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## **Understanding Rojava's Revolutionary Practice: Assessing Gender Egalitarianism with the Political Process Model**

Prats Torregrosa, Anna

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# **Understanding Rojava's Revolutionary Practice: Assessing Gender Egalitarianism with the Political Process Model**

*Anna Prats Torregrosa*

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Prof. Schulhofer-Wohl

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# 1. Introduction

Rojava, or Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, is an autonomous region in the northeast of Syria. It is part of the territory that constitutes Kurdistan, which stretches between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. However, the socio-political system of Rojava differs greatly from the ones in these other four regions. Rojava's political and social structures operate under the premises of democratic confederalism, a political theory that defends self-administration and horizontality through a bottom-up approach to politics. It is a stateless system that lacks hierarchical political structures, which makes it an extraordinary case of autonomic democracy, sustained by three pillars: direct democracy, political ecology, and gender egalitarianism<sup>1</sup>.

In this study, gender ideology and the implementation of gender egalitarianism in Rojava will be analysed by applying the Political Process Model. This model, which is considered one of the core theories of social movements, takes into account three elements: mobilising structures, political opportunity structure and framing. The model's aim is to provide an understanding of social movements by situating humans in the centre of the analysis, taking into account external factors, networks, ideas, and emotions, among others. Rojava has been chosen as a case study because of its exceptionality within the field of social movements, since it does not seek political change or greater representation within the state structures, but to operate outside of them. Furthermore, gender egalitarianism and women's liberation are situated in the centre of the revolutionary practice, rather than as a consequence of it, which influences the way social life and political bodies are organised. These two premises make Rojava an exceptional case for social movements theory. Firstly, because social movements'

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<sup>1</sup> This paper will treat gender in binary terms, which does not mean it is the reality of Rojava. As Shahvisi (2018) points out, Rojava's system as well as the literature on Rojava still lacks acknowledgement for non-binary understandings of gender, as well as for sexuality considerations.

scholarship has commonly assumed nation-statism as the analytical starting point and, secondly, because of the centrality of women's liberation in their programme, which is rarely seen in other movements to such an extent.

This study aims to provide new insights about the movement and the implementation of gender egalitarianism and to contribute to a new way of understanding social movements beyond the nation-state. Thus, the central research question, which will be address by applying the Political Process Model, will be the following: *How does the implementation of gender egalitarianism in Rojava's socio-political system contribute to the empowerment of liberation of women, and what insights does it offer for understanding alternative models of social movements?*

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Gender ideology and gender egalitarianism**

The concept of gender ideology emerges from the study of gender and feminism within the field of political ideology (Dauerst-Lahti, 2008, p. 160). It is based on ideas and beliefs about how power relates to gender and how the relation between the two should be arranged to create an egalitarian society. Politics and gender are innately connected, inevitably creating an ideological dimension (Anić, 2015, pp. 11-18). Thus, gender ideology is inherently political (Dauerst-Lahti, 2008, p. 160). Other definitions are found in the literature, describing it as a rhetoric or a populist speech used to reject and delegitimize feminist and queer theories about gender, for example by the Catholic Church (Corredor, 2019, p. 614; Mayer & Sauer, 2017, p. 23-24). In this study, gender ideology will be used following the first conceptualization.

Many social movements incorporate gender ideology, aiming to transform society by creating gender egalitarianism, such as Rojava. Gender egalitarianism emphasizes the need for equality and liberation in both the public and the private realm (McDaniel, 2018, p. 59). It is

understood as “a structure of social relations in which the division of labour around housework and caregiving within the family and occupational distributions within the public sphere are unaffected by gender” (Brighouse & Olin Wright, 2008, p. 360). “Unaffected by gender” does not mean that gender norms are abolished, since acknowledging them is part of the project. It means to advocate for the eradication of them as the basis for the division of labour, roles, and expectations both in the public and private sphere (Brighouse & Olin Wright, 2008, p. 360). Thus, gender ideology represents the theory needed to implement and achieve gender egalitarianism.

## **2.2. Social movements and gender ideology**

As Yulia (2010) argues, scholars from different fields have failed to acknowledge that social movements are gendered in multiple ways. Women’s social movements<sup>2</sup> and political action are different in their nature and their dynamics from other kinds of movements, for example, class-based mobilization. Notably, women's social movements are shaped by gender-based experiences and goals, which have often been disregarded in social movement theories (Taylor, 1999, p. 8-9; Yulia, 2010, p. 629). Thus, when applying models that study social movements, it is necessary to also understand how gendered experiences might shape the way they can be applied.

Moreover, in an age where current ideas such as “degrowth”, “postcapitalism” and “alternative economies” are gaining space in the political debate, it is fundamental look at those initiatives which are already applying such concepts (Schmid, 2019, p. 9). Many movements around the globe are adopting new models of societal organization, based on localism,

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<sup>2</sup> For this research, “Women’s social movements” will include movements in which women have played central roles, even though the goal of the movement itself is not related to gender issues.

horizontality, commoning, rejection of domination, and use of prefigurative politics<sup>3</sup> (Nelson, 2023, pp. 119-122; Srnicek & Williams, 2015). Thus, these “new social movements”<sup>4</sup> are concerned also with the “individual’s daily existence”, challenging individualism by proposing a model of common responsibility (Melucci, 1997, p. 219; Sari, 2021, p. 9). This approach to collective action and mobilization is of extreme relevance in terms of gender ideology. New social movements seek change in the conventional structures that organise society, arguing that concepts such as capitalism and nation-statism are inherently linked with gender hierarchies, thus, need to be reassessed (Sen, 2020, pp. 3-5). They do not only focus on influencing institutions but on the underlying mechanisms of social systems, human interactions and, social practices that have been constructed through the development of patriarchy (Melucci, 1997, p. 218). Rojava is an example of a social movement that approaches gender egalitarianism through this perspective: aiming to apply radical notions of democracy to achieve a horizontal society that prioritizes women’s liberation.

### **2.3. Jineology**

In Rojava, gender ideology is understood through the lenses of Jineology, an “emancipatory praxis”, known also as the “science of women and life”, that aims to deconstruct knowledge as a tool for socio-political change and emancipation (Gea Piccardi & Barca, 2021, p. 1273). Knowledge is seen as a form of self-defence that empowers women. But the knowledge needs to be constructed by breaking with the influence of hegemonic scientific narratives, which are based on orientalism and the stigmatization of societies that do not fit into the capitalist modernity and the nation-state parameters (Istituto Andrea Wolf, 2021, p.425). Thus,

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<sup>3</sup> Prefigurative politics is defined as structures that embody “those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal” (Sari, 2021, p. 1). It proposes alternative ways of living, evoking a framework of action that relies on performance and actions to drive positive change.

<sup>4</sup> “New social movements” will refer to those advocating for prefiguration and a society-based change, rather than the classical approach it is described. It is not an official term but for this study it will be conceptualised in this way.

Jineology aims to build knowledge from the experiences and learnings of women through history. Jineology opposes positivist approaches to knowledge, categorising them as androcentric and Western-centric, which is also connected to the importance that this philosophy gives to the relation of women and the nature.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

Social movements scholarship is dominated by state-centric analyses, which leaves out many other movements that do not suit these parameters. Furthermore, the gendered structures of social movements have also been widely overlooked. This study aims to provide insights into social movements theory using a case that operates beyond state structures and acknowledges gender in the core of its program. For this, the Political Process Model (PPM) has been chosen as a starting point to deconstruct the way social movements are understood and studied, especially when looking at movements with strong gender ideology.

#### **3.1. The political process model: a framework for social movements**

The PMM aims to explain the emergence, development and outcome of collective action and social movements by studying internal and external factors (Pellow, 2001, p. 48). It takes three elements as basis: mobilizing structures, political opportunity structures and framing (Morris, 2000, p. 446; Pellow, 2001, p. 48). The three elements are intertwined and influence each other, as it will be discussed in what follows. The PPM has been chosen for this study because it is considered the dominant model in the field of social movements (Morris, 2000, p. 446). It incorporates a broad analysis that allows for a deep understanding of the case, by including from external factors to “cultural and emotional processes” (Morris, 2000, p. 452). Furthermore, it situates human agency at the heart of social movements, which is in line with the philosophy of the case study selected. This section will develop each element in general terms and concerning women’s social movements.



### *3.1.1. Mobilizing structures*

Mobilizing structures are those vehicles through which people are able to join and take part in collective action, which can be formal or informal (McAdam, 1996, p. 3). They can vary from social informal networks and ties to more institutionalised structures, such as political organisations (Morris, 2000, p. 446). Mobilizing structures are internal factors that can contribute to understand the emergence, development, and outcome of the movement. As Freeman (1973, p. 794) argued, pre-existing networks or infrastructures of like-minded people are a necessary factor for collective action to emerge.

The outcome of a movement with strong gender-based demands will vary depending on the formation of these vehicles. How women are present and organised is crucial to transmit and develop their agenda. Whether the movement is based on mixed<sup>5</sup> or non-mixed structures, and what is the role and sphere of action of each organism will influence the movements' goals and outcomes. For example, in the Chiapas movement during the Zapatista Revolution in Mexico, even though there were women-only political formations, these were only relegated to discussion and debate (Torà Mañós, 2018, p. 37). Meanwhile, those formations where decisions were taken did not ensure women's representation, which normally resulted in a lack of focus on women's issues within the broad Zapatista movement (Torà Mañós, 2018, p. 37). Even though women were able to organise themselves autonomously, the roles they played within the movement did not follow equality premises in all the different spheres (Ruiz, 2004, p. 81).

However, representation is not always the most optimal way for women to engage in activism. Women's social movements have, on many occasions, emerged from outside of the existing political structures, since they did not consider these could fulfill their political

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<sup>5 5</sup> "Mixed" structures refer to those in which both men and women are present.

expectations or simply because they were not accepted in them. Consequently, many opted for grassroots participation through informal networks. For example, in the American civil rights movement, women were excluded from leadership positions in the Black Church, which left them with the only choice of continuing their activism within the community sphere, rather than in institutionalized structures (Taylor, 1999, p. 17). Women choosing to operate outside the formal structures is also related to how minority groups and women's claims for autonomous spaces have been denied and their experiences dismissed. There is a spread narrative of non-mixed spaces being not only unnecessary but also prejudicial, which shows the stigmatization and depoliticization that certain groups are subjected to under the nation-state structure (Lang, 2022, pp. 98-102). Therefore, these groups have chosen discreet or informal modes of participation, where they can express themselves, creating collectiveness outside of the oppressive gaze (Lang, 2022, pp. 98-102). These examples show the importance to look at the internal structures of movements and how women are organized within them to understand their positioning towards gender ideology.

### ***3.1.2. Political opportunity structure***

The political opportunity structure (POS) is the socio-political and economic context in which the movement takes place. This context is likely to influence the expectations and the outcome of the movement (Kurzman, 1996, p. 157-160). Thus, it is the "outside world", meaning the external conditions that provide people with incentives to engage in collective action processes (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004, p. 1459; Morris, 2000, p. 446). POS represents not only the question of "why", but also the "why now" (Hollands & Vail, 2012, p. 29). For example, a decrease in the state's deterrent capacity due to a context of war might encourage individuals to organise themselves against the state structures (Gleditsch & Ruggeri, 2010, p. 300). Likewise, other conditions such as the spread of a certain ideology in an area or region, an economic crisis or a natural disaster can have the same effect.

These structures of political opportunity are also gendered. The context in which social movements and their participants operate affects women and men differently. Gender roles are omnipresent in society, but they can vary depending on the political and social context in which individuals are interacting. In some cases, the context has favoured the flourishing and development of women-led movements. On the one hand, Friedman (1998) shows how, under authoritarian rule, women face less repression when engaging in anti-regime activism, since they are not perceived as threatening political actors. Social junctures, as the case of an authoritarian rule, also provide space for organizational forms that transcend the party-based structure in which women are normally relegated to secondary positions, encouraging informal ties and networks (Friedman, 1989, p. 91). This was especially visible in the Latin American anti-dictatorship movements during the 20<sup>th</sup> century with, for example, Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo<sup>6</sup> or the movement against the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela (Friedman, 1989, pp. 87-89; Sepherd, 2010, p. 9; Yulia, 2010, p. 631-632). In both movements the informal networks were an essential part of the movement since the parties had no political power. On the other hand, Friedman (1998, p. 89) also argues that democratization is closely linked to women's demobilization because the new democratic institutions are gendered in favour of men, due to their assignment as the "construction workers" of those new political structures.

Nevertheless, external factors can also make it difficult for certain movements to fulfil their goals since they are highly dependent on the socio-political context. For example, in a state-based analysis of the suffragist movement in the United States, researchers showed that the success of pro-feminist policy reforms was mainly dependent on the socio-political situation

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<sup>6</sup> In April 1977, a group of women gathered in La Plaza de Mayo (Buenos Aires), to protest against the disappearance of their children under the repressive regime of Jorge Videla. They continued doing so every Thursday during years, gaining international recognition, and presenting one of the main opposition forces to the regime (Howe, 2006, p. 43).

of each of the states, rather than on the movements' performance. Some of the relevant factors were the percentage of migrant population, the prevalence of gender roles in society and the involvement of women in public projects (McCammon, Campbell, Grandberg & Mowery's, 2001). These different external factors helped explain the differences across states in terms of when they approved full suffrage, presidential suffrage, and primary suffrage. Even if the suffragist movements had the same strategies and goals across states, the context allowed only some of them to succeed in their outcome. Other examples of external factors that could influence in the national level include the expansion of political rights in neighbouring countries or women's contributions to World War I (McCammon, Campbell, Grandberg & Mowery's, 2001). These examples highlight the importance of taking into account the general environment in which movements operate, looking at the external social and political circumstances.

### ***3.1.3. Framing***

Framing relies on interpretation and representation, involving questions of who the members of the movement are and what brings them together (McVeigh, Myers & Sikkink, 2004, p. 656). It is built through the collective construction of meanings, concepts, and ideas around the common struggle in order to legitimize the group's position and to provide a clear interpretive structure for the group's actions (Hollands & Vail, 2012, p. 30; Leach & Scoones, 2007, pp. 11-12). Framing allows movements to attract members and encourage collective action, and it is also considered to be relevant to predicting movements' outcomes (McVeigh, Myers & Sikkink, 2004, p. 656).

The literature shows that how women frame themselves in relation to gender roles affects the success of their demands (Esenstad, 2014, p. 41). Throughout history, some groups have opted for the rejection of gender roles while others have used them to their advantage by

strategies of reappropriation. Other groups have complemented their gender frame with other identity categories, such as indigenous, adding different layers to the movement's standpoint (Esenstad, 2014, p. 41). For example, Safa (1990) argues that women's social movements in Latin America have their roots in the acknowledgment of gender, not presenting the subject in gender-neutral terms but understanding gender roles and transforming them. In her analysis of Latin American women's movements, Safa (1999) explains how different groups have used the reappropriation of gender roles to legitimize their demands. For example, in movements like Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, women presented themselves as mothers and wives while protesting against the disappearance of their children. By bringing their demands to the public sphere, they challenged the traditional relation between women and the private, politicizing their role through a "maternal frame" and using their bodies as a weapon of protest (Shepherd, 2010, p. 9; Yulia, 2010, p. 633). Another example is the "Olla Común", a women-led project that has spread throughout Latin America especially since 1980s, that consists of small communal associations that work to collectively meet basic food needs. As leaders of this initiative, women assume a care-taker role, reframing the household duties and making them a political standpoint against neoliberal reforms (Hiner, Peña Saavedra & Castillo Delgado, 2022, pp. 711-714). However, this employment of gender frames can also be the cause of delegitimization, appealing to misogynist arguments of women being emotional, irrational, and lacking expertise (Yulia, 2010, p. 634). Some others have considered that this frame emphasizes and exploits gender roles, rather than deconstruct them (Howe, 2006, pp. 45-48).

To counteract these arguments and find legitimization within movements, women have tended to adopt masculine roles and behaviors, especially in the military context. For example, during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, images of hyper-masculine women were presented as propagandistic ideas of progress and gender equality (Li, 2020, pp. 66-67). The purpose of such propaganda was to show the commitment of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to women's

liberation. However, women's role in the revolution is "produced by men for men's needs", under the idea of patriotism and liberation (Li, 2020, p.74). During Confucian China, women were only allowed in the public sphere if their male relatives agreed to. Similarly, as Li (2020, p. 71) explains, female warriors under the CCP were presented as the "symbolic daughter", who can step into the public to complete "their father's mission", which in this case is personalized by the CCP. The father's authority is replaced by patriotism and loyalty, creating a revolutionary discourse in which women need to internalize masculine behaviors designed by a male figure (Chen, 2003, p.273; Li, 2020, p. 72).

## **4. Analysis: applying the political process model to Rojava**

### **4.1. Case study: Rojava**

#### ***4.1.1. Background on Rojava***

In order to understand the formation of Rojava, it is necessary to delve into the historical context of Kurdish people, Kurdistan, and the states it encompasses, with a special focus on Syria. Kurdistan is an area located in the Middle East, divided among four states: Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. Estimations show that there are around 30 million Kurds, of which one-third do not live within the borders of Kurdistan (Meho, 2001, p. 4). They constitute the largest stateless nation in the world, which has been manifested in centuries of oppression, assimilation, and marginalization at the hands of different states (Federici, 2015, p. 81). The 20<sup>th</sup> century has been decisive for the development of Kurdish nationalism; however, the so-called "Kurdish question" has developed significantly different among the four states. This section will focus on the developments in Syria and Turkey, due to the connections both have had around the Kurdish situation.

In Syria, prior to the establishment of Rojava (starting in 2000), governmental liberal economic reforms led to a situation of extreme precarity among the population; particularly

affecting Rojava (Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016, p. 74; “Revolución Ignorada”, 2015, pp. 89-90). Reforms in the party in 2010 worsened the economic situation, culminating in the Syrian welcome of the Arab Spring (Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016, p. 74). Looking specifically at the Kurdish situation, precariousness and marginalization were intertwined with large episodes of suppression and violence, especially towards politically affiliated groups. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the leading Kurdish political party in Syria, faced constant attacks and detentions by the Syrian security forces (“Revolución Ignorada”, 2015, pp. 91-92; Schmidinger, 2018, p. 176). Consequently, from 2004 to the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011, the PYD and other Kurdish organisations operated clandestinely. During initial uprisings previous to the war, the majority of Kurdish groups, including the PYD, supported the opposition to the Assad regime. However, there were major ideological differences, as the opposition was very Islamized and not democratic (“Revolución Ignorada”, 2015, p. 95). Influenced by the PKK’s values, the PYD positioned itself as an independent third force, distinct from both the regime and the opposition (Gunes & Lowe, 2015, p. 4; Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016, p. 139; Üstündağ, 2016, p. 198). Starting from Kobani, the YPG and the YPJ<sup>7</sup> liberated Rojava from the regime control, establishing what is known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (“Revolución Ignorada”, 2015, pp. 95-98).

Syrian and Turkish history has been very connected regarding the Kurdish movement, especially from the 80s on. Turkey has a long story of Kurdish repression, becoming especially violent with Ataturk’s Turkification process in 1923 (Meho, 2001, p. 13). In the last decades, Turkey has been immersed in a “low-intensity war” with the Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK) (Üstündağ, 2016, p. 197). The PKK has played a leading role in promoting Kurdish mobilization and fostering Kurdish nationalism since the 80s (Meho, 2001, p. 15). Furthermore,

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<sup>7</sup> YPG is the mixed-armed faction of the PYD. YPJ is the only-women faction of the PYD.

it has also been essential for Rojava's developments, since its founder, Abdullah Öcalan, Turkish activist and political theorist, developed the theory of democratic confederalism that will guide its emergence and evolution. Due to Turkish repression, Öcalan spent a decade in Syria seeking refuge, connecting the Kurdish movement of both countries through his ideas of democratic autonomy (Üstündağ, 2016, pp. 198-202). Öcalan's support from the Syrian government as a leader of the PKK strained Turkish-Syrian relations, leading to his departure from Syria after Turkish threat of attack ("Revolución Ignorada", 2015, p. 91). Nevertheless, he remains the most influential figure in the Kurdish-Syrian Movement and the organisation of Rojava (Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016, pp. 141-142). During his time in Syria, he spread the ideas of democratic confederalism and provided military trainings for the population. The conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state served as an "ideological and material source" for the creation of democratic confederalism (Üstündağ, 2016, p. 202). This means that the ideas and strategies that sustain democratic confederalism were already internalized and practiced among different Kurdish territories prior to the revolution in 2012, including how to organise militarily (Üstündağ, 2016, p. 202). This will be decisive for the fast and effective organisation of the Kurdish resistance in Syria.

#### ***4.1.2. Why study Rojava: an exceptional case in social movements literature***

There are three main reasons that showcase the exceptionality of Rojava as a case study, in relation to social movements theory and to its approach to gender ideology.

Firstly, Rojava's movement has been categorized as a separatist or nationalist movement, which represents a misconception of the goals and aims of the group and has produced a neglect of the case in the study of social movements (Burç, 2020, p. 322). Secondly, scholarship on social movements assumes nation-statism as a premise (Burç, 2020, p. 323). Thus, the movements' goals and strategies are centred around the state, which creates an inaccurate



analysis for the case of Rojava, since it does not aim for political representation or change within the system but rather the creation of a new one. Minority mobilization is overlooked, since they do not enter the paradigms of the nation-state, like the Kurds who are dispersed across four states. Thirdly, the exceptionality of this system is also explained by their approach to gender ideology. Different to other social movements, Rojava considers women's liberation the first and fundamental stage to achieve transformation, rather than a secondary consequence of this process (Dean, 2019, p. 4; Piccardi & Barca, 2021, p. 1276). The "women's question" is usually left for the future, for "after the revolution", expecting that it will be solved through the establishment of the new revolutionary structures (Dirik, 2022 p. 31). However, "the after" does not come in most cases (Dirik, 2022 p. 31). Thus, the focus on gender struggle as a starting point to create an egalitarian society, has differentiated Rojava from other leftist social movements (Piccardi & Barca, 2021, p. 1276; Rojava Information Centre [RIC], 2019, p. 40). Their political and social agenda includes the democratization and inclusion of political organisms in a way that women's freedom is part of the revolution, rather than a consequence.

#### ***4.1.3. Rojava: a system of democratic confederalism***

Rojava's social and political system is based on democratic confederalism, a political theory developed by Abdullah Öcalan. Democratic confederalism basic principle is the collective participation in the decision-making procedures, following a bottom-up approach (Colasanti, Frondizi, Liddle & Meneguzzo, 2018, p. 808). This socio-political model of organization has three pillars: grass-roots democracy, political ecology, and women's liberation (Dean, 2019, p. 4; Dirik, 2018, p. 222-223). Rojava's system aims to move beyond the state's coercive apparatus towards consensus and voluntary participation, thus rejecting the nature of the state itself. This voluntary participation is rooted in the idea of a "moral-political society" consisting of conscious citizens who understand their role in the community and aim to share common responsibilities against bureaucratic elitism (Colasanti, 2018, p. 816; Sari, 2021, p. 9). It

advocates for collaboration and self-organization of the multiple ethnic groups living in the region in different horizontal decision-making structures. It is a revolution of practice, which challenges preconceived ideas of societal organization by subverting them, creating a new model of stateless democracy (Dirik, 2018, p. 222-223).

This system is implemented by a structure that goes from the most local decision-making organism, the commune, to the Autonomous Administration that encompasses the seven regions that form Rojava. All of them are organised following a bottom-up approach<sup>8</sup> (RIC, 2019, p. 21). Decisions are mainly assigned to the local level, except those that affect multiple regions. The core of this system is to ensure direct democracy and collective self-management; thus, decisions are mainly assigned to the local level (RIC, 2019, p. 23). Higher organisms' decisions will be based on the communes' resolutions.

#### ***4.1.4. Gender ideology in Rojava***

An intersectional approach is necessary to understand the gender ideology of Rojava. Intersectional theory looks at how different systems of oppression and domination intersect and interrelate, and the impact of these overlapping identity categories in each individual (Torà Mañós, 2018, p. 35). Kurdish women have historically been victims of multi-layered forms of oppression due to both their gender and their Kurdish ethnic identity (Dirik, 2018, p. 222). Processes such as colonization and the expansion of capitalism and nation-statism have fostered the settlement of patriarchy, perpetuating power relations and the establishment of gendered hierarchies through oppression and violence (Dirik, 2018, p. 225; Sen, 2020, p. 3-5). These structures have also promoted processes of “othering”<sup>9</sup> and the creation of dichotomies

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<sup>8</sup> From the smallest political unit to the biggest one: commune, neighborhood, sub-districts, districts, cantons, region and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (RIC, 2019, p. 21)

<sup>9</sup> Othering is understood as “a discursive process by which powerful groups (...) define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups” (Jensen, 2011, p. 65).

to justify the domination of certain groups, as it is the case of minority/majority or citizen/non-citizen (Küçük & Özselçuk, 2016, p. 186). In this context, women emerge as “the oldest colony”, and feminism as the “uprising of the first colony” (Dirik, 2018, p. 226; Piccardi & Barca, 2021, p. 1277). In the case of the Kurds, state violence, deprivation, marginalization, and dispossession in combination with the pre-existing socio-economic and cultural conditions have perpetuated and normalised the subjugation of women throughout history (Dirik, 2022, p. 30).

Democratic confederalism highlights the need for women’s liberation as the basis to end any other form of subsequent enslavement. Öcalan situates women as the main revolutionary agent (Colasanti, Frondizi, Liddle & Meneguzzo, 2018, p. 817). This is translated into a system that prioritizes women’s liberation both in the political and in the social sphere, as it will be explained in the following sections. However, as Rojava women stated themselves, it is important to highlight that this model is not perfect and has not yet resulted in complete gender equality (Ghotbi, 2016, p. 29). Nevertheless, the changes are significant and visible at all levels of social and political life (Ghotbi, 2016, p. 29).

## **4.2. Application of the Political Process Model**

### ***4.2.1. Mobilizing structures***

Gender egalitarianism relies on the idea of liberating women both in the private and the public sphere. Thus, the political and social structures and vehicles that are used are of extreme relevance, since they need to be inclusive and democratic for women. In this section, different political and social organisations working in Rojava<sup>10</sup> will be assessed, including both formal and informal, and mixed and non-mixed/only-women. In Rojava, women engage in “double militancy”, because they have not rejected the alignment with political parties and formal

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<sup>10</sup> Within the larger Kurdish movement there are several other organisations and structures that will not be mentioned since they operate within the larger Kurdish movement, including Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.

structures, but they still maintain a strong focus on the informal networks of care, organization, and solidarity (Franceschet, 2004, p. 502). This combines the need for both representation and autonomy. Women's presence in both formal and informal networks is in line with Dirik's idea of a "24-hour militancy", in which every area of day-to-day life is permeated by gender ideology (Dirik, 2022, p. 104)

Firstly, the mixed structures will be explained. Every form of mixed political organization of the Self-Administration requires at least a 40% quota assigned to women, as established in articles 47, 65 and 87 of the Social Charter (Colosanti et al., 2018, p. 813; Dean, 2019, p. 27). Furthermore, all institutions have a dual presidency with power-sharing between a man and a woman (Burç, 2020, p. 334). This ensures that all decisions taken, from the communes to the Autonomous Administration, are based on gender egalitarianism, decentralization, representation, and consensus-building.<sup>11</sup> However, in an interview with Marko Ulvila<sup>12</sup> (personal communication, 22 May 2023), he explained that the private structures are still not fully implementing this system and that areas such as defense are still male-dominated. Thus, this is still an ongoing process towards gender egalitarianism.

Gender ideology questions how power relates to gender and how this interaction should be arranged to achieve gender egalitarianism. However, how can one begin a discussion on power relations in a space where power relations are still taking place? Women in Rojava have established non-mixed organisations for women to carry on different activities, free from men's interference and parallel to the structures of the Autonomous Administration<sup>13</sup>. Women's political autonomy and power is the "most central tenet of revolutionary struggle", which

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to mention that the system also takes into account the different ethnic, cultural, and religious groups coexisting in the region, ensuring representation from non-Kurdish population (RIC, 2019, p. 21).

<sup>12</sup> Marko Ulvila is a Member of the European Committee of Water for Rojava and member of the board of Siemenpuu Foundation who I had the opportunity to interview for this research.

<sup>13</sup> Each organism that constitutes de Autonomous Administration has a parallel only-women organism (RIC, 2019, p. 21).

highlights how women do not only need equality, but also autonomy (Rasit & Kolokotronis, 2020, p. 876). Öcalan's Theory of Rupture defines the need of a mental, spiritual, and cultural rupture with the dominant system as a premise to develop self-awareness ("Revolución Ignorada", 2015, pp. 51-52). This theory has guided the beginning of autonomous militancy as a self-defence mechanism, encouraging women to separate themselves from the male gaze (physically and mentally) to acknowledge themselves as autonomous subjects (Instituto Andrea Wolf, 2021, p. 240). This section will explain the main non-mixed structures in Rojava that contribute to gender egalitarianism through double-militancy, self-organization, and collective action.

Kongra Star (Star Congress) is the confederation of women's organizations operating in Rojava, which works through a committee-based structure that covers different areas, such as Diplomatic Relations, Education or Social Affairs (Burç, 2020, p. 333; Dirik, 2018, p. 229; RIC, 2019, p. 44). It seeks to empower people through "*perwerde*", which stands for "conscious raising, politization and self-reflection" (Dirik, 2018, p. 230). Kongra Star works in different cities and villages through the Mala Jin or Women's Houses. Mala Jin are institutions that provide space of support for women facing personal issues, such as marital and family conflicts. Their work is based on mediation and reconciliation, but also training and education for both genders, encouraging local and communal conflict resolution. They are in close connection with the Asayîsa Jin (Women Internal Security Forces), which intervenes in cases of violence and with the Women's Court of Justice, which is in charge of supervising the contracts signed (Kongra Star, 2022, pp. 10-11). Furthermore, Mala Jin has a system of Women's Protection Houses (Mala Parastina Jinê), which are shelters where women can stay while the Mala Jin works to ensure their safe return home (Kongra Star, 2022, p. 11).

In the judicial system, different organisms such as the Women's Courts and the Women's Councils oversee laws related to women's issues (RIC, 2019, pp. 47-48). Moreover, "Women's law" was created by a committee of women from different ethnic backgrounds with the aim of formalising women's rights and ban certain practices considered oppressive. The enforcement of the law is observed in the three Kurdish cantons, while it is yet to be ratified in the Arab regions of the south (RIC, 2019, p. 42).

In the military, Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (YPJ) or Women's Protection Units are militias entirely formed and led by women. They were created in 2013 and have played an essential role in the defeat of ISIS. On the one hand, the YPJ follows jineology's notion of self-defense in its most explicit way: defending themselves from war and all the atrocities women suffer because of it, especially as victims of ISIS. On the other hand, the YPJ refuses the masculinization process that women must accept to enter male-dominated spheres, such as the military. Before the creation of non-mixed structures, women had to "behave like men" to be accepted in the military (Instituto Andrea Wolf, 2021, p. 204). Thus, the work of the YPJ was also focused on the ideological fight to liberate women from those preconceptions about their role within those spaces, reconceptualizing masculinity and femininity (Instituto Andrea Wolf, 2021, p. 204). Furthermore, Dean (2019, p. 16) explains how, by entering military structures and transforming them, women are also able to ensure that they will not be relegated to the domestic sphere once the conflict ends. Similar to the effect of WWI in the suffragist movement in the United States, the presence of women in male-dominated areas can have a positive effect on the way they are perceived in society, promoting gender egalitarianism.

Other working areas are, for example, education, with the Women's Education and Research Centre, where they foster debates to construct communal knowledge (Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016, pp. 175-176). There are also Women's Academies, where Jineology is taught,

and a Kurdish Women's Press Association, that aims to replace hegemonic masculine narratives in the media (Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016, pp. 175-184). Not all of the existing organisms are explained since most have overlapping roles and spheres of action. The aim of this section is to provide an overview of the holistic approach to gender egalitarianism, which covers every aspect of the social and the political, from military units to research centres.

While the system might seem essentialist by homogenizing women based on their gender identity, suborganizations exist based on ethnicity, for example for Arab or Syriac women (Burç, 2020, p. 334; Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016, pp. 180-182). An intersectional perspective when analyzing women's experiences is crucial, even though the term is used as a single category. Informants in Rojava explain how they employed "strategic essentialism", which consists of the aggrupation of people that share the same background and goals to strength their political claims and visibility (Ghotbi, 2016, p. 22).

#### ***4.2.2. Political opportunity structure***

Rojava's development of democratic confederalism has always been parallel to the Syrian War and the general context of the Arab Spring (Potiker, 2021, p. 123). Even though the Rojava revolution and the takeover of the Kurdish areas was mostly peaceful and not always involved in direct conflict, measures such as embargos reinforced the exceptionality of the circumstances (Nordhag, 2021 p. 15). The contemporary geopolitical crisis in the region combined with the power vacuum created by the war have been argued to be conditions for such a project to succeed (Cemgil & Hoffman, 2016, p. 54). Taking Kurzman's (1996, p. 157-160) argument about the structure of political opportunity, one could argue that Rojava used the suspension and weakening of state structures and its coercive power as a political opportunity to implement its project (Federici, 2015, p. 83; Shahvisi, 2018, p. 1015). Furthermore, the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the Kurdish dominated areas in 2012 due to the intensification on the fight

in Aleppo provided a relatively peaceful takeover by the PYD (Federici, 2015, p. 84; “Revolución, Ignorada” 2015, pp. 96-97). These junctures have been historically an opportunity for women to assume certain roles due to the exceptional context they are operating in. Before the revolution, in the years of clandestine activism (2004-2011), women assumed the organisational roles within the movement, since they were less likely to face repression (Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016, p. 163). Moreover, women have been crucial in the fight against ISIS, which has granted them legitimacy as political subjects by reaffirming their capacities to participate in the conflict.

Nevertheless, part of rejecting nation-statism is to reject a state-centred analysis. Thus, it is important to look at the position of the non-state actors involved. The decrease of state capacities provided the space for Kurdish population to put into practice those forms of social and political organization they had been designing. Due to the breakout of the war, Kurdish population spent significant amount of time in the mountains, either hiding or reorganising their military strategies (“Revolución Ignorada”, 2015, pp. 51-52). This led them away from the roles and values they had adopted before, allowing them to experience new ways of understanding individual and collective ways of living (“Revolución Ignorada”, 2015, pp. 51-52). This radical departure from existing social structures is related to the aforementioned Theory of Rupture. Thus, this rupture was likely favoured by the wartime context.

As Öcalan argues (2013, p. 25), the homogenization project that the nation-state has carried on has materialized in centuries of “cultural and physical genocide” towards different minority groups. Rojava’s success does not only depend on Kurdish participation, but also on the coexistence and representation of the different ethnic groups. Thus, the revolution connected different groups whose identity was persecuted and subjected to Arabization, gathering them



under the revolutionary idea of multi-ethnic democracy, free belief, and cultural autonomy (Graeber & Ögünç, 2014, p. 5; M. Ulvila, personal communication, 22 May 2023).

However, political opportunity structure should not be used as a definite explanation to assess the movement's success. Despite the war most likely favouring Rojava, movement's seeds were planted decades ago (Üstündağ, 2016, p. 202). Furthermore, as Shahvisi (2018, p. 1016) points out, it is necessary to analyse cautiously Rojava's gains since the 2012 revolution concerning gender egalitarianism. The short period in which these developments have occurred can present a challenge for the system, since it is likely that the "time-honoured patriarchal culture" has not been reformed in its core (Shahvisi, 2018, pp. 1015-1016). Traditional gender roles tend to resurface after conflicts to provide a social sense of normality, pushing women back into housewife roles (Dirik, 2022). Thus, the ideological transformation of society is needed to preserve such structures. For many people, joining the YPG was a strategy to escape from the attacks of the Assad regime, ISIS, and other opposition groups (Federici, 2015, p. 84). Therefore, assessing the degree of ideological allegiance remains challenging. However, even though the ideological commitment can be questioned, Rojava's system has managed to cover people's basic needs, such as economic security, pensions, or salaries, which was not provided in such an extent by the government (M. Ulvila, personal communication, 22 May 2023). Therefore, people's satisfaction with the new system goes beyond ideological affiliation, which needs to be considered when speculating about Rojava's future.

#### **4.2.3. Framing**

This section will analyse how the different strategies of framing used by women in Rojava led to a successful implementation of gender egalitarianism. Women in Rojava reject the idea of the housewife, considering it a form of slavery. This suggests that they do reject gender roles radically, adopting the famous female-combatant position that has spread so widely through

the media. However, the shift from housewife to female-combatant goes beyond the mere rejection of gender roles, deconstructing what the private and the public entails for women and reframing it under the premise of self-defence.

Gender is socially constructed, and this construction has evolved and been redefined during the history of patriarchy. Different historical processes, including the development of capitalism and the colonization of the Global South have resulted in the “hierarchical separation between production and reproduction”, which has normalised women’s place as housewives (Gea Piccardi & Barca, 2021, p. 1275; Piccardi, 2022, p. 8). This reduction to their position as reproductive beings has created submission and dependency towards their male relatives and has reinforced their exclusion from the public sphere, through a process that has been named as “housewification” (Piccardi, 2022, p. 7). Öcalan (2013, p. 26) defined housewifisation as “sexism in an institutionalised form”, which accounts for the base of “hierarchical power relations”. Middle Eastern conceptions of the household and the family are strongly influenced by these ideas (Colasanti et al, 2018, p. 818, Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016, p. 160).

Rojavan women interviewed by Ghotbi (2016, pp. 30-32) conceptualised their position as housewives as an ultimate form of slavery that women have been subjected to by their communities and by the state. Öcalan argues that the family has become a microreproduction of the state structures, “a man’s small state”, enforcing patriarchal domination through concepts such as marriage, honour, or honour killings (Guler, 2020, p. 30; Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016, pp. 192-195). The process of housewifisation has also eliminated any form of communal organisation outside of the capitalist structures, which have been typically led by women. Kurdish women have been subjected to processes of cultural assimilation and destruction of their rural communities under premises of development and urbanization. These processes have

resulted in their isolation within their households, eradicating attempts of mutual protection against their male relatives.

The appropriation of the female-combatant role emerges with the aim of subverting housewifisation (Ghotbi, 2016, p. 32-35). The notion of the female combatant is constructed around the idea of self-defence, which should not solely be understood in military terms, but should also include symbolic forms of violence (Üstündağ, 2016, p. 199). Self-defence advocates for the empowerment of women as political subjects on their own, which can be achieved through many different means (Ghotbi, 2016, p. 33). Empowerment is defined “as the process of change through which those who have been denied the capacity to exercise choice gain this capacity” (Kabeer, 2012, p. 2). Women have historically been excluded from the public sphere, where matters of justice are addressed, leaving them with no choice than to accept and follow those decisions taken by men (Kabeer, 2012, p. 4). Mosedale (2005, p. 244) adds to this definition that empowerment cannot be achieved through a third party, but by the subjects themselves. Third parties can only provide favourable conditions for its development. Thus, the female-combatant is a political positioning that aims to bring back women’s capacities to exercise choice and it is based on the transformation of gender roles. The creation of only-women and women-led spaces gave them the chance to step outside the household that maintained them powerless, being able to reconstruct their public role within the communities. Moreover, housewifisation has tied women to the non-citizen status, taking Lister’s (1997, pp. 6-10) definition of citizenship as a practice rather than a status, since they have been excluded from the public domain, where citizenship is constructed (Ghotbi, 2016, p. 31). The female-combatant has brought women to the status of citizens, giving them the agency to engage with their societies (Kabeer, 2012, p. 220).

Thus, women in Rojava do not reject gender roles but rather transform them in a way in which activities of care and solidarity are perceived as a basis for societal organisation. The reversion of ideas and meanings through framing is essential to implement gender egalitarianism. Rejecting housewifisation does not mean rejecting acts of caring and engaging in male-dominated areas as an alternative, such as the military forces. Instead of serving a husband, women organise themselves in order to provide services to the community, sharing work and responsibilities (Gea Piccardi & Barca, 2021, p. 1281). Liberation of women in the private sphere requires the politicisation and socialisation of reproductive work, breaking their isolation towards a practice of commoning (Gea Piccardi & Barca, 2021, p. 1281). The reinterpretation of reproductive work as a “powerful source of social change, environmental sustainability and economic autonomy” is a strategy of framing (Gea Piccardi & Barca, 2021, p. 1281).

These ideas are related to the reframing of “primitiveness” and its relation to gender. Kurds have historically been categorized as primitive as a way to delegitimize them and justify their oppression (Jongerden, 2022, p. 13). However, the term has been reframed and revaluated to showcase the importance of learning from those societies based on egalitarianism and communalism, that existed before the emergence of modernity and capitalism (Jongerden, 2022, p. 13). 5000 years ago, Neolithic societies were organised by matristic structures<sup>14</sup>, where “women had a central but not hierarchical role” (Guler, 2020, pp. 28-29; Piccardi & Barca, 2022, p. 1274). Matristic values are also closely connected with the reconfiguration of the relation between humans and the nature, embracing political ecology.

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<sup>14</sup> Matristic structures represent a balanced society, where leadership is harmoniously shared connecting the needs of both genders and the nature (Ransom, 2021, p. 2). Some authors, such as Gimbutas (1992, p. 237) have differentiated this term from “matriarchy”, arguing that matriarchal structures are based on ideas of dominance, in the same way than patriarchy. However, others, such as Marler (2006), use them indistinctively. This study will use “matristic”, since it is the term used in literature about Rojava.

However, framing extends beyond transforming women's roles; men's roles and masculinity also require reassessment. Democratic Confederalism and Jineology emphasize educating men about their duties and responsibilities to achieve gender egalitarianism (Gea Piccardi & Barca, 2021, p. 1282). Rojava's system aims to create a society based on an "ethics-based commitment to social justice, sustainability and equality", which must include men's allegiance (Dirik, 2018, pp. 226-227). The reconstruction of masculinity is an essential and pivotal part of the project, that requires the destigmatization of men's connection to concepts such as care or emotionality (Burç, 2020, p. 332). The goal is to change peoples' minds and beliefs in order to construct a truly democratic society in its core, while debunking male-constructed terms such as nation-state or colonialism (Ghotbi, 2016, pp. 42-43).

## **5. Conclusion and implications**

When looking at the mobilising structures of Rojava, it is visible how, differently to other social movements, Rojava situates women in the centre of the political project. The power-sharing and consensus-based system ensures women's representation and input in every political organism, also embracing intersectionality through multi-ethnic representation. Moreover, the creation of only-women spaces covering different areas fosters a mental and physical rupture with the traditional roles they have been assign in, as well as a process of self-awareness as autonomous subjects. The core of Rojava's project is based on prefigurative politics, aiming to reconstruct society from the base, rather than just fostering change within the political elite and at the state-level. The concept of double militancy embraces this need to work both in the formal and informal networks in order for gender egalitarianism to be established as a base for the system. Here the difference with other movements in terms of the implementation gender ideology becomes essential. It is not a consequence of the revolution, but a premise for it to succeed, which is translated in women being part of the system-formation in the social and the political sphere.

This is connected with the political opportunity structure and how the war has affected or even fostered the development of this system. It is likely that the power vacuum created by the war has created a suitable context for women to intervene in the public sphere through political and military organisation. Since it is an ongoing conflict, it is difficult to establish to what extent the achievements of this project can be reversible when the situation in Syria and in the neighbouring countries becomes stable. Nevertheless, the reason why this case has been chosen is because it aims to produce change beyond the state structures. Thus, it might be the case that they are less influenced by such changes if the project succeeds on acting outside of that framework and targeting the underlying socio-political structures. Ulvila (personal communication, 22 May 2023) explained how, due to the large presence of women in the different institutions and the power-sharing mechanisms, it would be very difficult to revert such a project. Coming back to Dirik's (2022) argument of how, after juncture periods, women are relegated to housewives in order to preserve "normality", one could argue that Rojava aims to change what "normality" entails. This can be done by reframing gender roles and their relation to the private and the public, rather than by completely rejecting them. Through the ideas extracted from Jineology and a strong emphasis on education, women are able to revert old patterns of socialization, emphasising on empowerment through self-awareness. The female-combatant embodies the principle of self-defence, creating an autonomous woman that is able to protect herself from male-domination and that guides and organises society based on principles of equality and justice.

This analysis highlights the need to expand the framework within which the study of social movements operates, as Rojava represents a successful or in-progress model of women's liberation through its radical approach to democracy and social organisation. It is essential to study and analyse movements like Rojava to understand how to replicate such structures in different contexts, drawing from both their mistakes and their accomplishments. By learning

from Rojava's experiences, social movements can strive towards a genuine gender egalitarianism and create transformative change. Only advocating for governmental and institutional changes is insufficient to change societal attitudes towards women that perpetuate patriarchy and gender inequalities. Targeting those underlying structures is needed in order to ensure radical change. Therefore, including non-traditional cases that have implemented such ideas has the potential to provide previously unobserved insights. Furthermore, this specific case can provide insightful input for the current Syrian conflict, as well as for the Middle Eastern geopolitical situation, since they have found a path for ethnic coexistence as well as for women's emancipation, two factors that are still source of struggle in the region.

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