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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Empowering Kurdish Women in Turkey: Understanding the Dynamics of Gender-Based Violence, Contentious Politics, and Resistance

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Abstract: This article explores the complex experiences of Kurdish women in Turkey, focusing on the intersections of gender-based violence (GBV), contentious politics, and resistance. It examines how Kurdish women navigate the socio-political challenges they face, shaped by both ethnic and gender-based oppression. The study highlights the ways in which their experiences are influenced by migration dynamics, state repression, and the broader socio-cultural context of Turkey. It emphasizes how Kurdish women's struggles against systemic injustice are not only rooted in gender but are also intertwined with their ethnic identity, as they challenge both patriarchal norms within their communities and the Turkish state's assimilationist policies. Through participation in political movements, cultural activism, and collective resistance, Kurdish women have redefined their roles in society, asserting their autonomy and rights. By analysing these multifaceted struggles, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the resilience and agency of Kurdish women, revealing how their resistance shapes both their personal narratives and broader social change.

Keywords: Contentious Politics-Gender-Based Violence-Kurdish Women-Migration-Resistance-Turkey

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Introduction

This article explores the struggle of Kurdish women in Turkey, where ethnic identity, political resistance, gender inequality, and gender-based violence (GBV) intersect. It traces the “Kurdish question” and the Turkish Republic’s assimilationist policies, which have denied Kurdish cultural identity and civil rights (Yeğen 2007; Ergin 2017; Oran 2021). Facing double oppression, Kurdish women remain in a state of systemic vulnerability. The research questions explored are: How does ethnic and gender identity shape Kurdish women’s

experiences? How has their resistance redefined their roles within communities? What theoretical frameworks best explain their fight against systemic injustice?

These questions are explored through a systematic literature review that synthesizes existing research and theoretical perspectives on Kurdish women's experiences. This methodological approach allows the study to critically engage with the complex literature on ethnic and gender-based violence, state repression, and political resistance without relying on primary empirical data or field research. Instead, the article uses secondary sources and existing studies to analyse the conditions and transformations in the lives of Kurdish women in Turkey and the role of political and cultural movements in their empowerment.

The article is divided as follows: in the first section, theoretical considerations and the political framework in which the Kurdish question in Turkey is situated are introduced, analysing the state policies and exclusionary dynamics that have contributed to the marginalisation of Kurdish women. A review of existing literature on gender, ethnicity, and political resistance is provided. The next section outlines the main theoretical references, including intersectionality, conflict politics, and feminist perspectives. The method used for the analysis is also specified. The third section examines the narratives and representations of Kurdish women in political and social practices. The final section relates the results to current academic debates, showing how the research contributes to understanding gender and resistance dynamics in the Kurdish context. It highlights how Kurdish women have transformed marginalisation into political activism and the assertion of their rights. Intersectionality is key to understanding the complexity of the challenges they face.

In addition, the article examines the role of the Kurdish feminist movement, focusing on the struggles fought not only against gender oppression but also against ethnic and political discrimination. Within this broader movement, autonomous women's organizations, such as the Congress of Free Women (Kongreya Jinên Azad, KJA), are considered a key subgroup, as they specifically address issues of gender violence, economic empowerment, and political participation from a feminist perspective. The emergence of these new forms of solidarity and resistance—such as grassroots feminist activism, women-led political initiatives within the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and the creation of self-organized women's cooperatives—demonstrates how Kurdish women are reshaping the discourse on identity and empowerment in a very complex geopolitical context. These initiatives highlight the ways in which Kurdish women navigate the intersection of gender and ethnic oppression, forging strategies of collective resistance. Ultimately, the article analyzes the plight of Kurdish women in Turkey, showing how their resistance and ability to mobilize against injustice represent a struggle for survival and a powerful force for social and political transformation.

Throughout the article, drawing on the theses of Ayşe Betül Çelik (2014), it is demonstrated how the state of emergency, which for years has been a tool in the hands of the Turkish state to govern Kurdish-majority areas, has become an essential source of gender-based violence (GBV). Indeed, violence against women and the Kurdish conflict in Turkey both reflect and perpetuate inequality and injustice. Gender inequality is at the root of violence against women, supported by socio-cultural norms and institutions (Bengio 2016). The Kurdish issue is rooted in historical discrimination against Kurds and violent repression by the Turkish state (Çelik 2014). The intersection of gender and ethnicity provides insight into the Kurdish conflict. The conflict has a gendered dimension, particularly evident in the actions of the security forces. Crimes against women, sexual violence against female prisoners, and the mass displacement of Kurds in the OHAL (Olağanüstü Hâl, State of Emergency). Initially implemented in 1987 in the country's Kurdish-majority southeastern provinces to combat the PKK (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdîstan*) insurgency, it was more recently declared in 2016 following the July 15 coup attempt to strengthen the government's authority and quell opposition activities (Yavuz 2001; Aydın and Emrence 2015; Çınar and Şirin 2017). In this context, a gray area has emerged where these practices can be exercised, leading to an almost total anomie and intensifying the issue.

Violence against women in Turkey is influenced by a complex interplay of socio-cultural and institutional factors, including deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and childhood experiences of violence (Çelik 2014). While the Kurdish conflict certainly exacerbates gender-based violence (GBV), it is crucial to recognize that GBV in Turkey is not solely the result of this conflict. Instead, it is also a consequence of broader socio-economic and political inequalities affecting all society segments. Both state and non-state actors perpetrate these forms of violence. While some men who have experienced violence in their childhood, whether in the

context of state-led conflict or domestic violence, may perpetuate such behaviour, the issue cannot be reduced to a direct causal link between these experiences and their later actions toward women. This complex dynamic spans various groups, including both Kurdish and non-Kurdish men, as well as state actors such as Turkish soldiers.

This research embodies a conscious effort to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries, embracing Michael Shapiro's (2021) call for interdisciplinary engagement. The study focuses on Kurdish women in Turkey, particularly on gender-based violence (GBV), conflict politics, and various forms of resistance, requiring an analytical approach that synthesizes multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives to capture the complexities of the topic comprehensively. Shapiro's (2021) meta-theoretical and multidisciplinary orientation supports a pluralistic understanding of social realities, whereby no single disciplinary lens can sufficiently address the multifaceted nature of human experience. In this sense, the research draws on insights from sociology, political science, political philosophy, postcolonial studies, anthropology, and ethnography (Zürcher 1998; McDowall 2004; Ayata and Yüksek 2005; Alemdaroğlu 2005; Romano 2006; Jongerden 2007; White 2000; Lentin 2006; Abadan-Unat 2011; Çelik 2014; Biehl 2015; Çağlayan; Ergin 2017; 2019; Käser, 2021; Hassanpour and Mojab 2021; Yegen 2022; Ahmed 2023).

This study adopts a systematic literature review as its methodological approach, drawing on secondary sources such as peer-reviewed scholarly articles, books, legal documents, and historical texts. By synthesizing existing research, this approach enables a comprehensive examination of the political, social, and cultural dynamics influencing Kurdish women's resistance to gender-based violence. Through this lens, the study critically engages with the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and power, offering a nuanced understanding of the structural forces at play. These analytical tools are deeply informed by the interdisciplinary and critical research ethos that seeks to challenge and deconstruct dominant narratives about gender, ethnicity, and power (Spivak 1988; Butler 1990, 2006; Wallerstein 2011). Incorporating postcolonial and feminist perspectives (Spivak 1988; Butler 1990, 2006; Çağlayan 2019; Diyar 2021), the research aligns with Shapiro's (2021) multidisciplinary imperative to interrogate and destabilize established categories of analysis. These perspectives are critical to understanding the intersectional dynamics that characterize the lived realities of Kurdish women situated at the confluence of multiple axes of oppression. Meta-theoretical commitment to interdisciplinarity thus promotes a comprehensive and critical understanding of these dynamics, resisting the reductionism often accompanying more narrowly focused studies. In conclusion, rooted in Shapiro's (2021) meta-theoretical and multidisciplinary approach, this research aspires to produce a holistic and reflective account of the challenges faced by Kurdish women in Turkey, recognizing that the complexity of these challenges can only be fully appreciated through an interdisciplinary lens. In the context of this research, I pursue the belief that empowerment is the most essential driving force to follow to overcome the “double cage” in which Kurdish women are forced.

Empowerment, understood as the process by which individuals or social groups acquire the capacity, skills, and confidence to take control of their lives and exert a positive influence on the social, economic, and political context in which they live, provides an essential theoretical framework for understanding the actions taken by women in contexts of oppression. In particular, within marginalized communities such as the Kurdish community, women's empowerment manifests itself in their ability to access education, take active roles in the political and social spheres, preserve and defend their culture and language, and oppose forms of oppression such as gender-based violence and state repression (Schäfers, 2018; Shakiba, Ghaderzadeh and Moghadam, 2021; Alizadeh, Kohlbacher, Mohammed, and Vaisi, 2022; Galip, 2022). This process promotes the improvement of women's status and contributes to transforming power dynamics in their communities and society (Yuval-Davis, 1997). The study will, therefore, explore how the empowerment of Kurdish women is a critical element in their struggle against state and gender-based violence, highlighting the crucial role that art, culture, and political resistance play in this context.

1.1. Theoretical Considerations

The 19th and 20th centuries saw nationalist projects that subordinated women's socio-political status to modernization goals (Çağlayan, 2019). In this context, the concepts of vulnerability, intersectionality, and contentious politics provide a crucial framework for understanding Kurdish women's experiences in Turkey by analysing the interplay of ethnic oppression, gender discrimination, and political repression. This perspective moves beyond static interpretations, offering a complex view of subordination and resistance.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) is key to understanding Kurdish women's marginalization, which stems from the systemic interaction of assimilationist state policies, socio-economic exclusion, and patriarchal violence. This framework also challenges universalist feminist narratives by emphasizing Kurdish feminism's decolonial and self-determination roots. Similarly, as theorized by Fineman (2008), vulnerability is not merely exposure to risk, but a relational and structural condition shaped by access to resources and protections. Kurdish women experience intersectional vulnerability through state repression (e.g., detention, sexual violence) and patriarchal norms within Kurdish communities. However, vulnerability can also be politicized into a form of resistance. Contentious politics (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007) explains how Kurdish women transform oppression into political mobilization, engaging in movements, parties, and feminist organizations. Kurdish feminism integrates national liberation with gender resistance, rejecting both state assimilation and internal patriarchal hierarchies. This theoretical integration enables a nuanced analysis of oppression and resistance, dismantling victimizing narratives while highlighting Kurdish women's agency in reshaping identity and feminism in a conflict-ridden context. To understand the situation of Kurdish women in Turkey, it is essential to contextualize their oppression within the broader socio-political history, particularly the Kemalist revolution led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the early 20th century. This revolution aimed to create a homogeneous state by suppressing ethnic and cultural diversity, including that of the Kurdish population. It sought to integrate various groups into a unified Turkish identity, leading to the marginalization and repression of Kurdish language, culture, and political autonomy (Zürcher 1998; McDowall 2004; İnce 2017). The emphasis on cultural uniformity viewed ethnic and cultural differences as a threat to the new republic, prompting repressive and assimilationist policies (Yeğen 2007; Oran 2021). For Kurdish women, the distinction between vulnerability and victimhood is key. While they face systemic oppression due to ethnic conflict, gender inequality, and state repression, those involved in the Kurdish women's movement (KWM) challenge these systems, transforming their vulnerability into a source of activism and empowerment. This redefinition distinguishes them from those who passively endure their circumstances. Gender-based violence (GBV) is also exacerbated by forced migration dynamics. Many Kurdish women have been displaced from their homes in the Kurdish-majority regions of southeastern Turkey due to the ongoing Kurdish-Turkish conflict, military operations, and state policies of repression. This forced migration, driven by violence, security measures, and socio-political unrest, has led them to urban areas where they face socio-economic marginalization and are placed in a precarious position within Turkish society.

Yüksel (2006) highlights the double marginalization and exclusion of Kurdish women from the Kemalist modernization project, emphasizing the intersectionality of their experiences: The Kemalist modernization project reveals very strikingly that Kurdish women were doubly marginalized. On the one hand, their ethnic identity was dismantled; on the other, their Turkish counterparts became potential beneficiaries of the Kemalist reforms oriented to the improvement of the civil and political status of women in Turkey (Yüksel 2006, 778). However, it is equally crucial to examine how Kurdish women's intersectional experiences of inequality and violence have evolved in recent years under the rule of the AKP, which has pursued policies markedly different from those of the Kemalist era. Since the early 2000s, the AKP has shifted its policies towards Kurdish citizens, initially adopting a more inclusive stance, such as the promotion of peace talks and limited cultural rights. Yet, under the increasing authoritarianism of the AKP, particularly after 2015, Kurdish women have faced intensified repression, both in terms of state violence and gender-based violence (GBV). The AKP's shifting policies, including the suppression of Kurdish political movements, the re-establishment of military operations in Kurdish-majority regions, and the erosion of civil rights, have exacerbated the structural vulnerabilities of

Kurdish women, further entrenched their marginalization and exposed them to greater violence. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, and political repression under AKP rule has thus led to a changing landscape of oppression for Kurdish women, reshaping their experiences of both state and societal violence.

Nevertheless, vulnerability does not automatically signify a state of victimhood. While many Kurdish women have endured traumatic events and injustices, their identity should not be solely reduced to that of victims. Instead, they actively resist and challenge these oppressive structures, redefining their roles in their communities and society. This process of resistance can encompass visible actions, such as participation in social movements and protests, including the involvement of Kurdish women in the Women's Marches or protests against the Turkish government's policies in Kurdish regions. It also includes more subtle and less apparent acts of daily rejection and defiance, such as preserving and promoting the Kurdish language in daily life or refusing to conform to traditional gender roles within their families and communities.

The concept of victimhood thus becomes relevant when examining how Kurdish women may be perceived, both by themselves and by others, as victims of an oppressive system. In this way, their experience reveals a complex dynamic in which vulnerability and resistance coexist, providing a deeper and more complex understanding of their condition within Turkish society. According to Judith Butler (2006), vulnerability should not be viewed exclusively as a weakness to overcome, but rather as an ontological condition intrinsic to the human experience, reflecting our social, economic, and political interdependence. In the context of Kurdish women, this notion of vulnerability extends beyond the existential dimension and becomes socially and politically constructed through the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and state repression. Kurdish women's vulnerability is shaped by systemic oppression, including state violence, forced displacement, and socioeconomic marginalization, which compound their experiences of insecurity and inequality.

In this sense, recognizing vulnerability can become a basis for building solidarity and collective resistance. This is particularly relevant in the context of gender-based violence, where women should not only be seen as passive victims but as agent subjects capable of transforming their condition through collective action. Butler (2006) critiques the concept of "victimhood" as an essential and fixed identity, arguing that such labelling can perpetuate women's subordination and restrict their capacity for action. Instead, Butler (2006) proposes that, alongside recognizing victimization, there should be a focus on women's ability to resist violence and assert their agency. In feminist movements, this perspective allows for the development of strategies of struggle that are not limited to the denunciation of domestic and social violence but are based on the ability to transform vulnerability into a collective force for social change. In this way, Butler (2006) proposes a politics of vulnerability that is also a politics of power and transformation relevant to contemporary feminist movements.

Added to this framework is the critical concept of "contentious politics", which is closely intertwined with the experience of Kurdish women. As defined by sociologist Charles Tilly (2015), contentious politics represent interactions in which social actors make claims that affect the interests of others, with governments appearing as targets, claim initiators, or third parties. In other words, contentious politics encompass all forms of social interaction in which conflicts of interest emerge between groups, often culminating in forms of protest or resistance against power structures (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly 2008, 2015; Tarrow 2011). For Kurdish women, contentious politics manifests in their dual struggle for gender rights and ethnic self-determination, forming part of a broader resistance against Turkish state policies that marginalize Kurdish identity and cultural expression. These forms of resistance are dynamic and shaped by evolving power relations and social contexts. Through active engagement, Kurdish women transform their structural vulnerability into a site of political agency, redefining themselves beyond the victim paradigm. This shift illustrates how contentious politics are not merely reactions to oppression but also identity reconstruction and empowerment processes. Drawing on Butler (1990), the state's power often functions through containment and victimization, disproportionately affecting those who challenge normative identities, such as women, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQIA+ individuals (Leezenberg 2022). Intersectionality is essential for understanding the oppression of Kurdish women in Turkey, as their experiences cannot be fully understood by separating gender from ethnicity. State policies of ethnic assimilation, combined with patriarchal socio-cultural norms, impose a dual burden of sexism and racism (Aydin and Emrence 2015; Erengezgin, 2021; Mahmoud 2021; Geerse 2023). These intersecting forms of discrimination demonstrate how oppression varies across identity categories rather than

being uniform (Erel and Acik 2019). The distinction between Kurds and Turks is especially important when analysing privilege and marginalization. Kurds, particularly women, experience both ethnic and gendered oppression, while Turks in dominant socio-political positions enjoy systemic advantages. However, Turkish identity is not monolithic, as class, ideology, and religion influence diverse experiences of privilege and discrimination.

Within Kurdish society, gender disparities further differentiate experiences of oppression. Kurdish women face challenges distinct from Kurdish men, experiencing disadvantages in education, political and economic participation, and exposure to state violence. Their limited access to education reflects broader social inequalities that reinforce their marginalization (Yüksel 2006; Coşkun et al. 2011; Zeydanlıoğlu 2012; İnce 2017; Çağlayan 2019). Poverty and systemic violence exacerbate their vulnerability, demonstrating that their oppression is multidimensional and cannot be reduced to a single factor. Placing these considerations in the context of intersectionality, one can see how Kurdish women suffer from double discrimination: on the one hand, because of their ethnic identity, they are marginalized by the Turkish state; on the other hand, because of their gender, they are further disadvantaged compared to Kurdish males and Turkish women. This double marginalization not only amplifies existing inequalities but further complicates their path of emancipation and resistance within a society that excludes them both as Kurds and as women (Ahmetbeyzade 2008).

As Humeyra Çağlayan (2019) notes, Turkish nationalist intellectuals positioned women, particularly those identified as Turkish, as both agents of modernization and guardians of national authenticity. This dual role created tension: while women's public participation was deemed essential for societal progress, they were simultaneously expected to preserve traditional values, often limiting their autonomy. Women were encouraged to seek education, employment, and civic engagement as symbols of modernity, yet their roles remained confined by patriarchal structures and state policies that upheld gender hierarchies. Despite increased visibility, their participation was restricted to roles that reinforced traditional norms, with barriers such as political underrepresentation and gender-based violence persisting (Begikhani, Hamelink, and Weiss 2018; Çağlayan 2019; Coşkun and Özcan 2021; Błaszczuk 2022).

At the same time, women were tasked with safeguarding national identity, ensuring their education and public engagement aligned with moral and cultural principles. This reinforced their role as cultural preservers, shielding them from external influences deemed threats to national purity. This duality created a significant contradiction; while women were required to be modern and forward-looking, they were also required to remain faithful to the past, thus limiting their real emancipation. Women were, therefore, subject to a form of biopolitical control, in which political power regulated and disciplined their bodies and social lives to reconcile the demands of modernity with the preservation of national identity (Foucault 1978; Saracoglu 2011). This dualism profoundly influenced how women were perceived and treated within national societies and continues to be a relevant issue in contemporary discussions of women's rights and cultural identity. In the context of Kurdish nationalism, three main themes emerge in representations of femininity: “the freedom of Kurdish women, female heroism, and honor/chastity” (Çağlayan 2019, 108). Kurdish nationalist intellectuals, many of whom came from the dominant strata of society and had backgrounds influenced by Western positivism, argued for Kurdish women's freedom to demonstrate that the Kurds were a civilized nation capable of self-government. This discourse served to mask the contradictions inherent in the roles assigned to women within nationalism, arguing that Kurdish women were already essentially free, participated in social life, and occupied a respectable position among men (Mojab 2001; Çağlayan 2019).

In addition, Çağlayan (2019) highlights that the narrative of Kurdish women's freedom often served nationalist goals rather than reflecting their lived realities. Toivanen and Baser (2016) similarly note that women's empowerment was instrumentalized within Kurdish political discourse to legitimize the national cause instead of promoting genuine gender equality. Savelsberg (2014) further argues that official empowerment narratives frequently clashed with persistent gender inequalities and cultural restrictions. These studies suggest that while the discourse on women's rights is significant, it has sometimes obscured the real struggles that Kurdish women face (Novellis 2018). Like other nationalist movements, Kurdish nationalism provided women with public visibility without necessarily ensuring true empowerment. Kurdish women

remained constrained by patriarchal structures that limited their autonomy (Çağlayan 2012; Arat and Altınay 2015; Jongerden 2017; Al-Ali and Tas 2018; Dirik 2021; Merdjanova 2021).

Through an intersectional lens, Kurdish women in Turkey face dual discrimination: their ethnic identity marginalizes them within Turkish society, restricting their political participation and access to leadership roles (Cosar and Ozcan 2021). This lack of representation reinforces their exclusion from decision-making processes. In education and employment, they encounter structural barriers, including language exclusion, patriarchal norms, and discriminatory policies, which perpetuate inequality and limit their opportunities for advancement. Language barriers, a lack of inclusive educational policies, and the persistence of patriarchal norms help sustain this inequality, relegating many to subordinate roles and depriving them of the tools necessary to improve their lives. Despite these challenges, Kurdish women have demonstrated remarkable resilience, organizational skills, and political capacity. Their ability to organize collectively through grassroots movements, political activism, or community-building efforts has enabled them to challenge social and political structures and advocate for their rights. These organizational efforts range from local initiatives to large-scale political movements aimed at confronting both gender and ethnic oppression. They have developed alternative resistance strategies that challenge dominant power structures and promote their empowerment. A significant example is their increasing involvement in protest movements, where they actively participate and often assume leadership roles, challenging traditional power dynamics within Kurdish and Turkish society. These protest movements provide a platform for Kurdish women to assert their rights and raise awareness of their specific issues (Hassanpour and Mojab 2021). Kurdish women's cultural initiatives, storytelling, literature, and organizing events, serve as cultural resistance, preserving language and heritage while challenging assimilationist policies (Coşkun, Derince and Uçarlar 2011; Bocheńska et al. 2023). Rooted in contentious politics and cultural activism, these efforts embody symbolic resistance, affirming Kurdish identity despite systemic constraints. However, feminist and intersectional perspectives highlight contradictions within this resistance. While cultural activism strengthens collective identity, patriarchal norms within Kurdish society often limit women's full participation, reinforcing gender hierarchies under the guise of tradition (Gökalp 2010; Myrntinen et al. 2014; Al-Ali and Tas 2018; Merdjanova 2021). The notion that Kurdish women have historically enjoyed freedom risks obscuring these gendered inequalities, necessitating a critical approach that addresses both ethnic oppression and intra-community patriarchy.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The Kurdish women's movement (KWM) plays a crucial role in the Kurdish struggle for political and cultural autonomy, particularly in Turkey. Traditionally marginalized both within their communities and in the broader Turkish context, Kurdish women have built a resistance movement that spans politics, culture, social activism, and civil rights. Recent research highlights key themes in understanding this movement. Alizadeh, Kohlbacher, Mohammed, and Vaisi (2022) discuss Kurdish women's increasing presence in the public sphere, overcoming obstacles posed by tradition and state repression. Their involvement illustrates that Kurdish women are not passive but active agents in the fight for autonomy and civil rights. Altunok (2016) examines how the sovereign state uses biopolitics to control Kurdish women's bodies, emphasizing the impact of neo-conservatism and state power on their subjectivity. This repression is a form of political control that denies women autonomy, reflecting Foucault's concept of biopower, where state policies discipline and silence Kurdish women through exclusion, violence, and suppression.

Another key aspect of Kurdish women's struggle is their ability to create spaces of empowerment, as highlighted in Yeşim Arat and Ayşe Gül Altınay (2015). The KAMER project, a women's rights organization in Turkey that provides support services, education, and advocacy for gender equality, aims to promote cosmopolitan norms in Turkey and has become a symbol of resistance for Kurdish women. Establishing these empowerment centres not only offers women the opportunity to improve their social status but also becomes an expression of a broader struggle for human rights, integrating local demands with global demands for social justice. State violence, ethnic discrimination, and control over Kurdish women are central themes in Bilgin Ayata and Deniz Yüksek (2005), which discuss the internal displacement of Kurds in Turkey. Kurdish

women are often the first victims of state violence, with the experience of displacement and trauma marking them physically, psychologically, and culturally. The authors highlight the difficulties of social reintegration and the impact on female subjectivity as Kurdish women struggle to preserve their identity and dignity in a context of repression.

Joanna Bocheńska and Farangis Ghaderi (2023) highlight how, even in small communities, women can develop forms of empowerment that challenge dominant power structures. Kurdish women, especially those involved in refugee communities and resistance environments, create micro-spaces of resistance where they reassert themselves as agents of change. These spaces, although marginal, become crucial to building a new female subjectivity that challenges patriarchy and state oppression. Rosa Burc's (2018) article discusses the central role of women in the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and the Kurdish movement, which has radically reclaimed women's place in Turkish society. The Kurdish movement has placed gender equality at the center of its political agenda, demonstrating how the struggle for women's rights is not separate from the struggle for Kurdish autonomy. Through their political engagement, women have subverted traditional gender divisions, earning their place in the struggle against repression.

Judith Butler's (1990, 2006) theoretical work on gender fluidity and identity subversion is crucial to understanding how Kurdish women have developed a subjectivity that challenges imposed gender conventions. Her theories make it possible to analyse the Kurdish movement as an example of “queer feminism”, where Kurdish women are not only combatants but also subjects who redefine their identities in relation to the powers that seek to oppress them. Jill Bystydzienski, Jennifer Suchland, and Rebecca Wanzo (2013) discuss how women cope with states of emergency and crises, with reference to Kurdish women living under the constant assault of state violence and repression. Women's resistance in these contexts is a form of struggle that seeks to reassert their agency in precarious and vulnerable situations. Kurdish women use activism to counter violence and discrimination, turning their suffering into a powerful engine for social change.

Çağlayan (2012, 2019) analyses gender constructions within the Kurdish movement, illustrating how historical figures like Kawa and Ishtar have been reinterpreted to challenge patriarchal norms. By integrating women as activists, fighters, and political leaders, the movement has reshaped traditional gender roles and encouraged female participation in all aspects of the struggle. Ömer Çaha (2011) examines third-wave feminism within the Kurdish movement, emphasizing how Kurdish women have adapted feminist ideologies to address both patriarchal and political-ethnic injustices, driving profound social and political change. Kurdish nationalism, explored by M. Hakan Yavuz (2001) and Mesut Yeğen (2007, 2022), has evolved from an ethnic issue into a geopolitical one, reflecting shifting Turkish state policies, especially post-2015. Aysegul Aydin and Cem Emrence (2015) and Joost Jongerden (2007, 2017) provide deeper insights into Kurdish guerrilla warfare, analysing the PKK's ideological foundations and the transformation of the Kurdish struggle into one advocating radical democracy, gender equality, and resistance against the state control.

Within the Kurdish Women's Movement, *Jineolojî*, Kurdish feminist ideology, plays a central role. Al-Ali and Käser (2020) and Biehl (2015) explore the intersections between feminist theory and Kurdish resistance, focusing on the empowering roles of Kurdish women in both military and civilian contexts. As Çaha (2011) and Al-Ali and Tas (2018) discussed, Kurdish women's activism is deeply intertwined with feminism in Turkish society. Çıdam (2022) and Mojab (2001) highlight the crucial role of women in the Kurdish liberation struggle, both in armed resistance and in shaping cultural and social identities. Agamben (2005) and Foucault (1978) analyse how sovereign power and biopower reduce Kurdish women to 'bare life,' denying them political and legal protections. Zeydanlıoğlu (2012) and Coşkun, Derince, and Ucarlar (2011) explore Turkish linguistic repression as a tool of cultural genocide, with Leezenberg (2022) emphasizing resistance through Kurdish art and literature. Intersectionality, discussed by Erel and Acik (2019) and Göksel (2018), is crucial in understanding the activism of Kurdish women as they navigate challenges tied to gender, ethnicity, and national politics. Unal (2023) and Altunok (2016) analyse the role of populism and sovereign power in Turkey's gender politics. State violence and repression endured by Kurdish women are explored by Bystydzienski et al. (2013) and Mojab (2001), who also examine how trauma generates resistance. Geerse (2023) investigates the impact of forced displacement, while Sarikartal (2023) and Schäfers (2017) highlight how Kurdish literature and art serve as powerful forms of resistance to marginalization. Hostility toward

linguistic diversity, which began with the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and peaked with the 1980 coup d'état, began to decline only after the 1990s (Coşkun et al. 2011; Zeydanlıoğlu 2012). Two main factors drove this change. On the one hand, Kurdish and other minority groups began to challenge the state's conception of a monolithic national identity, putting pressure on the state. At the same time, with the global spread of multicultural ideas, some groups in Turkey began to challenge the imposition of an artificial identity by the state, struggling to make their voices heard. These developments have led to a loosening, albeit partial, of the state's stringent identity policies.

On the other hand, Turkey's relations with the European Union have played a significant role. After Turkey was accepted as a candidate for EU membership in December 1999, the strengthening of relations with the EU contributed positively to mitigating, at least partially, the prohibitions that restricted the expression of identities and languages other than the official Turkish one (Coşkun et al. 2011). Joanna Bocheńska, Wendelmoet Hamelink, Kaziwa Salih and Hüseyin Rodi Keskin (2023) point out to us that “The saying ‘Stories are women's stories’ (*Çirok çiroka jinê ye*), stated by Heciyê, a folklore gatherer from Bakur (Kurdistan, Turkey), underscores the crucial role of women in oral tradition and the preservation of narratives” (Bocheńska et al. 2023, 2). Historically, women have been the primary bearers of folk tales and songs, responsible for children's education and cultural transmission. In modern times, women in the Kurdish context have embraced the revival of the Kurdish language, folklore, and cultural heritage, reframing their role as active participants rather than passive custodians (Schäfers, 2017). This responsibility allows women to reclaim a marginalized cultural identity (Ahmetbeyzade 1999; Çaha 2011), offering an empowering space for redefining their societal role. Nonetheless, while this role challenges Turkish nationalism, it risks reinforcing patriarchal-nationalist views of women as cultural bearers whose primary duty is to pass on traditions. While this practice is a form of resistance, it also carries the potential to reproduce traditional gender roles, illustrating the duality in Kurdish women's roles. This complexity calls for a nuanced analysis that recognizes both empowerment and the potential reinforcement of patriarchal structures.

Through storytelling, the transmission of songs, and the perpetuation of folklore, Kurdish women exercise significant agency, becoming bearers of cultural resistance and identity revival. Their active participation in preserving and enhancing Kurdish cultural heritage serves as resistance against forces that seek to erase or assimilate their culture (Bocheńska et al. 2023). The rediscovery and valorisation of oral traditions increase their visibility and recognition, strengthening their role as agents of cultural and political change. In doing so, Kurdish women not only preserve the past but also actively contribute to building their community's future. These narratives draw on the hegemonic ideas of women's liberation propagated by the Kurdish movement but extend beyond the movement's visions, creating alternative spaces for liberation. Although these activities remain largely invisible in the cultural domain often dominated by political activists, they significantly impact ‘small circles’ of society (Bocheńska et al. 2023). Such practices represent forms of citizenship from below that challenge existing narratives and the role of women in private and public spaces while offering sources of inspiration for people in their everyday lives. Within its struggle against state and gender-based violence, the Kurdish feminist movement finds powerful expression in empowering women through art and cultural initiatives. A notable example of these ‘aesthetic practices of resistance’ (Çıdam 2022) is the increasing involvement of Kurdish women in Turkey in cultural projects aimed at preserving the Kurdish language and oral traditions, transforming aesthetic practices into instruments of resistance (Çıdam 2022). Art is a powerful tool of resistance, challenging authority, and exposing injustice, as Zehra Doğan exemplifies. The Kurdish artist and activist was imprisoned by the Turkish government for depicting the military destruction of Nusaybin, a painting the regime labelled as terrorist propaganda (Zaman, 2021). Doğan's work starkly condemns the suffering inflicted by power and underscores the threat that artistic expression, particularly by women, poses to repressive regimes.

Even in prison, her art defied imposed silence, transforming into an act of resistance that exposed a suppressed history. Kurdish women's resilience is reflected in their ability to preserve historical memory and fight oppression through creative means. Doğan, fully aware of art's power, becomes a guardian of collective memory, making historical documentation a form of defiance. Her work intertwines the struggle for women's

freedom and Kurdish self-determination, proving that artistic expression can break the silence and amplify long-standing demands for justice (Sarikartal 2023).

Anna Grabolle-Çeliker (2013) highlights that forced relocation during the Turkish-Kurdish conflict displaced many, including Kurds, Syriac Christians, and Yezidis. Reports show that during the 1980s and 1990s, villages were evacuated due to the conflict with the PKK (Ayata and Yüksek 2005). While some sought refuge abroad, most displaced people migrated within Turkey, with an estimated two-thirds of Kurds now living in western regions due to forced displacement and labor migration. The “Kurdish question” has often downplayed human rights violations, framing issues as terrorism and underdevelopment, leading to the view that displacement was a choice rather than a result of external pressures (Yeğen 2007; Ayata and Yüksek 2005; Çeliker 2013).

1.3. The Double Marginalization of Kurdish Women and the Rise of Women's Activism

The double marginalization of Kurdish women, shaped by both ethnicity and gender, exemplifies the concept of intersectionality, as they experience overlapping forms of discrimination (Arat and Altınay 2015; da Silva Ávila and Coutinho Areosa 2023). The lack of recognition of women's status results in their continued vulnerability. Since the 1970s, left-wing activism in Turkey has enabled Kurdish women to challenge societal prejudices, laying the foundation for the Kurdish women's movement (KWM) (Arat and Altınay 2015; Begikhani, Hamelink, and Weiss 2018). Initially marginalized in left-wing and Marxist movements, Kurdish women gained a more central role in the PKK after its founding in 1978, shifting from support roles to active participation as fighters and leaders. The 1990s saw the rise of autonomous women's units like YJA Star within the PKK. At the same time, the legalization of pro-Kurdish parties allowed for greater political involvement, highlighted by Leyla Zana's election to parliament in 1991. By the 2000s, parties like the DTP, BDP, and HDP introduced gender quotas, securing bigger female representation in political decision-making (Kaya and Whiting 2018). The 2013 Gezi Park protests saw increased female participation, with Kurdish women playing a key role in advancing gender demands. The subsequent rise of the HDP further strengthened women's political presence, exemplified by Figen Yüksekdağ, who co-led the party alongside Selahattin Demirtaş from 2014 to 2017. However, in 2017, Yüksekdağ was stripped of her party membership and sentenced to six years for alleged “terrorist propaganda”, later receiving a 30-year prison sentence in 2024. The HDP's emergence marked a turning point for women's political participation in Turkey (Burç 2018; İlhan 2023; Ucaray-Mangitli and Yıldırım 2023; Unal, 2023).

As Al-Ali and Tas (2018) highlight, the Kurdish women's movement extends beyond political struggle, engaging in humanitarian aid, welfare, employment, refugee support, and alternative dispute resolution. This last aspect is vital, as it challenges reliance on state institutions, particularly Turkish ones. Historically, gender-specific demands have been sidelined in many social movements, yet Kurdish women actively critique past revolutions and integrate gender equality into their political agenda. Initiatives like co-leadership demonstrate efforts to reshape political representation, though conservative norms and state repression remain formidable obstacles (Al-Ali and Tas 2018). A pivotal moment for Kurdish feminism came with Turkey's 1980 military coup and the subsequent OHAL (State of Emergency), which led to mass arrests, including pro-Kurdish activists and PKK militants (Jongerden 2007; Aydın and Emrence 2015; Kivilcim 2018). Women, mothers, wives, and sisters, were thrust into unfamiliar roles, navigating legal systems, overcoming language barriers, and challenging patriarchal constraints to advocate for imprisoned loved ones (Çağlayan 2019; Alizadeh et al. 2022).

Awareness of unjustified violence fueled collective protests, reinforcing Kurdish women's dual struggle as both Kurds and women (Bystydzienski et al., 2013; Göksel 2018; Kivilcim 2018). Experiences of detention and mistreatment deepened their understanding of oppression within both Turkish and Kurdish societies (Diner and Toktaş 2010; Begikhani et al. 2018; Novellis 2018; Hassanpour and Mojab, 2021). Novellis (2018) notes that, in the early 1990s, the PKK's need to recruit women expanded the ideological emphasis on women's emancipation. However, this drive towards emancipation coexisted with a strong support for traditional gender roles, suggesting that the adoption of emancipation discourse was motivated more by practical than ideological

reasons. A central aspect of this strategy was the redefinition of the concept of *namus* (honor), which came to be associated with protecting the homeland rather than exclusively that of women (Çağlayan 2012). Öcalan (2013), leader of the PKK, redefined *namus* as a moral construct that subjugates women while also critiquing women's use of sexuality as a means of control. Rather than directly challenging patriarchal discourse, the PKK reframed *namus* to remove barriers confining women to the home, enabling their participation in armed struggle (Novellis 2018). By equating women's honor with that of the homeland, the Kurdish struggle was framed as resistance to the ongoing "rape" of Kurdistan, an analogy Öcalan (2013) used to stress the urgency of liberation (Novellis 2018). Meanwhile, before its dissolution by the Turkish Constitutional Court in 1993, the newly formed HEP party began advocating for constitutional rights for women.

Çağlayan (2019) points out how each closure of a pro-Kurdish party on unfounded accusations of terrorism coincided with the opening of a new one with an ever-widening involvement of civil society, all of which demonstrates that the Kurdish movement was able to work steadily and fruitfully. Within these parties, ranging from the HEP, DEP, HADEP, DEHAP, Free Party (Özgür Parti), DTP, BDP to the HDP, the Kurdish women's movement (KWM) managed to create its locus of action and representation, which could guarantee empowerment to counter the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity imposed cross-vetoes (Çağlayan 2019; Merdjanova 2021). The year 2015 marked a pivotal date for the evolutionary process of democratic parties in Turkey, as the HDP surpassed the 10% threshold through the broad consensus demanded and obtained by all minorities, including gender rights, universal representation of citizenship rights, and a dense ecological agenda (Çağlayan 2019; Merdjanova 2021; Yegen 2022).

Despite its contradictions, the PKK has played a pivotal role in shaping the Kurdish feminist movement (KWM) (Jongerden 2017; Novellis 2018; Merdjanova 2021). Joost Jongerden (2017) describes how the PKK's shift toward gender democracy and non-state democracy was gradual and encountered resistance. These concepts emerged as 'ideas in action', evolving through careful exploration, confrontational debates, and experimental applications that risked destabilizing the party. Öcalan championed women's independent political organization, emphasizing that their structures should not be subordinate to PKK leadership (Novellis 2018; Haner, Cullen, and Benson 2019). Women's organizations gained autonomy to define policies, organize initiatives, and make decisions without requiring party approval, ensuring genuine representation in decision-making. Following Öcalan's imprisonment, debates arose regarding his role within the PKK, specifically whether he should retain political authority or serve as a symbolic leader. These discussions intertwined with the status of women's organizations. Despite efforts to centralize power and reassert control over the PKK-affiliated women's movement, women within the organization fiercely resisted and successfully defended their autonomy (Jongerden 2017).

This includes the concept of *jineolojî*, a discipline developed within the Kurdish movement, which represents not only a science of women but also a revolutionary paradigm for the transformation of society through a feminist perspective (Al-Ali and Käser 2020; Błaszczuk 2022). *Jineolojî* emerged as a response to the historical oppression of Kurdish women, seeking to dismantle both patriarchal and state-imposed marginalization, particularly in nations like Turkey. As Öcalan (2013) observes, Kurdish women endure a unique form of oppression, where honor-based violence reflects broader societal erasure: "The loss of masculinity is made to fall on the woman... The Kurdish male, who has lost moral and political strength, is left with no other sphere to demonstrate his power or his powerlessness" (Öcalan 2013, 40). Positioned as the driving force of this transformative movement, *jineolojî*, "the science of women" (Öcalan 2013; Cansız 2018), distinguishes itself from traditional feminism, which it critiques for its academic elitism and detachment from grassroots struggles. Instead, it offers a pragmatic, community-driven framework rooted in horizontal, non-institutional knowledge production led by women across different spheres of life (Biehl 2015; Al-Ali and Käser 2020; Leone 2024).

This discussion is essential for understanding the theoretical frameworks that best explain Kurdish women's experiences and strategies in resisting systemic injustice. *Jineolojî* offers a contextualized epistemology that reframes marginalization as a catalyst for activism, shifting the narrative from victimhood to agency. More than a theory, it is a practical strategy that enables Kurdish women to mobilize politically, build resistance networks, and articulate their demands for justice. The Academy of *Jineolojî* arises from this lived experience,

-serving as a model for inclusive political and social participation beyond ethnicity, class, or religion. Öcalan (2013) traces the roots of patriarchal dominance to early societies, where men secured power through struggle, solidified by monotheistic religions that confined women to domestic roles. He argues that this historical monopoly represents one of the earliest forms of colonial power. Such theorization is crucial for understanding gender oppression, as it highlights how women, particularly subaltern women, are silenced by both patriarchal structures and state mechanisms (Spivak, 1988). *Jineolojî* aims to counter this oppression by revitalizing ‘*perwerde*’, a Kurdish concept of education embodying freedom and love, thus shielding future generations from the oppressive educational systems of capitalist modernity (Diyar 2021). Historically, Kurdish women have led self-determination struggles, engaging in both armed resistance and civil-political movements (Dirik, 2021). Their activism has redefined gender roles within the Kurdish movement, emphasizing the necessity for a social revolution focused on gender equality. *Jineolojî*, as an alternative epistemology, challenges traditional power structures, fosters autonomous spaces for women, and strengthens their role in both local and international realms (Al-Ali and Käser 2020; Jaresand and Nilsson 2022). It remains the cornerstone of Kurdish women’s resistance, enhancing their capacity for self-determination and reinforcing their role in broader emancipation movements.

1.4. Forms of Empowerment and Resistance of Kurdish Women: Politics, Activism and Education

Kurdish women in Turkey have developed diverse forms of empowerment, navigating both gender and ethnic marginalization. Beyond collective protests that heightened awareness of their social and political conditions, they have pursued empowerment in multiple spheres. Politically, they have played active roles in opposition parties like the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), advocating for gender issues and securing leadership positions that amplify women’s rights in Kurdish and Turkish politics. Their activism extends to grassroots organizations such as the Congress of Free Women (Kongreya Jinên Azad, KJA) (Käser 2021), which focuses on gender violence, human rights, education, and economic empowerment. These groups foster solidarity networks, equipping women to resist intersecting oppressions. Despite barriers to education, many Kurdish women have pursued learning through community programs and self-organized initiatives. Literacy and education have strengthened their political and social engagement while enhancing economic autonomy. The concept of the *femina sacra* (Lentin 2006), expounded in the context of Giorgio Agamben's (1995) theory of *homo sacer* and its application to the biopolitical dynamics of nation-states, is deeply intertwined with the intersectionality of the Kurdish question, particularly concerning Kurdish women in Turkey. Ronit Lentin (2006) introduces the concept of the *femina sacra*, which derives from Agamben's examination of the *homo sacer*. This figure can be killed but not sacrificed as she is identified as ‘deconsecrated’ by society and therefore excluded from the umbrella of legally recognized rights (Agamben 1995; Lentin, 2006).

The concept of *femina sacra* can be perceived as a gendered expansion of the concept of *homo sacer*, in which women's bodies, due to their reproductive role and sexual vulnerability, are subject to the ultimate control of sovereign power (Lentin 2006). In contexts of genocide and oppression, such as those experienced by the Kurds in Turkey, women assume a central role in the biopolitical strategies of the state, e.g., the perfect exemplification of this ‘deconsecrated’ condition of life is the prolonged ‘state of emergency’ perpetuated in the Kurdish majority areas of the country. The Kurdish situation in Turkey has long been characterized by the fusion of state racism and sexism, constructing Kurdish identity as inherently threatening to the Turkish nation-state (Yeğen 2007; Ergin 2012, 2017). Kurdish women find themselves at the centre of this oppression. As the bearers of the next generation, they embody both the biological and cultural perpetuation of Kurdish identity, making them targets of biopolitical state control (Altunok 2016; Käser 2021). In this context, the Istanbul Convention that came into force on 1 August 2014 and is officially known as the ‘Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence’, represents a significant normative advance in the protection of women's rights, has had limited impact on Kurdish women. Indeed, the Convention's effectiveness has been undermined by difficulties in accessing services, the

militarization of Kurdish regions, the continued presence of the ‘state of emergency’, and ethnic discrimination, making Kurdish women particularly vulnerable and perpetuating their status as *femina sacra*. Turkey's further withdrawal from the Convention in 2021 exacerbated this situation, further reducing legal protections against gender-based violence (Şeker and Sönmezocak 2021).

However, to fully grasp the dynamics of their resistance, it is necessary to integrate additional theoretical perspectives, such as contentious politics theory (Tilly and Tarrow 2007) and *jineolojî* (Öcalan 2013; Cansız 2018). contentious politics offer Kurdish women a space to rewrite their role within the community and the larger society, moving from a position of victimhood to one of agents of change. Their resistance becomes a form of self-determination, opposing state policies of exclusion, marginalization, and violence. This shift from vulnerability to resistance is not just an act of survival, but a rewriting of their identity, making them protagonists in the struggle against systemic injustices, *jineolojî* offers an indigenous feminist paradigm that challenges both state-imposed narratives and those of Western feminism. By analyzing the interplay between oppression and agency, this study highlights the crucial role that Kurdish women play in reconfiguring political subjectivities and resisting systemic injustices.

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