

# Kurdish Woman and the Freedom Movement



## Washington Kurdish Institute

By: Giulia Anderson March 29, 2021

Kurdish women, alongside Kurdish men, have always played a major role in uprisings and the Kurdish struggle for freedom across greater Kurdistan. Throughout history, Kurdish women have faced brutal reactions from the governments and the regimes ruling Kurdistan, in addition to repressions caused by elements of backward cultural norms. Kurdish women in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria all faced a different type of persecution for the regimes, but violence has been the same. In recent years, women have fought for their point and have gained major roles in society - though always internally to Kurdistan. However, Kurdish women have been known as the 'good fighters' after their heroic fights against ISIS terrorism, mainly in Syria.

Often and especially by Western media, Kurdish women are depicted as brave soldiers, such that if you Google search Kurdish women, 99% of the pictures are all of soldiers, but there's much more to this than what you find on Google. As stated during the conference, which is reported below, Kurdish women are fundamental for society, especially in the bottom-up system special to Rojava. Not many know about the great accomplishments and satisfactions Kurdish women brought to their societies - of course, some of them are fighting related, but some of them are also social and cultural. In fact, in all of greater Kurdistan women have an important role for society, but this is not always accepted by the central governments who feel the need to persecute to sometimes kill those who they believe are dissidents - and women who speak their voice are, many times, subversive.

This important conference held at the Washington Kurdish Institute tried to give light to the fundamental role played in society by women in greater Kurdistan, while also underlining the struggles. Many times, the battle is stronger than the accomplishment, but the accomplishment is always important, even if small. And this is what makes Kurdish women great, they do not give up, and the speakers of this conference made it clear: they are strong and independent women. Hopefully, raising awareness of the Kurdish question may help women as well, because the two causes are parallel - ex: Rojava cannot exist without women.

Dr. Ozlem Goner, Ava Homa, and Aviva Stein are the protagonists of this important panel. Following, the excerpts from the online discussion hosted by the Washington Kurdish Institute on [Kurdish Women](#).

- **Dr. Ozlem Goner** of the College of Staten Island opened her remarks with a brief about the history of the oppression of Kurds, especially Kurdish women in Turkey. She spoke about the famous massacre against the Kurds in [Dersim in 1938](#).

“This is 1938, the massacres in Dersim happened within the boundaries of the Turkish State. So the colonial state of Turkey has undertaken a huge genocide in Eastern Turkey and North-Western Kurdistan called Dersim, killing thousands of people and forcing thousands more to move out of the town. These massacres were part of a genocidal project to exterminate any potential opposition from Kurdish Alevi and Armenian residents of Dersim. This is also important for us speaking about Kurdish women to also break that singular definition of an essential Kurdish woman because as we know, there’s a multiplicity diversity in the group of women that we’re talking about, which only makes the struggles of these women towards a more democratic society, more prominent. So this particular town is also an Alevi town, which was also a religious minority among the Turkish state and among the Kurds as well. So what is important here, just like in any form of genocidal state violence that you look at, is that this isn’t only a Genocide against the Kurdish populations, but a particular one is the specific one that’s targeting women in this society in different ways. The world came to recognize the importance of Kurdish women and their struggle.

So we have sexual gender violence that the Turkish State has used against the Kurdish Alevi women of this town. By means of rape, by means of sexual violence, by means of assimilation, by means of forced adoption of the young girls at the hands of the Turkish military. It was a complete genocidal and femicide project of extermination against the Kurdish women of this particular region in 1938. So this is the first generation also of women who have struggled and who have resisted Turkish oppression by bear means of survival. And I’m going to say survival under the means of the colonial extermination policies of this Turkish State. Survival itself becomes a struggle and becomes resistance against this particular genocide or violence of the early 1930s, the early formation of the Turkish nation-state, which oppressed and exterminated all forms of resistance, via its religious, via its ethnic so that made the Kurdish women at the bottom of this hierarchy. So we have to see this intersectional violence against Kurdish communities, but also against the Kurdish women, and in this case, Kurdish Alevi women who

for the State were not to survive. So their survival was a form of resistance as early as the 1930s and 1940s, but it wasn't only their survival. It was another process that these women were emboldened. So despite tens of thousands of people being killed, the massacres in Dersim had been hidden, secret from the Turkish population. And even the Kurdish population didn't have extensive knowledge of it until very recently where oral history, memory projects like mine, but also many, many others have tried to look into memories of State violence by the Kurdish populations. Interestingly, those who remembered and those who transferred these stories of massacre and oppression were mostly the women. Men were more resistant to share. Men kept it quieter. This is because of a patriarchal society. So it's not the femicide at the hands of the Turkey state, but as we know, the societies themselves were also patriarchal. So women weren't only oppressed at the hands of the state, but also within their own societies, they had to struggle for their own survival and freedom."

### **The Difference Between Men and Women in Telling the Story of the Massacre of Dersim.**

"Men in Dersim doing their military duty by the state, getting more of the state education, and learning the language of Turkish were more hesitant to talk about these early massacres. So in this sense, this is very interesting to me, and actually even emotional that Sakine Cansiz, and one of the pioneers that I'm going to talk about next as the second generation of women and their resistance in Bakur, refers to her grandmother's narratives of 1938 massacres as once that radicalized. As one that gave her clues to the oppression of the State, because people in their attempts, the older generation, their attempts to protect the newer generations and to make sure that they don't get punished at the hands of the State the way that they did. They tried not to communicate these memories of massacres, these memories of genocidal and femicide processes against them by the State. But women did, they talked, they talked in their fractured stories. They talked in their songs. They talk about coming up with narratives of not only what happened to them, but giving this broader, generalized historical consciousness of oppression at the hands of the State. This mobilized. So this is very important for me to not see them only as the ones with the guns, but to also not see them only as the victims of oppression, but as agents of struggle. Even in their brief tellings, that fractured stories and songs of these massacres, they were able to transfer both the language of Kurdish and in this case, in my region, it was the Zazaki Kurdish. So when you speak with these women, even on a daily basis, they start telling you about what they call 'ake me dît', which means all that we saw. And if you go into it in detail, it becomes all that we saw at the hands of the Turkish state."

### **The Next Generation and the Foundation of the PKK.**

"Then you have these narratives, these memories, these stories, these songs, these genres of memories of oppression that transfer to the newer generations, and then hence were mobilized into embodied forms of struggle to the next generation. So the next generation, one of the most important figures of the next generation was Sakine Cansiz who is one of the founders of the Kurdish Workers' Party known as the PKK. She became involved in this in the 1970s. So in the early formation, she has become a central figure in pushing for not only the Kurds' rights of self self-determination but of freedom understood as women's freedom as well. So early on from the

late 1970s, which became especially important in 1980 during her struggle in the infamous Diyarbakir prison because the Turkish State becomes once again, repressive, oppressive against not only the Turkish left in 1980 with the coup d'etat that the Turkish state had undertaken against all forms of oppression. But this is something often missed from Human Rights Watch and places like this that look at Turkey and say it's human rights violations. They fail to pay attention to how this becomes, especially genocidal and femicide against the Kurdish women. And so in 1980 in the infamous Diyarbakir prisons, which were in Bakur. So this is this place that the Turkey State showed its face of oppression most clearly to especially women because dehumanizing them was what the State tried to do by, again sexual violence by means of making women naked and giving them all sorts of torture to deep humanize them and to shame them. This is something that the Turkish state and all genocidal States have done is to use sexual violence as a form of dehumanization and putting the shame of its own violence on the oppressed woman. But there was a big resistance against the Kurdish women in the Diyarbakir prisons. So the second generation of women starting to become active in the 1970s and 1980s have formed the earlier moments of the Kurdish women movement to resist not only against the oppressive State but against patriarchal forms and understandings and power relations of their movements themselves. So they wanted to revolutionize and started to develop a theory and practice of revolution that would end up freeing not only the Kurdish societies but Kurdish women and women in general.”

### **Freedom for Krudish Women and Government’s Oppression.**

“During this period, State terror against the Kurdish villages intensified in Turkey. But once again, it gave birth to an increased momentum to the Kurdish freedom movement and increased momentum to women who were once again, living under excessive military occupation, were under the threat of not only violence because they were Kurds, but under the oppression of gender femicide violence at the hand of the Turkish State. They found salvation in the mountains. So this is very important for the Kurdish movement. This is the third generation in the 1990s. Kurdish women increasingly participated in the PKK in the freedom movement, but also they were leading parallel freedom movements within their own movement. We see the products of this coming out, especially in the 1990s, in the multiplication of organizations within the Kurdish freedom movement that are all women’s organizations. And this becomes very central to what we see in Rojava today and in the freedom struggle that became most popularized. But I think it’s important to recognize that these started in the 1990s. We saw, for example, that there’s a resolution in 1995 within the PKK, where the PKK declared this resolution concerning the women’s army and the free women’s movement, which states *‘the potential women who make up half of the society in the service of the revolution and their hidden and suppressed talents and intelligence in creating an entire society based on equality is the most humane and the most radical characteristic of our revolution.’* So this is 1995, and this resolution would grant independence to women’s organizations and opens the way to all women units’ relative power, and they have relative power over the old gender units. So this is as early as 1995, we see a very dramatic move, a success, a revolution of women that wasn’t attained in other freedom movements around the world.

I'm not just talking about the Middle East, but I'm talking about broader Europeans and the US. There are similar movements, there are notions of intersectionality. There's a very strong black woman's movement that has many parallels of intersectionality, but in terms of accessing their struggle resulting in these all women's units becomes a very exceptional and unique development that develops in the PKK as early as 1995. Now there's obviously resistance, by not only the Turkish State, which is already naming this quite radically free movement as a terrorist organization, but also there's resistance by the man within the PKK itself. And there is power holders and holders of patriarchy, but women's struggle, and Ocalan support, at that point also have become very important in the continuing success and continuing developments that lead to a multiplication of women's organizations, women's units, all women, independent organizations within the Kurdish freedom movement, all over Bakur and also in the diaspora.

So we have Kurdish women being very active in the pro-Kurdish political party. You have nowadays known as HDP obviously was closed down and targeted a number of times that had opened in different names. I'm going to end with this: the important thing is that these three generations of women, the 1930s, the resistance, the resilience, the survival, speaking of the language, the memories that they transfer, that then gets mobilized in the movements of the 1970s and 80s. And then within the PKK, they ended up in the 1990s with women increasingly joining the guerilla, but also the political party, they became pioneers of Saturday mothers. So they also point to these forms of gender violence that the colonial States have been conducting in the region. So you have peaceful mothers pushing for the peace process in Turkey. So you see women of all ages of all generations, of all political experience in education, being involved in a freedom movement with the motto if society pushes you to the bottom, not as Kurds only, but it's Kurdish women, then the only way to come out of that is to revolutionize the whole society."

### **Freedom of Kurdish Women Started in the Kurdistan Region of Turkey (Bakur).**

"I'm going to end with this by saying that the freedom movement that the Kurdish woman created starting in Bakur and expanding enlarging has also important lessons for the feminist movement, in the world. I'm situated, for example, in the US. The solidarity work between different feminist movements. That there's an important lesson that as early as the 1990s is that women cannot be free just based on a struggle based on gender. In other words, gender equality is not possible in an otherwise unequal world. So we know in order to become free that you need to destroy all forms of oppression that at the time were targeting the Kurdish women, beat the nation-State, beat patriarchy, and beat capitalism as well because the majority of these women are also farmers, workers, and agricultural workers. There's a class that I mentioned, they developed the *avant-garde* of revolution. The *avant-garde* political notion of understanding of freedom says women are the agents of freedom. But not only freedom from patriarchy, but freedom from the nation-State and freedom from capital structures of oppression as well."

- **Ava Homa**, a Kurdish feminist, and author of [Smoke and Fire](#) a book that delivered the reality of the Kurdish women in the Kurdistan region of Iran (Rojhelat).



## **Two contradictory Images of Kurdish women.**

“I would like to start by talking about the fact that two contradictory images of Kurdish women float in both Iranian media and international media. On one hand, Kurdish women are the unveiled women of the Middle East that just put on colorful dresses. They dance hand in hand with men. They are comfortably associated with men at war, at work, at home, family, but on the other side of the spectrum, Kurdish women have been battered than even killed in the name of honor. They being victims of FGM and most strikingly specifically within the Iranian border, we have alarmingly high rates of suicides by a Kurdish woman. A lot of it is self-immolation. Suicide itself is a huge cry for help, but using fire and gas is a whole different level of screaming, how unjust and unfair the situation is. But to understand this paradox, on both sides of the spectrum, it's important to look at the historical context. No matter which country the Kurds found themselves within, we've always been perceived and understood, not as human, but as threats. Threats to territorial integrity, threats to dictatorship, and all of that. We have been reduced to risks and threats and sub-humans. We have been dealt with through annihilation to elimination, and that can be gassing in Iran, arbitrary, detentions, executions, a lot of executions all in the name of what they call '*Moharaba*' which means 'enmity against God' which is a complete make-believe charge. Worse than that though, the idea of assimilation, where they destroy your language and culture and your identity, and they would allow a few is more of a shell of the human than someone who understands who they are and where they come from and what they're fighting for.”

## **Created Borders do not Stop Common Issues and Feelings for Kurdish Women.**

“But this fight borders that have separated Kurds across these different countries. It's important to understand that our common language and culture, but also most importantly, the tragedies that we go through specifically because of our ethnicity has created really deep bonds between Kurdish women, regardless of which city they live in. So I grew up in Sanandaj (Sina), the Iranian part of Kurdistan. But what happens to women in Diyarbakir, women in Kobani affect me as much, if not more than the decisions that are made by them. So understanding that affinity is very important in understanding Kurdish women's situation in general. In terms of rulers and governors, Western travelers have all those marvels about the fact that Kurdish people were the only people who had women as rulers and governors when their Turkish and Persian neighbors had never heard of such a thing. In fact, it was still common for Kurdish women to become rulers and governors that in Shahrazad's '*Qarar Nama*' is mentioned. Now, I'm not trying to say this idea exactly matches our today's idea of feminism, where women are seen as independent individuals, that these were powerful, wealthy women who were married to, or were born into wealthy, powerful families, but it's still for the time, it was unheard of. If you look at history in Kurdistan again, in Rojhelat we have had a lot of examples of powerful women. One of them is Adela Khatoun who created her own course of justice after she married Osman Pasha and moved to Halabja. She exercised her own influence over that until her death in 1924. In Bashur, in 1920, Habsa Khan was one of the powerful women who greatly emphasized women's literacy and fought for it.”

## **Kurdish Women in Present Time.**

“So where we are today and what we have achieved as Ozelm pointed out, really signifies the shoulder of giants. And it’s been generations of resistance to the fight that got us here today. Even though the first woman organization was established in Istanbul in 1919, imagine 1919, American women got the right to vote only a hundred years ago, and that included only white women. Black women waited so much longer. By 1919 the Kurds had the first woman organization. In fact, in 1946, when we had the Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan Republic in Rojhelat, chapter four of article 21 the constitution specifically stated that Kurdish women should enjoy equalizing, all political, economic, and social affairs. Two of the 16 leaders who spoke on that day were women and their names were Khadeja Sediqi and Esmat Qazi, and both of them called for women’s education.

So that’s our history in terms of present-day Iranian Kurdistan, as it was obviously mentioned, in Iran that laws are specifically misogynistic and those lessons affected women, all different ethnic groups, regardless of their religion, their class, or their sexual orientation, but obviously oppression is multilayered. So even though no woman in Iran can get married, get divorced, have custody of their children without male permission via their father or their husband, they can’t travel or even leave the country without their husband’s permission. For most cases, there are some exceptional cases, but in general, women are obviously treated as sub-humans because you can’t make some simple, small decisions about your own jobs and traveling without having the man’s consent. But on the other hand, Kurdish women have experienced a variety of levels of oppression. So the national chauvinism of the ruling state, the male chauvinism of the rule extent and our own culture and misogyny of Islamic groups, and the continuing war in Rojhelat, we have a lot of economic problems. Poverty is a huge issue, unemployment. So, then outside of Rojhelat, our statelessness means we have been ignored and excluded in both Middle Eastern studies and Western studies.

Today, the Kurdish women of Iran have really strong and extremely amazing inspiring activists and feminists who have done a lot of work. And they have been successful in cutting down and things like FGM and kind of honor killing. They have been successful at raising awareness, but we cannot mention their names because their lives can be at risk. So they have to stay anonymous for their own safety, at least for now. And in my work, my focus is mostly on suicide prevention. I have worked with most of the women that I mentioned. First of all, those women who are risking their lives, risking the family’s safety in order to be able to work against these oppressions. On the other hand, the devastating women’s attempt at suicide. And every time I look at this woman and hear their stories and the extreme pressure and pain that they go through, I keep telling myself that if they were somewhere else, if they were in Kobani today, their situation would be different. So instead of turning on against themselves, they would be able to turn on all the suppression against their oppressors. And that was a problem in Iran. Iran has a lot of strong women has a very strong feminist group, but unfortunately, the mainstream feminist are extremely ethnocentric. So they’re not capable of understanding nature, sectionality. They’re afraid of diversity, and they do not acknowledge that Kurdish women have a course in general, as a nation have legitimate rights and therefore the ethnically oppressive policies of the

government that affect traditional men for their agenda, as well as the intensity is completely denied and overlooked by the mainstream feminist.

Obviously, there are exceptions to that, but in general, women feminists who are afraid of admitting the national rights of the Kurds, have become unwitting agents of patriarchy themselves by denying the pressure and oppression that Kurdish women bear because of their ethnicity. When it comes to my personal experience, I work with activists in a suicide prevention workshop. As I said, this is the loudest cry for help. This is the loudest process but is this also the biggest sign of how unhealthy that Iranian society is. When it comes to my writing and literature, I write about both groups of women. In fact, my protagonist in my novel, *Daughters of smoke and Fire*, Layla, is a woman who starts by believing that her life is not worth living and that there is no way out of repression except to end it. She ends up becoming an artist and a filmmaker. So she is a person who goes through this entire spectrum. As a child, when I was coming of age I understood where, me, Ozlem, came from and pointed out that on one hand, yes, I belong to one person. I belong to people who have been subjected to annihilation repeatedly, but on the other hand, just being alive, just breathing was the version in itself because there are so many forces at hand trying to take away even the right to raise you. So I grew up with these hush stories. They were hushed stories. They wouldn't be said out loud because this was our parents' and grandparents' idea to protect us. But you hear these hush stories, massacre, how the soldiers came for us, how we survived them, how they came to kill us. They came to more than kill, lost how they torched our villages, raped our women, shot up father before the bright eyes of their children, and so much more. The problem is those of us will survive the physical embrasure and in Iran, physical embrasure has not been as prominent as cultural embrasure. And the States that ruled over us in Iran, Kurds were denied. 'You're not, you're just Iranian and you don't have an independent identity.' And if you do, then we were labeled '*Mofsed-e-filarz*' the corruptors on earth, that's what Khomeini called us. And obviously, anyone who fights back is labeled a terrorist. So state terrorism is completely accepted, resisting is not! As Kurdish parents try to protect their children under the stimulus policy, we gradually lose part of our heritage and develop this cognitive dissonance between the generations where a grandchild may not be able to really communicate with their grandparents because of having lost their language.

So our language and history were banned. We were denied. We were defined by our oppressors reduced to subhumans, but I want to end on this note that in spite of, or maybe exactly because of all this, we became masters of rising from our own ashes. And the fact that that's '*Barxudan Zyana*' meaning resistance is life, is our model is not just a pretty thing to say. It's actually literally what all of us have thought, including the woman here, the three of us who were working with you. We have seen the end of the world a few times before. And so my life works sense on this empowering intersection of literature and activism. I believe in the power of stories to evoke compassion and understanding. And I believe that with a little bit of guidance, compassion can be turned into action."



- **Aviva Stein**, Middle East, North Africa (MENA) development, and political stability specialist with a focus on peacebuilding, development, and female and youth empowerment. She speaks about the feminist model in the Kurdistan region of Syria (Rojava).

### **The Democratic Radical Feminist Model that has been Developed in Rojava.**

“This democratic radical feminist model has developed for generations. When you look at the historical context in Syria as well, Kurdish people have faced severe oppression under the Assad regime, both under Bashar al-Assad and Hafeez al-Assad over the course of many, many years. The Rojava region was and still is the breadbasket of Syria. But this was exploited, and the Kurdish people were oppressed in such a way that they were not even able to reap the benefits of the fact that they were the ones creating the wealth for the country, everything was taken from them. And they had to rebuy all of the finished products after being manufactured in other parts of Syria. So from a very, very early age, also Kurdish was banned in schools. The culture was severely oppressed and a very strong policy of Arabization was enforced. So you had this eraser on multiple levels of cultural and economic, and also gender. Of course, because when you remove these avenues of opportunity and prosperity, you also reinforce these cultural norms of the inability to express oneself, the inability to share a struggle, and it creates divisiveness and even more oppression that becomes manifested within a culture.

Thus you see much stronger elements of patriarchy emerging as well, which also limits what women are able to do in society and allowed to do in society. But now of course in Rojava, we see something very, very different. We see that they have built these systems that allow for a much more equal society, and they are based on these ideologies that were developed in Turkey, in Rojava, and Bakur over the course of many decades and generations. As Ozlem said, these ideologies were developed by eventually what became the PKK under Ocalan, and his contemporary Sakine Cansiz. And Because of the colonialist structure and the way that Kurdistan was originally broken down, families were separated along borders. So the borders between the different parts of Kurdistan have historically always been very porous. So with the flow of people, you also had a very strong flow of ideas. These ideas and these systems and parallel societies were brought into Rojava as well and really created a shadow system underneath the oppressive state that allowed people to create shadow societies and shadow civil societies that created avenues for women to share their histories, share their skills, share their stories and make sure that their culture was not lost, that their language was not lost. Eventually, of course, this led to what we see now.”

### **The Current Governing System of Rojava and the Role of Women.**

“I would like to focus on the implementation of the system now in Rojava which is known as democratic confederalism. The ideology and the system are based on four main elements, which are gender equality, self-defense, multiculturalism, and social ecology. There is an understanding that these elements cannot exist on their own fully. It is an intersectional approach. When it comes to gender equality, specifically, you have many different elements that

have been incorporated into governance and administrative structures that ensure that the traditions and patriarchal cultures cannot remove them again. So every government council, and this is a bottom-up system, so you have local village councils, you have communes, you have further up government councils. And then at the top, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Every council and body is headed by two democratically elected co-chairs one man, and one woman. 40% quotas in each representative body are reserved for women and not just Kurdish women, because of course, Rojava is a very multicultural environment. So these are reserved also for Arab women, Yazidi women, Turkmen, Assyrian/Syrian women. So these are systems that have been put into place to ensure that women will always have a voice and will always be able to participate and make their needs and their wants to know, and that they no longer have to do it in this hushed way of passing down memories, but that they are able to really voice their opinions very, very vocally.

They're also special women's organizations under the umbrella of Congress Star, which is the sister to TEV-DEM the umbrella of civil society in Rojava. Congress Star is the Congress of the women's movement first established in 2004, '*Yakitia Star*'. While it was originally an underground movement that was designed to combat the dominance of the Ba'athist regime, it has since emerged operating on the basis of confederalism. It has various organizations, committees, and unions that participate to develop a free and democratic Syria beginning with Rojava. These congresses, organizations, and unions, are all women's organizations. They represent the needs and they are only for women. So they also address issues like domestic violence. They provide '*Mala Jin*' women's houses, where women can go if they feel unsafe. They are also the over chain umbrella '*Jin Var*' the women's village, which is a village that has been created of I think 30 houses, only for women. This village access is a commune where women can live in safety and harmony. They grow their own produce, which also is a means of resisting the traditional form of oppression, of disconnecting women from the earth. So they're able to grow their own produce and, and sustain themselves in this way. This really aims to combine the elements of democracy, ecology, and women's liberation. This comes back to the focus on sustainability that is also core to the intersectional approach of democratic confederalism. Of course, this is not to say that there aren't challenges and there are the patriarchy and the traditional gender norms in culture in the region are very, very strong and they do have a long history.

However, education is also a core element of the changes that have been happening throughout the revolution in Rojava. Academies have been created that allow for both men and women to attend in order to understand the elements of democratic federalism and the benefits that they bring to both men and women. Because when you look at feminism, when you look at intersectionality, and when you look at patriarchy and toxic masculinity, these are things that affect men and women. Men are also very negatively impacted by the effects of patriarchy and toxic masculinity. They're not able to express emotion. They're not able to many times in oppressed societies feel as though they are able to provide for their families. They're not able to fulfill the role of being a man, but these toxic systems that have been inherently integrated into the culture, are not part of this new system in many ways.

So these academies serve to educate the entire society on how breaking down the patriarchy is beneficial to everyone in the same way that breaking down capitalism and class systems is beneficial to everyone. It allows economic independence, it allows political participation, and it allows equal sharing of life in general and participation in society. I know we don't have a lot more time, so I don't want to go too long. But I also wanted to touch on the way that women, Kurdish women are perceived by western media, especially, living in the Netherlands and being from the US. You see so many of these images of women holding guns, and especially in Rojava with the advent of the revolution and the role that Kurdish women and Kurds, in general, have played in the fight against Islamic States, *Da'esh*. They have been built upon this pedestal by Western media, but in a way that they are focused on, as beautiful fighters with flashy headlines. Always focused on the conflict and Kurdish women and women in general, they're still being reduced to objects. We are still either sexualized or infantilized. We are not given agency. And this is something that the Rojava revolution is really about, is restoring agency to women in a way that women have reclaimed. Reclaiming the means of actually living their lives in the way that they desire and not being reduced to an objectified thing. And this is something that I see Western media really struggling with to fully understand the role of Kurdish women in the YPG and the YPJ. The YPJ is the Women's Protection Units. It is the women's wing of the military, and it is not only Kurdish women. Some Arab women fight as well. Also, women from other ethnic groups, because multiculturalism and inclusivity is also a key element of democracy and federalism and building a society that can exist and coexist in peace and tolerance."

### **Western Media is Controversial.**

"One other element that I would like to touch on as well, as far as Western media goes, is also controversial but I find a very important contentious issue of the YPJ in particular accepting girls under the age of 18. This is something that is reamed in media, it's recruiting children in the military, 'child soldiers' and 'child labor.' This fails to understand the complexity of the situation. This inflexible Western perspective fails to understand that youth recruitment isn't necessarily youth recruitment. It is giving women an opportunity to leave a family, perhaps that wants to marry them at an early age. Many, many women are still trapped in these patriarchal and cultural vices. As Ava said, FGM is still a very, very common problem in this part of the world. So I would like to just emphasize that also women are not directly joining the military. They are being given education. They are learning skills, they are working in other aspects as well. There's a lot of administrative services. There are the "*Mala Jin*" and other organizations under Congress Star. So these opportunities provide women with avenues towards success, towards learning skills, towards economic independence, towards understanding a greater role in society. And as they're given these opportunities and these freedoms, they're also freer to participate in political life, as well as social life. That is so unbelievably important in creating a free society that truly understands the contributions of women and the talent and possibilities that women bring to the table. So I'd like to finish with that and thank you very much."