdish women started to become increasingly

interested in getting education, as it became apparent that if women could not work, they could not take care of themselves and their children if their men were killed. However, the interviewed women were aware that more needs to be done. Today women increasingly attend universities, but their aspirations are limited by poor economic conditions.

When the women in Istanbul were asked what they hoped for in the future and what they would change if they could, respondent I4, a young woman, summarized many of their feelings, saying that the government should 'create better economic conditions for the Kurds. It is self-evident that some Kurds will become thieves and Kurdish women will prostitute themselves because we do not have a chance for better lives. The circumstances force us to take these paths.' She then had to stop speaking because she had become upset. Respondent I5, a young woman originally from Mardin, finished the interview in Istanbul with hopeful and proud words: 'Let the whole world see that what 100 men cannot do, a single Kurdish woman can handle easily.' The other women laughed with pride in their voices. They then hugged each other to say goodbye with smiles and deeply sorrowful eyes.

Conclusion

While many Kurdish women have sought to improve their and the Kurds' position by joining the PKK guerillas or becoming politically active, exposing themselves more directly to the Kurdish–Turkish conflict, other women have also experienced conflict-related stress and have developed strategies for dealing with it. The interviews confirmed that Kurdish women experience the conflict both as members of an oppressed minority and as women.⁵⁸ However, they also revealed that while women can be subjected to direct violence and abuse, they also experience the conflict and relative deprivation through the experiences of their children and husbands. Moreover, many of the interviewed women related how they could not speak of their experiences and feelings to their husbands, or to Turkish society at large, fearing that doing so would make the situation worse for themselves and their families.

When there are no other fora for discussing their problems, Kurdish women meet in safe spaces and create networks in which to share their experiences with one another. Many interviewed women also spoke of the necessity of migrating from Kurdish regions so that their children could receive an education and get jobs. They lamented that this could create a sense of alienation and that many migrants still failed to succeed in life, though leaving is often necessary, given the limited opportunities in southeastern Turkey.

Moreover, the interviewed women explained that women educating themselves and working changes gender roles and creates tension in conservative families, but could ultimately contribute to ending the Kurdish–Turkish conflict. Some of the interviewed women said that education was a strong weapon against the oppressive state. Women educating themselves was also seen as a practical necessity when there is a risk that men, traditionally responsible for economically supporting their families, may die as a result of the violent conflict. There were also voices of women who could not educate themselves, who described childbearing as a form of resistance against the Turkish state.

While this study has sought to fill a knowledge gap by focusing on the experiences of women who have not opted for violence or political participation, knowledge of Kurdish women's experiences of the Kurdish–Turkish conflict is still limited. Future studies should further analyze Kurdish women's experiences of everyday life in both the private and

public spheres, as well as related coping strategies. In addition, comparative studies of different countries and social contexts could be analytically productive in uncovering the various impacts of violent conflicts on women.

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