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# The Kurdish Women's Political Organizing from the feminist neo-institutionalist perspective

Lucie Drechselová

EHESS

The “Kurdish exception” in Turkish politics<sup>1</sup>

In March 2014, Turkey's “democratizing package” allowed political parties to be chaired jointly by a man and a woman<sup>2</sup>. This legislative measure came about after being *de facto* practiced for nine years by the pro-Kurdish parties<sup>3</sup>. Back in 2005, the introduction of co-chairing system was one of the major achievements of the Kurdish women's movement. Within the pro-Kurdish party, opponents of the project argued that the existence of the co-

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Adnan Çelik for his comments on this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> The same bill also allowed education in Kurdish in private schools under conditions, authorized electoral campaigns in multiple languages, and instigated state financial contribution to parties achieving at least 3% of votes (CNN Türk 2014).

<sup>3</sup> There are currently two “pro-Kurdish political parties“: HDP (*Halkların Demokrasi Partisi*, Democratic Peoples' Party), which is represented in the Parliament and in Western provinces, and DBP (*Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi*, Party of Democratic Regions), mostly present at the municipalities in the south-eastern region. In the municipal election in March 2019, it was decided that the HDP will run in all the country, including the south-eastern provinces. However, during the writing of this chapter, both parties were equally active, be it in different territories.

chairing system would serve to state prosecutors as a pretext for the closure of the party. The closure eventually happened but the co-chairing system was applied also to the following political parties and was finally legalized in 2014. In March 2014 as well, municipal elections took place in which the pro-Kurdish parties introduced the co-chairing system to local governments. The party nominated male and female co-mayors to almost all of its 100 municipalities in the southeast region. Even though the co-mayoral system represents an extension of the newly legal co-chairing system in political parties, the former has faced severe negative response from the state and has largely been dismantled in the following years with numerous co-mayors arrested.

Pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey distinguish themselves from other political forces by significantly higher proportions of women represented on their lists as well as in the party decision-making structures. Besides the co-chairing system, there is a 40% gender-quota and women hold a quasi-monopoly on the selection of female candidates. In a country where the women's representation reached 17% in the Parliament in 2018 (Tahaoğlu and Hikmet 2018) and slightly overcame the 10% in local governments in 2014 (Kadın Koalisyonu 2014), the pro-Kurdish political parties are not only exceptional but can also have a contagion effect on other political actors<sup>4</sup>. For example, it has become much more common for political parties to nominate a woman as their deputy leader since the pro-Kurdish party did so for the first time in Turkish history in 2007 (Kışanak, Al-Ali, and Taş 2016). Similarly, the implementation of quota and the co-chairing system inspired women from other parties to

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<sup>4</sup> Matland and Studlar explored the contagion effect in politics (Matland and Studlar 1996).

voice comparable demands<sup>5</sup>. Lastly, in provinces where the pro-Kurdish party presented female candidates, other parties, including the governing conservative AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party), tend to present women as well.

The opening story of the co-chairing system spells out the main puzzle around which this paper revolves: how to explain the feminization of pro-Kurdish political parties? The feminist neo-institutionalist approach helps to elucidate this point by focusing on the evolution of women's political organizing and the positive action measures within the pro-Kurdish parties in Turkey. This perspective reveals the contours of the changing morphology of the pro-Kurdish women's movement. Kenny suggests that single case studies are particularly relevant as they allow capturing "the complex ways in which gender plays out in different institutional sites" (Kenny 2014, 681). This is also the objective of this paper which builds upon my doctoral research focusing on the entry points of women into local politics in Turkey. It mainly draws on non-participant observation and fifty interviews carried out between 2015 and 2017 in Diyarbakır, Mardin, Siirt as well as the HDP and DBP offices in İzmir and Ankara, coupled with several interviews in Paris and London<sup>6</sup>.

Feminist neo-institutionalist scholarship provides a useful framework for the study of the institutional change of women's structures within the Kurdish movement. It recognizes that institutions are profoundly gendered and inquires into how gender is embedded not only

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<sup>5</sup> In 2015 and 2016, my interviews at the opposition Republican Peoples' Party's (CHP) women's branches headquarters as well as within the party's Istanbul branch revealed the existing support of some CHP members to the co-chairing system.

<sup>6</sup> All the names of my respondents have been changed. Only the names of publicly quotes figures remained unchanged, such as former Diyarbakır mayor Gültan Kışanak whose interviews are referenced in the text.

in formal rules but also in the norms and informal rules (Lovenduski 2011, 2; Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010; Kenny 2014; Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016). Specifically, the literature dealing with political parties' candidate selection mechanisms is helpful in revealing "the secret garden" of these institutions from the gendered perspective (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2015; Kenny and Verge 2016). Institutional design and change often pertain to the "hidden life of institutions" because the political parties are often unwilling to share their internal proceedings with outsiders. The interviews realized for this research try to bridge this information and trust gap and try to capture how institutional design can enable some and constraint other involved actors (Chappell and Waylen 2013). In this paper as well, political parties are conceived as dynamic environments, products of "negotiation, conflict and contestation" (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010, 575). Organized women within them face challenges and at times overt obstructions from their fellow male partisans. The reversibility and unpredictability of institutional designs can be convincingly captured by what Deniz Kandiyoti termed as "masculinist restoration" (Kandiyoti 2013). This notion recognizes instances of patriarchy's adaptation in different contexts and point out to the instances of its backlash. Finally, explanations of change require to "take into account agency and to refine understandings of both exogenous and endogenously generated change and their interconnections" (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010, 582). That is what this paper aims for while looking into the case of Kurdish women's political organizing.

#### Contextualization: pro-Kurdish political parties gaining ground

Kurdish women's movement has been the main actor of increase in women's representation and contributed overtime to broaden the representational "gender gap" between the pro-Kurdish political parties and the other political forces in Turkey. However, studies about women's political participation in pro-Kurdish politics often fall short of

contextualizing. With some notable exceptions (see Çağlayan 2007, 2012b; Bozgan 2011), the crucial period around the year 2000 is often dealt with very briefly (such as in Ersanlı and Göksü Özdoğan 2011; Basch-Harod 2014; Bengio 2016; Şahin-Mencütek 2016; Al-Ali and Taş 2018b, 2018a). In the following analysis, I intend to give more detailed, though non-exhaustive, account of the period articulated around three main elements: firstly, the events of the year 1999; secondly, the ideological transformation propelled within the Kurdish movement since then; and thirdly, the raising legitimacy of the political and social involvement of women within the pro-Kurdish parties.

#### The critical year 1999 and the Kurdish movement

The year 1999 was marked by several crucial events in Turkey (Gambetti 2004, 5). Abdullah Öcalan, founder and leader of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), an organisation waging a war against Turkish state since 1984, was arrested<sup>7</sup>. During the trial, Öcalan used his defences as a platform to outline ideological transformation of the PKK, abandoning the aim of establishing the separate Kurdish state for the sake of democratic autonomy and communalism in the Middle East. Soon after that, the PKK declared a cease-fire and asked for peace negotiations with Turkey (Güneş 2012, 137). At the same time, in 1999 for the first time, the pro-Kurdish political party, HADEP (*Halkın Demokrasi Partisi*, People's Democracy Party), took part in local elections and won 37 municipalities<sup>8</sup>, including three

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<sup>7</sup> With the abolishment of the capital punishment, Öcalan's sentence was changed to life imprisonment.

<sup>8</sup> In 1994, the pro-Kurdish party decided not to take part in local elections due to the levels of state repression to which its members were exposed, with several of them killed as the

where the party nominated female mayors. Still in the same year, the legal impediments that prevented Turkey's parties from creating women's branches were lifted and these branches were again established<sup>9</sup>. At the same period, the instable governments and economic crisis paved the way for the 2002 electoral victory of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan<sup>10</sup>, who managed to establish himself as a dominant actor in Turkey's politics, and of his AKP, the refurbished version of the Islamic Refah Party and central right-wing parties of the 1960s and 1970s. It is also worth mentioning that in December 1999, European Council recognized Turkey's candidacy to the European Union (Ersanlı and Göksü Özdoğan 2011, 69). Turkey's bid for the membership speeded up several legislative amendments recognizing the Kurdish cultural rights (Bozgan 2011, 765). All these elements had repercussions on women's involvement in pro-Kurdish parties.

Before analysing in greater detail the salience of these factors for women's political organizing, a closer look on some of the involved actors – Kurdish movement, pro-Kurdish parties, and Kurdish women's movement – is necessary. Kurdish movement is the most encompassing of the three. It is a network of interconnected actors, involving the pro-Kurdish political parties, the PKK, associations, women's organisations and the media. Watts and

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election approached. ("1990'dan Bugüne, HEP'ten DTP'ye Kürtlerin Zorlu Siyaset Mücadelesi" 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Women's branches of political parties existed before the 12 September 1980 military coup, were subsequently banned and were only authorized in 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Technically, R.T.Erdoğan was elected in 2003 not in 2002 after the Parliament changed a law to allow then-banned AKP leader to stand in an election. He was elected in the by-election in Siirt, city of origin of his wife and also, symbolically, a city where he pronounced a poem in the 1990s that earned him a court conviction and the ban from politics.

Dorronsoro consider it as a “value community”, which none of the actors controls completely (Dorronsoro and Watts 2013, 101). The power relations among the actors are impacted by the political situation and the peaks of suppression of Kurdish politicians (such as in 2009 and in 2015) mark the strengthening the armed wing of the Kurdish movement.

Pro-Kurdish political parties are a significant component of the Kurdish movement in Turkey. The designation “pro-Kurdish” adopted in this paper has for purpose to de-ethnicize the notion as not all Kurds support the pro-Kurdish parties, not all supporters of those parties are Kurdish. Even though the major grievance of the parties is to end the state politics of forced assimilation of the Kurds, their programs also stand for the rights of minorities, gender equality and environmental protection (HDP 2014; DBP no date). Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a series of pro-Kurdish legal parties, the majority of which has been closed by the Turkish Constitutional Court<sup>11</sup>. Currently, there are two parties that co-exist: on the one hand, the HDP (Democratic Peoples’ Party) is an umbrella organization that represents the pro-Kurdish parties in the Parliament as well as in the provinces outside the southeast region. It is a coalition of actors, involving the Kurdish political party (DBP), leftist organizations, feminist associations and some trade unions. On the other hand, the DBP (Party of Democratic Regions) is concentrated mostly in the southeast and is in charge of

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<sup>11</sup> The overview of pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey (years correspond to periods when they were active in politics) is taken from my published conference paper: 1990–1993 HEP (People’s Labour Party), 1993-1994 DEP (Democracy Party), 1994-2003 HADEP (People’s Democracy Party), 2003-2005 DEHAP (Democratic People’s Party), 2005-2009 DTP (Democratic Society Party), 2009-2014 BDP (Peace and Democracy Party), 2014- HDP (Democratic Peoples’ Party) and DBP (Party of Democratic Regions). (Drechselová 2017, 78)



municipalities. It spearheads the local implementation of the democratic autonomy principles embraced by the Kurdish movement.

These multiple levels should be taken into account in the analysis of women's political organizing. Where do women's organizations stand with regards to the Kurdish movement? Women's structures embedded within pro-Kurdish political parties exist since the 1990s. Currently, both the DBP and the HDP have women's assemblies. But importantly, Kurdish women's movement extends its being beyond the political party, as the members of the umbrella organization Free Women Congress (KJA) put it, they are "nobody's branch" (*kimsenin kolu değiliz*)<sup>12</sup>.

#### Ideological transformation

I argue, together with Handan Çağlayan, that there is a mutual interaction between the Kurdish movement's ideology and women's political involvement (Çağlayan 2012b, 2). That is why the ideological transformation that the Kurdish movement underwent since the late 1990s is of utmost importance. Sponsored by Abdullah Öcalan, it is depicted as "profound transformation" (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012, 1) or "radical shift" (Al-Ali and Taş 2018a, 6) in the PKK's course. Instead of separatism, it offered a project of self-rule and radical participatory democracy for the whole Middle East without altering existing state borders<sup>13</sup>. Gender equality was to hold a central place of this new paradigm. Even though the PKK eventually accepted Öcalan's proposals, the shift opened a way for different factions to

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<sup>12</sup> I interviewed Estêr, in charge of diplomacy at KJA, on 25.5.2015 in Diyarbakır.

<sup>13</sup> Üstündağ identifies the beginning of the Kurdish movement's ideological transformation already in the mid-1990, the chronology could thus go further in the past to understand Öcalan's call for democratic autonomy (Üstündağ, Interview by Güney Yıldız 2019, 155).

compete over the power within the PKK (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012, 5) and it was not until 2004 that the democratic autonomy became an officially pursued goal (Üstündağ, Interview by Güney Yıldız 2019, 160). Three years later, in 2007 the pro-Kurdish party officially embraced the democratic autonomy as its programmatic priority (Toplum ve Kuram 2010, 168). Upon its creation, the HDP became the embodiment of this new ideological course.

Öcalan build mostly upon the Murray Bookchin's project of libertarian municipalism (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012, 6). Among his other sources of inspirations are Emma Goldman, Immanuel Wallerstein, Fernand Braudel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and the Zapatistas (Yarkın 2011, 76; Al-Ali and Taş 2018a, 13). Women were urged by Öcalan to become the architects of the democratic confederalism: "I am calling upon all sectors of society, in particular all women and the youth, to set up their own democratic organisations and to govern themselves."<sup>14</sup> His thoughts on gender issues evolved significantly over the course of years<sup>15</sup>. His early writings are paramount of ambiguous approach to gender issues and inequalities (Al-Ali and Taş 2018a, 13). It can be said that Öcalan's thought as well as Kurdish movement's gender ideology evolved in relation with women joining the ranks of the PKK<sup>16</sup>, while women joining the guerrilla organisation in turn propelled women to join the political parties. In Öcalan's ideology, women moved from being seen as a trap for men into a condition of everybody's liberation: "Unless women emancipate themselves first, it is rather unlikely that even those men considering themselves

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<sup>14</sup> Öcalan quoted by Biehl (Biehl 2012, 9).

<sup>15</sup> Handan Çağlayan analyses this transformation in great detail in her article (Çağlayan 2012b).

<sup>16</sup> It is estimated that in the late 1990s, women accounted for 30% of the PKK's 17 000 members (Basch-Harod 2014, 183).

as most progressive will make any proper contribution to liberation of the classes, of the nation, of society, culture and so forth” (Öcalan 2003, 77). Patriarchy gained its place among the three ills of the modern society (alongside the nation state, capitalism) (Üstündağ 2016, 198). In practice, Öcalan’s writings provide women with a tool to push for reform and positive action measures as Ayla Akat Ata, the founding speaker of the Free Women Congress (KJA), stated: “Mr. Öcalan’s support of the women’s issue gives us huge power. He has also put the freedom of women before any national freedom. This perspective has helped us to make radical changes in a short time period” (Akat, Al-Ali, and Taş 2016). The aim of the next section is to demonstrate that for the radical changes to happen, women’s mobilisation was key and that without it, these writings would remain on paper.

#### Rising importance of political and social struggle

Increasing women’s participation corresponded to the broader shift towards civilian organizing that the Kurdish movement in Turkey was experiencing since the end of 1990s. In his writings, Öcalan put accent on the “third domain”, the associational and civilian field, because he considered that: “because women and the youth are in most urgent need for peace and freedom, multi-faceted women’s and youth unions are among the backbone institutions of civil society” (Öcalan 2003, 25). This call on women’s organizing contributed to more women joining existing human rights organisations as well as establishing women’s associations (Şahin-Mencütek 2016, 481). Ever since, women were presented as exemplars of mobilisation according to the new party line (Güneş 2012, 120).

For the Kurdish movement, associations occupy a very privileged place; they are influential in candidate selection process as well as in education of party members. According to Watts and Dorronsoro, “the nature and impact of associational political involvement changed after 1999 with the thickening, diversification, and expansion of the political field”

(Dorrnsoro and Watts 2013, 104). For instance, all women's associations registered in Diyarbakır were created after 2004<sup>17</sup>. Compared to pro-Kurdish political parties, associations were less frequently targeted by state bans; in this regard, they represent a form of continuity of women's organizing while the parties were periodically closed down. The two areas (political and associational) are closely interconnected, not to say embedded. This becomes clear while looking at female political candidates out of whom an important proportion entered politics on the basis of their associational involvement. Having a background in civil society organization increases the likelihood of a candidate to be selected on the party's electoral list.

Finally, the PKK-sponsored cease-fire in 1999 contributed to the increase in legitimacy of political parties and with it, to the increase in women's political involvement. "It is not a coincidence," Bozgan remarks, "that women's organizing flourished in the period between 1999 and 2004" (Bozgan 2011, 780), following cease-fires declared by the PKK and the lifting of the emergency rule by the AKP in 2002. Crucially, the Kurdish movement used the periods of diminished levels of violence to build its local participatory structures and to root itself in the local governments. The peace process, as noted by Nazan Üstündağ, did not represent a "diplomatic endeavour" but a means to pursue the struggle on social and political grounds (Üstündağ, Interview by Güneş Yıldız 2019, 164). Municipalities became laboratories for pro-Kurdish policies in which women had key role: they were bringing into life local municipal projects in line with Kurdish movement's ideology (Ersanlı and Göksü Özdoğan 2011, 85). Thanks to these contextual shifts, progressively, the political parties became a "legitimate option" for women willing to be politically active and who in the 1990s

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<sup>17</sup> Out of 537 associations in Diyarbakır city in the same period, 15 are identified by the authors as "women's associations" (Dorrnsoro and Watts 2013, 104).

may have been left with joining the guerrilla struggle. Women's civic involvement throughout the 1990s also produced a generation of women eager to enter politics: women were present at the *Newroz* (New Year) manifestations (especially 1990, 1991 and 1992), in street demonstrations and *Serhildans* (mass protests) (Çağlayan 2012b, 13; Al-Ali and Taş 2018a, 11).

It should be noted that if the legitimacy of the political wing of the Kurdish movement increased, it doesn't mean that the legitimacy of the PKK decreased. Tezcür showed that at least 60 percent of PKK's university recruits had a history of political activism and that almost all urban recruits who joined after 1999 (23 out of 25) had a history of prior political activism (Tezcür 2016, 259). Even though this paper is concerned with the political parties, Tezcür's findings remind us that the interconnections and crossing points between politics and the armed struggle should be considered especially in a study of individual pathways of the activists.

#### Changing women's structures: explaining institutional design in the 2000s

The 1990s marked the entering of women into the public sphere, the appearance of first women's associations as well as women's magazines. These activities gave rise to a consciousness of "marginalisation of women within the wider political movement" which in turn contributed to women's collective mobilization in the following years (Al-Ali and Taş 2018a, 12). In this section, after a quick look at the 1990s, I offer a chronology of women's political organizing. This chronology is articulated around multiple critical junctures: the establishment of women's branches and significant alterations in political parties' programs around the year 2000; the withdrawal of the women's quota in 2004 municipal elections; the introduction of co-chairing system in 2005; the dissolution of women's branches before the creation of women's assemblies in 2005; the implementation of gender quota in the 2007

general election; the road towards the introduction of co-chairing system in municipalities in 2014. This chronology purposely cumulates elements in order to show the non-linearity in the progression of Kurdish women's organizing as well as the striking pace with which the "ups and downs" alternate. In this way, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the tensions and ubiquitous negotiations of women within the Kurdish movement.

#### Raising feminist consciousness throughout the 1990s

When women started joining the guerrilla in greater numbers, their struggle had a major impact on women involved in civilian political field<sup>18</sup>. Female fighters were pioneers in many regards, notably in setting up independent non-mixed structures (for more see Guillemet 2017). Şahin-Mencütek links the creation of women's commissions in the first pro-Kurdish parties in 1990 to the establishment of the women's units in the PKK (Şahin-Mencütek 2016, 480–81). Similarly, Bozgan suggests that the creation of the PKK's Free Women's Party (PJA) in 1999 represented a template for women's branches within political parties (Bozgan 2011, 779).

Feminist consciousness was built progressively. Women actively involved in the period, such as Gültan Kışanak, former co-mayor of Diyarbakır, acknowledge that "in the 1970s and 1980s women's rights were sacrificed for the sake of general political and national aims. The slogan was to first have a revolution and then make some improvements in

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<sup>18</sup> Women's organizing in the guerrilla encountered tremendous opposition which is beyond the scope of this paper. One can get a sense of these difficulties from testimonies of former women guerrillas collected by Berivan Bingöl. A comprehensive account, however, is still to be written (Bingöl 2016).

women's rights and gender equality" (Kışanak, Al-Ali, and Taş 2016). In addition, the political parties didn't adopt significant gender equality provisions until the late 1990s.

In the 1990s, women's activities were mostly oriented to the social problems that women faced in the southeast region (bride prices, domestic violence) and in consequence of forced migration. First association, Patriotic Women's Association (*Yurtsever Kadın Derneği*), was short-lived<sup>19</sup>. However, among its members, several female candidates were recruited for the 1999 elections. Women also published several magazines featuring some ideological plurality<sup>20</sup>. These publications had a great impact mostly thanks to the awareness raising efforts of women's commissions of the political party. Emine Ayna, former MP and co-chair of the DBP, recalled how they operated: "as members of women's commission, we took our magazine [*Özgür Kadın Dergisi*] and organized women's debate groups. We did that three or four days a week. We were selling the magazine to gain support for our activities, we also read from it out loud and discussed it" (Toplum ve Kuram 2010, 141). These publication efforts and debates stimulated women's consciousness of gender inequalities within the Kurdish movement. If Kurdish women were "first politicised under the umbrella of Kurdish nationalism", over time, they developed a critique of prevalent sexism in the movement as well as in the society (Yüksel 2006, 780). The legacy of the 1990s resides mostly in women's consciousness raising.

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<sup>19</sup> The association was closed few months after its establishment (Toplum ve Kuram 2010, 140).

<sup>20</sup> Necla Açıık analysed the magazines of Roza, Jujin, Jin û Jiyan, and Yaşamda Özgür Kadın (Açıık 2002).

## Establishment of women's branches

The post-2000 period can be characterized by the multiplication of women's spaces within the Kurdish movement as well as political parties. As Ayla Akat Ata, who in 2015 became the speaker of Free Women Congress (KJA), stated: "In 2000, many different women's organisations came together to discuss what more they could do, what kind of platform they can create to make women's rights one of the main political aims in Kurdistan and Turkey" (Akat, Al-Ali, and Taş 2016). On the civil society level, women took active part in trade unions, human rights organizations and sponsored the creation of women's associations which then established several women's platforms. Şeyda, one of the municipal councillors I interviewed, was among the founders of the Diyarbakır Women's Platform<sup>21</sup>. The fact that she was later elected municipal councillor confirms the salience of the "associational capital" for the political carrier of female activists. Democratic Free Women's Movement (DÖKH) was established in 2003 as an umbrella structure for women's associational and political organizing (Dorrnsoro and Watts 2013, 105). For over ten years, this platform sponsored civil society projects, organized demonstrations and coordinated activities of women's groups close to the Kurdish movement. DÖKH commanded a network of actors that was broader than the political parties.

The establishment of women's branches (*kadın kolları*) was enabled by a 1999 change in Turkey's legal system. In the pro-Kurdish political parties, contrary to all major parties in Turkey, women's branches became "equal structures" to the party's principal organization (*ana kademe*). Growing women's organization had also an impact on the place that was devoted to gender equality in official party documents. Progressively, women's liberation became one of the central chapters. In 2000, HADEP put in place 25% gender quota on

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<sup>21</sup> Şeyda, interviewed on 6.5.2015, municipal councillor, Diyarbakır.



internal decision-making organs and electoral lists. Its successor DEHAP increased it to 35% in 2003 (Çağlayan 2007, 134, 137). Handan Çağlayan recalled that before introducing the quota into party statutes, women from the party collaborated with Turkish feminists in order to draft the proposal<sup>22</sup>. In the beginning of 2000s, the number of women's candidates increased significantly. In 2002 general election, DEHAP didn't get over the 10% electoral threshold, but women were at the top of the list in 25 provinces (Bozgan 2011, 779).

Women's platforms were instrumental in putting into practice party's new gender policy. Women elected to municipalities contributed to the prioritization of gender equal measures and were quick to establish institutions tasked with their implementation. In 2001, DIKASUM (Women's Issues Research and Implementation Centre of Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality) was created (Bulut 2001). Municipalities supported the creation of women's centres such as *Kardelen Kadın Merkezi* in Diyarbakır or *Gulşılav Kadın Evi* in Nusaybin. Special focus has been on the creation of women's cooperatives with the aim of providing some level of income to women: *Bağlar Kadın Kooperatifi*, *Doğubeyazıt Kadın Kooperatifi*, and *Kızıltepe Kadın Kooperatifi* were among the first ones, remarkably, all established in municipalities with female mayors (Bozgan 2011, 787).

By the year 2004, women's organizations proliferated in all areas of the Kurdish movement, in associations, trade unions and above all, political parties (Tokdoğan 2013, 42). It was an era when institutionalization was clearly a priority. As stated by Ayla Akat Ata: "Our aim, with the help of a range of new organizations, is to create institutions which empower women. [...] It was, and is, necessary to have a strong committee, with institutions dealing with women's issues on a daily basis" (Akat, Al-Ali, and Taş 2016). It became

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Handan Çağlayan on 25.5.2016 in Ankara.

quickly clear that the introduction of positive action measures, such as the quota and women's branches' budget, doesn't automatically translate into practice.

#### Withdrawal of women's quota in 2004

Women's quota has been accepted as part of pro-Kurdish parties' program, but its implementation on the eve of 2004 local elections exposed the vested interests of existing man-dominated clientelist networks. While the intra-party selection process was already underway, women's movement announced a list of districts (around 25% of areas where the pro-Kurdish party expected to win) in which only women's candidates were going to be considered. Envoys from the party headquarters travelled throughout the southeast explaining that men should withdraw their application, which created disarray in concerned districts. Arvin, who was a member of party's local direction at that time, recalled that in his district, all men but one withdrew their applications and pushed women from their extended family to apply (much like their proxies). Not satisfied with the selection process development and under heavy intra-party pressure, the women's movement agreed not to pursue the implementation of gender quota in the 2004 election. Ironically, the decision came about late enough to not to enable other men's applications in Arvin's district and the only remaining male candidate (the one who refused to withdraw his application) was selected to run for the mayor's office<sup>23</sup>.

DEHAP and its coalition of associated leftist parties won 57 municipalities in 2004 (Radikal 2009). Out of these, 9 had female mayor, an amount that corresponds to slightly more than 15% ratio. If this score is significantly below the aimed quota level, the nine elected women mayors represent 50% of all elected mayors in Turkey that year (Aslan 2009,

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Arvin on 26.2.2017 took place in London.

71–72). Among them, for the first time in country’s history a woman, Songül Abdil Erol, became the head of a province (Tunceli) (Çağlayan 2012a, 145). However, party’s score was below the 2002 general election and Bozgan recounts that women and the youth were blamed for this drop (Bozgan 2011, 767). This accusation gives a sense of opposition women were facing while trying to implement the quota.

What happened in 2004 that made women’s movement concede to the pressure of party’s general headquarters and to abandon the quota? My interviewees were often silent on this point and provided very few elements. Literature on Kurdish women’s mobilizing is also mostly oblivious towards this point. However, Emine Ayna’s account in her 2011 interview in the magazine *Toplum ve Kuram* yields some precious information. Describing the 2002 and 2004 period Ayna stated:

“That time is the period when the biggest breaks happened and also a period when women withdrew from their activities. It was a period of intense debates, most often about women and society issues. [...] Within the PKK, the process of “purge”<sup>24</sup> was taking place. It was a period when Osman Öcalan and thousands of guerrilla fighters left the movement. [...] If I was to speak about myself, I went home and sit there for four years. We were mobilizing women but what was happening around had too much of a negative impact.” (Toplum ve Kuram 2010, 146)

Internal problems within the PKK had a direct negative impact on women’s capacity to push for their agenda. While the evolutions in the PKK during this period were widely

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<sup>24</sup> “Tasfiye”, term used in Turkish means also elimination, clearance, liquidation.

documented<sup>25</sup>, the concrete repercussions on women's political organizing are still to be uncovered.

There are also specificities of local politics which make it a difficult terrain to conquer. As one of Bozgan's interviewees remarked, people tend to focus more on the doings and public appearances of the mayor than to those of deputies, due to proximity bias (Bozgan 2011, 784). In 2002, there was little hope for the pro-Kurdish party to overcome the 10% threshold and enter the Parliament. On the contrary, the stakes were high in municipalities. My interviewee, Tuğba, aged 45, was elected mayor in 2009 and her experience reveals the tensions that accompany women's election to this influential local office. After the election, she was the only woman in the municipal hall building with no female councillor or employee. In office during her pregnancy, she had the hard task of heading a municipality that the pro-Kurdish party won for the first time and had to deal with sabotages from state institutions. During this time, Tuğba was also physically assaulted. She explained the assault not as an attack of "political opposition" but as a sexist hate crime of those unable to bear that they lost political power at the municipality to a woman<sup>26</sup>. As reiterated by Bozgan's interviewee: "when we entered politics, we didn't clash with the state system, but with the men" (Bozgan 2011, 791; similar assessment in Kışanak 2018).

If Öcalan's writings were instrumental in pushing for changes in party statutes, the existence of positive action measures in these statutes enabled women to push for their

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<sup>25</sup> Akkaya and Jongerden consider that Kurdish movement suffered "a kind of limbo" and that it went through a period of "impasse and reconstruction" at that time ("Kürt Hareketinin Kronolojisi, 1999-2011" 2011, 32) (Akkaya and Jongerden 2012, 8-9).

<sup>26</sup> Interview in Diyarbakır on 28.9.2016, even though Tuğba was elected outside of Diyarbakır.

application. In line with the feminist institutionalist scholarship, it appears crucial to consider inner opposition and sabotage practices manifested not openly, but informally and in a disguised manner. Even though the implementation of gender quota was postponed, in 2004 election women got a glimpse of the scale of intra-party opposition. At the same period, the foundations of a new principle were laid down. Tara, former journalist and DÖKH activist, recalled that it was precisely in 2002-2004 that women started to gain competence over the selection of female candidates<sup>27</sup>. This prerogative will acquire even bigger importance with the establishment of co-mayorship in 2014.

Introducing co-chairing: women's coup to men?

A year after the municipal elections in which the women's quota was withdrawn, in November 2005, the co-chairing system and the increase of women's quota were introduced to the statutes of the newly created Democratic Society Party (DTP). What allowed for this rather radical evolution? In this case, the answer, more than in the exogenous explanations, lies in women's organizing and strategy. The opposition towards the implementation of co-chairing system was not voiced in ideological terms because it was proposed by Abdullah Öcalan, whose authority proscribes overt criticism within the movement. Instead, women were told that the timing was not right. The fragmentation inside the PKK that served as a deterrent for women's quota in 2004 was still recent. There were fears that such a major change as the introduction of co-chairing could alienate party's conservative voters and weaken it (Toplum ve Kuram 2010, 145). In addition, women were told that the co-chairing is illegal in Turkish legal system and that they may speed up the closure of yet another pro-Kurdish party. Tara, journalist and member of DÖKH, was among those who actively

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<sup>27</sup> Tara, journalist and former DÖKH member, interview on 24.5.2017 in London.

contributed to the final stage of the institutionalization of co-chairing. I transcribe her account at length:

“With the introduction of co-chairing, women did a kind of putsch to men. Abdullah Öcalan in his defences suggested that co-presidency should be implemented. Women took his propositions as a serious matter for discussion. DÖKH coordinated those discussions. But men objected by the timing and by the illegality of the measure. They threatened us that we will entail the party’s ban. We, women, replied that if we don’t act as pioneers, the situation will never improve. At one of DÖKH’s meetings in Diyarbakır, we decided to implement the co-chairing by creating a *de facto* situation. We brainstormed ten names of women who could be our female co-president and finally, Aysel Tuğluk was selected. Other than us, no one knew. A day before party’s congress, we assembled all women delegates who accounted for 30% of all delegates at the time. We presented them with our plan and they assured us of their support. The day of the congress we published in the daily newspaper Özgür Gündem a feature interview with Aysel Tuğluk with the headline “Women’s co-presidential candidate”. That is how men learnt about the situation and it was too late to organize an opposition. By principle they couldn’t object because everything was justified by Öcalan’s texts.”<sup>28</sup>

The implementation of co-chairing system was not without difficulties but it has remained in place ever since. Gültan Kışanak acknowledged that competence-sharing among the co-presidents was often problematic with women being sidelined or seen as assistants to

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<sup>28</sup> Tara, journalist and former DÖKH member, interview on 24.5.2017 in London.

elected male president (Kışanak 2018). Nevertheless, with the co-chairing system women's mobilization marked a symbolical and practical achievement.

#### Dismantling women's structures: men's coup to women

Contrary to other pro-Kurdish parties, DEHAP was not banned but dissolved itself to open the way for the new legal representative of the Kurdish movement, the DTP. This "period of reconstruction" (Bozgan 2011, 788) had paradoxically negative repercussions on women's movement. Many of the experienced women were not involved in the new structures. The message sent was that of "renewal", calling for the "olds" not to seek offices and to leave the room for the "new". Women appeared to obey this instruction much more systematically than men. It seems that the "search for new organizational structures" was actually an attempt to break the wings (Bozgan 2011, 789) of the women's movement which became too influential over time. It is again Tara who provided more details:

"Around the year 2006, men did a putsch to women. They dissolved women's branches. Women stayed in a void before the women's assembly was created. Around the women's branches, there was a group of 600 mobilized women. These women were partially dispersed. Some partook in the efforts to establish new women's assembly, but it was lengthy and energy-consuming process and it weakened them. However, there was one thing that couldn't be dissipated – women's consciousness."<sup>29</sup>

These circumstances point to the fact that the transformation towards women's assemblies was not a change initiated by women. From the institutionalist perspective, it is

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<sup>29</sup> Tara, journalist and former DÖKH member, interview on 24.5.2017 in London.

interesting to note that while the transformation from women's commission to women's branches in 1999 was mainly sponsored by women and enabled by exogenous legislative modification, the impulse to create women's assemblies didn't come from women's movement and weakened it for some time. This shows that institutional change can be pushed for by the concerned actors and in a span of several years, it can be imposed on them.

#### 2007 General election and women's quota

The electoral quota on women's representation has been agreed upon since the year 2000 and it has been increased twice. However, its first electoral application dates back to 2007. Out of 26 elected DTP deputies, 8 were women (Kışanak, Al-Ali, and Taş 2016). By 2007, women's assemblies, the new form of women's organizing within the pro-Kurdish party were settled and resumed active lobbying for women's rights. In the same year, PKK issued a quota of 40% for the ratio of its women commanders (Basch-Harod 2014, 184). Although these elements may have facilitated women's bid for quota implementation, the organized women's effort seemed to play a crucial role. Gültan Kışanak's account gives an idea about the scale of difficulties women went through to secure the quota application:

“It might be difficult to believe but when I look back at my own experience and story, the hardest time for me as a woman was not in prison. It was not my time at university or when I was working as a journalist. But it was the struggle we had to fight in order to get a women's quota for MPs.”

(Kışanak, Al-Ali, and Taş 2016)

Women's candidacies were systematically an object of postponement. Excuses were voiced within the pro-Kurdish party such as that high women's ratio will alienate conservative voters. As Gültan Kışanak put it, the electoral score of the DTP in 2007



challenged the idea that women were not able to succeed as well as the one that society was not ready (Kışanak 2018). With Kurdish women's entry into the Parliament, the issue of gender equality in politics gained national visibility.

The principle according to which women select their own candidates was further institutionally strengthened in 2007 as women created women's electoral committees. The control over the selection mechanism helps to fight against using women as proxies of influential men. Praising the 2007 women's electoral success, Gültan Kışanak considered that the biggest challenge was the sustainability of the gender-equal representation (Kışanak 2018). Seven years of consolidation and negotiations have passed until another major innovation of pro-Kurdish political parties was introduced to the Turkish political landscape: the co-chairing system for municipalities.

#### Positive action measures: Road to co-mayorship

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the "local" has become the focus of the Kurdish movement encouraged by the shifts in ideology as well as sustained success of the parties in municipal elections. If party's votes were fluctuating (less votes in 2004 than in 1999, less votes in 2014 than in 2009), women's political representation has been on the rise. In 2009 local election, 14 out of 99 party's mayors were women (around 20%) (Ersanlı and Göksü Özdoğan 2011, 80). Women represented 16% of elected municipal councillors (Bozgan 2011, 793). In 2014, 23 women out of the total of 37 female mayors in Turkey were officially elected from the pro-Kurdish party (BDP). To that number we can add 68 women who hold the office of the mayor "unofficially" within the realm of the co-mayorship system (Kadın Koalisyonu 2014).

The years spanning from the implementation of women's quota in 2007 and the introduction of co-mayorship in 2014 are marked by multiple dynamics. Several new

participatory structures were established, such as, in 2007, the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) (Üstündağ, Interview by Güney Yıldız 2019, 164). In 2013-2014, political representation was “divided” between HDP and DBP. The former became the “national roof”, present in the Parliament and western provinces, while the later was in charge of municipalities in the southeast. Women’s movement has been affected by this multiplication of institutionalized actors. In 2015, new institution of women’s organizing was created: the Free Women Congress (KJA). It evolved from DÖKH, sharing its federating aim. Ayla Akat Ata, the first speaker of the KJA, noted that it was established to improve the communication with different actors, also outside the Kurdish movement and outside Turkey (Akat, Al-Ali, and Taş 2016). KJA built upon the 25 year tradition of women’s organizing. It was also illustrative of the relentless search for new organizing structures (Aksoy 2015), general feature of the Kurdish movement.

#### Troubles with the quota

In 2004, only three women managed to access the metropolitan council in Diyarbakır (9,4%), even though they accounted for 18,1% of district councillors (Arıkboğa 2009, 37). In 2014, however, 25 women represented 36,6% of DBP’s councillors in the metropolitan hall<sup>30</sup>. This shift shows not only the increase in numbers of women on electoral lists, but most importantly, their ranking on the lists. Only a certain proportion of district councillors are co-opted to metropolitan council and this means that in 2014 women were on average better positioned than in 2009. This is due to the scrupulous attention of the women’s electoral committee devoted to the lists.

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<sup>30</sup> However, in Diyarbakır’s metropolitan municipality, women’s representation was only of 27,7% of all metropolitan councillors due to the absence of elected women among the AKP members of the council. (“Diyarbakır Büyükşehir Belediyesi Meclis Üyeleri” 2014)

My interviewees were adamant on the fact that women are the ones who decide about the selection of female candidates which represents a crucial achievement since the beginning of the 2000s. The head of KJA's diplomacy department, Payiz, whom I met in Diyarbakır in 2015, described the selection process as following:

“Women are generally too modest. If a woman thinks she could get an elected office, she would above all concentrate her efforts to shine in her daily party or associational activities. She will be seen and her colleagues will suggest her name to the party. After this, we step in and encourage this woman to apply for candidacy.”<sup>31</sup>

However, women do not exercise a complete monopoly over the selection process. In several of Diyarbakır's peripheral districts, prior to the 2014 election, places reserved for women were subjected to strategic considerations. This seems to be the case in Kulp, where the DBP elected among its municipal councillors daughter of a former AKP mayor. One could suspect that the support of the extended family was at stake from the point of view of the party. Women were also, more often than men, made to “represent” a whole set of identity marks in order to “live up” to party's promise of diversity. Often times, the co-president or co-mayor was an older Kurdish man while female co-president was a young Kurd or Turk, Alevite, close to feminist movement or trade unions. This was the case in very different constituencies. In Karşıyaka (district in Izmir), a young female co-president without prior history of political involvement shared the party's presidency with an experienced older co-president from the Kurdish movement. In the metropolitan municipality of Mardin, 27-year-old Assyrian female co-mayor, Februniye Akyol, was sharing the office with a legend-

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<sup>31</sup> Payiz, member of KJA's headquarters, interview on 25.5.2015 in Diyarbakır.

like 76-year-old Kurdish politician, Ahmet Türk. In Kulp district in Diyarbakır, a Yezidi female co-mayor, Sadiye Süer Baran, shared the office with a Kurdish Sunni co-mayor. Among Diyarbakır's female co-mayors and councillors, many were Kurdish Alevi. This shows that in some cases, women were at the same time the youth, while in other cases, women were at the same time members of a religious minority. Supporting a multiplicity of identity markers may obey to party's image and program but it has also concrete repercussions on the exercise of power. It appeared that women were conceived more in their "representative" role and less as leaders. Being young and issued from religious minority may have contributed to their election in the first place but complicated their exercise of the mandate. In such scenarios, the support that could yield Kurdish women's movement appeared to be instrumental for those women to remain in office. Notably, in areas where the pro-Kurdish parties don't have significant local presence, the lesser implantation of women's movement was strongly felt by the female politicians.

In 2014, women selectors faced another difficulty – they were searching for candidates who could fill in the quota places in several districts that the party was about to win for the first time. In some districts of Elazığ or Ağrı, it seemed that the criteria for a female candidate inclusion of the list, other than family background, was also some level of education and "biographical availability"<sup>32</sup>: being young and single was "enough". This approach of the selectors in context of a shortage of female candidates points to the certain degree to their "interchangeability". As show the circumstances of entry into politics of my interviewee Rojhat:

"Before the election, friends from the party came to see me. They insisted that I am in the village without doing anything after completing my

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<sup>32</sup> For more on the concept of biographical availability see (Beyerlein and Bergstrand 2013).

high school. They encouraged me to apply for local council. I did so but I was frankly hoping it will not work out. A week later I learnt that I was on the list. After the elections, I even had to ask where the municipal hall was because I have never been there before.”<sup>33</sup>

In 2016, arrests of HDP parliamentarians and the DBP’s councilors and co-mayors increased significantly. In this context, missing female politicians sometimes had to be replaced by *ad hoc* decisions. At one of these occasions, prosecuted female co-mayor was to be replaced by one of the councilors whom I happened to interview earlier that day. The decision has landed on a “candidate” who was rather unwilling to take this office but ended up accepting. This shows the influence exerted by the party selectors who are able to convince young and little experienced newcomer to accept a relatively pressured and high-risk position in a time of crisis. It is remarkable that women maintained their prerogative to select female candidates also in this context and didn’t let the “extraordinary circumstances” to encroach over their selection monopoly.

However, the female quota was sidelined only in cases of scarcity of female candidates but also when political stakes were high. Izmir is an illustrative example. The city is divided into two constituencies and in June 2015 general election, in the first constituency men occupied the first two places on the list; while in the second constituency, a man headed the list followed by a woman. Only two men, both heads of the list, were elected (Haberler 2015). Women HDP politicians in Izmir criticized this distribution of offices among men. In the subsequent election in November 2015, even though the two men were elected again

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<sup>33</sup> Rojhat, aged 28, district councillor from outside of Diyarbakır, was interviewed on the 29.2.2016 in Diyarbakır.

(Habertürk 2015), women got to occupy the second place in both constituencies: the zipper system was implemented but was insufficient to secure women's election. The fact that in June 2018 general election, Serpil Kemalbay, former HDP co-president, got elected from the first place in Izmir may be also the result of women's pressure in that province.

Furthermore, it has become clear that the "acceptance" of quota can also be a matter of "patriarchal adaptation". Several of my interviewees, such as Roza from women's academy, bemoaned that the logic of quota has been twisted with the 40% becoming the maximum of possible women's representation in any given party organ or elective position<sup>34</sup>. Avşın, elected councillor in 2009 and who became co-mayor in 2014 in her peripheral district in Mardin showed that the "quota mentality" pervaded into all domains of political activity:

"With colleagues from the municipality we were about to attend a funeral. In total, we had four cars. Men got into three of them. I wanted to bring three women with me but they asked me to only bring two and one man in my car. I asked why. They said: because we are more. I answered: it doesn't give you the right to decide who will go in my car. Then, they said: But comrade, there is the 40% quota! This would apparently mean that they have the right to determine how many women attend. I refused and bought three other women with me."<sup>35</sup>

In this concrete situation, women-only car was subjected to "quota" which was twisted to secure additional male participation. Retrospectively, I was wondering what would

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<sup>34</sup> Roza, member of Women's Academy, based in Diyarbakır, interviewed on 8.5.2015.

<sup>35</sup> Avşın, co-mayor in a district outside of Diyarbakır, interviewed on 2.3.2016.

happen if Avşîn also pushed for the scrupulous interpretation of quota and asked for 40% women's participation in all cars.

These examples point to the fact that women within the pro-Kurdish parties not only face difficulties, but also that they are burdened with the task of ensuring the application of gender equal principles. In addition, women often have multiple roles within the Kurdish movement. Avşîn and Tuğba were simultaneously co-mayors, members of the Free Women Congress (KJA) and exercised other intra-party functions. Women politicians are also active within women's assemblies who act as resolving mechanism for women. Assemblies serve not only as an instigator and implementer of party's program and positive action measures but also as the main controller of their application. In reality, if women's movement doesn't stand up against the non-respect of the quota, it is unlikely that anyone else does.

#### Introduction of the co-mayorship system

The period before the 2014 municipal election was a period of consolidation of women's achievements but also a period of constant negotiation of their place within the party and the movement. The co-mayorship system was first tested in 2009 in Diyarbakır, where one of the female councilors became "unofficially" co-mayor to Osman Baydemir. The system was generalized in 2014 for one hundred of the pro-Kurdish municipalities. Throughout my interviews, I was able to gather very few elements about the negotiation process of the co-mayorship but I have participated, in 2016, in a party seminar for co-mayors in which the system was evaluated. Several male co-mayors questioned the timing of the measure considering that it was too soon for its introduction and estimated that the preparation for the co-mayorship was too poor. These were familiar ideas that were already voiced prior to the implementation of the co-presidency in the party and prior to the electoral quota. Also retrospectively, they give a hint of the type of arguments women faced before the co-mayorship was put into practice.

The seminar for co-chairs also revealed real discrepancies in co-mayorship practices. In some municipalities, the female co-mayor was responsible for women citizens coming to the town hall. This arrangement was praised because women felt confident voicing their pleas in the otherwise male-dominated institution. In other areas, the same arrangement was avoided not to enclose women strictly into “women’s issues”. Some municipalities were criticized for the seating arrangement with the male co-mayor occupying the table at the center of the room while female co-mayor was relegated to the side. The practice of calling man as “mayor” and woman as a “co-mayor”, giving a sense of her being “added” to the system, was criticized. In that meeting, women were more systematically criticized than their male colleagues. However, open misogynist criticism was strikingly absent. Women were never attacked for their womanhood but for lack of capacities or political experience. However, these critiques were mostly directed towards women, showing that the criticism had a gendered character. It seemed, that for some, women’s leadership can only be a matter of exception as pointed out the ex-co-mayor of Diyarbakır, Gültan Kışanak (Kışanak, Al-Ali, and Taş 2016). My interviewee, Tuğba, who experienced great difficulties in establishing herself as a mayor in 2009, was re-elected in 2014 and shared the office within the co-mayorship system. She witnessed how her political opponents rushed to support new male co-mayor in an attempt to erode her power<sup>36</sup>. In one sense, the co-mayorship system generalised women’s presence at the top of the municipal hierarchy. In the other sense, however, it also consolidated men’s presence in every municipality. Before 2014, roughly 30% of mayoral seats were reserved to women, which meant that men were not eligible for these seats. After 2014, men could run everywhere. It has been, I argue, out of great strategic

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<sup>36</sup> Interview in Diyarbakır on 28.9.2016 even though Tuğba was elected in another province.



caution that Kurdish women's movement ensured that 30% of the "officially" elected mayors were women.

#### Conclusion: Women's double resistance

This paper looked into the intricacies of the feminization of Kurdish politics in Turkey. It put institutions to the centre of analysis while systematically considering women's individual and collective agency. Firstly, it made the claim that it is necessary not to oversimplify contextualization. It went beyond simple listing of crucial events and stressed the impact of the events specifically on women's organizing and political representation. Secondly, the paper attempted to overcome the descriptive accounts of institutional evolution within the pro-Kurdish parties by providing a dynamic and detailed chronology of the development of women's structures and of the enactment of the positive action measures. This allowed me to stress the permanence of negotiations and tensions around women's demands as well as the non-linearity of the institutional evolution.

The overview of Kurdish women's mobilization not only confirms that complex processes of change can yield unintended effects (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010, 574). It also shows the centrality of formal rules that serve eventually as resources for increasing women's political representation (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010, 581). In parallel, though, the informal institutions that remain characterised by clientelist networks and men's "homosocial capital" (Bjarnegård 2013) continue to play a critical role. That is why women invested tremendous efforts into institutional design and introduction of new positive action measures. They managed to bring the gender equality struggle to the forefront of Kurdish movement's agenda. How did that happen? I argue that it was possible thanks to women's collective consciousness raising actions. That is how women from the pro-Kurdish parties

managed to enlarge the “horizon of thinkable possibilities” (Fretel 2010, 211) within the whole Kurdish movement. They pushed the limits of what was conceivable.

Thirdly, the paper looked into the evolutions in the period between the implementation of quota in 2007 and the next major innovation – the introduction of the co-mayorship system in 2014. It was clear that the implementation of the gender equality measures was not always coherent and that practice can differ from one district to another. These conclusions inspire two strands of further research: firstly, geographical comparison of gendered party practices. This could reveal the tremendous role that women’s mobilisation play in this process and yield some knowledge about geographical learning in organizations. Secondly, because several years have passed since the first implementation of positive action measures, I suggest that the opening up of the political space for women also contributed to developments in the profiles of female politicians. This new generation, the “generation of positive action measures”, should be uncovered, notably thanks to the sociological analysis of political pathways.

In this paper, the conflict between the Kurdish movement and the “state” was often implicitly mentioned but only the Kurdish movement was analysed in some plasticity. On the contrary, the “state” remained rather abstract and unitary. However, the state involves multiple actors (army, government, local bureaucrats, judges) who do not always act in accordance (Watts 2009). For instance, the attitude towards co-mayorship differed significantly. In some provinces, the co-mayors were investigated by the police on governor’s wish. In other places, public institutions delayed official writings with municipalities if those contained the signature of both co-mayors. More recently, detentions of both co-mayors took place which could be interpreted as a paradoxical acknowledgement by the state of the existence of the co-mayorship system. It is difficult to set up a balance sheet of the co-mayorship given the escalation and transformation of the conflict: since 2015, the democratic

autonomy initiatives in the southeast have undergone a significant shift from a nonviolent reorganization of social and political life to a militant movement of self-defence (Üstündağ, Interview by Güney Yıldız 2019, 163). With the spread of clashes, military operations and mass detentions, the year 2015 appears as a new turning point in the history of the conflict. Arrests of co-mayors, a major blow to the co-mayorship system (AleviNet 2017), can be interpreted on gendered terms as a backsliding in women's visibility and presence in local politics. It is also noteworthy that all the technocrats (*kayyum*) appointed to southeast municipalities at the place of the removed mayors were men.

State repression appears to help patriarchy in many ways. State closes and dismantles women's organizations: in November 2016, Free Women Congress (KJA) was closed down by a governmental decree. Its successor, Free Women Movement (Tevgera Jinên Azad, TJA), was created and continues to operate in difficult circumstances. Conceptually, this reveals the significant variations in the circumstances in which the institutional design takes place: the passage from women's commissions to women's branches was enabled by legislative change and motivated by women's search of stronger standing within the party. The transformation of women's branches into women's assemblies was far from smooth and it seems it was also meant to destabilize women's institutions becoming too powerful. The establishment of the KJA happened in line with Kurdish movement's push for assemblies and congresses as a privileged institutional form. However, the creation of TJA was an imposed necessity because of the abrupt closure of KJA, its predecessor.

Destabilizing women's structures within the Kurdish movement jeopardizes their capacity of intervention against forms of misogyny and patriarchy within the party. The fact that male politicians are also often arrested or sent to another province complicates the educational efforts of the women's movement. Due to the state repression, the entirety of the Kurdish institutionalized political space is devoid of the "luxury" of introspection. Instead of

discussing institutional reform in party congresses, the political structures are maintained in disarray due to forced closures and mass detentions of their cadres. Women's appearance in the media close to the Kurdish movement has been weakened by the closure of significant newspapers and TV stations. Hampering the educational and publication efforts of women's movement means narrowing the main communication channels through which the gender equality principles are spread towards the parties' constituencies.

The warfare diminishes the weight of political parties and those of women's demands. As a mirror analogy of the peace which favoured political involvement, warfare leads to the marginalisation of gender-based claims (Al-Ali and Taş 2018b, 18). State repression also further weakened women's institutions by imposing another agenda. As a result of massive urban destruction, organized women had to shift their priorities towards urgent needs of displaced population, focusing less on the violence against women and more on housing issues (Kışanak, Al-Ali, and Taş 2016). Finally, state targeting women's organizations may have weakened the Kurdish movement as a whole but it created a bigger platform for male voices to be heard within it. In this regard, the state acted as an agent of patriarchal restoration not only from outside but also from within the Kurdish movement.

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