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KURDISH WOMEN RISING: GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSES FROM THE PKK TO ROJAVA

Jenna Pearlson

Mentors: Nancy Reynolds and Timothy Parsons

After its founding in 1978, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) successfully mobilized many Kurdish women around its nationalist campaign against the Turkish state. Themes relating to gender equality have continued to gain importance within the movement, especially since the 1990s, as Kurdish women's participation in the movement increased. The developments regarding the role of women in the PKK had an impact on the formation of Rojava, or Western Kurdistan, the de facto autonomous state created by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. In Rojava, certain principles of gender equality previously articulated by the PKK have been implemented and expanded upon. Building on feminist studies strategies of exposing the interconnection between ethnic/nationalist processes and gender relations, this thesis examines the Kurdish movements from a gender perspective. By analyzing the writings of Abdullah Öcalan, interviews of Kurdish women, and documents from Rojava, this thesis seeks to better understand conceptualizations of gender equality in the Kurdish movement and contextualize these developments within the history of Turkey and Syria. This thesis argues that the PKK facilitated women's participation in the Kurdish movement and that the resulting contributions of women to that cause elevated the importance of gender equality within the ideological and political discourse of the Kurdish movement and within its organizational structure. Additionally, this thesis argues, based on ideological and historical developments within the Kurdish movement, that the events in Rojava are inherently linked to the PKK and therefore the histories and identities of the two movements are interwoven even though they primarily occur in different nation-states.