

1 The PKK – A Woman’s Party?

A History of the Kurdish Women’s Freedom Movement 1978–2020

On 30 July 1996, Zilan, a female PKK guerrilla, detonated a bomb in the middle of a military parade in Dersim. Beforehand she sent a letter to the exiled party leader Abdullah Öcalan in Damascus that stated:

I want to be part of the total expression of the liberation struggle of our people. By exploding a bomb against my body I want to protest against the policies of imperialism which enslaves women and express my rage and become a symbol of resistance of Kurdish women. Under the leadership of Apo [Öcalan], the national liberation struggle and the Kurdish people, will at last take its richly deserved place in the family of humanity. My will to live is very strong. My desire is to have a fulfilled life through a strong action. The reason for my actions is my love for human beings and for life! (Letter excerpt, Zilan 1996)¹

This suicide attack was the first of its kind and had a huge impact on the women, the party and Öcalan himself. With her suicide attack, Zilan became the new symbol of women’s resistance and determination for generations of women who came after her. Shortly after the attack, Öcalan started calling the PKK a ‘woman’s party’, in order to make official women’s important contributions and central role in the movement as a whole (interview with former commander, 14 May 2018). This signified an important shift for women who had spent years fighting for recognition within the male-dominated party structures. ‘We had to fight in order to be able to fight’, a former commander told me about her experience of the power struggles with men in the party in the 1990s. Zilan’s act, however, made it impossible for any male member of the movement to question her and, by extension, women’s dedication to the cause. Yet, in the day-to-day struggle, many of my respondents recounted how their male comrades actively sabotaged the women and their nascent party structures, especially after Öcalan’s arrest in 1999. The women nevertheless managed to establish their own army (1995) and party (1999) within the PKK. Since then, their party structures have developed and diversified into all cultural, political and military realms in different

¹ For the whole letter, see Zeynep Kinaci (Zilan). 1996. *PKK Online*.

parts of Kurdistan and Europe as well, most visibly so in the form of the female fighters in Rojava, the co-mayors in Bakur and the development of Jineoloji. Today, one can imagine the Kurdish Freedom Movement and its organisational structure like a tree that over the past decades has grown more and increasingly versatile roots.² Depending on the political space available, the party and the women's structures can branch out more or less in the respective regions. Until 2015, this was the case in Bakur and continues today in Rojava and Maxmûr refugee camp, where the organisational structures go down to the neighbourhood level with communes and cooperatives organising daily life. How much the party and its women can do in each region is constantly changing, and the boundaries between armed and political activism are often fluid.

I have chronicled elsewhere how the women's movement developed between the mountains and the cities and how the struggle for political space played out in different parts of Kurdistan (Käser 2021). This chapter will continue to investigate how women got to play such a central role within the PKK, how the 'free woman' came into being and how that resulted in semi-autonomous organisational structures and the development of Jineoloji. Analysing the women's struggle alongside the development as a movement as a whole will allow me to discuss the duality reinforcing the persistence of women's everyday resistance and Öcalan's ideological production (Al-Ali & Tas 2018c). This chapter is based on existing (academic) literature, as well as ethnographic research (2015–2019), namely in-depth interviews with both current and former female members of the Freedom Movement, in the armed and political spheres. The chapter is by no means a complete history of the Kurdish women's movement, but is intended to be read in tandem with other accounts that analyse the rich and complex history of the movement and its individual members struggling to realise their particular version of liberated women and a liberated Kurdistan (Çağlayan 2020; Dirik 2021).

The PKK, a Short History

The history of the PKK and how it found ways to adapt to the shifting political and military dynamics in the region is well researched (Aras

² Vera Eccarius-Kelly described the PKK as working in an 'octopus-like manner, extending its tentacles into the neighbouring countries and Europe'. She divides the tentacles into guerrilla, criminal and political (Eccarius-Kelly 2012, 238–39); however, my work shows that the issue is more complex and that different spheres of labour are in fact fluid and overlapping. For a diagram of the party as a whole and the women's structures in particular refer to the tables in the Appendix.

2013; Bozarslan 2000, 2004; Chaliand 1993; Gunes 2012; İmset 1992; Jongerden 2017; Jongerden & Akkaya 2011, 2012; Marcus 2007; McDowall 2001; Olson 1996; White 2000, 2015 inter alia).³ The women’s history on the other hand, aside from a few notable exceptions (Çağlayan 2008, 2012, 2020; Mojab 2001), is poorly documented in academic literature; the women’s struggle within the movement sometimes merits a chapter or subchapter at best (Çelik 2002; Grojean 2017; Gunes & Zeydanlıoğlu 2014; White 2015). However, the women’s movement has documented its own history in the many books published by the party in Turkish and Kurdish, which are mainly used for educational purposes in the mountains (Garzan 2015). Apart from a few exceptions (Flach 2003, 2007; Herausgeberinnenkollektiv 2012), the women of the movement were only propelled into the gaze of the Westerner’s (scholarly) eye with the defence of Kobani and Şengal against the attacks of *daesh* in 2014. This fascination is reflected in an upsurge of academic and journalistic publications foregrounding the role of women in the Rojava Revolution (Demir 2017; Flach et al. 2016; Lower Class Magazine 2017; Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness 2015; Tax 2016). These books by and large paint a rosy picture of the developments in Rojava, idealising the women as the fearless goddesses of war and defenders of an anti-capitalist, post-statist and post-patriarchal revolution, which they often are. But their struggle is much more complex, messy and perilous as I aim to demonstrate in the following chapters. Jordi Tejel (2009, 2017), Oliver Grojean (2017) and Thomas Schmidinger (2014, 2018) have published more nuanced accounts of the Rojava Revolution and the wider movement, which discuss the party landscape in Rojava historically and highlight the contradictions that emerge due to the PKK’s authoritarian structure versus the intended grassroots democracy (Leezenberg 2016). Turkey is the best-researched country in terms of how the Kurdish Freedom Movement operates, especially in the political sphere (Clark 2015; Watts 2010), which is also shaped by the fraught relationship between Turkish and Kurdish feminists (Al-Ali & Tas 2018a, b; Çaha 2011; Gökalp 2010; Küçükkıca 2018; Sahin-Mencutek 2016; Yüksel 2006).

The PKK emerged against the background of the 1971 military coup in Turkey, which cracked down harshly on the revolutionary left and civil society more broadly. Revolutionary groups were forced into the private

³ This research is based on literature in English, German, French and Kurmancî. Many Turkish sources exist on the topic of the PKK and some on the women within the PKK, which, apart from a few exceptions, including issues of *Jineoloji* (www.jineolojidergisi.com/); Bingöl 2016; Çağlayan 2007; Özgür Kadın Akademisi 2016; Newaya Jin 2016; Öcalan 2013b, 2015; Yılmaz 2016, have not been consulted.

spheres, such as university dormitories in Ankara, where they formed ‘friends’ groups’, reading and discussing politics. As early as 1972–1973, one of these groups started to assemble around Abdullah Öcalan, then a student in Ankara. At the time they referred to themselves as the ‘Kurdistan Revolutionaries’⁴ and started to build a dedicated group of cadres (Jongerden 2017, 235–36). Over the next four years, the group further developed its Marxist–Leninist ideology and the idea of Kurdistan as a colony that needed to be liberated through a people’s revolution.⁵ They agreed on the need for an armed struggle and expanded recruitment to different provinces in the Kurdish southeast of the country, where female cadres such as Sakine Cansız were at the forefront of mobilising women for the cause (Cansız 2015). The group that formally became the PKK in 1978 grew out of a regional and international context shaped by the Cold War and the Turkish student and workers’ movements of the 1960s, and was inspired by the successes of anti-colonial and national liberation movements such as in Algeria, China, Cuba, Nicaragua and Vietnam. The intelligentsia of the movement was made up of Kurdish and Turkish students around Abdullah Öcalan, Haki Karer and Kemal Pir, while their social base in the early stages was the disenfranchised Kurdish population in the country’s southeast. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to sketch out the complex history of Kurdish nationalisms or the highly fractured party landscape of the late 1960s and early 1970s in Turkey.⁶ However, it is important to note that this era produced charismatic and influential political thinkers and leaders such as Mahir Çayan, Deniz Gezmiş and İbrahim Kaypakkaya.⁷ Mahir Çayan was the first to formulate the discourse of the ‘New Man’ in the Turkish context. In reference to Franz Fanon, he put the responsibility of resistance into the hand of the oppressed, a resistance that goes beyond the military and political struggle, towards becoming a ‘free man’. Hereby, revolutionary violence was seen as the main tool to reach liberation and considered a cleansing force, freeing the native from his inferior position and restoring his humanity and self-respect (Fanon 1968, 94). İbrahim

⁴ The group was also known as *Apoçular*, ‘followers of Apo’, the nickname for Abdullah Öcalan (Jongerden 2017, 236).

⁵ To frame Kurdistan as a colony was not Öcalan’s idea but he was influenced by Mahir Çayan and Sait Kırmızıtoprak (Bozarıslan 2012, 7).

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the origins of Kurdish nationalism, see Vali (2003), and for Turkey’s political landscape in the 1960s and 1970s, see Bozarıslan (2012) and Jongerden & Akkaya (2011, 2012).

⁷ Mahir Çayan was the leader of THKP-C (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi*, Turkish People Liberation’s Party-Front) and Deniz Gezmiş the leader of THKO (*Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Ordusu*, People’s Liberation Army of Turkey). Both were executed by the Turkish state in 1972 (Jongerden & Akkaya 2011, 127).

Kaypakkaya, a Turkish Alevi, Maoist and founder of the Communist Party of Turkey–Marxist–Leninist in 1971, was the first revolutionary who criticised Kemalism as a fascist regime that needed to be overthrown by an armed struggle.⁸ Most of these ideas were later picked up by Abdullah Öcalan, who had, like most of the founding members of the PKK, a background in the revolutionary left and was informed by its discourse (Jongerden 2017, 235). After the military coup in 1971, the Kurdish groups became more radicalised and as of 1974 increasingly autonomous from the Turkish left, drawing in not only university students but also a new generation of politicised youth who had previously migrated from rural Kurdistan (Bozarslan 2012, 2–6).

The official history of the PKK starts on 27 November 1978, with the founding congress in Fis, a small village near Lice in the Diyarbakir district. The founding members included twenty-two Kurdish and Turkish students such as Abdullah Öcalan, Sakine Cansız, Kesire Yıldırım, Cemil Bayık, Mazlum Doğan and Duran Kalkan (Jongerden & Akkaya 2011, 138). Sakine and Kesire were the only two women present at the founding congress. Sakine Cansız, who became an important figure of the women’s movement, writes in her memoirs that she only briefly spoke at the congress and not about the topic that was closest to her heart: the role of women in the war of national liberation. Women, since the adoption of the Turkish Civil Code in 1926, had been important markers of the modern and westernised Turkish nation state and constituted the ‘civilised’ subject (Kandioğlu 1996; Kandiyoti 1996): they had the right to vote; polygamy was outlawed; child custody and the right to divorce were granted to both parents. However, these new laws for a long time remained formal, focused on urban centres and higher-class Turkish women. ‘The state assigned women’s rights only to a particular circle of women within society that was regarded integral to the national project built on the paradigms of “one state, one nation, one language, one flag”’ (Burç 2018, 6; Kandiyoti 1987). Kurdish women were thus left out, and their plight was largely ignored by the state feminist organisations that emerged over the following decades. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that Kurdish women were politicised as part of the revolutionary left and later as members of the PKK (Al-Ali & Taş 2018b; Yüksel 2006). Cansız being hesitant to speak at length amidst the more experienced male members present, the congress did not address further the ideological and practical position of women in the party (Cansız 2015, 393–400). In

⁸ These three leaders are greatly admired by the PKK, especially Ibrahim Kaypakkaya’s legacy is celebrated, not least with music. The song *İsyân Ateşi* by Grup Munzur is played everywhere between the mountains and the cities. See bibliography (multimedia).

1979, prior to the military coup, Sakine Cansız and many of her comrades were arrested (Cansız 2018, 14). To avoid meeting the same fate, Öcalan and a few of his followers escaped to Damascus, where the party's headquarters would be based for the next twenty years (Herausgeberinnenkollektiv 2012, 17).

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the PKK developed into the only significant Kurdish party, which started to pose a military and political challenge to Turkey's authority in the Kurdish regions (Gunes 2012, 101). At that time many women were active in the guerrilla, as student organisers in Istanbul or Ankara and as so-called city guerrillas. City guerrillas were party-affiliated cadres who organised the civilian populations in the villages and towns. Many of the grassroots activities were carried out by female cadres because women could go undetected for longer than men who were known to the security forces. These city guerrillas were particularly active in cities like Cizre, where Kurdish consciousness was strong and people were sympathetic towards the PKK. They used important dates such as Newroz (Kurdish New Year) or 15 August (date of the first PKK guerrilla attack) to stage their opposition (interview with Zelal, 1 June 2018). One of these city cadres was Bêrivan, who had been successfully organising and educating women in Cizre, building women's committees and militias that were able to operate between the different districts. In January 1989, Turkish police forces caught up with her and surrounded her house. Legend has it that she answered calls to surrender with slogans of resistance and fought to the last bullet in order to free her trapped comrades before being murdered (Binevş Agal 2011; Herausgeberinnenkollektiv 2012, 533). Her heroic death in January 1989, its commemoration a year later and the brutal state response sparked the uprisings (*Serhildan*) that continued and spread across eastern Turkey until 1993, mobilising large numbers of women to join the guerrilla force (Herausgeberinnenkollektiv 2012, 19).

However, the Kurdish women's movement, from the onset, was not only focused on an armed struggle. During our interview, Gültan Kışanak, a key figure in the pro-Kurdish legal parties and the former co-mayor of Diyarbakir, explained the emergence of the women's movement as a result of the political, economic and military violence that women faced:

When the Turkish state was targeting people, village, homes, and gardens, women's response was related to the principle of self-defence, they were defending their livelihoods and were politicised that way. The resistance started in prison and merged with the women defending their livelihood. They got politicised by themselves, because of the state violence, they went to the street and became political actors.

She emphasised that, contrary to other women’s movements, it was not a top down effort of a group of intellectual women who tried to mobilise the masses, but that in Bakur it had worked the other way – from a grassroots movement to a political movement. According to Gültan Kışanak women, joining the guerrilla ranks also had a huge impact on society: ‘Like in many patriarchal societies there were specific roles for women in the eyes of men. [...] But after they saw that women were leaving the village and joining the guerrilla they couldn’t behave in the same way [...] and the classical roles started to be questioned within the family’ (interview with Gültan Kışanak, 5 January 2016). Gültan Kışanak described an important dynamic that has been a dominant factor shaping the women’s movement: the simultaneous struggle in the activist, political and armed spheres, taking place in the prisons, villages, municipalities and the mountains. She also brings up the specific targeting of Kurdish women’s lives and bodies, something that has a long history in Turkish politics and can be observed to this day. The movement itself contends that this phenomenon (*feminicide*) and gender- and sex-based violence (GSBV) have increased a staggering 1,400–1,500 per cent under the AKP government (Herausgeberinnenkollektiv 2012, 49). Deniz Kandiyoti terms this darker and more violent form of authoritarianism ‘masculinist restoration’: a ‘profound crisis of masculinity leading to more violent and coercive assertions of male prerogatives where the abuse of women can become a blood sport [...]’ (Kandiyoti 2013). The organised women of the Kurdish movement (but not exclusively) are a direct target of this masculinist restoration. Thousands of activists have been arrested, particularly so with the start of the ‘KCK trials’ in 2009, when around 9,000 politicians, human rights and peace activists, union members and activists of the women and youth movements were arrested. Zelal, a London-based activist of the Kurdish women’s movement, contextualised the KCK arrests as follows:

Because of Kurdish women’s roles in the party, the state directly attacks them. They were caught and put in prison. The Kurdish women’s movement at that point [2010] was not just one organisation but between the guerrilla, the parliament, the many associations, and the media it was a diverse entity. [...] It was a powerful identity to be a Kurdish woman. But the state attacked all the different aspects of the Kurdish women. They knew that the Kurdish women are the blood and heart of the movement. (Interview with Zelal, 1 June 2018)

The criminalisation of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, particularly in Turkey but also in Iran and to a lesser extent in Syria and Iraq, illustrates that Kurds, inside and outside of the party, are excluded from biopolitical care and security provided by the state and become subjects of necropolitical

disciplining, imprisonment and eradication (Khalili 2013; Khalili and Schwedler 2010; Mbembé 2003). The criminalisation of Kurdish activists by the Turkish state denies the liberatory dimension of their actions as it is framed as an attack against the modern Turkish nation. Gültan Kışanak was arrested in October 2016 under alleged terrorism charges and has since been imprisoned together with many other female politicians, such as Sebahat Tuncel, another important member of the women's movement.

Liberating Women, on Paper and in Practice

While women started to organise in the political sphere and join the armed movement, Öcalan was based in Damascus and the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon. In the first party programme of 1978, the women's question was not yet formally addressed. Like other national liberation movements, it was thought that women would gain their freedom in the course of the anti-colonial struggle. From the mid-1980s, however, Öcalan put a lot of intellectual labour into the ideological creation of women's identity and role within the movement. It was after 1983 that first texts tentatively linked the liberation of Kurdistan to that of women. In 1986, the women's ideology was further developed, a process that went hand in hand with the foundation of the *Mahsum Korkmaz Academy* in the Beqaa Valley. Here, Öcalan's relationship with his wife Fatma (Kesire Yıldırım) and his struggle against the demeanour of traditional Kurdish women seem to have played a key role. During the third party congress in 1986, Fatma was accused of working for the Turkish state and was sentenced to death. She later left Syria and has since lived under a different name in Europe. Oliver Grojean argues that the early discussions about the 'women's question' should be seen less as an attempt to create equality and rather as a wish to 'correct' the unwanted women's behaviour that Öcalan had to deal with during his marriage to Fatma (Grojean 2017, 154–55). Öcalan's private musings aside, during the 1980s and early 1990s, due to the uprising in Bakur and the ongoing state repression, more women were educated in the Academy. Here the triple oppression of women was first discussed: the intersecting dynamics emerging from patriarchy, capitalism and nation states. As a result of these discussions, the first women's union, the Kurdistan Union of Patriotic Women (YJWK, *Yekitiya Jinên Welatparêzên Kurdistanê*), was established on 1 November 1987, not in Kurdistan but in Hannover, Germany. This organisation educated Kurdish women in the diaspora and mobilised women to join the armed resistance in Kurdistan (Herausgeberinnenkollektiv 2012, 20).

Handan Çağlayan, whose analysis traces the development of the 'free women's identity' from the 1980s to the late 1990s, shows that the biggest challenge in the effort to mobilise Kurdish women for the armed struggle was to overcome the honour (*namus*) barrier, which links men's honour to women's bodies and sexuality. In earlier writings, Öcalan had described women as being 'pulled down' – referring to being locked up in the house, dependent on men and always in danger of damaging their honour. This barrier needed to be removed so that women could leave the house and join the movement, thus freeing themselves from their state as 'slaves of slaves'. In the 1990s, Öcalan changed this discourse so that the liberation of men and all of society was hinged on women's liberation (Çağlayan 2012, 10–11). In this process he linked women's powers to a mystical past, the Neolithic era when women of Mesopotamia were active and free. In this paradigm shift women needed to free themselves from the shackles of slavery in order to rediscover their inner goddess, while the men were tasked with killing the 'dominant man': 'Indeed, to kill the dominant man is the fundamental principle of socialism. This is what killing power means: to kill the one-sided domination, the inequality, and intolerance. Moreover, it is to kill fascism, dictatorship, and despotism' (Öcalan 2013a, 51). These ideas of revolutionary femininities and masculinities were needed to create a new class of vanguards who could mobilise, theorise and push forward the idea of a revolutionary society. According to Öcalan's ideology, women can only become 'free' by struggling and by participating in the collective actions of the party as desexualised goddesses. Yet, my data demonstrate that while some women would only repeat these party slogans, most skilfully used the official identity bestowed upon them to keep organising on a large scale. Çağlayan's work further demonstrates that while the powerful 'Kurdish women's identity' drew clear boundaries and rules to be obeyed, it was this identity that opened new spaces for women, which further enabled their social, political and legal activism. As a result '[w]omen's active and massive participation not only has shifted the gender conception within the movement but also inserted women's demands into the political agenda of the movement' (Çağlayan 2020).

In the 1990s, the Kurdish political space changed profoundly. The PKK had turned into a permanent and legitimate actor, and the People's Labour Party (HEP, *Halkın Emek Partisi*), the first pro-Kurdish political party, started to organise around 'Kurdishness' in Turkey. HEP was not founded by the PKK but shared a social basis with PKK supporters and martyr families. By entering electoral politics, HEP and its successors gained access to state-allocated legal, political and material resources and helped to legitimise the Freedom Movement

through votes. The pro-Kurdish political parties were and still are heavily restricted by the PKK and the Turkish establishment's intolerance, a tension that plays out in power struggles within the legal parties over how closely to work with the PKK (Gambetti 2009, 54; Watts 2010, 14). The legal party could not adopt the radical discourse of the PKK or its military hierarchy; instead, it developed both as a Kurdish and as a left-wing party, advocating human rights and the democratisation of Turkey (Bozarslan 2012, 12). Zelal, who was serving a seven-year prison sentence in the 1990s, remembers the importance of HEP:

The Kurdish political parties gave hope to people because for the people it was easier to see their children being involved in the legal party, it meant they might live. Otherwise their children would join the guerrilla and after a couple of months or years they would lose their life. This was a new area for Kurdish people. The Kurdish legal party also had a big effect on people because for the first time they openly talked about the Kurdish issues. (Interview with Zelal, 1 June 2018)

Despite pressure from the PKK and the Turkish establishment, it was the Kurdish movement's efforts to diversify through civic organisations, trade unions, media outlets, women's organisations and international alliances that have turned the PKK's militaristic strategy into a social movement (Gambetti 2009, 54). The women were integral to this process. Similar to their comrades in the mountains, in 1996, they created a separate women's congress within the Kurdish political movement, established associations and published journals such as *Roza* (politically independent) and *Yaşamda Özgür Kadın* (linked to the Freedom Movement). These journals developed into important sites where the women's movement could set itself apart from the male-dominated Freedom Movement and from the feminist movement in Turkey (Yüksel 2006, 780–81). As part of the political work they also started to organise around the women's quota. The People's Democracy Party (HADEP) was the first political party in Turkey to introduce a voluntary 25 per cent women's quota in 2000. Over the next few years, women worked tirelessly to increase this quota to 30 per cent, before it was eventually set at 40 per cent in 2005 (Alkan 2018; Çağlayan 2020, 104).⁹

Apart from the political struggle in the cities, the 1990s were also a period of intense wars between the PKK and the Turkish army, as well as between the PKK and the Iraqi Kurdish parties (KDP/PUK). In the early 1990s, the

⁹ In the 1990s and 2000s, numerous pro-Kurdish parties were shut down: HEP in 1993, DEP in 1994 and the Democratic Society Party (DTP) in 2009. HDP, founded in October 2012, had come under immense pressure in 2015 when it managed to win 13 per cent of the popular vote and entered the parliament with eighty MPs (Gunes 2019, 222).

Turkish army destroyed up to 4,000 villages in Eastern Turkey in an attempt to break the support and supply networks of the PKK. Millions of Kurds migrated to urban centres such as Diyarbakir, or the Western cities of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. Around 20,000 people fled to Iraqi Kurdistan and eventually settled near the town of Maxmûr, establishing the Maxmûr refugee camp (Yılmaz 2016). While more women were fighting, more were also dying, some of them committing spectacular acts of resistance. Those who left a particularly significant mark were Bêrivan, Bêritan and Zilan, each of them initiating a new era of female mobilisation. Bêritan fought during the Southern War against an alliance between the Turkish army and the KDP/PUK *peşmerga* in 1992.¹⁰ Legend has it that she fought until her last bullet in Xakûrkê, when she was cornered by approaching *peşmerga* forces, who allegedly said: 'Surrender, we will marry you off and you will live like a rose.' To escape her capture, Bêritan jumped off the cliff she was standing on. Her death became a symbol of the will to resist (*îrade*) of Kurdish women and the symbol of the women's army that was initiated in 1993 (Herausgeberinnenkollektiv 2012, 535). While the resistance of Bêrivan sparked the uprisings in Cizre in 1989, Bêritan's death leap in 1992 pushed Öcalan to initiate a separate women's army in 1993. While this was only a promise in the beginning, autonomous structures started to take shape with the preparation for the first women's congress in 1995. During this process, women formulated forty-five questions, for example: how do you develop into a determined fighter? What is the influence of Islam? Why do women get distracted by men? What does honour mean in a liberated society? What is the meaning of marriage? What is the meaning of love? How should sexuality in relationships be understood and lived? (Solina 1997, 336). These questions were discussed during the congress in 1995, and a twenty-three-member executive council was elected. They formed the Free Women's Union of Kurdistan (YAJK, *Yekîneyên Azadiya Jinên Kurdistanê*), under which women started to build their independent units, aiming to live and fight without assistance from their male comrades (Herausgeberinnenkollektiv 2012, 22). 'That was a very difficult time', commander Zaxo, whom I interviewed in Iraqi Kurdistan, recounted, 'we were like children, trying to walk but we kept falling down. But what we lacked in physical strength, we made up with our will to resist' (*îrade*) (interview with Zaxo, 17 March 2017). By the end of the 1990s, around 30 per cent of the PKK's members were women. They were involved in a constant battle

¹⁰ The PKK fought against the Iraqi Kurdish parties and their *peşmerga* forces on different occasions during the 1990s: first in 1992 (against an alliance between the Turkish army and PUK/KDP), then again in 1995 (against the KDP/Turkey), in 1997 (against the KDP/Turkey), and in 2000 (against the PUK).

against their male comrades and remained absent in the leadership ranks of the party. Yet their presence and acceptance among the rank and file members had an impact on slowly challenging ideas around gender norms in the wider Kurdish society and politics (McDonald 2001, 148). This process, however, was not without its contradictions and setbacks, as will be further discussed in the next section.

The Formation of the PJKK

All my interlocutors emphasised that the early years, especially the 1990s, were a particularly difficult period, not only militarily but also internally: the ‘battle of the sexes’ being a constant feature of daily life and struggle. ‘Just because we joined a revolutionary movement did not mean that the men in the party had changed. In the early years we struggled against the same hierarchies in the party as in society,’ I was repeatedly told. Abdullah Öcalan was in Damascus, training cadres, producing ideology and sending reports with commands to the mountains, while brutal wars were raging on in Bakur and Başûr, and where women and men were mainly concerned with their own survival:

At that time, we weren’t so critical and this [the women’s movement] was not our priority. Our priority was the revolution, because there was a big war with a clear enemy; the Turkish government and the Turkish army, and our goal was to fight against the Turkish government. When I was a guerrilla in Bakur I can tell you honestly, I didn’t think so much about the women’s movement. Because our priority was different: you are in war, you have to survive, and you have to fight. (Interview with former commander 1, 14 May 2018)

This quote illustrates that often women joined and trained as combatants out of necessity and not out of a pre-existing feminist consciousness (White 2007, 869). Most of my respondents, who joined the party in the 1990s, confirmed that they joined because they wanted to do something for Kurdistan and only later, in education, learned that they are also liberating Kurdish women. Today, with televised wars such as Kobani or Şengal and social media, this has changed and many young recruits know about the parallel women’s struggle.

Another former commander describes the struggle to be accepted as equals in the 1990s:

We are women, so of course we have physical limitations. Men are stronger than women, that’s a fact. In the mountains it was like a competition. We had to do everything like the men, or we didn’t stand a chance. For example, if he carried 50 kg of flour then I have to do that too. Normally my body cannot carry 50 kg but in order to get accepted by the men I had to do it. We had to fight in praxis with

men. If he goes and attacks a *karakol* [Turkish army outpost] then I have to do that too and then we can talk about equality. In the mountains we experienced this the hard way and fought for this equality physically. (Interview with former commander 3, 11 May 2018)

In March 1998, two years after Zilan’s death, Öcalan finally published his official ‘Ideology of Women’s Liberation’ (*Bîrdoziya Rizgariya Jinê*). Öcalan had been in a constant discussion with women, talking about what a women’s army would look like, how a women’s party would be organised and according to what kind of ideology. However, he was the one who formulated the questions, structured the discussions and lectures, and it was those lectures that were recorded, transcribed and sent to the different mountain camps as educational material. Nevertheless, women’s everyday struggle in the mountains, their resistance in the prisons and their deaths in protest of Turkey’s oppression influenced him greatly. ‘He saw women as a power and wrote the liberation ideology accordingly’ (interview with former commander 3, 11 May 2018).

As was the case in other national liberation movements, prevailing ideas around masculinity and femininity had to be adapted, so as to fit the revolutionary agenda and the communal living in the party ranks. In 1998, Öcalan put into writing five undesired ‘types of women’, who due to their faulty or weak characters were holding the party back. In the official history of the women’s movement this occasion is described as follows: ‘For the first time in history, the women found out about their types. With this a new period started for us’ (Garzan 2015, 120). These five types of women were (1) the type who does not abide by the women’s liberation ideology (stubbornly holding onto old patterns), (2) the type who is a stranger to her own gender (too masculine), (3) the type who is too fragile and sensitive (too feminine), (4) the type who focuses on her individual freedom (power hungry, liberal) and (5) the type who misunderstands freedom or wants to create her own version of it (petite bourgeoisie) (Garzan 2015, 119–22). With these five types Öcalan explained to the women the roots of their oppression and laid out what can be done to resist them as a unified force. According to Garzan, the author of the educational book quoted here, these five types enabled the women to strengthen their ranks, as well as the party as a whole by determining what kind of femininity was wanted and needed. Women needed to distance themselves from their upbringing (both feudal and petite bourgeoisie), relearn their perception of femininity and how to put that to use for the goal of the greater good. Contrary to other national liberation movements, for example in Latin America, in the PKK, the feminine was not devalued, rejected or muted per se to maintain the privileged position of

men (Bayard de Volo 2012; Dietrich Ortega 2012). Instead, militant femininity was reimagined and rearranged by Öcalan in order to respond to the conditions of ‘mountain life’ (female-male bonding, cohabitation) and to include women on equal footing as men.

Öcalan not only told the women how they should not be, but also how they should become: like the famous martyr Zilan who dedicated her life and death to the struggle, and who deeply loved her country and her people (Garzan 2015, 122). Zilan is not only an example of female bravery and determination in the party, but also of the complexity that is reflected in the lives and deaths of the women. Multiple interviewees have told me that many people who can no longer bear living in the mountains and fighting for the party either commit suicide or choose a martyr’s death. According to some of my informants Zilan was one of them:

There are some people like Zilan who staged a big suicide attack with a bomb in Dersim. After that she became a hero. But I know the background of Zilan. She found it very difficult in the mountains and had big problems with the praxis [warfare]. Maybe she chose this attack to prove herself. [...] But we have to consider how brave this attack was, not everyone could do that. (Interview with former commander 3, 11 May 2018)

Despite her alleged human weaknesses, Zilan became the modern-day *Îştar*, the goddess of freedom, a symbol for a new Kurdishness, and a key role model for generations of fighters who came after her (Çağlayan 2020, 72). Moreover, her death signified a crucial rupture point in how Öcalan viewed the women and their role in the struggle, which was reflected in the women’s liberation ideology that was published shortly after.

The time between the publication of the women’s liberation ideology in March 1998 and Öcalan’s arrest a year later was crucial for the women’s movement. ‘Morale’ was high, as more women were put into leadership positions and their organisational and military power grew. When Öcalan spoke to the commanders of a certain region, he always made sure to speak to the female leader as well:

Öcalan was a weapon for women, and women were a weapon for Öcalan. Öcalan was able to control the men through the women. Men are better at lying and could have told him something different [about the situation in an area]. But women had a good and special relationship with him. He was a weapon for us, we were a weapon for him. (Interview with former commander 1, 14 May 2018)

At the end of 1998, the sixth party congress was held in the mountains. In preparation for this congress, Öcalan sent his decrees in which he frequently discussed the formation of a new women’s party. However, during the congress, on 15 February 1999, Öcalan was arrested, which sent shockwaves through all four parts of Kurdistan, as well as the

European diaspora. Despite the chaos, the proceedings in the mountains continued, and after the general congress ended, a woman's congress was held. Commander Zaxo remembered: 'Almost all women agreed that if we don't do it now [form their own party], we would never do it. Apo is in prison now, but we have his writings and his paradigm to support us' (interview with Zaxo, 17 March 2017). During that congress, the women decided to go ahead with the planned formation of a women's party and thus turned YAJK, a union, into the Kurdistan Women's Worker's Party (PJJK, *Partiya Jinên Karkerên Kurdistanê*). If PJJK was to be an independent party or a women's party within the PKK was not entirely clear at that point but remained a topic of discussion. The predominantly male leadership around Cemil Bayık, Osman Öcalan and Duran Kalkan all tried to pressure the women not to go ahead with their women's party:

[They] said we are now going through difficult times, Öcalan was arrested and all the power needs to be united in the central committee. A separate party, an independent party can weaken us, and the enemy can use this situation. They argued like this and said we don't accept your [women's] congress. This resulted in a big fight between the women and the leadership. The 200 women who participated in the congress were kept in a valley and weren't allowed to do anything. It was like an open prison. (Interview with former commander 1, 14 May 2018)

Abandoned by the leadership, the women were kept hostage in a valley for a few months. Here, they tried to find a way out of their predicament. They did not want to speak against the party because their beloved leader had just been arrested, but at the same time, women's gains and strength could not be compromised. 'It was difficult to find a way. If you say we accept the general leadership it means you lost the women's struggle, and all the power will be in the men's hands. But if you resist, they respond with violence, psychological violence' (interview with former commander 1, 14 May 2018). After a few months of back and forth negotiations, joint meetings were held, during which the female leaders chosen by the women were punished and removed from their post. In their place they put women chosen by men. 'This was a big blow for women. This really broke the women's morale and was a turning point, like before and after Jesus. [...] We saw that men would leave nothing to us, and we saw them becoming more patriarchal again' (interview with former commander 1, 14 May 2018).

Why did Öcalan not support the women during this difficult time? After a few months in prison, he was able to send messages through his lawyers; however, those messages only greeted the women but said nothing to support their party. I posed the question to a former commander who assessed the situation as follows:

Many of us said, if Öcalan was still here, this wouldn't have happened. [...] After this he didn't say anything about women for a long time. I understand that well. On the one hand the women's movement was a tactical move for him but on the other hand he also knew the male leadership. If he would have said something in favour of the women, the men would not accept it, and this would weaken his authority. He considered that. This doesn't mean he was against women, but he was also not clearly for women. It was a balancing act, he had to do it that way. Politically, I understand it, as a woman I don't. (Interview with former commander 1, 14 May 2018)

Another former commander who attended the congress was more critical, recounting how they waited for four weeks, but all the notes that were sent back through the lawyer only concerned the war, politics or commands for the male leaders such as Duran Kalkan or Cemil Bayik. 'I realised that we are not important for him. That the women's movement is not important for him. We are only a tool that you can use' (interview with former commander 2, 20 July 2018).

This power struggle between men and women, and women allied with men continued throughout the following year. During the seventh party congress in late 1999 and early 2000, women disagreed with the general direction Osman, Öcalan's brother was trying to take the party, as well as the names of potential leadership candidates that had been put forward. In protest they all cut their hair to shoulder length, a sign of 'having lost everything'. At that same congress, nineteen women refused to be part of the leadership and were put in detention in a valley yet again. The men accused them of working against the party and of collaborating with the enemy. They also put pressure on the women by withholding food and clothes (interview with Zaxo, 24 March 2017). Eventually, negotiations between the opposing factions resumed and women were told to hold their congress. During that congress PJKK became PJA (The Free Women's Party, *Partiya Jina Azad*). 'It became evident that slowly the women had lost their power, also because many of them changed their position and moved closer to the men, admitting that the decision to form PJKK as an independent party as wrong. [...] This was a great setback' (interview with former commander 1, 14 May 2018). Thereafter, the overt opposition to men stopped and it became clear that any women's party would exist within the framework of the PKK and not independently from men.¹¹ This is still the case today: the women are able to

¹¹ The women's movement underwent numerous name changes and processes of restructuring: 1987: YJWK, 1995: YAJK, 1999: PJKK, 2000: PJA, 2004: PAJK (Free Women's Party of Kurdistan, *Partiya Azadiya Jin a Kurdistanê*). Today PAJK functions as the ideological branch and is organised as a parallel structure alongside YJA-Star, the armed Free Women Units (*Yekineyên Jinên Azad-Star*), YJA, the political front Union of Free Women (*Yekitiya Jinên Azad*), and the Women's Youth Organization (*Komalên Jinên*

operate within their autonomous ranks as long as they do not transgress the boundaries set by the umbrella of the KCK, as well as the parameters set by what I call militant femininities.

While the women’s organisational structures in the mountains grew stronger throughout the 1990s, prior to Öcalan’s arrest, so did the political parties in the cities. Most of the grassroots work was done by women, which strengthened their networks and expertise. Their everyday efforts were helped by the publication of the ‘women’s liberation ideology’ in 1998, as Zelal recalled:

That was very important. At that time, I was in prison and we celebrated this. Because before that whenever we talked about a special women’s organisation, party or association, even in prison our male friends were telling us we are trying to separate the party, we are trying to spill the blood of the party. Or that we are taking the side of the Turkish government because we are attacking the party. But when this ideology was published, they couldn’t say anything anymore. (Interview with Zelal, 1 June 2018)

Zelal speaks to the fact that the contention between the men and women of the movement over the place of women in the movement was not only carried out in ‘the mountains’ but extended into all spheres of activism, even into the prisons. After his arrest, Öcalan reformulated his vision for a democratic future of Kurdistan and Turkey. He abandoned the goal to establish an independent Kurdistan and introduced Democratic Confederalism. He presented this as part of his written defence, which was also sent to the European Court of Human Rights in 2002 and 2004. In it he advocated a democratic, ecological, gender-equal social system, a bottom-up system of self-government. Democratic Confederalism seeks to develop a mode of ordering beyond the nation-state and capitalism that goes hand in hand with a process of social reconstruction (Jongerden & Akayya 2013, 171–78). The guerrillas should hence forward no longer carry out a ‘people’s war’ but only engage in ‘legitimate self-defence’ (Herausgeberinnenkollektiv 2012, 27). Naturally, many guerrillas and party cadres who had fought half their life for an independent Kurdistan and lost thousands of their friends in the struggle opposed this new ideology. At the same time, Osman Öcalan, who had previously tried to take on his brother’s leadership role, proposed the ‘reform of social relations’, in an attempt to legalise romantic and sexual relationships within the party. All women I spoke to, current and former cadres, had vehemently opposed this reform, knowing it would only lead to the weakening of the women’s structures, something Osman had intended all

Cîwan), all under the umbrella of the Kurdistan Women’s Union (KJK, previously KJB, *Koma Jinên Bilind*); see Jongerden (2017) and the tables in the Appendix.

along. Due to ideological differences and the staunch opposition he faced, Osman left the party in 2004, together with thousands of others. One of the former commanders stated:

Maybe fifty people left with Osman, not more. Most people understood that he is a feudal man. Most people left because they didn't agree with the new politics of the party. I am one of them. I didn't lose all these friends for the democratisation of Turkey. Others had fallen in love and wanted to have a relationship. Others again had seen injustices and lost their trust in the party. (Interview with former commander 3, 11 May 2018)

In the years that followed his arrest, Öcalan might have not said anything specific about women, but that did not keep the women's movement in the cities from progressing. Having PJA, a (weakened) women's party in the mountains, supported their efforts in expanding their grassroots and cultural work. Women opened women's associations across the country, where they offered education courses to women in minority and linguistic rights, women's and children's health issues, Kurdish and Turkish language courses, and women's history.

During Newroz in March 2005, Democratic Confederalism was officially declared as the new party ideology. With this announcement, women's centrality in the struggle was finally official. Shortly after, Öcalan proposed the co-chair system, meaning that all political leadership positions should be occupied by a man and a woman. Zelal, who was working in media at that point, remembered:

And we took it [the co-chair system] from him. But the male members of the party told the PKK that this wasn't acceptable and unrealistic, and that it was against the rule of the Turkish party system. We women came together and thought why are they now thinking about whether the Turkish system accepts this or not? We never acted according to the Turkish system, we have always been defectors. Of course, they said this because they didn't want to share power with the women. Meanwhile we women had a big meeting and decided that we are going to choose ten candidates. We spoke with all of them and in the end, we chose Aysel Tuğluk. I was an editor and writer and I did a big interview with Aysel just one day before the Kurdish party's congress. We published it and said 'Kurdish women's candidate for co-chair is Aysel Tuğluk'. So, they [the men] couldn't say anything. Both the men in the legal party and the men in the illegal party didn't like the power we had at that time. So, they said the women's branch is old-fashioned, and they destroyed it. They changed the structure of the legal party [DTP]¹² but they couldn't take back the co-chair system. (Interview with Zelal, 1 June 2018)

¹² The new party, which no longer had a women and youth branch was the Democratic Society Party (DTP, *Demokratik Toplum Partisi*), founded in 2005. The body that should govern these transitional processes was the Democratic Society's Congress (DTK, *Demokratik Toplum Kongresi*), another umbrella structure founded in October 2007, in order to unify all the political and activist organisations in Bakur. According to my

After this internal coup, which saw the youth and women’s branches suddenly dismantled, women continued to organise and mobilise around the co-chair system and the 40 per cent women’s quota. Women activists and politicians who were involved in this process stress that having Öcalan’s support was important but did not shield them from the resistance they continued to face from their male comrades. Quite the opposite, due to internal resistance, it was only in 2007 that women were able to create their own election committee and select their own candidates. That same year, the women’s movement managed to get eight female MPs elected, and the numbers have been rising steadily since then (Al-Ali & Taş 2018c, 15–16). Throughout the following decade women such as Gültan Kışanak, Leyla Zana,¹³ Sebahat Tuncel and Aysel Tuğluk played key roles in keeping the pressure and the organisational structures alive. During our interview in Diyarbakir, Ayşe Gökkan recounted:

In 2010 we organised a big conference, where the men said we have solved the problem between men and women, you no longer need the separate women’s organisation. And we said, really you solved it? How? At every conference we discuss this, still. At every conference we say, no we are not equal. The problem is not you, but the system, the state, the family. You and me don’t have a problem, the system is the problem, so we have to continue our struggle. (Interview with Ayşe Gökkan, 14 November 2015)

This struggle reached another important milestone with the establishment of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP, *Halkların Demokratik Partisi*) in 2012, a broad coalition of Kurdish and Turkish leftist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-nationalist, anti-sexist and pro-peace organisations and parties. Within the HDP, women organise autonomously in the Women’s Assembly, and the co-chair system is applied throughout (Burç 2018, 8). In the 2014 local elections, the HDP won 102 municipalities in the southeast of Turkey and in the 2015 general elections managed to pass the 10 per cent threshold to enter the Parliament of Turkey. The continuous pushback against patriarchal norms in society and the party was only possible due to the large-scale women’s network and umbrella organisations that had been established over the previous decades and unified by umbrella organisations such as the Democratic Women’s Movement

respondent, this restructuring under DTK was also aimed at curtailing women’s power (interview with Zelal, 1 June 2018).

¹³ Leyla Zana was an important political figure in Turkey, who came to her activism in the 1980s, when her husband was imprisoned in the notorious Diyarbakir prison. She joined HEP soon after it was established in 1990, and in 1991 she was the first Kurdish female politician to be elected as an MP. In 1994, when her party (DEP, Democratic Party, successor of HEP) was banned, she lost her parliamentary immunity, was arrested and was charged with treason and being a member of the PKK. She spent ten years in prison (Bruinessen 2001, 106f).

(DÖKH, *Demokratik Özgür Kadın Hareketi*, from 2003), later KJA (2015), and currently the Free Women's Movement (TJA, *Tevgera Jinên Azad*). The women's movement is active in all four parts of Kurdistan, both in its armed and political branches, working towards establishing a democratic, gender-equal and economic society. In an effort to put women's knowledges into writing and build stronger transnational alliances, Öcalan, in 2008, suggested that women establish Jineolojî, a new 'women's science'. Jineolojî has since become central to the movement's organisational work well beyond the four parts of Kurdistan.

Jineolojî: Decolonising and Feminising the Sciences

The Kurdish women's movement does not frame its struggle as 'feminist' but instead as 'women's liberation' or 'struggle for gender equality'. Until the late 1990s, the movement rejected the label 'feminist', a movement and mode of organising that was perceived as elitist and petite bourgeoisie (Al-Ali & Käser 2020; Öcalan 2013a, 55). Since the 1990s, Kurdish women and Turkish feminists, as well as international feminist groups, have increasingly collaborated on issues related to peace, human rights abuses and anti-militarism, which has softened this stance somewhat (Çağlayan 2020, 130). Despite this shift, in party education 'feminism' is taught as a movement that has made important political and legal gains but failed to truly challenge the capitalist and patriarchal system. During my research with militants of the movement I was often asked, 'Are you a feminist?' in a slightly patronising tone, indicating that feminism did not achieve what it set out to do and has been corrupted by capitalism. Instead, the Kurdish women's movement has developed Jineolojî, which supposedly goes further than feminism, by building the scientific foundations of Democratic Confederalism, the new gender-equal society in the making. Instead of feminism, Öcalan suggested:

I believe that the key to the resolution of our social problems will be a movement for woman's freedom, equality and democracy; a movement based on the science of woman, called Jineolojî in Kurdish. The critique of recent woman's movements is not sufficient for analysing and evaluating the history of civilisation and modernity that has made woman all but disappear. If, within the social sciences, there are almost no woman themes, questions and movements, then that is because of civilisation and modernity's hegemonic mentality and structures of material culture. (Öcalan 2013a, 56)

Proposed by Öcalan in 2008 and published as part of his book *Sociology of Freedom* (Öcalan 2009), the women's movement has since developed Jineolojî by publishing books (Özgür Kadın Akademisi 2016; Newaya

Jin 2016) and magazines (Jineolojî, since 2016)¹⁴, holding conferences¹⁵ and establishing Jineoloji committees across the four parts of Kurdistan, in Europe and more recently in Latin America, in order to spread the word among a wider feminist, anti-sexist, anti-racist audience (Exo 2020; Neven & Schäfers 2017; Sirman 2016). To outside observers the concept of Jineolojî often remains obscure and it is not altogether clear how exactly Jineolojî departs from post-colonial and transnational feminist knowledge production (Alexander & Mohanty 2010; Collins 2000; Harding 1986; Smith 1999; Wylie 2003). I put the question of what exactly Jineolojî does to Zozan Sinan, a PKK cadre who was building the Jineoloji Academy in Rojava when we met in Sulaymaniyah in 2016. She told me that because women face such big problems not only in the Middle East but globally, there is a need for a new perspective on women’s liberation. ‘The struggle the Kurdish women’s movement has been engaged in for the last forty years, has a lot to offer other women’s movements.’ Their goal is to create radical solutions to the severe problems women face and to share that knowledge globally. She also emphasised the importance to include men in this process and that they aim to do more research into who the free men should be:

We want to strengthen and spread the women’s revolutionary perspective because there is a great need for new ideas. Before it was socialism, then feminism, but they all failed the hopes of women. They are not radical. Now the capitalist system is not scared of feminism. Why? Because there is not a lot of dynamism and activism in it. But there is a big need for it. Look at *daesh*, their form of masculinity is a big problem for the whole world, not only the Middle East or Şengal. Every time fascism rises in the world, men also rise. And liberal movements cannot resist against this. As a women’s movement we criticise that. For 300 years there have been women’s movement, why didn’t they achieve more? What guarantees do we have? Can we trust the state? Or the police? No. Our goal is that we can defend ourselves. Jineolojî creates the ideas for that. (Interview with Zozan Sinan, 21 July 2016)

According to Zozan Sinan, Jineolojî is a philosophical, intellectual and political endeavour to challenge male knowledge production and to rewrite history from a female perspective. In that process, women discover old histories and produce their own knowledge, using their voice to claim intellectual ground. By living a communal, anti-capitalist life focused on the struggle, a ‘truth’¹⁶ and women’s power can be rediscovered (Jineoloji

¹⁴ See <https://jineoloji.org/en/2016/06/26/parameters-of-jineology-discussed-in-paris/>

¹⁵ See <https://kjkonline.net/en/turkce-kadinlar-kolnde-jineolojiyi-tartisiyor/>; <http://revolutioninthemaking.blogspot.eu/>

¹⁶ ‘Truth’ in the movement’s ideology refers to how things were in a pre-historical ‘natural society’, namely the Neolithic era, before men cemented their power over women, the

Committee Europe, 2018). In Jineolojî teachings, genders are essentialised and operate in a binary, women's bodies are seen to have become a commodity for capitalist consumptions, and sexuality (the identity and the practice) needs to be controlled so that women can focus on the struggle (Al-Ali & Käser 2020). Jineolojî resonates with certain elements of second wave feminist writings, such as the French 'woman's writing' (Irigaray 2011) or *écriture féminine* (Cixous 1976), which in the 1970s sought to rediscover the female voice in language, history and philosophy. Hélène Cixous writes: 'Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies [. . .]. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement' (Cixous 1976, 875). Moreover, Jineolojî's critique of capitalist commodification of sexuality reminds of feminist activism and literature that emerged in the United States in 1960–1970 and argued for asexuality in order to disrupt the intersections between sexuality and state politics. 'By removing themselves from sexuality, women assert an anarchic stance against the institutions that engender sex, thereby working toward more nihilistic, anti-reproduction, anti-family goals that severely disrupt commonly held cultural assumptions about sex, gender, and power' (Fahs 2010, 447). More research is needed to establish if Öcalan read this feminist literature in Turkey or Syria and later in prison, or whether 'becoming female' was influenced by his study of Derrida and Derrida's reading of Nietzsche (Derrida 1978), in which he discusses the convergence of the history of 'women' and the history of 'truth' (interview with former commander 4, 11 October 2017; Philips 2014), or whether his idea of women who seek a different 'truth' grew out of the local history and the everyday struggle of women. What is certain is that Jineolojî emerged as a result of an ongoing conversation between the women and Öcalan, who were corresponding regularly throughout the 1990s and 2000s, between the mountains, cities and prisons in Turkey, Syria and Iraq. I have further explored the meaning women attach to Jineolojî in an article with Naje Al-Ali, where we found that 'there exists a complex dialectic between the women's reverence for the leadership, using Öcalan's writings for women's advancement, and trying to move beyond his dogma'. We argue that Jineolojî can be considered the epistemology of the Kurdish women's movement: an ongoing effort to put into writing and develop further the knowledge this movement has acquired through its everyday confrontation with different forms of patriarchy, state formations and capitalism. We remain sceptical of the 'new science' claim and instead consider Jineolojî to be

family, economy and politics (Jineolojî Committee Europe, 2018; Öcalan 2013a). In order to get to the bottom of this truth, women have to rediscover their lost histories.

a continuation of and contribution to transnational and post-colonial feminist knowledge production and key to the movement’s local and transnational organising (Al-Ali & Käser 2020).

Conclusion

Women have played a key role in the establishment and development of the larger Kurdish Freedom Movement. Despite a strong pushback from the men in the PKK, women, with the backing of the leadership, managed to carve out important organisational spaces, such as PJKK and later KJK. Yet women were not a unified block in this process of emancipation. Both in the mountains and in the cities, they were and are divided into more or less militant factions, who were more or less close to or critical of the leadership or the way in which the PKK developed. However, in both spheres, so I was repeatedly told, it was the women’s determination that drove the movement forward. Or as a former commander told me: ‘If we didn’t have this parallel struggle for the freedom of women and the freedom of our nation, women would become passive and the whole movement would lose its energy’ (interview with former commander 2, 20 July 2018). One way the history of the Kurdish women’s movement can be read is through its famous martyrs. Any women’s centre or academy would have the pictures of the most famous ones on their wall: Bêritan, Bêrivan and Zilan are only a few martyrs heading a much longer list of women who had given everything to the struggle. As I traced the member’s labour in the founding, manifestation and expansion of the PKK, this chapter discussed the gender politics that unfolded as women worked to create a space for themselves within the male-led movement, one example being Jineolojî, which lays out an idea of the right way to undo male-led knowledge production and relearn history and the politics of social and economic relations. The Kurdish women’s movement has made tremendous gains in terms of gender-based equality and justice far beyond the guerrilla ranks, in Turkey’s political sphere, and in Rojava as a whole. However, these gains usually remain in the framework of the KCK/KJK and the highest decision-making powers are still largely in the hands of men who are in the mountains (Duran Kalkan, Cemil Bayık, Murat Karayılan). The KCK, aiming to implement Democratic Confederalism across the four parts of Kurdistan and perhaps beyond, is lacking democracy in its own ranks. One of the great paradoxes is that the PKK uses violence to implement a project of radical grassroots democracy (Jongerden & Akayya 2012, 5). All the women I spoke to are acutely aware of these contradictions and so their struggle continues in the armed and political

spheres. One powerful way to do that is to employ the movement's liberation ideology, which has gender equality at its core. Living and organising according to militant femininities gave them a hard-earned field from which to navigate the perilous terrain that is Kurdish politics, as I will discuss further in Chapter 2.