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Middle East



WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ROJAVA

PERCEPTIONS BELIEVED & REALITIES YET TO BE ACHIEVED

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July 2018

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
1- Women’s Political Role in the Autonomous Administration Project in Rojava.....	3
1.1 Women’s Role in the Autonomous Administration	3
1.1.1 Committees for Women	4
1.1.2 The Women’s Committee.....	4
1.1.3 Women’s Associations - The “Kongreya Star”	5
1.2 Women’s Representation in Political and Administrative Bodies:.....	6
2. Empowering Women in the Military Field	11
2.1 The Representation of Women in the Army	11
2.2 The People’s Protection Units (YPG) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ)	12
2.2.1 The Women’s Protection Units- YPJ	12
2.2.2 The People’s Protection Units- YPG.....	13
2.3 Asayish Police and Security Forces	14
2.4 Women’s Role in the Fighting.....	16
2.4.1 Women’s Role Post- War.....	16
3. The Social Fabric	17
3.1 Personal Status	18
3.2 Women in the Labor Market	20
3.3 Social Norms	21
4. The Pursuit of Legitimacy	22
5. Conclusion	24
References	25

Introduction

The efforts made by the Democratic Autonomous Administration in Rojava (Western Kurdistan) ¹ to promote the status of women in society and implement gender equality policies have not been a normal occurrence in a region otherwise governed by a complex network of family, tribal, socio-cultural, religious and other intricate influences. Many journalists, activists, non-governmental organizations and political actors have commended the Rojava Autonomous Administration for taking up the women's empowerment challenge, which became the subject of increasing interest and discussion worthy of an objective critical evaluation and review.

The rise of the Islamic state in the spring of 2013, its takeover of more than 350 villages in the vicinity of Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) and besieging of the city by the end of 2014² have heightened international attention to the battle for Kobani, a major turning point in the Syrian war, and an interesting story that made headlines in news bulletins and newspapers.

Military changes in the field have contributed to the mobilization of Kurdish women, especially in the predominantly Kurdish areas in northern Syria, and their unprecedented involvement in military action³. The resistance demonstrated by the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)⁴ was highlighted in the media so as to consolidate the image of the YPG women fighters as a symbol of courage and heroism in the face of the Islamic state. This media coverage of the Women's Protection Units continued until their most recent contribution to the victory over the Islamic State in its self-declared capital, Al Raqqa, on October 18, 2017⁵.

The Democratic Union Party, founded in Syria in 2003, benefited from the political vacuum caused by the Syrian regime's withdrawal of most of its forces from Kurdish-majority areas in the north and northeast of the country in mid-2012. The party then announced its "Democratic Autonomous Administration" project known as Rojava (Western Kurdistan), a project that seeks to implement the vision of the ideological leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Abdullah Ocalan detained in Turkey since 1999, or the "Democratic Confederalism" project⁶.

Democratic confederalism is based on grassroots democracy implemented through bottom-up initiatives that embrace the principles of pluralism, gender equality, and the achievement of the environmental society and sharing economy, and reject hierarchical state authority and patriarchal concepts⁷.

While the efforts to establish the principle of gender equality have been highly acclaimed by international media and women's and leftist organizations, the attempts to streamline such unfamiliar concepts in the local community through the representation of women in the autonomous government structure have collided with complex socio-political and economic structures, thus destabilizing the family, tribal, socio-cultural and religious institutions that had forged such structures.

The aim of this study is to understand the political, social and military role of women in the Democratic Autonomous Administration areas in north and north-east Syria. It seeks to shed light on the less-recognized aspects of this experience, detect the flaws in the implementation mechanisms, and identify the various limitations and challenges encountered.

The Methodology

The survey was conducted through November and December 2017. Data collection method included interviews with eight female employees in the political and military institutions of the Autonomous Administration and other partner organizations, eight male and female employees in local and international organizations in Afrin, Jazeera and Kobani, six local male and female journalists, two of the local players in the Autonomous Administration regions, five local women from Afrin and Jazeera, and three researchers, in addition to a review of previous research and other documents issued by the Administration or published online.

1- Women's Political Role in the Autonomous Administration Project in Rojava

The Democratic Autonomous Administration Project involves a set of laws aimed at enhancing the role of women in the political, social and military spheres, including the application of a high women's quota in all institutions, the implementation of the co-chairing principle whereby a woman and a man preside jointly over institutions, and the introduction of political, administrative and military entities that are specific to women.

These laws have led to an unprecedented involvement of Kurdish women in the various aspects of public life in Rojava, particularly in military settings⁸, while the participation of Arab women and women of other ethnicity groups existing in the same region remained limited and partial.

But despite the high participation of women, practice on the ground shows that the women's quota provided for in the Autonomous Administration's laws was unfeasible at times, and at other times, used as a Trojan horse to legitimize the dominance of women affiliated with, or close to, the Democratic Union Party.

Moreover, women's participation is often representative. The roles assigned to women are determined more by ideological considerations than by competence. Despite the vagueness in the decision-making mechanism of the Autonomous Administration institutions, women who have received military training in the PKK camps, or who belong to the families of the party's martyrs, have greater influence in the Autonomous Administration institutions.

1.1 Women's Role in the Autonomous Administration

In January 2014, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) announced the Charter of the Social Contract which is regarded as the constitution of the Autonomous Administration regions, or Rojava (Western Kurdistan). Under the Charter, the Autonomous Administration regions are divided into three cantons, namely, Jazeera, Afrin and Ayn el Arab (Kobani). Article 65 states that "all institutions of the Autonomous Administration must be composed of at least forty per cent (40%) of either sex"⁹.

According to Article 4 of the Charter of the Social Contract, the structure of governance in each canton includes a legislative assembly, an executive council, a judicial council, a high electoral commission, a supreme constitutional court, and municipal councils¹⁰, in addition to a general coordination council that acts on behalf of all cantons¹¹.

The executive council in each canton is composed of a number of committees that serve as ministries, including an all-female Women's Committee concerned with women's and family affairs¹².

The system of governance is a grassroots democracy based on cooperative economy, gender equality, and environmental protection. Decision-making starts from the level of the commune- the smallest institution unit in the Autonomous Administration- up to the neighborhood / district councils, the city councils, and then to the three cantons: Jazeera, Kobani and Afrin¹³.

For example, the city of Qamishli in Jazeera canton comprises 166 communes that make up seven major neighborhoods in the city. Each commune contains 500 to 1000 homes¹⁴. The communes are organized in villages, towns, localities and cities, most of them consisting of five to six committees, including a women's committee. Communes are mostly mixed-gender; however, there are some all-female communes, such as the one in Afrin, where women regard their commune as "the only place for solving women's problems". For them, their commune is a must for "helping women cope with their social challenges and develop their own economic projects¹⁵".

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the women's committees present in the various institutions of the Autonomous Administration, the Women's Committee, which is an independent body of the General Executive Council of the Autonomous Administration, and other women's associations within the Administration.

1.1.1 Committees for Women

The institutions of the Autonomous Administration have special committees for women at all levels starting from the communes, the neighborhoods, up until the city councils and the cantons. The main task of these committees is to monitor the decisions affecting women mainly so as to prevent the patriarchal stereotypes rooted in society from undermining women's rights. For example, women's committees can intervene in resolving personal disputes involving women, such as cases of domestic violence against women, and have veto power over policies that are unfair to women¹⁶.

1.1.2 The Women's Committee

Each of the three cantons has a special all-female women's body called the Women's Committee that reports to the Executive Board of the Administration. These Women's Committees also have veto power over decisions on women's issues made by other bodies of the Executive Council. However, a member of the Public Relations and Information Bureau of the Women's Committee in the Jazeera Canton said that the Committee has not used its veto power so far¹⁷.

In November 2014, shortly after its formation, the Women's Committee drafted a set of laws for women. The preamble to these laws states that they aim to stand up to the patriarchal concepts in society, to guarantee women's freedom and gender equality, and to activate their role and participation in social development and progress. The laws include 21 basic principles and nine general provisions, which were approved by the Legislative Council of the Jazeera Canton, and later adopted by Afrin and Ayn al-Arab (Kobani)¹⁸. They focus on women's rights in inheritance, marriage and divorce, and means to promote women's participation in the political and economic structures.

The most important issues addressed by these laws include the prohibition of polygamy and the marriage of girls under the age of 18, gender equality in inheritance and educational degrees, the criminalization of violence against women and honor crimes, as well as the right of women to stand for election and to hold office. It should be noted that some of these laws are not consistent with the Personal Status Law in force in the Syrian government, which is based mainly on Islamic law and allows polygamy. According to the

personal status law that applies to Muslims, the legal age of marriage for girls is 17 years; however, girls may be married at 13 if they are found physically mature¹⁹.

For this reason, the laws issued by the Women's Committee were regarded as "revolutionary"²⁰. They caught the attention of the Arab media²¹ and elicited mixed reactions among the Kurds and the Arabs. Those in favor of the laws considered that they "rise to the level of legislation in the developed countries that respect women's rights"²², while critics described them as inconsistent with the Islamic law or "de facto, temporary legislation, but not applicable in future Syria"²³.

Critics of these laws argue that they are not based on Islamic law and contradict some of the customs and norms prevailing in society. Although the Kurdish component in Syria is relatively liberal in terms of women's education, work, and participation in Kurdish political parties, conservative social norms are reflected in the personal status regulations that are based on the Islamic law.

1.1.3 Women's Associations - The "Kongreya Star"

The Democratic Union Party's "Star Union of Women" (*Yekîtiya Star*) was founded in January 2005 with the aim of consolidating the strength and potential of Kurdish women in Western Kurdistan through the establishment of a women's organization. In February 2016, the name was changed to "Star Congress" (*Kongreya Star*) so as to cover women from all parts of the region including Arabs, Syrians, Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans and others. A number of civil society organizations of the Autonomous Administration, such as the SARA organization concerned with combating violence against women, and other women's organizations, joined the Star Congress to work under its umbrella.

The main objectives of the Star Congress are to "solve the Kurdish issue within the Autonomous Administration Project", "to allow women to organize themselves independently within the Project", "to achieve confederalism", and "to combat all forms of inequality and consolidate the ideology of women's freedom in the society"²⁴.

The Congress plays a multifaceted role in the Autonomous Administration project. It falls under the TEV-DEM coalition founded in December 2011 to be the political umbrella of six political parties, including the Democratic Union Party, the most dominant party of the coalition, and several civil society institutions supporting the Autonomous Administration Project²⁵. The TEV-DEM has undertaken to implement the Autonomous Administration Project.

The "Star Congress" comprises various committees including the economic committee, the political committee, the social committee, the diplomatic committee, and the training and information committee. For example, the economic committee cooperates with the communes and municipalities to implement small investment projects for women, in the form of cooperatives for cultivating land or opening a sewing workshop, crafts workshop, bakeries, and parks where women work²⁶.

According to Ms. Nubhar Mustafa of the Committee on Public Relations and Diplomacy in the Congress, the relationship between the Star Congress and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) is "a reciprocal symbiotic relationship. The Star Congress can neither control nor decide for the Women's Protection Units which already have a different work mechanism, it rather supports, helps, and cooperates with such units, and encourages girls to engage in them especially that one of the pillars of the work of the Congress is to promote the principle of self-protection."

The organization of the Star Congress plays a key role in training women cadres who will serve as co-chairs of communes and councils²⁷. According to Ms. Nubhar Mustafa, the training material focuses on the "history of human thought". She explained that "sometimes the information is simplified and tailored to the abilities of the participants, and sometimes the training material is upgraded with mythology, religion, philosophy and science components. The material also includes units on women throughout history- especially Kurdish and Syrian women, units on the democratic nation and its meaning, on women's economy of communion, gender equality, gender community, the liberation of women and society from gender stereotypes, and other units that focus exclusively on the Kurdish issue-, in cases where all participants are Kurdish- the history of Kurdistan, and solutions to the Kurdish issue". Ms. Mustafa added that the Star Congress "has a social role to play by forging relations with the various components of society, and a political and diplomatic role, where it communicates with anarchist and women's groups as well as democratic movements and peoples to mobilize support for the Autonomous Administration Project".

1.2 Women's Representation in Political and Administrative Bodies:

The Autonomous Administration Project leaders claim that there is fair representation of all components of society in their areas of control, while, in fact, the Democratic Union Party dominates the Administration. Following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, the Democratic Nationalist Party and the Kurdish National Council (KNC) competed for the representation of Kurdish interests in Syria's future. However, the Democratic Unionist Party retained the upper hand after the failure of the "Erbil Agreement", a political initiative launched in mid-2012 under the patronage of Massoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Regional Government KRG, in an attempt to counter the supremacy of the Democratic Union Party on the ground. The initiative resulted in the formation of the "Supreme Kurdish Committee" (SKC) to ensure that power is shared with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) through joint political, economic and military committees that include an equal number of representatives of both parties, and a joint force of the People's Protection Units representing the military power of the Democratic Union Party, and the Syrian Kurdish Peshmerga Syrian Kurdish paramilitary forces (Peshmerga) trained by Barzani forces.

However, the Agreement never saw the light of day. The two parties disagreed in the interpretation of power-sharing: The KNC expected that the PYD would give up half of its powers, while the latter was only willing to allow the KNC to participate in power within its ideological framework and under its leadership²⁸.

As for Christians in the Autonomous Administration regions, both the Assyrian Democratic Party and the Syriac Union Party joined the Autonomous Administration Project, while a coalition of parties called the Assyrian Democratic Organization refrained from joining, being more inclined to the Kurdish National Council and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution Forces and Opposition Forces (SNC)²⁹.

In March 2016, the Autonomous Administration announced its transition to the federal system³⁰. It thus formed a 200-member Constituent Assembly to establish the National Democratic Federation of North Syria, elected the co-chairs of the Assembly and a regulatory body composed of 31 members of both sexes. The regulatory body was then assigned by the Constituent Assembly to draft a social contract and a comprehensive political and legal vision for the federal system within a period not exceeding six months³¹.

The Chair of the Assembly representing the Kurdish component is Ms. Hediya Yusuf (45 years), and the Chair of the Assembly representing the Arab component is Mansour Salloum. Hediya Yusuf is the former co-chair of the Jazeera Canton and a founding member of the TEV-DEM and *Kongreya Star*, formerly known as *Yekîtiya Star*. She was arrested by the Syrian regime on April 16, 2010 and convicted of joining a secret organization aimed at dividing Syria and annexing it to a foreign country³². She was released two years and three months later, on 19 July 2012. Some press reports said that Hediya Yusuf joined the Kurdistan Workers' Party PKK in 1999, at the age of 18 years³³.

Ms. Hediya Yusuf explained that the number of women in the Constituent Assembly of the federal system was 50 out of 200. She added that this number does not achieve 40% of female representation, but is the result of a consensus-based Assembly.

After the election of the regulatory body, a small legal committee consisting of nine members was formed to write the Charter of the Social Contract. The committee drafted the Federation's law on administrative divisions and electoral law. Hediya Yusuf, who was a member of this committee, did not disclose any statistics or figures but explained that men and women are equally represented in the legal and regulatory committees³⁴.

The Draft of the Social Contract of Rojava-Northern Syria was announced in June 2016. Soon after, the representation of women was increased to 50% in accordance with Article 16 of the Draft which provides for an "equal representation of women and men in all areas of life (political, social, and cultural)". And pursuant to the Draft, the Federation of Northern Syria was divided into three regions, namely Jazeera, Euphrates and Afrin, to include new areas of the SDF³⁵-controlled Arab territories, such as Tall Abyad and Al-Shadada³⁶.

The declared federation is a grassroots democracy where decision-making follows a bottom-up approach. Accordingly, elections were first held at the level of communes, up to the local council level, the democratic peoples' councils of the three regions, and then the Peoples' Democratic Congress or the parliament of the "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria"³⁷.

Explaining the co-chairing system of the Constituent Assembly of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (co-chaired by Hedaya Yusuf and Mansour Salloum), Yusuf pointed out that "co-chairing is a consultative decision-making system... For example, I have a bigger role than the man. I currently have the key role in the organization and management of activities mandated to the Assembly."³⁸

In the period following the establishment of the Autonomous Administration in January 2014, many of the components of the local community, especially in the Jazeera Canton, were not involved in the Autonomous Administration structures that were in the process of forming; the participation was rather restricted to the cadres and supporters of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). For example, work in the communes was voluntary and unpaid, and often relied on people, both men and women, who could not read or write. Although the communes had a high proportion of women, their staff was in general unable to manage the work well. When a group of local NGOs and other civil society organizations launched a campaign targeting the members of one of the communes in the city of Qamishli in order to assess their knowledge of the laws governing their employment and the extent to which they are performing their duties, a set of suggestions was considered, including the development of informative brochures that explain to the members of the commune their tasks, roles, work procedures, rights and duties. One of the campaigners complained that it was difficult to deal with the Commune staff who could not read and write³⁹.

However, as time passed with the Syrian regime unable to provide basic services such as water, electricity and fuel, a greater reliance has been noticed on the Autonomous Administration institutions that have proved effective in providing such services through their institutions operating in parallel with the institutions of the Syrian regime. The Administration has also proven effective in providing security through the police and security forces called Asayish⁴⁰, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ)⁴¹.

Ms. Nubhar Mustafa, a member of the Kongreya Star which helps train and prepare women cadres for work in the various structures of the Autonomous Administration, spoke about the difficulties that the

Administration sometimes faces in achieving the required 40% representation of women. The reasons are that women do not have the required academic qualifications or experience in the field of work. Mustafa said: "We have recruited the educated and qualified Kurdish women in the Administrative Bodies Department, but no woman could be recruited in the Legislative Council. We may at times overlook the qualification requirements, but we cannot recruit any woman applicant into the Legislative Council. She may not be able to discuss issues or make decisions. The decrees issued by the Legislative Council are laws that only qualified people can draft".

Other obstacles to women's participation arise from the society's rejection of working women due to social norms and traditions. Mustafa said: "It is easy to convince an Arab man to work. He will show up and work. But when you ask him about the wife, he will say that she is already busy with children and housework. Men use this pretext because they fear being criticized by the people of their village and need to maintain their social status in the village."

As for political obstacles, Mustafa said that "most Syrian women do not participate in the Syriac Women's Union, for example, because they support the Syrian regime and are against the Autonomous Administration. We asked the Syriac Women's Union in Syria to fill a certain percentage but their resources are limited and cannot achieve it."

Mustafa also considered that the obstacles to women's participation are sometimes self-imposed. "Women also tend to self-impose many obstacles to their participation. Such obstacles could be personal, social, related to childrearing, caring for the family, or the conditions of life that existed under the regime's control. Moreover, we are now living under conditions of war, not in some European country where children can be sent to school, or where nurseries, kindergartens and transportation are available so that mothers can work. In our situation, the mother of a one-year old baby will find it difficult to go out to work. We, as Autonomous Administration and members of the Kongreya Star have had extensive discussions on how to build a system that facilitates women's participation in the job market instead of forcing them to become housewives who are confined to strictly domestic and childrearing roles. We need to discuss this issue further and find solutions such as babysitting or anything else for that matter"⁴².

Ever since the Autonomous Administration moved to the federation-building phase in March 2016, the co-chairs of the communes have been selected through direct elections where women and men ran for office separately to secure the election of a woman. For example, two women and one man ran for office in the Martyr Arras commune of the village of Ataba in the Jazeera Canton. According to the results announced at the end of September 2017⁴³, Amal Husayn who was 19, married and mother to one child, was elected. She had left school since the fifth grade. The other co-chair is Mr. Mohamed Saleh Omar, a 60-year-old man, holder of a primary school certificate. He is affiliated to the Democratic Union Party and is a former member of the Democratic Labor Party⁴⁴. (The co-chairs work from home and the male co-chair has the biggest role to play, according to a number of villagers).

According to Noshin⁴⁵, the Women's Program Officer in a local civil society organization in the Jazeera canton, all communication regarding program activities that target women in the rural areas is done with the male co-chair rather than with the female co-chair, possibly because of the social norms prevailing in the countryside.

The Electoral Commission, which is responsible for conducting the electoral process, consists of 18 members of both sexes⁴⁶. Lawyer Rukin Mulla Ibrahim, the Electoral Commission's Co-Chair, said that out of the 18 Commission members, 8 were women. Rukin emphasized that although she is a veiled and religiously observant woman, women's rights are her primary concern, and she believes that there is

nothing wrong with the Administration laws that are not based on Islamic law. She added "I was once engaged to a man for more than a year, but I broke up with him because of his masculine mentality... I could not tolerate it. Times have changed. Slavery, patriarchal control, and all such things are definitively over. We are all fighting violence against women. This thing is over. I did not tolerate it, and I broke off my engagement".

The co-chairing system makes it difficult to know how the tasks are divided between the two co-chairs. Rukin said "We work as one person, we divide the tasks at the beginning of the day, and each of us goes out to do their tasks, and then we communicate in the evening to brief each other on the status of our tasks". When asked about her political affiliation, Rukin affirmed that she represents the Kurdish component and politically independent; however, she added that her background indicates an affiliation to the TEV-DEM which nominated her with her male Co-Chair to participate in the Commission as representatives of the Kurdish component⁴⁷.

In the second phase of the elections, the members of the local councils in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria were elected in accordance with the electoral law of the Federation. The law provided for the closed list system whereby 60% of the representatives are elected directly by the people and 40% by consensus among the ethnic, religious, ideological, cultural and social components⁴⁸. In the Jazeera canton, for example, there were two lists: the Democratic National Solidarity List composed of 18 parties including the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and the Syrian National Alliance List composed of 5 parties and 267 independent candidates⁴⁹.

According to the Co-Chair of the Electoral Commission in the Jazeera Canton, lawyer Rukin Mulla Ibrahim, lists were required to commit to a 50% quota for women candidates, yet the National Alliance list in the Jazeera canton was accepted although it had failed to meet such requirement. However, Rukin confirmed that the Commission will focus at a later stage on the fulfillment of the quota, after the announcement of the elections results in December 2017⁵⁰. (The Democratic Unity Party list and the Syrian National Alliance list in Afrin failed to satisfy the 50% women's quota requirement. Most political parties do not have a high percentage of women members).

The local council elections ended with the victory of the Democratic National Solidarity List in the three cantons, while the remaining 40% of representatives who are not directly elected were determined by the winning list, i.e., the Democratic National Solidarity list controlled by the Democratic Union Party. In Afrin, the Democratic National Solidarity List of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and another newly formed party won 1056 seats, the one-party "Democratic Unity Party" list won 72 seats, while the two-party Syrian Democratic Alliance List won eight seats, and the independent candidates won 40 seats. It is worth noting that the Democratic Unity Party is one of the oldest parties in Afrin and enjoys a popular base no smaller than that of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)⁵¹.

The Co-chair of the Social Justice Council in the Jazeera canton⁵², lawyer Einor Zaid Pasha, is in her 40s, single, and lives with her parents. She has worked as a lawyer with the Syrian government and has 17 years of experience in law. Pasha explained that she comes from a liberal family, and that no significant changes have occurred in her life in that respect. But from the professional perspective, Pasha explained that during her years of work with the Syrian judiciary, important positions, such as the position of the judge, for example, were reserved for members of the ruling Baath party in Syria.

When asked about her political background, Pasha said: "I am not affiliated to any party. Those who work in the judiciary must be independent, but I am from the families of the martyrs because my sister, who was a fighter in the PKK, was killed in Turkey in 2007."⁵³

The families of the martyrs of the PKK, the People's Protection Units and the Women's Protection Units have considerable influence in the Autonomous Administration. In fact, they have organized themselves into the "Association of Martyrs and Veterans". Many critics of the Autonomous Administration say the Association was similar to the Syrian regime in terms of allocating job privileges and educational grants to the martyrs' families.⁵⁴

It suffices to compare theory and practice in the self-proclaimed Federation of Northern Syria project, which claims to apply a grassroots democracy, to see that the project did not really start from the grassroots but from the top, by attempting to apply the vision of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan across the Democratic Union Party and its military wing represented by the People's Protection Units, the Women's Protection Units and other partner organizations.

Although there is a high percentage of women in the Federation of Northern Syria project, the 40 percent which is stipulated in the draft Social Contract of the Autonomous Administration, and which rose to 50 percent when the Federal project was announced, is often unrealized for various reasons, including the absence of women's representation in the parties involved in the Federal project, other than the Democratic Union Party, the unwillingness of a segment of women to participate for social reasons, the existence of a segment of women who do not agree politically with the Federal project and thus refrain from taking part in it, and the lack of women who have the required experience.

The ambiguity in the decision-making mechanism makes it difficult to know whether women in sensitive positions are the actual decision-makers. According to interviews with female administration staff, local experts and journalists, and civil society workers in the Democratic Union Party's control areas, the people who are close to the Democratic Union Party, especially those who have a military background within the PKK,⁵⁵ or who belong to the families of the party's own martyrs, have extensive influence in the institutions of the Administration.

It is worth mentioning in this context that many women's initiatives, academies and cooperatives are run by organizations close to the Democratic Union Party. Such organizations enjoy greater freedom, while others are paralyzed with restrictions. Many women who work with the local organizations registered with the Autonomous Administration complain about the approvals they are required to obtain for every activity they want to carry out, and about the Administration sending observers to supervise their activities, and not listening to them when they propose changes to the management system⁵⁶.

2. Empowering Women in the Military Field

The Rojava Autonomous Administration Project was characterized by a wide and unprecedented participation of women in the military and security arenas. Although the Kurdish women's participation in the PKK started in the 1990s, the social environment in the Kurdish-majority areas has been less receptive to the idea of women joining military action. This has relatively changed with the emergence of the Islamic State and its attempt to control those areas.

In April 2013, the first Women's Protection Units (YPJ)⁵⁷ were formed in Afrin, Jazeera, and then in Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) to work alongside the People's Protection Forces (YPG), the military wing of the Democratic Union Party.

Shortly after the YPJ units were formed, they made headlines in the media for their participation in the battle for the liberation of Kobani⁵⁸ from ISIS control in late 2014 and early 2015. Most Western media outlets portrayed these women as beautiful legendary heroines fighting their obscurantist enemies who represent the opposite⁵⁹. Women from different parts of the world have begun joining the Women's Protection Units (YPJ)⁶⁰. Also, women started joining the *Asayish* (police) forces.

2.1 The Representation of Women in the Army

Kurdish women have been fighting with the PKK for national liberation for years, and despite their sacrifices, they have often found themselves marginalized within the movement. The movement has thus reviewed these experiences so as to ensure that the concept of women's emancipation becomes a key element in the PKK's vision of social liberation⁶¹. In 1998, Ocalan announced the ideology of women's emancipation in his movement, which revolves around five core principles:

- Patriotism and the rejection of aversion, colonialism and coalescence imposed on women, because the liberation of women depends on the liberation of the land.
- Intellectual independence (women decide for themselves and are not subject to what the dominant structures dictate).
- Women's organizations and their importance (by organizing themselves, women can overcome patriarchy).
- The struggle for change (not only by imposing demands on the oppressor, but also by fighting for rights and finding alternatives).
- Aesthetics and ethics (women do not have to abide by the standards of beauty imposed by society and men).

Therefore, the legitimate defence forces have been developed to enable women to improve their strength in order to protect other women from all forms of assault by the patriarchal uncivilized system⁶².

During the same year in which Ocalan was arrested, the Kurdish Women Workers' Party (PJKK)⁶³ was founded, and the Free Women's Units or YJA-Star units were later established to promote the right of self-defence. Then new theories were developed, including the "theory of the rose" according to which says women may "seem weak but have thorns to protect themselves." In 2003, the party called for a model democratic eco-society based on the emancipation of women. In 2005, the Kurdistan Communities Union

(KCK) was founded to serve as an umbrella organization for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PÇDK) and the Kurdish Free Life Party (PJAK) and implement the leader Abdullah Ocalan's ideology of Democratic Confederalism. The Rojava project in Syria was the first practical application of this ideology⁶⁴.

Ms. Hediya Yusuf, Co-Chair of the Constituent Assembly of the self-proclaimed Federation of Northern Syria, explained that the presence of women in the military arena is necessary for the empowerment of women in society. She added "the presence of women in the military arena is very significant from the ideological perspective. It means that women can defend their country and society. They are not the weak component who is not entitled to participate in defending their country and society; quite the opposite, they have more energy to participate in battles and in society."

When asked about the impact of women's participation, Yusuf said that "women's participation is a proof that women can lead, organize, train and fight. It gives women stronger presence in all aspects of life, including being a member of a military wing and defending the country. The participation of women in all aspects of life gives them a starting point."⁶⁵

2.2 The People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ)

In late February, the first battalion of women's units was formed in the town of *Jindires* in the Afrin canton. It was followed by the announcement of the establishment of other battalions in other regions of the cantons of Jazeera, Kobani and Afrin.

In April 2013, the First Constituent Assembly of the Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) was held⁶⁶. The YPJ were founded to work alongside the People's Protection Forces (YPG), the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The YPJ are similar to the YPG in terms of military structure, with variances in the terminology used in the rules of procedure.

2.2.1 The Women's Protection Units- YPJ

The group is the smallest military unit in the Women's Protection Units' system of military formations. A group consists of three to five female fighters. After the group come the platoon, the brigade, and then the 81- to 135-member battalion. Joining the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) is voluntary; however, candidates are required to have reached the legal age. There are, however, special cases where girls under the age of 18 are admitted, including cases where such girls are victims of domestic violence or forced marriage and need protection⁶⁷.

The rules of procedure of the Women's Protection Units emphasize the social role of this force in opposing patriarchal authoritarian regimes. It focuses on the self-defense approach, and states that the Women's Protection Units "struggle for a free and democratic Syria, and are the main guarantor of women's liberation."

Chapter Five of the rules of procedure, which explains the characteristics of these units, states that Women's Protection Units are "the protective force of every woman in western Kurdistan and Syria. Women organize themselves semi-autonomously into protective units within the People's Protective Units" and that "the proportion of women should not be less than 40%"⁶⁸.

According to a research study conducted by Amy Austin Holmes, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the American University in Cairo, a number of female fighters in the Women's Protection Units agree with the Article 12 of the Social Contract of the Autonomous Administration in Rojava.

Article 12 stipulates the following “This administration is a model of the democratic autonomous administration in Syria, and is part of the future Syria which must be based on political decentralization, considering that federalism is the best political system for Syria, and regulating the relationship between the Administration and the Centre on this basis”.

In her research, Holmes considered that “The girls’ motivation to join the fight is not limited to political reasons. Many of the women I have interviewed said they did not join the fight against ISIS only, but also against the patriarchal norms and behaviors prevailing in their society.”⁶⁹

Nesreen Abdullah, 37, the official spokesperson and Public Relations Officer of the Women’s Protection Units who joined in 2011 considered that “if women continue to be submissive to norms and traditions and the social, tribal and family culture, nothing will change in their lives. They should enjoy their social and civil rights set forth in the Constitution. Their right to self-defense should be equally upheld, that is, they must be protected”.

Nesreen explained that had there been a mechanism to protect women, they would not have been exposed to slavery and slave trade in Sinjar, Mosul and Raqqa. The reason, according to Nesreen, is that “women were not trained to protect themselves. They depended on the men in the family- their father, brother, husband or son- or on the army of the country to protect them. But when neither the father nor the husband nor the brother nor the army protects the women from the oppressor, it becomes necessary to form a special protection force for women, and this force must be powerful and influential.”

Nesreen added that women’s forces are also a societal necessity, because “it has become clear to us, from our experience with the Women’s Protection Units, that when women protect themselves, they also protect their society. Had it not been for the struggle to free the land, the struggle to liberate the society and women would never have taken place. Everything we have achieved, we have achieved through our struggle. We want a pluralistic democratic system where the rights of all groups of society, including women, are upheld. And we believe that women must be pioneers in all the fields that I have mentioned earlier. They must never live at the mercy of men.”⁷⁰

Moreover, Nesreen affirmed that women of all ethnicities can join the units, provided they are not married. She pointed out that the unmarried status condition applies only to women and is strictly related to the possibility of pregnancy. “If a woman fighter is married and becomes pregnant, how will she be able to fight? Would any woman in our society get married and commit not to have children? Is that even possible?”⁷¹

Nesreen added that one of the behaviors that lead to expulsion from the Women’s Protection Units is “immoral acts of emotional and sexual relations”. She argued that “the society accepted the Women’s Protection Units because they protect women’s morals and teach them to live by very high standards. Even ISIS could not speak badly about the ethics of the Women’s Protection Units ... Society has high respect for us because of our ethics and high standards”. Still, Nesreen acknowledged that “we cannot deny that there are some unacceptable things happening in the society.”

2.2.2 The People’s Protection Units- YPG

The troop is the smallest military unit in the People’s Protection Units’ system of military formations. The troop consists of three to five fighters. After the troop, come the crew, the staff, the brigade, and the 54 to 90-member battalion.

According to the People's Protection Units (YPG) rules of procedure, joining the YPG is voluntary and "All Syrian citizens who have completed 18 years of age and accept the values and principles of the YPG may join the units after having completed the military and ideological training, and taken the oath"⁷².

While both the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units aim to build a democratic gender-free society, the rules of procedure of the Women's Protection Units focus more on their role in addressing patriarchal authoritarian systems in society. The rules of procedure of the People's Protection Units also describe Women's Protection Units as "the force that protects women in western Kurdistan".⁷³

But Hayat – the pseudonym of a Kurdish woman from the Jazeera countryside, who preferred to remain anonymous- criticized the participation of young men and women from her village in the YPG and YPJ: "this war is for oil. We have lost all these lives for oil. The son of a relative was a handsome young man who died in the fighting. We went to the graveyard on Friday and saw their pictures there. Beautiful young men and women have died for the sake of oil. What are they fighting for? Many have joined because they are poor. They rob and loot people's houses and come back from battles with stolen things and money. They rob the houses of people who have fled the war. Not one house has been spared. When they went to fight near Aleppo and Manbij, they brought with them refrigerators, TVs, and good appliances. And some of them never come back."⁷⁴

According to journalists, activists and local residents in Jazeera, Afrin and Manbij, underage boys and girls are being sent to the fighting fronts, if they so wish. Activist Ahmed Mohammed who is from Manbij and currently lives in Turkey said "some girls ran away from their homes to join the fight. Two of them used to live in our 14eighbourhood in Manbij. They left their parents' house and broke their mother's heart. Yes, young, teenage girls ran away from home to join Syria's democratic forces. Of course, the forces say they screen applicants before accepting them, but in reality, they take applicants in straightaway. When one of the families suddenly stopped receiving updates on their girl and went to the Syrian democratic forces to ask about their girl, they were told that she was not there. Soon after, news that she was killed in Raqqa reached the village, but nothing was confirmed."

Nesreen Abdullah denied the recruitment of minors. She said "Those reports are baseless. We have a "Youth Academy" which we have formed in agreement with the Geneva Call Organization. Girls who are under 18 years of age stay in the academy camps where they receive ideological and physical training to develop their talents. And at the age of 18, they are given the choice to either work in the community, go back home, or join the Women's Protection Units and the People's Protection Units. They are free to choose and decide".

When asked whether or not these girls receive military training, Nesreen answered "When they reach the age of 16 or 17, they have a program where comrades teach them how to defend themselves. We are in a war zone, and this allows them to protect themselves if anything happens."⁷⁵

2.3 Asayish Police and Security Forces

The Asayish forces were established in July 2013 to serve as police and security forces and fill the security vacuum caused by the withdrawal of the Syrian regime from the Autonomous Administration areas⁷⁶.

The Asayish forces have several affiliated institutions, including the Anti-Terror Forces Command (H.A.T), the Checkpoints Administration, the Organized Crime Directorate, the Intelligence Directorate, the Traffic Directorate, and the Training Academies⁷⁷.

In the early stages of their formation, the Asayish forces declared their affiliation with the Supreme Kurdish Committee, but they are now affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Council and the Legislative Council on the Autonomous Administration⁷⁸.

Women participate in the Asayish general forces, and there are also Asayish forces for women and Asayish centers for women Asayish. The first center for women Asayish was established in Qamishli in the Jazeera canton in late 2013. Several other centers were later established in various areas of the Autonomous Administration⁷⁹.

Women in the Asayish forces are involved in all the Asayish public activities. They are particularly responsible for supervising all women-related issues and activities⁸⁰. Women's participation in the police and security forces was not as common in the autonomous areas as in other Syrian regions. One local worker at an international organization said she feels proud and safe when she sees women standing at security checkpoints in the streets⁸¹.

Zainab is a member of the Asayish police and security forces. She is a 27-year-old Arab from Manbij who married an Arabic language teacher during the Islamic State's control on the city, and has two children (a three-and-a-half-year-old and a one-year-old). Problems with her husband led to their separation. "He took my children and left the country. My youngest son was 15 days old. That was the main reason I joined the internal security forces. I was the first woman to join the Asayish in Manbij."

Zainab now lives with her parents and two sisters (17 and 20), one of whom works with the traffic Asayesh (traffic police) and the other with the General Security Service. They are a family of seven daughters, one brother studying abroad, and a working father. Zainab explained that she joined the Asayish to defend women's rights because she had been subjected to injustice after her divorce, and because she supports Apoism (the ideology of Abdullah Ocalan). Zainab said she faced difficulties when she first joined the Asayish because her tribal society could not accept the nature of her work.

Zainab dropped out of school in middle school. Joining the Asayish forces was her very first "job experience". She said "I used to feel like a persecuted woman, but now women have freedom of opinion and thought. Spending money on myself, for example, makes me feel good. My father used to give me pocket money, but it was never enough. Now I can spend money on myself and my family. It feels very good to earn my own salary and never have to ask anyone for money."

Zainab works in the Organized Crime Directorate in Manbij. According to her, the Directorate staff is composed of three women and thirty men. Zainab underwent a month-long military training when she first joined the Asayish forces, as well as several other specialized courses when she joined the Organized Crime Directorate. She mentioned that her job is to handle crimes that involve women. Crimes in which a woman is killed are normally handled by female staff. In prostitution crimes, intervention is executed by the women's Asayish team. Zainab emphasized that her job requires a lot of courage. For example, "In murder cases, we may be required to open the graves and perform autopsies with a coroner, and this is not something that anyone can do."

Zainab pointed out that her current job is administrative, but proudly added that she was ready to join the fight because "now that we are free from oppression, we have a duty to free others from the Islamic State's unjust oppression and terrorism". She noted that the participation of women in fighting on the front lines is a significant step "because women have more patience than men, and are more precise in hitting targets."⁸²

2.4 Women's Role in the Fighting

According to Nesreen Abdullah, the Women's Protection Units have never been completely separated from the People's Protection Units. They are organized as an independent force that makes decisions about its own women's forces, has a military council and a presidential military council, and follows a hierarchical system. However, there are some commonalities in the organizational mechanism of the two military forces. Nesreen said "When the battle for Al Raqqa began, we decided to start the operation. A meeting of the Co-Chairs was held in the presence of both men and women comrades. The decision was that a woman comrade and a man comrade lead the battle with two forces commanded by two officers, one woman and one man. The two operations ran simultaneously". She added "This system applies to all our decision making processes without exception. We as women commit to this system because we believe in it. Had we noticed any patriarchal mentality or attempts to compromise or undermine our position in the People's Protection units, we would neither have tolerated nor accepted to work with them."⁸³

According to Nesreen Abdullah, the approximate number of the Syrian Democratic Forces SDF is more than 60,000 fighters of both sexes, including 30,000 YPGs and YPJ, with the Women's Protection Units (YPJs) representing 45% of the total force⁸⁴.

When the Autonomous Administration was first declared in the Jazeera, Ayn El Arab (Kobani), and Afrin, the cantons were not connected with each other, and the battle for Tel Abyad was critical for connecting the areas together. According to Amy Austin Holmes, five of the seven leaders on the front line were women.⁸⁵

When asked about the tasks assigned to women, Nesreen pointed out that the experienced fighters train new fighters, and that "a war on terror involves a lot of raids, and when we want to raid a village where there are women, we send a greater number of women fighters out of respect for the norms of the community. Women fighters search the women and their houses to prevent any awkwardness or embarrassment with men fighters". Nesreen added "Women fighters also play an important role where there are children on the raid site. Children are normally not afraid of women, even if they carry a weapon in such missions".

However, these units could not effectively break the cycle of Kurdish nationalism: Although there were a number of Arab women in the ranks of the Women's Protection Units, their names never stood out as leaders. Although the Women's Protection Units assert that they fight for women in general and not only for Kurdish women, they are generally perceived as Kurdish forces linked to the PKK.

In the battle for the liberation of Al Raqqa, for example, hoisting portraits of the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, drew widespread criticism from the people of the city. Nesreen Abdullah commented: "Commander Abdullah Ocalan is a Kurdish leader, and we, as Kurdish women and the loyal people of Rojava, are loyal to Ocalan and would have done the same to any other Kurdish leader because we support our people and the leaders of our people. As Women's Protection Units, we owe it to Leader Abdullah Ocalan. Without his philosophy, women would not have achieved what they have achieved. This is why, we, the Women's Protection Units, believe that it is our right to remind the people that he is still in prison and that he has been denied lawyer and family visitation for over two years now. Every loyal Kurd should demand that our leader be released. This is every Kurd's sacred duty. Anybody with an ounce of humanity must raise our leader's image and demand his release."⁸⁶

2.4.1 Women's Role Post- War

It is difficult to predict the future of women fighters after the end of the fighting. The question arises as to whether the participation of women in the fighting was a mere imperative of the state of emergency imposed by the Islamic state, or a real conviction in the culture of the community. Nesreen answered this

question by saying "I am ready to do any work that I know will serve my people and my country, even if this means cleaning the streets. I consider this as an honor. It is our duty to respond to the needs of our people. If they need us to stay in the military, we will stay. If they need us in political action, we will move to political action. If they need us in community action, we will do it. We are even ready to be involved in technical and cultural work. We are a grassroots force not a state-run force. We work wherever we are needed.

3. The Social Fabric

Abdullah Ocalan's ideology on the emancipation of women is grounded in the legends of the Neolithic mother goddesses. He believes that patriarchy later prevailed due to the rise of the caste system, state and religion, and the global systems in their advanced stages, namely, the capitalist system.

According to Ocalan, the oppression of women is rooted in the patriarchal mentality passed on from generation to generation and from family to family, especially through the idea of linking man's honor to the body of the woman. Ocalan's ideas on Kurdish national liberation intersect with his ideas on the emancipation of women. He saw that in the Neolithic era, not only women were free; all Kurds were living in peace and enjoying freedom. But the rise of state and religion led them to renounce their true identity⁸⁷.

The preamble to the draft of the social contract of the Federation of Northern Syria- Rojava and the Women's Freedom Committee, which acts as the Ministry of Women, appears to be based on Abdullah Ocalan's vision: "The democratic federal system of northern Syria- Rojava is based on the culture of the mother goddesses, the humanitarian and moral values of the messengers, prophets, philosophers and sages who seek truth, justice and equality, the cultural heritage and wealth of the civilization of Syria, Kurdistan and Bet-Nahrain, and the free will of all the components of northern Syria- Rojava. And according to the principles of the democratic nation, this contract was agreed upon".⁸⁸

The definition of the Women's Committee mentioned in Article 69 of the draft contract stipulates that the Committee "shall:

- Fulfill its leading role in the democratization of society, and actively fight against patriarchal domination and mentality.
- Fulfill a key role in building the society based on the principle of free life, and lead the activities related to the organization of women into a specific and semi-independent structure within the democratic system of the society.
- Coordinate and cooperate with and support democratic women's movements and organizations, women's civil society groups and associations, and women's workshops, and make decisions in the light of their recommendations and views.
- Design educational programs and projects for the protection of women under the principle of equal representation.
- Act in accordance with the principle that women decide on women-specific matters".⁸⁹

But the attempts of the Democratic Union Party to implement the vision of the PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, and the wartime conditions have destabilized the social fabric and disrupted the functions of social institutions, especially the family, where parents no longer have authority over their children, and husbands no longer have authority over their wives. The role of the family and the tribe declined. This was

mostly evident in three fundamental issues: marriage and personal status, social norms, and women's employment.

3.1 Personal Status

Toward the end of 2014, the Women's Committee issued a set of laws pertaining to women's issues, including the regulation of civil marriage contracts and the prohibition of underage marriage and polygamy. These laws received wide and mixed reactions: some described them as positive and good for "safeguarding women's rights" while others criticized them⁹⁰.

Paradoxically, residents of the areas under the control of the Democratic Union Party resort to the Syrian government institutions to obtain personal status documents including marriage certificates, family statements, and personal identity papers, etc. This hinders the application of the abovementioned laws. For example, while polygamy is prohibited under the laws of the autonomous administration and entails a fine, a prison sentence, and separation, it is allowed for Muslims under the law of the Syrian state, and the Autonomous Administration would not be able to know whether a second or third marriage happened if no one reports such marriage.

Another issue is that the woman herself may become a victim of these laws. In the social environment of the autonomous regions and Syria in general, the girl lives in her parents' house and moves from it to her husband's house after marriage. In the event of a divorce, she returns to her parents' house. A divorced woman will suffer from the society's negative perceptions of her. Not having a job will only make it worse. Hediya Yusuf, the Co-Chair of the Constituent Assembly of the Federation of Northern Syria said "the law does not protect the dupes⁹¹. The blame is on the husband who did not think about the fate of his family". On the other hand, Nubhar Mustafa of the Kongreya Star said that "those who do not like these laws are free to leave our regions".⁹²

But Huda Ali of the Women's Committee in the Jazeera canton acknowledged the existence of flaws in these laws and said that they were working to address them "There are a few obstacles, especially in the law on polygamy. The courts and women's organizations are currently discussing its implementation mechanism. And since the second marriage is prohibited, the second wife is repudiated, and a penalty is imposed on both the husband and the wife, without her having any rights to claim. This provision is however subject to certain limitations related to pregnancy, in addition to the nature of our Islamic society which allows every man to marry four wives".

Einor Zaid Pasha, the Co-Chair of the Social Justice Council, explained that "there is often confusion between the laws that regulate women's issues and the basic principles that constitute the rights of women. Society and women in particular, should be aware of women's rights and the mechanisms available for them to claim such rights. Anyone who violates women's rights shall be punished. But the problem lies in the application of these rights. The Social Justice Council, the Women's Committee, and the Kongreya Star are currently working on a law for marriage, which includes the definition of marriage and divorce and stipulates the cases in which divorce is allowed. Not every woman who wishes to divorce can do so, and a man can not divorce his wife at any moment. We are also looking forward to drafting a special law that regulates child custody".⁹³

Ms. Kevat from the Roshan Women's Association in Afrin admitted that "The implementation of laws varies from one region to another and from one case to another. The law on the prohibition of polygamy is a good example". She explained that her association intervenes in polygamy-related cases. In one of the cases, she said, a man in his sixties wanted to marry a second wife because his wife has diabetes, has been paralyzed for the past seven years, and can not move without help: "She is unable to help herself or her husband and can not manage the household. This family needed help but employing maids or helpers is

not common in our society, and no one around was available to come and help". Kevat described the dynamics of family relationships: "Men who grow up with an Eastern mentality in our society are taught that their duty as men is to work outside of the household. They either have property to look after, or work as farmers or manual workers. All they know is that their role is to secure a living for their family. This is the reason why our association decided to intervene in the case of this man."

We believe that polygamy is positive in some cases: "Men who marry a second time tend to marry an older woman who has not yet married, and so, the second marriage solves three problems: the man will rest assured that everything in his household is taken care of, the sick wife will have someone to serve her, and the new wife will feel fulfilled and have a family. But polygamy is prohibited in the Autonomous Administration and the law should not be violated".

Ms. Kevat continued: "We went with the man, his sick wife who wanted her husband to have a second wife, and his married children to the Women's Committee who refused to cooperate in the beginning. Two or three months later, the man married his second wife. The Autonomous Administration simply let things slide and spared the man the legal prohibition.

Ms. Kevat sees that the law on the prohibition of polygamy is strict and should provide for some exceptions: "They oppose polygamy, but what about men who do not have children? A man without children has no value. A man's life without children and grandchildren has no value, especially if his wife has health problems, had her uterus removed, or has no ovaries and can not carry children."⁹⁴

The Administration institutions hold discussion sessions on these topics with civil society organizations and community activists. Ms. Kevat mentioned that they have attended several discussion sessions on the laws that regulate women's issues and tried to make their voice heard: "We voiced our concerns in several discussion sessions. We told them that these laws should not be as strict as military laws. But they are now busy building the Federation and more important developments are unfolding".

Many critics of the Autonomous Administration have talked about a contradiction in the standards set by the Administration to protect women's rights. While the Administration prohibits the marriage of underage girls under the pretext of protecting them, it encourages their participation in the fighting⁹⁵. Some Administration officials say they are protecting children from their parents. But Ms. Hediya Yusuf, Co-Chair of the Constituting Assembly of the self-proclaimed Federation of Northern Syria denied this and said: "It is not true... It is a lie... Women's admission to the military forces is voluntary and not part of the recruitment system. Women who wish and decide to join the forces can join... Most women currently enrolled in the Women's Protection Units are there of their own free will. Our military laws are clear in that the fighters should be above 18 years of age. There are cases in which young girls escape from their families, or parents want to marry their 14-year-old daughters. What would a girl do if her parents insist on marrying her at such a young age?" Some of them flee their families and turn to women's organizations because they do not want to marry. Such cases are not very common, but they exist. Fourteen-year-old girls are not eligible for military service. Their recruitment is prohibited. There are however several youth and cultural organizations and academies that provide young boys or girls with education and training in an environment that suits their age. We provide cultural and language training courses. The girls can even go back home if their families change their mind and become convinced that they should not marry their daughters. Some girls stay for a year, others stay for a couple of months only, and others prefer to stay and never return, and when they reach the legal age, they may choose to join the military action; otherwise, we continue to give them education and training".⁹⁶

The Administration sometimes resorts to more stringent solutions. For example, in order to address social phenomena such as the non-acceptance of unmarried women or women living alone apart from their

husband, the Administration set up a special women-only village in the city of Darbasiyeh for women who want to live alone. But when the Administration, which has yet to be recognized internationally, failed to secure financing for the project, the project was entrusted to one of the Kongreya Star organizations.⁹⁷ Still, the project was met with criticism. Activist Ghada (pseudonym), who works for a civil society organization in al-Qamishli said: "Have you heard about the women's village project? What is happening here has never happened anywhere in the world before".⁹⁸

3.2 Women in the Labor Market

According to an English Language graduate from Afrin "...There are conditions imposed on those who wish to get a job in the Autonomous Administration: They must complete three levels of Kurdish language proficiency, in addition to an arms training course or something like that. Women teachers have a political and arms training course that goes on for nearly one month if they are married and three months if they are not married. I couldn't get a job here because this is against my own and my family's principles. I do not want to be labelled as one of them because my family is affiliated with another party. But in the end, everyone is serving the community. I have no problem working in Afrin schools, for example, but there are many conditions and obstacles. I do want to serve the children of my country and I have no problem teaching in the Kurdish language, but I cannot leave my home without even knowing where they will take me. People who took part in these training courses told me that the trainers would confiscate our mobile phones and not let us know where we are. And I was told the same thing when I went to apply at the Administration's educational center here".⁹⁹

A 50-year-old woman living in the Jazeera countryside said she refused to send her daughter to the teachers' training course: "Our daughter has just finished the baccalaureate and she is a hardworker. But because of the wartime conditions we did not send her to Hasakah or Damascus to study. All her friends are now teachers. Some of them only have a primary school certificate and are paid 60 to 80 thousand. They sent them to a mixed residential school in Rumailan for one month. How do you expect her father to allow it when we do not even allow her to return two minutes late to the house?"¹⁰⁰

Several universities have opened in Jazeera, Afrin and Kobani, but the degrees that they issue are just like the intermediate and secondary education certificates issued by the Administration schools, not recognized outside the boundaries of the Autonomous Administration.

Moreover, the implementation of the Administration's Self-Defense Duty Law, which entails a compulsory military service for young Syrian people between the ages of 18 and 30, has pushed a large proportion of youth from this age group living in the Autonomous Administration to leave the country to avoid enlistment, while those who did not leave had to join the self-defence forces. In both cases, women in some households found themselves obliged to work, sometimes in jobs that were reserved for men, in order to survive.¹⁰¹

Ms. Hanifa Sido, 44, from a village in the countryside of Afrin, had to work in her brother's motorcycle spare parts shop after he joined the self-defense duty. Sido said that she is managing well now but things were difficult in the beginning because she lacked experience in spare parts. Hanifa Sido does not know how to read, so her 12-year-old nephew helps her read whatever is written on the spare parts. She is a member of the village commune and lives with her father, her brother's wife and four children whom she supports through her work in the shop.¹⁰²

A woman from the Jazeera countryside said that poor living conditions and rising prices forced some husbands to allow their wives to work, sometimes out of fear that the wife would complain to the institutions of the Autonomous Administration. She added "There are organizations that provide sewing courses. I wish my husband would allow me to go. They would give me 100,000 pounds to buy a sewing

machine, and they would come to see if it was properly installed, and then, I get to keep the money for myself. But he did not accept. Our dignity comes first. We have to accept our situation, especially since these services are provided by the Autonomous Administration institutions. Some people now accept to do anything for money. We are different. Those who work with the institutions have become rich, while we have become poor because we refuse to cooperate with such institutions. I know I can file a complaint against my husband and force him to allow me to work, but I feel it is morally wrong to do so".¹⁰³

Zainab from the Organized Crime Directorate in Manbij said her relatives were against her and her sisters' enrolment with the Asayish forces because of tribal norms that impose restrictions on women's involvement in this field. She said her cousin even attacked her mother, insulted her daughters, and blamed her for failing to control them. But Zainab did not quit her job. She said the matter was resolved after she went to her cousin's home during a routine patrol and arrested him. He stayed in prison for several hours before she released him for the sake of her uncles and father and because he is still her cousin, after all".

104

Although Zainab believes that society eventually accepted the nature of her work, it is difficult to judge whether there has been a real change in society's perception of women's involvement in areas such as police and warfare, or whether such acceptance was forced or driven by fear of retaliation.

3.3 Social Norms

Ms. Kevat of the Roshan Badrakan Association for Kurdish Women in Afrin said her association "handles women's issues but is different from the Women's Committee of the Autonomous Administration. It disagrees with the decree that the Committee issued because the Kurdish and Syrian communities are in a state of instability and there are tragedies unfolding. We live in an Eastern society and can not suddenly become like European societies in one giant leap. We have norms and traditions. Our women, men and families are different and we can not imitate European societies. We disagree with the Women's Committee and they know our point of view. We told them that the laws are supposed to be flexible and not rigid." ¹⁰⁵

There are centers called "women's houses" being established across the Autonomous Administration regions. They report to the judicial system of the Autonomous Administration and serve as reconciliation committees that intervene in family disputes between spouses, parents and children, or siblings. Only women work in these centers. A dispute that is not resolved at the women's house level is referred to the Justice Diwan, or the Court, if it cannot be resolved there. The Co-Chair of the Social Justice Council in the Autonomous Administration explained that the women's houses are staffed by women only, but most men do not accept the participation of women in reconciliation. As a result, the Justice Diwan provides reconciliation for spouses, and the Diwan decides on the disputes brought before it.¹⁰⁶

A woman from al-Qamishli told us about her 16-year-old son who joined the People's Protection Units and was sent to fight in al-Raqqa about three months ago without his family being informed about it: "they told them at 9:00 pm that they were going to al-Raqqa the next day at 4:00 am, and ordered them to turn off their mobile phones. I tried to call my son several times, but his phone and his friends' phones were off. I felt restless and tried to contact as many officials as possible in the Autonomous Administration but no one could help me. They said they did not know where he was, but I somehow felt he was in al-Raqqa. I know how the system works, so I kept searching for a clue by contacting all my acquaintances. In the end, someone called me and said "We left al-Rakka and your son is with us. We survived without food and water for a month". My son was sent to al-Raqqa and those who sent him have been telling me they had not seen him. He is still very young but now his eyes have seen terrible things... He is home now, but he keeps threatening us that he would go back. Whenever he asks for something and I do not buy it he threatens to go back... My son has changed and I am very cautious with him now. All mothers in al-Hasakah feel the

same. We can no longer control our sons and daughters because they immediately threaten to join the fighting.¹⁰⁷

4. The Pursuit of Legitimacy

The liberation of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) from the Islamic state between 2014 and 2015 was a major turning point. It was the beginning of a strong military cooperation between the People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units and the US-led coalition forces fighting against the Islamic State.

After the successful battle for Kobani (Ayn Al Arab), this cooperation gained momentum and led an unprecedented campaign to recover areas of northern Syria from the Islamic State¹⁰⁸. Syria's Democratic Forces were formed later in October 2015 to be "a united national military force for all Syrians, bringing together Arabs, Kurds, Syrians and all other components", as their mission statement reads. The People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party form the backbone of Syria's Democratic Forces, known as SDF.¹⁰⁹

The battle for Kobani received wide coverage in the international media. The media focused first on the threat of the Islamic state which sought to establish an Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq. The focus then shifted to the Kurdish forces defending the city, with special emphasis on the mobilization of women and their participation in the fighting.

This battle was often depicted in the media as a conflict between civilization and barbarism. When women joined the forces, their participation in the fight made headlines. Ms. Nubhar Mustafa from the Kongreya Star underlined that "The spotlight on women fighters was wonderful, but the stereotyped image of the Women's Protection Units has had a negative impact". Every time they mentioned the Rojava women, they had to put the image of a woman fighter in a military uniform carrying a weapon, as if the women of Rojava are nothing but fighters".¹¹⁰

However, Nesreen Abdullah, the spokeswoman for the Women's Protection Units, saw that the exceptional work of the women fighters attracted media attention: "This is normal. Women have already been involved in politics and society around the world, but their involvement in fighting is something that has never happened before." All armies of the world, including the NATO, have a so-called women's military wing where women are assigned administrative work. However, women in the Women's Protection Units fight on the battlefield, go on missions, and make great sacrifices. Hundreds of women were killed and never tolerated being looked down on. The work and conduct of the Women's Protection Units have shown the world that we have made an important step forward. Women around the world now take pride in the Women's Protection Units who have scored an unprecedented achievement for women, that of fighting a terrorist organization."¹¹¹

Many journalists went to Syria to meet the women fighters.¹¹² The Women's Protection Units have benefited from the media spotlight to disseminate propaganda such as the Islamic State fighters' fear of being killed by a woman because that would mean they would not enter paradise.¹¹³

The Democratic Union Party also benefited from the media coverage and mobilization of women in the People's Protection Units to promote its project in governance. Nubhar Mustafa confirmed this when she

said that "The political impact of women's participation in the fighting has led to an international recognition of and support to the Women's Protection Units, and gave momentum to the Kongreya Star Conference and many women's organization. Everyone wanted to discover the political background of the women fighters. Journalists who went on the field to report on the work of the Women's Protection Units had to go through the politically active women's organizations and associations, and learn about them, and write about them".¹¹⁴

Despite the military cooperation between the coalition forces and the military wing of the Democratic Union Party, the Rojava project has not received international political recognition, and Turkey's opposition seems to be the biggest obstacle: The Turkish government sees the Democratic Union Party as an extension of the PKK, which is classified as a terrorist organization, and considers it as a threat to its borders.¹¹⁵

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the forces was their taking over the capital of the Islamic State. According to Hediya Yusuf, this military victory will pave the way for the recognition of their political project.¹¹⁶

The Syrian regime first rejected the declaration of the Federation of Northern Syria and described the elections there as a "joke".¹¹⁷ But the Syrian Foreign Minister later announced that "an autonomous administration for the Kurds in Syria is negotiable if it is established within the borders of the state." Russia welcomed the move.¹¹⁸ However, TEV-DEM leader Fawza Youssef told Reuters: "the position of the Syrian government is unclear. One day they are open for negotiations, then the second day they deny their first statement and issue a completely different statement. Someone wants the war and the other wants to negotiate".¹¹⁹

Hediya Yusuf stressed that the Autonomous Administration is trying to "open channels of dialogue with the Syrian regime" in order to find a solution "within Syria", a "Syrian-Syrian solution", because no matter how long the revolution takes, it will eventually lead to a political solution." But Yusuf warned at the same time that "Rojava will defend itself against any force that will attempt to attack it or its achievements. Anything can happen since the regime will try as much as possible to insist on the central state system, but we too have a vision regarding this issue, and if the Syrian regime insists on the central system, the result will be the division of Syria. We do not rule out the possibility of the Syrian regime attacking us because the political positions of the regime and the United States or any other state depend on the political balances in the region, but we insist that it is neither in the interests of the regime nor in the interests of the regional or international powers to clash with the force that has defeated terrorism on its own territory. Therefore, any confrontation led by the Syrian regime against the Federation of Northern Syria will not be in the regime's favour nor in the favor of any other international force".

Yusuf pointed out that "the situation now depends on political balances ... and anything can happen as some political lines are still unclear... The situation in Syria is difficult, and all political parties and international parties are trying to establish their influence in the region. It is not in the interests of the rest of the parties to oppose this successful experience in northern Syria. If any development unfolds in this direction, we will exercise our right to defend ourselves."¹²⁰

5. Conclusion

The Autonomous Administration Project, led by the Democratic Union Party has emerged as a key pillar for the promotion of gender equality and succeeded in attaining a high proportion of women in its military, administrative and political institutions. However, the presence of women in the Autonomous Administration entities is rather representative. It is often employed for political and media purposes that add legitimacy to the new project in northern Syria.

The participation of women is publicised in the media to build advocacy networks for the Autonomous Administration project led by the Democratic Union Party. The participation of Arab or Syriac women in the fighting, albeit limited and formal, attracts some media attention. Amendments to women's laws and representation are often inspired by Western experiences and do not take into account the local reality, hence the clashes with the local community whenever such amendments are implemented.

Some say that the Autonomous Administration project is theoretically a non-nationalist project that seeks to implement the vision of Abdullah Ocalan's, but the social and historical reality of the relationship between the indigenous components in northern Syria is compelling. The fact that the majority of women leaders in the Autonomous Administration project are Kurdish and non-Kurdish women constitute a minority has led to social division within the institutions of the Administration. For example, the Democratic Union Party has a high percentage of women, unlike the rest of the Kurdish parties and other parties involved in the Autonomous Administration project. This promotes the dominance of the Democratic Union Party women in the Autonomous Administration project structures, as was the case in the December 2017 local administration elections, and marginalizes a wide range of women who disagree with the Autonomous Administration project and confines them to the housewife role after they had been leading the life of working women.

The conclusion is thus clear: the experience of women with the Autonomous Administration in Rojava is indeed worthy of attention, but has it really achieved all the slogans it had been raising? The findings of this research confirm that things are still blocked by many challenges, complexities and difficulties, which call for more efforts, perseverance and hard work.

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- ¹¹⁸ Alwatan, 7/11/2017, <http://alwatan.com/details/218000>;
Reuters, 7/11/2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/damascus-says-syrian-kurdish-autonomy-negotiable-report-idUSKCN1C10TJ>
- ¹¹⁹ Reuters, 31/10/2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-analysis/assad-sets-sights-on-kurdish-areas-risking-new-syria-conflict-idUSKBN1D02CN>
- ¹²⁰ Interview with Hediya Yusuf, conducted via WhatsApp, in November 2017