

WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN NORTHEAST SYRIA ENFORCING GENDER EQUALITY

The Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration in Northeast Syria has been lauded for advancing women's rights and fighting off the Islamic State – also with all-female military units. However, the way the Administration enforces gender equality and how its reforms affect people's daily lives need further investigation.

Julia Wartmann



A typical neighbourhood in the small town of Amûda in Northeast Syria, where women go from house to house, explaining the importance of women's rights to their neighbours.

It's nine thirty in the morning in the town of Amûda in Northeast Syria. Jamira claps her hands in front of a house in her neighbourhood. Its residents do not seem to be expecting a visit: no one opens the door. Viyan, an interpreter who accompanies me on this visit, stands at a distance from the typical one-

storey house, looking like she is ready to bolt. As if she feels like this unannounced visit is an invasion of the family's privacy.

The visit is part of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria's (AANES) campaign to raise awareness about gender equality and to educate



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The town of Amûda is located in the far Northeast of Syria close to the border with Turkey.

people on women's rights. Jamira, a 45-year-old woman with dark hair under her brown headscarf, works for the local branch of Kongra Star. This is the umbrella body for all women's organizations linked to the Autonomous Administration, commonly referred to as the self-administration. Its members go door-to-door to educate residents on the "Women's Law"¹ with the aim of fostering societal change in the region also known as Rojava.

Liberating women from masculine domination

Adopted in 2014, the Women's Law bans female genital mutilation, polygamy and child marriage. The idea behind the neighbourhood visits is to educate the roughly two million people who live in Northeast Syria about gender equality and women's rights. Though not exclusively, the campaign targets young women and mothers "who are the future and responsible for raising the new generation", says the director of Kongra Star in Amûda. "We tell them about the importance of treating boys and girls equally", she elaborates, summarising the official aim to overcome power imbalances between the genders. Not only are women's social, political, and economic rights infringed, but many women also suffer from gender-specific violence and exploitation.

1 "Women's Laws in Rojava – Northern Syria." n.d. Kongra Star (blog). Accessed September 15, 2020. <https://eng.kongra-star.org/2019/04/06/womens-laws-in-rojava-northern-syria/>.

In 2012, when the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), seized control of Syria's Northeast amidst the ongoing Syrian conflict, democratic confederalism became the doctrine of the self-administration. The area under its control stretches across 50,000 square kilometers; it encompasses rather arid land in the East close to the Turkish border as well as vast stretches of fertile soil in the West – a region belonging to the so-called fertile crescent thanks to the river Euphrates that passes through it. Modelled after the political thought of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, the self-administration endorses a non-state political solution that seeks to liberate nature from capitalism, an idea also prevalent in eco feminist ideas, that envisions a democracy without a state, and – crucially – pursues the liberation of women from masculine domination. As part of the PYD's agenda of establishing democratic confederalism, reforms aimed at including women in politics and achieving a more (gender-)equitable society were introduced.

Raising awareness for women's rights

In democratic confederalist theory, self-government starts with communes at the neighbourhood and village level, eventually confederating to the higher levels, while preserving the autonomy and decision-making power at the local levels. Using family visits to mobilise the public and raise awareness has been a common practice of the PYD. It had conducted such visits even before the start of the war in 2011 under the Assad regime to promote its political agenda, of which gender equality is an integral feature.

The promotion of women's rights is a major factor why the Kurdish-led Administration is generally regarded positively by journalists and scholar-activists in the Global North, who view democratic confederalism as a progressive alternative to authoritarianism and patriarchy in the region. Such observers like to claim that it can serve as a model for women's liberation and community building for the entire Middle East, if not the world. Some locals, on the other hand, are concerned about the forceful imposition of the new ideology.

When looking at the social change geared towards gender equality in Northeast Syria, it is imperative



Where there is water, there is agriculture. Lately, the region has been suffering from severe drought due to the Turkish government cutting off water from the area under control of the Kurdish-led self-administration.

that we consider both the empowering and restrictive effects of the reforms implemented amidst the ongoing conflict – especially if democratic confederalism is to be emulated by others. Rather than evaluating the self-administration’s policies by holding them to a standard dictated by the benchmark of liberal democracy, the aim of my research is to learn how the democratic confederalist discourse, rooted in an emancipatory political ideology that seeks to liberate women, affects their daily lives and what we can learn from their example.

Based on the material from my ethnographic fieldwork I argue that while reforms, such as the introduction of the co-presidency, have certainly increased women’s political participation, other measures, such as the family visits, have also resulted in new forms of control over the population. What I can say after having spent five months in the region is that any reforms aimed at changing social relations need to happen bottom-up and cannot be implemented top-down, against the will of the people.

Targeting the patriarchal family

Unlike in other Kurdish conceptions of statehood, such as the neighbouring Kurdistan Regional Government’s nationalist and patriarchal politics, democratic confederalism rejects the nation state and all nationalisms on the grounds that it enslaves women and creates divisions based on ethnic identity. In his earlier writings in the late nineteen seventies and eighties, Abdullah Öcalan, who is currently serving

a life sentence on İmralı prison island, advocated for the liberation of Kurds and for an independent Kurdish state. In the early 1990s and particularly after his arrest in 1999, the nationalist tone of his writing started to give way to a new framework with women’s liberation at its centre. In more recent writings, Öcalan positions women’s liberation as an imperative and the first step towards a social revolution that will result in the liberation and freedom of all people.²

Many of the newly implemented laws and reforms in Northeast Syria thus aim to equalise the relationship between women and men, including granting women the right to divorce and inherit. The self-administration has anchored women’s rights in the constitution by introducing a fifty per cent women’s quota in all institutions, as well as establishing special all-female committees such as the “women’s houses”, which handle issues of domestic violence, marriage law, and family disputes involving women. However, these legal reforms are not recognised either nationally or internationally.

But Öcalan’s vision also targets the domestic sphere: Problematizing the family as “man’s small state”, he builds on feminist theory arguing that women’s “housewifeisation”, the exploitation of their unlimited and unpaid labour in a patriarchal society, has enslaved women to men and, by extension, to the state. To overcome male domination means to abolish patriarchal family structures, which Öcalan considers the primary place where control over women is exercised. This is where the family visits come in.

² Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (Köln: International Initiative, 2011) or Abdullah Öcalan, *Liberating Life Woman’s Revolution* (Köln: Transmedia Publishing Ltd., 2013).



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A small offshoot of the Euphrates runs through the Raqqa countryside in the Northwest of Syria. The region is part of the famous fertile crescent.

Conducting family visits

On the day I joined Jamira on her door-to-door visits, we visit five homes over the span of about one and a half hours. All but the first woman knows Jamira as a neighbour, which surely contributes to a smooth course of events, for visits amongst neighbours are a daily occurrence. It is only at one house that residents refuse us entry claiming that someone is not feeling well – according to Viyan a subtle sign that the family does not support the self-administration. At the second house, an elderly woman is full of praise for the work of the local women’s house. She is grateful for their support, thanks to which she was able to divorce her abusive husband.

At the third house, however, the situation escalates. Representatives of Kongra Star have repeatedly visited this house, reprimanding a Kurdish man for his plans to marry a third wife. His first and second wives are both present as the exchange between him and Jamira gets heated. He tells her that his personal life is none of her business and that he will go ahead with his plan. “You should be glad that I am marrying more than one woman since there are not enough men left in the region as it is”, he calls out, alluding to the ongoing war and the forced conscription into the Syrian Democratic Forces, the official defense force of the AANES. After a heated back and forth, during which neither party gives in, Jamira tells him: “If you marry the

third wife, we’ll take you to jail and bring husbands for both of your wives. We will take all your money and give it to them and their children.” Shortly thereafter, we are shown to the door.

According to the self-administration, cases of polygamy and underage marriage have decreased in the areas where the Women’s Law has been enforced since 2014. However, in the newly liberated Arab-majority areas, such as Raqqa and Tabqa in the West, polygamy and underage marriage have not yet been made illegal due to the population’s rejection of the Women’s Law. Many officials of the administration claim that this rejection is rooted in the piety and traditional way of life of Arab people, implying that Arabs cling to religion more than Kurds and Christians in the region.

Changing gendered relations in Syria

In broader Syria, the role of women is codified by personal status laws, which limits women to the domestic sphere. But even before the self-administration was established at the beginning of the Syrian conflict, change was gradually underway: Women’s increased access to education as well as the liberalisation of telecommunications, which resulted in access to a wide variety of international media, contributed to a change in gendered relations, particularly marriage

practices.³ The 2011 uprising and the ensuing war further accelerated the entry of women into the workforce since the absence of male breadwinners resulting from forced conscription, imprisonment, death and migration forced many women to work outside of the home.

In 2019, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad amended the personal status law in a tokenistic attempt to further gender equality. The legal age for marriage was raised from 17 to 18 years for both men and women, and women were granted the right to marry without their guardian's approval. In addition, married women were given the right to request a divorce in case of a separation "for compelling reasons" or if their husbands had abandoned them.⁴

The amendment was intended to send two messages to the international community: On the one hand, the regime presented itself as secular, thus implying its willingness to confront Islamic extremism. On the other it demonstrated its unabated power and ability to carry out reforms despite the ongoing war. But the changes made also speak to a grim reality on the ground: The lack of single men and the disappearance of husbands in regime cells or through death have caused a spike in cases of polygamy and underage marriage in regime- and rebel-held areas – a phenomena that had been on the decline before the war. [5] ⁵Moreover, the Assad regime's decision to amend personal status laws highlighted the need to eliminate a legal hurdle for widows and wives of the disappeared to remarry in a socially conservative environment and under dire economic circumstances.

Analyzing the self-administration's gender equality reforms

In banning polygamy, introducing alimony provision, and making men and women equal before the law with regards to inheritance, the AANES Women's Law far exceeds the Syrian regime's amendments and any

previous attempts at gender equality in the region. The creation of institutions, such as the all-female committees and women's houses present new contact points for dealing with gender discrimination. But how do the reforms affect women's daily lives and what are the consequences of implementing ideologically driven social change in an ethnically mixed region that is currently still at war?

Overall, my fieldwork indicates that most women appreciate the efforts on their behalf and agree with the ban of polygamy and underage marriage. In fact, most of the women I talked to assured me that thanks to the Women's Law they have more choices and can move around more freely than before. They entered fields that were previously closed to them, for instance political parties, and are starting to take office thanks to the co-presidency, according to which each office is headed by both a male and a female director. Nonetheless, as I witnessed on door-to-door visits, as well as the fact that the Arab-majority regions reject the Women's Law, show that not everyone accepts the self-administration and its approach to furthering women's rights.

On our way home from the family visits my translator Viyan says to me: "People knew that underage marriage was bad before the self-administration told them so, but the alternative for girls is to sit around at their parents' house, not doing anything." In her view, it is the absence of a bright future that forces families to marry off their daughters at a young age. So, if practices such as underage marriage and polygamy are results of economic circumstances and the ongoing conflict rather than of piety or conservatism how do we interpret the rejection of the Women's Law? And what does this mean for the self-administration's gender equality agenda?

The effects on people's lives should be closely observed. In recognising male dominance and women's subjugation as root causes for injustice and violence, democratic confederalist theory incorporates core feminist demands. Additionally, it provides methods for implementing change that are adapted to local communities and practices. Targeting gendered inequalities within patriarchal family structures and the wider society by means of family visits and seminars to raise awareness has contributed to improving women's situation in Northeast Syria and is surely an approach worthy of emulation. Policies such as the co-presidency have further resulted in the increased political participation and decision-making of women.

3 El-Dine, Sandra Nasser. 2016. "Arab youth Occidentalisms: Images of the West and the negotiation of gender relations in Syria and Jordan." *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 41 (2): 11-31.

4 Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. "Syria: Women's Rights in Light of New Amendments to Syrian Personal Status Law." Web page. Accessed November 9, 2022.

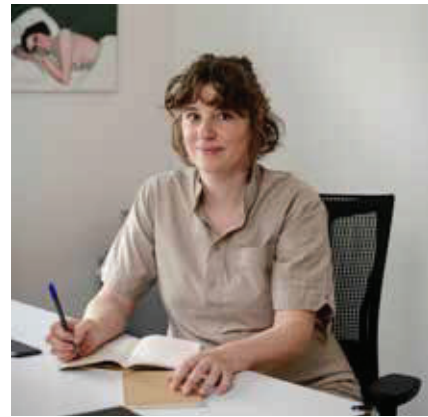
5 Enab Baladi. "The Causes of Spinsterhood in Syria," July 10, 2017.

However, despite AANES' claims that progress is attributable to the establishment of the self-administration alone, a change in gendered relations was already underway before the outbreak of the war. In the context of the ongoing conflict and the significance of international support for the Kurdish-led administration, it is in the latter's interest to stake an exclusive claim to the advancement of women's rights and portray those opposing democratic confederalism as being against progress and oppressive towards women.

The self-administration's modus operandi further suggests that support of gender equality is not merely fostered through persuasion, but, where people do not comply with democratic confederalist ideology, also through coercion. In encroaching on the domestic sphere, family visits consolidate the self-administration's grip over previously less regulated spaces. The criminalisation of those who oppose the new normative framework is a worrisome development and not necessarily conducive to social change. Inflicting penalties on those who defy the Women's Law may combat the symptoms of gendered inequalities, while its root causes, such as economic and physical insecurity, remain and are exacerbated by the ongoing conflict.

Gender equality and social justice were among the main demands of protesters during the Arab Spring as well as protest movements in Iran and other authoritarian states in the region. This speaks of a clear desire for social change amongst these populations. However, conflict and the continuing violence exercised by states and militias, as well as patriarchal laws and practices, stand in the way of equality and justice. The measures taken by the self-administration to further gender equality have certainly increased women's visibility and participation. And while the passage of the Women's Law is laudable and worthy of emulation, its implementation, and the effect the reforms have on people's lives should be closely observed.

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FURTHER READING

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